

# The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory

3 Volume Set

Edited by  
Beverley Best,  
Werner Bonefeld,  
and Chris O'Kane



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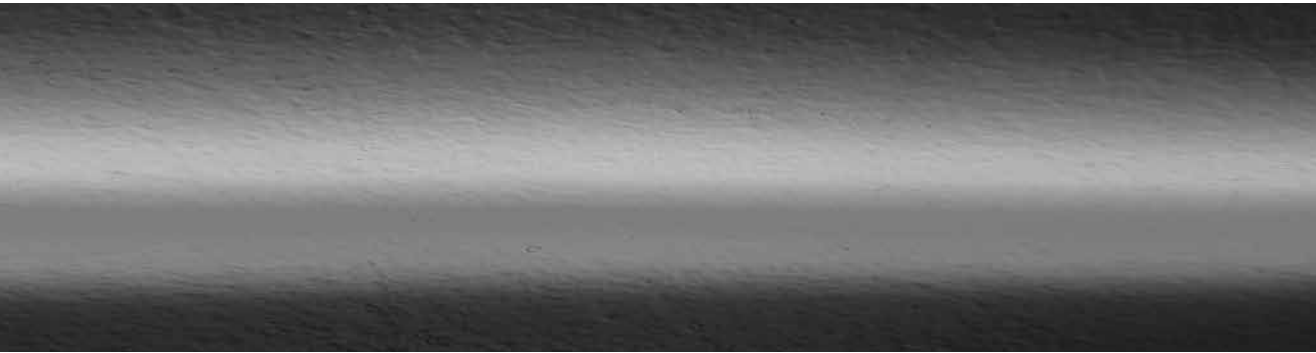
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The SAGE Handbook of  
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# The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory

Volume 1

Edited by  
Beverley Best,  
Werner Bonefeld,  
and Chris O'Kane

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*In memoriam*

Moishe Postone

Moishe Postone died on 19 March 2018. Words fail to express the sadness felt and the loss encountered. Amidst the misery of a time made abstract, a time of value for valorisation's sake, Moishe showed us what it means to think against the grain. He was *ein guter Mensch*.

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# Introduction: Key Texts and Contributions to a Critical Theory of Society

Beverley Best, Werner Bonefeld and Chris O’Kane

The designation of the Frankfurt School as a ‘critical theory’ originated in the United States. It goes back to two articles, one written by Max Horkheimer and the other by Herbert Marcuse, that were both published in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (later *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*) in 1937.<sup>1</sup> The *Zeitschrift*, published from 1932 to 1941, was the publishing organ of the Institute for Social Research. It gave coherence to what in fact was an internally diverse and often disagreeing group of heterodox Marxists that hailed from a wide disciplinary spectrum, including social psychology (Fromm, Marcuse, Horkheimer), political economy and state formation (Pollock and Neumann), law and constitutional theory (Kirchheimer, Neumann), political science (Gurland, Neumann), philosophy and sociology (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse), culture (Löwenthal, Adorno), musicology (Adorno), aesthetics (Adorno, Löwenthal, Marcuse) and social technology (Gurland, Marcuse). In the Weimar Republic, the Institute was

known by sympathisers as ‘Café Marx’. It was the first Marxist research institute attached to a German University.

Since the 1950s, ‘Frankfurt School’ critical theory has become an established, internationally recognised ‘brand name’ in the social and human sciences, which derives from its institutional association in the 1920s and again since 1951 with the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, (West) Germany. From this institutional perspective, it is the association with the Institute that provides the basis for what is considered critical theory and who is considered to be a critical theorist. This *Handbook* works with and against its branded identification, concretising as well as refuting it.

We retain the moniker ‘Frankfurt School’ in the title to distinguish the character of its critical theory from other seemingly non-traditional approaches to society, including the positivist traditions of Marxist thought, constructivist idealism, French philosophies of structure, events and rhizomes,

post-colonialism, the abstract negativity of subjectivism, including the existentialist traditions and contemporary Anthropocene, and justice-orientated abstract normativism.

## CRITICAL THEORY: AN OUTLINE<sup>2</sup>

In its original formulation, critical theory is characterised by thinking against the flow of the (reified) world. It is an attempt to brush against its grain to reveal its foundation in historically specific social relations. It was the first serious Marxist attempt to confront the historical materialism of the orthodox Marxist tradition. According to the orthodoxy, labour is a transhistorical objective necessity and the various modes of production present historically specific forms of labour economy. In this view, history is objectively unfolding towards a 'higher' mode of production: socialism. For the orthodoxy, therefore, there can be no such thing as the critique of labour. There can only be a critique of the capitalist irrationality of labour organisation, leading to the endorsement of socialism as a rational form of labour organisation.<sup>3</sup> Orthodox Marxism thus conceived of capitalism as transition to socialism either through reformist struggle for recognition of labour rights or revolutionary struggle as midwife for a centrally planned labour economy.<sup>4</sup> In the 1920s, Frankfurt School critical theory emerged from within the constraints of these positions as well as the deadly hostility that existed amongst their respective supporters and between the latter and their nationalist foes.

Following Max Horkheimer, the opposite of a critical theory of society is not an uncritical theory: it is 'traditional theory'. For Horkheimer, traditional theory is uncritical of its own social and historical preconditions. Instead of seeking to establish the social and historical constitution of its object, it identifies society as given – mere data. Against idealism, it holds that positivism is an element

of critical thought. Critical theory is about the conceptuality of a historical reality. It is both a method of thought and a process of thinking in and through the social object. It is not a method of organising concepts and of thinking about society. Rather than applying thought to the social object, it argues that conceptuality holds sway within it. This insight formulates the task of critical theory as an immanent critique of society, one that sets out to uncover what is active in objects. Thus, against positivism, it holds that in its immediate and direct appearance the whole of society is untrue.

Horkheimer's 'Traditional and Critical Theory' argues that in its posited appearance, society presents itself in the form of petrified relations, which perpetuate themselves as if by some independent dynamic that is regulated by invisible forces. This appearance is real as necessary illusion, which is ideology; the ideology of the social object is its appearance as natural. According to Horkheimer, Marx was the first critical theorist who conceived of capitalist society as an objective illusion.<sup>5</sup> That is, the fetishism of commodities is real as the objective inversion of the social relations that vanish in their appearance as a relationship between economic quantities, which are regulated by an invisible hand that, as Adorno put it, takes care of 'both the beggar and the king'.<sup>6</sup> What has vanished cannot be identified nor conceptualised; what remains is the social subject as a non-conceptuality.<sup>7</sup> Abstract things neither posit themselves nor do they impose and reproduce themselves according to some innate objectively unfolding logic. Rather, it is the social relations, individuals in and through their social praxis, that render social objectivity valid by bestowing it with a consciousness and a will. The veracity of this insight is no way challenged by the equally valid insight that the subjects act under the compulsion of social objectivity, on the pain of ruin and disaster. In this context, critical theory is best seen as an attempt at conceptualising capitalist social objectivity

as a definite form of human social practice. Critical theory thus becomes a negative dialectic of the conceptualised praxis (*begriffene Praxis*) of capitalist social relations.<sup>8</sup>

As argued by Horkheimer in 'Traditional and Critical Theory', Marx's critique of political economy amounts to a devastating judgment on existence, not just of the economic sphere but of society as a whole, as a totality. Totality is a negative concept of the wrong state of things. For Horkheimer, Marx's critique of political economy is social critique. It is critique of the economic categories as the valid categories of a 'false' society. For Adorno, Marx's critical theory is characterised by its resistance to substituting the truth content of thought for its 'social function and its conditioning by interests'. Traditional theory, says Adorno, 'refrains from a critique' of social contents, and '[remains] indifferent to it'.<sup>9</sup> It classifies and defines social phenomena but does not look into them. The purpose of critical theory as a critique of ideology is to uncover what is active in things to reveal the socially constituted principle of compulsion, that power of society as a whole, in which the social subject, Man in her social relations, appears as a mere character-mask (Adorno) or personification (Marx) of reified relations between seemingly natural social things. It is of course true, as traditional theory recognises, that the 'life of all men hangs' by the profitable extraction of surplus value.<sup>10</sup> Time really is money and money is money only as more money. Yet it does not ask why that might be so and does not inquire into its conceptuality – that is, it does not attempt to comprehend the social laws that are innate to this mode of human social reproduction as definite laws of human social practice.

Furthermore, critical theory holds that social reality and theoretical praxis are the same and not the same. There is neither an untheoretical reality nor can reality be reduced to thought. Reality, the real, entails theory as the condition of its comprehension, meaning and practical intelligibility. Whether something is rational is a matter of thought

and interpretation. The comprehension of reality is a theoretical effort and the critique of reality is therefore a critique of its theorising. Reality neither speaks for itself nor by itself. Its critique is fundamentally a theoretical critique, which is also a critique of epistemology and science, that includes philosophy and political economy. As a critical theory, therefore, materialism is 'a dissolution of things understood as dogmatic'.<sup>11</sup> In this context, Lukács' notion of 'false consciousness', which he developed most clearly in his *History and Consciousness*, is unhelpful. In the 'enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world' of capitalist social relations, thought too is enchanted, perverted and topsy-turvy. Critical theory is here characterised as an effort of critique, making thought work, which entails confrontation of the cogitative account of society with its experience. Critical theory holds that the theoretical concept of society is fundamentally an experienced concept and vice versa.<sup>12</sup> Traditional theory might want to analyse society on the basis of algorithmic data. It can do this because it has no experience of society. What counts are numbers; whether numbers inflate or deflate is, however, of no concern to the numbers themselves. It is a concern for the social subject, and the validity of inflation or deflation is therefore a social validity. For traditional theory, experience is not a scientific category. It therefore excludes what is vital from its analytical gaze. Nevertheless, the development, say, of economic theory into social statistics is not 'false', as opposed to the 'right' theory of so-called Marxian economics. Economics, as the science of economic matter, meets definite social needs, takes the direct appearance of society as immediate proof of its veracity, analyses the economic phenomena and articulates the economic quantities in the form of mathematical equations. In this manner, it rationalises society by scientific-mathematical method. It does all this in the name of scientific method and accuracy without once asking itself what the economic categories are, what the economic quantities

are quantities of and, indeed, why the effort of human social reproduction appears in the form of economic quantities that present themselves devoid of innate human contents. For the science of economic matter, the consideration of such contents, and questions about their human-social validity, amounts to a metaphysical distraction. It inserts into economics a non-economic subject, disrupting the economic idea of purely economic matter.<sup>13</sup>

The critique of economics as a social science without social content does not entail its rejection as a science of 'false' consciousness. It rather entails social critique – that is, critique of a society that expresses itself in the form of economic categories and economic matter, which economic science seeks to render intelligible by rationalising the economic appearance of society, without distraction. Traditional social theory does not see that economic forces are forces of definite social relations. Why, indeed, does this content, human social reproduction, the satisfaction of human needs, take the form of independent economic categories, upon whose power 'the life of all man hangs by'?<sup>14</sup> The theory of society becomes no less traditional when it demythologises the social object into a secular 'logic of things' that, akin to an abstract system of logic, structures the actual behaviour, consciousness and mentality of the actual individuals and their libidos, too.<sup>15</sup>

In Adorno's memorable formulations in *Negative Dialectics*, reality requires thought for its comprehension, and historical materialism is critique of society understood dogmatically.<sup>16</sup> It is critique of society through theoretical critique. Critical theory is characterised by its attempt to dissolve the dogmatic posture of social objectivity by revealing its vanished social genesis. It holds that in order to grasp the world one has to be within it. Critical theory is critical on the condition that it thinks through society. What is vital about economic quantities is not their quantitative expansion. What is vital is the sheer unrest of life for access to the means of subsistence,

which for its success depends on economic growth for its own sake, on the accumulation of abstract wealth for accumulation's sake. As a critical theory the critique of political economy entails the recognition of suffering as the hidden truth of the relations of economic objectivity. Critical theory, therefore, is a critique of a world that is 'hostile to the subject', no matter that it is the social individual herself who endows the reified world with a consciousness and a will, not just in the economic sphere but in society at large, body and soul.<sup>17</sup> In fact, Alfred Sohn-Rethel, who never established a close working relationship with the Institute but who stayed in close contact with some of its members, and whose theoretical concerns were also close, focused the programme of research most clearly: it amounts to an anamnesis of the social origin, or genesis, of real abstractions.<sup>18</sup>

## HISTORY AND THOUGHT

The Institute was founded in Frankfurt am Main in 1923, where it was affiliated with the University of Frankfurt am Main. It was the creation of Felix Weil. Weil was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He was the son of a wealthy grain merchant and was able to use money from his father's business to finance the Institute. Weil graduated with a doctoral degree in political science from Frankfurt University. His doctoral thesis was about the practical problems of implanting socialism through central economic planning. It was published by Karl Korsch.

The immediate background to his initiative was the First Marxist Work Week, which Weil also financed. It was a week-long symposium in 1922 attended amongst others by György Lukács, Karl Korsch, Karl August Wittfogel and Friedrich Pollock, a close friend of Horkheimer's and co-founder of the Institute. Wittfogel was a historian noted for his studies of ancient China and is best known for developing the notion of an Asiatic mode

of production. Karl Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* (1923), which broke the ground for the development of heterodox Marxism, was discussed at the symposium. Korsch worked at the Institute in exile but never joined it formally.

Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*, also published in 1923, was a major inspiration for the development of the Frankfurt School, particularly because of its argument about reification and identification of the importance of Hegel's philosophy for Marx's critique of political economy. The relationship between Lukács and critical theory is perhaps best described with reference to Wiggershaus' account of a meeting between Lukács and Adorno in 1925.<sup>19</sup> Adorno, who began his association with the Institute in 1928 and became a formal member in New York in 1938, is said to have been shocked to find that, in an attempt to restore his reputation as a reliable supporter of the Bolsheviks, Lukács was retracting precisely what had attracted Adorno to his work in the first place – namely, the critique of capitalist society as a (reified) totality. If, indeed, Lukács was Adorno's intellectual mentor, the mentoring proved short-lived and unreliable. Similarly, Neumann and Kirchheimer had started out as (socialist) students of Carl Schmitt's, and Marcuse had started his second doctorate, his *Habilitationsschrift*, under Martin Heidegger. Schmitt and Heidegger promptly supported the Nazi regime and joined its ranks as intellectual flagbearers.

Marcuse joined the Institute in 1932, having been recruited by Leo Löwenthal. Löwenthal had joined the newly founded Institute in 1926 and established himself as its leading expert on the sociology of literature and mass culture. He was the founding managing editor of the *Zeitschrift*, which was published from the United States for most of its existence. In the face of the Nazis' growing influence, including at Frankfurt University, the Institute's founders decided in September 1930 to prepare to move abroad. They established a branch in Geneva and moved the

Institute's funds to The Netherlands. In 1932, shortly after Löwenthal had recruited him, Marcuse was sent to Geneva in preparation for possible exile. The Gestapo closed down the Institute in early 1933 for 'activities hostile to the state'.<sup>20</sup>

The initial research at the Institute was close to Weil's interests in the social history of the workers' movement. Its first publishing venture was the first critical edition of the collected works of Marx and Engels, with the Institute acting as a mediator between the Moscow-based Marx–Engels Institute and the German Social-Democratic Party. It was this venture that reinforced existing, strongly held suspicions about the Institute as subversive and led to a police investigation into the backgrounds of its members. The police concluded that Felix Weil and Friedrich Pollock were undoubtedly communists. Pollock came in for special treatment on the grounds of his activities during the Munich Soviet in 1919.

During the 1920s, Löwenthal's sociological approach was the exception in the Institute. Its designated first director was Kurt Albert Gerlach, who died before the Institute's inauguration. He sympathised with anarcho-syndicalism and published on industrial relations and the conditions of female factory workers in England. Gerlach's successor and founding director was Karl Gruenberg, a Marxist historian seen as the 'Father of Austrian Socialism'. He counted Otto Bauer, Rudolf Hilferding and Karl Renner amongst his students. Gruenberg took his journal *Archive for the History of Socialism and the Labour Movement*, which he had started in Vienna in 1910, with him to Frankfurt. It became the house journal of the Institute until 1930, when it ceased publication. The two most important publications of the Institute during this time were Henryk Grossmann's *The Law of Accumulation and Breakdown of the Capitalist System* and Friedrich Pollock's *Attempts at Planned Economy in the Soviet Union 1917–1927*, both published in 1929. After Gruenberg suffered from a stroke, he retired, in 1929, and

Pollock stepped in as acting director. He was succeeded in 1930 by Max Horkheimer, who was not the obvious candidate, but who was chosen despite his leanings towards council communism. In the same year, Erich Fromm, who became one of the founders of 'socialist humanism', joined the Institute. Under Horkheimer's directorship, the Institute's research profile started to change from one focused on mainly economic developments and labour-movement studies towards empirical social research, social theory, cultural study, philosophy and social psychology, firming up the interdisciplinary research associated with critical theory.

Frankfurt School critical theory was shaped by profound experiences. It originated in the aftermath of the failed Soviet revolution, after Lenin's death and at the beginning of the new economic policy that was accompanied by the resolutely dictatorial direction of the Soviet state under Stalin. It originated, too, in the aftermath of the failed German revolution of 1918 that led to the short-lived Weimar Republic, which despised the revolutionaries and was rejected by the *ancien régime* and its willing foot-soldiers. Horkheimer took on the directorship of the Institute against the background of the crash of 1929 and the worldwide socio-economic and political consequences that followed: on the one hand, hyperinflation, depression, austerity (the German chancellor from 30 March 1930 to 30 May 1932, Heinrich Brüning, was called the *Hungerkanzler* – the famine chancellor), mass unemployment, political violence and assassinations, emergency government, politicised labour relations and a strong but bitterly divided labour movement and, on the other, Nazi storm-troopers. Against the background of German Nazism and Italian Fascism, Herbert Marcuse wrote about the coming to power of a new form of liberalism, which he conceived of as an authoritarian liberalism.<sup>21</sup> It entailed, he argued in 1934, the 'existentialization and totalization of the political sphere'.<sup>22</sup> The decisive experiences for the formation of critical theory were the

failure of revolutions, the total collapse of the German labour movement in 1933, the conditions of 'bare life', the Nazi dictatorship, Stalinist show trials and concentration camps, world war, exile and disorientation, antisemitism as political program and industrialised slaughter.

With the exception of Adorno, the small band of critical theorists left Germany in 1933, finally settling in either New York or Los Angeles. Walter Benjamin, the great literary critic and condemner of positivist Marxism, eventually settled in Paris. During the 1930s, the Institute provided him with publishing opportunities and, most importantly, financial support. Adorno who had been introduced to Benjamin in the early 1920s by a mutual friend, Siegfried Kracauer, was instrumental in securing this support. When Paris fell to the Nazis in 1940, he fled south with the intention of escaping to the United States via Spain. Informed by the chief of police at the France–Spain border that he would be turned over to the Gestapo, Benjamin committed suicide. Adorno had hoped to remain in Germany after 1933 and until 1934 hoped that the German army would take over. He enrolled for advanced studies at Oxford in June 1934 and during the next four years made trips to Germany to see his parents and, in 1937, to New York to visit the Institute. He left Europe for the United States in 1938.

Initially the focus of study in exile was authoritarianism, starting with the collected volume *Studies on Authority and Family* (1936), to which, amongst others, Fromm, Marcuse and Horkheimer contributed, then Horkheimer's 'The Authoritarian State' (1942) as well as particular analyses of the character of the Nazi state (Neumann, Pollock and also Kirchheimer and Gurland). Kristallnacht in 1938 was the immediate precursor of Horkheimer's 'The Jews of Europe' (1939). The extermination of European Jewry changed the Institute's research outlook decisively. Its two bases in the United States, in New York and Los

Angeles, developed overlapping and yet distinct research programmes on antisemitism and unreason. One was led by Pollock from the east coast, leading to the publication of a four-volume work entitled *Studies in Anti-Semitism*; and the other was led by Horkheimer and Adorno from California on the dialectic of Enlightenment (un)reason, leading to their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and to Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason*, both published in 1947. *The Authoritarian Personality* was published in 1950 and Adorno's *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* in 1951. Erich Fromm's *The Fear of Freedom* (1941) explored damaged life in social-psychological terms.

The Institute returned to Frankfurt in 1951. However, of its core members, only Pollock, Adorno and Horkheimer returned; Leo Löwenthal, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, Franz Neumann and Otto Kirchheimer did not, nor did the majority of the Institute's members. The designation 'Frankfurt School', which came to the fore only in the 1950s, need not, then, be fixed on the Institute's post-war location; it is much more fruitful, rather, to see the Institute's decidedly heterodox Marxist social critique as originating in a specific formative experience in Weimar Germany and developing through the experience of exile, loss and disorientation. It continued to mature, against itself, in the context of Auschwitz, and later established itself as a dissenting voice in the Cold War silences. Later still, it became a theoretical expression of the new left that emerged in the movements associated with 1968.

Of the critical theorists who returned to Germany in the 1950s, Adorno is the one whose publishing took off, leading especially to *Negative Dialectics* (1966) and *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), which was published posthumously. The experience of exile and loss, authoritarianism and barbarism, tragedy and dashed hope, re-emerge in *Negative Dialectics* as a form of thought that turns thinking inside out by revealing its affective origin in 'suffering'. The experienced

catastrophe was not an aberration of an otherwise civilised world; it showed what the civilised world is capable of. What lies within its concept is not the idea of a future humanity that, reconciled with itself, organises its social affairs in freedom from coercion and according to its needs – this great idea of an equality of individual human needs that constitutes the association of the free and equal, as Marx put it in the *Communist Manifesto*. Rather, what lies within its concept is the promise of barbaric violence. The catastrophe asserted the hidden veracity of bourgeois reason, revealing its conceptuality in domination. Adorno's negative dialectic claimed that 'Hitler had imposed a new categorical imperative upon humanity in the state of their unfreedom: to arrange their thinking and conduct, so that Auschwitz never repeats itself, so that nothing similar will happen again'.<sup>23</sup> In the context of post-war Germany, and beyond, Adorno's stance was singular and unique. It enthused the emerging new left, with frustrating consequences. Adorno rejected the student revolt of 1968 as quasi-action.

In 1962, Adorno had called for a 'praxis that fights barbarism'<sup>24</sup> and in his lectures endorsed Marx as the thinker who directed his critique 'at the substance' of society – that is, the 'social production and reproduction of the life of society as a whole'.<sup>25</sup> He upheld the insight that 'society remains class struggle'.<sup>26</sup> However, and distinct from a whole tradition of Marxist theory, class struggle was not something positive or indeed desirable. On the contrary, class struggle is the objective necessity of the false society. It belongs to its concept. *Negative Dialectics* thus argues that bourgeois society is 'antagonistic from the outset' and that it 'maintains itself only through antagonism'.<sup>27</sup> Class struggle does not posit an alternative to capitalist society and does not go beyond it. That is to say, class struggle is not a positive category of history in the making. It is an entirely negative category, and the struggle to make ends meet is no longer an ontological privilege. Rather, it is a

great misfortune. 'Proletarian language is dictated by hunger. The poor chew words to fill their bellies.'<sup>28</sup> Like Benjamin, in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', Adorno holds that 'there is a tenderness only in the coarsest demand: that no-one should go hungry any more'.<sup>29</sup> The orthodox Marxist dictum of capitalism as transition to socialism had long been shown up, since Lenin, as mere leadership propaganda, which lived on in academic circles and as official state ideology in the countries of the then Eastern bloc.

Herbert Marcuse too demanded a praxis that fights barbarism. His writings snatched Marx from the orthodox embrace, establishing a new Hegelian Marxism in *Reason and Revolution* (1941) and Freudian Marxism in *Eros and Civilisation* (1955) and denouncing eastern Marxism in *Soviet Marxism* (1958), where he developed the notion of the communist individual as the subject of emancipated society. He established the contours of a new revolutionary subject amidst the closed society of an administered world in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), posing the conundrum of revolution: slaves, he argued, 'have to be *free* for their liberation before they can become free'.<sup>30</sup> At the height of the 1968 movement, he explored liberation in 'An Essay on Liberation' (1969); he later assessed the balances of the forces of history in *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, advocating a council-communist approach to revolution (1972); and in his final work, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978), he examined the political character of works of art. Contrary to Adorno's characterisation of the movement of 1968 as quasi-action, Marcuse – and also Ernst Bloch, who, though not amongst the central figures of the Frankfurt School was a figurative intellectual influence on it – participated in the revolt and influenced a great number of its student activists, from Hans-Jürgen Krahl and Rudi Dutschke to Angela Davis. Unlike Adorno's post-war publications, which critiqued the commodified world of social relations, Marcuse's focus on the power and

probability of the rebellious subject, charting the emergence and assertion of the new left in theoretical terms and calling for liberation, endorsing the movements associated with 1968 in a direct manner.

Critical theory's call for a praxis that fights barbarism entails a shift from a critical theory of the object towards one of the subject. It articulates the need for the subject either to prevent the barbarism inherent in unfreedom from asserting itself (Adorno) or to resist the totally administered world and reified forms of experience, consciousness and rationality (Marcuse), including gender relations, racism, sexual repression, body and soul (Fromm), to achieve liberation of the subject from oppression and repressive personality in whatever form. The movements associated with 1968 fractured the post-war consensus irretrievably. For some, it was the soon to be disappointed beginning of radical and indeed revolutionary change. Others saw it as an opportunity for greater tolerance and progressive democratic renewal. Conservative critics recognised 1968 as the beginning of the end of their world. They held the Frankfurt School responsible for the turmoil and denounced it as one of the causes of terrorism.<sup>31</sup>

It was against this background that the Habermasian revision of critical theory found its voice. The new direction of critical theory under Habermas might best be exemplified by his retort to Adorno's insight into the 'radical effect [of the capitalist form of labour] on the concept of practice'.<sup>32</sup> For Adorno, in capitalism, 'the needs of human beings, the satisfaction of human beings, is never more than a sideshow';<sup>33</sup> he proclaimed that 'the abolition of hunger [requires] a change in the relations of production'.<sup>34</sup> In distinction, Habermas argued that '*liberation from hunger and misery* does not necessarily converge with *liberation from servitude and degradation*, for there is no automatic developmental relation between labor and interaction'.<sup>35</sup> His path-breaking work is *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984), which concerns the process of formation



of public opinion and rational discussion. It is an attempt to rescue the ideas of the Enlightenment from the critique to which Horkheimer and Adorno subjected them in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Habermas moved critical theory away from Marx and back to the principles of idealist reason and classical conceptions of political morality. Habermas reconfigured critical theory as an extension of the Enlightenment project, seeking to free reason from instrumental rationality in support of a perfectly civil society, constitutionalism and cosmopolitan democratic forms of government. Habermas' democratic conception of reason involved what he termed 'discourse ethics', which posits communication as reason's form of social action. His revision of critical theory as a philosophy of reason unbound by the unsocial irrationality of the relations of domination and exploitation positions the democratic constitutional state as the pinnacle of social morality. His communicative action derived from many sources and was consciously eclectic, from Gadamer's conservatism via Luhmann's system theory to pragmatic philosophy, which in the case of Dewey the critical theory of Adorno and Horkheimer had regarded with great suspicion.

Axel Honneth's theory of recognition builds on Habermas' pragmatist turn. His contribution came to the fore during the 1990s, after the collapse of the Eastern bloc and at the emergence of a so-called new economy that was variously called neoliberalism, financialisation or globalisation. His account focuses on normative forms of social interaction in the purportedly differentiated economic, political and private spheres that are held to be independent of the dominating economic logic of the social reproduction of capitalist society.<sup>36</sup> This also means, however, that he regards such a conception of the economic logic of social reproduction as one that critical theory does not touch. Whereas Habermas returns to Kant to establish the reason of communicative action on rational and moral bases, Honneth goes back

to Hegel to establish his theory of recognition with philosophical argument. As he sees it, modernity is characterised by a welcome expansion of rights claims by actors who, as a consequence of their struggle for recognition, 'have to be taken into consideration'.<sup>37</sup> He therefore argues that because of the dynamic of recognition, which establishes an 'expansive participation in rational will-formation',<sup>38</sup> contemporary society contains within itself the 'promise of freedom'.<sup>39</sup> The poverty of conditions, which critical theory originally recognised as belonging to the conceptuality of the capitalist social relations, now appears contingent upon the capacity and power of the forces of recognition to impose participatory demands upon economic processes, moralising the global economy through cosmopolitan schemes. In fact, his proposals for socialism are not dissimilar to the reformist ideas at the start of the last century, which proposed to create institutions of social freedom and solidarity that realise the Enlightenment's normative project for society as a whole, establishing a just and fair labour economy beyond social-class divisions and struggles. Honneth links critical theory with concrete practices and institutions, which entail the promises of freedom through what Hirsch termed a politics of 'radical reformism'.<sup>40</sup>

The distinction between the old and the new is sharp. Whereas the founding critical theorists conceived of bourgeois society as one of unfreedom, and barbarism as a potential means of sustaining it, 'contemporary critical theory' goes back to the philosophers of reason, Kant and Hegel, to ascertain the promise of freedom in contemporary society. Instead of stopping its further progress, as Benjamin had demanded for the sake of avoiding catastrophe, the critical theory associated with Habermas and Honneth now demands its further development to achieve the progress of reason beyond the pathologies of the present. Whereas the founding thinkers understood social pathologies as innate to the existing relations of social objectivity,

it now seems that social pathology is contingent upon the power of the social forces that act upon social situations. The judgment on existence that Horkheimer brought to attention in his 1937 critique of traditional theory appears no longer as a judgment about the character of definite social relations. Instead, it appears as a contingent social situation that can be rectified depending upon the power of those left behind to demand recognition of their needs through democratic assembly.

Therefore, the idea of a linear trajectory, however fractured, from the founding critical theorists – Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse in particular – to the contemporary critical theory of Habermas and Honneth is more apparent than real. It is pure ideology to claim that a first generation was replaced by a second generation, and now by a third generation, etc., which shaped critical theory in its own specific ways according to the demands of its day. Discontinuities and drastic shifts notwithstanding, it is also the case that, mostly under the radar of academic officialdom and on the margins of academic respectability, an Adorno-inspired critical social theory of the object and also of the subject continues both within and outside the university and both within Europe and outside Europe, including the Americas. On the one hand, there is the social critique of the object that led to a reconstruction of Marx's critique of political economy as a critical social theory, including *Wertkritik*, Open Marxism and the *Neue Marx Lektüre*, associated with Hans-Georg Backhaus and Helmut Reichelt, both students of Adorno's. In the United States, the development of critical theory as a critique of the economic object belongs to Moishe Postone, as well as Patrick Murray, Christian Lotz and Tony Smith. On the other hand, a critical theory of the subject – experience, history and praxis – was developed by Negt, Kluge, Schmidt and Krahll, all students of Adorno's, and Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, Roberto Schwarz and Paulo Arantes, as well as Jameson, in his critique of postmodernism and aesthetics. Feminist critical theory was

developed amongst others by Nancy Fraser in the United States and Regina Becker-Schmidt, Axeli-Gudrun Knapp and Roswitha Scholz in Germany. Furthermore, John Holloway emerged as the voice of the subject in resistance, negating power. Since the 1970s, the early critical theory of the state, from Horkheimer's authoritarian state to Pollock's and Neumann's analyses of the character of the Nazi state, has provided the background to the emergence of a heterodox Marxist state theory that developed in the context of the political challenge of 1968, the crisis of the welfare state and so-called globalisation. In the German case, Johannes Agnoli pioneered a critique of political form and also legal form, which developed further as the German state-derivation debate and as the Conference of Socialist Economists state debate in the UK.<sup>41</sup>

Considered as a concept, critical theory has its own conceptuality. The persistence of critical theory, its continued resistance against traditional theory and its own 'traditionalisation', and its expansion into new areas, including urbanity and space and post-colonialism, show first of all that its original concerns with social praxis and the critique of social totality remain unbroken. Furthermore, they also show that the development of critical theory is not linear. Critical theory is not some abstract metatheory. Rather, it belongs to and develops in and through the social constellations that it seeks to render intelligible, with practical political intent. Lastly, critical theory is not bound by disciplinary borders and never was. On the contrary, it is characterised by its refusal to comply with academic discipline and disciplinary requirements. It thinks against the order of the world to understand it better. Interdisciplinarity does not mean lumping disciplines together; rather, it entails thinking in and through social relations, becoming aware of totality through the particular traits of the manifold manifestations that constitute society as a definite praxis of human social reproduction. The conceptuality of critical theory defies definition. It is critique of society for the sake of society.

At its best, and with reference to Marx, it makes the petrified relations dance by uncovering the sheer unrest of life that endows society as a real abstraction with a dynamic, a consciousness and a will, however perverted, in the form of the social object and the social actions that it entails.

## SCOPE AND PURPOSE

The *Handbook* expounds the development of critical theory from its founding thinkers to its contemporary formulations in an interdisciplinary and global setting. The *Handbook* showcases the scholarly rigor, intellectual acuteness and negative force of critical social theory in all its theoretical manifestations, past and present, and sketches its potential future trajectories in a world that remains fundamentally hostile to the needs of human beings and to the survival, as opposed to the disintegration, of human society itself.

Our contributors are not academic gatekeepers and disciplinarians, nor do they understand critical theory in institutional terms. We asked them to think freely and to disregard the security of academic borders. The *Handbook* maps the terrain of a critical social theory expounding its distinctive character vis-à-vis alternative theoretical perspectives, exploring its theoretical foundations and developments, conceptualising its subject matters both past and present and signalling its possible future in a time of war and terror, climate change, mass migration, economic hardship, nativism, nationalism and populism.

Critical theory, at least in its founding tradition, did not look on the bright side. Especially in a time of great uncertainty and social mischief it is important to look into the eye of the storm and ascertain what is active in things. With Adorno, the *Handbook* holds that the time of human emancipation from social compulsion by real abstractions is the time of human purposes. ‘Freely

disposable time’ (Adorno) – ‘time for enjoyment’ (Marx) – is the very content of an emancipated humanity.<sup>42</sup> It posits a form of human wealth that is entirely at odds with the existing form of wealth, in which time is money and in which money is more money. *Negative Dialectics* brushes the categories of social objectivity against their grain with practical intent so that the reason of human emancipation does not become ‘a piece of the politics it was supposed to lead out of’.<sup>43</sup>

## VOLUMES AND STRUCTURE

The *Handbook* is published in three volumes. Volume 1 is entitled *Key Texts and Contributions to a Critical Theory of Society*. It maps the terrain of critical social theory in terms of key contributors and key contributions, subject matters and critical theoretical developments. Volume 2, *Key Themes in the Context of the Twentieth Century*, introduces the key themes of a critical theory of society and explores critical theory as a critique of the social object and the social subject. Volume 3, *Contexts*, expounds the development of critical theory in the context of alternative theoretical approaches and in a contemporary context of social crises, movements and theories.

Volume 1 contains chapters on key contributors to the development of a critical theory of society beyond the confines of the Frankfurt School. With the exception of Chapter 9, which explores *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the chapters provide biographical introductions to key thinkers and develop a critical textual and contextual analysis of key notions and texts.<sup>44</sup>

Volume 1 comprises three parts. Part I, ‘The Frankfurt School and Critical Theory’, contains chapters that introduce the key founding figures of a critical theory of society, including John Abromeit on Horkheimer, Christoph Hesse on Löwenthal, Kieran Durkin on Fromm, Paul Mattick Jr on Grossmann,

Karsten Olson on Neumann, Frank Schale, Lisa Klingsporn and Hubertus Buchstein on Kirchheimer, David Kaufmann on Benjamin, Charles Reitz on Marcuse, Nico Bobka and Dirk Braunstein on Adorno, plus Marcel Stoetzler on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a single publication. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was co-authored by Horkheimer and Adorno and includes an important contribution from Löwenthal. It is a core text of critical theory, in which they scrutinised the demise of the age of reason into barbarism. Distinct from traditional Marxism, it argued that the capitalist relations do not contain a developmental logic towards human emancipation. Instead, they manifest and continue to manifest barbarism as prospective destiny. Jürgen Habermas held that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* conceived of bourgeois society as a mode of irrational rationality beyond reconciliation – that is, it left ‘nothing in reserve to which it might appeal’ for it lacked ‘any dynamism upon which critique could base its hope’.<sup>45</sup> This led to Habermas’ revision of critical theory as a discourse ethics intended to assure the further progress of enlightenment reason in contemporary society.

Part II, ‘Theoretical Elaborations of a Critical Social Theory’, contains chapters that introduce the development of critical social theory by figures that were closely associated with the founding thinkers either as colleagues, friends or students. Its chapters include Cat Moir on Ernst Bloch and his philosophy of hope and Eric-John Russell on Georg Lukács, whose work was not only of immense importance for the development of critical theory but also subject to robust critique by Adorno in particular.<sup>46</sup> Ansgar Martins focuses on Siegfried Kracauer, also a close friend and critic of Adorno’s. He was an early critic of mass culture, who, like Habermas some decades later, challenged Adorno’s critical theory for its negativity – nothing remains on which to fall back and build something new. Two further chapters, by Christian Voller and Hubertus Buchstein, introduce Alfred Seidel and A.L.R. Gurland.

Gurland is a largely forgotten member of the Institute. In exile he worked closely with Neumann and Kirchheimer on the political character of bourgeois society and Nazism. Compared with Gurland, Alfred Seidel is entirely unknown. He was, however, a decisive figure in the heterodox theoretical milieu of Frankfurt in the early 1920s, and the emergent critical theorists were familiar with him as a thinker of unconditional negativity.

Frank Engster and Oliver Schlaudt’s chapter about Alfred Sohn-Rethel introduces a thinker who appears on the margins of the official history of critical theory. In the 1920s, he was in close contact with Bloch, Benjamin, Kracauer and Adorno. Especially for Adorno’s exposition of critical theory as negative dialectic, Sohn-Rethel’s understanding of historical materialist critique as anamnesis of the genesis of social objectivity and of bourgeois society as real abstraction were of decisive importance. With one exception – Johannes Agnoli, whom Stephan Grigat discusses – the remaining chapters in this part introduce theoretical elaborations and challenges by students of Horkheimer and Adorno, including Hermann Kocyba on Alfred Schmidt, Richard Langston on Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, Jodi Maiso on Hans-Jürgen Krahl, Ingo Elbe on Helmut Reichelt, Riccardo Bellofiore and Tommaso Redolfi Riva on Hans-Georg Backhaus and Christoph Henning on Jürgen Habermas. Schmidt’s work focused on praxis as a category of critical social theory. He conceived of it with nature as a category of the human metabolism, explored the capitalist conceptuality of nature and human praxis and rejected the structuralist view of history and society, Althusser’s in particular, as an exemplar of traditional theory. For Schmidt, the economic critique of Marx is a critique of the entire system of social reproduction. With the exception of Habermas, this understanding of Marx’s critique of political economy as a critical social theory is key also to the theoretical exploration of the subsequent contributors to the theoretical elaborations of

critical theory. Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt introduced the notion of obstinacy as a category of the critique of history as universal, linear and unfolding. Experienced history is cognisant of violence as the midwife of the constituted forms of civility. Social objectivity hides suffering. Turning to the chapter on Hans-Jürgen Krahl, who was at the forefront of 1968 in Germany, we see his exposition of critical theory as critique of political economy as practical. Given the conditions of (economic) objectivity and, as Marcuse had argued, integration of the working class into the capitalist system, Krahl asked about the agent and the means of human emancipation. He developed the idea of a praxis of social struggle as revolutionary process – an idea that, partly in critique of Habermas, Negt and Kluge later explored with greater depth when writing about proletarian experience and the proletarian public sphere. Krahl's work on economic objectivity opened the door of critical theory to autonomist Marxism (see Volume 3), Holloway's account (see below) and to the so-called *Neue Marx Lektüre*, associated in particular with the work of Reichelt and Backhaus. One of its 'beginnings' is a paper on the value form, prepared by Backhaus for a seminar led by Adorno, but which never materialised due to Adorno's untimely death. Backhaus' value-form analysis emphasised the social character of capitalist wealth that in the form of money presents itself in the form of seemingly independent economic categories. He explored these categories as inverted social categories. The *Neue Marx Lektüre* put Adorno's critical theory to work on Marx's *Capital*. For Reichelt in particular, the new reading entailed a negative dialectic which he unfolded in the form of a dialectical presentation of economic categories, uncovering a process of economic inversion of definite social relations. In their specific ways, the contributions by Backhaus, Reichelt and Krahl, as well as those of Schmidt, Negt and Kluge, developed critical theory as a critique of society, of social praxis in the form of inverted economic categories,

uncovering a dynamic of social compulsion through the movement of fundamentally economic things. The two exceptions to these elaborations of critical theory are Johannes Agnoli and Jürgen Habermas. Agnoli's critical theory focused on the state as the political form of bourgeois society. His critique of politics examined the political character of the critique of political economy against the background of earlier critical theory about the authoritarian state and its enduring significance in the post-war liberal democracies. In context of these further elaborations of critical theory, Jürgen Habermas' critical theory is distinct. It offers neither a critique of the economic object and its political character nor a critique of the socially specific forms of human praxis and its relationship to nature. His critical theory is characterised by its ethical commitments towards reason. He established a critical theory of social civility and ethical conduct through moral government. Habermas is the outstanding German public intellectual of the last century, and his critical theory provides philosophical underpinning to his commitments.

Part III, 'Critical Reception and Further Developments', contains chapters that introduce the further development of a critical theory of society by figures that were influenced by, took up and elaborated key themes of Frankfurt School critical theory. In particular, it contains a chapter by Andrew Brower Latz on Gillian Rose, her critique of neo-Kantianism and her notion of 'the broken middle' in post-fascist modernity. The scheme of the *Neue Marx Lektüre* is developed further with a chapter by Elena Louisa Lange on Moishe Postone and his exploration of the critique of political economy as a critique of labour. Postone's work rejects the tradition of labourism and Marxian economics in a direct manner, arguing that Marx's critique of political economy amounts to a critique of labour. This theme is further developed in Ana Cecilia Dinerstein's chapter on John Holloway's critique of the state and political reading of Adorno. The expansion of critical

theory as the dialectical critique of reification and utopia in postmodernity is taken up in Carolyn Lesjak's chapter on the work of Fredric Jameson. Claudia Leeb and Michael J. Thompson's chapters on Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth's notions of redistribution and recognition critically expound the principal development of post-Habermasian thought in critical theory. The part also contains chapters by Andrés Sáenz De Sicilia, Stefan Gandler, Nicholas Brown and Pedro Rocha de Oliveira on Latin American thinkers who developed the tradition of critical theory from within their own historical contexts, socio-economic conditions and cultural settings. These thinkers – Bolívar Echeverría, Adolfo Sánchez Vásquez, Roberto Schwarz and Paulo Arantes – developed their own reading of Marx's critique of political economy as a critical social theory. The chapter on Bolívar Echeverría explores his critique of capitalist social reproduction through the notion of 'ethe', by which he understood historically specific cultural configurations of modes of life. The chapter on Adolfo Sánchez Vásquez introduces his philosophy of praxis as critique of everyday consciousness. This topic is further developed in the chapter on Roberto Schwarz, whose critique of modern Brazilian culture developed the critical-theory notion of 'social form' as critique of realism as social process in the then periphery of capitalist society. Finally, the chapter on Paulo Arantes introduces a thinker of the dialectics of Brazilian modernity and its historical temporality. Arantes reads the 'North' by the 'South', and in this manner he joins Schwarz, Vásquez and Echeverría in making an unrivalled contribution to a critical theory of the so-called periphery and its relationship to global capitalism.

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## Notes

- 1 Max Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory' [1937], in *Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum, 1972), 188–243. Herbert Marcuse, 'Philosophy and Critical Theory' [1937], in *Negations. Essays in Critical Theory* (London: Free Association Books, 1968), 134–58.
- 2 The outline emphasises critical theory as a critique of economic objectivity, which according to Martin Jay and Jürgen Habermas was not something that Adorno especially concerned himself with. Habermas, *Philosophisch-politische Profile* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1987). Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination, A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923–1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973). According to this view critical theory is fundamentally a critique of instrumental reason and of

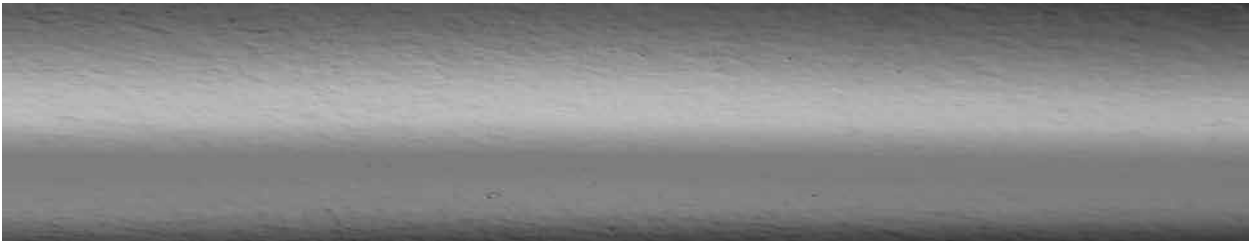
- culture, not of political economy. This is a widely held view. See, for example, Moishe Postone and Barbara Brick, who argue that Friedrich Pollock's work on political economy spoke for the whole Frankfurt School, which allowed Adorno and others to develop more philosophical and cultural critiques. Postone and Brick, 'Critical Pessimism and the Limits of Traditional Marxism', *Theory and Society* 11(5): 617–58, 1982.
- 3 On this see the ground-breaking account of Moishe Postone, *Time, Labour, and Social Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
  - 4 Most decisive are Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', which he wrote in 1940 and were first published in 1942. According to Benjamin in a letter to Gretel Adorno, the *Theses* focused 'some thoughts about which I may say that I have kept them about myself for some twenty years', and they were to establish a break between what he calls 'our' way of thinking and the 'survival of positivism', especially in the Marxism of his time. Yet, they were not meant for publication, which, he said, 'would throw wide open the doors to enthusiastic incomprehension' (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1.3 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 1226–7). According to Benjamin, history is not on the side of the oppressed. He therefore argued for its progress to be stopped – here and now. Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations*, edited with an introduction by Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), 245–55.
  - 5 For further argument about this term and its standing in critical theory, see Hans-Georg Backhaus, 'Between Philosophy and Science: Marxian Social Economy as Critical Theory', in *Open Marxism: Dialectics and History*, edited by W. Bonefeld, R. Gunn and K. Psychopedis (London: Pluto, 1992), 54–92. Helmut Reichelt, 'Marx's Critique of Economic Categories: Reflections on the Problem of Validity in the Dialectical Method of Presentation in *Capital*', *Historical Materialism* 15(4): 3–52, 2007. Werner Bonefeld, *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).
  - 6 Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1990), 251.
  - 7 *Ibid.*, 11: 'all concepts, even the philosophical ones, refer to non-conceptualities'.
  - 8 The term 'conceptualized praxis' is Alfred Schmidt's. Schmidt, 'Praxis', in *Gesellschaft: Beiträge zur Marxschen Theorie 2* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), 264–306.
  - 9 *Negative Dialectics*, 197.
  - 10 *Ibid.*, 320.
  - 11 *Ibid.*, 196. See also Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1990), 494, n. 4.
  - 12 On the importance of the concept of experience in critical theory, see especially the work of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, in particular their *History and Obstinacy* (New York: Zone Books, 2014).
  - 13 On human contents as distraction in economic argument, see Joseph Schumpeter, *Geschichte der oekonomischen Analyse* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rubrecht, 1965). See also Louis Althusser's metaphysics of economic structure and being – he defines the social science as a discourse without a subject and argues that one can recognise Man only on the condition that the 'philosophical myth of Man is reduced to ashes'. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 160, and *For Marx* (London: Verso, 1996), 229. Althusser's theory is entirely traditional in its rejection of the subject, Man in her social relations, as scientific distraction to social theory.
  - 14 *Negative Dialectics*, 320.
  - 15 Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1955). See also Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom* (London: Routledge, 2001).
  - 16 See, for example, *Negative Dialectics*, 11, 196. For recent elaborations, see Matthias Benzer, *The Sociology of Theodor Adorno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and Bonefeld, *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy*, esp. chapter 3.
  - 17 *Negative Dialectics*, 167.
  - 18 Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Warenform und Denkform* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978), 139.
  - 19 Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance* (London: Polity, 1994), 75–6.
  - 20 The notice by the Gestapo can be found in Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 15 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1985), 111–12.
  - 21 As did Hermann Heller in 1933. Heller, 'Authoritarian Liberalism', reprinted in translation, *European Law Journal* 21(3): 295–301, 2015.
  - 22 Herbert Marcuse. 'The Struggle against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State', in *Negations*, 3–42, here 36.
  - 23 *Negative Dialectics*, 365.
  - 24 Theodor Adorno, *Einleitung zur Musiksoziologie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1962), 30.
  - 25 Theodor Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 83, 141.
  - 26 Theodor Adorno, 'Society', in *Critical Theory and Society*, edited by E. Bronner and D. Kellner (London: Routledge, 1989), 267–75, here 272.
  - 27 *Negative Dialectics*, 304, 311.
  - 28 Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005), 102.
  - 29 *Ibid.*, 156. Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', 252–3.

- 30 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012), 41.
- 31 Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 656.
- 32 *Negative Dialectics*, 244.
- 33 Adorno, *Lectures on History and Freedom* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 51.
- 34 Theodor Adorno, 'Introduction', in T. Adorno, H. Albert, R. Darendorf, J. Habermas, J. Pilot and K. Popper, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* (London: Heinemann, 1976), 1–67, here 62.
- 35 Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice* (London: Heinemann, 1973), 207.
- 36 See Axel Honneth, *The Fragmented World of the Social* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).
- 37 Axel Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996), 114–15.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Axel Honneth. *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 10.
- 40 Joachim Hirsch, 'Globalization and the State', *Studies in Political Economy* 54: 39–58, 1997.
- 41 On these debates see the volumes edited by John Holloway and Sol Picciotto, *Capital and State* (London: Arnold, 1978), and Simon Clarke, *The State Debate* (London: Macmillan, 1991).
- 42 Theodor Adorno, *Gesellschaftstheorie und Kulturkritik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975), 43. Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), 252.
- 43 *Negative Dialectics*, 143.
- 44 Pollock's key contribution to the development of critical theory – his theory of state capitalism – is discussed in depth in *Volume 2: Key Themes in the Context of the Twentieth Century* by Alexander Neupert-Doppler in his chapter on political form.
- 45 Jürgen Habermas, 'The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment', *New German Critique* 26: 13–30, here 21, 1982.
- 46 See in particular Adorno's 'Reconciliation under Duress', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, edited by T.W. Adorno (London: Verso, 1977), 160–76.



PART I

# The Frankfurt School and Critical Theory



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# Max Horkheimer and the Early Model of Critical Theory

John Abromeit

## OVERVIEW OF HORKHEIMER'S LIFE AND THOUGHT<sup>1</sup>

Max Horkheimer was born in 1895 near Stuttgart, Germany. His parents were members of the local Jewish community, which had grown steadily during the course of the nineteenth century and had succeeded in becoming an integral part of the city's economic, political and cultural life. During the economic boom in Wilhelmine Germany, Horkheimer's father established himself as a successful textile manufacturer. He tried to prepare his only son to take over his factory one day, but Horkheimer was determined from an early age to follow his own path. In 1911, Horkheimer met Friedrich Pollock, whose father was also a wealthy manufacturer, and the two of them quickly became inseparable friends. As Friedrich Engels' parents had done some 70 years earlier, Horkheimer and Pollock's parents sent them abroad to learn French and English and to study the most advanced techniques in textile

production. While living in Belgium, France and England, Horkheimer and Pollock pursued their burgeoning interests in literature and philosophy and cultivated a bohemian lifestyle. With the outbreak of World War I, they were forced to return to Germany, and Horkheimer begrudgingly took a position working in his father's factory. Having already lived abroad and realizing that other Europeans were no better or worse than the Germans, Horkheimer rejected the nationalist hysteria that accompanied the outbreak of the war. As the war and his labors in his father's factory dragged on, Horkheimer's already significant disaffection with the bourgeois world of his parents and the career path his father had chosen for him grew to fever pitch. Horkheimer passionately expressed his disdain for the war and the society that had produced it in a series of novellas, short plays and diary entries.<sup>2</sup> After being drafted into the military and serving briefly as a non-combatant, Horkheimer was sent to a sanatorium near Munich to recover

from a debilitating illness. While there, Horkheimer became acquainted with Germaine Krull, an avant-garde photographer and a leading figure in the radical leftist, bohemian circles that would spearhead the Munich Council Republic in 1919.<sup>3</sup> Horkheimer became close friends with Krull and presented his novellas and plays at social gatherings in her atelier, which were attended by prominent members of Munich's literati, such as Ernst Toller, Stefan Zweig and Rainer Maria Rilke. After the brutal suppression of the Council Republic by the *Freikorps* in May 1919, Horkheimer decided that the possibility for a mass-based social revolution was foreclosed for the time being. Horkheimer's explorations of bohemia and his self-understanding as an artist were brought to an end by his decision to move to Frankfurt with Pollock in order to get a rigorous theoretical education, which he now viewed as the prerequisite for any serious social critique.

Horkheimer's first genuine philosophical interest was Schopenhauer, but he also became interested in Marxist theory toward the end of the war. Although he chose psychology and philosophy as his major fields of study at the recently founded J.W. Goethe University in Frankfurt, he continued to study Marx on the side with Pollock, who would complete a dissertation on Marx's theory of money in 1923. In the fall of 1919, Horkheimer and Pollock met Felix Weil, with whom they shared the unlikely combination of a bourgeois family background and a serious interest in socialist theory and politics. The sustained discussions between the three of them, along with the generous financial support of Weil's father, Hermann, led to the formation of the Institute for Social Research in 1923. Although Horkheimer – unlike Pollock – was not directly involved with the Institute during its early years, he did play an important role in conceiving the idea of the Institute. Horkheimer's critical theory developed independently in the mid and late 1920s and would not become the guiding

force of the Institute until 1931, when he became its director. In the early 1920s, Horkheimer became acquainted with several of the other figures who would play an important role in the Institute's later endeavors, such as Leo Lowenthal and Theodor W. Adorno, but neither played an important role in the development of Horkheimer's Critical Theory at this time. The most important figure in Horkheimer's academic studies at the University of Frankfurt in the early 1920s was Hans Cornelius, an idiosyncratic and polymathic professor of philosophy, whose primary interest was neo-Kantian epistemology. Horkheimer wrote both his dissertation and *Habilitationsschrift*<sup>4</sup> under Cornelius' guidance. Both works addressed Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and both criticized Kant – and implicitly German academic neo-Kantianism as well – from a standpoint that reflected Cornelius' philosophical arguments.<sup>5</sup> Although Horkheimer learned some important lessons from these academic writings, they remained within the horizon of Cornelius' philosophy of consciousness. As we shall see, Horkheimer's Critical Theory took shape in the period between 1925 and 1930 as an explicit critique, not only of Cornelius but of consciousness philosophy as a whole.

In the late 1920s, Horkheimer offered a series of lectures and seminars as a *Privatdozent* in the philosophy department at the Goethe University in Frankfurt. In addition to his official academic duties, he continued to develop a radical theory of contemporary society in a series of aphorisms, *Dämmerung*, which he would not publish until 1934 and then under the pseudonym of Heinrich Regius.<sup>6</sup> When the first director of the Institute for Social Research, Carl Grünberg, suffered a stroke in January of 1928, Horkheimer emerged as the best candidate to replace him. In order to qualify for the directorship and the new chair in social philosophy that had been established for him, Horkheimer published in 1929 a lengthy essay on 'The Beginnings of the Bourgeois

Philosophy of History', which explored the role of psychology, natural law, utopia and myth in various early modern conceptions of history, including Machiavelli, Hobbes and Vico. During this time, Horkheimer was undergoing psychoanalysis – with his friend and former student of Freud's, Karl Landauer – and establishing a working relationship with Erich Fromm. With the support of Landauer, Fromm and his wife, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, Horkheimer founded the Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute in February 1929 – the first psychoanalytic Institute officially affiliated with a German university.<sup>7</sup> Because Fromm had been trained not only as a psychoanalyst but had also earned a PhD in sociology – from the University of Heidelberg – and was sympathetic to historical materialism, Horkheimer was eager to harness his expertise for his own plans to shift the focus of the Institute from the history of the European workers' movement to a critical theory of contemporary society, which would draw on Marx, Freud and empirical social research. Even before Horkheimer was inaugurated as the new director of the Institute for Social Research in January of 1931, he and Fromm had begun work on what would be its first large-scale empirical project – a study of the conscious and unconscious attitudes of blue- and white-collar workers in Weimar Germany.

In 1931, Horkheimer also established a new journal for the Institute, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, which he would edit until its discontinuation in 1941. The *Zeitschrift* became a primary locus of Horkheimer's attempts to realize his vision of interdisciplinary materialism, which would draw upon the most advanced research in traditional academic disciplines, while at the same time integrating this research into a more comprehensive and radical Critical Theory of history and contemporary capitalist society. Many of the essays by Horkheimer, Fromm, Adorno, Löwenthal, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, Franz Neumann and others that have come to define Frankfurt School Critical

Theory were published in the *Zeitschrift* in the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> When the National Socialists came to power in Germany in January 1933, Horkheimer and the Institute – most of whose affiliates were Jewish and/or socialists – were forced to flee. Fortunately for them, Robert Lynd and the Sociology Department of Columbia University in New York were willing to welcome them as associates and to provide them with the facilities they needed to continue their work in exile.<sup>9</sup> During the mid 1930s, the Institute completed its second major empirical research project – the *Studies in Authority and Family* – and Horkheimer continued to publish substantial theoretical essays in the *Zeitschrift*. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, both the institutional and the theoretical development of the Institute underwent significant changes. When Horkheimer's theoretical collaboration with Erich Fromm began to sour, Horkheimer forged a closer working relationship with Adorno, whom he invited in 1938 to join the Institute in New York (Adorno had been living in exile in Oxford, England for several years). During this time, the Institute was undergoing a financial crisis, which precipitated a final break with Fromm and led to a dramatic reduction of its operations in New York and of his own administrative responsibilities. Horkheimer was now free to focus his attention on a major work on 'dialectical logic', which he hoped to carry out in collaboration with Adorno in the following years. Seeking a climate more conducive to Horkheimer's frail health and a location with fewer distractions, Horkheimer and Adorno moved from New York to Los Angeles in 1941, where they began work on the major theoretical project that would eventually become *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. During their time in Los Angeles, Horkheimer and the Institute continued to apply for funding for major empirical research projects, although they were unsuccessful at first. It was not until 1943 that they received funding from the Jewish Labor Committee and the American Jewish Committee to carry

out a major study of anti-Semitism among American workers.<sup>10</sup> Although this study was never published, it did lead to the more ambitious *Studies in Prejudice*, in which members of the Institute collaborated with American sociologists and social-psychologists to examine the conditions that gave rise to prejudice and authoritarian social movements in modern capitalist societies. The *Studies in Prejudice* were published in five separate volumes in 1949 and 1950.<sup>11</sup>

Horkheimer's respect for American democracy increased during his years of exile, and he was deeply ambivalent about returning to Germany after the war. But several factors ultimately convinced him to move back to Frankfurt in 1950. These included the prospect of re-establishing the Institute in Frankfurt, with the financial support of the American occupying authorities and the city of Frankfurt; restoring the traditions of critical philosophy and the social sciences, which had been interrupted by the Nazis; and contributing to the reconstruction of democracy in West Germany, particularly by influencing the education of a new generation of students. That same year, Horkheimer was elected chair of the Philosophy department and the Institute was reopened under his renewed directorship. The following year, the Institute moved into a newly constructed building on the campus, and Horkheimer was elected rector of the university. He served as rector – the first unconverted Jew ever to hold this position at a German university – until 1953. In his capacity as rector, and director of the Institute, Horkheimer established and maintained contacts with some of the leading figures of both the American High Commission – such as John J. McCloy – and of the new West German government – such as Theodor Heuss and Konrad Adenauer. In 1953, the city of Frankfurt bestowed upon him its highest honor, the Goethe Award. In 1954, he was offered a part-time guest professorship at the University of Chicago; he taught there two or three months per year until 1959. In 1955, the first substantial fruits of the collective labors

of the refounded Institute appeared, including *Group Experiment* – an innovative large-scale empirical study of the attitudes of West Germans toward the contemporary political situation and their own recent catastrophic past.<sup>12</sup> In 1956, Horkheimer organized – along with the Frankfurt-based psychoanalyst and author Alexander Mitscherlich – a series of lectures by foreign and émigré scholars on Sigmund Freud, on the occasion of his one-hundredth birthday. These influential lectures and Horkheimer's key role in the following years in the founding of a new Sigmund Freud Institute in Frankfurt – with Mitscherlich as its first director – were crucial in re-establishing the tradition of psychoanalysis in Frankfurt and Germany more generally.

In the post-war period – after Auschwitz – Horkheimer paid closer attention than he had prior to his exile to specifically Jewish concerns in his own life, in Germany and in the world as a whole. In 1951, Horkheimer became an official member of the Jewish Congregation in Frankfurt. In the mid 1950s, he organized a series of lectures at the university by international scholars on the history and culture of Judaism, which he viewed as part of his larger task of helping the next generation work through the recent past and learn more about the history of Jews in Germany and Europe. As Horkheimer's notes from this period reveal, he was also a relatively close and not uncritical observer of Israel during this time. He believed that Zionist nationalism did not have the right to speak for all Jews, but also that it was a justified response to anti-Semitism in Europe and elsewhere. He viewed the existence of Israel as legitimate insofar as it offered an asylum for persecuted persons, but not as the realization of a homeland for all Jews.<sup>13</sup> Horkheimer also criticized Israel's handling of the trial of Adolf Eichmann.<sup>14</sup> As the Institute's empirical study *Group Experiment* had revealed, anti-Semitism remained widespread in post-war Germany and was particularly virulent in German universities.<sup>15</sup> After becoming the target himself of anti-Semitic comments

from one of his faculty colleagues in 1956, Horkheimer put in a request for early retirement, which resulted in a substantial reduction of his teaching responsibilities. In 1957, he, his wife Rosa Riekher and Friedrich Pollock moved to Switzerland. Until his full retirement in 1961, Horkheimer divided his time between Switzerland and Germany. In 1958, Adorno replaced him as director of the Institute.

Horkheimer's sharp critique of Soviet communism and his commitment to the Allies' aim of reconstructing liberal democracy in West Germany caused him to become more conservative politically in the 1950s and 1960s. The discrepancy between his public statements and academic persona, on the one hand, and his private reflections on the current state of Germany and the world, on the other – a continuation of the discrepancy between the 'interior' and 'exterior' that had characterized his work from the very beginning – became even more pronounced in the post-war decades. Publically, Horkheimer frequently offered interviews, gave well-attended lectures and spoke on the radio on a wide range of philosophical and sociological topics. For the most part, however, Horkheimer's public pronouncements moved increasingly within the rigid tracks of Cold War liberalism. Horkheimer's response to some of Jürgen Habermas' early writings provides a good example of his increasingly conservative political attitudes during this time. One year after Habermas had become an assistant at the Institute in 1956, he published what he thought was a scholarly review essay on the secondary literature on Marx and Marxism. Horkheimer reacted allergically, accusing him of defending an anachronistic theory of revolution, and ultimately forced Habermas to complete his *Habilitation* at a different university. In the 1960s, Horkheimer continued to articulate surprisingly conservative positions, such as criticizing the Algerian struggle for independence, viewing the US war in Vietnam as a defense of 'human rights' against barbarism, and raising concern about

the effects of birth-control pills on love and marriage. Horkheimer long resisted pleas to republish his writings from the 1930s and 1940s, and when he finally acceded, in 1968, he stressed in a new introduction that they were no longer directly relevant to the changed historical conditions of the present. Not surprisingly, Horkheimer demonstrated little sympathy for radical students in the 1960s who were circulating pirate editions of *Dämmerung* and his other earlier writings in order to justify their criticisms of the authoritarian structure of German universities, the fascist tendencies they believed existed in West German society, the US war in Vietnam and 'capitalist imperialism' more generally. By this time, however, Horkheimer's appearances in Frankfurt were rather infrequent, and it was left to Adorno and Habermas – who had in the meantime returned to Frankfurt, with the support of Adorno – to represent the Institute in its contentious dealings with the students.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time as Horkheimer's public pronouncements became increasingly indistinguishable from the Cold War liberalism that guided the reconstruction of West Germany, he continued to preserve a private, interior intellectual sphere in which he could express his more authentically critical, pessimistic and skeptical thoughts. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Horkheimer wrote thousands of short notes, a sampling of which he collected and prepared for publication shortly before his death in 1973. Stylistically, they represent a continuation of his early novels, the aphorisms in *Dämmerung* and the 'notes and sketches' at the end of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in their unsystematic and frequently passionately polemical nature. The notes cannot be seen as a final philosophical work, because they were composed over a long period of time and were so fragmentary; nonetheless, when read systematically, a number of themes reappear regularly. These include sharp criticisms of the repression of the recent past in Germany and of the unbroken preservation after 1945 of German

nationalism;<sup>17</sup> dark reflections on the ongoing collapse of classical bourgeois-liberal ideals, and the ideals of Western civilization itself;<sup>18</sup> a critique of the affluent society, mass democracy, technology, the totally administered society and the disappearance of individual autonomy;<sup>19</sup> strong reservations about the transformation of traditional gender roles, the increased entry of women into the workforce and the dissolution of the bourgeois family, marriage and – allegedly – love itself;<sup>20</sup> a sharp critique of the subordination of science to the interests of dominant social groups and the reduction of philosophy to an esoteric and meaningless academic specialty;<sup>21</sup> a lament about the current powerlessness of intellectual activity in general;<sup>22</sup> and scattered positive reflections on religion and theology which, at their best, preserve a ‘longing for a completely different state of things’ even in the face of the catastrophes of the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup>

Considering the pessimistic tone of Horkheimer’s later, private reflections, it should not come as a surprise that he also returned during this time to his first philosophical love, Arthur Schopenhauer. Horkheimer emphasized the contemporary relevance of his thought on several different occasions.<sup>24</sup> At the same, Marx – who played a much more important role than Schopenhauer during the most productive and interesting phases of Horkheimer’s thought – remained a central presence in Horkheimer’s writings until the very end of his life. Not unlike the European New Left, of which he was frequently critical, Horkheimer combined a sharp criticism of the Soviet Union with an stubborn insistence on the ongoing relevance of many aspects of Marx’s Critical Theory – not only his critique of political economy but also his critique of ideology.<sup>25</sup> Where the late Horkheimer was perhaps most interesting – and went beyond both Soviet Marxism and the New Left – was his interpretation of Marx’s theory as a continuation of the Enlightenment tradition and his insistence that efforts to revive critical Marxism today need to reintegrate the

best aspects of that tradition.<sup>26</sup> Horkheimer passed away in 1973 and was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Bern, Switzerland, next to his wife, Rosa Riekher, and his lifelong friend Friedrich Pollock, who had preceded him in death in 1969 and 1970 respectively.

## THE EMERGENCE AND KEY CONCEPTS OF HORKHEIMER’S EARLY MODEL OF CRITICAL THEORY

In the following section, I present a more detailed account of the emergence and development of what I call the ‘Early Model of Critical Theory’ in Max Horkheimer’s writings from approximately 1925 until 1940. 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.<sup>27</sup> As we have already seen, when Fromm left the Institute, at the end of the 1930s, and Horkheimer began working more closely with Adorno and, at the same time, adopted significant aspects of Friedrich Pollock’s ‘state capitalism’ thesis, 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, and not only because this volume already contains an essay on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. I have chosen to focus on Horkheimer’s early writings, first, because they were – in my own view and that of several other prominent commentators<sup>28</sup> – his best. Second, I am convinced that the early model of Critical Theory is still, or has become once again, 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 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 re-emerged 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.<sup>29</sup> I will say, however, that the currently widespread view of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as the magnum opus of the ‘first generation’ of the Frankfurt School is misleading, 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. The following remarks are part of an ongoing effort on my part to restore the memory of the latter, as it flashes up in the current moment of danger.

In contrast to Jürgen Habermas, who has argued that the model of early Critical Theory ‘failed not as a result of this or that coincidence, but because of the exhaustion of the paradigm of consciousness philosophy’,<sup>30</sup> I would like to argue here that Horkheimer’s Critical Theory took shape in the period between 1925 and 1930 as an explicit critique not only of his academic mentor, the neo-Kantian Hans Cornelius, but of consciousness philosophy as a whole. Horkheimer’s move beyond consciousness philosophy proceeded along two interrelated yet distinct axes: a diachronic-historical and a synchronic-social axis.<sup>31</sup>

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 argued, 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 interpreted the affirmative character of British political economy and the resigned skepticism of David Hume as expressions of a triumphant bourgeois society. He viewed 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. 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. 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 not only an expression of ascendant bourgeois society but also pointed beyond it. Horkheimer’s lectures demonstrated that a critical, historically specific concept of Enlightenment – very different from the transhistorical concept of Enlightenment that he and Adorno would develop later<sup>32</sup> – was central to his thought from early on. Horkheimer

placed the Enlightenment, along with 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 psychoanalysis. Horkheimer explored the continuing relevance of Marx's ideas in *Dämmerung: Notizen in Deutschland*.<sup>33</sup> Stylistically and thematically, *Dämmerung* 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 – and in social revolution – remained lively during this time.<sup>34</sup> The collection was not published until 1934, after Horkheimer had already fled Germany, and even then only under the pseudonym of Heinrich Regius.<sup>35</sup> 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',<sup>36</sup> 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 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'<sup>37</sup> 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'.<sup>38</sup> 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 it from the standpoint of the sociology of knowledge.<sup>39</sup> 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 had been sparked during his university studies in the early 1920s. This interest also grew out of Horkheimer's interpretation in the late 1920s of the history of philosophy, which clearly 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 US sociologists, such as Robert and Helen Lynd's *Middletown*, as models for the integration of empirical social research into his own incipient Critical Theory.<sup>40</sup> In 1929–30, 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 3,000 questionnaires in 1929, and by 1931 over 1,000 had been returned. Based on the preliminary results of the 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, in many cases, deeply authoritarian. The preliminary conclusion of the study, that the German lower-middle and working class 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 psychoanalysis. Horkheimer's abiding interest in psychology emerged in the early 1920s, when he was exposed to Gestalt psychology at the J.W. Goethe University of 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.<sup>41</sup> 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. Fromm's later split with the Institute and his subsequent acrimonious debates with Adorno and Marcuse have obscured Fromm's crucial role in the early formation of Critical Theory. Horkheimer's

enthusiasm for Fromm was apparent in his decision to appoint him as director of the empirical study on the attitudes of German workers and his offer to make him a permanent member of the Institute.

By the time Horkheimer had been installed as the new director of the Institute in January 1931, the basic components of his Critical Theory were already in place: a materialist interpretation of the history of modern philosophy as the mediated expression of the uneven development and transformation of bourgeois society, and a theory of contemporary society based on a critical synthesis of Marx, empirical social research and psychoanalysis. 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.<sup>42</sup> He began 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 pre-ordained 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'.<sup>43</sup> Of particular interest for the Institute's future work would be 'the question of the connection between the economic life of society, the psychological development of individuals and the changes in the realm of culture'.<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup>

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*.<sup>46</sup> 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 developed a thoroughly historical concept of materialism, in order to elucidate the philosophical foundations of Critical Theory.<sup>47</sup> Horkheimer recognized 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 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.<sup>48</sup> 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,<sup>49</sup> Horkheimer demonstrates how common historical experiences can create similar psychic structures among members of the same social group. Since these psychic structures have relative autonomy 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 de 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 Freedom Movements' provided the theoretical foundations for much of the Institute's later work on prejudice and authoritarianism;<sup>50</sup> the essay can still shed much light on the mechanisms involved in right-wing populist and authoritarian movements today.<sup>51</sup>

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'<sup>52</sup> 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'.<sup>53</sup> Horkheimer's seminal conceptualization of Critical Theory in his most familiar and influential essay from this period, 'Traditional and Critical Theory' (1937),<sup>54</sup> 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), 'Bergson's Metaphysics of Time' (1934), 'On the Problem of Truth' (1935), 'The Latest Attack on Metaphysics' (1937) and 'Montaigne and the Function of Skepticism' (1938).<sup>55</sup> When one reexamines these essays together, the contours of Horkheimer's larger project on dialectical logic emerge. Horkheimer developed 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 put forth the argument that the philosophy of the bourgeois epoch as a whole is characterized by a recurring dichotomy between science and metaphysics. Horkheimer showed 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 antimony 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 stressed, 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 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 specific historical 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 at the same 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.

The contours of Horkheimer’s concept of dialectical logic can be seen clearly in ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’, which can be interpreted as an attempt to update and elaborate upon Marx’s ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, in order to provide a critical theory of knowledge and its relation to emancipatory social praxis. According to Horkheimer, the two main ways in which critical theory differs from traditional theory are its historical self-reflexivity and its recognition of the *active* role it plays in reproducing and – potentially – transforming society. Just as Marx had criticized Feuerbach’s static and passive concept of materialism and had drawn on German idealism to reconceptualize the relationship between theory and praxis, so Horkheimer characterized traditional theory as lacking any awareness of its historical specificity or the active role it plays in reproducing existing social relations. Traditional theory accepts uncritically the existing division of labor in

the sciences and accepts passively its own role within it. It posits the given methods – of subsuming particulars under general principles and thereby contributing to the gradual expansion of knowledge – as trans-historical. Critical theory, in contrast, reflects consciously upon the form and function scientific knowledge has assumed within a particular historical epoch. It also recognizes the active role it plays in reproducing this historically specific form of human social relations. Horkheimer described critical theory as a ‘human activity [*menschliches Verhalten*] which has society itself as its object’.<sup>56</sup> By this, Horkheimer meant that critical theory is aware that it forms one active element within a larger social totality that has come into being historically and that could be transformed into a qualitatively different society at some point in the future.

One of the principal tasks of critical theory, then, is to identify the essential, defining characteristics of society in the current historical epoch, which Horkheimer referred to as the ‘bourgeois epoch’. Horkheimer distinguished further between the modern epoch as a whole – which begins with the gradual ascendancy of bourgeois society in early modern Europe and its concomitant expansion throughout the globe<sup>57</sup> – and specific historical periods within the modern epoch. Following Marx, Horkheimer identifies the private ownership of the means of production and the division of society into antagonistic classes as a defining characteristic of the bourgeois epoch as a whole. But Horkheimer was also attentive to the transformations bourgeois society has undergone over its long history and continues to undergo in the present. The following macrohistorical description of transformation of bourgeois society illustrates some of the key assumptions guiding Horkheimer’s early Critical Theory.

To put it in broad terms, the theory says that the basic form of the historically given commodity economy on which modern history rests contains in itself the internal and external contradictions of the modern era; it generates these contradictions

over and over again in an increasingly heightened form; and after a period of progress, development of human powers, and emancipation of the individual, after an enormous extension of human control over nature, it finally hinders further development and drives humanity into a new barbarism.<sup>58</sup>

One sees here a historically specific notion of the *dialectic of bourgeois society*, which differs quite markedly from the tendentially transhistorical notion of a dialectic of Enlightenment that would soon come to dominate Horkheimer's thought.<sup>59</sup> In the essay, though, Horkheimer also moved beyond such macrohistorical descriptions of the bourgeois epoch as a whole, in order to determine more recent and specific transitions within it. He described the transition from liberal to monopoly capitalism that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which brought with it – among other things – the concentration of capital, the emergence of a powerful new group of economic leaders distinct from the owners of the means of production and the possibility of new, more directly and consciously produced forms of ideology.<sup>60</sup> We shall see below how Horkheimer would also soon adopt the concept of state capitalism, to signal the emergence in the 1930s of new forms of global political economy and ideology. In short, Horkheimer's early Critical Theory is a form of *critical historicism*,<sup>61</sup> insofar as it emphasizes periodization; but it differs from traditional, bourgeois historicism – sharply criticized by Benjamin<sup>62</sup> – in its emphasis on self-reflexivity and its ambition to guide concrete historical praxis that will usher in a new historical epoch.

Although 'Traditional and Critical Theory' makes clear that Horkheimer 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.<sup>63</sup> 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.<sup>64</sup> 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 above. 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.<sup>65</sup> 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'.<sup>66</sup> 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.<sup>67</sup> Regarding the closely related second question, Horkheimer did offer a number of different formulations of the long-term aims of Critical Theory. He spoke, for example, of a 'new organization of labor',<sup>68</sup> a transformation of the blind necessity of capitalism into conscious planning<sup>69</sup> and a future society as a 'community of free men'.<sup>70</sup> Yet, in the end, Horkheimer remained



true to Marx's critique of utopian socialism, insofar as he refused 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 wrote, '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'.<sup>71</sup>

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 1938–41 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 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.<sup>72</sup> 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*'.<sup>73</sup> 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 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*.<sup>74</sup>

Horkheimer's theoretical shift in the late 1930s and early 1940s has been variously described as a 'pessimistic turn',<sup>75</sup> a 'rephilosophization of Critical Theory',<sup>76</sup> and a shift from 'the critique of political economy to the critique of instrumental reason'.<sup>77</sup> 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.<sup>78</sup> 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.<sup>79</sup> 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.<sup>80</sup> Second, this shift was reflected in the increasing prominence of a negative philosophy of history, which Adorno had adopted from Benjamin in the late 1920s.<sup>81</sup> 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 new-found 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.<sup>82</sup>

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. Beyond what was mentioned in the overview above, I will not seek to 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 re-establish 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 authoritarian and right-wing populist movements on a scale unprecedented since the 1930s, the analyses of early Critical Theory have become *unheimlich aktuell* once again.<sup>83</sup> 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.

## Notes

- 1 This essay draws in places upon an earlier essay of mine: John Abromeit, 'The Origins and Development of the Model of Critical Theory in the Work of Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse', *The History of Continental Philosophy*, vol. 5, *Critical Theory to Structuralism: Philosophy, Politics and the Human Sciences*, ed. David Ingram (Durham: Acumen, 2010), 47–80. Any of the content reproduced in this essay is done so with the permission of Sage Publications.
- 2 Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, ed. Alfred Schmidt (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1988).

Hereafter, I will refer to the *Gesammelte Schriften* edition of Horkheimer's writings as *MHGS*. Horkheimer's earliest writings have not been translated. For an overview of them and their relation to Horkheimer's biographical and intellectual development at the time, see John Abromeit, *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 27–41. Hereafter, I will refer to this book as *MHFFS*.

- 3 On Krull see Kim Sichel, *Germain Krull: Photographer of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).
- 4 A second dissertation that one had to write in order to become a professor in the German university system.
- 5 For a summary of the arguments in Horkheimer's first and second dissertations, see Abromeit, *MHFFS*, 65–84.
- 6 *Dämmerung: Notizen in Deutschland*, *MHGS*, vol. 2, 312–454. An incomplete and unsatisfactory English translation of *Dämmerung* does exist: Max Horkheimer, *Dawn and Decline: Notes 1926–1931 and 1950–1969*, trans. Michael Shaw (New York: Seabury, 1978), 17–112.
- 7 As Freud himself confirmed with gratitude in a letter to Horkheimer at the time, the Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute was the first time that a German university had recognized psychoanalysis as a legitimate academic discipline.
- 8 True to Horkheimer's emphasis on interdisciplinarity and on keeping abreast of recent developments in the 'traditional' sciences, the *Zeitschrift* also offered a truly extensive array of reviews of recent publications in the social sciences and humanities.
- 9 On Horkheimer and the Institute's transition to New York and their relationship to Lynd and other members of the Department of Sociology at Columbia University, see Thomas Wheatland, *The Frankfurt School in Exile* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 35–94.
- 10 On the Institute's study of anti-Semitism among US workers, see Mark Worrell, *Dialectic of Solidarity: Labor, Antisemitism and the Frankfurt School* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009).
- 11 The *Studies in Prejudice* consisted of the following five volumes, all published by Harper & Brothers, in New York. Volume 1: Theodor Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswick, Daniel J. Levinson and R. Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). Volume 2: Bruno Bettelheim and Morris Janowitz, *Dynamics of Prejudice: A Psychological and Sociological Study of Veterans* (1950). Volume 3: Nathan W. Ackerman and Marie Jahoda, *Anti-Semitism and Emotional Disorder: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (1950). Volume 4: Paul

- W. Massing, *Rehearsal for Destruction: A Study of Political Anti-Semitism in Imperial Germany* (1949). Volume 5: Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman, *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator* (1949).
- 12 For my own review of a recent English translation of *Group Experiment*, see *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 85, no. 1 (March 2013), 161–8.
  - 13 For Horkheimer's views on Israel, see Jack Jacobs, *The Frankfurt School, Jewish Lives and Antisemitism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 133–42.
  - 14 Max Horkheimer, 'The Arrest of Eichmann', *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1996), 119–23; 'Zur Ergreifung Eichmanns' and 'Zu Eichmann', *MHGS*, vol. 6, 347–50, 364.
  - 15 Among the different professional and educational groups studied in *Group Experiment*, university graduates scored second only to peasants in their levels of anti-Semitic prejudice. *Group Experiment and Other Writings: The Frankfurt School on Public Opinion in Postwar Germany*, trans. A.J. Perrin and J.K. Olick (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 92–3.
  - 16 On Adorno's (and Marcuse's) shifting relationships to the student protest movements in the late 1960s, see my essay, 'The Limits of Praxis: The Social Psychological Foundations of Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno's Interpretations of the 1960s Protest Movements', *Changing the World, Changing Oneself: Political Protest and Collective Identities in the 1960s/70s West Germany and U.S.*, eds. B. Davis, W. Mausbach, M. Klimke and C. MacDougall (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 13–38.
  - 17 *MHGS*, vol. 6, 233–4, 302–3, 345–6, 361–2, 404, 411.
  - 18 *Ibid.*, 246, 301, 322–3, 332–3.
  - 19 *Ibid.*, 229, 232–3, 236–7, 278, 285–6, 291, 415.
  - 20 *Ibid.*, 189, 209–10, 224–5, 389, 406.
  - 21 *Ibid.*, 207, 281–2, 298–300, 417–18.
  - 22 *Ibid.*, 322–3.
  - 23 *Ibid.*, 288, 319–21, 329–31, 417.
  - 24 Max Horkheimer, 'Schopenhauer Today', *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1996), 63–83.
  - 25 *MHGS*, vol. 6, 191–2, 213, 395–6, 410–11. See also, 'Marx Heute', *MHGS*, vol. 8, 306–17.
  - 26 *Ibid.*, 241, 414.
  - 27 I will discuss Fromm's role briefly in what follows. For a fuller discussion of Fromm and Marcuse's roles in the formation and continuation of Critical Theory, see my essay, 'The Origins and Development of the Model of Critical Theory in the Work of Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse', cited above in note 1.
  - 28 See, for example, Jürgen Habermas, 'Remarks on the Development of Horkheimer's Work', *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives*, eds. S. Benhabib, W. Bonss and J. McCole (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1993), 51.
  - 29 John Abromeit, 'Critical Theory and the Persistence of Right-Wing Populism', and 'Right-Wing Populism and the Limits of Normative Critical Theory', in *Logos: A Journal of Modern Society and Culture*, vol. 15, no. 2–3 (Summer, 2016) and vol. 16, no. 1 (January, 2017). <http://logosjournal.com/2016/abromeit/>.
  - 30 Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981), 518 (my translation).
  - 31 For a more detailed discussion of Horkheimer's critique of consciousness philosophy, see *MHFFF*, 85–90.
  - 32 For an extended analysis of this point, see John Abromeit, 'Genealogy and Critical Historicism: Two Concepts of Enlightenment in Horkheimer and Adorno's Writings', *Critical Historical Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Fall, 2016), 283–308.
  - 33 See note 6.
  - 34 Because it expressed Horkheimer's theory at its most radical, *Dämmerung* was circulated widely in pirate editions among radical students in the 1960s – much to the elder Horkheimer's chagrin.
  - 35 Regius (1598–1679) was a professor of medicine in Utrecht and a materialist student and critic of Descartes.
  - 36 *Dawn and Decline*, 61–5.
  - 37 *Ibid.*, 61.
  - 38 Max Horkheimer, 'The Authoritarian State', *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, eds. A. Arato and E. Gebhardt (London: Bloomsbury), 117 (translation modified).
  - 39 Max Horkheimer, 'A New Concept of Ideology?' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Essays*, trans. and eds. John Torpey, Matthew S. Kramer and G. Frederick Hunter (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 129–50.
  - 40 Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1929).
  - 41 On the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute, see *Psychoanalyse in Berlin: Beiträge zur Geschichte, Theorie und Praxis* (Meisenheim: A. Hain, 1971) and Veronika Füchtner, *Berlin Psychoanalytic: Culture and Psychoanalysis in Weimar Republic Germany* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011).
  - 42 *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 1–14.
  - 43 *Ibid.*, 9.
  - 44 *Ibid.*, 11. Horkheimer's emphasis here on the 'relative autonomy' of the culture and psychic character structures illustrate the important difference

- between his Critical Theory and the mechanistic 'base-superstructure' model advocated by many Marxists (if not Marx himself). On Horkheimer's concept of culture, see John Abromeit, 'Max Horkheimer et le concept matérialiste de la culture', *Les Normes et le possible: Héritage et perspectives de l'École de Francfort*, eds. P.F. Noppen, G. Raulet and Iain Macdonald (Paris: Maison de Science de l'homme, 2012), 53–70.
- 45 *Studien über Autorität und Familie: Forschungsberichte aus dem Institut für Sozialforschung* (Paris: Felix Alcan, 1936).
  - 46 For a more detailed examination of the concepts of materialism, anthropology of the bourgeois epoch and dialectical logic in Horkheimer's writings in the 1930s, see *MHFFS*, chapters 6, 7 and 8, respectively.
  - 47 'Materialism and Metaphysics', *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell et al. (New York: Continuum, 1992), 10–46; 'Materialism and Morality', *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 15–48.
  - 48 'Egoism and Freedom Movements: On the Anthropology of the Bourgeois Epoch', *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 49–110. For a more detailed discussion of the theoretical premises that informed this essay, see also his 1932 essay 'History and Psychology' in the same volume, 111–29.
  - 49 See, for example, 'The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology', *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, 477–96.
  - 50 Eminent Frankfurt School scholar Martin Jay has written of Horkheimer's 'Egoism and Freedom Movements' that 'as a seed-bed for much of the Frankfurt School's later work, it is virtually unparalleled'. Martin Jay, 'Introduction to Horkheimer', *Telos*, no. 54 (December 1982), 5.
  - 51 See, for example, John Abromeit, 'Critical Theory and the Persistence of Right-Wing Populism'.
  - 52 Here in a letter to Walter Benjamin from September 6, 1938, *MHGS*, vol. 16, 476.
  - 53 *Ibid.*, 490.
  - 54 'Traditional and Critical Theory', *Critical Theory*, 188–243.
  - 55 'On the Problem of Truth', 'The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy' and 'Montaigne and the Function of Skepticism', *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 177–216, 217–64 and 265–312 respectively. 'The Latest Attack on Metaphysics', *Critical Theory*, 132–87. An English translation of 'Bergson's Metaphysics of Time' appeared in *Radical Philosophy: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Philosophy*, vol. 131 (May/June 2005), 9–19.
  - 56 *Critical Theory*, 206.
  - 57 For Horkheimer's elaboration of this concept of the historical epoch, see his theoretical introduction to the *Studies on Authority and Family*, in *Critical Theory*, 47–54.
  - 58 *Critical Theory*, 227.
  - 59 On the concept of a 'dialectic of bourgeois society', see *MHFFS*, 4, 394–5, 429–32.
  - 60 *Ibid.*, 234–6.
  - 61 For an elaboration of this interpretation of Horkheimer's early Critical Theory as a form of 'critical historicism', see John Abromeit, 'Genealogy and Critical Historicism: Two Concepts of Enlightenment in Horkheimer and Adorno's Writings'. and John Abromeit, 'Reconsidering the Critical Historicism of Karl Korsch and the Early Max Horkheimer', in *Karl Korsch zwischen Rechts- und Sozialwissenschaft: ein Beitrag zur Thüringischen Rechts- und Justizgeschichte*, eds. A. Seifert, K. Vieweg, A. Ecker and E. Eichenhofer (Stuttgart: Boorberg, 2018), 151–76.
  - 62 For Benjamin's critique of bourgeois historicism, see his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 253–64.
  - 63 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 149–222.
  - 64 *Critical Theory*, 218.
  - 65 For this reason, Horkheimer makes a distinction between what he calls the 'existential' judgments of Critical Theory: the 'classificatory' judgments of the pre-bourgeois world, which accept the world as unchangeable, and the 'hypothetical' or 'disjunctive' judgments of the bourgeois world, which state that 'under certain circumstances this effect can take place; it is either thus or so'. *Ibid.*, 227. Again, one sees Horkheimer's reliance upon a 'critical historicist' periodization in order to support his claims. Horkheimer discusses this problem of verification in even greater detail in his 1935 essay 'On the Problem of Truth', *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 177–216.
  - 66 *The Marx-Engels Reader*, second edition, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 144 (emphasis Marx's own).
  - 67 *Ibid.*, 221.
  - 68 *Ibid.*, 209 (translation amended).
  - 69 *Ibid.*, 229.
  - 70 *Ibid.*, 217.
  - 71 *Ibid.*, 242 (translation amended).
  - 72 For a detailed examination of the divergence, estrangement and eventual rapprochement that occurred over the course of the 1930s at both the personal and political levels between Horkheimer and Adorno, see *MHFFS*, 349–93.
  - 73 *MHGS*, vol. 15, 498.
  - 74 *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was republished in a larger, revised edition in 1947. For a discussion of

- Dialectic of Enlightenment*, see Marcel Stoetzler's article in this volume.
- 75 Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 104ff.
- 76 Helmut Dubiel, *Theory and Politics: Studies in the Development of Critical Theory*, trans. B. Gregg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 106.
- 77 Andrew Arato, 'Introduction' to *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, 20.
- 78 For a good examination of the ways in which Pollock's 'state capitalism' thesis informed *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, see Manfred Gangl, 'Capitalisme d'Etat et dialectique de la raison', in *La Dialectique de la Raison: Sous bénéfice d'inventaire*, ed. Katia Genel (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2017), 105–16.
- 79 On Horkheimer's theory of 'rackets', see Peter Stirk, *Max Horkheimer: A New Interpretation* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 131–54.
- 80 For an illuminating examination of this important shift of emphasis, see Gerd-Walters Küsters, *Der Kritikbegriff in der Kritischen Theorie Max Horkheimers* (Frankfurt: Campus, 1980). See also my own essay, mentioned in note 29.
- 81 See, for example, Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, 253–80.
- 82 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 14. The fact that Horkheimer and Adorno continued to carry out empirical research projects in the 1940s (most notably, the five-volume *Studies in Prejudice*) and that empirical research remained a crucial aspect of the Institute's work after its re-establishment in Frankfurt after the war, demonstrated that Horkheimer never completely abandoned his early model of 'interdisciplinary materialism'. Nonetheless, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* does represent a substantial break from Horkheimer's position in the 1930s and a model of Critical Theory which is more consonant with Adorno's overall philosophical trajectory.
- 83 Uncannily relevant.

# Leo Löwenthal: Last Man Standing

Christoph Hesse

His most unlikely name is probably his most enduring legacy. Skimming through the legendary history of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, especially the years in American exile, one will quickly come across him. Leo Löwenthal – or Lowenthal, as he used to spell his name in English-language publications – was then Max Horkheimer's closest associate (next to, of course, Friedrich Pollock, an intimate friend of yore with whom Horkheimer shared virtually all his thoughts and decisions). He officiated as the managing editor of the Institute's journal *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, and later, as it were, rather unwillingly, as the housekeeper of its remaining branch in New York when his colleagues moved to California in the early 1940s. Löwenthal's contribution to the maintenance of the Institute in its hardest times, when he, along with Horkheimer, sought to keep up the material conditions for the persistence of what has since been termed 'critical theory', may scarcely be overestimated.<sup>1</sup> His own scholarly works,

however, in large part went widely unnoticed, at least by comparison with those of his celebrated colleagues. His pioneering inquiries into the sociology of literature, his formerly renowned studies on the historical formation of popular culture as well as on authoritarianism and anti-Semitism, have all withered on the vine for decades now. Neatly canonized, but seldom read anymore. Even among those familiar with – and still genuinely interested in – critical theory, the writings of Löwenthal are rather unknown.

Compared to his friends, most notably Theodor W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, Löwenthal never rose to intellectual stardom, nor did he win overwhelming public acclaim on the part of the protest movements that emerged across Western Europe and North America in the 1960s. Lacking both Adorno's aesthetic aura and Marcuse's radical – or, as some say, even erotic – appeal, his unpretentious and rather cautious, almost gentle style of writing was not supposed to attract an audience craving idols to look up to,

albeit he is said to have been the most approachable and amiable of them all. While Adorno delivered hundreds (!) of lectures on West German radio stations throughout the 1950s and 60s, and Marcuse, beyond belief today, was a best-selling author who spoke to enthusiastic crowds of politicized students at meetings and sit-ins in both West Germany and the United States, Löwenthal kept to the sidelines. As early as 1931, Adorno teasingly called him the 'king of the desert roaming his territory'.<sup>2</sup> Yet he stood his ground when it was most desperately needed. For instance, when the Nazis assumed power in Germany, he remained in the country a while longer than his colleagues, taking measures to ensure the Institute's survival in exile.<sup>3</sup> Later, when Horkheimer, now intellectually associated mostly with Adorno, returned to Frankfurt in 1949 on an invitation to reestablish the Institute for Social Research, Löwenthal was left behind. Yet this time it was meant to be forever. While the Frankfurt School, as it came to be nicknamed by the 1960s, soon earned some measure of fame in West Germany and abroad, he remained almost invisible, at least in Europe. Involuntarily distanced from his old friends, whom he only seldom met – except for Marcuse, who deliberately decided not to relocate to post-Nazi Germany – Löwenthal pursued his own course as a solitary 'Frankfurter' in American academia.

It was only in the 1980s that Löwenthal, by then the last member of Horkheimer's former circle still alive, came to the fore in Germany. Helmut Dubiel edited a five-volume collection of his writings, comprising early academic works and contributions to the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* as well as subsequent American publications, many of which had not been easily available in Europe before.<sup>4</sup> Maybe even more important for his public perception, Dubiel published a series of interviews in which Löwenthal recollected his intellectual and political biography, thereby revealing as much about his own unexpectedly turbulent life as of the history

of the Institute that had decisively shaped his way of thinking.<sup>5</sup>

Quite recently, a new book about Löwenthal was published, one of the very few monographs on him. The title reads, in English translation, 'No Critical Theory without Leo Löwenthal'.<sup>6</sup> Yet as true as this may be, with particular regard to his managerial functions, the well-meaning and also somewhat boastful title unwittingly reflects the oblivion into which Löwenthal's oeuvre has fallen, most obviously in the United States, where he had once established himself as a sociologist and as an outstandingly erudite scholar of European literature and philosophy. As distinct from Adorno and even more so from Horkheimer, who very reluctantly revealed any details about the shrouded history of the Institute, Löwenthal held no reservations about his outright Marxist past which he had never really moved away from.<sup>7</sup> All the same, the critical theory that he passionately advocated throughout his life has been largely supplanted by a variety of self-professed critical studies, most of which, curiously enough, sprang from the post- or sometimes blatantly anti-modernist line of thought he had warned against.

Almost tragically, it was Löwenthal's unstinting commitment to the Institute, a commitment verging on self-abandonment at times, that hampered his own theoretical production. On October 3, 1947, Horkheimer wrote to him (in English): 'The fact that for a number of years you have not written an article or a book which is an adequate expression of the stage of our theoretical insight is due to the practical situation and to the set-up into which we were forced for the sake of our survival'.<sup>8</sup> The circumstances of those decades were adverse in the extreme. While Marx, back in his anything but happy days, could realistically bank on an increasing working-class movement, the likes of Horkheimer and Löwenthal had no social forces to rely on, not even virtually. In the face of Nazism and Fascism on the one hand, and the dreadfully miscarried trajectory of the Bolshevik



Revolution on the other, which had developed into a rule of sheer terror, an unflinchingly critical theory of society found itself redirected to what the young Marx called the 'ruthless criticism of all that exists'.<sup>9</sup> With hindsight, Löwenthal said, 'we had not abandoned praxis; rather, praxis had abandoned us'.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, if there was no revolutionary subject to hope for, it was up to those otherwise powerless intellectuals not only to produce and maintain theoretical insights but to anticipate, also practically, at least a few elements of a humanity that might never really come into being. 'Moreover', Horkheimer added, 'it has always been our conviction that the development of our conceptions does not exclusively express itself in theoretical writings, but in the conduct of our lives. There must be an interaction between existence and theory as it is exemplified in our own history [...]'.<sup>11</sup> This rule of etiquette, if that is what it can be called, was probably best exemplified by Löwenthal. At the end of his conversations with Helmut Dubiel he revealed, 'Of course, my heart beats faster when the utopian seems to throw off sparks, if only for a moment; but disappointment follows all too quickly. Just take a look at the world today. Tell me, just where should one plant one's political sympathies and hopes?'<sup>12</sup> What he knew for certain, though, was that any admission of regression – for example, a romanticizing of pre-modern or supposedly more authentic cultures – would offer no way out. 'You can't turn back history'.<sup>13</sup> In his early years, he had already described the life of Freud as a constant struggle to gain both insights and people sharing these insights.<sup>14</sup> The same might be said of Löwenthal himself.

His most significant insights will be discussed here. First, his contributions to the perception of art and culture, particularly his sociological – meaning, historical materialist – approach to literature. Second, his notion of mass communication and popular culture, which might offer a deeper historical understanding of what Adorno and Horkheimer notoriously termed the culture industry.

Third, his empirically based theoretical studies on authoritarianism and anti-Semitism. Finally, his critical remarks on the emerging post-modernism in the humanities and social sciences.

Before that, a quick biographical sketch, to supplement what has been said above. Born into a middle-class family in Frankfurt in 1900, Löwenthal was shaken by the horrors of the First World War, leading to his engagement in both socialism and Zionism. During his university studies, he taught classes at a Jewish center for adult education along with Erich Fromm. He was also involved in a relief agency for eastern Jewish refugees. He earned his PhD with a thesis on the social philosophy of Franz von Baader,<sup>15</sup> a widely unknown early-nineteenth-century Catholic philosopher. Through his friend Siegfried Kracauer, Löwenthal then joined the newly founded Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, initially as an unsalaried associate. His attempt to qualify as a professor (with a treatise on Helvétius and the French Enlightenment) failed, so Löwenthal taught German literature at high-school level until he became a full member of the Institute in 1930, with Horkheimer as its new director. The social history of literature was the field of study Löwenthal had been entrusted with upon his entry into the Institute in 1926. He went on to explore it throughout the years of exile and beyond. In the early 1940s, alongside Marcuse, he worked for the Office of War Information, not only to make a living but also to support the United States' defeat of Nazi Germany. By the end of the war, he had taken a growing interest in the development of popular culture. In 1949, when Horkheimer and Adorno relocated to Frankfurt, Löwenthal was appointed as research director of Voice of America. Unlike Marcuse, he would have appreciated an opportunity to go back, but Horkheimer was not able to ensure another academic position in Germany. In 1956, after a period of depression,<sup>16</sup> when he had probably given up the idea of returning, he became a

professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, where he lived until his death in 1993. But this particular disciplinary denomination never meant much to him. At the most general level, he considered himself a philosopher.<sup>17</sup> 'You know my cynical remark', he told Helmut Dubiel, 'that the division of the social sciences into different academic departments is just a means of limiting structural unemployment among intellectuals'.<sup>18</sup>

## LITERATURE, ART, AND POPULAR CULTURE

Löwenthal initially outlined the task of a historical materialist theory of literature in 1932. A heated debate on this issue was already in full swing, particularly among the ranks of the Union of Proletarian Revolutionary Writers, which was closely affiliated with the German Communist Party. Regardless of the shortcomings of its opposition between proletarian culture and bourgeois tradition, such an eminently political debate was not admitted into legitimate academic discourse in those days. Moreover, Löwenthal did not quarrel with the Communists' strategically motivated understanding of literature as a weapon, an understanding alien to art which he never shared. Instead, he sought to counter academic discourse from within. Challenging both time-honored idealist and more recent positivist conceptions of literature, he insisted that a

concern with the historical and sociological dimensions of literature requires a theory of history and society. This is not to say that one is limited to vague theorizing about the relationships between literature and society in general, nor that it is necessary to speak in generalities about social conditions which are required for the emergence of literature. Rather, the historical explanation of literature has to address the extent to which particular social structures find expression in individual literary works and what function these works perform in society.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, rather than providing general considerations on the relationship between literature and society, or the social conditions that determine literature, the social dimensions of literature can only be demonstrated in detail by reference to a particular author and his or her work.

Unsurprisingly, Löwenthal's approach to literature was met with some resistance by his associates at the Institute. Adorno was particularly suspicious of this 'historical-sociological kind of work', leading him to confide to Benjamin that the Institute was unlikely to accept the *Arcades Project* as long as Löwenthal made decisions on questions of literary history.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, even if it was based on notions of historical materialism, Adorno suspected that a sociology of literature would tend to focus on the author as a social subject at the expense of his or her artistry, or at least underestimate the transcendent capacities of art. This informed a bizarre idea Adorno harbored: sending Löwenthal to Paris to apprentice with Benjamin.<sup>21</sup> This simmering conflict came to a head in March 1941 when Adorno seized the occasion of an Institute meeting to rebut Löwenthal's emphasis on the writer, his position in the process of production, and in society more generally. In contrast, Adorno argued in favor of the work of art itself, a product exempt from the constraints of production, which transcends its creator's intentions and maybe even his cognitive capacities.<sup>22</sup>

It remains questionable to what extent Löwenthal's supposedly inadequate or insufficient methodological approach really impaired his numerous studies on the history of literature. Obviously, he was a little less interested in the form and the inner logic of a work of art than in its social meaning and reception. Löwenthal saw literary works as the most revealing documents of their epoch, including their missed historical opportunities. This was the case not only because of their manifest subject matter but also because of their specific form, which he too, albeit in a manner less pronounced than Adorno,

regarded as an expression, or an unconscious inscription, of social conditions. 'Literature teaches us to understand the success or failure of the socialization of individuals in concrete historical moments and situations'.<sup>23</sup> Despite their purported status as fiction, literary works thus provide insight into the experience of particular historical realities. This is because, unlike contemporary conditions, historical realities in the full sense of the word cannot be studied immediately. Thus, as Löwenthal stated, 'great literature is the only reliable source, in my opinion'.<sup>24</sup> This perhaps slightly exaggerated assessment resonates with Engels's remark about his understanding of French history on the basis of Balzac's *Comédie humaine*.<sup>25</sup>

Roughly speaking, Löwenthal traced the development of two different paths of the literary depiction of society, a true and a false one, which occasionally overlapped and could be found in the same text. According to this simplified distinction, true refers to a genuine experience of social reality, whereas any kind of delusion that escapes reality, or society, is false. Both are incumbent upon the depiction of the individual's struggle with the emergence of bourgeois society, which brought forth the individual as a social category and at the same time denies its demands for fulfillment.

Regardless of whether Shakespeare and Goethe, Löwenthal's favorite classic authors, are realists of form and style, he considers them true witnesses of their times. Their works convey a vivid portrayal of exactly that struggle, or, in other words, of the process of bourgeois civilization, its *promesse du bonheur* as well as its immanent failure.<sup>26</sup> For instance, in Caliban, the antagonist of Prospero in Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, Löwenthal discerned a prototype of the authoritarian personality characteristic to modern mass communications and manipulations. Thus a historically true work of art also transcends its time.

German Romanticism, by contrast, offers an outstanding example of the false in its

spiriting away from the emerging bourgeois society. Löwenthal called it a repressed revolution,<sup>27</sup> or, more precisely, 'a revolution in a type of reality that exists only on the other side of social life'.<sup>28</sup> Like an adult imagining themselves in a fairy-tale world, seeking their way back either to nature or to a long-bygone past, the Romantics succumbed to regression (as Löwenthal put it in psychoanalytic terms). Social alienation was thereby transformed into a virtue and the socially imposed isolation of the individual into a desired 'solitude in the woods', what Ludwig Tieck famously termed *Waldeinsamkeit*.

While the reactionary elements of German Romanticism remain ambivalent, to say the least, the apparently romantic depictions of rural life in the novels of Knut Hamsun reflect the development of political consciousness from liberalism to the authoritarian state.<sup>29</sup> From this point of view, Hamsun is depicted as a revenant of German Romanticism in late modern times, a reactionary in the most precise sense of the word. In their humble praise of down-to-earth life, with everyone rooted to his or her native soil, Hamsun's novels do not even portray living human beings, Löwenthal argued, but merely resentful attitudes toward urban civilization. Apart from the moods and landscapes they display so enticingly, the novels thus convey a false account of historical reality. Accordingly, Löwenthal was the first critic to frankly disclose Hamsun's sympathies for the Nazis, which eventually cast a shadow on his fame. Given his popularity in post-Wilhelmine years, his novels won the readers they deserved. Yet even a greater oeuvre than Hamsun's may, at least temporarily, fall prey to the dark desires of an unhoped-for audience, as Löwenthal demonstrated in his analysis of the German reception of Dostoyevsky.<sup>30</sup>

It was on the question of public reception that Löwenthal, in the mid 1930s, gradually stepped away from the realm of *Weltliteratur* (world literature) to take a closer look at more popular readings. Parallel to Adorno's examination of jazz and radio listening,

he began to explore the reception of popular biographies.<sup>31</sup> The latter, according to Löwenthal, personalize otherwise unfathomable, manifold, mediated social relations and thereby turn their protagonists into idols.<sup>32</sup> They offer their readers what Löwenthal would subsequently call a 'vicarious experience', to him one of the most salient features of popular culture. A biography of a celebrity's life, stylized like that of a hero in the movies, invites readers to put themselves in his or her place, namely to experience virtually the significance of personal existence in an age of impersonality, in which individual thoughts or actions are largely absorbed by overpowering social forces and institutions.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps due to his comparatively circumspect diction, Löwenthal has sometimes been considered more receptive to – that is, less critical of – the promises and possibilities of popular culture than his friend Adorno, an estimate that Löwenthal himself forthrightly rejected. 'It is indeed in this area of popular culture – or, as Adorno called it, "the culture industry" – that our interests frequently converged'.<sup>34</sup> Löwenthal was probably less suspicious of the culture industry's technology, which he thought could be easily used for better purposes. But what certainly does distinguish his approach to popular culture (not only from that of Adorno) is his inquiry into the history of this seemingly ultra-modern phenomenon, which according to Löwenthal emerged in eighteenth-century England, with its blossoming journals and newspapers.<sup>35</sup>

Löwenthal, moreover, did not just look into the institutional development of media and culture but also traced the evolving debate on it back to early modern times. To the surprise of many of his contemporaries, he found out 'that quite a few basic concepts which we have been accustomed to regard as very modern emerge as early as the sixteenth century: distraction, entertainment, and, last but not least, vicarious living'.<sup>36</sup> These concepts, which are used to describe the functions of modern popular culture, had been developed long before anything like

it. Furthermore, Löwenthal did not discover them in England but in France. The first to attest to these new experiences was the solitary writer Montaigne, the renowned pioneer of modern skepticism, who, by the way, also introduced a new literary genre: the essay. And it was Montaigne, Löwenthal wrote, who first

took stock of the situation of the individual after the breakdown of medieval culture. He was particularly struck by the phenomenon of loneliness in a world without faith, in which tremendous pressures were being exerted on everyone under the conditions of a postfeudal society. To escape destruction by these pressures, to avoid becoming lost in the horrors of isolation, Montaigne suggested distraction as a way out.<sup>37</sup>

About a century later, when bourgeois commercial culture had already developed to a considerable extent and when 'the waning influence of religion, pre- or post-Reformation, had made itself felt much more strongly in the average way of life', those moods and feelings described by Montaigne had spread further, as was evident in the work of Blaise Pascal, a mathematician and above all else a firm religious believer. 'Restlessness, the search for relief everywhere and anywhere, had become a major social phenomenon. It was then that Pascal spoke up against the complete surrender of man to self-destroying restlessness'. As strictly opposed to Montaigne, Pascal 'warned against what he called "diversion" as a way of life which could lead only to permanent unhappiness'.<sup>38</sup>

'Thus', Löwenthal concludes, 'the attitude toward leisure which, for Montaigne, guarantees survival means self-destruction to Pascal. And the controversy is still going on'. Today, he suggests, we could easily imagine a 'benevolent analyst of a mass medium who seems to say that, while everything is not yet wonderful, it is getting better every day', and on the other hand a 'nonconformist social critic who connects the loneliness of modern man with his interest in mass media as a setup of utter frustration'.<sup>39</sup> However, the concepts introduced by Montaigne and

Pascal noticeably changed with the ongoing development of art and popular culture. Montaigne, back in his century, made 'no clear-cut distinction between the psychological motives of artist and audience', whereas Goethe, for example, more than 200 years later, saw 'the artist as the spokesman for the high standards of his "trade" and the public in the passive role of consumers'. Löwenthal refers particularly to the 'Prelude on the Stage' in Goethe's *Faust*, which presents a dispute between the Manager and the Poet. Here, 'when the Poet resists the Manager's exhortations, he does not do so in the name of religious or spiritual values, but in terms of the artist's mission'. And this, Löwenthal points out, was only 'the beginning of the period which witnessed both the spread of popular newspapers and magazines and the unprecedented flowering of high literature'.<sup>40</sup>

It was in this period, the early nineteenth century, that the antagonism between art and popular culture fully developed. Löwenthal points out two issues that have been discussed ever since. First, the problem of artistic standards, which is closely related to the question of the influence of public taste on the character of artistic or cultural products. Second, the problem of mediocre art. Goethe's friend Schiller early on 'recognized that as society became more mechanized it made harsher demands on the life of the individual. These demands exhaust both mind and body, and man therefore requires rest and relaxation in his leisure-time'. Beauty, according to Schiller, 'addresses all the faculties of man and can only be appreciated if a man employs fully all his strength. He must bring to it an open sense, a broad heart, a spirit full of freshness',<sup>41</sup> whereas mediocre art would make no such demands but rather suspend thought. Thereby Schiller, who, unlike Goethe, already possessed an idea of social classes, anticipated 'the tired businessman's conception of art, and foreshadows those more recent critics who are concerned about the extent to which mediocre artistic products lull the reader, listener or viewer

into passivity'.<sup>42</sup> However, the elevation of art at the expense of popular culture was by no means a uniquely German idea (although it is quite telling that those time-honored German classics, in Löwenthal's reading, knew well that their time was all but over). The English poet William Wordsworth, in considering the spread of popular literature in the early nineteenth century, arrived at the quite similar conclusion that the modern world brought forth a need for 'gross and violent stimulants' which 'tends "to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind"', whereas the function of true art is to stimulate these powers. Popular literature reduces people to an attitude of passivity or, in the words of Wordsworth, to "a state of almost savage torpor".<sup>43</sup> Finally, Alexis de Tocqueville was even more pessimistic about this. He believed that in modern societies, only mass communications would ever be successful, 'and that they can only be products of popular culture, unrelated to valid intellectual, artistic or moral criteria'. Thus, the writer of poetry, plays, and novels would in his way become 'just as much a manufacturer of commodities as any other businessman'.<sup>44</sup>

Löwenthal, for his part, did not disavow the merits of popular culture straightaway. Toward the end of his historical survey, he discusses the artistic possibilities of mass media.<sup>45</sup> Unlike conservative critics of modern culture, he certainly was not afraid of the 'masses'. He knew quite well that they were no indisputable *fait social* but a product of advanced capitalist societies. Yet why should the vast majority of people be fobbed off with lowbrow substitutes of art for all eternity? Löwenthal never condescendingly justified the badly established division of cultures, a reflection of the social division of labor. 'I don't sympathize with the proletariat', he quipped. 'Marx didn't sympathize with the proletariat either: the proletariat was to be abolished! Proletarian life-styles are hardly a model worth imitating, nor are petty-bourgeois life-styles that attempt to emulate the life-styles of the upper classes'.<sup>46</sup> On the

other hand, more strikingly, Löwenthal was not even sure about the blessings of art. With hindsight, when he turned almost 80, he said, 'How much, indeed, the art, the great literary art of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, really accomplished; whether it changed people – that is very much yet to be decided. For, ultimately, those are our ancestors and forefathers, and what, after all, has become of our society?'.<sup>47</sup> Whatever true art might be able to achieve in terms of social history, Löwenthal clearly saw that this entire tradition was about to be absorbed by the culture industry. In response to being asked if the broad access to art was to be considered progressive, he replied that this perhaps partly sincere democratic distribution of art would not include the capability of experiencing art. For the latter was being suppressed not only by the institutions of popular culture but also by social relations more generally.<sup>48</sup>

As to both popular culture and art's transformation into the culture industry, Löwenthal was most concerned about the growing loss of individual experience and thus of individual expression. He characterized this as a process of dehumanization within a society purportedly promoting the autonomy of the individual (also contravened by the persistence of repressive collectives, communities, or clans). Communication, the main function of media, had long since assumed a reality independent from the human beings technically involved in it. This decline of language in the age of ubiquitous communication is perhaps the most striking manifestation of what Löwenthal described as a life-style of vicarious experience.<sup>49</sup> Ironically, the so-called linguistic turn in the humanities and social sciences, boasting a soberly instrumental and decidedly 'anti-human' conception of language, has supported this tendency.

Moreover, in Löwenthal's view, the aforementioned problem of artistic standards, or rather criteria, in addition to the obvious commercial interests on the part of the producers, has likewise been affected: broiled

down to the dichotomy I like it / I don't like it.<sup>50</sup> While such an attitude had already been applied to the products of popular culture, it was now applied to supposedly serious works of art as well. Even well-trained readers, listeners, and viewers of popular texts, music, or any other media product could hardly be expected to believe in utopian promises anymore. The perpetual consumption of all those more or less overtly illusionary displays of happiness had left them with no illusions, except for the enchanted world of everyday life, a reality that had become its own ideology. This most deceptive kind of realism inevitably affects the possibilities of art. Nevertheless, Löwenthal insisted that the difference between the prospering industry of cultural commodity production and works of arts must not be relinquished.<sup>51</sup> Not because art, as Goethe would have it, ought to be defended for the sake of its high standards; rather, because the experience of art, however negatively, anticipates a state of things 'that are no longer distorted by exchange, profit, and the false needs of a degraded humanity'.<sup>52</sup>

Löwenthal, more so than Adorno, was concerned with the reception of both art and popular culture. But, unlike cultural studies, he never sought to diminish the importance of the work of art as such in favor of its supposedly very significant appropriation by manifold audiences. Much like Adorno, he associated art – in a remotely messianic, though quite secular sense of the word – with redemption, or reconciliation.<sup>53</sup> Or, in Adorno's words:

Art is not only the plenipotentiary of a better praxis than that which has to date predominated, but is equally the critique of praxis as the rule of brutal self-preservation at the heart of the status quo and in its service. It gives the lie to production for production's sake and opts for a form of praxis beyond the spell of labor. Art's *promesse du bonheur* means not only that hitherto praxis has blocked happiness but that happiness is beyond praxis. The measure of the chasm separating praxis from happiness is taken by the force of negativity in the artwork.<sup>54</sup>

## AUTHORITARIANISM AND ANTI-SEMITISM

Empirical research had been part of the Institute's agenda since its inception, although it was only in American exile that Horkheimer and his associates, not always entirely by their own choice, acquainted themselves with state-of-the-art methods. Their most important empirical study, however, had already been undertaken in pre-Nazi Germany, conducted by Löwenthal's old friend Erich Fromm. This study of the mindset of German workers and employees was intended to find out why they were interested in anything but a proletarian revolution. But Fromm found out something else, namely that there was a subliminal inclination toward authoritarian rule even among otherwise progressive and liberal-minded people. The results of the *Arbeiter- und Angestelltenerhebung*, which was not fully published until the 1980s,<sup>55</sup> instantly alarmed the Institute's members and led Horkheimer to take precautions for emigration. This study saved their lives, recalled Löwenthal. It was 'one of the few examples, although not the only one in world history, in which social research helped the social researchers themselves'.<sup>56</sup>

Henceforth, the question of authority continued to solicit the Institute's attention in various ways. Löwenthal's first study, undertaken in exile, was a series of theoretical reflections on the vicissitudes of authority in modern societies, which in contrast to the medieval understanding of authority and tradition claim to be based on reason.<sup>57</sup> Even within constitutional democracies' different cultural institutions – most notably the bourgeois family – social life is governed by unquestioned, purportedly rational, authorities rather than individual desires. Owing to their broad scope, though, these essays were not included in the Institute's voluminous *Studies on Authority and the Family* published in Paris in 1936. When Löwenthal got back to this issue in the 1940s, it was on unfamiliar empirical grounds.

Research into the social and psychological foundations of authoritarianism and anti-Semitism, in particular, kept several of the Institute's members busy during this time. Horkheimer was appointed research director of the American Jewish Committee, while Adorno, along with American colleagues, proceeded with the studies on the *Authoritarian Personality*, certainly the most famous piece of empirical work associated with the Institute. Yet another groundbreaking study was also under way: Leo Löwenthal, in collaboration with Norbert Guterman – an émigré from France, where he had formerly been closely affiliated with Henri Lefebvre – conducted empirical research on fascist agitation in the United States. The resulting *Prophets of Deceit*, published in 1949, was soon to be widely regarded as a landmark study in political psychology.

The core question is why demagogic agitators are able to attract large audiences in democratic societies and how otherwise quite reasonable people can be won over to a fascist cause. Löwenthal and Guterman's answer is that the agitator deliberately rejects the rules of democratic debate, revealing that they are a giant deception staged by sinister and alien (foreigners, communists, Jews, non-believers, bureaucrats) enemies of the honest, hard-working people. While his own revelations and insinuations rely on resentments rather than arguments, they quite often match the mood of many of his listeners, who therefore tend to embrace such an impositor as their savior. In psychoanalytic terms, this is regression (if only metaphorically); people suspend their political judgment and ultimately their own ability to think while they eagerly submit to an imaginary father who promises to care for them. An illusion of happiness, or paradoxically even strength, is bought for the abandonment of reasoning.

Just one topic will be focused on here by way of example. The agitator's constant warning of imminent catastrophes will lead his followers to vaguely hope that 'when the deluge comes they, too, may be allowed

to perform the acts that are attributed to the enemy'.<sup>58</sup> This is what Löwenthal, using Freudian terms, called pathic projection, a central element of his critical theory of anti-Semitism, of which more later. Additionally,

The explanation of everyday mischances in terms of uncanny world catastrophes revitalizes and reinforces the heritage of infantile anxieties. The unconscious finds in the agitator's interpretations a replica of its own primitive reactions to the outside world; the listener plays the role of the little child responding to the warning that bogeys may come for him.<sup>59</sup>

Considering the numerous conspiracy theories cropping up nowadays, promoted by not only fascist and religious zealots or pseudo-religious agitators but various political activists, bloggers, and the like, the techniques illuminated by Löwenthal and Guterman may still prove revealing.

Moreover, as Adorno asserted back then, this kind of social-psychological research on both empirical and theoretical grounds could offer an efficient antidote to the blossoming nonsense of the strictly quantitative methods usually applied to this field of study.<sup>60</sup> Remarkably, Löwenthal analyzed fascist agitation in relation to the culture industry; both could be regarded 'as "psychoanalysis in reverse", that is, as more or less constantly manipulated devices to keep people in permanent psychic bondage, to increase and reinforce neurotic and even psychotic behaviour culminating in perpetual dependency on a "leader" or on institutions or products'.<sup>61</sup>

Löwenthal was involved in another empirical research project launched by the Institute in the 1940s. Although less renowned than the *Prophets of Deceit*, his study on anti-Semitism among American workers might be considered even more important today. Its results are certainly more disillusioning.<sup>62</sup> Löwenthal had already experienced the attitude of young German proletarians toward an allegedly privileged Jewish intellectual first-hand, when he was drafted at the age of 18 during the First World War.<sup>63</sup>

Now, by means of methodologically approved social research, he had his own personal experience empirically confirmed. The hatred for the Jew, he found out, is the hatred for the individual. Or, as he later put it, 'a perverted and suppressed form of utopia. The Jews represent something that others want to be'.<sup>64</sup> That is why at times the most relentless enemies of the Jews can at the same time be among their most fervent admirers. Anti-Semitism is longing for redemption by means of destruction, as if the imagined sinister powers of those to be killed might thus be bestowed on their assassins. Indeed, it was only in those years that the Institute, and Löwenthal in particular, gained an understanding of the specificity of anti-Semitic resentment.<sup>65</sup>

Parallel to his empirical studies, Löwenthal co-authored the first three theses on 'Elements of Anti-Semitism', a chapter in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. At least, this is what Horkheimer and Adorno declare in the foreword to their book. However, the letters at the time, particularly the correspondence between Horkheimer and Löwenthal, suggest that the contribution of the latter went much further.

The outset of 'Elements of Anti-Semitism' states that 'For the fascists the Jews are not a minority but the antirace, the negative principle as such; on their extermination the world's happiness depends'.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, anti-Semitism ought to be clearly distinguished from racism, a lesson yet to be learnt by many today. True, the Jew can easily be portrayed as a scapegoat, though a scapegoat 'not only for individual maneuvers and machinations but in the wider sense that the economic injustice of the whole class is attributed to him'.<sup>67</sup> Whatever shortcomings the 'Elements' may have otherwise, the theoretical insights formulated in theses I and III have proven indispensable to any critical notion of anti-Semitism ever since. And there is yet another substantial one to be found in thesis IV, where Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that:



Anti-Semitism is based on false projection. It is the reverse of genuine mimesis and has deep affinities to the repressed; in fact, it may itself be the pathic character trait in which the latter is precipitated. If mimesis makes itself resemble its surroundings, false projection makes its surroundings resemble itself.<sup>68</sup>

But this notion of pathic projection had probably been brought up by Löwenthal in preceding discussions with Horkheimer and Adorno. 'I think we should add a paragraph on projection to the "Thesen"', Horkheimer wrote to him (in English). 'After all, the projection of aggression or destruction is the most obvious psychological fact of Antisemitism. [...] Would I be asking too much if I begged you to jot down the notes on projection which you made on the Sunday afternoon before I left?'<sup>69</sup>

One more thing seems worth mentioning here. In 1946, a couple of years before Hannah Arendt came up with her voluminous study *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Löwenthal published an article on the devastating functions and dehumanizing effects of terror, covering both National Socialism and Stalinism.<sup>70</sup> Apart from many crucial insights into the very specific rationality of terror as a means of social domination, this little treatise points out an aspect that may be of interest on a more general level. Löwenthal observes the collapse of continuous experience, which terrorist rule purposefully precipitates but which, inadvertently, and to a much lesser effect, of course, is about to strike people's lives under the rather comfortable conditions provided by orderly democratic countries. Biographies are quite literally falling apart, perhaps one of the reasons why the biographic genre had become so popular in books and films.

## POST-MODERN TIMES

In his old age, Löwenthal received several honors and awards from his native country.

Belated recognition perhaps, yet certainly a welcome opportunity for him to address a familiar foreign audience in his mother tongue. From a distant point of view, however, it seems as if those honors, irrespective of the good intentions of those in charge, were also intended to say that Germany had irrevocably overcome its sinister past and that critical theory could therefore come to a close. Indeed, this kind of theory by then looked somewhat 'traditional' in its own fashion. In the 1980s, after a decade of steady decline, social criticism originating from the works of Hegel, Marx, and Freud was virtually over and done with. The Frankfurt School's 'second generation', as it came to be called, basically formed and most famously represented by Jürgen Habermas, had not only diminished the significance of both Freudian psychoanalysis and the Marxian critique of political economy but likewise stripped away their founding fathers' ill-reputed negativity. Most notoriously, Adorno's intransigent attitude toward a 'wrong' society was to be replaced by a rather conciliatory theory of communication and thus an inevitably quixotic ethics of discourse placed well beyond the relations of production.<sup>71</sup> According to Habermas, history, instead of keeping us under its spell, was finally loosening its grip on societies and individuals alike.<sup>72</sup> Of course, the legacy of Horkheimer's critical theory had not – and still has not – been fully eclipsed. One might think of, for instance, disparate authors such as Rolf Tiedemann, Detlev Claussen, and Wolfgang Pohrt in Germany, or Moishe Postone and Martin Jay in the United States. Nevertheless, an even greater challenge than Habermas's attempted rescue of modern rationality was being posed by the post-modern farewell to reason, history, and reality. Löwenthal, unperturbed by colorful intellectual trends and at the same time acutely alert to the complacent talk of *post-histoire*, in his last years seized several occasions to breast this wave that was about to wash away the conceptual

foundations of critical theory and Enlightenment altogether.<sup>73</sup>

Perhaps the most appropriate, and personally rewarding, occasion was the reception of the Theodor W. Adorno Award in his native city of Frankfurt in 1989. The speech he delivered then might be regarded as his legacy, on his behalf as well as his deceased friends'. Löwenthal said he was there to bear witness to the intellectual and moral motives of critical theory. The award, therefore, ought to belong to the entire group. Incidentally, this was shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall inaugurated the collapse of state-socialist rule in Central and Eastern Europe. Thus the remains of the revolution, which, in Löwenthal's words, had long since abandoned him and his associates, were to be removed from history once and for all. But, by then, the idea of history he had been keeping up against all odds, particularly of a history yet to come, had already been called into question by others, most prominently by former Western Marxists, or renegade Leninists and Maoists, who, from an almost religious level of dogmatic belief in history taking its course for the good of humanity, had meanwhile arrived at quite the opposite point of view. History, for all its catastrophic failures and its obvious senselessness, now appeared to them as a mere conglomeration of contingent events, if not as an illusion, just as society or reality.<sup>74</sup> Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and the simulation of reality probably reached the very peak of this overall intellectual tendency. The Marxian critique of the apparition of reality – that is, a socially produced and socially (not solely technically) mediated reality – was thereby turned into a cynical denial of reality as such, allegedly indistinguishable from its own simulation. Consequently, any possible change of social reality was to be considered equally illusory, and social criticism was exposed to ridicule, 'a travesty of what Adorno meant by his notion of a damaged life'.<sup>75</sup>

But beyond this perhaps most flamboyant display of post-modernism, which soon

disappeared, there were arguably some more serious contenders. Under the influence of French post-structuralism, many notions pertinent to critical theory were now being reviewed from a different point of view and to different ends – for example, the category of the subject. Starting with Roland Barthes's 'Death of the Author' and Michel Foucault's famous saying 'that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea', it had become fashionable, if not obligatory, at least in many departments of the so-called humanities, to disclose the human subject as a discursive construction. In contrast, Goethe, Löwenthal recalled, had already turned against a false subjectivity, but of course he never intended to abolish the subject but to elevate it in a dialectical sense. This, too, is what critical theory always had in mind. 'We did not have to attend a post-modern salon to learn about the problematic notion and ideology of the individual'.<sup>76</sup> The much noticed fragility of the subject, Löwenthal remarked, was intended to indicate its expendability in present societies. Yet at the same time, while dismissing the subject as fiction, the post-modernist discourse itself indulges in an 'orgy of subjectivism'.<sup>77</sup> If, literally, anything goes as well as anything else, no one can tell the difference between a Manhattan phone directory and a tragedy of Shakespeare.<sup>78</sup> It goes without saying that, from this declaredly pluralistic, actually downright relativistic position, art cannot be reasonably distinguished from the products of the culture industry, nor even from any other phenomenon. What initiated as a kind of reissue of Montaignian skepticism, though more meddlesome and less smartly written, amounted to a 'triumph of instrumental relativism'.<sup>79</sup> Even worse, Löwenthal suspected, the 'monstrosity of post-histoire',<sup>80</sup> if it does mean anything at all, would entail a refusal of the Jewish-messianic heritage and of any utopian hope, however difficult these notions might have become.

Although hardly ever read, Löwenthal's distant early warnings are echoing even

louder today, since ‘deconstructionism’, as he called it, probably the most influential ‘spawn of post-modernism’,<sup>81</sup> now provides the major source of theory even for those devoted to social criticism. If they are not just grappling with cultures and identities, then notions such as class or the exchange of commodities are remodeled in terms of discourse. ‘Universalism’, for example, has become a term of abuse, whereas any kind of autochthonous barbarism might be glorified as an act of resistance to a modernity summarily equated to Western capitalism. Apparently, the dismissal of Enlightenment categories, traditionally a raging passion of reactionary critics of Western civilization, has in only slightly different terms been embraced by those who, according to that same tradition, would be considered liberals or left-wingers. But maybe this tradition has come to an end. It is quite telling that nowadays, with critical theory widely being treated as a dead dog, as Marx would have it, the works of Walter Benjamin have gained an almost obtrusive popularity, though mostly owing to ‘readings’ informed by post-structuralist philology. This is why Benjamin can now as easily be linked to Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt as to Marx or the Messiah. In this respect, at least, Löwenthal could consider himself lucky, since virtually no one is reading his writings anymore. Indeed, ‘the overshadowing vogue of deconstruction’, says Robert Hullot-Kentor, ‘has done inestimable damage to critical thought’,<sup>82</sup> although the real degree of this damage remains to be seen. As for the United States, where Löwenthal spent most of his life after being exiled from Germany, Hullot-Kentor notes that

academia’s contribution to a nation always wanting to get things done as with hammer and saw, rather than by invoking intellect, was to provide reading to dislodge interpretation, rewriting to take the place of conceptualization, and the handy toughness profiled in any announced *deconstruction* to easily trump weak-willed *critique* and the fragile mentalism of *insight*.<sup>83</sup>

In his very first essay, written in 1920, entitled ‘The Demonic: Draft of a Negative Philosophy of Religion’,<sup>84</sup> Löwenthal went through various demonologies worrying mankind in this disastrously enchanted world. Only the bright messianic light would ultimately doom them all. The questions they kept asking would then be answered. For the time being, however, it would be helpful to ask the right questions.

## Notes

- 1 See, for example, Horkheimer’s most grateful letter to Löwenthal from June 18, 1941, in Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 17, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1996: 67).
- 2 Letter to Kracauer, June 8, 1931, in Theodor W. Adorno and Siegfried Kracauer, *Briefwechsel 1923–1966*, ed. Wolfgang Schopf (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008: 284). ‘Well, I never had a crown’, Löwenthal laconically replied decades later in his ‘Intellectual Memoir’ of Adorno, in Leo Löwenthal, *An Unmastered Past*, ed. Martin Jay (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1987: 184).
- 3 Provisions for this imminent case had been made since 1931. The first destination was Switzerland, yet Horkheimer and his associates were not given the opportunity to settle down. While still pondering the prospects of going to Paris or London, they received a generous offer from Columbia University in New York, which they eventually accepted.
- 4 Leo Löwenthal, *Schriften*, ed. Helmut Dubiel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp). Vol. 1: *Literatur und Massenkultur* (1980); Vol. 2: *Das bürgerliche Bewußtsein in der Literatur* (1981); Vol. 3: *Falsche Propheten. Studien zum Autoritarismus* (1982); Vol. 4: *Judaica, Vorträge, Briefe* (1984); Vol. 5: *Philosophische Frühschriften* (1987). An English version of this edition, except for volume 5, containing Löwenthal’s early writings, was subsequently published under the title *Communications in Society* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books). Vol. 1: *Literature and Mass Culture* (1984); Vol. 2: *Literature and the Image of Man* (1986); Vol. 3: *False Prophets: Studies on Authoritarianism* (1987); Vol. 4: *Critical Theory and Frankfurt Theorists: Lectures, Correspondence, Conversations* (1989).
- 5 Leo Löwenthal, *Mitmachen wollte ich nie. Ein autobiographisches Gespräch mit Helmut Dubiel* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980). English

- translation: 'I Never Wanted to Play Along', in Leo Lowenthal, *An Unmastered Past*. In that same year, the American journal *Telos* (No. 45, 1980), in a 'Tribute to Lowenthal', published a series of articles on his life and work, including parts of Dubiel's interviews.
- 6 Gregor-Sönke Schneider, *Keine Kritische Theorie ohne Leo Löwenthal: Die Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung 1932–1941/42* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014).
  - 7 That's why a first attempt on the history of the Institute, Martin Jay's *The Dialectical Imagination* (1973), was taken in the United States, under the tutelage of Leo Löwenthal, who provided Jay with personal documents.
  - 8 Letter to Löwenthal from October 3, 1947, in Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 17: 900–1.
  - 9 Karl Marx to Arnold Ruge, September 1843, in *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*: [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43\\_09.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09.htm)
  - 10 Leo Lowenthal, 'I Never Wanted to Play Along', in *An Unmastered Past*: 61.
  - 11 Letter to Löwenthal from October 3, 1947, in Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 17: 901. Back in 1946, Löwenthal confided to Horkheimer, 'I consider it utterly more important to stress today the differences with the party [i.e., the Communist Party] than those with the liberals' (Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 17: 761). But Horkheimer was not yet convinced. See his letter to Löwenthal from September 24, 1946, *ibid.*: 758–9.
  - 12 Leo Lowenthal, 'I Never Wanted to Play Along', in *An Unmastered Past*: 159.
  - 13 *Ibid.*: 110.
  - 14 Leo Lowenthal, 'Sigmund Freud', in *Critical Theory and Frankfurt Theorists*: 49. In the original German text it reads: 'Kampf um die Gewinnung von Einsichten und von Einsichtigen'. (*Schriften*, Vol. 4: 52.)
  - 15 Printed in Leo Löwenthal, *Schriften*, Vol. 5: 99–168.
  - 16 See his gloomy letter to Horkheimer from September 13, 1955, in Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 18, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1996: 308).
  - 17 Leo Lowenthal, 'I Never Wanted to Play Along', in *An Unmastered Past*: 115.
  - 18 *Ibid.*: 144.
  - 19 Leo Lowenthal, 'On Sociology of Literature' (1932), in *Literature and Mass Culture*: 247.
  - 20 See Adorno's letter to Benjamin from May 20, 1935, in Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *Briefwechsel 1928–1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994: 111). (Much harsher, by the way, was the judgment he passed on Marcuse's essay 'The Affirmative Character of Culture'. See Adorno's letter from April 25, 1937, *ibid.*: 236.)
  - 21 See Adorno's letter to Benjamin from September 13, 1937, *ibid.*: 273.
  - 22 See the discussion of Löwenthal's lecture on the function of literary criticism (March 14, 1941) in Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 12, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1985: 553–8).
  - 23 Leo Lowenthal, 'Sociology of Literature in Retrospect', in *An Unmastered Past*: 169.
  - 24 Leo Lowenthal, 'We Never Expected Such Fame': A Conversation with Mathias Greffrath, 1979', in *Critical Theory and Frankfurt Theorists*: 244.
  - 25 See Engels's letter to Margaret Harkness from April 1888, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Literature and Art* (Moscow: Progress, 1976: 90).
  - 26 See his essays on Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* in Leo Lowenthal, *Literature and the Image of Man*: 57–98 and 131–56.
  - 27 Leo Lowenthal, 'Romanticism: Revolution Repressed', in *Literature and the Image of Man*: 221–34.
  - 28 Leo Lowenthal, 'Eduard Mörike: Troubled Embourgeoisement', in *Literature and the Image of Man*: 255.
  - 29 Leo Lowenthal, 'Knut Hamsun', in *Literature and the Image of Man*: 185–218.
  - 30 Leo Lowenthal, 'The Reception of Dostoevski in Pre-World War I Germany', in *Literature and Mass Culture*: 167–88.
  - 31 Authors such as Emil Ludwig and Stefan Zweig, the subjects of Löwenthal's early studies, had won international fame with their pleasing portrayals of renowned artists and statesmen. But since Löwenthal did not intend to embarrass these celebrated Jewish émigrés, he withheld the publication of his articles until the collapse of Nazi rule.
  - 32 Leo Lowenthal, 'The Biographical Fashion', in *Literature and Mass Culture*: 189–202; see also 'The Triumph of Mass Idols', *ibid.*: 203–36.
  - 33 Leo Lowenthal, 'I Never Wanted to Play Along', in *An Unmastered Past*: 131–2.
  - 34 Leo Lowenthal, 'Theodor W. Adorno: An Intellectual Memoir', in *An Unmastered Past*: 185.
  - 35 Leo Lowenthal, 'Eighteenth-Century England: A Case Study', in *Literature and Mass Culture*: 75–152. Interestingly, almost at the same time, in the early 1960s, Jürgen Habermas explored the historical vicissitudes of the public sphere – what Löwenthal did not know then, apparently. His interest was different and more specific anyway. Unlike Habermas, he sought to grasp the intellectual development of mass culture, not the

- political formation of a genuinely bourgeois public sphere.
- 36 Leo Lowenthal, 'Historical Perspectives of Popular Culture', in *Literature and Mass Culture*: 5.
  - 37 Ibid.: 4–5.
  - 38 Ibid.: 5. Regarding Montaigne and Pascal, see also 'The Debate over Art and Popular Culture: A Synopsis': 22–5.
  - 39 Ibid.: 6.
  - 40 Leo Lowenthal, 'The Debate over Art and Popular Culture: A Synopsis', *ibid.*: 27.
  - 41 Friedrich Schiller, 'On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry', quoted *ibid.*: 34.
  - 42 Ibid.
  - 43 Ibid.: 40.
  - 44 Ibid.: 45.
  - 45 Ibid.: 50–5.
  - 46 Leo Lowenthal, 'I Never Wanted to Play Along', in *An Unmastered Past*: 157.
  - 47 Leo Lowenthal, 'We Never Expected Such Fame', in *Critical Theory and Frankfurt Theorists*: 244.
  - 48 'The Left in Germany Has Failed. Interview with Peter Glotz', in *An Unmastered Past*: 253–4.
  - 49 Leo Lowenthal, 'Popular Culture: A Humanistic and Sociological Concept', in *Literature and Mass Culture*: 291–305.
  - 50 See Löwenthal's conversations with Frithjof Hager, in *Geschichte denken. Ein Notizbuch für Leo Löwenthal*, ed. Frithjof Hager (Leipzig: Reclam, 1992: 44).
  - 51 See, for example, *ibid.*: 42–3.
  - 52 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 2002: 227).
  - 53 See his speech on the reception of the Theodor W. Adorno Award, in Leo Löwenthal, *Untergang der Dämonologien. Studien über Judentum, Antisemitismus und faschistischen Geist* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1990: 9).
  - 54 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*: 12.
  - 55 Erich Fromm, *The Working Class in Weimar Germany: A Psychological and Sociological Study*, ed. Wolfgang Bonß (London: Berg, 1984).
  - 56 Leo Lowenthal, 'We Never Expected Such Fame', in *Critical Theory and Frankfurt Theorists*: 247.
  - 57 Leo Lowenthal, 'Toward a Psychology of Authoritarianism', in *False Prophets*: 253–98.
  - 58 Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman, 'Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator', in *False Prophets*: 44.
  - 59 Ibid.
  - 60 See Adorno's letter to Löwenthal from January 3, 1949, in *Critical Theory and Frankfurt Theorists*.
  - 61 Leo Lowenthal, 'Theodor W. Adorno: An Intellectual Memoir', in *An Unmastered Past*: 186.
  - 62 Leo Lowenthal, 'Images of Prejudice', in *False Prophets*: 193–253.
  - 63 Leo Lowenthal, 'I Never Wanted to Play Along', in *An Unmastered Past*: 44–6.
  - 64 Leo Lowenthal, 'I Never Wanted to Play Along', in *An Unmastered Past*: 32.
  - 65 See, by contrast, Horkheimer's essay 'The Jews and Europe' from 1939, in *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, eds. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas MacKay Kellner (London and New York: Routledge, 1989: 77–94). Löwenthal, interestingly, subedited this piece of text before publication and apparently approved of it. See Horkheimer's letter to him from July 20, 1939, in Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 16, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1995: 618).
  - 66 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002: 137).
  - 67 Ibid.: 142.
  - 68 Ibid.: 154.
  - 69 Letter to Löwenthal from March 17, 1944, in Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 17: 549.
  - 70 See Leo Lowenthal, 'Terror's Dehumanizing Effects', in *False Prophets*: 179–92.
  - 71 Remarkably, Löwenthal, at least in public, never criticized Habermas's revision of critical theory.
  - 72 To be sure, Habermas, as a public intellectual, often fervently interfered in controversies, about recent German history in particular, whereas his purportedly growing theoretical understanding of Western democratic societies might lead readers to believe that 'there has been history, but there is no longer any' (Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*). Some decades before, interestingly, Horkheimer had suspected Habermas of adolescent revolutionism without much thinking about history the other way, meaning what separates post-Nazi Germany from the days of the early Marx. See his letter to Adorno from September 27, 1958, in Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel*, Vol. 4: 1950–1969, eds Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006: 508–21).
  - 73 See Richard Wolin, 'Die Vorzüge der Ungleichzeitigkeit: Leo Löwenthal mit Neunzig', in *Geschichte denken*: 154–62.
  - 74 As early as 1983, in 'Caliban's Legacy' (*Critical Theory and Frankfurt Theorists*: 98–109), Löwenthal criticized the anti-historicism of structuralist and post-structuralist thought.
  - 75 Leo Löwenthal, *Untergang der Dämonologien*: 7.
  - 76 Ibid.: 8.
  - 77 Leo Löwenthal in his conversations with Frithjof Hager, in *Geschichte denken*: 36.

78 Ibid.: 42.

79 Leo Löwenthal, *Untergang der Dämonologien*: 8.

80 Ibid.

81 Leo Löwenthal in his conversations with Frithjof Hager, in *Geschichte denken*: 42.

82 Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance. Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006: 23).

83 Ibid.: 2.

84 Leo Löwenthal, *Schriften*, Vol. 5: 207–23.

# Erich Fromm: Psychoanalysis and the Fear of Freedom

Kieran Durkin

## INTRODUCTION

Erich Fromm's role in Frankfurt School critical theory history has historically been under-acknowledged and under-analysed. Works such as Schroyer (1973) and Tar (1977) make scant reference to Fromm, and even those works from the same period that accord Fromm a greater degree of recognition – such as Jay (1996), Held (1980), and Wiggershaus (1994) – fail to really see Fromm in his true significance. It was not until more recently that Fromm's proper place in this history has come to be more fully restored (see Abromeit, 2011; Braune, 2014; Bronner, 1994; Burston, 1991; Durkin, 2014, 2015; Funk, 2000; McLaughlin, 1999, 2008; Wheatland, 2004, 2009; Wilde, 2004). It is now clear that Fromm was very much a central figure in the early period of Max Horkheimer's directorship of the Frankfurt Institut für Sozialforschung (hereafter generally either 'Institute for Social Research' or 'Institute'), second only to

Horkheimer in terms of the derivation of the Institute's early research programme and methodology. From the theoretical and empirical merging of psychoanalysis and historical materialism, to the focus on personality/character and authoritarianism, Fromm helped shape much of the formation of the Frankfurt School's critical theory of society, but he left the Institute in acrimonious circumstances in the late 1930s, at a time when the Institute itself was realigning around the theoretical and interpersonal union of Horkheimer and Adorno. As it was, Fromm went on to have a career as a 'public intellectual' in the United States and beyond, achieving fame and recognition decades prior to his Institute ex-colleagues with books such as *Escape from Freedom* (1941), *The Sane Society* (1955), and *The Art of Loving* (1956). During this post-Institute period, Fromm developed some of the central themes of critical theory in a particular direction that he would come to describe as 'radical humanist' – developments that have

generally been thought by many to be beyond the boundaries of, and even antithetical to, critical theory, as it is canonically understood. Whilst the strong normative thrust of Fromm's writings during this period has drawn the ire of colleagues and critics alike, a more capacious understanding of critical theory and its sphere of relevance can help us see the potential that these works have for avenues of retrieval and progression in relation to the original liberatory aims of critical theory.

### **EARLY LIFE: JUDAISM, SOCIALISM, AND PSYCHOANALYSIS**

Deeply influenced by the Judaic milieu he inhabited as a child, Fromm's first wish on graduating from Frankfurt's Wöhler Gymnasium was to train to become a rabbi. This wish was thwarted, however, due to parental pressure to remain close to the family home, and Fromm eventually embarked upon an academic career, deciding to study jurisprudence at Frankfurt University. Fromm's study at Frankfurt lasted only a few months before he transferred to Heidelberg's Ruprecht-Karls University to study what was then known as 'national economics'. During his time at Ruprecht-Karls, where he attended lectures by Alfred Weber, Karl Jaspers, Heinrich Rickert, and Hans Driesch, Fromm remained devout, studying the Talmud daily with his teacher, Salman Rabinkow, as well as engaging in Jewish public life in Frankfurt as part of the circle around Rabbi Nehemia Nobel. Fromm was also instrumental in setting up a Jewish teaching institute in Frankfurt – the *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus* – where he taught alongside Rabbi Nobel, Franz Rozenweig, Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, Leo Baeck, and Siegfried Kracauer, amongst others (Funk, 2000: 41; Funk, 1988). Fromm would later claim that this period in his life – particularly the time he spent with Rabinkow – was the most

influential in terms of forming his intellectual view of the world.

That this period was an important one in Fromm's development can be seen by virtue of the fact that it also contains the nucleus of what would become his characteristic contribution to critical theory. Fromm's study with Rabinkow and Nobel brought him into extensive contact with the Hasidic tradition and with Habad Hasidism in particular. Through this connection, Fromm learnt the importance of psychological analysis and self-knowledge – the psychological being stressed in Habad to the extent that Kabbalism, the ground from which Hasidism in general flows, acts as an instrument of psychological analysis and self-knowledge (Scholem, 1971: 341). Although psychological analysis and self-knowledge here are interpreted in and through a mystical-theological vernacular, it is nevertheless in this encounter that Fromm begins to develop his appreciation of depth psychology – an appreciation that anticipates his subsequent move into psychoanalytical practice and analysis (Funk, 1982: 203–4, 1988; Durkin, 2014: 48–50).

The all-pervading influence of Judaism on Fromm's life in this period is also evident in his choice of dissertation at Ruprecht-Karls. Still very much influenced by Rabinkow and Nobel, Fromm's dissertation was concerned with analysing the social and psychological functions of Jewish law in the diaspora community – the Karaite, Reform, and Hasidic sects in particular – attempting to explain how it was that they survived as Jews despite the absence of national religious institutions to help sustain their way of life (Funk, 2000: 56–8). The study, which was supervised by Alfred Weber, whom Fromm regarded as the only 'master' amongst his university teachers, was specifically concerned with how it is that ethical forms are internalised by members of groups and turned into ways of life that become definitive for those groups – a nucleic form of his later preoccupation with character and its socio-economic derivation. Notably, the study concluded



with a positive appraisal of Hasidism's ability to maintain its integrity in face of the ever increasing encroachment of liberal-bourgeois and capitalistic values (Funk, 1988).

Fromm also attributed his Judaic upbringing, and his time with Rabinkow, as the main factor in his proclivity for socialism (Fromm, 1986 [1983]: 98–9). Brought up in a world which, by his own admission, was more medieval than modern, bourgeois life always possessed something of an alien character for Fromm, its dominant values contrasting with the values instilled in him through his extensive engagement with the Judaic tradition. Such a situation is, of course, insufficient grounds for identification with socialism and with Marx, – and it is clear that Fromm played no role in activist politics during this period of his life. Fromm did, however, take courses on Marx whilst at Ruprecht-Karls, and, in his later testimony, he is quite clear that his early love for the messianic vision of the prophets did lead to an affinity for Marx's writings. Although there are subsequent encounters that were crucial in Fromm's move to Marxism (encounters which will be discussed in due course), the elective affinity, as Fromm saw it, between Marx's idea of communism and the messianic visions of the prophets is a significant factor in the constitution of his own contribution to critical theory. Fromm's heterodox, humanist reading of Marx argues that messianic thinking finds 'its latest and most complete expression' (2004 [1961]: 54) in Marx's concept of communism, representing as it does not only 'the *genuine* resolution of the antagonism between man and nature, and between man and man' (Marx, 1977: 90) but also 'the true realm of human freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself' (Marx, 1991: 959). In order to fully grasp the nature of this correlation, and its role in the constitution of his critical theory, it is necessary to explore Fromm's relationship to the Jewish tradition in greater depth (see Durkin, 2014: 54–63 for a discussion of Fromm's account of Marx as a secular prophet).

Fromm's engagement with Judaism continued post-university and was directly implicated in his move to psychoanalysis. Fromm was formally introduced to psychoanalysis by Frieda Reichmann, an established psychoanalyst he had met through orthodox Jewish circles and whom he would marry in 1926. After being analysed by Reichmann in 1923, Fromm went on to work at the sanatorium Reichmann had established in Heidelberg – an institution specifically set up for the cure of Jewish patients. Fromm's involvement in this venture illustrates the degree to which he was still committed to Judaism during this period. As part of the sanatorium venture, Fromm spent a year in Munich, undertaking psychoanalytic training with Wilhelm Wittenberg and attending lectures given by Emile Kraepelin, amongst others. After this, Fromm spent a period of analysis with Karl Landauer in Frankfurt before moving to Berlin, where he was taught by Hans Sachs and Theodor Reik at the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute and where he was to open his first psychoanalytic practice in 1928. The period with Reichmann, however, was also the beginning of Fromm's split from the Jewish faith.<sup>1</sup> Fromm marked this significant personal milestone through the symbolic eating of leavened bread on Passover alongside Reichmann in 1926 (Funk, 2000: 61). Despite suggestions that it was Fromm's deepening experience of psychoanalysis that provided the key motivating factor in his eventual renunciation of Judaism as a theological position, Reichmann herself suggested that the move was motivated more by Fromm's growing 'leftist interests' than any particularly exclusive function that psychoanalysis could offer (Jacobs, 2014: 34). In fact, as we will see, it is clear that Fromm came to see even psychoanalysis in terms of the service it could offer 'leftist interests'. So although Fromm officially renounced Judaism as a theological position, it is clear that his interests as derived in and through his Judaic upbringing (his interest in social psychology, in 'right living', in love, reason, and

justice) led him, in large part, to a position where Marx and Freud meet, and therefore to the position where his central contribution to critical theory took shape.

### **THE MARX–FREUD SYNTHESIS: BERNFELD, *THE DOGMA OF CHRIST*, AND PSYCHOANALYTIC SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY**

The Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute, where Fromm studied from 1928 to 1929, played a crucial role in his development. Differing from its Viennese counterpart by virtue of its marked concern with the social and political implications of psychoanalysis, the Berlin Institute amplified Fromm's own interest in understanding the psychic milieu of groups and societies that was evident in his sociological dissertation at Ruprecht-Karls. During his time in Berlin, Fromm attended Otto Fenichel's famous *Kinderseminar*, a grouping consisting largely of dissident young analysts interested in exploring the connections between psychoanalysis and socialism. Fromm was personally acquainted with Paul Federn, Ernst Simmel, Siegfried Bernfeld, and Wilhelm Reich, all established psychoanalysts and socialists with whom he shared ideas on these connections. Bernfeld, in particular, influenced Fromm during this period, his teachings at the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute directly moulding Fromm's nascent approach to the fusion of the thought systems of Marx and Freud. In his 'Psychoanalysis and Socialism', which appeared in 1925, we can see Bernfeld concerned with preparing the grounds for the meeting of psychoanalysis and Marxism and for what he hoped would be the eventual development of a 'materialist' and 'dialectical' psychology. In words that prefigure Fromm's own working-through of this synthesis, Bernfeld notes that:

Marx...never dealt with that problem which Freud tackles, admittedly in an elementary form – how

those psychic mechanisms operate, by means of which particular relations of production bring about corresponding ideologies in the minds of the living individuals constituting the economy. (1972: 65)

Bernfeld's pamphlet needs to be seen in relation to the critique of mechanical materialism inaugurated by Karl Korsch and Georg Lukács in the late 1910s and early 1920s, in the aftermath of the First World War and the failure of the German proletariat to unite in furtherance of social revolution. Korsch (1974) had seen that this failure could be attributed to the social-psychological ill preparedness of the workers for revolution, and Lukács (1971) had seen the general need for Marxism to deepen its appreciation of the subjective consciousness of the working class.<sup>2</sup> The synthesis of Marx and Freud, as mooted by Bernfeld, was an extension of this reasoning, even if Korsch and Lukács ultimately disavowed any recourse to psychoanalysis in their own writings. Fromm, then, was working within an environment circumscribed by Korsch and Lukács and on the path staked out by Bernfeld. Bernfeld's short piece provided an opening, paving the way and highlighting substantive connections, but it was not a detailed piece by any stretch of the imagination. It was not until Fromm's contribution, alongside the contributions of Wilhelm Reich (Reich 1929, 1931, 1933), that more detailed and substantive developments in the attempt to synthesise Marx and Freud took place.<sup>3</sup>

Fromm's earliest public pronouncements on the matter of the Marx–Freud synthesis took place in 1929, the same year as Wilhelm Reich's influential 'Dialectical Materialism and Psychoanalysis'. By this time, Fromm was partly based in Frankfurt, where he helped set up the Frankfurt Psychoanalytical Institute, alongside Gustav Landauer, Heinrich Meng, and Frieda Reichmann. At the inauguration of the Frankfurt Psychoanalytical Institute, Fromm gave a short paper on the relationship of psychoanalysis and sociology (Fromm, 1989 [1929]) in which he outlined

the potential psychoanalysis has to advance Marxian sociology. Here, we can see Fromm clearly developing Bernfeld's earlier piece, stressing in particular the contribution psychoanalysis can make to investigating the role played by the psychic apparatus in the overall functioning of society. Although this paper was an important intervention in itself, and although it definitely advanced the basis of the Marx–Freud synthesis, showing much less reticence than Bernfeld in mapping the grounds of what would turn out to be, for Fromm, a deep and lasting synthesis (Bernfeld himself abandoned the synthesis, along with Marxism, in the following years), the piece really amounts, in Fromm's own words, to little more than 'a few fundamental remarks' (1989 [1929]: 37). In it, Fromm stressed the need to avoid the reduction of analysis from the sociological to the psychological, or vice versa, but also, and in contrast to Bernfeld, to be alive to situations where the issues at hand are *simultaneously* sociological and psychological, and where, therefore, analysis needs to be social-psychological in its entirety. It was not until the following year, with the publication of his first monograph, *Die Entwicklung des Christudogmas, Eine Psychoanalytische Studie zur Sozialpsychologischen* (published in English as *The Dogma of Christ* in 1963), that Fromm made his first real standout contribution.

Substantively, *The Dogma of Christ* is concerned with the development of Christian dogma in the first centuries of Christianity. According to Fromm, Christianity arose as 'a significant historical messianic-revolutionary movement' (1992 [1930]: 35), its original doctrine, the adoptionist idea of man becoming God, addressing not primarily the educated and property-owning class but, rather, the poor, oppressed, and suffering, who had a ready attraction to the idea that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. As the economic and political relations in society began to change, however, and as a feudal class state arose in which nationalities

were levelled and in which infinite dependencies were set up under the hierarchy of the emperor, the Christian dogma itself changes, Fromm argued, coming to align with the psychic attitude most compatible with the altered social situation. In particular, Fromm argued that the dogma changed from the original adoptionist messianic-revolutionary position to a position that was its direct inverse: a doctrine of passive harmony, where love and grace were bestowed upon God the father, a God who had undergone an anthropological conversion and literally *become* a man. Crucially for the subsequent development of the 'psychic surfaces' of the population, Fromm argued that the aggressive impulses did not disappear but were turned away from the earlier object and back on to the self, the identification with the suffering Jesus essentially becoming an identification with his self-annihilation. The rulers were no longer to blame for wretchedness and suffering; rather, the sufferers themselves were guilty and were to reproach themselves for their unhappiness.

Fromm's account here, whilst carrying some clear limitations, is nevertheless a psychologically sophisticated historical materialist analysis which, in contradistinction to the account of his erstwhile teacher, Theodor Reik, seeks 'to understand dogma on the basis of a study of people, not people on the basis of a study of dogma' (1992 [1930]: 21). He works through an attempt to comprehend the change of consciousness as expressed in the theological ideas of the early Christian communities by the change in the unconscious processes related to individual and social character, this change in turn brought about by and corresponding to an altered socio-economic situation. In as much as this is the case, the study aligns with the basic Marxist thesis pertaining to the social determination of ideas whilst serving to extend the Marx–Freud synthesis, as inaugurated by Bernfeld. In so doing, it clearly foregrounds Fromm's work with Horkheimer as part of the Institute for Social Research.

In the opening chapter of *The Dogma of Christ*, Fromm praises as one of the central accomplishments of psychoanalysis the fact that it has 'done away with the false distinction between social psychology and individual's psychology' (1992 [1930]: 3). Fromm is clear that from its inception psychoanalysis has functioned on the premise that the individual psyche is formed and functions within the wider social environment of which it is a part. Following Freud in rejecting the notion of a 'group mind', Fromm then expounds upon the relationship between individual and social psychology, united in method of analysis, i.e. the investigation of the influence of life-situation on the pattern of emotional development, but separated with regards to specific aim. Whereas individual psychology aims at revealing the dynamism of the psychic structure of the individual under study, social psychology aims specifically at discerning the 'character matrix' common to most members of a particular group, class, or society, and it seeks to do so with primary reference to the dynamic connection between such a matrix and the economic base of the society in question. Although Fromm speaks only loosely here of the concept 'character structure' that would form the basis of his later theory and central contribution to critical theory, what he means by 'character matrix' is to all intents and purposes identical, referring to the 'average characteristic common to all members of the group, which does not necessarily play a central role in the character structure of each individual' (1992 [1930]: 6).

As Franz Borkenau described it in a review in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, *The Dogma of Christ* was 'the first attempt by way of a concrete example of the method of a synthesis of Marxism with Freudian psychoanalysis' (quoted in Jay, 1996: 91). As Abromeit (2011: 252–3) points out, it is highly likely that it played a significant role in influencing Horkheimer's early formulation of critical theory and in the development of his concept of 'the Anthropology of the Bourgeois Epoch' in particular. Horkheimer's 1932

*Zeitschrift* article 'History and Psychology', an often overlooked essay that is nevertheless pivotal in advancing the methodological basis of his critical theory, shows clear commonalities with Fromm's outlining of an historical materialist psychoanalytical social psychology in *The Dogma of Christ* and in his earlier paper on psychoanalysis and sociology.<sup>4</sup> This raises the issue of the relative recognition accorded to Fromm in the development of critical theory. A strong case can be made for the existence of a far more reciprocal relationship between Horkheimer and Fromm at this stage than has generally been thought to be the case (Jay, 1996; Schroyer, 1973; Tar, 1977; Held, 1980; Knapp, 1993), even though Horkheimer may still be thought of as the more senior of the two. Not only does *The Dogma of Christ* prefigure Horkheimer's 'History and Psychology' and his whole concept of the anthropology of the bourgeois epoch, Fromm's 1929 paper prefigures Horkheimer's inaugural lecture as director of the Institute in 1931.<sup>5</sup> According to Abromeit (2011: 194), we can see Fromm's introduction to Horkheimer as taking place no later than 1928, and perhaps as early as 1926. It seems likely that Horkheimer also played a facilitative role in the establishment of the Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute in 1928, which was housed in the same building as the Institute for Social Research; and certainly, by 1931, Horkheimer and Fromm had developed a tight personal and theoretical relationship. As such, it is perhaps best to follow McLaughlin (2008: 15) in conceiving of Horkheimer and Fromm during this period as the central 'collaborative pair' in the circle that centred around Horkheimer – this circle, and particularly the Horkheimer–Fromm pairing in turn influenced by the wider formation and development of a psychoanalytically sophisticated historical materialism, as seen initially in Bernfeld but also Fenichel, Reich, and other Berlin leftist psychoanalysts.

Fromm's development of the Marx–Freud synthesis continued apace, with two articles

on the issue appearing in the *Zeitschrift* in 1932. The first of these, *Über Methode und Aufgabe einer Analytischen Sozialpsychologie. Bemerkungen über Psychoanalyse und historischen Materialismus* (translated later as 'The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology'), stands as Fromm's definitive statement on the synthesis. Following on from *The Dogma of Christ*, Fromm elaborated here upon the methodological and theoretical prerequisites of a psychoanalytical social psychology that can work with historical materialist theory. 'Psychoanalysis', he proclaimed, 'is a materialistic psychology, which should be classed amongst the natural sciences. It points to instinctual drives and needs as the motive force behind human behaviour, these drives being produced by physiologically based *instincts* that are not directly observable in themselves' (Fromm, 1970 [1932a]: 110). The use of psychoanalysis in historical materialist research will, therefore, lead to 'a refinement of method, a broader knowledge of the forces at work in the social process, and greater certainty in understanding the course of history and in predicting future historical events' (1970 [1932a]: 129). In particular, psychoanalytical social psychology enables insight into and interrogation of the 'subjective factor' in the social process. Through this, it can also help ground the concept of 'ideology', showing, in a way that Marx and Engels could not, precisely *how* the economic situation is transformed into ideology via human passions and drives, i.e. through demonstrating how the content of ideologies are the products of wishes, instinctual drives, interests, and needs which come to be expressed in the form of rationalisations.<sup>6</sup>

The 'Method and Function' article is also important for its codification of the particular approach of psychoanalytical social psychology that Fromm recommends, namely: the attempt 'to explain the shared, socially relevant psychic attitudes and ideologies – and their unconscious roots in particular – in terms of the influence of the economic conditions on libido strivings' (Fromm, 1970 [1932a]:

121).<sup>7</sup> As befits a Marxist account of social life, the economic conditions are considered by Fromm to be the primary formative factor here; but, whilst this is so, the libido strivings are seen to play a crucial role alongside the economic conditions, and alongside the other factors that determine social development. What psychoanalysis can contribute to historical materialism, then, is an account of the psychological *basis* of the social structure – the active foundation upon which that structure rests and a primary reason for its stability. Indeed, Fromm straightforwardly discounts the notion that the external power apparatus is sufficient to ensure structural stability. We need, he stresses, to factor in libidinal strivings, alongside and underneath the more rational and egoist interests, and to see these libidinal strivings as the social cement that keeps the system together. Emphasis is thus placed on the 'active and passive adaptation of the instinctual apparatus to the socio-economic situation' (1970 [1932a]: 121).

In the second of his 1932 *Zeitschrift* articles, *Die psychoanalytische Charakterologie und ihre Bedeutung für die Sozialpsychologie* (translated later as 'Psychoanalytic Characterology and its Relevance for Social Psychology'), we can see Fromm developing his programmatic account of psychoanalytical social psychology. The piece is particularly important for its raising of the hitherto relatively unspoken factor of 'character' to a central analytical position. In the 'Method and Function' article, Fromm had spoken of 'libidinal strivings' and of 'psychic traits', which, as in *The Dogma of Christ*, were to be explained in terms of the socio-economic structure and the shared life experiences of their group. He also spoke of the focus of social psychology as being on the distinctive libidinal structure of a particular society. But it is in 'Psychoanalytic Characterology' that we begin to see a more consistent and explicit stress on 'character traits' as the central focus. What Fromm is primarily concerned with here is to 'show how the character traits

common to most members of a society are conditioned by the distinctive nature of that society' (1970 [1932b]: 148). In line with psychoanalytic theory, Fromm traces the social influence of society on character primarily to the family, which he describes as 'the chief medium through which the child's psychic formation is oriented toward the surrounding society' (1970 [1932b]: 148). It is through the family and the wider educational process that the child's strivings are either suppressed or intensified, this suppression and intensification taking place generally in line with the wider economic, social, or class structure to which the family is related. In addition to this, and in anticipation of his later work, Fromm stresses how the specific character of a society is conceived of as a productive force which shapes the development of that society. The piece finishes with a brief application of his approach to the issue of the 'bourgeois-capitalist spirit', including examples taken from Sombart's analysis of the Alberti family, and passages taken from Benjamin Franklin and Daniel Defoe.

The Marx–Freud synthesis as outlined in 'Method and Function' and in 'Psychoanalytic Characterology', both developing *The Dogma of Christ*, is built upon the recognition of Marx's demonstration of our being enmeshed in socio-economic conditions and Freud's demonstration of our being enmeshed in a network of psychological needs (and the enmeshing of the one with the other). By such an account, Fromm is able to add an extra dimension to Marxist analysis in the form of a sophisticated understanding of the human psyche as a determinant of social development alongside external factors, whilst at the same time grounding the claims of psychoanalysis on a more accurate sociological footing. This is the central contribution that Fromm brings to early critical theory, a contribution which, as will be shown, was instrumental in the development of the Institute under the leadership of Max Horkheimer.

### **GERMAN-WORKERS STUDY, STUDIES ON AUTHORITY AND THE FAMILY, AND THE BREAK WITH HORKHEIMER**

The first concrete manifestation of Fromm's relationship with Horkheimer at the Institute, however, was a landmark study of the attitude and psyche of German manual and white-collar workers. The study, of which Fromm assumed complete directorial control upon joining the Institute in 1929,<sup>8</sup> was a direct example of the kind of empirical research that Horkheimer spoke of in his inaugural address some two years later (Horkheimer, 1989), i.e. empirical socio-psychological research that would serve to deepen social theory's account of the connections between economic life and individual (and group) psychology. Although it followed on from previous surveys of German workers, particularly Levenstein's (1912), it was the first set up to probe the 'subjective factor' highlighted by the earlier work of Korsch and Lukács. Making use of a comprehensive questionnaire, comprised of a total of 271 questions distributed to some 3,300 workers, the study explicitly sought to gain insight into the character of the recipients. As such, the questions were concerned with general political opinions, emotional attitudes to authority, and attitudes towards collective or individualistic approaches to life, which it was hoped would elicit unconscious responses that Fromm and his team could interpret in line with standard psychoanalytical criteria. In an environment characterised by marked social upheaval and the rise of the National Socialist Party, it was hoped, too, that it would be possible to determine the relationship between outwardly socialist or communist sympathies and the unconscious authoritarian attitudes that may underlie them (in particular, they hoped to reveal something of the relationship between character traits and political commitment). In terms of results, the study concluded unsettlingly that the supporters of left-wing parties

amongst the respondents frequently exhibited a psychic attitude which in no way corresponded with the ideal-typical attitude expressed through left-wing doctrine. Indeed, as the data demonstrated – through attitudinal scepticism towards individual freedom, through the belief in the subordination of the human individual to higher powers, and through identification with the powerful over the weak, etc. – there was a marked tendency towards an authoritarian attitude amongst these very individuals. The tendency for emotional attachment to authoritarian positions, rooted at a characterological level, served, as Fromm noted, to directly undermine the avowed radicalism of a significant proportion of socialist and communist supporters – a conclusion which not only helped to explain the failed revolution of 1918–19 but also suggested the general acquiescence and even active support that would be shown to Hitler in the ensuing years.

Despite the apparent success in finding some clear empirical evidence of the social-psychological mechanisms Fromm had posited in previous writings, the study remained unpublished for close to 50 years, appearing in 1980 as *Arbiter und Angestellte am Vorabend des Dritten Reiches. Eine sozialpsychologische Untersuchung* (it was subsequently published in English as *The Working Class in Weimar Germany: A Psychological and Sociological Study* (1984)). Controversy surrounds what was essentially Horkheimer's decision not to publish the study. Officially, Horkheimer argued that the high number of non-replies to certain questions, as well as the relatively low response rate of 33 per cent, rendered the study unfit for publication (Horkheimer also cited a lack of funds as a further reason why the study could not be published). Fromm, who had been writing up the study throughout the mid 1930s, disputed that any interview was lost and suggested, in fact, that Horkheimer was disinclined to publish the study for fear of its 'leftist' pretensions (letter to Bottomore, 26 March, 1974, in McLaughlin,

1999: 116n) – a far from groundless suggestion, given the extent to which the Institute went to avoid explicit reference to socialism or Marxism in its published work at this time. Either way, it cannot be denied that the study was genuinely pioneering, paving the way for the Institute's later authoritarian-personality study led by Adorno some ten years later (Adorno et al., 1950). The fact that *The Authoritarian Personality* makes almost no mention of Fromm in its pages is remarkable, and is surely at least partly reflective of the direct attempt by Horkheimer and Adorno to obfuscate Fromm's role in the early stage of the Institute (McLaughlin, 1999).

The high watermark of Fromm's contribution to Frankfurt School critical theory, however, is surely his contribution to the Institute's *Studien über Autorität und Familie* (*Studies on Authority and the Family*) (Horkheimer, 1936). Following the research programme set out by Horkheimer in his inaugural address, *Studies on Authority and the Family* was primarily concerned with the transformation of the bourgeois character taking place in twentieth-century European capitalist societies. Fromm's contribution, 'Sozialpsychologischer Teil' ('Social-Psychological Aspects') (1936), appears in the theoretical first section of the volume, and is concerned with mapping out the social-psychological rise of authoritarianism in precisely these European capitalist societies. Fromm's account begins with a discussion of the decline of ego strength brought about by changes in the patriarchal family and in wider society. The family had, as the primary agent of socialisation, long been an important theoretical focal point for psychoanalysis, and Fromm here draws out this significance, expounding upon the role the patriarchal family has traditionally played in instilling obedience and susceptibility to authority in the population at large. Fromm then moves on to claim that the routine suppression of emotional drives that is traditionally found in the patriarchal family milieu had actually intensified in the face of monopoly capitalism.

Especially amongst the lower classes and the petty bourgeoisie, there had, Fromm argues, arisen a generalised feeling of powerlessness and inconsequentiality which, in turn, prompted ego disorganisation and depletion. As a result of this disorganisation and depletion, Fromm claims, there arose a distinct tendency to identify with and submit to the dictates of a 'superior power' - an exaggerated substitute for the reduced authority of the family. From here, a culturally patterned masochism is said to come to the fore, the self increasingly turned over to external social and internal psychic authorities in an attempt to quell the increasing isolation and estrangement experienced in society at large.

By the time *Studies on Authority and the Family* was published, the Institute had relocated to New York, partly on the basis of connections established and pursued by Fromm (Wheatland, 2009). Throughout the period covering the move to New York and the preparatory work for *Studies on Authority and the Family*, however, Fromm was recuperating from recurring bouts of tuberculosis, which severely restricted his ability for any sort of work beyond that of reading (Funk, 2000: 81–2). The physical separation from the other members of the Institute that the illness brought about – Fromm had been based at a sanatorium in Davos from 1932–4 and was thereafter frequently forced to seek sea and mountain air to aid his recuperation – meant that he was removed from regular contact with Horkheimer and therefore cut off from the kind of direct participation in the development of the Institute's research programme that had previously been the case. During this time of relative disconnection, Horkheimer's attitude towards Fromm and towards the interdisciplinary project itself had begun to shift. Such a shift was to become evident in Horkheimer's rejection of a prospective article Fromm wrote for the *Zeitschrift* in 1937 (the article has since been published, along with other previously unpublished works, by Rainer Funk (Fromm, 2010)). In a powerful piece of critical exposition, Fromm

demonstrated the central tensions and contradictions that afflict Freud's account of psychological functioning and which, thereby, undermine the very adequacy of its explanatory power. Taking issue with what he sees as the untenable sexual reductionism and bourgeois mechanicism that frame Freud's libido theory, Fromm called for a far-reaching revision that would restore 'the historical, that is to say, the social principle of explanation' (2010: 23) that he felt was ultimately missing in Freud. As part of his revision, Fromm worked through a critical exposition of Freud's account – of the Oedipus complex, of the psychology of women, of the role of the family, of the theory of the drives, and of the anal character as a stage in the predetermined process of psychosocial development – before offering an alternative interpretation based on a more thoroughly sociological and historical materialist basis. The nature of Fromm's revision is aptly summed up in a letter to Robert Lynd in the same year the unpublished essay was submitted. In the letter, Fromm outlined what he now saw as the task of psychoanalytic theory, namely: the attempt 'to understand the structures of character and instincts as a result of adaptation to the given social conditions and not as a product of the erogenous zones' (quoted in Funk, 2000: 93).

Horkheimer's rejection of the article is initially somewhat surprising, given his previous support for the interdisciplinary fusion of Marxist sociology and psychoanalysis that was the very basis of Fromm's position (see McLaughlin, 1999: 118–31; Abromeit, 2011: 34–8; and Durkin, 2014: 93–102 for discussions of the different facets of this situation). Despite seeming to follow the logic of historical materialist analysis – based as it was on sociological and anthropological considerations that challenged the patently ethnocentric and biologically reductive aspects of Freudian orthodoxy – Fromm's modification of Freud drew accusations of 'revisionism' from Horkheimer on the grounds that he was sliding into culturalism and dispensing with



the critical foundations of Freud's system. Horkheimer insisted, contrary to Fromm, on the retention of the libidinous drives as a somatic realm relatively out of reach of society – one which offers the critical function of opposing, reacting against, and therefore providing a perennial source of resistance to adverse social pressures.<sup>9</sup> More and more intent on carrying out his long projected social-philosophical 'dialectics' work, Horkheimer was in the process of striking up an increasingly tight theoretical and personal relationship with Theodor Adorno, seeing in him an aggressiveness and a 'maliciously sharp eye for existing conditions' that he felt was lacking in Fromm (Horkheimer to Adorno, 8 December, 1936, in Wiggershaus 1994: 162). As a result of these factors, alongside Horkheimer's refusal to publish the German-workers study and some personal issues relating to Fromm's request for financial assistance to secure his mother's passage to New York, Fromm finally left the Institute at the end of 1939.

### **ESCAPE FROM FREEDOM, 'PUBLIC INTELLECTUALISM', AND NORMATIVE HUMANIST CRITICAL THEORY**

One of the immediate consequences of Fromm's departure from the Institute was his exclusion from the type of financial and personal support that would have enabled him to further develop the social-psychological research programme to which he was so integral at the Institute (it would not be until 1970, with the publication of *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (Fromm and Maccoby, 1996 [1970]: 6), that Fromm would return to and expand upon his empirical work in the German-workers study<sup>10</sup>). Yet Fromm's first publication post-Institute – *Escape from Freedom*, which, for the first time, was written in English – was a clear thematic extension of the Institute's work on authority as found in

*Studies on Authority and the Family*. Appearing some two years after his leaving the Institute, the book can be seen in certain definite respects as the realisation of the proposed psychological study of 'Man in the Authoritarian State', which had been listed as part of the Institute's research programme in the prospectus of 1938 (Wiggershaus, 1994: 272). In its pages, Fromm developed his account of the basis of the contemporary authoritarian character, tracing its genesis back to the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and Reformation periods and to the diminution of priestly and monarchical power over the individual that characterises this transition. Fromm saw the development of increased individual freedom in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe as simultaneously leading to heightened doubt, insecurity, and isolation, as taken-for-granted certainties and ways of interpreting the world became increasingly unfixed. His discussion here focused on the social changes and economic pressures unleashed upon the working and lower-middle classes during these periods and devotes extensive space to an exposition of the religious doctrines of Luther and Calvin considered in relation to these classes. The conclusion Fromm arrives at in this part of the book stresses the striking psychological correspondence between the unconscious authoritarian message of these doctrines – their stress on the 'wickedness of human nature' and, as he saw it, the insignificance and powerless of the individual – and the sadomasochistic need of the classes to which they primarily appealed. In as much as this is the case, the work is a direct extension of *The Dogma of Christ* – demonstrating Fromm's further development of the Marx–Freud synthesis.

After this historical preamble, Fromm moved the discussion forward to the present day and to what is the underlying concern of the work, namely: 'the meaning of freedom for modern man' (1969 [1941]: xiv). In this part of the discussion, Fromm recapitulated his earlier work on the growth of authoritarianism in Germany – the rise of

monopoly capitalism and the decline of the authority of the family, and the feelings of powerlessness and insignificance engendered by this – before moving on to look in some depth at the psychology of Nazism. His stress here was mostly on the appeal of Nazism to the lower-middle classes: that certain socio-economic and political changes – particularly the decline of the traditional middle class in the face of monopoly capitalism and hyperinflation, but also the defeat Germany suffered in the First World War and ensuing Treaty of Versailles – had a deep effect, removing traditional psychological bulwarks and mechanisms of self-esteem. As with the previous case of the adherents to Reformist Protestantism, these psychological changes led, Fromm contended, to deep feelings of anxiety and powerlessness, which Hitler was able to capitalise upon, his sado-masochistic messages of love for the strong and hate for the weak providing the means of escape from intolerable psychological burdens experienced on a mass basis. Just as in *The Dogma of Christ*, in *Escape from Freedom* we see the psychological identification of a particular class with the objective and subjective needs of their situation. In both cases, the ideological material that most clearly speaks to these objective and subjective needs is seen as deeply reflective of and, in fact, bolstering the original psychological proclivity. The point that Fromm was trying to communicate in both cases is that the influence any particular doctrine or idea will have in social life is dependent upon the extent to which it can appeal to the psychic needs of the character structure of the people to whom it is addressed. Only if the doctrine or idea answers powerful psychological needs common to certain social groups will it become a potent force in history – something that Fromm makes clear in his respective accounts of Hitler and of Luther and Calvin.

Importantly, Fromm's account of authoritarianism in *Escape from Freedom* extends beyond the authoritarianism so evident in the German situation to look at what he contends

is its presence in the American context. His analysis proceeds once more by expounding upon what he identifies as the socially patterned feelings of insignificance and loneliness that characterise American life. Consciously contradicting the much heralded individualism of the age, Fromm painted the individual American as fundamentally in thrall to gigantic forces that bear down upon and threaten it: from the alienating effects of the 1929 stock-market crash and contemporary forms of mechanised factory work to the prevalence of political propaganda and hypnoid forms of advertising, he saw the American individual as suffering from a 'loss of self' similar to that found amongst contemporary German citizens. But whereas the German citizen proceeds to 'escape' from this loss of self by flight into overt authoritarianism, the mechanism of escape predominant in American society is what Fromm termed 'automaton conformity', i.e. the tendency to conform and merge with the dominant cultural patterns and to follow the anonymous, internalised authority that encourages it. This form of compulsive conforming, in which the individual needs to continuously gain approval to avoid deeper insecurity and doubt at this loss of self, is, Fromm contended, the central affliction of the modern age. In an early example of the 'alternativism' that would come to characterise his later writings, Fromm was clear that the individual is increasingly faced with two choices: 'to escape from the burden of his freedom into new dependencies and submission, or to advance to the full realisation of positive freedom which is based on the uniqueness and individuality of man' (1969 [1941]: x).

*Escape from Freedom* was an immediate critical and popular success. Fromm quickly became a well-known name in his adopted homeland at a time when the other members of the Institute, who were much less confident writing in English, remained relatively unknown. *Escape from Freedom* was followed by *Man for Himself* (1947),

an ambitious attempt at a philosophically grounded psychology of ethics. This was followed by *The Sane Society* (1955) and by *The Art of Loving* (1956), the latter in particular becoming an international best-seller. Fromm's development of the notion of the 'marketing character' (which had first appeared in *Man for Himself*) and his critique of the affluent alienation of American society in these latter two works struck a chord with the cultural mood, during a period of rising self-and cultural-awareness. But despite Fromm's contribution to this reflective shift – a shift that would grow into the tumultuous 1960s – his popular appeal and other apparent lapses into supposedly 'existentialist' and 'psychologistic' phraseology drew the ire of his Institute ex-colleagues, who effectively accused him of regressing to a form of conformist idealism. This opposition took its most public and devastating form in a highly personal attack launched by Marcuse in *Dissent* magazine in 1955 and repeated again in *Eros and Civilization* later that year. Echoing earlier criticisms by Horkheimer and Adorno, Marcuse accused Fromm of 'mutilating' Freud's theory and of being little more than a 'sermonistic social worker' (Marcuse, 1966: 6). Marcuse's critique here came to be echoed by later critical-theory scholars such as Russell Jacoby (1977, 1983), and Fromm's reputation as a critical theorist was heavily compromised.

If, however, we look at critical theory as a pluralistic whole, with and against its branded identification, as this *Handbook* seeks to do, then it is clear that the criticisms mounted against Fromm by Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, etc. are shot through with anomalies – these anomalies, in fact, pointing at areas of weakness in critical theory as canonically understood. Although the particular points of debate merit a fuller discussion than space allows here, it is clear that the characterisation of Fromm as 'conformist' or as a 'sermonistic social worker' is grossly unfair. The fact that Fromm wrote to a large audience in the form of a didactic practical

philosophy, and the fact that he devoted significant time to suggesting bridging solutions between the present and the future, in one sense surely compares favourably with Horkheimer's and Adorno's relative reticence on these matters. Books such as *The Revolution of Hope* (1968) and *To Have or To Be?* (2009 [1976]), which markedly stress ethical motivation and active transcendence of the structural forms of contemporary capitalism – on 'awakening' from the grip of alienated consumer capitalism – are in fact tied to Fromm's earlier critical theory, showing ways of uniting social psychological depth with prophetic criticism that can mobilise and engage individuals in a realm beyond that of the academy. Indeed, if what is meant by 'critical theory' at its most fundamental is the striving for greater self-awareness that can contribute to the task of emancipation, then Fromm cannot be seen as anything *but* a critical theorist. If anything, Fromm's writings after his break with the Institute take critical reflexivity in the service of emancipation to an even higher level. Certainly, it cannot be denied that his concerns in *Escape from Freedom*, *Man for Himself*, *The Sane Society*, etc. deal precisely with this issue – anticipating and chiming with Horkheimer's and Adorno's criticism of the 'culture industry' in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) and Marcuse's criticism of 'one-dimensionality' in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964).

The fact that Fromm conjoins philosophical – and, crucially, empirical – anthropology with social analysis in these works is not terminal to the materialist status of his account; it may, in the end, point at the greater progressive potential of Fromm's thinking and the avenues to which critical theory may wish to return in its future configurations. Indeed, part of what is important about Fromm's writing post-Institute is its clear and unequivocal normative nature. In these writings, Fromm seeks to ground critique on an explicit (and extensive) account of what it is that makes us human; he is positive and substantial where Horkheimer and Adorno, for instance, tend towards the

negative and elusive. Fromm's more fulsome account, which refers to *homo sapiens* in their relative stability as a recognised species of beings and which seeks to facilitate a more robust understanding of what it means to articulate an emancipatory interest, does not mar the dialectical nature of his account (Fromm too sees the future society as the result of a dialectic that will qualitatively change our nature as manifest); rather, it provides it with a didactic clarity that can be more easily employed at a time in which it has become increasingly difficult to advance the case that some particular social, economic, or political situation is *good* and that another is *bad* for human flourishing. This strong normative-ontological basis is something that tends to be occluded in the more canonical critical-theory texts, such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and in later-generation theorists such as Habermas and Honneth. The practical consequences of this can be seen when we consider the more abstract formulations of Adorno's 'messages in bottles' approach or of Habermas' equally abstract regulative notion of the 'ideal speech situation'. In contrast to these accounts, which naturally have their merits and logic of application, Fromm proffers a more explicitly normative form of humanism based on a deep underlying commitment to a prophetic form of messianism that neither seeks for apocalyptic rupture nor consoles itself with the belief that the time for action has been missed (Braune, 2014; Durkin, 2014). The difference, then, is not one that resides purely at the level of theory, but one of praxis and dialectics – and, importantly, one which is increasingly being returned to and raked over in the always renewed struggle for the emancipated future that stands at the beginning of the critical-theoretical enterprise.

## CONCLUSION

One of the co-architects of the early programme of the Institute for Social Research,

Erich Fromm was central to the development of the interdisciplinary materialism which characterised critical theory in its germinal phase during the late 1920s and early to mid 1930s. Works such as *The Dogma of Christ* and 'Method and Function' were landmark contributions to the Marx–Freud synthesis that the Institute promoted during this period. His contribution to the 'Studies on Authority and the Family' and his work on the little-known study of German workers with which the Institute was engaged during the early 1930s helped to decisively set the agenda for later Institute work and the whole critical-theory preoccupation with authoritarianism. In addition to this, his *Escape from Freedom* was the first critical-theory-related work to reach widespread recognition, developing the early Institute concern with authoritarianism and popularising many of the themes that would later feature as leitmotifs in the critical-theory canon. *Escape from Freedom* was followed by works such as *Man for Himself*, *The Sane Society*, *The Art of Loving*, and *The Revolution of Hope*, as Fromm took a divergent path to the dominant 'negative dialectical' approach that was becoming emblematic of critical theory. The didactic practical philosophy that came to characterise Fromm's later works, and their appeal to a wide popular audience may, as the twenty-first century progresses, prove to be a more enduring ground upon which to base the critical theory of the future.

## Notes

- 1 Despite the fact that Fromm eventually came to lose this attachment, his work largely follows through, in a secularised form, the Judaic concern for right living, justice, and peace. His concern with 'idolatry' is central and integrated from a Judaic position through a psychoanalytic position to a Marxist position (Durkin, 2014: 51–2). Rainer Funk has also suggested more extensive commonalities between the Judaic tradition and Fromm's thinking (Funk, 1982: 183–204).
- 2 In his account of 'reified consciousness', outlined in the essay 'Reification and the Consciousness of

- the Proletariat' in *History and Class Consciousness* (Lukács, 1971), and particularly in his confrontation of the objective and subjective configuration of capitalist ideology as pertaining to the commodity form, we see Lukács challenging the shallow mechanism of the then orthodox Marxism.
- 3 There are extensive commonalities between Reich's early approach and that of Fromm, which, due to space, cannot be pursued here.
  - 4 Horkheimer's combination of psychological categories with detailed historical research so as to analyse and explain concrete historical developments was precisely the form of analysis that Fromm had pioneered in *The Dogma of Christ*, showing how the psychic structure of groups is constantly renewed in connection with their role in the economic process.
  - 5 In this address, Horkheimer stressed the need for the dialectical integration of philosophical questions with empirical social-scientific methodology. He called, in particular, for a multidisciplinary programme of research concerned with 'the question of the connection between the economic life of society, the psychological development of its individuals and the changes within specific areas of culture to which belong not only the intellectual legacy of the sciences, art and religion, but also law, customs, fashion, public opinion, sports, entertainments, lifestyles, and so on' (Horkheimer, 1989: 33).
  - 6 In Fromm's own words: 'Marx and Engels postulated the dependence of all ideological processes on the economic substructure. They saw intellectual and psychic creations as "the material basis reflected in man's head." In many instances, to be sure, historical materialism could provide the right answers without any psychological presuppositions. But only where ideology was the *immediate* expression of economic interests; or where one was trying to establish the correlation between economic substructure and ideological superstructure. Lacking a satisfactory psychology, Marx and Engels could not explain *how* the material basis was reflected in man's head and heart' (Fromm, 1970 [1932a]: 127).
  - 7 Fromm, at this time, was still a relatively orthodox Freudian for whom the libido occupied a central position in his explanation of the psyche. It is possible, however, to replace 'libido' for 'passionate forces of various kinds' which are rooted in character, as Fromm himself suggests in a footnote to the English translation of the piece (Fromm, 1970 [1932a]: 111n).
  - 8 Whilst Fromm was given directorial control of the study, he received significant assistance from Hilde Weiss – someone who had a more extensive practical and theoretical knowledge of social-scientific methodology – such that it cannot be ascertained precisely which parts of the research design stem from Fromm and which from Hilde Weiss (Bonss, 1984: 24).
  - 9 Although Fromm is generally taken to have erred in his revision relative to Horkheimer (Marcuse, 1955; Jacoby, 1977; Abromeit, 2011), it can be argued that this is not the case. Certainly, the critical view that Fromm took on the issue of the libidinal drives has come to be accepted as accurate in contemporary psychoanalysis (McLaughlin, 2000; Durkin, 2014). What is more, Fromm makes explicit reference to neuroscience and evolutionary psychology in many of his writings, something we do not see in Horkheimer, Adorno, nor Marcuse.
  - 10 The study itself commenced in 1958.

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# Henryk Grossmann: Theory of Accumulation and Breakdown

Paul Mattick

## LIFE

Like most of the central figures of the Frankfurt Institute, Henryk Grossman came from a wealthy Jewish family: his father was 'a small industrialist and a mine owner'.<sup>1</sup> He was born in 1881 in Kraków, in the Austrian-Hungarian province of Galicia (transformed after the First World War into part of Poland). As a university student (enrolled in the law and philosophy faculties) he became involved in revolutionary politics, becoming active in the Polish Social Democratic Party and helping to found the Jewish Social Democratic Party of Galicia (unusually for someone of his class background, 'Grossman learned Yiddish, so he could agitate among Jewish workers'<sup>2</sup>). In 1908, however, Grossmann abandoned the life of a militant to study economics in Vienna under the academic Marxist Carl Grünberg. When in 1924 Grünberg moved to Frankfurt as first director of the Institute for Social Research established at the university there, Grossmann

became his assistant. His great book, *Das Akkumulations- und Zusammenbruchsgesetz des kapitalistischen Systems*, was published as the first volume of the *Schriften des Instituts für Sozialforschung*, under Grünberg's editorship, in 1929. Grossmann remained a paid associate of the Institute, following it to New York during the Second World War, until he became a professor of economics in Leipzig, (East) Germany in 1948.

## MARXISM

Without false modesty, Henryk Grossmann dedicated the last section of his survey of Marxism since Marx, written in the early 1930s for the *Wörterbuch der Volkswirtschaft*, to an exposition of his own ideas. It was also the longest treatment of an individual theorist, apart from his discussion of Marx's thought. This seemed appropriate as in the



period after the First World War it was Grossmann who, in his own words, 'undertook... to obtain new respect for the much-disputed fundamental idea of Marx's system', the breakdown of capitalism.<sup>3</sup>

This idea is fundamental because, as Grossmann explained in his *Wörterbuch* article on Marxism, Marx's theory of capitalism 'starts from the view that human history exists in incessant and always renewed change' (274), so that capitalism, which came into existence through the transformation of an earlier, quite different, form of society, would in turn lead to the creation of a new form of social life. 'This progressive process of transformation is however a matter not of chance, but of specific laws'; accordingly, the end of capitalism 'can only arise out of the development [of that system] itself' (274, 279).

As Grossmann's history of theory showed, a satisfactory understanding of this fundamental idea of Marx's was largely absent from socialist discussion. One reason for this was that, until the end of the nineteenth century, Marx's *Capital* existed 'only as a torso, as only one of several volumes' (281): Volume III of Marx's great work, containing the discussion of breakdown and crisis, was only published in 1894, and the *Theories of Surplus Value*, with its detailed discussion of the relation of Marx's theory to those of his bourgeois predecessors, in 1910. But even the parts of the first volume in which Marx theorized 'the historical tendencies of capital accumulation and the tendency for capitalism to break down to which they lead' (282) could hardly be understood in a period when 'capitalism had not yet reached that mature stage at which its breakdown and the realization of socialism could have had immediate reality'. (283) Instead Marxist theory, like socialist practice, was dominated by reformism, the shaping of radical ideas to the conditions of an expanding capitalism, in which it came to seem that this expansion would lead to socialism not because of the system's difficulties in functioning but

precisely because of its success, in the fruits of which the growth of socialist parties and trade unions would allow the working class to participate.

Reformist theory was proved an illusion, according to Grossmann, by the rise of imperialism, which brought with it 'a sharpening of domestic class conflicts' in the capitalist countries (306). The First World War led not only to a renewal of violent class struggle but even to the world's first successful communist revolution. With the October revolution, according to Grossmann, capitalism lost 'the aura of eternity and unshakeability, proving to be an historical, i.e. a transitory category' (323). The question of the end of capitalism had become concrete. At the heart of this question was 'the evaluation of the developmental tendencies of world capitalism' (327). Was the Soviet revolution peculiar to the backward condition of Russia as a 'weak link' in the capitalist system? Did the failure of revolution elsewhere signify that, as Karl Kautsky and others argued in 1928, capitalism was on the brink of a great upswing? Or was it, as others believed, that capitalism 'found itself in a period of downturn, which might be interrupted by short periods of transient stabilization, but as a whole pointed to a lasting sharpening of class antagonisms, which must in the end lead to a decisive struggle for power' (327)? Even if the foundation of the USSR could be understood as 'a symptom of and as the beginning of the breakdown of world capitalism' (328), an answer to this question required an analysis of the tendency to breakdown in the developed capitalist countries. This would be an examination, for the first time, of the validity of Marx's theory in *Capital*.

Grossmann thus explained his fitness to undertake this task, in a Marxian manner, by his historical position: on the one hand, as a committed Bolshevik, he recognized the historical obsolescence of capitalism; on the other, as a careful student of Marx's now published writings, he was in a position finally to grasp the contribution of the

theory in *Capital* to understanding the limits of the existing system. It was the latter aspect in particular – his comprehension of Marx’s method of analysis as worked out in the critique of political economy – that allowed him to make his particular, important contribution to the Marxist theory of crisis.

### **CAPITAL: CRISIS AND BREAKDOWN**

At the time when Grossmann entered it, the discussion of crisis by the Marxist left had been affected, after a delay, by the 1885 publication of Volume II of *Capital*. The revisionist insistence on the incorrectness of Marx’s dire predictions about the future of capitalism had acquired a solid theoretical foundation in the writings of those Grossmann called the ‘neo-harmonists’, like Rudolph Hilferding and Otto Bauer, who claimed that economic crises, caused by disproportionalities among the different branches of production, could be minimized – for example (in the former’s view), by the control over production made possible by the growth of industrial and financial monopolies. Such views built on Michael von Tugan-Baranowsky’s *Studien zur Theorie und Geschichte der Handelskrisen in England* (1901) and *Theoretische Grundlagen des Marxismus* (1905), which interpreted the reproduction schemas in Marx’s second volume as demonstrating the possibility of a proportionate, and so crisis-free, development of the capitalist system. Dividing the total capital of society into a department (I) producing consumers’ goods and another (II) producing producers’ goods, Marx showed algebraically that a condition for continuous accumulation was the exchange of products between the two departments at a particular ratio, in terms of the values of the products, given an initial distribution of investment in means of production and labor-power within and between the two departments. This seemed to disprove underconsumptionist

arguments for the inevitability of crisis, by showing that the expansion of Department II provided a market for the expansion of production beyond the consumption requirements of the working population.

Against such views, Rosa Luxemburg (and, afterwards, Nikolai Bukharin<sup>4</sup>) insisted – and in this Grossmann saw her great historical importance – that ‘the basic idea of *Capital*’ is the existence of ‘an absolute economic limit to the further development of the capitalist mode of production’.<sup>5</sup> For Luxemburg, as for Grossmann, only this could give the idea of socialism scientific meaning, making it not just an ethical ideal on the part of theorists or activists but a discernible trend in the history of modern society. Accordingly, Luxemburg argued that Marx’s reproduction schemas were ‘full of hot air’.<sup>6</sup> If equilibrated growth depends on sales within Department II – that is, on trade between capitalists – how are the latter to transform the surplus-value contained in their products into the money needed for this operation? Though it looks easy on paper, Luxemburg objected, in the real world capitalists require a non-capitalist market to realize (transform into money) the surplus produced by their employees if accumulation is to proceed. But trade with the non-capitalist environment of an expanding capitalism can only lead to further expansion and so to the eventual closing off of this essential market. Hence Marx was correct to insist in the first volume of his *magnum opus* that capitalism was doomed to collapse; the contradictory argument derivable from the second volume is actually an error.

While Luxemburg was right to insist on the historical limits of capitalism’s existence, Grossmann argued, the argument she gave was faulty. The problem was the focus she shared with her theoretical and political antagonists on the reproduction schemas. Marx’s schemas are formulated in terms of labor-time values, but exchanges in the real world are made in terms of prices, which – Marx himself argued in Volume III

of *Capital* – must differ systematically from values. Therefore, Grossmann asserted, ‘Whether one argues for the necessity and inevitability of crises under capitalism, or, as the neo-harmonists do, for the possibility of crisis-free progress, it is clear that any deductions drawn from a value schema must be premature and inconclusive’.<sup>7</sup> Such deductions misunderstand the basic nature of Marx’s theorizing, in particular the use made in *Capital* of the labor theory of value.

Curiously, it was in the very same reproduction schemas that Grossmann believed he had discovered the key to understanding Marx’s theory of crisis. In an essay published in 1929 Grossmann argued that Marx had altered his plan for the writing of *Capital* as a result of his discovery of the reproduction schema in 1863. Since capitalism’s vitality depends on the growth of capital, the dominant form of social wealth, Marx’s goal was an analysis of the ‘law’ regulating the accumulation of capital, the process by which surplus product, transformed into money, serves to increase the capital invested in means of production and labor-power. Understanding the dynamic of accumulation requires understanding what determines the growth of surplus-value and the conditions for its utilization as additional capital. Marx’s original plan of study began with the empirically given forms of capital – industrial, commercial, financial – but this approach proved unusable because of the extreme complexity of the capitalist economy, in which surplus-value produced by the employees of industrial capitalists has to be shared with commercial and financial capitalists, as well as with landlords and the state, in forms (mercantile profit, interest, rent, taxes) that seem to alter the value of a product or to be costs of its production. The solution which came to Marx in the course of trying to represent the relation between the two departments of production in the reproduction of the system as a whole was to reformulate his analysis of ‘the capitalist process of surplus-value production’ in terms of ‘the common, general category of capital as

such’,<sup>8</sup> abstracting from the particular forms of capital and their interactions and reducing the picture of modern society to the relation between industrial capitalists and productive workers, as though these exhausted the totality of economic relations.

The resulting, highly unrealistic model also solved the methodological problems raised by the divergence of prices from values caused by competition between capitalist firms, their efforts to achieve equal rates of profit measured against their total capital investments. According to the labor theory of value, surplus-value, the substance of profit, is generated only by labor, when workers work for a longer time than that necessary to reproduce their means of existence. Firms with larger shares of investment devoted to means of production – in Marx’s terminology, with higher compositions of capital – would therefore earn profit at lower rates than those with larger shares of investment in labor-power, if goods were sold at their values. By abstracting from the effects of differences in composition, thus pretending that goods exchange at their values, as well as by excluding the consideration of the multiple forms of capital investment from his initial analysis, Marx could formulate a theory of the determination of surplus-value in relation to the total capital investment of society.

The greatest significance of this procedure was that it allowed Marx to explain what he called ‘the most important law of capitalist economy’, the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall.<sup>9</sup> If the stability of capitalist society – its apparent naturalness and inevitability in the eyes of its members – depends on the success of capital accumulation (bringing an expansion of employment and improvement of standard of living along with greater labor productivity) this in turn depends on the sufficiency of profits to make accumulation possible – that is, on the adequacy of the surplus-value generated relative to the capital already invested. Although the tendency of profitability to decline had been sensed by the classical economists, they had been unable

to provide an adequate formulation of it. This is because

[t]he movements of the empirically visible parts of income without labour temporarily and for specific parts of surplus value run counter to the *general tendency of the movement* (or, as it is put today, the 'secular trend line') of surplus value and by the mediating movement of circulation. All those who see only the *partial* movements of surplus value, e.g. the large profits of *individual* branches of production and not the relations of society as a whole... therefore dispute the fact of the fall in the rate of profit.<sup>10</sup>

Since the law 'is a self-evident consequence of the labour theory of value if accumulation takes place on the basis of a progressively higher organic composition of capital'<sup>11</sup> it requires for a convincing statement a representation of the capitalist economy in value terms – that is, with the degree of departure from the complications of reality to which Marx adhered in *Capital*.

We know now, as Grossmann could not have, that his theory of the alteration of the plan followed in the writing of *Capital* was incorrect. The 1939 publication of the *Grundrisse*, the rough draft Marx wrote in 1857–8, contains both a first sketch of the reproduction schemas and Marx's determination of his object of study as 'capital in general', rather than the 'many capitals' of empirical reality.<sup>12</sup> But while his philology was mistaken, Grossmann's insight into Marx's methodology was both correct and fundamental. Marx himself stressed in the preface to *Capital* that because 'in the analysis of economic forms neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of any use', the 'power of abstraction must replace both'.<sup>13</sup> As Grossmann explained, Marx began his study with a radically idealized model of the capitalist production of surplus-value, reducing the population to capitalists and industrial workers in a closed economy without foreign trade, merchants, bankers, or the state, with prices calculated in terms of quantities of gold (rather than the credit and fiat money that Marx knew to be basic to capitalist reality).<sup>14</sup>

Marx had made this clear for himself in the draft of *Capital* written in 1861–3: his analysis, he noted,

need only consider the forms which capital passes through in the various stages of its development. The real conditions within which the actual process of production takes place are therefore not analyzed. It is assumed throughout, that the commodity is sold at its value. We do not examine the competition of capitals, nor the credit system, nor the actual composition of society, which by no means consists of only two classes... and where therefore consumers and producers are not identical categories. ... Nevertheless... the examination of the general nature of capital... reveals [the possibility of crisis]... clearly.<sup>15</sup>

Grossmann was the first to understand this key feature of Marx's methodology and to make it central to the explanation of capitalism's crisis tendency. As he put it in the introduction to his *Akkumulations- und Zusammenbruchsgesetz* of 1929, 'People forget the basic rule of all scientific investigation, that every result that still seems interesting is worthless if we don't know the path by which it was won'. This is especially important, he observed, in a case like Marx's, as it provides the only way in which differences of interpretation can be decided.<sup>16</sup>

The goal of Marx's investigation, Grossmann emphasized, was 'the exploration and understanding of the concretely given totality of' the phenomena of capitalist society<sup>17</sup> – that is, not just the possibility of crisis but the particular forms taken by particular crises. The 'law of motion' identified in the value analysis is significant only in so far as it has causal effects in observable reality. Its having such significance is, of course, dependent on the possibility of making the representation of the economy more realistic while preserving the basic relations exhibited in the idealized model. In Grossmann's words, 'The decisively important "task of science" is thus to find the "mediations", the "intermediary stages", which lead from the essence [i.e., the basic structures of the model] to the concrete phenomenon'.<sup>18</sup>

This is why Marx spoke of his depictions of 'the configurations of capital' in the third volume as approaching 'step by step the form in which they appear on the surface of society... in competition, and in the everyday consciousness of the agents of production themselves'.<sup>19</sup>

Grossman described Marx's procedure as one of 'approximation': first, 'applying numerous simplifying assumptions' to create an abstract representation that is then made more phenomenally descriptive by the addition of more specific features, such as the difference between mercantile and industrial capital.<sup>20</sup> The theory of the tendency of the profit rate to fall therefore needed to be concretized, to give it purchase on the unfolding history of the social system. In particular, as we will see, this was accomplished by its transformation into a theory of the crisis cycle. In Grossmann's eyes, it was the exploration of the 'mediations' between the idealized theory and economic experience that explains the striking dualism of Marx's theory, which both proposes an explanation of the business cycle, with its recurrent episodes of crisis, as a normal feature of capitalism and predicts an inherent limit to this social system's development – a breakdown.

The breakdown, Grossmann claimed to demonstrate, followed inevitably from the mechanism of accumulation in Marx's idealized model. The chief force driving this process, the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, is a consequence of the requirement to expand imposed upon every capital entity by the need to appropriate as much as possible of the surplus-value produced by the system as a whole. Expansion – capital accumulation – would involve, Marx predicted, a tendential increase in capital invested in means of production relative to that invested in labor-power. From the point of view of the individual firm, this is a means to lower costs; with regard to the system as a whole, it (directly or indirectly) decreases the value of labor-power and so raises the rate of exploitation, increasing the quantity of value appropriable

by capital entities as profit. The long-term effect must, however, Marx argued, be a decline in the surplus-value produced per unit of capital invested (the rate of profit), since value is produced only by labor and 'the compensation for the reduced number of workers provided by a rise in the level of exploitation of labour has certain limits that cannot be overstepped'.<sup>21</sup> Thus 'the rise in the rate of surplus-value and the fall in the rate of profit are simply particular forms that express the growing productivity of labour in capitalist terms'.<sup>22</sup> In Marx's view, this process is self-reinforcing: even apart from the competitiveness inherent in a system of independent firms, each of which is striving to maximize profitability, the tendential decline, relative to total capital investment, of the total surplus-value available for division between those firms exerts pressure on each of them to increase profitability by cost-cutting.

Grossmann illustrated this process in a polemical fashion, by starting with the dynamic reproduction schema devised by Otto Bauer precisely to show, in opposition to Rosa Luxemburg's theory, that capitalism was capable of crisis-free development.<sup>23</sup> Bauer believed that the growth of the working population limited capital accumulation, and that in fact conflicts between investment decisions and population growth were the source of the cycle of prosperity and depression characteristic of capitalist history. Neither this cycle nor the tendential fall of the profit rate, however, held for Bauer any threat of an eventual collapse of capitalism. The profit rate falls as Bauer's schema progresses through time, but capital continues to accumulate, in fact at an increasing rate. This is, as Grossmann notes, 'because the extent of accumulation develops not in relation to the height of the profit rate but in relation to the weight of the previously accumulated capital'.<sup>24</sup> The existing scale of investment, for both technical and value-related reasons, determines the minimum practical further investment. It is the mass of profit available, whatever the rate at which it

is produced, that determines the accumulation possibilities.

But as the rate falls, eventually the mass will grow at a rate too small for continued accumulation. For the total capital to expand, surplus-value must be invested in additional means of production and the hiring of additional labor-power, at scales commensurate with the existing investment and the changing productivity of labor; in addition, some must go to capitalists' consumption, if the capitalist class is to continue to exist. Bauer had demonstrated to his satisfaction capitalism's capacity to meet these objectives by working out the numbers for his reproduction schema for four successive years. Grossmann demonstrated that he had simply not gone far enough: by the 34th year of Bauer's schema capitalist consumption declines, only to vanish the following year; the 36th year finds uninvestable (because insufficient) surplus-value, on the one hand, and an unemployable 'reserve army of labor', on the other. This is the situation Marx calls the over-accumulation of capital: an

undermining of the capitalist mechanism, with its economic finish. Accumulation would be, for the class of entrepreneurs, not only pointless, it would be *objectively impossible*, because the over-accumulated capital would lie fallow, could not be made functional and would yield no valorization, no profit.<sup>25</sup>

At this point, the fall in rate of profit would be accompanied not by an increasing mass of profit, as earlier, but by a declining quantity of profit. From expanding, the capitalist system would contract: break down. As it approached this point, the declining mass of profit would produce struggles over its allocation between wages and capitalists' consumption, along with struggles among capitalists for cheaper raw materials and markets for their productions. The path to breakdown would be the scene of class struggle and imperialist war.

Of course, Grossmann could not rest his argument on Bauer's schema, with its

particular assumptions; it provided only an illustration of the general case, presented for mathematicians in an algebraic argument, 'free from the contingencies of a concrete arithmetical schematic example'.<sup>26</sup> Further, the schema borrowed from Bauer, made in value terms and ignoring the use-value constraints on systemic reproduction, 'is not able to represent the *real* accumulation process'.<sup>27</sup> This is equally true of Marx's idealized model of capitalist accumulation, which is intended to show that an equilibrium growth path would lead to systemic breakdown.

Applying the theory to the understanding of historical experience requires concretization, the introduction into the theoretical description of aspects of the system from which abstraction was originally made. What Grossmann was the first to grasp was that Marx's concretization of his model of accumulation transformed it into a theory of the business cycle.

In his discussion of declining profitability in *Capital*, Marx mentions, without much elaboration, a list of factors counteracting his law: the temporary effects of productivity increases, the reduction of the value of labor-power, the cheapening of constant capital, foreign trade, and even the unproductive use of capital in speculation. Marx's treatment of the 'counteracting factors' shows little sign of careful reworking; indeed it seems to have been largely taken over from J.S. Mill's discussion of bars to declining profitability.<sup>28</sup> Thus under the heading of 'foreign trade', we find both the cheapening of constant capital and an increase in the rate of surplus-value, already discussed under those headings. On the other hand, the discussion here clarifies the concretization of the idealized model required to bring its representation of social development closer to historical actuality. Thus, to the idealized model capitalism that generates the law of declining profitability corresponds in reality to a world economy in the form of diverse nations, at different levels of capitalist development. The pressure on profitability operating in a relatively

developed area may be eased by sales to and purchases from relatively undeveloped areas, in which 'the labour of the more advanced country is valorized ... as labour of a higher specific weight' – that is, 'labour that is not paid as qualitatively higher is nevertheless sold as such'.<sup>29</sup> This increases the average profitability (while concentrating the higher profits in the more developed area). To take another example, Marx notes that paying wages below the value of labor-power, which 'has nothing to do with the general analysis of capital, but has its place in an analysis of competition', is 'one of the most important factors in stemming the tendency for the rate of profit to fall'.<sup>30</sup> When we add such factors to 'the general analysis of capital', we see why the 'law of motion' that Marx thought explained the experienced pattern of capitalist development 'operates ... as a tendency, whose effect is decisive only under certain circumstances and over long periods'.<sup>31</sup>

In speaking of 'long periods' Marx means that the counteracting factors cause the developmental path of capitalism to fluctuate around the trend defined by the tendential fall of the profit rate. That trend should still lead, therefore, to what Marx called 'an absolute overproduction of capital', which would be reached at the moment when the mass of surplus-value produced at the new low rate of profit would be insufficient for further accumulation given the existing scale of investment. At this point, therefore, 'no further capital could be employed for the purposes of capitalist production', i.e., of producing accumulable surplus-value. This moment would mark the end of capitalism as a social system governed by the drive to accumulate.

But this picture of the future of capitalism still requires a high degree of idealization. Marx de-idealizes further by depicting this trend as inflected not only by Mill's counteracting factors but by systemic crises. Mill too, despite his Ricardianism, saw recurrent crisis as a feature of the capitalist economy. For him also, 'the waste of capital in periods

of over-trading and rash speculation, and in the commercial revulsions by which such times are always followed' is both 'a consequence of the... tendency of profits' to fall and chief among the circumstances counteracting that tendency.<sup>32</sup> Mill derives the fatal tendency from a Ricardian argument that the growth of capital leads inevitably to an increase in wages, which, by the supposed laws of distribution, drives down profits.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, he explains the return of prosperity as aided by speculative losses or foreign investment 'sweeping away from time to time a part of the accumulated mass by which they are forced down'.<sup>34</sup> These factors, however, would be insufficient to restore adequate profitability without increasing productivity, which will bring higher profits so long as it does not 'raise, to a proportionate extent, the habits and requirements of the labourer'.<sup>35</sup>

For Marx, in contrast, there is no inherent conflict between profitability and stable or even increasing real wages. This, in fact, is why he presented his law on the assumption of a constant rate of surplus-value: to derive the decrease in profitability endogenously from the process of accumulation itself. The rate of profit falls because the portion of social capital invested in labor-power falls relative to total capital. It requires the restructuring of this relationship in order for accumulation to proceed. Looked at in abstraction from the complexity of the economic system, this process leads to the long-term 'historical tendency' discussed above. Within this long term, 'certain circumstances' under which the process takes place produce near-term manifestations of the tendency.

These 'circumstances', which will be different at different historical moments, have in common, in Marx's analysis, that they are manifestations of a conflict between the development of labor productivity, to which capital is driven in the struggle for surplus-value, and the need to maintain the capital value already invested, even while it is being devalued as a result of the continuing progress of productivity. The ongoing devaluation

of capital ‘disturbs the given conditions in which the circulation and reproduction process of capital takes place, and is therefore accompanied by sudden stoppages and crises in the production process’.<sup>36</sup> Some firms continue to make sufficient profits under these circumstances, while others, unable to meet demands from creditors or to see produced goods at sufficiently high prices to continue operations, go under. ‘The portion of capital that exists simply in the form of future claims on surplus-value and profit... is devalued simultaneously with the fall in revenues on which it is reckoned’. Money ‘lies idle and does not function as capital’. The sale of commodities at prices below their original sales prices likewise represents a destruction of the capital value that produced them, since it cannot be reconstituted. And in the same way ‘the elements of fixed capital are devalued’.<sup>37</sup> All this, by lowering the composition of capitals, makes possible an increase in profitability and a resumption of capitalist growth. (At the same time, typically, rising unemployment leads to a fall in the value of labor-power and so to a rise in the rate of exploitation, which also increases profitability.) A crisis, although experienced by capitalists and workers alike as a calamity, is thus a solution (however temporary) to the underlying problem of insufficient profitability, at least for those firms that survive.

The latter point is particularly significant, as can be seen if we consider the same subject in terms of the concept of ‘organic composition’ of capital. Marx defines the ‘technical composition’ as the relation between quantities of use-values – specific types of means of production, on the one hand, and particular types of labor, on the other – involved in the production process, and the ‘value composition’ as the relation between the quantities of money invested in production goods and labor-power. To capture the close historical relationship between the two, he calls ‘the value-composition of capital, in so far as it is determined by its technical composition and mirrors the changes in the latter, the organic

composition of capital’.<sup>38</sup> To the extent that a period of depression, through such phenomena as bankruptcy sales, lowers the cost of means of production (along with that of produced goods) it decreases the value composition of capital independently of the technical composition. This can occur because value is a socially constructed, not a natural, property of commodities: the labor expended in producing them *as represented by the price system*. Just as commodities for which there is no effective demand have zero value – contain no socially necessary labor time – even in good times, so commodities for which the advent of bad times has brought decreased demand lose value, so that, *ceteris paribus*, their prices decrease.

This, so to speak, resets the value relations of capital, so that the tendential increase in the organic composition (which continues to occur in depression periods, normally characterized by technologically induced – and fear-induced – increases in the productivity of labor) starts again from a lower level. In this way, as Grossman puts it, ‘the breakdown as the natural “basic tendency” of the capitalist system decomposes into a series of cycles apparently independent of each other, in which the breakdown tendency sets in anew only *periodically*, like the natural growth process of wool, which is broken by every shearing only to begin again’.<sup>39</sup>

Grossman’s metaphor is not in accord with the diagram of the crisis cycle included in his book, in which the starting point of each upturn from a level of capital investment lowered by crisis-induced devaluation is nevertheless higher than the one before. This is a question of importance, for the diagram, unlike the metaphor, suggests a trend working its way through a cyclical process. But must things be in accord with the diagram? A negative answer to this question is proposed, for example, by Andrew Kliman:

The destruction of capital value through crises is a recurrent phenomenon. The restoration of profitability that this destruction brings about is therefore a recurrent phenomenon as well. Because of



this, the rate of profit does not have a determinate secular trend throughout the entire history of capitalism, and efforts to deduce or predict such a trend are futile.

Specifically, if 'capital value has been destroyed on a massive scale, the peak rate of profit in the boom that follows is likely to be *higher* than the previous peak'.<sup>40</sup> From this point of view, the cyclical process can disrupt – and Kliman believes, has disrupted – the secular trend.

Since Kliman offers no evidence to support his opinion, it seems to be pure speculation on his part. One might just as well guess that the continual rise in the technical composition of capital since the inception of the industrial revolution has been so gigantic, in all major industries, that periodic devaluations, even on the large scale of recent depressions, could hardly return the total capital investment, against which the rate of profit must be measured, to the levels holding at the start of the previous upswing. Kliman suggests that 'if major slumps become increasingly frequent, the tendency for the rate of profit to fall between slumps has less and less time in which to operate, so it is as likely that trough rates of profit rise over time'.<sup>41</sup> But, apart from the fact that no argument is offered relating depth of devaluation to length of slump, an increasing frequency of slumps may also suggest an insufficiency of slump-induced devaluation – in fact, I believe something like this is likely to have been true in the years since the mid 1970s – and so a failure of the profit rate to recover significantly.

The growth of the composition of capital over the first three quarters of the nineteenth century seemed to Marx so obvious that, as he put it, what has to be explained is not a fall in the profit rate but 'why this fall is not greater or faster'.<sup>42</sup> Grossman also noted, in an unpublished manuscript, that 'the experience of more than one hundred years... teaches that the *value* of constant capital... in relation to variable capital grows *more quickly* than variable'.<sup>43</sup> It is perhaps more

significant that the numerous non-Marxist researchers who have attempted to trace changes in what economists call the capital–labor ratio, despite the inherent limitations of economic statistics and the particular problem of defining a standard of price measurement holding over long periods and across different national currencies, have come to an analogous conclusion, although in terms of prices rather than values. One authoritative example can be seen in Table 2.2 of Angus Maddison's *Monitoring the World Economy, 1820–1992*: 'Stock of Machinery and Equipment and Non-Residential Structures per Person Employed, Six Countries, 1820–1992'. Maddison concludes from his data that there 'seems no doubt that high rates of capital accumulation, and high and increasing levels of capital per worker were a necessary condition for the productivity increases achieved in the capitalist epoch'.<sup>44</sup> The empirical data, such as they are, are clearly at least compatible with Marx's prediction of a tendential increase in the value composition of capital.

Of course, if capitalism's history had not taken the course prescribed for it by Marx's 'law of motion' – if the increasing productivity of labor due to mechanization had not been accompanied by crisis phenomena, the concentration and centralization of capital, and the generation of a reserve army of labor – we would have had good reason to believe that the available data for the capital–labor ratio did not echo, at whatever distance, the changes Marx expected in the organic composition of capital. But so far, at least, history seems in accord with Marx.<sup>45</sup>

While declining profits, market gluts, and bankruptcies are the real-life forms in which capitalists experience Marx's value-theoretic breakdown tendency most sharply, that tendency affects the working class directly in the form of what Marx calls 'the progressive production of a relative surplus population'. Both sets of effects are aspects of the continuing accumulation of capital, which involves 'a progressive qualitative change

in composition, i.e.... a continuing increase of its constant component at the expense of its variable component'.<sup>46</sup> Despite the continuous increase in the employed population, its numbers fall relative to total capital investment. This process is most visible at moments of crisis, as 'the path characteristically described by modern industry... [with] periods of average productivity, production at high pressure, crisis, and stagnation, depends on the constant formation, the greater or less absorption, and the re-formation of the industrial reserve army or surplus population'.<sup>47</sup> But this cycle of employment and unemployment itself is the manifestation of a trend, towards the increase of the 'industrial reserve army' of unemployed:

The same causes which develop the expansive power of capital also develop the labour-power at its disposal. The relative mass of the industrial reserve army thus increases with the potential energy of wealth. But the greater this reserve army in proportion to the active labour army, the greater is the mass of a consolidated surplus population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to the amount of torture it has to undergo in the form of labour. The more extensive, finally, the pauperized sections of the working class and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism. *This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation.*<sup>48</sup>

It was Grossman's opinion that the falling rate of profit, a phenomenon of the global capitalist system, manifested itself serially in different countries, with its effects visible in the eighteenth century in Holland, in the 1820s in England, and in the 1860s in France.<sup>49</sup> The United States was, in his view, similarly affected after the First World War, and surely Grossman saw the Great Depression, which broke out in the United States in the same year as his magnum opus was published, as a confirmation of this judgment. This is an interesting speculation, which merits further examination.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, given the ever closer integration of the world's nations into what gradually emerged as a world market for commodities and capital investment, the international

character of crises became stronger. In addition, the breakdown tendency manifested itself in the strengthening of imperialism in the early twentieth century, as states – nationally organized capitals – competitively strove to overcome the effects of declining profitability by extracting surplus-value from other nations.<sup>51</sup>

While a crisis is 'a *healing process* from the standpoint of capitalist production',<sup>52</sup> it is only a momentary break in the movement towards breakdown. If at some time the counter-tendencies should be weakened or cease to operate, 'the breakdown tendency would win the upper hand and achieve *absolute* recognition as the "final crisis"'.<sup>53</sup> In this situation, the only way out for capitalism would be the absolute immiseration of the working class, a lowering of wages so far below the historically achieved value of labor-power that the reproduction of the working population would be called into question. The development of capitalism would have led to 'the unfolding and sharpening of the inner contradictions between capital and labour, which can only be overcome by the *struggle* between the two'. The capitalist offensive against the working class is 'a symptom that capitalism has overstayed its time'.<sup>54</sup>

## A NEGLECTED THEORY THAT EXPLAINS OUR TIMES

Grossmann was mistaken in thinking that the 1930s had ripened the time for the reception of Marx's breakdown-and-crisis theory. He was mistaken about the nature of the Soviet regime: the inauguration of the first five-year plan marked not the construction of socialism but the stabilization of a new form of exploitative class society inaugurated by the Bolshevik revolution. Marxism in Russia became nothing but an ideology serving the needs of the regime. In Western Europe, Japan, and America, the Great Depression of which Grossmann's book was a sort of

announcement produced not revolutionary movements but state management of the economy in the interest of imperialist war. The thirty years of prosperity that followed the depression and the Second World War provided inhospitable soil for speculation into the breakdown of capitalism, at least until the weakening of the post-war prosperity in the late 1960s.

Thus it happened that Grossmann had only one important theoretical follower. Rejected not only by the official Marxist economists subservient to the USSR but also by his colleagues in the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, as they moved away from Marxism to the Critical Theory evolved in their US exile,<sup>55</sup> his work came as a revelation to Paul Mattick, an émigré German tool and die maker in Chicago.<sup>56</sup> For Mattick, Grossmann's work provided both the key to the understanding of Marxian theory and an analysis of the world crisis of the 1930s, which seemed to be the 'final crisis' of capitalism,<sup>57</sup> leading inevitably to the choice between 'an insoluble, irrational crisis, or a new world-scale butchery'.<sup>58</sup> After the butchery that turned out to be the world's choice laid the groundwork for the post-war Golden Years of capitalism, Mattick took Grossmann's interpretation of Marx as a starting point for an analysis of the 'mixed economy', in which Keynesian methods had apparently overcome the breakdown tendency. His chief foray into Marxian theory, *Marx and Keynes*,<sup>59</sup> which predicted the limits of the mixed economy, can be seen as an elaboration of a passage in *Das Akkumulations- und Zusammenbruchsgesetz*, where Grossmann acknowledges that military spending by governments can increase the profits of individual concerns but represents only unproductive, non-profit-producing, consumption from the standpoint of the total social capital, in which value is 'destroyed instead of "saved," that is, invested as return-yielding capital'.<sup>60</sup>

Although since the 1970s there has been a revival of interest in Marxist circles about the tendency of the rate of profit to fall,

Mattick has been almost alone in insisting on Grossmann's distinction between the highly idealized model which predicts the tendency and the realities of capitalist development in which its effects can be identified.<sup>61</sup> He was also unusual among contemporary Marxists in refusing to substitute alternative formulations for Marx's in examining such questions as the value-price transformation or the analysis of the social surplus. The near uniqueness of Mattick's position suggests the idea that Grossmann's very orthodoxy in Marxian theory has paradoxically given his work a heterodox character in relation to the norm of contemporary academic Marxist economics and socialist thinking.

Meanwhile, the prosperity made possible by the economic and physical destruction effected by the Great Depression and the Second World War was, even at its highest point, the late 1950s, insufficient to obviate the need for government stimulus to maintain something approaching full employment. Government spending, on the other hand, was not able to eliminate 'official pauperism', as the failure of the American 'War on Poverty' demonstrated. Exactly as Marx's value-theoretic model suggests, the increased productivity of labor making possible the post-war growth of private capital continued to involve a displacement of labor from employment. This feature of capitalist development was accentuated when the post-war prosperity came to a definitive end in the mid 1970s, leading to a durable increase in unemployment in Europe and a tendential weakening in the American labor market. As a specialist on the topic observed more than a decade ago, the 'perceptible rise in [European] unemployment in the mid-1970s marked the beginning of a new phase' in which 'elevated unemployment rates are the reflection... of the definite decline of the [post-war] epoch of full employment'.<sup>62</sup> The current downturn has brought these conditions to the United States as well as raising levels of unemployment throughout the world.

If we attend specifically to the workers involved in Marx's theoretical model, which focuses on those whose labor is given social definition as value and surplus-value, 'the last 30 years have witnessed a global stagnation in the relative number of industrial workers'. It is only 'a low-wage service sector' that 'has made up the difference in the high GDP countries alongside an unparalleled explosion of slum-dwellers and informal workers in the low GDP countries'.<sup>63</sup> As the authors of the insightful text just cited also observe, this so-called deindustrialization – which has involved not so much a decline in industrial production as in the numbers of workers, relative to capital investment, needed to perform it – has been an international tendency, operating in the underdeveloped as well as the developed countries.

At the same time, the economic growth made possible by the increase in the rate of exploitation achieved by the combination of lowered global wage levels and technologically enhanced labor productivity has clearly not involved a growth in profits sufficient to employ increasing numbers of the masses of people being thrown onto the mercies of the labor market or to satisfy their needs unproductively. In the words of a recent survey,

Between 1973 and the present, economic performance in the U.S., Western Europe, and Japan has, by every standard macroeconomic indicator, deteriorated, business cycle by business cycle, decade by decade (with the exception of the second half of the 1990s). Equally telling, over the same period, capital investment on a world scale, and in every nation except China, even including the East Asian [Newly Industrialized Countries] since the middle 1990s, has been growing steadily weaker.<sup>64</sup>

As a result, according to the United Nations' *Human Development Report 2004*, 'an unprecedented number of countries saw development slide backwards in the 1990s' – before the current downturn. 'In 46 countries people are poorer today than in 1990. In 25 countries more people are hungry today than a decade ago'.<sup>65</sup> To take only one example of this trend, the mass pauperization of

the population in the formerly 'socialist' countries after 1989 led, by one estimate, to an increase of those living in extreme poverty from 14 to 168 million.<sup>66</sup>

Alongside these surplus people we find surplus capital – that is, capital that cannot be profitably invested in the production of new surplus-value. Here again, Grossman's development of Marxian theory, formulated on the basis of economic history up to the early twentieth century, has been strikingly vindicated by developments of the most recent period. Speaking of 'unemployed capital', unable to find investment opportunities, he observed that 'because it cannot be utilized within the sphere of production, capital is exported or – from the viewpoint of production – directed towards "internal export", the streaming of unemployed money into speculation'.<sup>67</sup> This function of financial speculation – to create 'a profitable "investment" for over-accumulated capital'<sup>68</sup> – is accompanied by speculation in real estate,<sup>69</sup> to which we can now add all the other asset classes on the basis of which bubbles can be developed, from commodity futures and more arcane derivatives to fine art. And just as capital flowed into speculation instead of into productive investment, producing the effect of temporary prosperity by means of a series of bubbles, working-class living standards were maintained only by the massive growth of consumer debt, culminating in workers' participation in the mortgage bubble of the early twenty-first century.

Like the growth of state debt and the welfare state, the difficulty we see today in doing away with them registers the decline of the private enterprise economy. Despite its dynamism and the gigantic increases in the productivity of human labor that it has achieved since the early nineteenth century, and despite the disappearance of political and social barriers to its spread in the course of the twentieth, capitalism has not been able to generate the quantities of profit required to incorporate much of the world's population into its modern industrial form. The failure

of the non-financial parts of the economy to expand sufficiently showed itself in 2008 in the near collapse of the whole Rube Goldberg device of cantilevered finance. For the same reason, the massive increase in government spending that avoided a return to depression conditions after the mid 1960s led not to a steady flow of profits from a now primed pump but to today's increasingly problematic state deficits.

Is this to say that the current crisis cycle has moved capitalism to the point of breakdown, in the sense of self-destruction? No, because today, as at all earlier moments, capitalism's fate ultimately depends (as Grossman himself insisted<sup>70</sup>) on the willingness of human beings to engage in the difficult struggles needed to overthrow existing relations of social power and create new forms of production and consumption. In the absence of revolutionary action on a scale sufficient to wrest control of the means of production from their current owners – and in the absence of the destruction of the material conditions for its existence by ecological catastrophe – capital can in principle gain yet another lease on life through the radical restructuring of capital ownership, and in its relationship to the owners of labor-power – a process likely to involve suffering and death for millions on the gigantic scale initiated in the previous century by two world wars.

On the other hand, in its current condition capitalism promises economic difficulties for decades to come, with increased assaults on the earnings and working conditions of those who are still lucky enough to be wage earners around the world, waves of bankruptcies and business consolidations for capitalist firms, and increasingly serious conflicts among economic entities and even nations over just who is going to pay for the system's survival.<sup>71</sup> The mass unemployment and material deprivation that Marx predicted as the long-term outcome of capitalist development have become features of the world economy that if not permanent will clearly be with us for an extended time. Perhaps this situation

is part of the reason for the current revival of interest in the work of Henryk Grossmann.

## Notes

- 1 R. Kuhn, *Henryk Grossman and the Recovery of Marxism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007): 1.
- 2 Ibid.: 17.
- 3 *Wörterbuch der Volkswirtschaft*, 4th edition (Jena: Verlag von Gustav Fischer, 1931–3); citations are from the reprint: H. Grossmann and C. Grünberg, *Anarchismus, Bolschewismus, Sozialismus*, ed. C. Pozzoli (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1971): 328; further citations to this text will be in parentheses.
- 4 See R. Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital* [1913], trans. A. Schwarzschild (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1951) and *The Accumulation of Capital – An Anti-Critique* [1921, written 1915], trans. R. Wichman (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972); N.I. Bukharin, *Imperialism and the Accumulation of Capital* [1924], trans. R. Wichman (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972); and my commentary, 'Economics, Politics, and Crisis Theory: Luxemburg, Bukharin and Grossmann on the Limits of Capital', in R. Bellofiore (ed.), *Rosa Luxemburg and the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 2009): 92–101; Grossmann found his arguments, shared with Lenin, of no scientific merit.
- 5 R. Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*: 318–19.
- 6 Letter to Constantin Zetkin, November 16, 1911, cit. P. Mattick, *Economic Crisis and Crisis Theories* (White Plains: M.E. Sharpe, 1981): 122.
- 7 H. Grossman, 'The Value–Price Transformation in Marx and the Problem of Crisis' [1932], trans. D. Meinenreis, *Historical Materialism* 24:1 (2016), 105–34, 129.
- 8 H. Grossman, 'The Change in the Original Plan for Marx's *Capital* and Its Causes' [1929], trans. Geoffrey McCormack, *Historical Materialism* 21:2 (2013), 138–64: 150, 151.
- 9 K. Marx, 'Economic Manuscript of 1861–63', in *MECW* 33: 104.
- 10 Ibid.: 152.
- 11 Ibid.: 152–3. By 'organic' composition Marx meant an increase in the value composition of capital caused by the labor-saving technological changes he thought endemic to accumulation.
- 12 See M. Rubel, 'Plan et method de l'Économie', in *Marx critique du marxisme* (Paris: Payot, 1974): 369–401.
- 13 K. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I [1869], trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976): 90.

- 14 That such methodological ideas were not entirely foreign to Marxist circles at the time can be seen in Anton Pannekoek's article 'Das Wesen des Naturgesetzes', in the logical empiricists' journal *Erkenntnis* 3 (1932–3): 389–400. Discussing natural laws, Pannekoek – who was both an important Marxist theorist and a notable astronomer – observed: 'The abstract character of natural law must in the first place be considered with respect to the relationship between it and concrete appearances. The "a body" or "the body" of which the law [of gravity] speaks is no real, existing body, but an abstract concept' (392). For a discussion of idealization in Marxian theory, see my *Theory as Critique* (Dordrecht: Brill, forthcoming), chapter 2; for introductions to idealization in science generally, see M. Weisberg, *Simulation and Similarity: Using Models to Understand the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) and N. Cartwright, *How the Laws of Physics Lie* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). One of the earliest explorations of scientific idealization, Leszek Nowak's *The Structure of Idealization* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1980), strikingly took *Capital* as its chief case in point, unfortunately without a mention of Grossmann's work.
- 15 K. Marx, 'Economic Manuscripts of 1861–63', in *MECW* 32: 124.
- 16 Henryk Grossmann, *Das Akkumulations- und Zusammenbruchsgesetz des kapitalistischen Systems* (Leipzig: C.L. Hirschfeld Verlag, 1929): v, vi.
- 17 H. Grossman, 'The Value–Price Transformation': 105.
- 18 *Ibid.*: 106.
- 19 K. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III [1895], trans. D. Fernbach (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981): 117.
- 20 H. Grossman, 'The Value–Price Transformation': 107. It would be better to translate Grossman's 'Annäherung' as 'approach' rather than 'approximation', because the latter word, without a clear definition in this context, misleadingly suggests that for Marx the value calculations employed in *Capital* are numerical approximations of the price calculations that structure real-life economic affairs. This problem arises particularly for L. Nowak, because he attempts, in chapter 10 of *The Structure of Idealization*, an exact definition of approximation relevant to Marxian theory, in order to argue that values approximate prices. But, apart from the unknowability of values, values cannot be approximations of prices, because the 'transformation' relating the two is not a direct relation between individual values and prices. Nowak may have believed that value theory would have to be understood in terms of approximation to guarantee its significance for the description of economic reality. But the inapplicability of these terms is far from peculiar to Marxian theory.
- 21 K. Marx, *Capital* III: 356.
- 22 *Ibid.*: 347.
- 23 O. Bauer, 'Die Akkumulation des Kapitals', in *Neue Zeit* 31:1 (1913): 831–8, 862–74; trans. J.E. King, 'Otto Bauer's "Accumulation of Capital"', in *History of Political Economy* 18:1 (1986): 87–110.
- 24 H. Grossmann, *Das Akkumulations- und Zusammenbruchsgesetz*: 118–120.
- 25 *Ibid.*: 122–3.
- 26 *Ibid.*: 183; the mathematical demonstration is on 184–5.
- 27 *Ibid.*: 105n.
- 28 To my knowledge, Grossmann was the first to identify Mill as the (unacknowledged) source of the list of counteracting factors in Volume III of *Capital*. See J.S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy* [1848], Book IV, Part IV, secs. 5–8 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994: 110–16). In this connection it is of interest that Mill argued, in a discussion of the method of political economy, that what 'is true in the abstract, is always true in the concrete, with proper allowances. When a certain cause really exists, and if left to itself would infallibly produce a certain effect, that same effect, modified by all the concurrent causes, will correctly correspond to the result really produced' (J.S. Mill, 'On the Definition of Political Economy and on the Method of Investigation proper to It', in J.M. Robson [ed.], *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Vol. IV [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967]: 326–7). Mill did not think that the social sciences differed from the natural sciences in this regard, though he argued that, given the impossibility of experimentation, the social sciences have 'no other method than the *a priori* one, or that of "abstract speculation"' (327). In his *Logic* he argued that *all* 'laws of causation are liable to be... counteracted, and seemingly frustrated, by coming into conflict with other laws' (*Collected Works*, Vol. VII: 443). For this reason he held that causal laws 'require to be stated in words affirmative of tendencies only, and not of actual results' (445). In political economy, too, Mill held, a theorist will err in predicating 'an actual result, when he should only have predicated a *tendency* to that result – a power acting with a certain intensity in that direction' ('On the Definition': 337). That Marx had, for good reasons, a low opinion of Mill's work in political economy makes the shared elements in their methodological pronouncements all the more striking.
- 29 K. Marx, *Capital* III: 345.
- 30 *Ibid.*: 342.
- 31 *Ibid.*: 346.

- 32 J.S. Mill, *Principles*: 110–11.
- 33 Ibid.: 108–9. Hence for Mill all the counteracting factors are economic phenomena offsetting a process which is based on extra-economic facts, in particular the fertility of the soil and population growth, just as he derives the inducements to save and invest, Keynes-style, from human psychology.
- 34 Ibid.: 111.
- 35 Ibid.: 112.
- 36 K. Marx, *Capital* III: 358.
- 37 Ibid.: 362–3.
- 38 K. Marx, *Capital* I: 763.
- 39 H. Grossmann, *Das Akkumulations- und Zusammenbruchsgesetz*: 140.
- 40 A.L. Kliman, *The Failure of Capitalist Production. Underlying Causes of the Great Recession* (London: Pluto Press, 2012): 25.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 K. Marx, *Capital* III: 339. As Marx expressed this conviction in the 1861–3 manuscript, 'It is an incontrovertible fact that, as capitalist production develops, the portion of capital invested in machinery and raw materials grows, and the portion laid out in wages declines. ... For us... the main thing is: does this fact explain the decline in the rate of profit? (A decline, incidentally, which is far smaller than it is said to be)' (in *MECW* 33: 288).
- 43 H. Grossman ms. starting 'Die Entwertung sollen die Zusammenbruchstendenz aufheben', cit. R. Kuhn, *Henryk Grossman and the Recovery of Marxism*: 141; Grossman had earlier presented statistics bearing on this question in *Das Akkumulations- und Zusammenbruchsgesetz*.
- 44 Paris: OECD, 1995: 36.
- 45 It would be too great a digression to explore the controversy over whether the tendency of the rate of profit to fall cannot be overcome by the tendential increase in the rate of surplus-value produced by the increased productivity of labor brought by accumulation. The many restatements of this argument tend both to misunderstand Marx's conception of the rate of surplus-value and ignore his ideas about the limits within which it can be increased. And, of course, the whole history of capitalism so far seems to confirm Marx's treatment of the question, as just noted. For a detailed discussion see my *Theory as Critique*, chapter 10.
- 46 K. Marx, *Capital* I: 781.
- 47 Ibid.: 785.
- 48 Ibid.: 798.
- 49 H. Grossman, *Das Akkumulations- und Zusammenbruchsgesetz*: 530ff. Thus the geographical expansion of capitalism was not a process of serial repetition but of the enfolding of ever more people into a complex dynamic of nationally organized competition for surplus-value, in the course of which capitalism evolved as a world system.
- 50 It is suggestive that while '[a]dvanced economies were the engines of previous global recoveries... the emerging market economies have accounted for the lion's share of global growth since the 2009 global recession' (M.A. Kose and M.E. Terrones, *Collapse and Revival: Understanding Global Recessions and Recoveries* [Washington: International Monetary Fund, 2015]: 76).
- 51 See Grossmann, *Akkumulations- und Zusammenbruchsgesetz*: 300.
- 52 Ibid.: 187.
- 53 Ibid.: 140.
- 54 Ibid.: 599.
- 55 For a survey of the Stalinist reception of Grossmann's work, see R. Kuhn, *Henryk Grossman*: 138ff.; for relations with the Frankfurt School, see J. Scheele, *Zwischen Zusammenbruchsprognose und Positivismusverdikt. Studien zur politischen und intellektuellen Biographie Henryk Grossmanns (1881–1950)* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999) and R. Kuhn, 'Henryk Grossman and Critical Theory', in *History of the Human Sciences* 29:2 (2016): 42–59. Serious consideration of Grossmann's work by bourgeois theorists has been slight; worth mentioning are two efforts, both hamstrung by academic predispositions: M. Trottmann, *Zur Interpretation und Kritik der Zusammenbruchstheorie von Henryk Grossmann* (Zurich: Polygraphischer Verlag, 1956) and S. Mavroudeas and A. Ioannides, 'Henryk Grossmann[s] Falling Rate of Profit Theory of Crisis: A Presentation and a Reply to Critics', in *Indian Development Review* 4:1 (2006): 69–91.
- 56 G. Roth, *Marxism in a Lost Century. A Biography of Paul Mattick* (Leiden: Brill, 2015): 90–4.
- 57 Paul Mattick, 'The Permanent Crisis: Henryk Grossmann's Interpretation of Marx's Theory of Capital Accumulation', in *International Council Correspondence* 1:2 (1934): 1–20.
- 58 Ibid.: 20.
- 59 P. Mattick, *Marx and Keynes* (Boston: Porter Sargent Publishers, 1969).
- 60 H. Grossmann, *Das Akkumulations- und Zusammenbruchsgesetz*: 371.
- 61 See, notably, the discussion in C. Rollhausen (ed.), *Kapitalismus und Krise: Eine Kontroverse um das Gesetz des tendenziellen Falls der Profitrate* (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1970).
- 62 E. Pugliese, 'The Europe of the Unemployed', *International Journal of Political Economy* 23:3 (1993): 15.
- 63 *Endnotes* and A. Benanav, 'Misery and Debt', *Endnotes* 2 (2011): 34.

- 64 R. Brenner, 'What's Good for Goldman Sachs is Good for America: The Origins of the Current Crisis' (2009: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/osgo782h>; last accessed November 10, 2010): 62.
- 65 Cit. M. Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006): 163.
- 66 Ibid.: 106.
- 67 H. Grossman, *Das Akkumulations- und Zusammenbruchsgesetz*: 536–7.
- 68 Ibid.: 543; Grossman adds that, of course, 'these profits do not arise from actual production, but are transfers of capital from one hand to another', whence the inevitable bursting of all such bubbles.
- 69 Ibid.: 541.
- 70 Ibid.: 601–2.
- 71 This seems to have penetrated even the practitioners of what Marx called vulgar economics: see, for a journalist's exposition, N. Irwin, 'We're in a Low-Growth World. How Did We get Here?' (*New York Times*, August 6, 2016), in which the advent of global stagnation is explained as the effect of 'supply and demand'.



# Franz L. Neumann's *Behemoth*: A Materialist Voice in the *Gesamtgestalt* of Fascist Studies

Karsten Olson

## THE PROTOTYPICAL 'POLITICAL SCIENTIST': A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

As Alfons Söllner notes in 'Neumann als Archetypus – die Formierung des *political scholar* im 20. Jahrhundert' [Neumann as Archetype – The Formation of the Political Scholar in the 20th Century], there has been no true biography of Franz Neumann to date, and due to the lack of a Neumann archive, it is unlikely that one will be created (Söllner, 2002: 42). What is known of Neumann draws primarily from his work, correspondence and anecdotal interviews with his sister and former students. As a result, there is an unfortunate degree of uncertainty in many basic details of his life which is reflected in the following sketch.

Franz Leopold Neumann was born to German-Jewish parents in 1900 in the small town of Kattowitz, located in what was then Silesia. His father was a successful tanner and a figure of some prominence within the

local Jewish community – nonetheless, this tradesman heritage differed sharply from the bourgeois upbringing of later colleagues such as Adorno and Horkheimer. This distinction is worth emphasizing, as it most likely influenced the course of his education and chosen profession (Söllner, 2002: 46). Franz was remembered by his sister as the gifted child of the family, the only child of five to attend Gymnasium in neighboring Krakow. During his first two years of study in 1918–19, Neumann attended three different universities in as many semesters: Breslau, Leipzig and Rostock. In Leipzig, he took part in the barricade combat of the November Revolution, which Duncan Kelly characterizes as the beginning and end of his revolutionary ambitions (Kelly, 2002: 460). In 1919 Neumann moved again to Frankfurt am Main, where he completed several degrees. In 1923 he completed his dissertation *Rechtsphilosophische Einleitung zu einer Abhandlung über das Verhältnis von Staat und Strafe* [A Legal-Philosophical Introduction to a Treatise on the

Relation between State and Punishment] in 1923 under the tutelage of Hugo Sinzheimer, a man described by Rolf Wiggershaus as 'the founder of German employment law and one of the fathers of the Weimar constitution' (Wiggershaus, 1995: 223). In Frankfurt, Neumann met both Ernst Fraenkel, his future law partner, and Leo Löwenthal, his first connection with a future member of the Frankfurt School. After completing his degree, Neumann published essays on the topics of law and labor practices, worked as an instructor at the Labor Academy and lectured to unions. Neumann's early works are notable for connecting a theoretical interest in the nature of society and economy inspired by the Austrian Marxists with labor law and democratic reformism (Wiggershaus, 1995: 223).

In 1928 Neumann moved to Berlin in order to establish a law practice with Ernst Fraenkel. While in Berlin he met Otto Kirchheimer and lectured alongside Carl Schmitt and Hermann Heller at the College of Politics. From 1928 to 1933 Neumann fought ceaselessly against right-wing encroachments on the constitution, becoming one of the most prominent lawyers of the SPD. In 1933 the SA occupied Fraenkel and Neumann's law office in an attempt to arrest Neumann, who, as a result of his political activity and Jewish heritage, had the dubious distinction to be among the first stripped of German citizenship. To avoid arrest Neumann fled to London, where he studied under the patronage of Harold Laski, whom he had met previously when Laski traveled to Berlin to strengthen ties between the Labour Party and the SPD (Söllner, 2002: 48). Like Kirchheimer, Neumann initially continued writing articles under pseudonyms that were to be imported into Germany in order to foment resistance, but eventually gave up once he determined this course to be ineffective. Unable to practice law due to differences in the legal system, Neumann used his experience teaching at the Deutsche Hochschule für Politik as a bridge to re-education at the London School of Economics, where

in 1936 he completed his second dissertation, *The Governance of the Rule of Law: An Investigation into the Relationship between the Political Theories, the Legal System and the Social Background in the Competitive Society*, a work which 'owed much for its methodology to Karl Mannheim, Max Weber and Marx, and for its content to Harold Laski' (Wiggershaus, 1995: 225).

Neumann moved to New York that same year in order to join the Institute for Social Research, a position Laski helped him to obtain (Jay, 1973: 144). Neumann's official connection with the Institute would be brief, lasting only from 1936 to 1940. Wiggershaus characterizes Horkheimer's attitude towards Neumann, Kirchheimer and others excluded from the Institute's inner circle as uncharitable bordering on exploitative. Neumann's role within the Institute was largely administrative, ranging from organizational duties to legal counsel and defense, including a trip to Buenos Aires to defend the family interests of Felix Weil. When Neumann discovered in 1939 that he was to be included in cuts to peripheral figures of the Institute, he complained in a letter to Horkheimer that he had been assured a permanent position, and furthermore that his administrative and legal functions had kept him from publishing frequently, a fact which would make finding a position at a university difficult. Nevertheless, it was during his time at the Institute that he was able to establish a lasting connection with Columbia University through lectures on the totalitarian state in 1936–7 and again in 1941, a connection which would eventually lead to a full professorship. More importantly, it was during this time that Neumann wrote his magnum opus, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1944*. The work owed its existence to a debate within the Frankfurt School, and was in part written against Friedrich Pollock's conception of state capitalism. *Behemoth* was important not only for Neumann but for the Institute as a whole, with which it was associated despite a lack of official

recognition (Jay, 1973: 162). It was not only the Institute's first major work written in English, but also remained its most popular work for years, a popularity which William Jones ascribes to Neumann's more empirical approach, an empiricism which found wider reception in the Anglo-American audience (Jones, 1999: 149).

*Behemoth's* success opened a number of doors for Neumann and is often credited with securing him a job advising in the US State Department in 1942 and later in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), a forerunner of the CIA. As Matthias Stoffregen notes, *Behemoth* is permeated with a practical concern for how the Nazis were to be defeated, and also the manner in which Germany was to be rebuilt in the wake of Nazi rule (Stoffregen, 2002). Neumann was eventually joined at the OSS by other ex-Frankfurt School members such as Marcuse, Kirchheimer and Gurland. Working as a team, they coauthored a series of reports advising US foreign policy. Just how influential this group of Institute expatriots was a matter of debate: Joachim Perels notes that there was a sizeable cultural gap between the more theoretically minded Marxist Jewish Germans and their conservative and practically oriented American colleagues (Perels, 2002: 86). Nevertheless, their shared concept of technical rationality coupled with *Behemoth's* depiction of Nazi Germany as a non-state ruled by four competing powers did have an impact on policy. Most notably, the initial structuring of the Nuremberg Trials followed *Behemoth's* four-powers conception of complicity in an attempt to broaden the scope and effectiveness of denazification (Hilberg, 2001: 81). Furthermore, Neumann's conviction that Germany under the Nazis had been a lawless state initially invalidated the *nulla poena sine lege* defense of war criminals (Perels, 2002: 85, 92). Ultimately, however, few prosecutions against complicit members of industry were successful, and the retroactive invalidation of Nazi law was also lifted from 1955 until 1998, allowing many to avoid prosecution.

While the ex-Frankfurt School group argued for the expansion of guilt in Nazi leadership, they simultaneously argued against actions such as the Morgenthau Plan, which sought to deindustrialize Germany, arguing that not all Germans were Nazis and that in particular the lower and working classes had remained uncorrupted by Nazi propaganda, again expressing convictions central to *Behemoth*. They were similarly concerned with the manner in which democracy was to be established within the new nation, advocating optimistically for the Allied forces to allow for a democratic movement to form naturally within the shattered nation, instead of attempting the seemingly impossible task of instilling a democratic spirit by force (Stoffregen, 2002: 61).

Neumann worked for various state agencies from the dissolution of the OSS, in 1945, until 1947, when, in part due to the changing atmosphere within the United States, as the anti-fascism of the Second World War transformed into the anti-communism of the Cold War (Stoffregen, 2002: 63), he left. In 1948 Neumann was granted first a visiting and then full professorship at Columbia University, where he had continued to give lectures throughout his work for the state. Raul Hilberg, Holocaust scholar and former doctoral student of Neumann, described Neumann as extremely popular and influential, boasting more advisees than any of his colleagues (Hilberg and Söllner, 1988: 177). Hilberg also credits *Behemoth* as a major source of inspiration for his own work, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, for which he adopted Neumann's conception of the non-state, the four power structures and the emphasis on continuity between the Weimar Republic and National Socialism. During his tenure at Columbia, Neumann began traveling to Berlin, where he helped establish the Institute for Political Science at the Freie Universität, in addition to founding what would later become the Otto Suhr Institute for Political Science. Mattias Iser and David Strecker (2002: 7) position Neumann as one of the founding figures

of political science as a discipline within Germany, cross-pollinating the more legal and social-theory-oriented German form with the empiricism of the Anglo-American model. Neumann died in a car accident in Germany in 1954 at the age of 54, an early death which is typically listed as one of the primary causes for his diminished presence in modern literature.

## BEHEMOTH: A MATERIAL ECONOMIC RETELLING

*Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1944*, first published in 1942, is comprised of five sections: an introduction, three main sections and an appendix added in 1944. The introduction provides a brief history of the German Empire and the Weimar Republic, establishing certain trends which led to the production of the National Socialist regime. Section one examines the primary political structures within National Socialism, introducing the idea of the non-state, the Nazi party as a movement, a Weberian concept of the charismatic leader and the idea of a racial people. Section two is an extensive study of the function of economics within National Socialist Germany, much of which is written explicitly against Pollock's assertion of the primacy of the political. Section three is broken into thirds, one dedicated to the organization of the ruling elite, one to the atomized and dominated ruled class and one to summarizing the theory of the Behemoth, as well as including predictions for the future and a plea for the manner in which Germany should be rebuilt. The 1944 appendix makes primarily factual changes regarding the structure and personnel of administrative bodies, although it also expands significantly on Neumann's theory of anti-Semitism and hints at an ascendancy of the party relative to the other three powers. The following analysis seeks to create a single narrative of argumentation highlighting the material economic

core of *Behemoth*. Any attempt to summarize a work as rich and complex as *Behemoth* is bound to make major sacrifices. What has been primarily lost in my condensation is, on the one hand, the work's staggering empirical rigor and, on the other, specific references to its theoretical heritage. This has been done in order to render more clearly those aspects unique to *Behemoth*, both in order to better situate it in larger discourses and to underscore what it can still tell us about the formation and functioning of fascism.

The fundamental claim of *Behemoth* is that the Weimar Republic collapsed due to an increasing disparity between the forces and relations of production. Already during the German Empire, agriculture and industry had begun consolidating; in a now familiar process, technological innovation allowed for ever more efficient means of large-scale production, which in turn led to the concentration of the means of production into a rapidly shrinking number of cartels, monopolies and industrial combines. As efficiency and productive capacity increased, so too did the demand for resources and markets, creating an explosively expansionary dynamic within the German Empire which played no small part in precipitating the First World War. While the war provided an enormous, if temporary, release for the productive capacity of German industry, the discrepancy between the forces and relations of production increased drastically in its aftermath. The problem was that while the productive capacity remained unchanged, and even continued to expand, the societal support surrounding it had been severely damaged. German trade was restricted, limiting access to both potential markets and raw materials, as was labor capital, by the huge losses of life incurred during the war; along with heavy war reparations they contributed to prevent production from operating anywhere near peak efficiency and thereby profitability. This discrepancy created tremendous political pressure within the fledgling Republic, a pressure which it was unable to resolve,

either through further socialization of the means of production or in gaining sufficient concessions from its international trade partners to allow for peaceful expansion. The National Socialists, on the other hand, were able to resolve the discrepancy and to provide a framework for nearly limitless growth through militarization, public works projects and, inescapably, violent expansion (Neumann, 1944: 3–34).

The central axiom of Neumann's theory is that every mode of production has a corresponding and complementary political system. During the era of competitive capitalism, prior to the rise of monopoly capitalism, the liberal constructs of the rule of law and property rights had best matched the needs of the economic system. Competitive capitalism requires many small, relatively equal entrepreneurs, who, through mutual competition, drive the economic 'law' of supply and demand, creating a price mechanism which regulates the market. Liberal democracy and the rule of law achieves this by placing all individuals as well as all organs of state under a universal set of norms, creating basic legal equality and freedom on the basis of the inviolability of the individual's right to person and property. Legal equality is necessary because it produces the calculability and predictability required by the 'economic laws' of the free market; for the price mechanism of supply and demand to function, individuals must be free to create contracts between one another to sell their property and labor with the assurance that the state will honor and enforce these contracts. The creation of this predictable system is raised to moral imperative by the fact that classical liberalism declares that it is through the progressive motion of competitive capitalism that humanity as a whole is guided towards ever greater prosperity and happiness (Neumann, 1944: 255–61).

Because Neumann's understanding of the political realm claims that it exists to satisfy the needs of the economic, he therefore contends that the common understanding of

'laissez faire' as the total absence of governmental interference is incorrect: instead, within liberalism and the rule of law, the state must constantly interfere in order to uphold those conditions necessary for competition. Again, because the movement of the economy and society as a whole was believed to be responsible for humankind's eventual emancipation, the 'natural lawyers' of the seventeenth century and the 'classical economists' of the eighteenth recognized that it is not enough for competition to be theoretically and legally preserved: it must be actualized. If, despite the continued *legal* ability to buy and sell goods, *actual* competition becomes impossible due to the establishment of monopolies, it is the responsibility of the state to intervene and re-establish a competitive market. If the state does not intervene and monopolies are allowed to persist, their size allows them to subvert the price mechanism through price fixing, flooding the market and buying out competitors. This was increasingly the case in both the Weimar Republic and in the German Empire before it. Neumann attributes this shift to several factors: first, to a complicity between the governmental and economic elite. Throughout *Behemoth*, Neumann is at pains to demonstrate the huge and troubling degree of continuity in judicial and bureaucratic branches of government, both between the Empire and the Republic as well as between the Republic and the Third Reich, a conservative core allied to large industry and the military and arrayed against the progressive, redistributive aspects of liberal ideology. Second, Neumann faults the left, and in particular his own party, the SPD, for a crippling degree of indecision – the SPD was famously unsure if they were to act as the doctors or poisoners of the ailing competitive economy. Following traditional Marxist theory, many saw the consolidation of businesses into increasingly large conglomerates and corporations to be an inevitable function of the economic process and welcomed it as heralding the end of capitalism (Neumann, 1944: 13–16).

Finally, and most importantly, Neumann notes that monopolization of the economy was hastened by technological changes within the manufacturing process itself. Neumann, building on the work of A.R.L. Gurland, argued that in the late 1920s and early 1930s Germany experienced a second industrial revolution. The salient example of this transformation was the creation of polymers through new chemical processes. Polymers represented a fundamental shift in the demands of manufacturing; the final reaction necessary for their creation required heat and pressure of a scale previously unimaginable, which necessitated the creation of factories on a new scale and with a greater degree of centralization, requiring unheard-of levels of economic risk on the part of investors. This risk was heightened by the highly experimental nature of the end product; millions had to be spent creating wholly new materials that would possibly have no commercial viability. Polymerization, however, is only the final step in a much larger economic process; it requires huge amounts of raw materials to be completed, especially coal, which in turn requires massive infrastructure for its mining, shipping and supply. Polymerization and other similar emerging manufacturing processes exceeded the limits of competitive capitalism: the property rights and universally valid contracts that are its cornerstone worked instead to restrict the growth of monopoly concerns. The vertical integration necessary for polymerization demanded individual measures designed to suit the immediate material and labor needs of the monopoly, not universal norms. These monopolies needed the state as an ally and not as an impartial arbiter, an ally which would cover the staggering losses associated with plant experimentation, an ally which could provide markets of sufficient scale to make the manufacturing process economically viable (Neumann, 1944: 277–92).

Neumann contends that the conditions required by vertically integrated manufacturing processes of scale specifically, and

monopoly capitalism in general, were best met in the German context by National Socialism. Crucially, the National Socialist party did not establish a state at all. Neumann gives two possible understandings of the term 'state': first, the more commonly understood liberal interpretation, one which is 'characterized by the rule of law' – that is, the establishment of a universal precedent which must be obeyed even by the governing body that created it (Neumann, 1944: 467). Through law, the monopoly of violence possessed by the state is in all instances a mediated and predictable violence, a distinction which differentiates it from the 'natural law' of sheer force. The second, more limited, understanding of the state is simply the monopoly of violence in a sovereign body. Unlike the rule of law, citizens in this limited sense of state remain vulnerable to excesses of the sovereign body but are nevertheless protected from the chaotic violence of natural law. Life under National Socialism afforded none of these guarantees or protections. While the Nazi party left the laws and the constitution of the Weimar Republic largely unchanged, the laws themselves lost all operative force, and even new legislation created by the National Socialist government itself was largely ignored. This is because the essence of law, delimitation, is antithetical to the 'movement' which the National Socialists sought to establish (Neumann, 1944: 422). The Nazis worked constantly to destroy the universality upon which laws depend, instead acting in accordance with the individual discretion of the judge or, as was more frequently the case, the administrator of the law. It was not the letter but the 'spirit' of the law which was championed, a shift which destroyed the calculable, rational foundation of the law: 'If general law is the basic form of right, if law is not only *voluntas* but also *ratio*, then we must deny the existence of law in the fascist state' (Neumann, 1944: 450). Stripped of the egalitarian properties granted by universal applicability, law which has ceased to be law functions as an instrument of obfuscation

and terror, cloaking real relations of power between employer/employee and ruler/ruled in a mystical language of shared racial destiny. Neumann writes, 'The average lawyer will be repelled by the idea that there can be a legal system that is nothing more than a means of terrorizing people' (Neumann, 1944: 440). The specificity and partiality of the individual measure, coupled with its ability to hide power relations behind vague ideological statements, provided precisely the direct support which monopolies had been denied under universal law.

Beyond lacking the protective and stabilizing framework of the rule of law, Neumann argues that National Socialist Germany failed to meet even the most primitive definition of the state as monopoly of violence in a sovereign body. Instead of one sovereign body, four discrete sources of power existed in an uneasy state of equilibrium within Germany: the army, the bureaucracy, the National Socialist party and the captains of industry. Each power bloc 'is equipped with legislative, administrative and judicial power of its own' (Neumann, 1944: 398). In place of calculable norms, the population of Germany found itself the object of four competing and overlapping jurisdictions. These competing jurisdictions had the combined effect of reducing the individual from a citizen of a state to an object of multiple dominations, a situation which lacked even the most basic guarantee of the state: safety against the strong. The temporary alliance which bound these separate fiefdoms together was an alliance of mutual dependency and loosely shared goals and *not* the result of either a single unifying ideology or the total bureaucratic centralization of the state. The distinction between an ideology and 'a series of ever shifting goals' is important. Neumann defines an ideology as a rational political theory, one which exists among others and attempts to persuade that it possesses the best explanatory force (Neumann, 1944: 38, 464). Nazi ideology, by contrast, was 'a mere *arcadium dominationis*, a technique outside of

right and wrong, a sum of devices for maintaining power' (Neumann, 1944: 465). As a result, it was an 'infinitely elastic' ideology which could position the party as simultaneously 'for agrarian reform and against it, for private property and against it, for idealism and against it' (Neumann, 1944: 438). Neumann argued that even 'magical beliefs', such as 'leadership adoration, the supremacy of the master race', were not so much central organizing principles as they were a convenient cover for the one goal shared by all factions: limitless expansion (Neumann, 1944: 439).

That the National Socialist party had not established a state, let alone a totalitarian one, was by design. This was again partly due to the fact that they correctly recognized that any state, even in its most limited sense, tends to restrict arbitrary power. Another factor was the recognition that the 'fundamental goal' of National Socialism, 'the resolution by imperialistic war of the discrepancy between the potentialities of Germany's industrial apparatus and the actuality', was best served by allowing the four major power bodies to operate independently of one another (Neumann, 1944: 38). In other words, it was a tacit acknowledgment by the Nazi party that it lacked the expertise and manpower to successfully regulate all aspects of German society, in particular the economy. It was for this reason that the 'material foundations of society' were left untouched (Neumann, 1944: 467). Neumann's use of 'material' here seems to imply material only in the limited sense of 'economic', but it is important to remember that the economic for Neumann also has a concretely material aspect; by granting industry the freedom to operate with a large degree of autonomy, the National Socialist party was pragmatically deferring not only to the superior knowledge of management but also to the material dynamics of the process of production itself.

In order to assert the relative autonomy of all four factions, it is necessary for Neumann to reject the apparent and openly stated

structure of Nazi rule. After all, the rise of National Socialism was accompanied by a staggering escalation in bureaucratic apparatus, which at least appeared to dominate all aspects of life, including the economy. Neumann concedes that for the everyday experience of the population, this totalizing bureaucratic penetration and domination was very real. In attempting to free itself and the other power blocs of all normative restrictions, the Nazi party had begun an exhaustive process of destroying all mediating institutions within society, such as families, unions, political parties, etc. and replacing them with bureaucracies of scale (Neumann, 1944: 367). In this manner, the party which claimed to honor the family actively sought its destruction through organizations such as the Hitler Jugend and pro-birth-rate policies and institutions. Similarly, instead of trade-based unions, the monolithic German Labor Front replaced specific interests with a representation so diffuse and ineffectual that it served none of its members. This indicates the other side of Nazi bureaucratization: while the number and size of bureaucracies skyrocketed, their efficacy dwindled to non-existence. Like Nazi law, bureaucracies more often than not functioned as an empty 'shell', something which served no operative function beyond obscuring underlying power struggles (Neumann, 1944: 525). Real power was not achieved through bureaucratic positions but by situating oneself at the intersections of the four power blocs. The 'regulation' of industry was for this reason a farce: in most instances, the party bureaucracies tasked with regimenting industry were occupied by the members of the industrial elite, just as the executive boards of industry were home to many high-ranking party officers. As Neumann grimly notes, under fascism, 'The practitioners of violence tend to become businessmen, and the businessmen become practitioners of violence' (Neumann, 1944: 632).

To state it more sharply than Neumann's own formulation, underneath the ideological

claims of the Nazi party, the expansionist impulse of Nazi Germany was fueled not only by the profit-driven desires of the heads of industry but also by the will of the polymer molecule itself. By intimately linking the form of government with the mode of production, it becomes possible to suggest that the rise of Hitler was preceded and accelerated by material relations descending to the atomic level. The Behemoth is an anti-state designed to unleash the productive and destructive potential of monopoly capitalism through the eradication of all mediating institutions and restrictive norms.

### **TOTALITARIAN MONOPOLY CAPITALISM VS STATE CAPITALISM**

The debate over State Capitalism is often depicted in rather lurid terms, describing the opposing sides as 'fronts' and emphasizing the vehemence with which the two groups opposed one another. The two sides are typically drawn with the 'inner circle' of Horkheimer, Adorno and Pollock comprising one 'camp', and Neumann, Kirchheimer, Gurland and Marcuse making up the other, although sometimes Marcuse is indicated as a mediating agent (Dubiel and Söllner, 1981: 23). Though no one goes so far as to suggest a causal link, this narrative is strengthened by the fact that shortly after this debate, the entire outer circle had to leave the Institute due to budgetary constraints. Each side had a clear protagonist, with Friedrich Pollock standing as the main proponent of State Capitalism and Neumann representing Totalitarian Monopoly Capitalism. Despite the seriousness of the debate within the Frankfurt School, the two theories share many core assumptions. Both blame the disparity between the forces and the relations of production within monopoly capitalism for the rise of National Socialism. Both agree, at least historically, that modes of government had been dictated by the modes



of production, and that specifically liberal democracy was the government of competitive capitalism before it was replaced with mass parties and fascism in monopoly capitalism (see Pollock, 1933). These similarities have led some scholars to claim the fascism debates were much ado about nothing, with Wiggershaus proclaiming that they 'were basically quibbles about words' (Wiggershaus, 1995: 288). This position becomes untenable when the debate is viewed through the material economic lens developed in the previous section; at stake are claims about the functioning of capitalist economies at the most fundamental level. The following section will sharpen this distinction before suggesting that, by reading Pollock and Neumann's competing theories as part of a *Gesamtgestalt*, it is possible to turn these differences into an analytical strength of a general Frankfurt School theory of fascism.

The disagreement between State Capitalism and Totalitarian Monopoly Capitalism concerned the relationship between politics and economics within Nazi Germany – that is, in what way (and to whose benefit) the tension between productive forces and relations had been resolved. Neumann holds that the solution came from within monopoly capitalism itself, that the limitless expansionary potential of production had helped foster and continued to drive an opportunist government which shared its ambition of total domination and was willing and able to destroy all institutions which prevented expansion. He argues in *Behemoth* that the 'planned' economy is bureaucratic smoke and mirrors designed to obscure the true seats of power, four distinct but overlapping ruling interests which existed inside National Socialist Germany. Neumann argues that the Nazis never intended to dominate industry, because they realized that they lacked both the manpower and the technical ability to control monopoly capitalism.

Pollock, by contrast, argues that not only was the total management of industry by the

state possible, but that this degree of management was the only solution to the disparity which had been created. While Pollock agrees that National Socialism owed its rise to monopoly capitalism during the Weimar Republic, he argues that this monopoly capitalism was in the process of being completely transformed into an entirely new form of capitalism: State Capitalism. State Capitalism is defined by the existence of a general plan, a 'conscious decision on ends and means' which dictates all aspects of the economy (Pollock, 1941: 204). This general plan replaces the 'laws' of traditional capitalism with the Tayloristic principles of scientific management. In other words, the natural, fate-like quality of capitalism posited since Smith had been stripped away, leaving a fully rationalized machine. Administrative techniques learned during monopoly capitalism replace the 'occult' arts of predicting consumer buying patterns and market fluctuations, making 'total production control technically possible' (Pollock, 1941: 208). This change 'signifies the transition from a predominantly economic to an essentially political era', with the state assuming the primary functions of the economy (Pollock, 1941: 203, 207). One of the fundamental assertions of State Capitalism is that competitive capitalism is an inherently inefficient and wasteful system, one which squanders resources on overproduction and bad investments. These shortcomings are mitigated through the implementation of a fully rationalized economy operating under the guidance of a central planning committee. Inefficiencies still occur, but when they do, they are a burden shouldered by society as a whole as opposed to a crushing blow delivered to a single entrepreneurial endeavor. Pollock sees State Capitalism as a purely technical apparatus, neutral machinery which was theoretically applicable to any industrialized economy and compatible with any form of government. State Capitalism could just as easily assist a democracy to emancipate humankind from the inequities of traditional capitalism

as enable National Socialism to perfect its imperial war machine and the domination of the masses (Pollock, 1941: 201). Because State Capitalism contained none of the inherent internal instabilities of competitive capitalism, Pollock argues that, in the theoretical absence of external interference, it could last indefinitely. State Capitalism was an economic system still in the process of forming, but worryingly, if achieved by the National Socialists, it could provide an economic engine which could make the 'Thousand Year Reich' a reality.

It is useful at this juncture to turn to a mode of analysis inspired by Dubiel and Söllner's concept of the *Gesamtgestalt* as developed in 'Die Nationalsozialismusforschung des Instituts für Sozialforschung – ihre wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Stellung und ihre gegenwärtige Bedeutung' [The National Socialism Research of the Institute for Social Research – Its Historical Status and Its Current Significance] (Dubiel and Söllner, 1981). In this essay, working against the centrifugal pressures of 'great names' scholarship and the publishing practice of collected works, they suggest that the various studies of fascism created by members of the Frankfurt School are best understood in the interdisciplinary context in which they emerged. Dubiel and Söllner argue that as a 'discursive Gesamtgestalt', collectively the Frankfurt School achieved 'an as of yet unsurpassed level of fascism research' (Dubiel and Söllner, 1981: 7). When read in this context, the State Capitalism debate is significant as a defining moment for the Institute's theory as a whole, pushing the group collectively towards the outer limits of their shared theoretical base. Neumann was so horrified by the prospect of an eternal fascist economy that he dove ever deeper into the minutiae of Nazi bureaucracy and economics, searching for proof that the laws of the economy were still in effect and with them internal contradictions inherent to the capitalist system. The second section of *Behemoth*, dedicated exclusively to economic analysis, is formulated explicitly

as a refutation of State Capitalism. It was through confrontation with the imagined perfection of State Capitalism that Neumann was forced to examine the materiality of the mode of production, to tighten the connection between the mode of production and the form of government by granting agency not only to the monopolists but also to the matter which they produced. Neumann's analysis of the imperialist force of the polymer borrows from Gurland's essay 'Technological Trends and Economic Structure under National Socialism' (Gurland, 1941). This essay links competitive capitalism with steam energy, 'non-competitive' capitalism with electric power, and totalitarian capitalism with 'the preponderance of chemical processes', also in an attempt to disprove the assertion that 'economic dynamism has come to an end in our time' (Gurland, 1941: 226). By highlighting the material agency of the mode of production, Gurland and Neumann hope to demonstrate both the continued influence of the economic on the political and the impossibility of a 'neutral' bureaucracy repurposing the monopolistic manufacturing process for different political ends.

The claim that the differences between State Capitalism and Totalitarian Monopoly Capitalism can be reduced to an argument over semantics must be discarded in light of very real differences in the conception of the relationship between the political realm and the mode of production. Similarly, the existence of two distinct 'fronts' within the Institute also loses credibility under scrutiny. Horkheimer helped define and establish the concept of State Capitalism within the Institute but completely disagreed with Pollock that it represented 'neutral' machinery equally suited to totalitarian and democratic ends, or, relatedly, that the inevitability of State Capitalism meant that it was the theorist's task to discover its best implementation. Horkheimer categorized this approach as a form of progressive fatalism, one which inadvertently advanced natural forces of domination (Horkheimer, 1981: 66–7). For the same reason,

Horkheimer rejected Neumann's optimism that continued class antagonisms within Nazi Germany would inevitably produce resistance and systemic failure, arguing that emancipation could never be the result of a mechanistic process and must instead be a conscious choice to step outside natural laws (Horkheimer, 1981: 69–70). Similarly, although both Kirchheimer and Gurland opposed the idea of State Capitalism, they developed a concept of 'technical rationality' which similarly asserted that National Socialism represented the application of the scientific techniques of Taylorism to the body politic, with the important difference that they interpreted this phenomenon as the subjugation of the political will to economic domination (see Kirchheimer, 1972; Gurland, 1941). Finally, Marcuse does not represent a middle ground between camps but, rather, the fluid, ambivalent and nuanced quality characteristic of all participants. On the one hand, he denies the narrative of reduced governmental interference during the liberal period advocated by Pollock and to a lesser extent Horkheimer, but, on the other, he suggests that the 'technics' of control developed during monopoly capitalism are neutral and can be utilized towards the enslavement or the liberation of humankind (Marcuse, 1941: 414). The *Gesamtgestalt* of a Frankfurt School theory of fascism can only take shape when these important subtleties are resolved into a mutually extending constellation, one which can accommodate both Horkheimer's critique of mechanistic progress as well as Neumann's material economic analysis. The many theoretical features shared within the Institute suggest that such a constellation is possible, but as yet a comprehensive scholarly attempt has not been made.

## BEHEMOTH AND TOTALITARISM

The term 'totalitarianism' emerged in the 1920s, but totalitarianism as a distinct field

of study would only develop post-Second World War, reaching its zenith during the Cold War. Experts on the Frankfurt School often accuse totalitarianism studies of either ignoring the wealth of research afforded by the Frankfurt School into the authoritarian personality and fascism or of taking many of its central claims without citing or acknowledging their source. While totalitarian studies do owe a debt to the work of Franz Neumann and others, it is not sheer ingratitude or a lack of scholarly rigor which prevents them from linking totalitarianism studies with earlier works on fascism. Rather, the Frankfurt School theories on fascism operate within an entirely different set of assumptions, one which is often antinomical to those of totalitarianism. This fundamental difference is already inscribed in the fact that, generally speaking, the Institute avoided the use of the term 'totalitarianism', and when it was used, such usage was 'tentative, experimental and ambivalent' (Jones, 1999: 17). The reason for this discomfort becomes clear when the field is viewed as a whole. In his essay 'Totalitarismus Theorie' [Totalitarianism Theory], Söllner enumerates three key points which all totalitarianism theories seem to share: (1) the equation of National Socialism with Stalinism; (2) a concentration on the political system and the specific methods of domination; and (3) the normative comparison between totalitarianism and an idealized Western democratic state (Söllner, 2007: 230). Often the Marxist background of the theorists is indicated as a major stumbling block for adopting totalitarianism theory, with scholars such as Peter Hayes condemning as leftist bias their unwillingness to recognize Soviet Russia as coequal with Nazi Germany. An alternative explanation would seem to be that they limited their studies to National Socialism because of personal experience and superior knowledge of German political systems. This explanation gains credibility when one considers that, unlike other Marxist thinkers, the Frankfurt School conspicuously avoided

supporting the Soviet Union, a critique in the negative which was then positively restated after the war. Furthermore, Marxism did play a role in the rejection of totalitarianism, not as a source of undue loyalty to Stalin but, rather, as a source of critique for the normative ideal of liberal democracy. What all of the Frankfurt School theories shared was the conviction that fascism had emerged not as an external threat to liberal capitalist society but as an immanent product thereof. It is impossible to sustain the binary us-vs-them mentality which totalitarianism demands when one recognizes that the same forces that produced repressive political domination are active in one's own society.

To give a concrete example of this theoretical incompatibility, of Friedrich and Brzezinski's canonical six elements of a totalitarian state, *Behemoth* contradicts half of the elements and is ambiguous towards the remainder (Brzezinski and Friedrich, 1956: 9–10). Neumann disallows any unifying ideology, arguing instead that the National Socialists were opportunists with a series of rotating mastheads used to rally support. Neumann further denies not only the existence of a central planned economy but even of a total state as such, instead developing the model of overlapping and competing jurisdictions for which *Behemoth* is named. Despite these fundamental differences with totalitarian studies as it would later develop, Neumann does use the term 'totalitarian' for *Behemoth's* most important concept: Totalitarian Monopoly Capitalism. By pairing 'totalitarian' with 'monopoly capital', Neumann fundamentally contradicts its accepted meaning; again, this is *not* a totalitarianism of the state but, rather, of lived experience. Property, labor and life no longer belonged to the individual but to the employer, the party, the bureaucracy or the military by turns. Processes of massification dislodge the individual from the protective situatedness of family, class and religion. All mediating institutions are liquidated in order to destroy spontaneity and increase atomization to the extent that the masses became

another infinitely malleable resource, ready to be formed into soldier, worker or corpse as necessary, completely 'amenable to control from above' (Neumann, 1944: 436).

Neumann's use of 'totalitarian' is fundamentally incompatible with the classical understanding of the term because it denies the existence of a centralized state as well as the domination of the economy by political forces. Furthermore, by emphasizing continuity from the German Empire through the Weimar Republic to National Socialism, Neumann, like his Frankfurt School colleagues, rejects the unreflective opposition of totalitarian with liberal states, since the monopolistic system of production which created fascism was active within both. This basic incompatibility, however, does not preclude the possibility of *Behemoth* having served as an often unaccredited source of inspiration for later studies of totalitarianism, and several works of scholarship have been dedicated to tracing this kind of influence. Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt, 1966) in particular has often been singled out for scrutiny, most likely because it remains one of the most brilliant and influential interpretations of National Socialism ever written. Essays such as Söllner's 'Hannah Arendt's *The Origin of Totalitarianism* in its Original Context' (Söllner, 2004) and Vicky Iakovou's 'Totalitarianism as a Non-state' (Iakovou, 2009) attempt to demonstrate the debt Arendt owes to Neumann based on the significant similarities between Arendt's depiction of the totalitarian state and *Behemoth*. Despite Arendt only directly citing the work twice, Iakovou describes *Behemoth* as a 'permanent, privileged, if implicit, source' within *Origins*. Many central features of Arendt's analysis, such as the shapelessness of the non-state, the replacement of the restrictive concept of the nation state with the expansionist idea of the racial people, and the focus on the party as a movement, are either adapted from or parallel with remarkable consistency Neumann's arguments. While such attempts

to uncover hidden or buried connections with *Behemoth* are useful in restoring an intellectual history, the danger of 'contextualizing' *Origins* in this manner is that it tends to suppress or trivialize those aspects which made it the paradigm-shattering success that it was and is. Despite Söllner's professed interest in preserving the work's 'originality' and 'dynamism', over the course of his essay this 'originality' is reduced to sales tactics, literary embellishment and philosophical exaggeration married to personal experience. His critique culminates with the troubling accusation that *Origins* failed to generate 'consequential' further research in the same manner as Neumann's *Behemoth*, and that *Origins* has possibly even impeded the production of 'disinterested... historical or social-scientific... research on totalitarian societies' (Söllner, 2004: 234, 235). Rather than 'contextualizing' *Origins*, I would argue for expanding Söllner's own concept of the *Gesamtgestalt* to include Arendt, since this is a model which highlights shared theoretical assumptions while accentuating those features unique to the individual theories.

### NAZI GERMANY: REALM OF PROFIT OR IDEOLOGY?

Despite the aforementioned shared features of *Origins* and *Behemoth*, there is a major obstacle to any kind of collaborative project such as the one proposed. Hannah Arendt's Nazi Germany is an ideologically dominated world, one organized around an entirely new rationality which is beyond capitalist interests. By contrast, Neumann's *Behemoth* argues that the ideology of the Nazi party is an internally inconsistent and opportunistic sham concocted with the sole purpose of hiding its true motivating forces and power structure, which remain those of monopoly capital. Putting the question of ideology momentarily to one side, the theoretical divide over the role of capitalism alone

seems insurmountable. However, this difference is more apparent than real, as Arendt and Neumann do not disagree over capitalism as such but over the role of profit and self-interest. Despite declaring Nazi Germany to be a post-capitalist society, Arendt grants capitalism a privileged position in establishing the dynamics of totalitarian rule not unlike that granted by Neumann. When discussing imperialism, one of the origins of totalitarianism, she notes that the concept of expansion defining imperialism is 'not really political at all, but has its origin in the realm of business speculation, where expansion meant the permanent broadening of industrial production' (Arendt, 1966: 125). Imperialist expansion only occurs once the process of production slows as the result of encountering national borders, i.e. political resistance. It is at this moment that the expansion demanded by capitalist production is transferred into the political realm, 'for the accumulating process must sooner or later force open all existing territorial limits' (Arendt, 1966: 146). Arendt is then able to claim that the expansionary drive in National Socialism has ceased to be capitalist because she creates the rather fine division between the accumulation of power vs the accumulation of profit, but the internal dynamics remain identical with those of capital accumulation. Arendt sees this expansion as an endless process which can know no peace and recognizes no political or social boundaries, one which is in perpetual need of 'more material to devour' (Arendt, 1966: 146).

Arendt and Neumann's theories of anti-Semitism are likewise similar in their reliance on metaphors of limitless expansion derived from economic models, while remaining divided on the role of economics limited to the pursuit of profit. Neumann argues that the Jews represented 'a testing ground for universal terrorist methods', a subject on which methods of absolute domination and atomization could be tried before being applied to other, ever expanding enemies

(Neumann, 1944: 551). The anti-Semitism of the Nazis was merely the 'Spearhead of Terror'; while this may seem to underestimate the specificity and the intensity of the Jew hatred of the Nazis, it is important to remember that Arendt was also at pains to indicate that the eradication of the Jews represented a first step in a process of human destruction that would have no end. The concentration camps for her were laboratories of domination, the true expression of Nazi rationality in which a new humankind was being forged and whose reach was constantly growing, as demonstrated by the inclusion of Germans with heart conditions in the lists for extermination by the end of the war (Arendt, 1966: 451). Similar to Arendt, Neumann saw anti-Semitism as both an integrative tool for domestic policy through the production of collective guilt, while also serving as an export product designed to undermine the foundational values of liberal democratic enemies. Neumann substantiates this with a quote from Nazi ideologue Werner Best: "A country that surrenders to anti-Semitism has thereby already surrendered its liberal tradition. It has abandoned its bulwark against totalitarianism" (Neumann, 1944: 521). This is a current of anti-Semitism very similar to the phenomenon described by Arendt in which anti-Semitism is exported through the expulsion of the 'penniless Jew', thereby seemingly lending credence to Nazi discrimination against a 'useless' people (Arendt, 1966: 415). The purpose here is not merely to demonstrate similarity but to show that the language and dynamics of capital expansion expressed elsewhere continue to inform and structure even those moments either unmarked or coded specifically as beyond capitalism, simply because they defy the logic of profit accumulation.

Part of what makes Neumann's analysis of anti-Semitism interesting, however, is that he does connect his theory to explicitly economic motivations. Neumann argues that, in part, anti-Semitism served as a financial diversion, a means of realizing some of the

anti-capitalist promises of Nazi ideology while leaving the fundamental economic order intact (Neumann, 1944: 120–9). Beyond serving as a distraction, by expropriating Jewish owners of small businesses the Nazis were simultaneously able to severely weaken the middle class and strengthen the monopolistic elite in a process of 'combing out'; the stolen businesses and goods typically proved too expensive for the Jewish businessmen's direct competitors and were instead snatched up by major conglomerates. Neumann is always careful to avoid reducing anti-Semitism to an exclusively economic tool, but his conviction that the dynamics of capitalism worked unabated in Nazi Germany allows him to see economic consequences that are far too convenient to be incidental to the process. This approach, however, has its limits. At several junctures, he is forced to bracket off a 'magical', 'totalitarian' rationality, something which he claims defies all reason and logic. The kind of anti-Semitism he discusses is exclusively the 'non-totalitarian' form, 'for the totalitarian Anti-Semite, the Jew has long ceased to be a human being. He has become the incarnation of evil in Germany, nay, in the entire world. In other words, totalitarian Anti-Semitism is magic and beyond discussion' (Neumann, 1944: 121–2). By contrast, Arendt's insistence on the novelty of totalitarian government enables her to create a corresponding totalitarian rationality, one which is designed to explain precisely those moments where 'common sense' fails, when people and institutions begin to work against the traditional rationality of self-interest. *Origins* is littered with examples in which confounded Nazi generals and businessmen complained that a particular initiative would be detrimental to military victory or productive efficiency, unaware that the operational logic of the party surrounding them saw such concerns as petty in comparison with the grandeur of a millennial destiny.

To recognize that moments existed in which self-interest and profit were

suspended is not the same as to assert that the forces of capitalism had been rendered wholly inoperative. Arendt is so preoccupied with asserting the novelty of totalitarianism that she often slides towards essentializing the 'outside' world of liberal democracy, thereby creating the unreflective binary which plagues much of totalitarianism studies. This blindness seems to be the result of conflating capitalism with profit motives and self-interest, seemingly forgetting that she has elsewhere shown capitalism to be the transnational force responsible for exploding political and social boundaries, the motor of limitless expansion and destruction which served as the model for totalitarian domestic and international policy. It is at these junctures that *Behemoth* is illuminating, constructing a bridge of continuity between liberalism and totalitarianism, highlighting capitalism's infinite elasticity and ability to shape the political world. Neumann, however, also lapses into reductive definitions of capitalism. He frequently pins hope for the future of Germany on a potential revolution of the working class, catalyzed by their exposure through labor to the 'rational' process of production. In so doing, he neglects the revolutionary discoveries of his own research: first, by underestimating the disintegrative effects monopoly capitalism has had on all mediating institutions, including class, and, second, by forgetting the nature of the 'rationality' produced by monopoly capitalism. The mode of production is not neutrally rational and does not lend itself to the goal of emancipation but is rather imperial and socially corrosive at the molecular level. Both Arendt and Neumann's analyses suffer from overly narrow characterizations of the capitalist process; but when read with and against each other in a mutually extending *Gesamtgestalt*, the novel features of both interpretations become apparent, creating a plastic conception of Nazi Germany capable of demonstrating both the operation of a new kind of capitalism and a political model capable of exceeding it.

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# Otto Kirchheimer: Capitalist State, Political Parties and Political Justice

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Otto Kirchheimer worked at the exiled Frankfurt Institute of Social Research in Paris and New York between 1934 and 1943. This was a crucial period of time for Kirchheimer, as well as for the Frankfurt School in general.<sup>1</sup> John H. Herz and Erich Hula have rightly stated that Otto Kirchheimer ‘was no systematic thinker’ (Herz and Hula, 1969: ix). The wide intellectual range of his work does not rest on an overarching theoretical basis. Kirchheimer’s focus was rather on current political problems. Nevertheless, the originality of his Weimar writings, his contributions to the work of the Institute, his analyses of changes in party systems and his reflections on political justice have stimulated a persistent interest in his work and an ever growing body of secondary literature on both sides of the Atlantic.

As is the case for many émigrés, knowledge of Otto Kirchheimer’s biography is fragmentary.<sup>2</sup> This is particularly true for his

childhood and the first years after the Nazis came to power in 1933. Otto Kirchheimer was born on November 11, 1905 into a German-Jewish family in Heilbronn, a small city in the south-western German state of Württemberg. He was the youngest of six children born to his parents, Julius and Frederike Kirchheimer. Both his mother and his father died during his childhood and teenage years. Thanks to the family money he inherited, he could be sent to excellent private boarding schools. Although he was not religious as a teenager, Kirchheimer enthusiastically joined the socialist German-Jewish youth movement *Die Kameraden* in 1919. The experiences and friends he made there awakened his interest in philosophical questions, as well as in socialism and communism. As for many left-leaning, politically organized youth at the time, renowned Marxist authors such as Rosa Luxemburg and Max Adler proved formative to his political outlook.

Supported by his parents’ inheritance, Kirchheimer studied philosophy, history,

sociology and law from 1924 to 1928. He began his studies with the Neo-Kantian philosopher Karl Vorländer in Münster. During this time he joined the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and became active in its youth movement (*Jungsozialisten*). In 1925 he moved to Cologne to take classes with the sociologist Max Scheler and then to Berlin to study law and constitutional theory with Rudolf Smend and Hermann Heller. Smend encouraged him to move to Bonn in order to study with Carl Schmitt. Despite their diametrically opposed views, the polemically minded Schmitt relished the discussions with the young Kirchheimer, who quickly became a sort of leftist Wunderkind in Schmitt's Bonn circle (Mehring, 2011; Breuer, 2012: 111–41). Under Schmitt's supervision, Kirchheimer completed his doctoral thesis on constitutional theories in socialist and Bolshevik political thought at the beginning of 1928.

In 1930 Kirchheimer moved to Berlin, where he got a job at the law office of Franz L. Neumann and Ernst Fraenkel. The office worked for the labor unions and the SPD. Kirchheimer was skeptical of Fraenkel and Neumann's defense of social-democratic reformism but built a close personal relationship with Neumann during this time. In Berlin he also reestablished contact with Schmitt, who had also moved there. Schmitt's diaries indicate the intellectual exchange between the two of them as well as the harsh anti-semitic reservations Schmitt personally had about Kirchheimer (Schmitt, 2010: 231).

Shortly after the election in March 1933 that secured Hitler's power, the Gestapo took Kirchheimer into custody. He was rescued by the fortunate coincidence of being in a prison cell with Paul Kecskemeti, a United Press correspondent for the *New York Times*. They had never met, but when Kecskemeti was supposed to be released, due to international protest, he insisted that Kirchheimer also be released. Kirchheimer quickly managed to escape to France. In Paris, he rejoined his wife. Having lost all his inheritance, he

desperately tried to find work as a journalist and translator. He joined a group of young academics including Walter Benjamin and Arkadij Gurland who were supported for various lengths of time through small research contracts from the Société Internationale de Recherches Sociales. In 1934 he was taken on to the payroll of the exiled Institute on a part-time basis to research criminal law and criminology. Given the political situation in Europe, Kirchheimer prepared to emigrate to the United States. Due to his ties to the Institute, his papers were accepted by the US immigration agency and he arrived at Ellis Island in 1937. In New York, he found a home with Kurt Rosenfeld and his group, and Franz Neumann offered him a part-time contract at the Institute, which was now loosely affiliated with Columbia University.

With Neumann's support, he was employed two years later in the Research and Analysis Branch of the newly established Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in Washington, D.C. In collaboration with John H. Herz and Herbert Marcuse, he prepared documents on the legal grounds for bringing the political elite of Nazi Germany to trial after the war.

After the war, the intelligence branch of OSS moved to the Department of State. Whereas Neumann, Marcuse and many others left the administration and found employment at US universities and colleges, Kirchheimer had to stay on for ten more years at the Department of State, hating his job and feeling mistreated by the FBI, who interviewed him a couple of times under the suspicion of being a communist.<sup>3</sup> Kirchheimer found his intellectual succor as an adjunct teacher at colleges in nearby Washington and as the author of academic papers and numerous book reviews for the *Washington Post*.

Kirchheimer achieved a temporary professorship in Political Science at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1955 and a full professorship in Political Science at Columbia University in 1960. Professionally, he remained an outsider from academic and

intellectual émigré circles in the United States. His exchanges with Hannah Arendt were among the few exceptions, due to a shared interest in the prosecution of Nazi criminals.

After Kirchheimer's release from the State Department, he became a very productive academic writer. He finished his magnum opus, *Political Justice*, in 1961, wrote numerous reviews for newspapers and journals and published a number of articles about European political systems in general and about structural changes in party systems in particular. His next plan was to write a comprehensive book on the role of political parties in late capitalist societies. Otto Kirchheimer died of a fatal heart attack on November 22, 1965.

### **THE WEIMAR YEARS: CLASS STRUGGLE AND THE DECLINE OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL STATE**

Kirchheimer's political views during the Weimar period ranged from a reformist social democracy to a more militant class-conscious socialism. The theorists of reformist social democracy, like Rudolf Hilferding, Hermann Heller, Franz L. Neumann or Ernst Fraenkel, considered the Weimar Constitution as an opportunity to pave the way to democratic socialism. In contrast, in his early Weimar writings, Kirchheimer was one of the most outspoken young voices critical of the Weimar Republic among the non-communist left. However, he changed his position and defended the Weimar Constitution after 1930 when the democratic system of the Weimar Republic was under attack by the political right and authoritarian politicians.

In *Weimar—and What Then?* (Kirchheimer, 1930b), published in the first months of 1930, and one of his most famous texts, Kirchheimer presented his critical analysis of the Weimar Constitution in systematic form. Following more radical theorists like Max

Adler or Arthur Rosenberg, he viewed the existing Weimar Constitution as the final step in the history of bourgeois rule. According to Kirchheimer's early outlook, democracy is only one political form by which to organize a capitalist society; dictatorship is another (Kirchheimer, 1928). Following Marx's analysis of the 18th Brumaire, Kirchheimer describes the social basis of the Weimar Republic as a compromise between different social groups: the revolution of 1918 forced the old imperial and bourgeois military, industrial, bureaucratic and legal elites to agree to a compromise with the leaders of the working class. However, the political parties that founded the new German republic did not replace the old elites because they feared a revolution like the one in Russia. Right from the start the Weimar Constitution was created with 'birth defects'. This critique was aimed in particular at the second section of the Weimar Constitution ('On Basic Rights and Duties') and its unsystematic list of liberal, Christian, socialist and nationalistic statements.

Kirchheimer refused to agree with the leading social democrats who tolerated a conservative non-parliamentary government and its extensive use of the emergency rule of the constitution in the German Reichstag. Whereas Carl Schmitt was supportive of this authoritarian turn to the right, Kirchheimer criticized it and its toleration by the SPD from the very beginning in 1930. He viewed the employment of the emergency measures as not only destroying the achievements of the working class over the last decade but also of parliamentary democracy in general. Owing to the fact that the crucial administrative fields of the state had never been democratized, he stated:

Herein lies the basic and irreparable error of this constitution: it did not come to a decision; it fell prey to the misconception that the principles of democracy alone constitute the principles of a specific social or ideational order; it forgot that democracy cannot do more than articulate already existing conditions. What a democracy can do is

to give external expression to an existing social order and to represent it meaningfully. Because of the confusion between the form of democracy and its content no one undertook to endow this constitution with a political program. (Kirchheimer, 1930b: 72)

This quotation reveals two central tenets of Kirchheimer's critique of the Weimar democracy in the first months of 1930. First, picking up on Carl Schmitt's famous formula of 'a constitution without a decision' (Schmitt, 1928: 32), Kirchheimer interpreted the legal and political system of the Weimar Republic as an unstable compromise between diverse and often antagonistic social groups and classes. Both Schmitt and Kirchheimer shared the conviction that legal norms depend on power and decisions. Yet there is a discrepancy between their understandings of the term 'decision'. For the young socialist, a decision never emanated from nothing but was rather to be founded in class relations. Neither did Kirchheimer adopt Schmitt's cynical concept of the political as an uncompromising distinction between friend and enemy. In Kirchheimer's understanding, the struggle of the classes is not a blind combat in history but rather a competition of principles. Every attempt to improve the situation of the working class was thwarted by the conservative executive or judiciary. The consequence was a crisis of bourgeois rule: first, with respect to its democratic quality, as non-elected forces heavily restricted the power of legislature; and, second, with respect to the rule of law, since the current rules were not applied administratively and judicially in accordance with the rules given by the constitution or the legislature. In such a system, the belief in the rational-legal authority is shaken.

This leads us to the second tenet of Kirchheimer's critique of the Weimar parliamentary system. In order to establish a functioning democracy, society has to decide on a common social order. The implementation of political equality at the beginning of the Weimar Republic was interpreted

as a revolutionary breakthrough by many social democrats. But to Kirchheimer this 'political democracy' did not say anything about economic power relations. Although Kirchheimer's argument was often described as 'left-Schmittian' anti-parliamentarism, he did not argue for an identitarian ideal of democracy as Schmitt did. If we follow Max Adler's distinction between 'political' and 'social democracy', Kirchheimer saw only the latter as a democracy; 'social homogeneity' is the basic premise of any democratic state. Here, homogeneity does not refer to the idea of some transcendent national unity. Rather, homogeneity is a social category and, as such, a necessary condition preventing the establishment of permanent minorities, which would be marginalized and even repressed through majority rule. This argument is also expressed in his dissertation. At the end of *The Socialist and Bolshevik Theory of the State* (1928), Kirchheimer mentioned two alternatives: the policy of social democrats, which he pictured as a weak 'antipolitical refusal to make a decision' (Scheuerman, 1997: 36), and the strong Bolshevik claim for state sovereignty and power politics, which overturned any ethos of constitutionalism. Kirchheimer rejected both options and demanded a more active and militant realization of socialist aims, which had become part of the second section of the Weimar Constitution.

It is, therefore, hardly surprising that Kirchheimer focused on how the Weimar Constitution dealt with private property. According to its wording, the expropriation of private property without full financial compensation was possible as long as it was done for the public welfare and proceeded via parliamentary laws. In a democracy, the legislature is supposed to be omnipotent, and the historical trend points toward growing state intervention: 'The principle of the liberal *Rechtsstaat* is abandoned, insofar as the state, acting on its own conventions, interferes with that which was previously an unquestionable sphere of private domination'

(Kirchheimer, 1930a: 103). However, in the political reality of the Weimar Republic, Kirchheimer's interpretation of the constitution on the issue of property rights had no chance of being implemented. On the contrary, the prevailing legal opinions of the conservative courts expanded the security for private property rights and made it impossible for the state to realize certain infrastructure programs. The political hope of mainstream social democrats that the state would be able to transfer economic enterprises into common property turned out to be illusory.

Kirchheimer diagnosed a deadly crisis of the Weimar parliamentary system and suggested a more militant politics of socialist transformation. Although he had criticized the Weimar Constitution fundamentally and radically, he could draw only a limited practical conclusion from this. Kirchheimer did not change the general picture of his analysis of the Weimar Republic, but the conclusions he drew from it in 1928 were very different from those he drew from the summer of 1930.

The year 1930 ended the era of parliamentary governments in Germany. From that point on, the executive governed without the support of a majority in the Reichstag, based on presidential emergency decrees. This regime change influenced Kirchheimer's position with respect to constitutional politics.<sup>4</sup> In July 1930 he stated that the Weimar Constitution was 'at least a bit of a democracy' (Kirchheimer, 1930c: 93), which was worth being defended, because up until 1930 it led to substantial compromises between the parties of the bourgeoisie and the social democrats. Schmitt, relying on his antagonistic concept of politics, celebrated the use of emergency rules as a resurrection of the state's sovereignty and the presidential system as a true incarnation of democratic identification. Kirchheimer condemned this process as a decay of democracy and as the first phase of a dictatorship. For Kirchheimer, ruling by emergency decrees could not prove a stepping stone toward the restoration of

public order of a *pouvoir neutre* but rather a partisan tool to regulate economic, labor or social policy in a partisan way. However, instead of calling for mass demonstrations, civil disobedience or even revolutionary acts, he now insisted on compliance with the legal regulations of the constitutional state in order to defend the republican order: 'democracy is 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 and Leites, 1933: 82). In his critique of the Prussian coup (*Preußenschlag*) of July 1932 as 'one of the rudest and most evident cases of abuse of form' (Kirchheimer, 1932: 49), Kirchheimer again defended the parliamentary system. In January 1933, a few days before Hitler came to power, he wrote:

The big difference between an autocratic order and a democratic constitutional order is the fact that only the latter secures legal development, though to a limited degree and at the cost of an unavoidable tension between the legal order and the order of power. Therefore, in a democratic state system it can very easily happen that [...] the ideological superstructure of the legal order 'limps ahead of' the actual power relations. (Kirchheimer, 1933b: 183)

Whereas in 1930 Kirchheimer characterized the legal superstructure of the Weimar Republic in a rather orthodox Marxist manner as inferior to power relations (Kirchheimer, 1930b), in 1933 his view turned around.

In the last two years of the Weimar Republic, Kirchheimer defined democracy not merely as a political form for social benefits and emancipation of the working class, but also as the political form that guarantees the interrelation of freedom and equality. He stated: 'the demand for equality is integrated into a demand for the realization of freedom, defined here as an agreement between an unhindered process of will-formation among citizens with the will of the government' (Kirchheimer and Leites, 1933: 65). He no longer defined democracy on the basis of a homogeneous society like Adler and Schmitt did.

Kirchheimer emphasized that democracy neither works by itself nor by the unpolitical power of the state administration; instead it has to be achieved through controversies, conflicts and, sometimes, even civil wars. Ideally, besides leading to maximal political participation, the mutual dependency of freedom and equality in democracy would result in a growing satisfaction of social needs. According to Kirchheimer, the telos of democracy is social democracy. This defense of parliamentarism distinguishes Kirchheimer from communist attitudes as well as his former teacher Carl Schmitt. After 1930, Kirchheimer rejected not only Schmitt's negative view on party politics and his anti-parliamentarianism but also Schmitt's negation of the civilizing function of law.

Kirchheimer seems to make a turnaround: despite all its weaknesses, the Weimar Constitution is no longer to be seen as a misconstruction. However, the practical political question is still unanswered: what is to be done when the legal, administrative and military elites turn their backs on democracy? The answer Kirchheimer gave in January 1933 was the following:

A socialist appreciation of democracy does not primarily concentrate on the legal norms of a democratic constitution but has to make its evaluation of democracy dependent on the question of whether it can count on the overall legal behaviour of the other political agencies of power; whether the other parties and social power groups are prepared to accept the basic democratic institutions, even if they are intent upon limiting their aspirations of power and conceding free play to their political enemies. (Kirchheimer and Leites, 1933: 180-2)

If this is not the case, even violence becomes a legitimate tool for the restoration of democracy. The social democrats should not be afraid, he repeated in an article published in March 1933, 'that the working class can conquer executive political power'. Such a 'civil war has only been forced upon it' (Kirchheimer, 1933a: 27). German history, however, took a different turn.

## THE LEGAL ORDER OF NATIONAL SOCIALISM

The biographical details of Kirchheimer's early time in Paris are still not known. Only four articles written by Kirchheimer during his first two years in exile have been discovered so far: *Remarks on Carl Schmitt's 'Legality and Legitimacy'* (Kirchheimer and Leites, 1933), *The Growth and the Decay of the Weimar Constitution* (1933c), *Zur Geschichte des Obersten Gerichtshofes der Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika* (1934) and *State Structure and Law in the Third Reich* (1935), which was published as an indictment against the Nazi regime under the pseudonym Dr Hermann Seitz. It was smuggled into Germany and published in disguise as part of the series *Der deutsche Staat der Gegenwart* edited by Carl Schmitt (Schmitt, 1933). The article was printed in Amsterdam and illegally distributed in Germany by the anti-Nazi resistance. The series *Der deutsche Staat der Gegenwart* was a main source of legal justification for the Nazi state. Important writings from Schmitt were published in this series as well as writings by leading Nazi jurists like Ernst Rudolf Huber, Reinhard Hoehn, Theodor Maunz, Paul Ritterbusch and Werner Weber. In *State Structure and Law in the Third Reich* Kirchheimer attacked the very heart of their justifications for the Nazi system by claiming that the dissolution of constitutional guarantees by National Socialism destroyed the bases for any legal order.

In retrospect, Kirchheimer described the fall of the democratic Weimar Republic as not just due to the successful agitation of the National Socialist party but on a more fundamental level as a consequence of the shift from competitive capitalism toward monopoly capitalism in modern society, a general trend he identified in other Western capitalist societies. Similar to his conclusion in *Weimar – and What Then?*, he blamed the lack of a distinct decision about the social order in the Weimar Constitution for the fall of the republic.

The idea of the 'social state' had not been compatible with the parliamentary and bureaucratic interests of the middle classes. Those groups had no interest in regulating conditions of ownership in big industrial and agricultural enterprises (Kirchheimer, 1933c: 562–4). Monopolization was not solely a product of the Nazi regime but had already developed during the Weimar Republic. He wrote in 1941:

This process of absorption of individual rights by monopolistic groups, although noticeable throughout the whole world, was especially apparent under the Weimar Constitution, where the mixture of traditional liberties and status quo guarantees under the misleading title of fundamental rights offered an excellent legal starting point for such developments. Property rights became a protective screen for the process of monopolization, freedom of religion was used to strengthen the existing religious corporations, and freedom of speech and association had to be supplemented by strong protecting organizations in order to obtain recognition. (Kirchheimer, 1941a: 142)

In his first paid work in the United States at the Institute, from winter 1937 to summer 1938, he was to revise, edit and finish a book manuscript by Georg Rusche on the labor market and penal system. The book was published in 1939 with the title *Punishment and Social Structure* and became the Institute's very first publication in English (Kirchheimer and Rusche, 1939). Kirchheimer wrote the final chapters of the book, in which he argued that punishment policies had no direct influence on the crime rate. Neither a mild policy with the goal of character reform nor a severe policy with the goal of deterrence determine the crime rate. Instead he identified the economic condition of society as the main determinant.

After completing this book, Kirchheimer was offered new contracts as a part-time assistant for the Institute. Since the beginning of the Second World War, the general research agenda of the Institute had focused on conferences and research projects on Nazi Germany. In this context Kirchheimer published his best-known work on the economic

and legal order of National Socialism during 1939 and 1943: *Criminal Law in National Socialist Germany* (1939/40), *Changes in the Structure of Political Compromise* (1941a), *The Legal Order of National Socialism* (1941b) and a book he wrote together with Arkadij Gurland and Neumann, *The Fate of Small Business in Nazi Germany* (Kirchheimer et al., 1943). Together with Gurland, he also provided the economic statistics for Neumann's book *Behemoth* (Neumann, 1942).<sup>5</sup>

Kirchheimer's position at the Institute was difficult. The historian Thomas Wheatland describes the atmosphere and Kirchheimer's status under Max Horkheimer's hierarchical regime during the years in New York in the following words:

Horkheimer, as paternal authority figure, occupied the table's center seat and never smiled. To his left sat Theodor W. Adorno, who – unable to contain his intellect or excitement – flitted about the room like a hummingbird constantly conversing with people. On Horkheimer's right sat Friedrich Pollock in a state of perpetual solemnity. Herbert Marcuse and Franz L. Neumann, two of the wittiest and most personable members of the group, were assigned the next pair of seats beside Adorno and Pollock. Leo Löwenthal and Henryk Grossmann occupied the last two interior spaces at the table, and Otto Kirchheimer and Arkadij Gurland sat at the ends of the table, occupying the most hazardous position at the seminars. After each paper, Institute members would address it in turn. Horkheimer would speak first, followed by Pollock, then Adorno, and so it would proceed until the floor was turned over to Kirchheimer and Gurland. Because both were always the last to speak, their comments often seemed unoriginal or wildly speculative, formulated in a desperate attempt to say something new. As [Daniel] Bell recalls, both received the frequent derision of their colleagues. (Wheatland, 2009: 80)

Anne Kirchheimer-Rosenthal, Kirchheimer's second wife, remembered his years at the Institute with little sympathy for its leading figures: 'They gave him a pittance and they did treat him like dirt. Only after he got a job and a position [in the American academia] they treated him like a human being' (Schale, 2006: 96). Nevertheless, Kirchheimer closely

collaborated at the Institute with Neumann, Gurland and Marcuse, and intellectually the years with the Institute were a very productive period of his life.

As Max Horkheimer explained to Neumann in a letter on February 1, 1942, profound theoretical and political differences concerning the nature and structure of National Socialism led to harsh disputes between the members of the Institute (quoted in Laudani, 2013: 3–4). Horkheimer and Adorno's theory on National Socialism was grounded on Friedrich Pollock's concept of 'state capitalism', which understood the Nazi regime as one among other cases of an emerging new economic and social order, which had transformed monopoly capitalism into a 'command economy' (Pollock, 1941: 454). They were inclined to the view that the Nazi regime was like the Soviet regime. In contrast to these members of the inner core of the Frankfurt School, Kirchheimer agreed with Franz L. Neumann, Arkadij Gurland and partly with Herbert Marcuse (Jay, 1973: 143–72; Wiggershaus, 1995: 223–36, 280–91) that National Socialism was a monopoly capitalistic system built on the social order of private ownership. The economic imperatives of monopoly capitalism were intact and the compromises among the elites of economy, party, military and administration were based on an economic system of private capitalism. This turned out to be the last intensive and truly interdisciplinary debate at the Institute.

Already in 1935, Kirchheimer had argued that in order to secure full state integration and monopolization the Nazis prevented free movements of goods by suppressing freedom of contract while maintaining the social order of private capital. This was also achieved by toughening criminal law and changing the meaning of basic legal terms, like 'substantive justice', or legal compliance (Kirchheimer, 1935: 145–6). Those terms were no longer based on legal rationality – referring to the independence of courts in reaching a sentence – but were used as an instrument to

ascertain political reliability to secure the *deutsche Volksgemeinschaft* (ethnic German community). In 1941 Kirchheimer called this form of rationality 'technical rationality' to exemplify how the administration of justice functioned (Kirchheimer, 1941b: 99). Whereas Marcuse applied the concept of technical rationality to the ideologically instrumentalized mass culture (Marcuse, 1941) and Pollock to the economic structure, and thus concluded that National Socialism is based on a 'command economy' (Pollock, 1941: 447–8),<sup>6</sup> Kirchheimer applied the concept exclusively to the legal order of National Socialism. Courts were transformed into executive organs to secure political reliability and economic monopolization enhanced by a plurality of organizations having their own jurisdiction over their members (Kirchheimer, 1941b: 108). Not only the army but also industrial and agricultural enterprises were judging working and production conditions autonomously. There was no possibility for workers to call the courts on their own. In this way the Nazis were able to secure the support of all interest groups in power. Thus, criminal law was primarily a source of instructions for political suppression, which ignored possible social circumstances as the origin of criminal behavior (Kirchheimer, 1935: 148).

Since Kirchheimer did not apply the concept of technical rationality to the economy (like Pollock did), he could interpret German National Socialism as a political compromise between certain social groups. The political compromise of National Socialism was constituted by the NSDAP and members of the SA and SS, big industrial companies, agriculture, the *Reichswehr* (the German army) and the state bureaucracy. Hitler's role as Führer was to integrate these different groups with their different social interests. Similarly to Neumann, Kirchheimer argued that the Nazi government was not in full control of the capitalist economy. The Nazi compromise was achieved by new economic and political guarantees for certain interest groups: first, the assurance of institutional



security by enforcing a 'strong government' and abolishing democratic fluctuations in the instructional structure to lower investment risks for big industries; second, opening new investment markets to benefit the few economic power holders; and, third, enhancing monopolization and cartelization by, for example, granting self-jurisdiction to the big industries (Kirchheimer, 1941a: 143–7). Therefore, the Nazi regime was by no means anti-capitalistic or post-capitalistic; it concentrated the possibility of ownership and economic power among a few people holding power over large trusts, while the middle class and small businesses were destroyed (Kirchheimer, 1941a: 155–9).

Kirchheimer insisted on the view that the self-preservation strategy of National Socialism was not sustainable. The reason for the instability of Nazi Germany was that it relied on a state that had to be able to secure simultaneously successful external expansion by war and by internal suppression of any opposition. Such a constellation was problematic for the stability of the system because in the case of external shocks 'it is rather doubtful whether suppression can be maintained when the system that insured it has been substantially shaken' (Kirchheimer, 1944: 193).

In a way similar to Neumann and Gurland, Kirchheimer occupies a distinct place within the group of the first generation of the Frankfurt School in exile. He did not follow the negative philosophy of history in Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), nor did he share the revolutionary optimism of his close personal friend Herbert Marcuse. In the debates within the Institute about the best way to describe German Nazism, he insisted, against Horkheimer, Pollock and Adorno, on the priority of structural changes in modern capitalism for any analysis of Nazi Germany. In retrospect, this constellation was paradoxical. Horkheimer and his followers created a theory of 'state capitalism', a system of society in which politics dominate the economic

sphere; but they did not carry out any analysis in political science to get a closer look at the political processes of this new system. Kirchheimer on the other hand was hired to fill the gap in Horkheimer's ambitious 'interdisciplinary materialism' in the fields of politics and law. However, his empirical research led him to conclude that any serious analysis of politics and law in Nazi Germany has to have as its analytical starting point the capitalist character of the economy.

But it is not only detailed empirical knowledge that makes Kirchheimer's analysis of fascism, in retrospect, more convincing than the state-capitalism theory of Horkheimer and his inner circle at the Institute. Axel Honneth is correct when he attributes the superiority of the interpretation by Kirchheimer, Gurland and Neumann to a 'social-theoretical approach, which is more implicitly than explicitly' (Honneth, 1995: 79) to be found in their work. Whereas for Horkheimer and his inner circle, social integration represented a process which comes about by means of the unconscious compliance with the functional imperatives of society, Kirchheimer and his two co-authors understood social integration 'also by way of communication between social groups' (Honneth, 1995: 78). Such an approach sets up a barrier against a Marxist functionalism that finally led Horkheimer and his close associates to draw a monolithic picture of a totally administered society. Against such a functionalism, Kirchheimer's analyses of both the Weimar Republic and of Nazi Germany started from an analysis of the interests and orientations that the main social groups themselves had brought into the political games.

## **WESTERN POSTWAR SOCIETIES: THE VANISHING OPPOSITION**

Kirchheimer's view on the prospects for democracy after the war changed over the years. But whereas his writings in the Weimar

period and, to a lesser degree, in the early years of his exile, were underpinned by an optimistic vision of a better and just social and political order, in his very late work he changed his fundamental perspective: instead of hoping for a better political world he hoped to avert the worst. In his last essay in the *Festschrift* for Herbert Marcuse, Kirchheimer concluded his reflections with the following diagnosis of the times:

It may well be, however, that the historian of the twentieth century will be less impressed by diverse propagandistic claims of various regimes as to the reign of law under their dominion than with the close cohabitation between wide stretches of certainty for mass man's daily living conditions with unheard-of areas of oppression, lawlessness, and rewards for maximum aggressiveness. A generation that has lived through Auschwitz and Hiroshima and was indifferent or powerless to prevent them, and which is prepared to see bigger Hiroshimas, has no cause for complacency about its preservation or even enlargement of some orderly forms of living. It may have forgotten the essential: there must be life for life to be worth living. (Kirchheimer, 1967: 261)

Kirchheimer's first studies on Germany at the OSS were guided by his fear of a forthcoming Nazi resurgence. However, such a scenario soon played a minor role in his evaluations of German society. According to Kirchheimer, the majority of Germans and the key political parties seemed to focus on industrial and economic reconstruction; political conflicts, ideological controversies and accounting for the past mattered next to nothing. West Germany was more than another bastion of the postwar affluent society, with its orientation on non-political pragmatism. The so-called economic miracle, the position in foreign policy and even the taboo of its Nazi past fostered its defining feature: the welfare state with its all-embracing universe of claims. The once feared revanchism and nationalism were replaced by the satisfaction of private consumer dreams, an increasing national income and the maintenance of social normality. West Germany was, in Kirchheimer's eyes, a stable political system but not a democratic

community with a culture of civic discussion. His criticism was now directed toward the political parties – not exclusively toward the government – and no longer toward the judicial system. Kirchheimer praised the Federal Constitutional Court for its decision in the 1950s on civil service law after Nazism and its cautious activity in the communist party-ban proceedings. His critique of political power, however, revolved around the replacement of the normative ideal of a 'good life' with the satisfaction of consumer needs. 'Part of the stupendous absorptive capacity of the West German regime [...] rests on its collective lack of memory; there is little demand for self-criticism in a successful going concern' (Kirchheimer, 1961a: 254–66).

Kirchheimer stated that anyone who disturbed this universe of claims by questioning the German emphasis on economic developments and consumerism, suggesting an alternative foreign policy toward the Soviet bloc or remembering the Nazi past was regarded as a troublemaker. His prime example became the so-called 'Spiegel case'. In October 1962, leading journalists of the German weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel* were taken into custody and prosecuted for treason by the Federal government. Kirchheimer drew a parallel between some of the government activities and the methods of the Gestapo. He called the government activities against the journalists 'cheese cover' (Kirchheimer, 1964: 85) and criticized the rise of a 'surveillance state' (Kirchheimer, 1966a: 282–6) in West Germany. Although Kirchheimer perceived the widespread public protest in the Spiegel case as an indicator for positive political change, he remained skeptical with respect to the political culture in West Germany.

Kirchheimer's research on the change of party structures can be best understood as part of his broader analysis of modern mass society (Schale and Buchstein, 2014). Due to their non-ideological behavior, the rising catch-all parties are the key political actors in modern society. They are exclusively focused

on electoral success, which leads to a minimization of ideological conflicts. Moreover, the orientation toward voters instead of party members strengthens the managerial dimension of political leadership and weakens deliberation within the party. These managerial trends strengthen the cooperation of business, administration, media and parties to a large extent and lead to a loss of critical supervision of the administration and other institutions of government. Political opposition becomes even more difficult. Kirchheimer discusses two ideal types: an opposition loyal to the government and an 'opposition by principle'. Both types of opposition lack programmatic ideas within the constitutional framework. Repeatedly, Kirchheimer wrote about the postwar setup in terms of absurdity: 'Activity becoming another form of passivity' (Kirchheimer, 1959: 499). Kirchheimer replicates such disillusioning results in many analyses, e.g., of the labor unions or the decline of intra-state federalism. However, as long as the economic miracle and the welfare state are able to maintain a 'universe of claims' (Kirchheimer, 1954: 312), this type of political integration by marketing works perfectly well.

Kirchheimer's last and more explicit sociological studies illustrate the extent to which his analyses are connected to Herbert Marcuse's writings of the early 1960s. Modern society is described as 'one-dimensional'. Kirchheimer tries to demonstrate how non-ideological political attitudes arise from social changes in modern mass production, bureaucratization and consumerism. Conspicuous private consumption substitutes the attainment of socio-political aims. Sometimes the labor unions sense the limits of such a view on society but 'an awareness of another and better order and a need to dissociate their claims from those of other groups by way of an elaborate theory [...] simply does not exist' (Kirchheimer, 1956: 508). Alienation without any proper political form entails false consciousness, the distinguishing characteristics of which are irrational

escapism, growing self-understanding as a pariah and confining oneself to pure instrumental reason. As in Marx's early writings, individualism does not mean liberation but isolation. Such an interpretation follows Marcuse's terms 'surplus repression' and 'repressive desublimation' as features of modern society, but Kirchheimer does not see any demand for non-repressive sublimation. The only remaining insight is that all the agencies organizing the universe of claims 'are insufficiently related to the major problem of his [man's] existence: his purpose in life' (Kirchheimer, 1966b: 24). Based on such a view, an analysis of Kirchheimer's magnum opus, *Political Justice* (1961b), sheds light on the extent to which his early normative ideal of a just humane society was transformed into hopeful skepticism for the reduction of injustices.

## POLITICAL JUSTICE AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The first edition of Kirchheimer's book *Political Justice. The Use of Legal Procedures for Political Ends* came out in 1961. The much extended German edition appeared in 1965. Kirchheimer had worked on this book right after he had left the OSS in 1955. However, as John Herz and Eric Hula rightly emphasize, *Political Justice* is more a product of his lifelong experiences with the administration of law and politics in liberal democracies since the Weimar Republic than of his observations during the years of the Nazi regime (Herz and Hula, 1969: xxxii). While it is common to assume that the phenomenon of political justice is mainly a practice used by authoritarian regimes for purposes of propaganda, Kirchheimer focused his interest on liberal constitutional states. He was inspired by his former teacher Rudolf Smend and his 'theory of integration', which states that the courts in liberal democracies should not

only integrate the legal community but also support the general political goals of the regime and thus enhance state integration (Kirchheimer, 1965: 23).<sup>7</sup> This is where Kirchheimer's reflections on political justice begin.

The title of the book is ambiguous to English readers, as Kirchheimer explains in the preface:

The term Political Justice is usually taken to reflect the search for an ideal order in which all members will communicate and interact with the body politic to assure its highest perfection. Is it, then, gross linguistic abuse and utter cynicism to apply this term, as European writers have traditionally done, to the most dubious segment of the administration of justice, that segment which uses the devices of justice to bolster or create new power positions? (Kirchheimer, 1961b: vii)

It was to avoid confusion that Kirchheimer added the subtitle 'The Use of Legal Procedures for Political Ends' (Hackler and Herrmann, 2015: 183). Most American scholars when referring to *Political Justice* use the term 'political trials' instead.

Political justice in Kirchheimer's sense is a necessary but paradoxical component of the judicial process in any democratic state. Courts are supposed to be neutral institutions that decide on the limits of political thought and action (Kirchheimer, 1961b: 6–7). Kirchheimer claims that political trials have been a useful tool throughout history to legitimize persecution in states based on liberal principles. He illustrates this claim by presenting numerous examples up to the Nuremberg trials and those against suspected communists in the United States and West Germany. In one chapter he takes a closer and critical look at the administration of justice in the GDR; this investigation had a personal component as well, because his first wife – remarried as Hilde Neumann – took a leading position in the East German judicial apparatus until her early death in 1959. The final chapters of the book deal with the adjustments of political justice, asylum and clemency.

For Kirchheimer, 'authentication' had been one of the two major functions of political trials in liberal constitutional systems since the French Revolution. By referring to *a priori* rules, judicial authentication simultaneously legitimizes and constrains government actions. Therefore, political justice has a positive aspect: in order to gain legitimacy, a judicial process has to follow procedural law. This is the reason for Kirchheimer's exclusion of regimes like Nazi Germany from his analysis. In such systems, law is always politically controlled and implemented like an order or a directive. As Ulrich Scheuner put it in a letter: 'The counterpart [of political trials] is even worse: It is the administrative annihilation of foes, from concentration camps through to administrative forced exile'.<sup>8</sup>

The mobilization of public opinion is the second function of political justice. The courtroom becomes a stage not only for the regime but also for the accused. It gives the accused a chance to promote his or her political beliefs and goals:

The aim of political justice is to enlarge the area of political action by enlisting the services of courts on behalf of political goals. It is characterized by the submission to court scrutiny of group and individual action. Those instrumental in such submission seek to strengthen their own position and weaken that of their political foes. (Kirchheimer, 1961b: 419)

For Kirchheimer political justice is not bound to political criminal law but characterized by the intention of the actors to use courts for political purposes. It is important to emphasize that for Kirchheimer political justice does not necessarily result in the misuse of law. The functions of authentication and producing public images are also the reasons why political justice in some cases seems more attractive to power holders than administrative action (Kirchheimer, 1961b: 95–7).

Kirchheimer's definition of political justice reveals his complex intellectual relationship with Carl Schmitt and his terminology

of friend and foe. Even though Kirchheimer manages to mention Schmitt's name not once, close readers of the book realize that he defines politics as a battlefield for power in ways similar to Schmitt. But even though he uses the term 'politics' as Schmitt does, the meaning for Kirchheimer is different. According to Schmitt, politics and law are antagonistic entities and therefore any constitutional jurisdiction is self-contradictory; whenever the medium of law is used to settle political disputes, the logic of friend and foe automatically transfers law into politics. Kirchheimer, in contrast, assumes that political justice is a suitable and essential instrument to settle fights over political power. Thus, political justice should be understood in a positive way as a cultural achievement of the modern *Rechtsstaat* to constrain political arbitrariness. This insight leads Kirchheimer to agree with legal positivists like Hans Kelsen and Max Weber and their formula of 'the juridification of politics' (van Ooyen, 2011). In order to give readers of the German edition of the book who were familiar with Carl Schmitt's vocabulary no reason for possible misunderstanding, Kirchheimer instructed Gurland to avoid the term 'Feind' (enemy) and to use 'Gegner' (opponent) in the translation instead.<sup>9</sup>

## KIRCHHEIMER'S LEGACY

Kirchheimer's early articles on the Weimar years were widely recognized in Germany from the mid 1960s on, when predominantly left scholars rediscovered the *Weimar Staatsrechtslehre*. Since then, Kirchheimer's early work has stood out as a foresighted critique of the Weimar Republic. In addition, some of his concepts and categories in his Weimar writings have been picked up independently by authors of a later generation of the Frankfurt School – for example, his use of the term 'juridification' by Jürgen Habermas (Habermas, 1995: 356–73), his

analytical distinction between a 'directive' and a 'distributive' sphere in modern capitalism by Claus Offe (Offe, 1984: 89) or his discussion about the relationship between legality and legitimacy by Ulrich K. Preuss (Preuss, 1984). The Anglo-American reception of Kirchheimer's Weimar writings came more slowly and by different paths. Frank Burin and Kurt Shell had already called attention to Kirchheimer's work in 1969 with their edition *Politics, Law and Social Change. Selected Essays of Otto Kirchheimer* (Burin and Shell, 1969), but it was only in the 1980s that Anglo-American scholars took greater interest in Kirchheimer's Weimar writings. Keith Tribe's edition of essays by Kirchheimer and Neumann, *Social Democracy and the Rule of Law*, introduced Kirchheimer and Neumann in 1987 as witnesses of the fall of Weimar and advocates from the left of the 'rule of law' (Tribe, 1987). Tribe correctly contrasted Kirchheimer's and Carl Schmitt's positions. William Scheuerman picked up on this interpretation in his book *Rule and Law under Siege. Selected Essays of Franz L. Neumann and Otto Kirchheimer* (Scheuerman, 1996), in which he referred to Kirchheimer in order to argue against the emerging reception of Schmitt in Critical Legal Studies.

However, in the Anglo-American academy, Kirchheimer was for a long time mainly associated with his contributions to the body of literature by the Frankfurt School on Nazi Germany (Held, 1980; Arato and Gebhardt, 1982) and in particular with Franz Neumann's book *Behemoth*, to which he had contributed intellectually (Jay, 1973: 160–7). Only later did Thorsten Sellin and Edwin H. Sutherland discover *Punishment and Social Structure* as an important starting point for critical criminology (Taylor et al., 1975; Platt and Takagi, 1981; Melossi and Pavarini, 1981; Garland, 1990; Michalowski and Carlson, 1999: 217–49). An enthusiastic reference by Michel Foucault to *Punishment and Social Structure* in the first chapter of his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the*

*Prison* (Foucault, 1976: 35) helped to raise a broader interest in Kirchheimer's work on criminology.

The next wave of interest began with a crucial misunderstanding: the work of Kirchheimer, Marcuse and Benjamin was interpreted by some Anglo-American academics to be deeply influenced by right-wing conservative thinkers like Carl Schmitt, Martin Heidegger and Ernst Jünger. Kirchheimer was declared by some authors in this debate (Kennedy, 1987a, 1987b; Scheuerman, 1997) to be a 'left-Schmittian'. The critics accused Kirchheimer of following Schmitt in his concept of the political, in his anti-parliamentarism and in his critique of liberalism. It took a closer look at Kirchheimer's intellectual roots and the ways he made creative and critical use of Schmittian categories to correct this simplistic impression (Jay, 1987; Söllner, 1987; Preuss, 1987; Bavaj, 2007; Schale, 2011).

Among the wide range of topics in his late work, two issues stand out: his reflections on political justice and his analysis of the rise of catch-all parties. The English-speaking reception of *Political Justice* was sometimes characterized by misunderstandings, when his analysis was understood by some readers to contribute to the discussion of 'What makes a trial political?'. Judith Shklar's book *Legalism, Law, Morals, and Political Trials* (1964) in which she applied Kirchheimer's concept of political trials in a creative way to the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials (Shklar, 1964: 237), was the most productive reception of Kirchheimer's thoughts on this issue. She reaches, however, a different conclusion from Kirchheimer with respect to the function of political trials. Whereas he saw the Nuremberg Trials (again contra Schmitt) as a crucial contribution to the development of international law (Kirchheimer, 1961b: 341), Shklar evaluated political trials as an illegitimate or indecent practice. According to her, the Nuremberg Trials were legitimate only in a political sense, not in a legal one. The recent attempt to define political

trials in the tradition of Kirchheimer by Jens Meierhenrich and Devin Pendas leads to an even more critical conclusion: Kirchheimer's use of the Schmittian term 'politics' narrows his concept to politically intended battles in the courtroom and leaves out possible non-political trials, which may still have a major political impact (Meierhenrich and Pendas, 2016: 27).

Kirchheimer's writings about the structural changes of party systems draw wide attention from political scientists until today. Kirchheimer has become *the* classic author on the emergence of the catch-all party. Within the tradition of the Frankfurt School, Jürgen Habermas in his early work on the transformation of the public sphere, and Claus Offe in his writings about the legitimacy crisis in late capitalism, relied on Kirchheimer's reflections about the changing party systems and the vanishing of opposition in modern democracies (Habermas, 1992: 196–222; Offe, 1985). Meanwhile, there exists a rich body of literature about the empirical validity of his thesis (Wolinetz, 1979; Dittrich, 1983; Krouwel, 2003; Williams, 2009). In addition, it serves as a conceptual tool to model recent developments in party systems facing the rise of right-wing popular parties. Peter Mair and Richard S. Katz and their concept of the 'cartel party' could be read as an update of Kirchheimer's theory which corresponds to recent publications by Colin Crouch and others on 'post-democracy' (Mair and Katz, 1992, 1994, 2002; Mair, 2013).

Kirchheimer's late articles and papers are characterized by a sense of critical distance from, and even grim coolness toward, industrial societies and modern Western democracies. He sympathized with the American student protest movement, which started in Berkeley in 1964, while not sharing Marcuse's enthusiasm for it. Like Horkheimer, Adorno or Löwenthal, he did not trust that the institutions of modern democracy and the public sphere would have a powerful curing effect on the power elites in the long run. Nevertheless, Alfons Söllner

has made an important point when he identifies Kirchheimer's intellectual development as a process of internationalization, acculturation and normative Westernization in the context of his political experiences as an émigré (Söllner, 2003). Kirchheimer's personal experience during the Weimar Republic and its collapse, his precarious existence in Paris and New York and the willingness of the United States to accept him at the OSS, the State Department and in the university system turned him into an intellectually open political scientist who had learned to value and to insist on the minimal normative standards of a liberal democracy. Kirchheimer in his late work did not hope for a better political world but simply wanted to avert the worst.

## Notes

- 1 The authors would like to thank Eno Trimcev, Kerstin Pohl, Werner Bonefeld and Beverley Best for their helpful comments.
- 2 The following biographical sketch is based on John H. Herz and Erich Hula (1969) and Frank Schale (2006). Additional biographical information is based on Otto Kirchheimer's Papers (at the University at Albany, M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections & Archives) and on conversations and interviews (Frank Schale with Anne Rosenthal-Kirchheimer on October 6, 2006; Hubertus Buchstein with John H. Herz on November 15, 1985, with Leo Löwenthal on October 10, 1990, with Wilhelm Hennis on September 26, 2009, with Peter Kirchheimer on March 12, 2015 and with Hanna Kirchheimer-Grossman on March 11, 2016).
- 3 First investigations by the FBI are documented in 1940. During his time at the OSS Kirchheimer had been the subject of loyalty reports several times. While working at the State Department in 1952 he was classified as an employee who is 'eligible on loyalty' (see FBI Headquarters file 121-HQ-13351, Section 1, Report from Hiram Bringham to Honorable J. Edgar Hoover, May 21, 1952).
- 4 *Artikel 48 und die Wandlungen des Verfassungssystems. Auch ein Beitrag zum Verfassungstag* (1930c) was the first article that showed Kirchheimer's radically changed position toward the Weimar parliamentary system after the recently announced *Reichskanzler* Heinrich Brüning passed laws in July 1930 to implement a new fiscal policy by using the emergency rule. Before-

hand, the Social Democratic party had blocked Brüning's policy. *Weimar – and What Then?* was published only a few months earlier.

- 5 On Kirchheimer's close collaboration with Gurland see Buchstein (2010).
- 6 Pollock explicitly refers to Otto Kirchheimer's essay 'The Legal Order of National Socialism' (Pollock, 1941: 447–8).
- 7 Kirchheimer only mentions his former professor Rudolf Smend in the German translation. The enlarged German edition of the book from 1965 is around 250 pages longer and was translated by his old friend from the Young Socialists Arkadij Gurland.
- 8 Letter from Ulrich Scheuner to Kirchheimer, October 10, 1955. In: University at Albany, M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections & Archives, Otto Kirchheimer papers, Series 2, Professional Correspondence, 1927–65, Box 2, Folder 7 (our translation).
- 9 See letter from Otto Kirchheimer to Arkadij Gurland, August 30, 1961. In: University Archive, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main, Folder: Gurland Papers, Na5/675(5).

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# The Image of Benjamin<sup>1</sup>

David Kaufmann

Benjamin's writings are an attempt in ever new ways to make philosophically fruitful what has not yet been foreclosed by great intentions. The task he bequeathed was not to abandon such an attempt to the estranging enigmas of thought alone, but to bring the intention less within the realm of concepts: *the obligation to think at the same time dialectically and undialectically*.

T.W. Adorno (Adorno, 2006a: 151–2;  
emphasis added)

## THE FIGURE OF CONTRADICTION

Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) has always cut a difficult figure. Mystical Marxist, materialist Jew, he was the self-conscious embodiment of contradiction. He performed contradiction in his work and in his life. He triangulated friendships with any number of the most important and opposed intellectual figures of late Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany from the anarchist and Marxist Left all the way to the proto-Fascist Right.

His closest correspondents held each other in the deepest suspicion.

Benjamin's writing – not quite philosophy (he abhorred deduction), not quite literary history and always more than mere journalism – is just as hard to pin down. It is inseparable from the pathos of failure and from the even greater pathos of his suicide. (He killed himself while trying to flee to America in 1940.) Benjamin's professional disappointments were many. In the mid 1920s, he found himself unable (or unwilling) to secure a university position with his brilliant and intractable study of the Baroque, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* [*Trauerspiel*]. As a result, he spent the last 13 years of his life moving from city to city, apartment to apartment, living from small grants, little gifts and whatever he could scrape together from reviewing. All the while, Benjamin was working on his often promised and ultimately incomplete magnum opus, a study of Baudelaire and of the Paris of the nineteenth century. We only have a torso of

this project: hundreds of pages of notes, a few preliminary drafts of essays and a string of brilliantly elusive aphorisms which have been bundled together by his editors in a book known in English as the *Arcades Project*. This volume, baffling and provocative as it is, is clearly not anything that Benjamin would have published.<sup>2</sup> It comes to us under the sign of disappointed hope. It is not a ruin. It is a monument to that which was never built.

Apart from his doctoral dissertation, Benjamin only wrote one scholarly book – the study of the *Trauerspiel* – and a very slim autobiographical volume about the socio-geography of his youth, *A Berlin Childhood around 1900*. The rest of his considerable output comes in the form of essays and reviews. The essay and the feuilleton suited Benjamin's talents, and in no small part Benjamin's considerable influence lies with the fact that he was a formidable stylist. His sentences are notable for their paradoxical force, their arresting mixture of clarity and enigma. They are just as remarkable for the brilliance of their indirection. Two examples will have to do. His great theological meditation on Goethe's *Elective Affinities* ends this way: 'Only for the sake of the hopeless have we been hope' (Benjamin, 1996: 356). At the other end of his career, in his last essay, 'On the Concept of History', he writes: 'There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism' (Benjamin, 2003: 392). In neither instance does Benjamin unfold an argument that would support these literally stunning statements. To go on to say, as he does in 'On the Concept of History', that the materialist historian reacts to the barbarism of culture by 'brush[ing] history against the grain' (Benjamin, 2003: 392) is not to explain the matter but to give it a slogan. In other words – and the words here are Benjamin's – Benjamin is most interested in the lightning flash of insight, not the thunder of explication that follows (Benjamin, 1999b: 456).

Benjamin is not a social theorist as such. While he assumes that Lukács's analysis of

classes and class consciousness is generally valid, his own Marxism shows surprisingly little interest in the working classes. (Like his hero Baudelaire, his compassion goes not to those whom capitalism exploits but to those whom capitalism discards.) His investment in the notion of freedom has little to do with the dictatorship of the proletariat and everything to do with his rejection of the Law. So, even though Benjamin came under the sway of Marx's thought in the late 1920s, his politics early and late always lean heavily on a distinctly German-Jewish kind of theological anarchism, one that we also find in the work of his friend, the great historian of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem (Kaufmann, 2001). Indeed, Benjamin's work is less about freedom than it is about happiness (the theme of his last essay, 'On the Concept of History'). His utopianism is based on the assumption that fulfillment is within human reach yet rendered impossible by the present organization of society. Benjamin devotes his career to showing how the artifacts of culture both display and betray the promise of happiness.

In the Anglophone world, Benjamin's influence does not rest, as it does in Germany, on the essay on Goethe or the *Berlin Childhood* or on the aphorisms on history. While the *Arcades Project* has attracted a fair amount of local attention since it was translated nearly two decades ago, it has not gained traction and, considering its fragmentary and often under-theorized materials, it is not likely that it ever will. Even if it does, it will never cast the shadow that the third version of 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility' has cast since its first appearance in English in the late 1960s. Although Miriam Hansen's brilliant and painstaking exegesis of the different versions of the essay have shown how its arguments and their development were riven by tension and conflict, the essay has been commonly taken to be a relatively straightforward celebration of film. It has been read as a call for what Benjamin in 'Experience and Poverty'

(1933) terms ‘a new barbarism’. It seems to advocate the liquidation of the outmoded privilege that is granted to traditional works of visual art and thus to demand the elimination of traditional aesthetic categories.

The rousing ending of the final version of the essay – the claim that the Fascists have aestheticized politics and it is for the Communists to politicize aesthetics (Benjamin, 2003: 270) – obscures its ambivalences. So does the force with which it comes down on one side of each of its constituent dichotomies. It plumps for the nearness that the contemporary ‘masses’ demand against the distance that inheres in the aura of traditional art; for exhibition value against cult value; for tactility against vision; and for bodily habit against disembodied contemplation. To get to the liquidationist position that he appears to advocate, Benjamin has to ignore contemporary film practices; he has to fudge his terms somewhat (‘tactility’ in the essay is a predicate of the *visual*, not of touch); and he has to present categories that need further elaboration (what *exactly* is ‘exhibition value’?). While Robert Hullot-Kentor’s dismissal of the essay as ‘a condensed weave of non-sequitur and untruth’ (Hullot-Kentor, 2006: 137) is unduly harsh, he is correct in his assessment that the essay assiduously ignores a good deal of Benjamin’s work on the aura during the 1930s. It thus seems to avoid his thought’s greatest insights (Hullot-Kentor, 2006: 140). One does not have to share Hullot-Kentor’s marked distaste for Benjamin to see that the ‘new barbarism’ that underscores both the second and the third versions of the ‘Work of Art’ essay goes against the line of argument that leads from ‘The Image of Proust’ (1929) through ‘A Short History of Photography’ (1931) and ‘The Storyteller’ to the all important ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ (1940). This argument, whose exploration is more or less coterminous with the *Arcades Project* itself, is a defense of the aura in its passing and of the form of knowledge-experience (*Erfahrung*) that underlies the aura in its decay. In other

words, for a good part of the 1930s, Benjamin takes up a line of inquiry that runs directly contrary to the ‘Work of Art’ essays.

My interest in pointing this out is not to choose sides but to note that Benjamin discusses the aura in two markedly different affective registers. In some places, he discusses it in a tone of liquidationist triumphalism, which seems to affirm the course of contemporary history. In others, he mourns it with a nostalgia that regrets that course. The important thing is that Benjamin strikes each of these notes in essays that are contemporaneous. He therefore appears to contradict himself. To see him as self-defeating or self-contradictory is tempting, but it misses the point of Benjamin’s triangulations. Benjamin wanted to redeem the truth-potential of *all* positions, no matter how vitiated those positions might have been. What is more, Benjamin courted misunderstanding. As Adorno reminds us in a discussion of Benjamin: ‘misunderstandings are the medium in which the noncommunicable is communicated’ (Adorno, 1983: 131).

Benjamin is a utopian – or, to put it theologically, a redemptive – thinker. In order to outline the utopian thrust of Benjamin’s thought and to see how one of its most important and elusive categories – the aura – is to be construed, I will begin by looking at Benjamin’s method and in particular at his notions of the constellation and the dialectical image. I shall go on to argue that by the end of his life, Benjamin had come to see that the utopian kernel of the aura had fled from art and had come to rest in messianic historiography.

## AGAINST DIALECTICS

Let me begin by taking to heart Adorno’s repeated complaint in his correspondence that Benjamin’s writings of the mid 1930s were not properly dialectical. We can see

Adorno's point in the 'Work of Art' essay itself, whose polarities are nothing more than mere dichotomies, categorical oppositions that do not engage each other. Unlike the other thinkers associated with the Institute for Social Research, Benjamin refuses Hegelian dialectics. He avoids overt mediation through the totality. Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse follow Lukács's account of reification and take the totality to mean social labor, the fact that under capitalism, commodity production organizes the whole of society. This organization ranges from the design of the industrial infrastructure to the very constitution of individual consciousness. As a result, all particulars take their shape and their meaning from commodity production. To ignore the mediation of the social whole is to fall into ideological illusion. Hence Adorno's complaint in a letter of 1938 to Benjamin about the apparently unmediated recital of historical facts in 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire': 'It does not do justice to Marxism, because mediation by means of the total social process is missing and you almost superstitiously ascribe to the enumeration of materials a power of illumination' (Benjamin, 1994: 583). Adorno objects to Benjamin's tendency to present facts – details of a wine tax, say, or of the use of iron in construction – as if they were self-explanatory, as if they were not defined and determined by the gravitational pull of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism.

If Adorno is right and Benjamin's work does not *look* dialectical, how do we explain what Benjamin was up to? Benjamin was by philosophical education and bent a Neo-Kantian. He studied with Rickert, and his correspondence of the 1910s is punctuated by his sometimes dyspeptic comments about the great Neo-Kantian, Hermann Cohen (Caygill, 1998; Friedlander, 2012). One of Benjamin's most polemical works of the war years is the unpublished 'On the Program for the Coming Philosophy' (1918), a post-Kantian critique of Kant's strictures on experience. Now,

Benjamin's Kantianism was in good part dispositional. Hegel was not to his *taste*. As he wrote to Scholem in 1918, 'The Hegel I have read... has so far totally repelled me... an intellectual brute, a mystic of brute force, the worst there is; but a mystic, nonetheless' (Benjamin, 1994: 112).

## THEOLOGICAL SCRUPLES AND THE CONSTELLATION

That said, Benjamin's disdain for Hegel is more than a question of disposition, because it betrays a theological scruple. Even at his most materialist, Benjamin could write that the detailed interpretation of reality requires a *theological* method (Benjamin, 1999b: 460), and he is aware that his thought is 'saturated' with theology (Benjamin, 1999b: 471). Though Benjamin was not at all religious, Jewish theology served an important function in his work. With its insistence on G-d's absolute transcendence, Jewish theology provided a way of thinking past the imminence of the bourgeois world that Benjamin so detested. (His emphasis on Judaism was itself in part a protest against the increasingly anti-Semitic bent of late Wilhelmine culture.) Benjamin argues at the beginning of 'On the Concept of History' that even Marxism needs the help of theological transcendence if it is to fulfill its ultimately utopian emancipatory promise. In short, from the beginning to the end, Jewish theology was central to his project.

Pantheism is the great Jewish heresy, and the monism that many readers find in Hegel is just part of that heresy. In this light, nothing could be farther from normative Jewish thought than the vision at the end of the *Phenomenology* of the Absolute Spirit internalizing through memory (*Er-innern*) its self-othering in and through history. What is more, the Hegelian insistence on mediation also leads straight to the Incarnation, where the divine and the natural meet and are

sublated in the figure of Jesus. Judaism, on the other hand, only admits a *linguistic* mediation between God and humankind, Creator and Creation. That is why so many Jews have found so amenable the Kantian distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal. Even when Benjamin kicked against this distinction in 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' and sought out that Kantian impossibility – a *metaphysical* experience – he did it by Kantian, not Hegelian, means.

It is against this background that we can understand the importance of the *constellation* for Benjamin and how it replaces the dialectic in his work. The constellation allows him to represent the social totality without requiring that his representation fall into the dialectical trap of incarnation – of filling in the outline as if it were indeed a substantial figure. The constellation, as Benjamin outlines it in the *Trauerspiel* study, derives from Hermann Cohen's notion of the 'correlation' and from Goethe's notion of primal phenomena,<sup>3</sup> even though he presents it in Platonic terms, as a new version of the doctrine of Ideas. In the preface to the *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin claims that Ideas are *objective interpretations* of phenomena. They provide the meaning of things (Benjamin, 2009: 34). Benjamin's concern lies with the *representation* of Truth, because his definition of Truth as 'the death of intention' (Benjamin, 2009: 36) eliminates all deduction. As Truth is opposed to scientific knowledge, philosophy cannot rely on the modes of representation that science uses. Rather, philosophy will present the Idea as 'the arrangement [*Gestaltung*] of the context [*Zusammenhang*]' (Benjamin, 2009: 35) of phenomena. It is this arrangement that allows the Idea to be represented, and it is this representation that reveals the outlines of phenomena as they truly are. So *constellations* of things are their arrangement into figures that make the truth of those things self-evident. As with constellations in the heavens, written constellations require readers, an audience that will connect the dots and see the figures that they describe.

Benjamin abandoned the doctrine of Ideas as soon as he introduced it in 1926. The Ideas are the means by which he smuggled in his properly theological interests. Benjamin never jettisoned the constellation, however. It would be the cornerstone of his work for the rest of his life, though he would come to revise it in the face of his encounter with Surrealism and his 'conversion' to Marxism in the late 1920s.

## INTRODUCING THE DIALECTICAL IMAGE

The chief revision to the constellation as a figure in Benjamin's later thought comes with the introduction of the *dialectical image* in the Baudelaire studies and the *Arcades Project*. Benjamin clearly thought that the dialectical image was pivotal. In fact, it serves as the focus for the notes on epistemology and method in the file known as Konvolut 'N' of the *Arcades Project*. Even so, there is no consensus about what the dialectical image means and how it works. It is a notion that Susan Buck-Morss has called 'overdetermined' (Buck-Morss, 1989: 67; see also Pensky, 2002: 178) and which, on the other hand, Benjamin's editor, Rolf Tiedemann, has called 'undivulged'. Tiedemann's charge that the dialectical image 'never achieved any terminological consistency' (Tiedemann, 1999: 943) can be leveled at most of the terms in Benjamin's critical lexicon. Benjamin does not define his terms but allows meaning to accrete to them in ever new contexts. In other words, each term is part of a number of different constellations. In fact, each term becomes a constellation in itself.

This meaty formulation of the dialectical image from Konvolut 'N' ties the *image* to the *constellation*:

It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present [*das Gegenwärtige*], or what is present

[*das Gegenwärtige*] its light on what is past [*das Vergangene*]; rather, image is that wherein what has been [*das Gewesene*] comes together in a flash with the now [*das Jetzt*] to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present [*die Gegenwart*] to the past [*die Vergangenheit*] is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been [*das Gewesene*] to the Now [*das Jetzt*] is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. Only dialectical images are genuine images.... And the place one encounters them is language'. (Benjamin, 1999b: 462)

Some preliminary things are worth noting here. The first is that one of the results of Benjamin's encounter with Surrealism was his fascination with images and his conviction that the image was the key to action. He wrote in *One-Way Street* (1926) that '[o]nly images in the mind vitalize the will' and that '[t]here is no intact will without exact pictorial imagination' (Benjamin, 1996: 466). So the will, the driver of conscious revolutionary change, depends on the image. The second thing to note is that the constellation here no longer consists, as it did in the *Trauerspiel* study, of mortified phenomena reorganized into a figure of the Truth. Rather, the constellated dialectical image has a temporal core. It draws the past and the present into a relation with each other. Where the constellation is ontological, the dialectical image is historical. Most importantly, the figure that the dialectical image describes is meant to have an explosive effect: it transforms the present [*die Gegenwart*] into the Now [*das Jetzt*].

## AGAINST PROGRESS

What is the Now? Benjamin makes it clear at the beginning of 'On the Concept of History' that Marxist historiography requires theological categories. The theological category that most interests him is redemption, the task of making good the losses and the promises of the past. Benjamin wants to use redemption as a way of exploding the notion

of progress, that version of history which insists that things are always getting better. In the Hegelian formulation, it is unavoidably apologetic. Even though Hegel recognizes that history is a 'slaughter bench', this blood-letting is necessary for the Spirit's full self-consciousness and thus, for the final instantiation of freedom. So the problem with the intellectual commitment to progress – and, as Kierkegaard argued, its full brutality becomes clear in Hegel – is that it sacrifices all the intervening stages to the supervening goal, the bloody middle to the glorious end. The concept of progress does *nothing* for the people who suffered so that freedom could finally find its fitting end in the Prussian state. For Benjamin, writing in the shadow of the stunning success of Fascism and the imminence of war, progress had become an impossible notion to swallow.

How to redeem the utopian promise of the notion of progress while jettisoning its plodding narrative structure? How to transform 'past' and 'present' (which are merely markers of temporal succession) into 'the what-has-been' and 'the Now' (which are the cardinal points of Benjamin's vision of conscious and consciously human history)? Benjamin claims that Marxist thought must employ a properly theological (and specifically Jewish) version of the messianic in order to break progress's delusory spell. A story from the Talmud will demonstrate the alternative to the slow crawl of progress that Benjamin has in mind. The Tractate *Sanhedrin* relates that a third-century rabbi was directed by the prophet Elijah to find the Messiah sitting among the beggars at the gates of Rome. (One of the messianic promises was precisely that the Jews would be able to throw off foreign rule, so this story has strong political overtones.) Rabbi Joshua duly went to Rome and asked the Messiah when he would come. Rabbi Joshua received the enigmatic and ultimately disappointing answer, 'Today'. So the rabbi returned to Elijah and complained that the Messiah had lied. The Redeemer would surely not come today.



To this Elijah replied, 'Today, *if you will but hear his voice*'. In other words, messianic fulfillment is possible at any time and its potential charges every moment. This is how Benjamin reworks the Talmudic motif in his notes for 'On the Concept of History': 'In reality, there is not a moment that would not carry with it its revolutionary chance – provided only that it is defined in a specific way' (Benjamin, 2003: 402). So, against an either indefinite (if you are a Hegelian-Marxist of the Third International) or infinite (if you are a Kantian) deferral, Benjamin proposes the messianic promise that even today we could see the redemption of the world. The present can give way to the Now – the moment when the divine and the human touch – if we only heed the images that lead us to revolutionary action. In other words, Benjamin thinks that dialectical images are charged with messianic energy.

## THE DIALECTICAL IMAGE AND THE NOW

Benjamin does not give many concrete examples of how the leap into redemption might work, but he does provide a telling one in 'On the Concept of History':

History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time, a past which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. (Benjamin, 2003: 395)

The arc of redeemed history does not describe a temporal succession through empty time, the apparently natural flow of one damned thing after another. It is a construction, a constellation or, more properly put, a dialectical image. The French Revolution (the present) looked at Rome (the past) and in so doing, tried to fulfill the Roman Republic's untapped promise of virtue and freedom.

It remained untapped, because Brutus and his fellow conspirators lost in the end. The Republic was lost to the Empire. What is more, the Empire's own utopian promises (universal citizenship, the institution of a universal rule of law) fell in turn to the Gothic invasions, and so on. The utopian kernel of each stage was sacrificed to the thumping, catastrophic reality of the next.

For Robespierre, however, Republican Rome was a living possibility and he was able to realize the potential of its 'what-is-past' in the fulfillment of an actualized Now. Even though more than a millennium separated the end of the Republic from the French Revolution, the two moments were separated by less than a breath for Robespierre and Saint-Just. The *novum* of the Revolutionary dream of Republican Rome marked both a rupture within the existing order and the eruption of a possible *novo ordo seclorum*. In an interesting aside in the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin defines 'catastrophe' as missing an opportunity (Benjamin, 1999b: 492). 'History', in its redeemed sense, then, means nothing less than grasping the opportunity and keeping the promises of the past.

Robespierre and Saint-Just form a dialectical image with the Roman past, and *their* past as it swims into *our* ken provides us with our own revolutionary possibility. All this happens in language, not pictures. Benjamin's montage of time is linguistic. It's also worth noting that this montage, the dialectical image, is not a *narrative*. If it did tell a story, it would mimic the ongoing catastrophe of 'progress'. The dialectical image is thus the moment that *stops* that narrative and it therefore has a structural affinity with the revolutionary moment that pulls the brake on the chuffing engine of progress (this image too is Benjamin's).

Benjamin wants to change our sense of history. That is why, in the definition of the dialectical image above, Benjamin calls it 'dialectics at a standstill'. It marks an interruption of business as usual. The dialectical image is a way of writing or thinking that

shocks thought out of the dogmatic slumber that we call ideology and helps us see what has not been seen or what cannot be seen, an intimation of the truly new. He describes it this way in 'On the Concept of 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...* In this structure he recognizes the sign of... a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. (Benjamin, 2003: 396; emphasis added)

Like Kierkegaard's notion of paradox, the dialectical image stops thought dead in its tracks and shows its limits. In Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*, this arrest comes in the form of a chiasmus: the paradox of thought – that it wants to find its limits – leads to the thought of paradox. The absolute paradox is the paradox of the absolute. (Kierkegaard, 1985: 37–48). Benjamin too is fond of this kind of chiasmic turn, most famously at the end of the essay on the *Elective Affinities*: 'Only for the sake of the hopeless are we given hope'. Paradox forces thought to think about itself even as thought fails.

## CONSTRUCTION OR ILLUMINATION?

The term 'dialectical image' is itself paradoxical. As Ansgar Hillach points out, 'image' [*Bild*] describes a figure and a *Gestalt*, whereas 'dialectic' describes the unfolding and overcoming of a contradiction in time. A dialectical image *contains* the contradictions which give it its shape. The structure that results is not dialectic at a permanent standstill. If it is dialectics, the figure can only constitute a *moment* in a further development (Hillach, 2000: 186–7).

This paradox – how can an image stop dialectics altogether and yet still be

dialectical? – brings us to the *effect* of the dialectical image. It also brings us back to the objection that Adorno raised against the portions of the *Arcades Project* that he read in the 1930s. Adorno complained that they 'superstitiously ascribe to the enumeration of materials a power of illumination'. Max Pensky has shown how Benjamin's discussions of the dialectical image cut in two opposed directions at once. On the one hand, the dialectical image hews to Benjamin's Surrealist side. It is an intentionless constellation that provides an apparently instantaneous 'profane illumination'. On the other hand, it is much more Brechtian. It describes a self-conscious construction that arrests unreflective 'common sense'. It makes the audience think. The technique of montage can serve either version of the dialectical image (Pensky, 2002: 192–5).<sup>4</sup>

So how are we supposed to read the dialectical image? Is it a figure that stops the course of thought or is it meant to be the spur to further thought, the *beginning*, not the end, of dialectics? The answer, of course, is both. Even though the notes in Konvolut 'N' in the *Arcades Project* and the evidence of 'On the Concept of History' indicate that while Benjamin never jettisoned the hope that the dialectical image would provide the immediate illumination of an intentionless truth, he takes a position in his correspondence with Adorno that is more recognizably Brechtian and less mystical.

Benjamin countered Adorno's charge that sections of 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire' 'superstitiously ascribe to the enumeration of materials a power of illumination' by claiming that

[the] author's philological interpretation must be sublated in Hegelian fashion by dialectical materialists. Philology is the examination of a text, which, proceeding on the basis of details, magically fixates the reader on the text... They share the magical element, which is for philosophy to exorcise, reserved here for the concluding part. (Benjamin, 1994: 587–8)

Benjamin's defense would have been familiar to Adorno, because in his essay on Goethe's

*Elective Affinities*, Benjamin had been careful to distinguish between commentary – or what he here calls ‘philology’ – and critique. Benjamin is happy to concede that the philological sections of his Baudelaire study cast the very spell of the commodity fetishism that they record. He then promises that he will break this spell in the dialectical materialist final section of the book. This section will step out of the magic circle and provide the theoretical underpinning that Adorno requires. Of course, that concluding section was never written.

In his letter, Benjamin then turns the tables on Adorno. He cites a moment in Adorno’s study of Kierkegaard, where Adorno seems to say that the *effect* of the mythical image in Kierkegaard – amazement or astonishment [*Verwunderung*] – provides Kierkegaard’s deepest insight into the relation of dialectics and myth.<sup>5</sup> At that moment in his book, Adorno is quoting Benjamin, as he does throughout, by providing what is essentially a Benjaminian account of the dialectical image. (Scholem, disgusted by the ‘chutzhutzhut’ of Adorno’s book, felt it was outright plagiarism.) Adorno argues that our amazement that the mythical coexists with the rational in the image is an affective index of the truth that we do not want to admit. Our rationality is tinged with the mythical. Our pride in our ‘enlightenment’ stumbles over this reality and we feel amazed.

Benjamin is careful not to appeal to Adorno’s authority here (Adorno’s authority rests on his unacknowledged citation of Benjamin in the first place). Rather, Benjamin corrects Adorno and therefore himself:

I could be tempted to invoke this passage. Instead I want to propose that it be amended (by the way, just as I plan at another opportunity to amend the subsequent definition of the dialectical image). I believe it should read: astonishment is an excellent *object* [*Objekt*] of such an insight. (Benjamin, 1994: 588)

The affective moment is itself not the insight but the *object* of the insight. Amazement

serves as a catalyst for thought. In other words, there are two moments in the dialectical image. The image makes thought stumble, but thought then thinks about that stumble. To use the motif that Benjamin repeats throughout the *Arcades*, the dialectical image represents both dream and awakening, both astonishment and subsequent insight.

Benjamin thus switches places with Adorno. He attributes to Adorno the position that Adorno attributes to him. He criticizes Adorno for doing precisely what Adorno criticizes in him. However fair or merely tactical this moment is, it is important because it cedes to Adorno the undeniable fact that the *effect* of Benjamin’s constellations – in the more concentrated images of the *Berlin Childhood* or the more diffuse ones in ‘The Paris of the Second Empire’ – is less an immediate illumination than an amazement that needs to be thought through.

## PSAMMENITUS

In this light, enigma and illumination are intimately related. Thus – as Adorno suggested – misunderstanding might well be the medium of the as-yet-unthought. Consider Benjamin’s reflections on the story of Psammenitus in ‘The Storyteller’ (1936). Herodotus tells us that this Egyptian king did not cry when he saw his family marched as slaves in the triumph of his Persian vanquisher, but broke into tears when he saw his own servant being led away:

Herodotus offers no explanations. His report is utterly dry. That is why, after thousands of years, this story from ancient Egypt is still capable of provoking astonishment [*Staunen*] and reflection. It is like those seeds of grain that have lain for centuries in the airtight chambers of the pyramids and have retained their germinative power to this day. (Benjamin, 2002: 148)

Herodotus’s tale is an example of a dying genre, *the story*. The story (which Benjamin

opposes to the short story, the novel and journalism) was born of an era of guilds and handicrafts, of manual labor and manual expertise. It is about wisdom, not information. It transmits the content of a collective knowledge-experience (*Erfahrung*) that gets woven into the fabric of the individual life at a not-quite-conscious level.<sup>6</sup> The story does not present news you can use. It represents a tradition you can draw on. What is the aesthetic effect of the story? In this case, it is a form of astonishment [*Staunen*] that resembles in its way the kind of amazement [*Verwunderung*] that Adorno and Benjamin attribute to the dialectical image. And this effect is similar because its cause is similar. The image astonishes us because it confronts us with an unresolved piece of our archaic past. The sublimity of Psammenitus, his greatness of soul, has nothing to do with our present historical conditions. He is a defeated king whose tears speak – on the most superficial level – to ancient forms of paternalism, to kinds of warfare and social organization that no longer exist. Yet they remain compelling. They interest and perplex us. As Benjamin goes to some pains to point out, we do not have a ready *psychological* explanation for Psammenitus's tears. Something else is going on and it seems clear to Benjamin that the tears make sense and no sense at the same time. They beg for the explication that Herodotus refuses to provide. The story thus stops thought and provokes it all at once. This is its 'germinative' power. Like the Roman Republic, it demands a Robespierre to fulfill it. Until that Robespierre comes, it will tantalize – even taunt – us.

If there is any accuracy to my reading of the structural analogy between the story and the dialectical image – an analogy that rests on our aesthetic reaction to both the story and the image – then the dialectical image has everything to do with the problematics surrounding the story and with the account of modernity that Benjamin develops in 'The Storyteller' and in other major essays of his last decade: 'The Image of Proust',

'A Short History of Photography', 'Work of Art' in all its iterations and 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire'. It has to do with the depletion of collective knowledge-experience [*Erfahrung*] and its supersession by individual lived-experience [*Erlebnis*]. It has to do with the way that traditional wisdom – the very stuff of *Erfahrung* – has been eroded by the shocks to the human sensorium that the conditions of industrial labor, commodity consumption and urbanization have dealt. It has to do with the reasons that art is no longer transmissible and no longer has little, if any, critical, utopian core. In other words, it has everything to do with the *aura*.

### AURA: OVERDETERMINED AND UNDERDIVULGED

Like the dialectical image, the notion of *aura* is overdetermined. Benjamin derived it from a number of different and conflicting sources (Fürnkäs, 2000; Hansen, 2008). It is also 'undivulged', to the extent that Benjamin barely defined it. Instead, he deployed it.

For Benjamin, the *aura* swims into view at the moment of its loss. The decay of the *aura* and the concomitant end of auratic art are historical facts. As I have already noted, his discussions of them are governed by mood. Either Benjamin mourns the fall of the *aura* (this is the case in the essays I mention above) or he views it with the 'gaiety' that he ascribes to the 'destructive character' and 'the new barbarism'. But the end of auratic art that Benjamin celebrates most famously in 'Work of Art' in all its versions is the end of a historical process that is not about art itself. In other words, the decay of auratic art is collateral damage in a larger war.

Benjamin is a follower of eighteenth-century philosophy in the following respect. As aesthetics is primarily about our sensory apparatus, it is not about art but about our sensorium, the order of our perception. Benjamin's particular contribution to that

discussion is that he historicizes aesthetics. He assumes that perception is tied to – even dependent on – particular forms of experience and that these forms of experience are historically determined.<sup>7</sup>

As noted, Benjamin opposes two different modes of perception, two different kinds of experience *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. It is important to see that each has its own particular time-sense as well. *Erfahrung* experiences time as duration, while *Erlebnis* is conscious of time as the empty succession of single moments. *Erfahrung* is tied to religious and communal ritual, agriculture and craft manufacture. *Erlebnis* is the creature of modern shocks: Taylorized line work, city traffic and modern technologies (including photography and film). Aura belongs to the historical sensory regime of *Erfahrung*.

*Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* seem to be mutually exclusive. They fall into an orderly historical succession: first we have one, then the other. As Benjamin presents them in ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’, *Erfahrung* and the aura are depleted – and eventually extinguished – by the victory of industrial capital and its new perceptual-experiential regime, *Erlebnis*. This is an important point. The ‘Work of Art’ essays notwithstanding, the aura has not been done to death by the specific technologies of reproduction any more than *Erfahrung* was done in by the assembly line. If Benjamin believes that culture is the *expression* of the economy, then experience must also serve as its expression. *Erlebnis* is thus born of commodity fetishism, not of technological change as such.

## ‘WHAT IS AURA, ACTUALLY?’

We would therefore do well to pose the question that Benjamin first asks in ‘A Little History of Photography’ and then repeats in the second version of ‘Work of Art’: ‘What is aura, actually?’ This is how he defines it:

A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter

how close it may be. While at rest on a summer’s noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance – this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch. (Benjamin, 1999a: 518–9)

Benjamin indicates that he lifts his emphasis on distance from the art historian Alois Riegl and from Riegl’s notion of *Stimmung*. *Stimmung* can be translated as ‘mood’ or, in a more Heideggerian way, as ‘attunement.’ But distance in Riegl’s famous article ‘Mood as the Content of Modern Art’ (1899) serves a very particular function. It allows art to body forth the totality of nature and thus compensate for the limitations of modernity’s understanding of the universe (Riegl, 1996). For Benjamin, though, auratic attunement performs a different function. The aura does not entail the fuzzy elision of particularity celebrated by Riegl. It marks the experience of the very kind of spatial and temporal particularity that *Stimmung* eliminates. Aura, then, reveals how a thing actually *is* a specific moment. Its ‘distance’ is precisely the appearance of a thing’s particularity.

The branch that throws its shadow on the observer in Benjamin’s definition of the aura makes more sense if we note Benjamin’s emphasis on the relation of the gaze to the aura in ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’:

Experience of the aura thus arises from the fact that a response characteristic of human relationships is transposed to the relationship between humans and inanimate or natural objects. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us. (Benjamin, 2003: 338)

Our sense of the aura would thus seem to rest on a categorical error. With the aura, we experience objects as if they were people. The relationship is one of reciprocity – hence the shadow of the object falls *on us*, and the object *returns* our gaze. It would be tempting to call such a relationship *intersubjective*, but Benjamin’s whole project is dedicated to

leapfrogging over the subject. Benjamin seems to see the subject as a historical mistake, not a dialectical moment. Given Benjamin's allergy to the subject, then, we might want to say that the auratic experience of an object lends objects *dignity*. It grants them the respect that is due, according to Kantian ethics, to subjects. It treats them as subjects should be treated, not as subjects themselves.

The auratic object does not decenter us, as Miriam Hansen has suggested in her magnificent account of the aura (Hansen, 2008: 351). Nor is the aura, as Carolin Duttlinger has argued, a forerunner of Barthes's account of the *punctum*. She claims that aura involves 'a play of *identification* between viewer and image' (Duttlinger, 2008: 97; emphasis added). But the aura is not about specular identification. It establishes the proper attunement between humanity and nature.

## AURA AS FORETASTE OF RECONCILIATION

I am arguing therefore that the moment of the aura contains a utopian dimension and that this dimension is precisely its temporal index. *The aura points forward to our potential reconciliation with nature*. Benjamin makes this clear in his footnote to the passage I have quoted immediately above:

Whenever a human being, an animal, or an inanimate object thus endowed by the poet lifts up its eyes, it draws him into the distance. The gaze of nature, when thus awakened, dreams and pulls the poet after its dream. (Benjamin, 2003: 354)

This dream of nature brings together the utopian thrust of both the auratic and the beautiful:

But even there, [the Romantic definition of beauty] had some derivative qualities. Its famous tenet that beauty is semblance – the sensuous appearance [*Erscheinung*] of an idea or the sensuous appearance of the true – not only coarsened the original

teaching of antiquity but forfeited its basis in experience. This resides in the aura. 'The beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil' – this is the quintessence of the ancient aesthetic. Through its veil, which is nothing other than the aura, the beautiful appears [*scheint*]. (Benjamin, 2002: 137)

In this fragment from 1935, Benjamin makes it clear that the aura is not only that peculiar weave of time and space that shows us the object in its concrete particularity. It also shows us its utopian fulfillment, its ideal future. Squaring the circle between Goethe and Schiller, Benjamin sets up a polar tension between *Schein* and *Spiel*, appearance and play. The beautiful – and art, then – contains within it a kernel of time. It shows what nature, the world, should be, which, for the sake of shorthand I have called its *potential*:

Art (the definition might run) is a suggested improvement on nature: an imitation that conceals within it a demonstration [of what the original should be]. In other words, art is a perfecting mimesis. (Benjamin, 2002: 137)

The aura, then, speaks to the utopian function of art. It is an intimation, through play and mimesis, of a reconciled world.

## THE DECAY OF THE AURA

The aura is thus a slippery concept. On the one hand, it appears to be a quality that inheres in the object. (That is why we can talk about auratic and post-auratic art.) On the other, it seems to refer to a relationship between the branch or the mountain and us, between the object and the subject. Thus the depletion of the aura either refers to a change in the structure of our relationship to objects or in the objects themselves. A mountain cannot be post-auratic, though an artwork can be. This also raises the all-important question of the auratic work in a post-auratic age. Benjamin's attempt to historicize aesthetics while tracing them back to our

experience of nature thus leads to interesting problems that he does not address. Perhaps they are problems that cannot be answered. In any event, he shows that the depletion of *Erfahrung* and the decay of the aura signal the flight of the utopian from both our experience and our art. As Benjamin writes in one of the notes for 'Work of Art', the problem for contemporary aesthetics is 'to determine the effect of the work of art once its power of consecration has been eliminated' (Benjamin, 2002: 141). Thus is it that 'Work of Art' asks what art can do now that its utopian core has been hollowed out. This goes some way towards explaining the essay's liquidationist animus towards the aura, but it does not explain its claim – a false one, if my argument holds – that the aura now serves distinctly anti-utopian ends.

Of course, the 'aura' as it appears in 'Work of Art' is a 'pseudo-aura', an after-image created for an age of commodity aesthetics. The nimbus that surrounds the film star is not a real aura but a simulation that is essentially affirmative, not utopian. At best it apes the aura, invoking an 'outmoded mode of perception' for regressive ends (Fürnkäs, 2000: 141–2). At worst, it lends its halo to the Führer at Nuremberg.

Benjamin provides an account of the transformation of the aura into this pseudo-aura in 'A Little History of Photography'. This discussion serves as a valuable corrective to the common impression that the technologies of mechanical reproduction are in themselves necessary and sufficient to destroy the aura. While mechanical reproduction helps undermine the aura of the visual arts – and 'Work of Art' is limited to the visual arts – Benjamin makes it clear that photography did not undo the aura. In fact, the question that lies at the center of 'Little History' is one that Benjamin outlines in his notes: 'If the aura exists in early photographs, why is it not in film?' (Benjamin, 1991: 1048).

In 'Little History', Benjamin notes that early photography is 'a medium that lent fullness and security' to the gaze of its subjects

(Benjamin, 2002: 515–7). That fullness and that security are a feature of a somewhat primitive technology. The aura of early photographic portraits rests on 'the way light struggles out of darkness'. The long exposure time of these early photographs leads to what Benjamin calls their 'comprehensive illumination', and it would seem – at first glance – that the lighting 'gives these early photographs their greatness' (Benjamin, 2002: 517).

But the weight of these photographs depends on more than just this 'comprehensive illumination'. In fact, Benjamin notes that the technical limitations of early photography proved easy to reproduce as the technology developed. So the aura of early portrait photography is not merely a question of technology alone. Rather, the aura of these photographs is the result of the social situation that they capture. It rests with their 'animated conviviality':

These pictures were made in rooms where every client was confronted, in the person of the photographer, with a technician of the latest school; whereas the photographer was confronted, in the person of every client, with a member of a rising class equipped with an aura that had seeped into the very folds of the man's frock coat or floppy cravat. For this aura was by no means the mere product of a primitive camera. *Rather, in this early period subject and technique were as exactly congruent as they become incongruent in the period of decline that immediately followed.* (Benjamin, 2002: 517; emphasis added)

The subjects of these early portraits were members of the rising bourgeoisie, and their ascendancy lent them a personal presence that made their very clothes an expression of their being.<sup>8</sup> The photographer too represented the latest technology, and that technology itself was *congruent* with both the technician behind the camera and the rising class in front of it.

In other words, the aura of these early photographic portraits has everything to do with the attunement of all aspects of the photographic situation: the class of the sitter, the

technical knowledge of the photographer and the development of the technology itself. In this way, the circumstances surrounding these auratic photographic portraits resemble the circumstances surrounding the 'story' that Benjamin outlines in 'The Storyteller'. There, too, the transmissibility of the story depends on an alignment between the stage of technology (craft), the class of the storytellers (who Benjamin imagines as craftsmen) and the class of the audience (also craftsmen).

This attunement between artist, subject and technology disappears in later photographs and as a result the aura vanishes. Why? Benjamin notes that improvements in the technology led to the abolition of that 'comprehensive illumination'. The vignetting and the high levels of contrast which had granted 'fullness and security' to the earlier works were subsequently eliminated by improved lenses and lighting. As a result, photographers had to find ways of simulating the lost aura. Even an easily faked duskiness, though, could not hide the fact that the bourgeoisie had become brittle:

Notwithstanding this fashionable twilight, however, a pose was more and more clearly in evidence, whose rigidity betrayed the impotence of that generation in the face of technical progress. (Benjamin, 2002: 515)

Benjamin describes the impotence of the following generations as 'the degeneration of the imperialist bourgeoisie'. Notice, though, that in the passage I have just quoted, Benjamin is not talking about decadence, but about the bourgeoisie's impotence 'in the face of technical progress'. The aura of early photographic portraiture was tied to the congruence between the relations and the means of production, a momentary equilibrium between technology and economic organization. But that equilibrium was tenuous at best. The tension between the means and the relations of production meant that the organization of society served as a brake against the revolutionary potential that the technology

presented. So, as technology outstripped the forces that controlled it, those forces became enfeebled. They were reduced to fighting a rearguard action against the new rising class (the proletariat) and the insurgent potentials that lay embedded in the technologies of the new mass industries.

The decline of auratic photography was also due to the fact that 'businessmen invaded professional photography from every side' (Benjamin, 2002: 515). Photography was no longer a craft. It had become a modern business and the photograph itself had been transformed into a commodity. So photography no longer presented an attunement between the class being photographed, the technician and the technology. We can see, then, that the aura of early photographic portraiture was *not* destroyed by technology but by the changing social relations that surrounded it. Once it becomes a commodity for an atrophied class, the auratic portrait photograph is a thing of the past. The temporal dimension of the aura – its yoking of the archaic to the present to intimate a perfected future – is flattened and its utopian potential hollowed out. All that is left in this transformation is the pseudo-aura, and it is that pseudo-aura that the new barbarism (and 'Work of Art') must liquidate.

## AURA AND TRANSMISSIBILITY

The aura is a difficult concept in Benjamin's work because it both inheres in the object and is the medium of its reception. As we have seen in my brief account of early photographic portraiture in 'Little History', it designates a relationship that includes subject and object, viewer and viewed. This is why Howard Caygill has said of the aura that it is not 'the predicate of a work of art, but a condition, now surpassed, of its transmission' (Caygill, 1998: 101). In view, though, of the drift of Benjamin's discussion in the essays on Proust and Leskov and 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', I wonder if it would



not be more correct to say that *Erfahrung* is actually the condition of art's transmissibility. It is the collective knowledge-experience that allows art to be written and understood. On the other hand, art's utopian charge lies with its aura.

Benjamin shows that the transmissibility of poetry, as Baudelaire discovered, becomes difficult, if not impossible, once the collective knowledge-experience on which the cultural heritage rests has given way to the individualized lived-experience he calls *Erlebnis*. Once poetry's aura becomes untransmissible, then its aura cannot help but decay, because it has no medium in which it can persist. If the aura is indeed the aesthetic-perceptual prefiguration of a utopian reconciliation, an intimation of the kingdom of ends, then the decline of knowledge-experience can only lead to the decline of the aura. In short, *Erfahrung* is the condition of the aura's transmissibility.

The new barbarism that Benjamin calls for, then, does not need to liquidate the aura. History is taking care of that quite well on its own. 'The Work of Art' essay is about shattering the privilege of the *pseudo-aura*, about destroying that nimbus of *false* consecration that surrounds art when it has become a commodity and a tool for regressive politics. This much has been clear to most commentators.

## THE AURA IN A POST-AURATIC AGE

It is worth remembering, though, that the 'Work of Art' essay discusses the visual arts, not literature. The essay thus serves as something of an anomaly in Benjamin's work. Literature complicates its argument, because literature has not been as susceptible to the technological changes of the last two centuries, at least not directly. So, the argument of the 'Work of Art' essay does not quite transfer, and this is clear in Benjamin's discussions of Baudelaire. The decline of collective knowledge-experience and of the transmissibility of the cultural heritage has been a

feature of the commodification of literature, for sure – that is the argument that gets outlined in the aphorisms that make up 'Central Park' and in 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' – but this has nothing to do with the printing press. It is indirectly tied to the technologies of communication but not to the technologies of mechanical reproduction as such. This is why Baudelaire is so important for Benjamin, why he serves as a model. The poet was able to turn the loss of the aura into a theme for auratic poetry. *Les Fleurs du Mal* might mourn the not-so-slow death of both the cultural heritage and *Erfahrung*, but it has become part of the cultural heritage itself. Through a brilliant legerdemain, Baudelaire made the individualization of lived-experience recognizable and thus general. In other words, Benjamin demonstrates that Baudelaire was able to secure a handhold – tenuous, of course – for both the collective knowledge-experience that he calls *Erfahrung* and the aura by thematizing their decay. Similarly, Benjamin's essay on Proust shows that the novelist was ultimately successful in his attempt to reconstitute the web of the *memoire involontaire* that makes *Erfahrung* possible (Benjamin, 2002: 315–6).

I am suggesting therefore that Benjamin's meditations on literature leave open a space for the aura in our post-auratic time. The essays on Proust and Kafka and Leskov indicate – again with qualification – that something resembling auratic art might still be possible in an age of *Erlebnis*. But Benjamin is not Adorno and is not willing to argue that the aura has come to rest in authentic art. Because he sets up *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* in historical succession rather than dialectical opposition, Benjamin cannot without contradiction be emphatic about finding a home for auratic experience in contemporary high art.<sup>9</sup>

Where does this leave the aura in the end?

In our relationship with nature and with art, the term 'aura' designates an experience that offers an intimation of transcendence and a

foretaste of reconciliation. But hasn't history foreclosed the aura and therefore redemption? Although Benjamin seems to come to this rather grim conclusion in the 'Work of Art' essay, the evidence of his other writing indicates that Benjamin was unwilling to let pessimism fall into despair.

It is worth considering 'On the Concept of History' for a moment. That essay – really a set of interlocking aphorisms and images – comes to us as Benjamin's final testament. Its hero is not the artist or even the Angel of History (which appears in its most famous image), but the materialist historian, who seems to stand in for the revolutionary class. After all, the Angel sees in history nothing but ruin. It would like to raise the dead, make whole what has been broken. But the Angel cannot do this. The materialist historian, however, knows that he cannot resurrect the dead. He can only hope to bring their wishes to fulfillment through the revolutionary deployment of dialectical images that will in turn lead to revolutionary action. In other words, the materialist historian wants to raise any number of latter-day Robespierres through his writing.

## MY PERORATION

At one of the darkest moments in European history, Benjamin looked around for comfort and he found it in a rather odd place – in Jewish messianism and in the writing of history. I have suggested that the temporal structure of the dialectical image is utopian. It reveals that every second is 'the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter' (Benjamin, 2003: 397). The dialectical image is pitched to redeem the dreams of history. In this way, it is very much like the auratic moment, which offers a foretaste of a world in which nature's dreams are redeemed. This is why it is a mistake to take the 'Work of Art' essay as conclusive. Rather, it makes sense to accept Miriam Hansen's

argument that in all its versions it was always something of a long shot (Hansen, 2004).

While Benjamin was willing to admit that the visual arts had lost their utopian core and to concede that literature was on the brink of losing it – Proust and Kafka would stand as notable exceptions – he was not willing to give up completely. Literature might have been on the brink of completely losing its redemptive function, but *writing* was not. Benjamin's final gamble – and this gamble was a mark of both the urgency of the times and of his staunch refusal to give in to defeat – was to locate the aura in materialist historiography and to settle it squarely in the dialectical image. As a result, he left us with a body of work that is as suggestive and as enigmatic as literature. From beginning to end, it is, as Adorno claims in my epigraph, dialectical and undialectical. This is of course a contradiction. But contradiction is not a fatal condition for thinking. Contradiction is the very stuff of paradox, and paradox, like misunderstanding, is a way of communicating the incommunicable or thinking the unthinkable. So, like paradox and like the dialectical image itself, Benjamin's *oeuvre* continues to serve as a source of astonishment – a spur to think what has not yet been thought.<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

- 1 This essay is dedicated to Jacob Bard-Rosenberg and to his future: *Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst/Das Rettende auch*.
- 2 It is important to remember that the *Arcades Project* is not a book that Benjamin would ever have published. Giorgio Agamben makes the case very clearly in the Italian version of the work:

There is no doubt [...] that the *Aufzeichnungen und Materialien* [the notes and materials, which constitute the bulk of the *Passagenwerk*] do not represent in any way a draft, however temporary, of the book on the Arcades, but only the documentary and theoretical research materials. Benjamin had a very clear sense in his work of the Marxist distinction between *Forschungsweise* [mode of research] and *Darstellungsweise* [mode of representation],

which he expressly refers to in Section N: 'Research must appropriate the subject matter in its details, must analyze its various forms of developments, and trace their inner connections. Only after this work has been completed, can the real movement be presented [*dargestellt*] in an adequate matter.'

In other words, the *Arcades Project* is an important tool for Benjamin scholarship but should not be treated as a finished work, any more than the notes for the 'Work of Art' can be substituted for that essay itself. (Agamben, 1986: xviii–xix)

- 3 Here is Benjamin's testimony of his theoretical debt to Goethe:

In studying Simmel's presentation of Goethe's concept of truth, I came to see very clearly that my concept of origin in the *Trauerspiel* book is a rigorous and decisive transposition of this 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, 1999b: 462)

For a more detailed account of Benjamin's debt to Cohen, see Kaufmann (2000).

- 4 Benjamin would answer Pensky's incisive analysis by citing Simmel's claim that for Goethe,

all the difficulties in knowledge end when the power of thought [*Denkkraft*] and perception [*Anschauung*] coincide in the representations of art. There the receptive part of perception catches the Truth without mediation, and the 'Idea' becomes visible in the figure [*Gestalt*] without any further mediation. (Simmel, 1913: 57)

The dialectical image, like the constellation, then becomes something like Goethe's Ur-phenomenon – a true, ideal form that actually exists. But the Goethean solution to the problem of the difference between the subject and the object, the particular and the universal, between sensuous intuition and the Truth, only works if you presume that perception gives us immediate access to the Truth of forms because of a pre-existing adequation of the senses to the universe:

The unity of the world lives in an unmediated way in phenomena and all the faculties of cognition of a particular subject are so fitted and adjusted [to the world] that the subject cannot find any content for itself beyond the

appearances that are given to him. (Simmel, 1913: 58)

And the fact of the matter is that very few people – least of all Adorno – make that presumption and accept the Goethean solution. There are therefore certain limits to Benjamin's intellectual eclecticism. It is very hard to cross Goethe, Kant and Hegel and maintain strict coherence.

- 5 Kierkegaard writes:

One may arrive at a similar consideration of the mythical beginning with the image. When in an age of reflection one sees the image protrude ever so slightly and unobserved into a reflective representation, and, like an antediluvian fossil, suggest another species of existence washed away by doubt, one will perhaps be amazed that the image could ever have played such an important role.

Kierkegaard wards off the 'amazement' [*Verwunderung*] with what follows. And yet this amazement announces the deepest insight into the relation of dialectic, myth and image. For it is not as the continuously living and present that nature prevails in the dialectic. Dialectic comes to a stop in the image and cites the mythical in the historically most recent as the distant past... They [images in Kierkegaard] are dialectical images, to use Benjamin's expression... (Adorno, 1989: 54)

- 6 In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers. But if today 'having counsel' is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, this is because the communicability of experience is decreasing. In consequence, we have no counsel either for ourselves or for others. After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is in the process of unfolding. To seek this counsel, one would first have to be able to tell the story. (Quite apart from the fact that a man is receptive to counsel only to the extent that he allows his situation to speak.) Counsel woven into the fabric of real life [*gelebten Lebens*] is wisdom. The art of storytelling is nearing its end because the epic side of truth – wisdom – is dying out. (Benjamin, 2002: 145–6)
- 7 Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception. The way in which human perception is organized – the medium in which it occurs – is conditioned not only by nature, but by history. (Benjamin, 2003: 254)
- 8 Compare this with later generations who appear to be expressions of the fashions that they sport. One of the tricks of commodity fetishism, as Marx

points out, is that it turns human subjects into objects and grants commodified objects a kind of spectral life and subjectivity. So it is hardly surprising that subsequent generations, however substantial and prosperous they might have wanted to appear, should be transformed into mannequins in the photographer's studio.

- 9 Benjamin's concept of the 'auratic' artwork largely coincides with that of the 'closed' artwork. The aura is the uninterrupted contact of the parts with the whole that constitutes the closed artwork. Benjamin's theory emphasizes the phenomenon's historico-philosophical appearance, while the concept of the closed artwork emphasizes its aesthetics.... What results from the disintegration of the auratic or closed artwork depends on the relation of its own disintegration to knowledge. If this disintegration remains blind and unconscious, it falls to the mass art of technical reproduction. It is not a fate external to it that such art is everywhere haunted by the remnants of aura but rather the expression of the blind obduracy of the works that results from their being enmeshed in the actual relations of domination. It is in their stance as knowing what artworks become... fragmentary.... The closed artwork is bourgeois, the mechanical artwork belongs to Fascism, the fragmentary artwork – in its complete negativity – intends utopia. (Adorno, 2006b: 183n)
- 10 I realize, coming to this end, that I have done little more than reiterate Habermas's repeated critique of Benjamin, although in a different register. But here register and tone do count. Mood is indeed disclosive, and while redemptive critical theory relies strongly on the rationality of the arts and on aesthetic categories, the insights that it yields – and the astonishment that is their object – might not be available in any other way.

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# Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments

Marcel Stoetzler

The secondary literature on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is vast but most contributions focus on one isolated aspect or chapter of the book. Much of it is meta-theoretical and often sidesteps detailed textual analysis. There is a general tendency to overstate the extent to which *Dialectic of Enlightenment* constitutes a turning point in Critical Theory. Schmid Noerr, one of the most authoritative commentators in the German-language literature, asserts that in his writings from the 1930s Horkheimer had seemed more optimistic about the possibility that Critical Theory could be articulated with critical empirical scholarship as well as radical political action than *Dialectic of Enlightenment* suggests (Schmid Noerr, 1987: 437). He also points out, though, that several projects that involved empirical research, and which were begun in parallel with and completed after *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, closely followed the programme of Critical Theory as formulated by Horkheimer in the 1930s, including proposals for reform of the education system

meant to prevent the emergence of the ‘authoritarian character’ prone to fascist mobilization (Schmid Noerr, 1987: 448). Observations like these suggest that there are multiple shifts in emphasis between the many different texts that comprise the canon of Critical Theory but no definitive and central shift of perspective. This chapter is based on a close reading and examination of key passages of the text and concludes that the idea that there was a ‘negative turn’ of which *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was the avatar is simplistic and unconvincing.

## ON DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT

*Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments* was written between 1941 and 1944 in Los Angeles by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer in close cooperation, also involving Gretel Karplus-Adorno, who typed both men’s dictations, and Leo

Löwenthal, who contributed to the first three sections of the chapter 'Elements of Antisemitism'. Five-hundred mimeographed copies of a first version were informally distributed in 1944 under the title *Philosophical Fragments*. In this version, the first chapter, which in 1947 was renamed 'The Concept of Enlightenment', was titled 'Dialectic of Enlightenment'. The Amsterdam publisher Querido Verlag, a leading publisher of German-language exile literature, published the book under its final title, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, in 1947. The word 'enlightenment' means both the specific eighteenth-century movement of that name and a general notion of incrementally, albeit not linearly, progressing self-consciousness observable throughout human history. The title clearly references its principal proposition: 'enlightenment' contains both the seeds of its own destruction and the potential of an escape route from that destruction. As stated in the preface, the critique of the enlightenment 'is intended to prepare a positive concept of enlightenment which liberates it from its entanglement in blind domination' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: xvi; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 21/xviii).<sup>1</sup>

The body of the work consists of five chapters of roughly equal length and a final section of twenty-four short pieces ('Notes and Sketches') that pick up various aspects of the argument. The first chapter of the book is (since the 1947 version) 'The Concept of Enlightenment'. It is followed by two chapters that are designated as 'excursus', or digressions, related to the first chapter. The fourth chapter, 'Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', was also initially intended to be an excursus. The last chapter, bar 'Notes and Sketches', is 'Elements of Antisemitism: Limits of Enlightenment', which is divided into seven theses, the last of which was added in 1947. The writing generally refuses the linear logic expected of regular academic philosophy. Instead, each section starts with a fragmentary perspective,

explores its contradictions, suddenly comes to a halt and moves on to another fragment. This style of writing may appear repetitive and circular, as similar arguments are made from only slightly differing angles using different fragments of empirical or historical material. No argument is ever exhausted or concluded – arguments are rather brought into a constellation in what resembles the montage technique used by some avant-garde novels and films of the first half of the twentieth century. This unusually open style puzzled even close collaborators at the time who were familiar with the substantive arguments, and has since contributed to the book's reputation as being hermetic and esoteric. For Horkheimer, the concept of 'dialectic' meant first of all the refusal to treat any phenomena in a reductionist manner: this conception of 'dialectic', thinking about history and society as a dynamic and contradictory totality, was developed by Horkheimer in a series of essays in the 1930s and must be kept in mind when reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The actual phrase 'dialectic of enlightenment' was first used by Adorno in a letter to Horkheimer in November 1941 in the context of his reflections on a book on the Marquis de Sade (Gorer, 1932; de Sade is discussed in the second excursus of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). Adorno wrote that this book (not in fact referenced in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) provided him with 'a lot of ideas' (Wiggershaus, 1995: 310).

Several publications by Horkheimer and Adorno from the years preceding *Dialectic of Enlightenment* anticipate aspects of the latter's argument and can usefully be studied to make it more accessible. The most obvious preparatory text is Horkheimer's 1936 essay 'Egoism and the Freedom Movement: On the Anthropology of the Bourgeois Era' (Horkheimer, 1982). This essay takes its inspiration from the contrast between the pessimistic and optimistic strands of bourgeois anthropology (such as between Hobbes and Rousseau). Horkheimer develops a dialectic of the constitution of bourgeois

subjectivity – ‘anthropology’ – in a historical framework reaching from ‘early modernity’ to the (then) present. The aim of the essay is to derive the character structure and political practice of contemporary fascist demagogues from the contradictory character of bourgeois society, rather than seeing them as forces that somehow struck from outside that society. In other writings in the 1930s, too, Horkheimer used readings of what he called ‘the dark writers of the bourgeois epoch’ – those who explored and systematically exposed its most violent and illiberal aspects – as a method to get under the skin of contemporary society. This method resonates with a sentence from Karl Marx’s ‘Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*’: ‘these petrified conditions must be made to dance by having their own tune sung to them’, which Adorno pointed to as a key methodological inspiration (quoted in Wiggershaus, 1995: 189).

Another key influence on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was Benjamin’s text ‘On the Concept of History’, which Adorno received (via Hannah Arendt) in June 1941 (Wiggershaus, 1995: 311). Benjamin, who had committed suicide in September 1940, identified liberals’ and socialists’ belief that they were sailing with the wind of progress as one of the chief causes of their failure to defeat fascism.

While they were writing, news about the Holocaust continued to build up, and the analysis of antisemitism became another focus of the book. The fifth chapter, ‘Elements of Antisemitism: Limits of Enlightenment’, is therefore best seen as the actualization (in both senses of the word) of the conceptual work done primarily in the first chapter, informed also by the large-scale empirical research on the causes of antisemitism that Horkheimer, Adorno and other members of the Institute undertook from March 1943 (Ziege, 2009).

Horkheimer and Adorno state in the book’s preface that its aim is ‘to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: xi;

Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 1/xiv), and they relate the fragmentary nature of the book to the collapse of their initial plan to structure the book along the disciplinary boundaries of sociology, psychology and epistemology. Scholarly disciplines, though, became meaningless in the context of ‘the present collapse of bourgeois civilization’. Fascist demagogues and liberal scholars feed off the same zeitgeist, marked by the ‘self-destruction of the enlightenment’. Science and scholarship are therefore no longer potent weapons against fascism, and this even affects ‘tendencies opposed to official science’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: xii; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 17/xv). It is for these reasons that ‘in reflecting on its own guilt’, thought finds that it lacks a language. Self-censorship has made censorship superfluous, which seems to be ‘the ambition of the educational system’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: xiii; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 18/xv). The cult of facts and probabilities has flushed out conceptual thinking, a crucial means of resistance: ‘the blocking of the theoretical imagination has paved the way for political delusion’, i.e. fascism (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: xiii; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 18/xvi). The ‘self-destruction of enlightenment’ inhibited the writing of the book but also provided its primary subject matter – it became thereby an exercise in self-reflection. Thinking that aims at enlightenment is inseparably linked to freedom in society, but also in its very concept (as in the societal institutions with which it is intermeshed) ‘already contains the germ of the regression which is taking place everywhere today’. Enlightenment must reflect on this ‘regressive moment’ in order to survive. Thinking must salvage its ‘sublating [*aufhebenden*] character’, i.e. its ability to drive the actuality of historical progress beyond its limitations, preserving but negating it in the making of a truly humane world. Only critical, conceptual thinking is able to contribute to this: thought that has been deprived of concepts easily falls



‘under the spell of any despotism’. Only critical, conceptual, self-reflective thinking can guard against paranoia.

Horkheimer and Adorno assert the classic Marxian point that ‘the increase in economic productivity... creates the conditions for a more just world’, which spells progress but at the same time tremendously increases the social power of those who control production. Individuals are better provided for than ever before, but they ‘vanish before the apparatus they serve’. This state of things is completed by ‘the flashy and noisy propagation of spirit [*der gleißnerischen Verbreitung des Geistes*]’: while spirit’s true concern is the ‘negation of reification’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: xv; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 20/xvii), the spread of *reified* spirit – i.e. culture in the form of things and commodities: *Kulturgut* – kills off spirit and with it the hope for the better state of things. ‘The flood of precise information and brand-new amusements makes people smarter and more stupid at once’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/ 1997/2002: 20/xv/xvii). Horkheimer and Adorno emphasize that their concern is not the same as that of the conservative ‘critics of civilization’ who promote ‘culture as a value’: ‘What is at stake is not conservation of the past but the fulfilment of past hopes’. The ‘selling out of culture’ would not *in itself* be particularly deplorable: the point is that it helps in ‘converting the economic achievements into their opposite’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: xv; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 21/xviii). Capitalist civilization has not only destroyed metaphysics, i.e. the transcendental element in thinking that pushes beyond the reality of ‘that which is’, but has itself become metaphysics: the ‘hygienic factory’ and the commodities that are produced there are imbued with the power to transcend what they actually are. The critique of the reification and destruction of spirit is meant to help reaping ‘the economic achievements’ of the capitalist economy, and *thereby* to defeat fascism and other delusions.

## ‘THE CONCEPT OF ENLIGHTENMENT’

As the first chapter contains the principal argument of the book on which the other chapters build, it will be presented here in greater detail.

‘The Concept of Enlightenment’ consists of three sections of roughly equal length, divided into nine, six and seven rather long paragraphs respectively. Most paragraphs contain several trains of thought that often dialectically negate each other. This complex style of presentation means that any kind of summary treatment of the whole would be liable to distort the argument: the essential points tend to be suspended in the tension between blocks of text that destabilize each other’s meanings. The argument of ‘The Concept of Enlightenment’, like that of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in general, is therefore best presented through close readings of selected substantive sections. I will concentrate on reconstructing the third section (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 29–42; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 52–66/22–34) as it is the most comprehensive part of the chapter. The main motives of the first two sections are, very briefly, as follows:

- In the first two paragraphs of the first section, a quotation from Francis Bacon (1561–1626) is used to introduce the concept of enlightenment: enlightenment lets itself be guided by nature in order to be able to command it in practice; knowledge is for the increase of power, not of happiness.
- The enlightenment translated myths into concepts, but then (in the form of positivism) went on to dismiss concepts for being merely myths in disguise, including its own core ideas, such as that of ‘human right’: enlightenment critique destroys its own concepts and becomes destructive of enlightenment, a process that is summed up in the formula ‘Enlightenment is totalitarian’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 6; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 28/4); ‘totalitarian’ means here that nothing is left out – it is complete and without gaps (not ‘totalitarian’ as in ‘totalitarianism’, although that might have been intended as an connotation).

- The fourth paragraph argues that enlightenment denounces myth as the projection of human subjectivity on to nature; both rationalism and empiricism aim to abstract from particularity and quality through emphasis on systems, logic, numbers, equivalence.
- The following three paragraphs discuss myth as an early form of enlightenment that gradually turns into the enlightenment that destroys myth while preserving aspects of the mythical. Myth was always part of the attempt to dominate nature; through patterns of replaceability, representation, fungibility, abstraction and signification, logic gradually emerges from magic and myth.
- The last two paragraphs present the enlightenment, beginning with myth, as a response to fear whose expression it turns into explanation. Anything outside the systems of naming and explaining is taboo. This is still the case with positivist science, which, like myth in the beginning, is concerned with banning the fearsome, dangerous and unknown. As long as it does this, however, it remains unfree.
- The second section begins with reflections on the separation of art from science, their differing relationships to truth, and the role played by the distinction between language as a system of signs and language as a system of symbols. Art remains akin to magic that tries to influence nature by mimicking it, whereas science tries to dominate nature through work. Bourgeois revolutions have typically preferred faith over art and science; Horkheimer and Adorno refer to militant religiosity as a characteristic of modernity. In the (fascist) present, 'the utterly enlightened' turn the irrationality of faith into rationally organized fraud (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 20; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 43/15).
- The third paragraph of the second section turns back to the discussion of the germs of enlightenment in prehistoric times. Social domination emerges together with a division of labour that makes magic a concern of a specialist: the magician. Magic rituals, then ideas, then concepts, then science are in the service of domination until domination is secure enough to do away with them altogether. On the way, human history has produced a number of ways in which enlightenment negated but also preserved magic (fourth paragraph).
- The fifth and sixth paragraphs discuss the mathematization of science as 'totalitarian', as

mathematical equations turn even unknowns into already knowns (again, 'totalitarian' means it is so complete that it knows even the unknowns). Horkheimer and Adorno argue, *pace* Husserl, that thinking becomes an automatized process and a tool. Positivism rejects atheism as metaphysical and happily tolerates religion as well as art as long as they do not claim to contribute to cognition. Everything that exists is subsumed to logical formalism, while reason (including its potential for transcendence of the existing towards a humane world) is subsumed to the world as it exists (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 26; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 49/20). This circularity means the defeat of reason by myth. Existing social injustice becomes sacrosanct, immune to critique by reason.

- In the final paragraph of section two, Horkheimer and Adorno return to the more specific critique of the capitalist present: rather than being subjects, individuals are reduced to being functions and carriers of conditioned reactions in a web determined by 'the agencies of mass production and its culture' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 28; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 51/21).

The third section of 'The Concept of Enlightenment' is in three parts: the first paragraph develops the theme of 'self-preservation' as central to both myth and enlightenment; the following three paragraphs explore the Sirens episode from the *Odyssey*; and the last three paragraphs return to a more modern context and discuss aspects of agency of the exploited, culminating in a critique of modern socialism and the labour movement.

At the beginning of the third section, Horkheimer and Adorno single out as central to enlightenment philosophy, and indeed as 'the true maxim of all Western civilization', Spinoza's formulation, 'conatus sese conservandi primum et unicum virtutis est fundamentum': 'the endeavour of preserving oneself is the first and only basis of virtue' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 29; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 52/22; this is from Spinoza's *Ethica*, pars IV, propos XXII, Coroll.). This is, they argue, the one point in which all the differing religious and philosophical tendencies of bourgeois thought coincide.

Enlightenment detects myth 'in any human utterance that has no place in the functional context of self-preservation'. The concept of the self was gradually stripped of all 'natural traces' – denounced as 'mythological': body, blood, soul, 'even the natural ego' – so that it was sublimated to the transcendental or logical subject, 'the reference point of reason, the legislating authority for action' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 29; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 52/22). Enlightenment judges that 'those who abandon themselves directly to life, without any rational reference to self-preservation, regress to the prehistoric'. Instinct itself is as mythical as are superstition, thoughtlessness and lust. The process of self-preservation (the economy) is 'based on the bourgeois division of labour' and forces the individuals 'to mould themselves body and soul on the technical apparatus' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 29–30; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 52/23). Once enlightenment, virtue and rationality are grounded in self-preservation, the stripping down of the increasingly abstract notion of the self continues to its dismal extreme point in (logical rather than Comtean) positivism that abolished even the (fairly abstract) Kantian 'transcendental subject of cognition'. Cognition is now considered a matter of logical processes that are not dependent on subjectivity. Logical positivism has eliminated with thought 'the last intervening [literally: interrupting] agency between individual action and social norm'. After subjectivity has eliminated itself from its own consciousness, it has become *sachlich* (objective/thingly/value-free) and 'free from the polyvalence of mythical thinking and of signification in general'. Reason has become 'a universal tool for the fabrication of all other tools'. Like manual work, it is instrumental and subject to goals it would not dare to challenge (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 30; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 53/23). From the critique of reason's reduction to a tool for tool making, Horkheimer and Adorno move (within the same paragraph) to their critique of the centrality of formal logic in the context of contemporary logical positivism. Typically for

*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they argue here on two levels at once, a specific historical and a generic or genetic one: 'The exclusiveness of the laws of logic' (in the specific context of contemporary logical positivism) stems from the single-minded functionality of reason that has limited itself to being a mere instrument, whereas, more generally speaking, it stems 'from the compulsory character of self-preservation'. The latter 'ever again comes down to the choice between survival and death which still reverberates in the principle that from two contradicting propositions only one can be true and only one false' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 30; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 53/23). The proposition here is that the most modern philosophical fashion reflects a mental reaction that used to be adequate for prehistoric humans who needed to decide whether to run away or to throw the spear in a split second, without any ambiguity or the luxury of pondering on shades of grey: in prehistory there was no time for dialectics. This begs the question, of course, why such caveman philosophy, geared towards excluding the middle, seems cutting-edge in the twentieth century (and now the twenty-first)? This question is addressed by the following sentence, which contains a different, but complementary argument:

The formalism of this principle... is caused by the opacity and the entanglement of interests in a society in which the maintenance of forms and the preservation of individuals only accidentally coincide. The expulsion of thought from logic ratifies in the lecture hall the reification [*Versachlichung*] of human beings in factory and office. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 30; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 53/23)

Logical positivism's concern with form is caused by the fact that society subordinates the preservation of individuals to the preservation of social forms (i.e. the mode of production). Excessively formal thinking follows from the preponderance of social forms over social individuals and their concrete needs. Enlightenment subsumes any hesitancy and ambivalence under the category of 'mythological thinking' and therewith under a taboo. This taboo 'encroaches on the power that

imposed it': enlightenment encroaches 'on spirit which is what enlightenment itself is'. Once spirit as enlightenment has finally reduced itself to the formal poverty of (logical) positivism – imposing binary caveman thinking: yes/no, kill/run – it goes into reverse and destroys the unfolding of spirit, i.e. itself. The process that had started out as the promise to exorcize nature ends up unleashing nature, namely the single-minded, ultimately self-destructive pursuit of self-preservation pure and simple, culminating in capitalist crisis and modern warfare. Tragically, the self-destruction and regression of the spirit (i.e. of enlightenment) is fuelled by its own fear of regression: the process in which the self has alienated [*entfremdet*] itself from 'mere nature' was so painful that the self is horrified by the notion of falling back into nature (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 31; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 54/24). This horror causes the regression: the fear that humans could regress to that heart of prehistoric darkness made them do the most horrible things – right in the heart of *historical* darkness: 'The living memory of prehistory, of its nomadic and even more of the truly pre-patriarchal periods, has in all millennia been expunged from people's consciousness with the most terrible sanctions'. In the modern period, torture by 'fire and the wheel' has been replaced by 'stigma with which it branded any irrationality as leading to perdition'.

The acknowledgement that evolving civilization has softened itself to the extent that torture has been replaced by stigma is followed – in the same paragraph – by sarcastic remarks on the bourgeois love for 'lesser evils' and moderation. Even enlightened hedonism is well tempered: lust that has learned to hate itself 'through millennia of work pressure' remains 'mean and mutilated'. It 'remains under the spell of the self-preservation to which reason, that has been deposed meanwhile, has once trained it' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 31; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 54–55/24).

Enlightenment slandered the fear of unsubdued, threatening nature as superstition, while it made domination of internal and external nature the absolute purpose of life. In developed industrial society, 'when self-preservation has finally been automated, reason is dismissed by those who, as controllers of production, have taken over its inheritance and fear it in the disinherited' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 32; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 55/24–5): the dialectic of enlightenment, or of reason, takes on a new form, as the triumph of increasingly rationalized self-preservation leads the ruling class (those who control production) to turn against reason because they fear that reason has now jumped ship and gone over to the exploited. In this particular perspective, the dialectic of enlightenment – at least in the paranoia of the ruling class who sense the irrationality of their domination – coincides with the class struggle in developed capitalism. This train of thought is not further developed here, though, and Horkheimer and Adorno continue with the primary motive of this section: 'The essence of enlightenment is the binomial [*die Alternative*] whose inevitability is that of domination'. This formulation needs careful reading: 'the binomial' is as inevitable as domination is, which is not to say that it is in fact inevitable – nothing in the text suggests that domination *is* inevitable. The point here is that *as long as* enlightenment takes place under the conditions of domination, it remains restricted to thinking in alternatives of either/or – kill or run (i.e. binomials) – that are the signature of nature. Horkheimer and Adorno sum up:

Human beings were always forced to choose between their subjugation under nature or that of nature under the self. With the spread of bourgeois commodity economy the dark horizon of myth is illuminated by the sun of calculating reason beneath whose icy rays the seeds of the new barbarism are germinating. Under the compulsion of domination, human labour has always led away from myth but under conditions of domination it has always fallen back under its spell. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 32; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 55/25)

The conclusion at the end of the first paragraph of section three is unequivocal: enlightenment is self-defeating *because and as long as it comes in the form of domination*.

### DISCIPLINE AND DEAFNESS IN ODYSSEUS' FLOATING FACTORY

The following three paragraphs of section three (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 32-7; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 55-60/25-9) discuss the Sirens episode from the twelfth book of the *Odyssey*, the Homeric epic from the eighth century BCE. Sirens are seductively singing demons, often connected with death (they are sometimes depicted as half bird, half woman, like harpies); whoever listens to their singing will die. The aspect of Homer's text picked up on by Horkheimer and Adorno is how Odysseus deals with the danger. As Odysseus' ship is taken as a metaphor for a workplace – a kind of factory under conditions of quasi-slavery – this section is in fact a reflection on the concept of labour. The discussion of the Sirens episode in chapter one has therewith a different focus from the excursus on the *Odyssey* in chapter two, which is chiefly a refutation of contemporary romanticizing readings of Homer. They are connected, though, through the interpretation of the character of Odysseus as a prototype of bourgeois subjectivity due to his use of cunning rationality in the service of the struggle for self-preservation. The bourgeois subject is required to be totally in the present moment. To survive, one must not dwell in the past. This is, however, just what the Sirens offer: they sing about the past. Getting lost in their song promises enjoyment: their song is proto-art, art not yet 'neutralized to being merely art'. Their naughty promise of enjoyment threatens the patriarchal order represented by nautical discipline. Horkheimer and Adorno are scathing about the disciplining process: 'Humanity had to inflict terrible injuries on itself before the self – the identical,

purpose-directed, masculine character of human beings – was created, and something of this process is repeated in every childhood' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 33; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 56/26). To lose oneself – which means to lose one's *self* or one's ego – is tempting but as it was such hard work to produce the self, the bourgeois subject must be determined to keep it up. The process of producing the self is that of civilization, whose path 'was that of obedience and labour, over which fulfilment shines always only as semblance, as beauty deprived of power': art is the beauty of a hard-working, beauty-less world.

Odysseus' men must row like crazy and have their ears plugged: 'those who work are forced to look ahead, full of energy and keenly focussed, ignoring anything that lies to one side' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 34; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 57/26). 'Odysseus, the landowner, who has others working for him', by contrast, keeps his ears unplugged: he chooses to be exposed to the temptation but has himself bound to the mast, while his men can hear neither the Sirens nor their boss asking to be unbound. In the name of self-preservation, Odysseus arranges a fettering constellation to the effect that neither he nor his workers are able to abandon work discipline, but he affords himself the torturous luxury of being exposed to the temptation that he knows he will want but cannot allow himself to give in to. He denies happiness to himself as much as his men, but he at least wants to know what he is missing. The Sirens' tempting promise of happiness is 'kept out of the way of praxis' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 34; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 57/27), reduced to art: something to be contemplated at a distance. Homer depicts here the separation of art and labour.

Horkheimer and Adorno discuss in the following paragraph the relationship between Odysseus and his men, focusing on the image of Odysseus in bondage. The image demonstrates his remarkable power: the workers work while the boss is chained to the mast; his power is so

secure that it can be deputized. This implies, however, regression as well as increased power (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 34–5; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 58/27): exemption from labour means mutilation. As in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, the lord becomes dependent, while the bondsman who works on the thing from which the lord is separated enjoys the element of independence that the involvement in direct production grants (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 35; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 58/27). For Horkheimer and Adorno, Odysseus' bondage points to both, the differentiation and development of skills and knowledge that civilization comprises and the increasing 'fixation of instincts through greater repression' through which 'imagination withers'. 'The curse of unstoppable progress is unstoppable regression', which implies that those who have been left behind by progress 'represent not only untruth': those at the cutting edge are fettered by their own civilization, while some dimension of truth may be accessible to those less 'developed'.

In the following paragraph, Horkheimer and Adorno explore the other side of the relationship, that of the rowers. Here the focus is on their enforced deafness, which mirrors the self-induced immobility of their commander. 'The autocratic intellect... detaches itself from sensuous experience in order to subjugate it' and is likewise affected by regression. The intellect's 'domination over the senses' (such as when it plugs the ears in order to facilitate the labour process) takes place through the 'unification of the intellectual functions' (all energies are concentrated on one task, such as, in the Homeric image, rowing), whereby thought resigns itself to producing unanimity (the unanimity of the hard-working team of rowers). Both thought and experience are impoverished in the process of their separation: the deafness of 'the compliant proletarians' is the equivalent of 'the immobility of those in command' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 36; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 59/28). The Sirens episode is summed up as follows:

The more complicated and refined the social, economic and scientific apparatus, to the operation of which the system of production has long since attuned the body, the more impoverished are the experiences of which it is capable.

In other words, the system of production has attuned the body to the societal apparatus destroying its ability to make experiences. Science-based rationalization of production turns qualities into functions and humans back into amphibians:

The elimination of qualities, their conversion into functions, spreads from science via rationalized modes of work to the life world that is shared by all modern human societies and approximates it once more to that of the amphibians. The regression of the masses today lies in their inability to hear with their own ears what has not been heard before, to touch with their hands what has not previously been grasped; it is the new form that delusion assumed after all its mythical forms were defeated. Through the mediation of the total society that subsumes all relationships and impulses, human beings are being turned back into precisely what the developmental law of society, the principle of the self, had struggled to overcome: mere species beings, identical to one another through isolation within forcibly directed collectivity. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 36; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 59–60/28–9)

'Delusion' [*Verblendung*] has merely changed form: mythical delusion has become enlightened delusion. The history of society has returned humans to their prehistoric starting point. Horkheimer and Adorno interpret the image of the rowers as representing 'modern workers' in three different contexts that are unified by the societal totality, production (factories), culture (cinemas) and politics (collectives): 'The rowers, unable to speak to one another, are all harnessed to the same rhythms, like modern workers in factories, cinemas and collectives'. It is important to note that, in spite of the overall emphasis on civilization as the history of 'spirit' and 'the self', Horkheimer and Adorno assert here a materialist perspective: while 'conscious manipulation... additionally render[s] the oppressed stupid and deflect[s] them from the truth', conformism is enforced

*first of all* by ‘the concrete conditions of work in society’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 36-7; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 60/28-9;

## REIFIED REASON CAN BECOME EMANCIPATORY

The fifth paragraph begins – like many in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – with the counterargument: ‘This logical necessity’, i.e. the necessity of the powerlessness of the workers, ‘is not final, though’: the element that would empower the workers to end domination seems to be, in sturdy idealist fashion, their ability to think. Thinking is ‘the servant whom the master cannot control at will’. The human capacity to think is not *necessarily* subservient to power: the master’s tools can, after all, undo the master’s house, or rather are needed for doing so. Horkheimer and Adorno in particular celebrate here the positive upshots of reification and alienation. Domination has ‘reified’ [*verdinglicht*] itself by taking on the forms of law and organization, and in the process had to limit itself. These instruments of domination have gained some independence in the process, as the mediating instance of *Geist* (spirit) moderates the immediacy of exploitation: ‘The moment of rationality in domination also asserts itself as something different from [domination]’. The object-like quality of the means of domination – language, weapons, machines, thought – makes these means universally available, including for those pursuing ends other than domination, and therewith implies the critique of domination. It seems that Horkheimer and Adorno argue here not only that the instruments (guns, etc.) *can* be turned around but that their object-like, thing-like character *asks for it*. It is in this sense that progress, *by way of* being the progress of domination, is *also* the progress of the *negation* of domination – which is, of course, just what the phrase ‘dialectic of enlightenment’ means. It is here a surprisingly optimistic

concept. In the capitalist present, thought may have lost its self-reflexivity and today’s machines may mutilate their operators, but ‘in the form of machines... alienated reason moves towards a society which reconciles thought [in its reified forms, namely material and intellectual apparatuses]... with the liberated living beings’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 37; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 60–1/29–30).

Of course, Horkheimer and Adorno instantly pour cold water on the hints of optimism in this account of reification by pointing out how ‘the rulers’ react to the objective openness of the historical situation: smelling the rat, ‘the rulers’ denounce reason itself as ideology, which brings the discussion back to one of the book’s leitmotifs, the attack on (Comtean as well as ‘logical’) positivism. The ruling ‘cliques’ (fascist and proto-fascist) have abandoned rationalist justifications of their ‘misdeeds’ and use instead the rhetoric of intuitions, mission and destiny, posturing ‘as the engineers of world history’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 38; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 61/30). Horkheimer and Adorno conclude this paragraph with a reflection on productivity, power and class in contemporary capitalism:

Now that the livelihood of those still needed to operate the machines can be produced with a minimal part of the labour time which the masters of society have at their disposal, the superfluous... mass of the population...are drilled as additional guards of the system, so that they can be used today and tomorrow as material for its grand designs...Misery that consists of the contrast between power and impotence is growing immeasurably, in tandem with the capacity permanently to abolish any misery. Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 38; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 61–2/30)

The following paragraph explores the contradictory state of thinking under these conditions. Thinking about thinking is central to Critical Theory that constitutes an exercise in self-reflection: enlightenment’s enlightenment. It begins by stating that ‘the reason of

the reasonable society' is not in fact reasonable (it is so only in the sense in which the father orders his children 'to be reasonable, or else'). The good news is that this system's inevitability is only an illusion; the bad news is that thinking that is societally constituted 'as an instrument of domination' cannot dissolve this illusion (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 39; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 62/31). Unfortunately, a type of *in itself* emancipatory thinking does not exist, but the crux of Horkheimer and Adorno's argument is that the nature of thinking *as such* points beyond its own social-historical constitution. Thinking cannot escape the entanglement that keeps it 'ensnared in prehistory' (the struggle for self-preservation), but at least it can recognize 'the logic of either-or... with which it radically emancipated itself from nature, as this nature itself': *we are able to understand that we escaped nature only by means of being very much like nature*. We have not yet transcended nature, and in this sense we are not human – humane – yet, and we know it somehow, due to the relentlessness of thinking itself: unstopably consistent thinking, relentless in this respect like nature, cannot stop short of recognizing, and then challenging, its own nature-like character. Thinking produces a kind of overflow that enables it to reflect on itself. Its steady trickle is the basis of humanity's hope for emancipation.

Horkheimer and Adorno's concept of dialectics precludes any attempt to separate the good bits of enlightenment from the bad bits. Enlightenment is emancipatory and liberating only *through* its instrumental and dominating aspects: this is the dialectic of enlightenment. The remainder of this paragraph elaborates this notion. Horkheimer and Adorno state bluntly that people cannot but represent nature to themselves 'in such a way that it can be mastered' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 39; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 63/31). They relate the notion of thinking as an instrument to that of identity: an instrument or a tool is a thing that is *the same thing* in a variety of different situations. In this sense it stands out

as something 'known, unitary and identical' from a world of 'chaotic, manifold and disparate' objects: I have one (identical) hammer but I use it to hit many different (non-identical) nails. Likewise, the concept is 'the mental tool that fits into just that point in many things where one can clutch them'. Horkheimer and Adorno caution against any form of thinking that tries to deny its own instrumental character, such as mysticism and some forms of utopian thinking: the assumption there could be a mystic union of concept and thing, or subject and object, is delusional. They applaud enlightenment, by contrast, for coldly declaring and asserting domination as a process of separation. When enlightened thinking separates subject and object, it reflects reality and is, in this sense, true; at the same time it is false when it believes things ought to be the way they ('positively') are. Domination is at the root of both superstition and enlightenment. When enlightenment denounces superstition, it actually denounces *itself* (albeit in its own earlier guise, and not consciously). Although enlightenment means domination, it also makes the dominated 'audible in its alienation'. The rate of increase of domination of nature by enlightenment seems to correspond to the increase of the counter-tendency, the greater hearing that the same enlightenment grants to alienated nature. As it did through myth, exploited nature continues to speak through enlightenment, but it speaks differently. When spirit recognizes itself as 'nature split from itself', spirit *is* in fact nature that invokes itself as blind and mutilated, whereas in prehistory nature used to invoke itself, using humans as its medium, as *mana*, as omnipotent. 'When spirit modestly confesses that it is domination and as such *not something other than nature* [*in Natur sich zurücknimmt*], it dissolves its claim to domination that subjects it to nature' (*italics added*). Domination of nature is not to end, but it ought to recognize itself honestly for what it is, and thereby – as *self-reflexive* domination of nature – transform itself into a softer, more enlightened, maybe humane form of domination of nature: it would thereby



begin to *transcend* nature. Human history (as humane history) would finally begin (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 40; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 63/31–2). The weapons with which humans have subjugated nature always have undermined human freedom as much as they rendered it possible, and they need to be radically transformed. ‘Through recognition of nature within the subject, which constitutes the unrecognized truth of all culture, enlightenment is antithetical to domination as such’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 40; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 64/32). This is one of the clearest statements of the benign side of the dialectic: Horkheimer and Adorno describe transformed, self-reflective, emancipatory enlightenment as ‘the unrecognized truth of all culture’. The enlightenment that tends to ‘confus[e] freedom with the business of self-preservation’ is denoted ‘bourgeois’. The positivistic hostility to conceptual, transcendental, truly philosophical thinking ‘left the field wide open for the lie’. Lies cannot be distinguished from truth anymore where truth has been ‘neutralized to being *Kulturgut*’, i.e. accumulated ‘cultural goods’ that are summed up in the chauvinistic notion of cultural heritage.

### THE INSUFFICIENT RADICALISM OF THE LABOUR MOVEMENT’S SOCIALISM

The last paragraph of ‘The Concept of Enlightenment’ begins with a critique of the insufficient radicalism of the labour movement: ‘socialism, in a concession to reactionary common sense, prematurely confirmed as eternal that necessity’, namely the necessity of the societal domination that results from the struggle for self-preservation against overwhelming, hostile nature. The domination of nature, though, reflects and extends nature itself, whose essence is nothing other than necessity and the struggle for self-preservation, thereby trapping humanity in prehistory:

the progress towards history proper, the history of humane society reconciled with nature, is arrested. When humanity fights and dominates nature, it *is* nature; when humanity reconciles nature on the basis of acknowledging its own being part of it, it *transcends* nature. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that socialism ‘elevated necessity to being the basis [of society] for all time to come and degraded spirit – in keeping with time-honoured idealist tradition – to the pinnacle [of the superstructure], clutching therewith too frantically the heritage of bourgeois philosophy’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 41; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 64/32). In other words, the nominally Marxist notion that the economy was the ‘basis’ and that anything to do with thinking was housed upstairs in the ‘superstructure’ is a continuation of bourgeois thought that ‘degrades’ spirit by elevating it out of the realm where it would make a difference: the relationship with nature. In this traditional perspective, nature would continue to be ‘posited as entirely alien’ as it had been in mythology. Nature that remained alien and unreconciled, however, was bound to stage a backlash against its domination by human civilization and ‘become totalitarian and absorb freedom, socialism included’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 41; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 64–5/33).

This (Benjamin-inspired) comment on the socialism of the labour movement is followed by a general round-up of the argument of ‘The Concept of Enlightenment’. Enlightenment ‘subjected everything particular to its discipline’ but in the process ‘allowed the uncomprehended totality as the domination of things to rebound on being and consciousness of humans’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 41; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 65/33). The situation is not entirely without hope, though: ‘But true praxis capable of overturning the state of things depends on theory’s intransigence against the comatose state in which society allows thought to ossify’. It seems that those scattered bits of thought that escaped

reification – such as Critical Theory, perhaps – can, by being intransigent, inform ‘true praxis’ that will shake society out of the coma that makes thought ossify. Here Horkheimer and Adorno add an attack on the (then as now) influential conservative ‘critique of civilization’: ‘Fulfilment is not jeopardized by the material preconditions of fulfilment, unfettered technology as such’. The question of technology is not the ‘supreme’ but the wrong question as ‘the fault lies with a social context that induces delusional blindness [*gesellschaftlicher Verblendungszusammenhang*]’. The ‘mythic-scientific respect that people all over the world pay to what the given facts are’ has become ‘a fortress before which even the revolutionary imagination despises itself as utopianism and degenerates to the compliant trust in the objective tendency of history’. Horkheimer and Adorno encourage here ‘the revolutionary imagination’ not to capitulate before the positivistic fetishization of facts: ‘The spirit of a theory that is intransigently formulated in this perspective might be able to turn around that of merciless progress when it has run its course’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 42; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 65/33).

The notion of the achievements of progress brings the argument back to Bacon’s dream of the unimaginable wealth of the future, referred to in the first paragraph. Horkheimer and Adorno note that Bacon’s dream has surpassed itself:

In multiplying *Gewalt* [i.e. violence, power, force, domination] through the mediation of the market, the bourgeois economy has multiplied also its things and forces [*Kräfte*] to such an extent that their administration no longer requires kings, nor even the bourgeois themselves: it only needs all. They learn from the power [*Macht*] of things finally to forgo domination [*Macht*]. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 42; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 66/33)

‘It only needs all’ must be the understatement of the century. On close reading, and considering the historical context, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is much more Mountain Hut

Halfway House than ‘Grand Hotel Abyss’, where Georg Lukács famously housed Adorno in the 1962 preface to his *Theory of the Novel* (Lukács, 1971: 22). Bacon’s utopia that ‘we should command nature in action’ has revealed itself as the dream (read: nightmare) of perfecting human domination *in society*. In the process, though, human knowledge has increased so much that it can finally begin to dissolve domination for good. Unsurprisingly, the optimism of this account of what humanity can achieve is dampened in the last sentence of the text that points forward to the discussion of the ‘culture industry’: ‘But in face of this possibility enlightenment, in the service of the present, is turning itself into total deception of the masses’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 42; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 66/34).

### ‘EXCURSUS 1: ODYSSEUS OR MYTH AND ENLIGHTENMENT’

*Dialectic of Enlightenment* addresses contemporary concerns by way of working through materials that are far from contemporary. The extreme point of this method is ‘Excursus 1: Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment’, the book’s second chapter, a reading of passages from the *Odyssey*. Horkheimer and Adorno indicate in the first pages of the chapter what directed this choice of material (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 43–6; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 67–70/35–7), pointing to how the Homeric epics had been used to denounce liberalism and modern bourgeois individuality. Some nineteenth-century conservative German ‘humanists’ had celebrated the Homeric epics as documents of genuine, archaic humanity, whereas some proto-fascists sensed that Homer’s protagonists were already quite capable of rational thinking, cunning, mediation and even exchange relations. The fascists understood that even the earliest of the Greek classics already had one foot in (emerging) bourgeois society: Homer had not in fact

painted uncorrupted images from a myth-soaked past that both conservatives and fascists dreamed of tapping into. Horkheimer and Adorno observe that the fascist critics 'made a correct observation here' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 45; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 68/36). The excursus on Odysseus puts a finger on a sore point at which bourgeois humanism made itself vulnerable to fascist attack: the humanists celebrated as 'myth' something that was in fact already a document of enlightenment, clearing the ground for the fascists' *anti-humanist* celebration of myth.

Horkheimer and Adorno, by contrast, deal with the literary form of the ancient myth (the epic) as a case study of the dialectic of enlightenment. Odysseus' adventurous journey home from Troy is read as a tale of the making of the bourgeois subject by resisting and overcoming temptations, conquering the emerging subject's internal nature. The chief motive is the notion that civilization is the history of the introversion of sacrifice (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 55; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 79/43) as renunciation of desires: throughout the epic, Odysseus, whose most prominent qualities are patience and cunning, has to conquer his own impulses. Repeatedly gifts are made that, resembling sacrifices to gods and demons, amount to exchanges of equivalents that are not in fact equivalents: sacrifices are attempts to cheat the gods by offering them things (say, an animal) that are much less valuable than that which the humans in question expect to receive in return (survival, good winds, luck in warfare, etc.). Odysseus' cunning consists in his accepting the powers of the mythical forces he finds himself confronted with while discovering gaps. The most pronounced of his tricks is the (literal) denial of his own subjectivity by claiming his name is 'nobody' (which in Greek sounds similar to his actual name). After his successful return home, Odysseus engages in the reconstitution of another civilizational form of sacrifice and denial of instinctual drives:

marriage. Horkheimer and Adorno demonstrate that Odysseus' actions are driven by a form of rationality that dovetails with that discussed in 'The Concept of Enlightenment'.

## **'EXCURSUS 2: JULIETTE, OR ENLIGHTENMENT AND MORALITY'**

While the excursus on the Odyssey provides a relatively straightforward argument based on the interpretation of one principal source, the second excursus is much more complex, based as it is on a constellation of texts that conventionally would not be discussed together. It begins with an exploration of the concepts of reason and enlightenment in Kant and other enlightenment philosophers, emphasizing that reason creates order out of itself, as opposed to submitting to order externally imposed (which it denounces as 'tutelage'). Horkheimer and Adorno point to the ambiguity in the concept of reason as denoting, on the one hand, the utopia of liberated conviviality (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 83; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 106/65) and, on the other, calculating thought in the service of self-preservation. The central theme of the chapter is the question of how enlightened thinking attempts, and fails, to argue that moral behaviour is reasonable without recourse to doctrines that it must dismiss as so many superstitions. If it postulates the existence of an ethical instinct, it finds it impossible to argue why the latter is superior to its opposite, which is equally evident empirically. Fascism draws the most unequivocal conclusion and does away with morality.

The chapter illustrates the ambiguities of Kantian moral philosophy by reading it through the writings of the Marquis de Sade, chiefly the novel *History of Juliette* (1797), as well as Nietzsche. De Sade's novels contain both pornographic narrative, which often depicts sexual practices that take the form of complex, mechanical, almost machine-like arrangements, resembling modern team

sports, and philosophical speeches and tracts that belong to the most radically atheist and materialist texts of the Enlightenment period, anticipating elements of later nihilism. Horkheimer and Adorno emphasize the closeness of both de Sade and Kant to enlightenment rationalism and of Nietzsche to fascism respectively.

The first third of the chapter (the first seven paragraphs; Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 81–93; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 104–117/63–74) provides the general argument, culminating in the observation that the mainstream representatives of the Enlightenment movement rejected the radicalism of Kant's first critique as they understood it undermined the, as it were, reasonable amount of superstition and religion that bourgeois society required, while Kant himself limited the 'critique of pure reason' through his moral philosophy 'in order to rescue the possibility of reason' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 93; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 117/74). Horkheimer and Adorno add that 'unreflectingly enlightened thinking' (i.e. that of lesser thinkers than Kant) always tended towards scepticism (later, positivism and, arguably, more recently, post-modernism), i.e. the rationalist doubt of the 'transcendental' validity of reason itself, especially its utopian aspects such as the goal of universal peace. 'Dark thinkers' like de Sade and Nietzsche are contrasted to both the dialectician Kant and the various forms of (proto-liberal) bourgeois sceptics, as consistently rationalist thinkers who attack morality and civilization as so much mythology. The remainder of the chapter (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 94–119; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 117–43/74–93) mainly explores the radicalism of the 'dark thinkers'. The discussion moves from the rationalist rejection of pity and philanthropy to the discussion of the relationship between work and enjoyment – the idea that lust is only allowed as a break, and in reasonable terms rather than excessively as festival – and finally to love, marriage, family and the domination of women.

### **'CULTURE INDUSTRY: ENLIGHTENMENT AS MASS DECEPTION'**

Culture, the sphere of activity of spirit, or enlightenment, has become 'industry' and therewith deception. The logical presupposition of this idea, the central thesis of the fourth chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is that the concept of 'culture' is meaningful only if it is opposed to industry, the sphere of self-preservation, production, exploitation, manipulation and domination of nature. Culture that has become industry is a scam. One of the countless imprecisions of the available English translations makes even the title of this chapter problematic, as there is no article in the German text: it is 'Culture Industry', not 'The Culture Industry'. The definite article wrongly added by the translators facilitates the misinterpretation of 'the culture industry' as a determinate, particular sphere of cultural production, perhaps in the sense of 'popular culture'. This is not what the chapter is about, though. 'Culture industry' is about culture *as such* that has become what it should be a negation of, thereby negating itself. In this sense, culture as 'culture industry' is another dimension of the dialectic of enlightenment.

The chapter's starting point is the rejection of the principal complaint of modern 'cultural critique': modernity's social differentiation created 'cultural chaos' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 120; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 144/94), a position that was ubiquitous at the time in either its right-wing, proto-fascist version or the conservative-liberal one that animated much of classical sociology. Horkheimer and Adorno make the opposite claim: contemporary culture systematically produces sameness everywhere, even across political divides. Culture has always been business, but now it has abandoned any attempts to hide it. Although written in the United States, the text hints at the fact that the new world did not seem altogether new to these German refugees: 'In Germany the graveyard

stillness of the dictatorship already hung over the gayest films of the democratic era' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 126; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 150/99). The claim that there is cultural continuity between liberal and fascist regimes refers to Weimar Germany and the Third Reich first, then to the latter and 'the West'.

Standardization and centralization derive neither from technology as such, nor from consumers' demands but from the inner logic of the social totality. Within the latter, the 'cultural monopolies' are relatively weak and dependent: 'the objective societal tendency in the present era' is incarnated in the leaders of steel, oil, electricity and chemistry concerns to whom the producers of culture 'must hurry to adapt' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 122; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 147/96). Culture (or spirit) is an index, not the cause of the societal misery. Formulaic culture saves subjects the effort that Kantian epistemology had postulated is involved in synthesizing sense data into perceptions: culture industry 'does [their] schematizing for [the subjects]' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 124; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 149/98). The tension that characterizes great artworks, resulting from the artist's ever failing struggle to create identity between the logic of the material and the style of its artistic shaping, fails to come about because the cultural artefact's form and matter are already prefabricated for each other (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 131; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 155/103).

One of the key themes of the chapter is the collapse of the separation of high and low culture which damages both ((Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 135–6; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 160–1/107–8). Horkheimer and Adorno describe 'the circus, the peep show, or the brothel' as much as Schönberg's twelve-tone music as eccentric and 'embarrassing' to society: culture industry domesticates, perfects, streamlines and mainstreams *both*, high and low culture, and in the process exorcizes whatever could be recalcitrant about them. The split between cheap and dirty amusement and high art should in fact

be defended as it is witness to the division and falseness of society itself. Horkheimer and Adorno applaud 'cartoon films' that 'were once exponents of fantasy against rationalism' and 'redeemed animals and things by having their technology electrify them'. Lesser examples, domesticated by culture industry and lacking any subversive imagination, 'merely confirm the victory of technological reason over truth' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 138; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 163/110). 'Traces of the better state of things persist in those features of the culture industry by which it resembles the circus' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 142–3; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 168–9/113–14). Culture industry is 'causing meaninglessness to disappear at the lowest level of art just as radically as meaning is disappearing at the highest'; it imposes the same schemata of meaning on everything and in the process ruins all. Under the regime of culture industry, 'to be entertained means to be in agreement' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 144; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 170/115). Concerning high culture, Horkheimer and Adorno emphasize that artworks have always been commodities (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 157; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 184/127): the purposelessness of great art depended on the anonymity of the market. Beethoven was a great businessman. The artwork is classically described as being determined by (internal) purposiveness without (external) purpose, but its own purposelessness is owed to purposes dictated by the market. Horkheimer and Adorno do not in fact critique culture industry for having turned all culture into commodities (as conservative and romantic 'cultural critique' does): on the contrary, part of what they lament is the *false dissolution* of its commodity form. An extreme point of this process is radio broadcasting, which lends itself to centralized, fascist manipulation. Under conditions of culture industry, the classical concert is attended in order to gain the prestige of having been there and of knowing all kinds of things about it (its exchange-value, as it were) rather than for the enjoyment (its use-value). Artworks

are denigrated to being *Kulturgüter* (culture-goods, now often supplied or subsidized by the state as advertisements of itself) when they should be *aufgehoben* (sublated, overcome, resolved) in a liberated society (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 160; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 188/129–30).

### **'ELEMENTS OF ANTISEMITISM: LIMITS OF ENLIGHTENMENT'**

'Elements of Antisemitism' consists of seven numbered sections. The first six have clearly demarcated themes and develop different aspects of the argument, whereas section seven, added to the edition of 1947 only, mostly restates in more pointed form some of these arguments.<sup>2</sup> Like its reprise in the seventh section, the argument of the very short first section of 'Elements of Antisemitism' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 168–70; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 197–9/137–9) is disturbingly acerbic in tone even by the standards of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Horkheimer and Adorno sarcastically explore the meaning of the concept of 'truth' in the context of 'the false social order'. They state that the fascist doctrine of race is empirically true because the fascists *made* it true: the Jews are now the 'anti-race' or 'counter-race' that attracts the 'will to destruction' which the false societal order cannot but produce. It also speaks the truth about the fascists themselves, who 'express their own essence' in the image they create of 'the Jew': it is the fascists who desire 'exclusive property, appropriation, limitless power, at any price'. Horkheimer and Adorno add that the modern hunger for limitless power paradoxically emerges 'while economically there is no need any more for domination'. The liberal response to the fascist doctrine, by contrast, is 'true as an idea' only: 'By positing the unity of mankind as in principle already given, though, the liberal thesis contributes to the ideological legitimation of the existing

order' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 169; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 198/138). The fact that there are still Jews who have not entirely assimilated to the (false) totality is an embarrassment to liberalism. Liberal support for Jews is therefore half-hearted. The fact that 'progress brought with itself cruelty as well as liberation' had been evident in the ways 'the great representatives of the Enlightenment as well as the democratic-popular movements' treated the Jews, and it now also showed itself in the assimilated Jews' own character. They joined 'the modern bourgeoisie' when it was already 'in the process of moving on towards regression to naked domination' in fascism. The assimilated Jews adopted the liberal belief in the integrative 'harmony of society' at a time when this harmony was already morphing into the *Volksgemeinschaft* (the nation in the state of declaring itself race) that murdered them. The opening salvo of 'Elements' thus defines the illusory commitment to liberal society as the main cause of helplessness in the face of this society's fascist metamorphosis.

While the first section presents antisemitic nationalism as a movement of the modern bourgeoisie in its post-liberal state, the second section (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 170–2; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 199–202/139–41) looks at 'antisemitism as popular movement'. For the commoners, antisemitism is 'a luxury' without material benefits. In class society, wealth and happiness are reserved for the elites. If a group from outside the traditional elites acquires wealth and happiness, they must be trampled down. The Jews are, in the context of European society, just such a group. 'The banker and the intellectual... form an imagery of the denied longings of those crippled by domination which domination utilizes for its own perpetuation'. Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that antisemitism is a particular form of appearance (*Gestalt*) of spirit (*Geist*) entangled in domination. 'Spirit' being the desperate effort of humans to break out of domination, antisemitism helps obscure the spirit's entanglement in domination itself. The entanglement

in what it struggles to overcome is the fundamental malady intrinsic to civilization as such, and this fact explains antisemitism's impenetrability: 'straightforwardly rational' explanations and refutations of antisemitism (in terms of economics and politics), even if they are entirely accurate, are bound to fail 'because rationality as entangled with domination is itself at the root of the malady'. Only reflection on the entanglement itself would help, i.e. a form of reflective rather than 'straightforward' rational explanation. The argument of the second section culminates in the claim that antisemitism is 'a ritual of civilization' that is 'pointless' if looked at from a rationalistic perspective: 'The pogroms are the true ritual murders' (ritual murder libel thus being a case of projection). Rituals are not rational, but they reflect the rationality of society.

The third section of 'Elements' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 173-6; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 202-5/141-4) is in two parts. The first part deals with one of the structural preconditions of antisemitism, namely the need for capitalist producers to deflect their responsibility for exploitation on to a scapegoat. The key idea here is that capitalist production conceals its exploitative character and 'shouts: stop thief!', pointing at the Jew' as an old-fashioned representative of the sphere of circulation. The second part attempts to explain why the Jews are the obvious group to be cast in that role historically: 'The Jew was not allowed to put down roots and was hence slandered as rootless'.

Section four (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 176-9; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 205-9/144-7) deals with religion, the chief claim being that religion was 'subsumed' when it became a cultural artefact but not 'overcome [*aufgehoben*]'. This destroyed the delicate dialectic between truth and deception that had characterized spirit (i.e. the dynamic of human civilization) in its traditional, religious form: there had been priestly deception and manipulation but also the longing for redemption. Spirit-as-religion in its modern incarnation ends up hating spirit (or rather, ends up allied

with those who do). Section five (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 179-86; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 209-16/147-53) contains an anthropological discussion of how civilization preserves the traces of its subjection of nature, and how it becomes quasi-nature in the process. Modern civilization develops a destructive fury against the 'anachronistic' remnants of its own initial stages (including mimesis and magic as representative of the first attempts of human civilization to get a grip on nature) but in fascism ends up celebrating and fetishizing mimetic and magic behaviours (formulae, rituals, uniforms, etc.). Section six (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 187-200; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 217-30/154-65) discusses paranoia and projection, which are, on the one hand, characteristics of fascist antisemitism but, on the other, fundamental to human perception of reality – part of dealing with nature – and thus intrinsic to civilization. Horkheimer and Adorno pick up the psychoanalytic explanation of modern antisemitism but refract it through their reading of Kantian epistemology (according to which every perception contains an element of projection by the subject and is guided by fears, desires, etc.), framed by a conception of the evolution of human civilization. This allows them to propose an argument about *what kind of* projection and paranoia is implicated in fascism and antisemitism – namely the kind that is unreflectingly spellbound by self-preservation and in the process loses contact with reality as its touchstone.

Section seven (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 200-8; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 230-8/165-72) mostly recapitulates in condensed form the overall argument of 'Elements', articulating some aspects rather more strongly than in the previous sections: the responsibility of German liberalism for fascism; the implication of progressive-democratic leftism in the general tendency of a 'rage against difference' and thus, at least indirectly, in antisemitism; the anachronism of the liberal-bourgeois order in the face of the ability of humanity's productive forces to rebuild human society on the

basis of abundance rather than artificial scarcity. Section seven, along with the first three sections, is therewith the most immediately fruitful source for discussions of antisemitism from a perspective that is political as well as societal and economic.

## 'NOTES AND SKETCHES'

The twenty-four short pieces in 'Notes and Sketches' cover a range of subjects, including education, liberalism, fascism, the philosophy of history, crime and punishment, the body, individuality, morality and animals. The last piece is titled 'On the Genesis of Stupidity', in which Horkheimer und Adorno state that the 'emblem of intelligence is the antenna of the snail' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 256; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987/2002: 288/213). They seem to imply here that human sense-activity – like the enlightenment in general – should be directed at the world in the hesitant manner of the snail's 'groping face [*tastendes Gesicht*]'. This image concludes the book.

## Notes

- 1 I have worked from the German text and used, and silently modified, both standard English translations, neither of which is entirely reliable.
- 2 For a detailed analysis of the seventh section see Stoetzler (2009), and of sections one to three see Stoetzler (forthcoming).

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# Herbert Marcuse: Critical Theory as Radical Socialism

Charles Reitz

In Herbert Marcuse one encounters what was lacking in other members of the Frankfurt School: a critique of advanced industrial society (Wiggershaus, 1988: 676) and a vision of the most radical goals of socialism (Marcuse, 1972: 5). Marcuse is one of the most illustrious and radical thinkers of his time – the author of the highly acclaimed and influential volumes *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) and *An Essay on Liberation* (1969a). His life's work offers much more than is brilliant, and constitutes his matchless contribution to the field of Frankfurt School critical theory.

Often characterized as the 'philosopher of the student revolts', his intellectual impact has been connected most closely to the campus-based turmoil of the 1960s in the United States and Europe. At that time (at the age of 70) he was seen by many as a key academic spokesperson in solidarity with the student anti-Vietnam war movement, the insurgent movements for democratic socialism, and against racial- and gender-based inequality.

His radical political philosophical positions were grounded in his critical analysis of global capitalism's wasted abundance, its forms of alienated labor, oppression, and war, and the latent utopian possibilities of this society, arrested under current conditions, yet attainable through a socialist revolutionary struggle for a future of freedom.

## EARLY YEARS (1919–22)

Born into an upper-middle-class family of Jewish descent in Berlin in 1898, Herbert Marcuse was classically educated and of that generation of young men in Germany caught up in World War I. When the war ended in 1918, Marcuse was witness to the ensuing political tumult in Berlin. A revolutionary uprising of soldiers and striking workers, with whom he empathized, sought to establish self-governing socialist republics in Berlin and Munich. These efforts ended in

defeat, and Marcuse became politically demoralized by what he understood as the complicity of the conservatively Marxist German social democrats, whom he had supported, in the assassination of the revolutionary communist leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg.

Disillusioned with his own political activism, Marcuse turned in his twenties to university study to reflect upon the troubled condition of the world and the very limited possibilities he saw for a truly socialist revolution. The dissertation he was then preparing would not look for advice in the struggle against the alienating conditions of social life to economic analyses or party-oriented political action, but rather to works of art from the history of German literature.

### ***The German Artist Novel (1922)***

Promoted to doctor of philosophy in Freiburg in October 1922, his dissertation, *Der deutsche Künstlerroman* [*The German Artist Novel*], focused on recurrent issues in modern German fiction dealing with the artist's stress and frustration at the incompatibility of an aesthetic life and the painful exigencies of everyday existence. Marcuse's approach was consistent with that of historian Wilhelm Dilthey and the then prevailing *Geisteswissenschaftliche Bewegung* the reform movement in German higher education. This emphasized the post-war renewal of German culture through study of the humanities and social sciences (the *Geisteswissenschaften*) rather than through what in the United States today are called STEM disciplines: science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. The ostensibly neutral logical positivism and empiricism of the latter fields were thought to have left unchallenged the technocratic and dangerously imperial leadership mentality of Germany's recent militarist past. Dilthey proposed that the *Geisteswissenschaften* served as an organon of critical reflection on

historical human reality and that human existence in society could best be understood in historical works of literature. The concluding sentence of Marcuse's dissertation highlights this same conviction: 'Above and beyond the literary-historical problems, a piece of human history becomes visible: the struggle of the German people for a new community [*Gemeinschaft* rather than *Gesellschaft*]' (Marcuse, 1978c: 333, my translation). His analysis is most striking when it assesses Goethe's concept of the artist's educated ripeness, maturity, and self-controlled sublimation. To Marcuse, the testimony of literature shows that a person's self-confidence and aplomb require a certain distance from any uncritical surrender to empty convention, immersion in a subjectively Romantic aestheticism, or engagement in radical mass organizations and social movements. In contrast, Marcuse became critical of Germany's conservative and traditional liberal arts education in an essay of the mid 1930s, 'On the Affirmative Character of Culture' (Marcuse, 1968a). German high art and high culture tend to 'affirm' or replicate the repression of the established social order through a poetization and exoneration of society's problems. Marcuse remained nonetheless convinced that there is a ground of reason in great literature, and he continued to pay close attention to educational philosophical issues throughout his life's work.

### ***Hegel's Ontology and Heideggerian Marxism (1932)***

After a brief hiatus compiling a bibliography of Friedrich Schiller at a publishing house back in Berlin, Marcuse returned to Freiburg from 1929 to 1933 to do post-doctoral work with Husserl and Heidegger. To qualify for an academic career the German university system required a post-doctoral dissertation directed by an academic chair. Thus, Marcuse completed his first Hegel book, *Hegel's*

*Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*, with Heidegger (Marcuse 1978b, 1975). The influence of a fundamental ontology upon Marcuse during this period was tangible and later gave rise to the term ‘Heideggerian Marxism’ (Habermas, 2013; Piccone and Delfini, 1970) to describe Marcuse’s thought (see also Wolin and Abromeit in Marcuse, 2005a; Feenberg, 2005). With the publication of *Hegel’s Ontology* in 1932 (Marcuse, 1987b), Marcuse sought Heidegger’s sponsorship, but Heidegger had antisemitic reservations (given his explicit embrace of Nazism and his ascent from Chair of the Freiburg Department of Philosophy to the university chancellor’s office in 1933). On the affinities of Heidegger’s philosophy and fascism, Heidegger’s antisemitism, and his recently discovered ‘Black Notebooks’ see Richard Wolin’s *The Politics of Being* (2016) and Olafson’s (1977) interview with Marcuse about Heidegger (also in Jansen, 1989 and Marcuse, 2005a). Max Horkheimer offered to undertake the academic sponsorship of Marcuse at Frankfurt, home of the Institute for Social Research, but political circumstances led him to assist Marcuse with emigration instead. Horkheimer invited Marcuse to become associated with the newly established branch of the Institute at Geneva, and when the Frankfurt center moved to New York City’s Columbia University in 1934, Marcuse joined its staff there.

### THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL IN NEW YORK CITY (1934–41)

At Columbia during the 1930s and 40s, Marcuse wrote several essays, first published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* and republished in 1968 as *Negations* (Marcuse, 1968b). Thus this academic refugee from the *Gleichschaltung* [legally enforced political conformity] during the Third Reich began to elaborate his vision of a critical theory of society.

The work of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and their colleagues will always be rightfully known as the work of the Frankfurt School, but the very concept ‘critical theory’ is a product of the New York period of the Institute. The term was not utilized at all in Frankfurt, and was first coined in the United States in essays written by Horkheimer and Marcuse ([1937]1968b). Marcuse developed a remarkable series of books, each an English-language original, that represented to the world the Frankfurt School’s critical social theory: *Reason and Revolution* (1960), *Eros and Civilization* (1966), *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), *An Essay on Liberation* (1969a), and *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1972). Critical theory for Marcuse was more than an Aesopian substitute for Marxism. He sought to raise the philosophy of Marx to its highest level (Jay, 1973; Kellner 2005, 1984).

### REASON AND REVOLUTION (1941)

*Reason and Revolution*, Marcuse’s second Hegel book, centers on the need for a transformed revolutionary philosophy. Much of the substance of *Hegel’s Ontology* was incorporated into its first sections. In both books, Marcuse highlights the convergence of Hegel’s early writings on the ontological concept of ‘life’ with the more mature Hegelian concept of mind (*Geist*). In the former, a turning inward of the mind (*Er-innerung*) is counterposed to a loss of mind in external phenomena of alienation (*Ent-fremdung*). In the latter, inwardness and introspection are thought to provide a key intellectual warrant for the ‘revolution’. *Hegel’s Ontology* had concluded with a section explicitly on Dilthey’s theory of the humanities and social sciences, the study of which is required to grasp the meaning of being. *Reason and Revolution* was to think in a new way about the ‘and’ in ‘reason and revolution’ and transform Marx’s primarily *economic* theory of the material human

condition into Marcuse's culturally broadened critical theory. 'An *immediate* unity of reason and reality never exists. ... As long as there is any gap between the real and the potential, the former must be acted upon and changed until it is brought into line with reason' (Marcuse, 1960: 11; see also Anderson and Rockwell, 2012).

### THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL IN WASHINGTON (1942–51)

By the time of the publication of *Reason and Revolution*, the Institute's self-funded budget was stretched, and Horkheimer encouraged Marcuse to find additional employment and reduce his reliance on Institute resources. Horkheimer lowered Marcuse's salary in 1941 as a means of pressuring him into finding other sources of income and ultimately into separating himself monetarily from the Institute and its foundation, while continuing to identify intellectually with it (Wiggershaus, 1988: 295, 331–2, 338). Thus Marcuse took a position with the research branch of the Office of Strategic Services during World War II doing assiduous intellectual work against fascism. Archived projects from this period like 'The New German Mentality', 'State and Individual Under National Socialism', and 'German Social Stratification' have been published (Laudani, 2013; Kellner, 1998; Jansen, 1998), and they are treated at length in Müller (2010). Following the war, Marcuse continued to do research with the US State Department on the new Soviet adversary.

### BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY, EROS AND CIVILIZATION (1955)

From 1954 to 1965, Marcuse taught at Brandeis University, where he published *Eros and Civilization*. This took up the

dialectical frame of mind elucidated in *Reason and Revolution* in combination with the Left Freudian pursuit of a more humane society in which the social and psychological necessities of life and their fulfillment could coincide. In this work, Marcuse explores Freud's metapsychology and the relationship between life instincts (Eros) and death instincts (Thanatos). Marcuse contends that life regulated by capitalism's *performance principle* engenders surplus or needless alienation. He contends that an alternative logic of gratification needs to supplant the logic of domination. The pleasure principle is thought to persist as a sub-conscious memory of past states of fulfillment and joy, which also belong essentially to the worlds of art and literature. Marcuse argues for the economic obsolescence of scarcity and the political obsolescence of domination, such that societal suffering could be replaced by the general societal satisfaction of human needs. Elaborating Schiller's *Letters on Aesthetic Education*, he propounds a militant aesthetic humanism to advance against alienation.

### SOVIET MARXISM (1958)

Columbia University's Russian Institute (1952) and Harvard's Russian Institute (1954–5) supported the research and subsequent publication of Marcuse's study *Soviet Marxism (SM)* in 1958 (Marcuse, 1961). This depicted Soviet philosophy and politics as expressions of an untenable bureaucratism, technological rationality, aesthetic realism, etc. In this project, Marcuse did something quite unique and unexpected, which set him apart from Cold War-fueled political writing at the time: having sharply and objectively criticized culture and politics in the Soviet Union, he fearlessly risked censure in the United States by explaining that both the Soviet and Western forms of political rationality had in common the prevalence of

technical over humanistic elements in the development of the relations and forces of production. Marcuse did not back away from profound criticisms of US culture in *SM* that in 1958 might have led him to be branded as 'anti-American'. This was a major departure from the much more cautious politics of the Horkheimer inner circle as well as from the conventional wisdom in the US academic sphere. Marcuse felt confident enough to develop a clearly dialectical perspective, and in this manner *SM* was crucial in the development of his critical theory. With the 1964 publication of *One-Dimensional Man (ODM)*, Marcuse consolidated his key and most characteristic arguments to the effect that US society and culture were, likewise like the Soviet Union's, politically and economically unfree.

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL MAN (1964)

*ODM* addressed the problems of alienation and social control and the closed universe of discourse and thought in advanced industrial societies. It continues to be his most influential work (Maley, 2017; Lamas, 2016; *Radical Philosophy Review*, 2016; Sethness, 2015).

In this way, 'one-dimensionality' updates the Marxist analysis of alienation. Marcuse believed alienation theory required revision because advanced capitalism had become a society of plenty rather than scarcity and because the condition of the working class had fundamentally altered. *ODM* is centrally concerned with the new aspects of alienation resulting from the increasingly sophisticated exercise of the social-control apparatus of corporate capitalism. According to its famous first sentence: 'A comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress' (Marcuse, 1964: 1).

Marcuse argues that alienation consists in the total absorption of the personality into the processes and systems of capitalist

commodity production. This gives rise to a new kind of totalitarianism, unlike that formerly characteristic of fascist societies.

By virtue of the way it has organized its technological base, contemporary industrial society tends to be totalitarian. For 'totalitarian' is not only a terroristic political coordination of society, but also a non-terroristic political coordination which operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests. It thus precludes the emergence of an effective opposition against the whole. Not only a specific form of government or party rule makes for totalitarianism, but also a specific system of production and distribution which may well be compatible with a 'pluralism' of parties, newspapers, 'countervailing powers', etc. (Marcuse, 1964: 3)

Thus emerges a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behavior in which ideas, aspirations and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe. (Marcuse, 1964: 12)

Marcuse is famous for his contention that labor, narcotized and anaesthetized by consumerism and in collusion with business priorities, lacks a critical appreciation of the potential of its own politics to transform the established order. 'Under the conditions of a rising standard of living, non-conformity with the system appears to be socially useless, and the more so when it entails tangible economic and political disadvantages and threatens the smooth operation of the whole' (Marcuse, 1964: 2).

We are socialized to 'submit to the peaceful production of the means of destruction, to the perfection of waste, to being educated for a defense which deforms the defenders and that which they defend' (Marcuse, 1964: ix). Thus the lack of resistance to the new and unfree social order of the working classes and others.

In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse had already specifically criticized schooling in advanced industrial societies, writing that 'the overpowering machine of education and entertainment... [unites us all]... in a state of anaesthesia' (Marcuse, 1966: 104).

More troubling still is the suppression of any vision of a genuinely democratic socialist society among intellectuals. ‘The intellectual and emotional refusal “to go along” appears neurotic and impotent’ (Marcuse, 1964: 9). Theory is rejected as foreign and useless:

The intellectual is called on the carpet. What do you mean when you say..? Don’t you conceal something? You talk a language which is suspect. You don’t talk like the rest of us, like the man on the street, but rather like a foreigner who does not belong here. (Marcuse, 1964: 192)

*ODM* thus began a vital new way of understanding the ideology of advanced industrial societies, building also on insights from Marcuse’s experience with, and critical study of, fascism in Germany. Marcuse had the civic courage to break through the paralysis of critique, and he had the philosophical means due to his association with the thought of the Frankfurt School, Marxism, and classical German philosophy. ‘The fact that the vast majority of the population accepts, and is made to accept, this society does not render it less irrational and less reprehensible’ (Marcuse, 1964: xiii). The critical Marxism of *ODM* sought to break through the ‘pre-established harmony between scholarship and the national purpose’ (Marcuse, 1964: 19).

### ***Technological Rationality and Reification***

The technological achievements of advanced industrial systems are what have led to the establishment of one-dimensional social realities and social philosophies from which all contradiction has been eliminated. ‘Technology has become the great vehicle of reification – reification in its most mature and effective form’ (Marcuse, 1964: 168). This reification is *the* philosophical phenomenon characteristic of the oppressive tendencies in advanced technological cultures, wherever practice and theory have forsaken the human dimension of experience and

reason in favor of a strictly instrumentalist or functionalist logic of discourse and action. Reason alienated in this manner may assume even the most inhuman tasks in the technological rationalization of methods of domination against society and nature. Andrew Feenberg argues that Marcuse’s critical theory ‘seized on Lukács’ concept of reification, which... became the basis of [his] critique of positivism and its dialectical reformulation of Marxist theory. ... [His] aim is the establishment of a dialectical paradigm of rationality suited to the task of social self-understanding and human liberation’ (Feenberg, 1981: xii–xiii; see also Feenberg, 1991 and 2014). The negation of advanced industrial society’s technological rationality becomes the revolutionary task of reason.

### ***‘Happy Consciousness’***

Marcuse understood as single-dimensional any perspective that is oblivious to the problematic nature of prevailing social and economic relations. One-dimensionality is the triumph of a ‘happy consciousness’ grounded in the suffocation and repression of life’s internal inconsistencies and contradictions. Cultural kitsch is, in contrast, grounded in the pleasant sanitization and repression of life’s internal inconsistencies and contradictions, since this facilitates adjustment and compliance to the established social order.

Critical intelligence must be more serious and sensitive to questions of complex causality and more skeptical of simplistic visions of the good life or good society. It must confront ‘the power of positive thinking’ (which he holds to be destructive of philosophy) with ‘the power of negative thinking’, which illumines ‘the facts’ in terms of the real possibilities which the facts deny. Critical intelligence, as he sees it, is thus essentially always multi-dimensional, dialectical, realistic, and normative, i.e. philosophical and generative of fuller cultural freedom.

It was Marcuse who identified the political tendencies of advanced industrial societies to manipulate and indoctrinate the public mind, and who challenged the 'total administration' (i.e. the closing) of the established cultural and political worlds. 'At nodal points of the universe of public discourse, self-validating, analytical propositions appear which function like magic-ritual formulas. Hammered and re-hammered into the recipient's mind, they produce the effect of enclosing it within the circle of the conditions prescribed by the formula' (Marcuse, 1964: 88). Today we might think of the familiar political phraseology of 'No Child Left Behind', 'Right to Work', 'Equal Opportunity Employer', 'Job Creators', etc. Marcuse castigated earlier forms of this one-dimensional thinking: 'The meaning is fixed, doctored, loaded' (Marcuse, 1964: 94).

### ***Repressive Desublimation***

*ODM* also introduces Marcuse's notion of repressive desublimation. Following a line of thinking from *Eros and Civilization*, he theorizes that the 'mobilization and administration of libido may account for much of the voluntary compliance... with the established society. Pleasure, thus adjusted, generates submission' (Marcuse, 1964: 75). He explains that society's control mechanisms become even more powerful when they integrate sexually suggestive and explicitly erotic and violent content into advertising and the mass media, and into the content of mass entertainment and popular culture. The unrestrained use of sex and violence by large-scale commercial interests accomplishes more effective social manipulation and control in the interest of capital accumulation than had repressive *sublimation*. Repressive desublimation substitutes reactionary emotional release in place of rebellion, and counterrevolutionary illusion in place of freedom.

As a critical philosophical work, *ODM* foregrounded and combated the empiricism,

behaviorism, and British and American perspectives on linguistic analysis that framed the ascendant functionalist schools of social and political thought. In England, Ernest Gellner (like Marcuse a Jewish intellectual in exile from Nazi Germany) confronted the linguistic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Gilbert Ryle at Cambridge University in his book *Words and Things* (1959), which Marcuse (1964: 173) acknowledged in *ODM*. Gellner's book was supported by Bertrand Russell, and a huge row developed between Ryle and his defenders on the one side and Russell and Gellner on the other. This revealed the built-in theoretical blinders, silences, repressiveness, and false concreteness of our prevailing ways of thinking and acting (Marcuse 1969b).

It should be recalled that in the 1930s and 40s Marxism found a variety of viable oppositional forms in the United States – from the black Marxists W.E.B. DuBois and Eugene C. Holmes (Harris, 1983) to Upton Sinclair, Herbert Aptheker, and Barrows Dunham. The near-Marxist 'social reconstructionist' perspective in politics and education of George Counts, Merle Curti, and Theodore Brameld also thrived at Teachers' College, Columbia. By the 1950s and the Cold War, the situation had changed with the anti-communist mobilization in labor law (the Taft–Hartley Act of 1947) and in the culture at large (the blacklisting of the Hollywood Ten, Paul Robeson, and Pete Seeger, and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)). 'As late as 1959, the FBI's New York field office had only ten agents assigned to organized crime compared to over one hundred and forty agents pursuing a dwindling population of communists' (Hortis, quoted in Gladwell, 2014: 40). A US form of *Gleichschaltung* was coordinating US politics and culture with the general commodification and commercialization of social life. Wiggershaus (1988: 432) has emphasized that Horkheimer, especially, saw himself as a guest in the country and was sensitive about being seen as promoting 'unAmerican ideas'.

Horkheimer and Adorno would also see the US and German student movements as ‘anti-American’, and they were careful to distance themselves from activist students and from Marcuse. Marcuse was the subject of several FBI background investigations. The earliest was in 1943 in connection with his work for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). A second wave of inquiries, with regard to his loyalty to the United States during his 1950s employment by the State Department, discloses that the FBI consulted with the HUAC concerning his case. During the 1960s, he was also under surveillance in connection with his ties to the New Left and international student movements (Gennaro and Kellner, 2009).

### ***Challenging Euro-centrism, Antisemitism, Racist Anglo-conformity***

The Frankfurt School’s critical theory is sometimes criticized as having a narrowly Eurocentric focus (Outlaw, 2013; Gandler, 1999). *ODM* widened the cultural perspective through Marcuse’s effort to deepen intellectually certain broadly critical projects already underway in the United States: the demystification of the vaunted myths of affluence and melting-pot assimilation in American life (Gordon, 1964). Marcuse understood the reigning Anglo-conformity and WASP patriotism and militarism in the United States as well as its economic instrumentalism as single-dimensional insofar as they were oblivious to the problematic nature of prevailing social and economic relations. If abundance for all was a capacity of advanced industrial society, this was effectively canceled by the forces of capitalism, while affluence for some was the privilege of the propertied. ‘In the contemporary era, the conquest of scarcity is still confined to small areas of advanced industrial society. Their prosperity covers up the Inferno inside and outside their borders’ (Marcuse, 1964: 241;

see also 1968c). Marcuse understood the limits of liberal democracy (Farr, 2009: 119–36) and how the notion of the ‘affluent society’ actually masked a gravely unequal, patriarchal, and monocultural form of domination. Of course, the conventional wisdom within the nation itself was largely oblivious to its own racism and other forms of prejudice. In many ways, it continues to be.

From 1944 to 1950, Horkheimer and Adorno, working with the American Jewish Committee, published a five-volume series, *Studies in Prejudice*. The fifth volume, *Prophets of Deceit*, written by Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman, was furnished with a foreword by Herbert Marcuse when it was reissued in paperback in 1970. Marcuse stresses that any mobilization of bias must be understood concretely within the social context of contradictory economic and political conditions (Jansen, 2013).

The year 1963, just before *ODM*’s publication, marked the culmination of the US civil rights movement with its black-led (i.e. SCLC, CORE, and SNCC) bus boycotts, lunch-counter sit-ins, freedom rides, voter-registration campaigns, and the March on Washington. These anti-racism efforts also involved the support of many radical and progressive whites, especially students. Marcuse would make an explicit contribution to the movement against racism with the 1965 publication of his critique of pure tolerance, ‘Repressive Tolerance’ (Marcuse, 1965), an essay still contributing to the ferment surrounding issues of institutional racism, especially when hate speech is seen as officially, absolutely, and ‘purely’ tolerated as free speech under the First Amendment.

In 1964, in *ODM*, given the background of recent and high-profile lynchings, bombings, and murders of blacks in the United States (Emmett Till; Medgar Evers; the four girls in Birmingham’s 16th Street Baptist church), Marcuse wrote: ‘Those whose life is the hell of the Affluent Society are kept in line by a brutality which revives medieval and early modern practices’ (Marcuse,



1964: 23). As Nina Simone was singing 'Mississippi Goddamn' and castigating the 'United Snakes of America', ODM famously concluded:

underneath the conservative popular base is the substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors. ... Their opposition hits the system from without... it is an elementary force which violates the rules of the 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. ... The critical theory of society... wants to remain loyal to those who, without hope, have given and give their life to the Great Refusal. (Marcuse, 1964: 257)

In 1987, conservative culture warrior Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* presented a bizarre attempt to turn the political tables and attack Marcuse's critical and cosmopolitan perspective. Bloom attributed a general decline in US culture to what he considered the illegitimate popularization of German philosophy in the United States in the 1960s, especially Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Marcuse. Bloom argued that US culture, entertainment, and education have imported 'a clothing of German fabrication for [our] souls, which... cast doubt on the Americanization of the world upon which we had embarked' (Bloom, 1987: 152).

## NO 'PURE TOLERANCE' OF HATE SPEECH (1965)

During the mid 1960s, Marcuse met Brandeis student Angela Davis and began an intellectual/political relationship that lasted well beyond her student years (Davis, 2004, 2013). He also published his anti-racist essay 'Repressive Tolerance' at that time and dedicated it to Brandeis students. Its insights are extremely pertinent today as we debate how to best protect human rights in an era of acrid

backlash against the multicultural education reform movement.

Given also the heightened awareness of the regularity of police killings of unarmed black men in the United States after incidents such as Ferguson, Baltimore, Cleveland, New York City, and elsewhere, Marcuse's condemnation of the violence of repression demands renewed attention. In 1965, Marcuse condemned the violence that actually prevails in the ostensibly peaceful centers of civilization: 'it is practiced by the police, in the prisons and the mental institutions, in the fight against racial minorities. ... This violence indeed breeds violence' (Marcuse, 1965: 105).

Neither a relativist nor a pragmatist, Marcuse did not tolerate all views as equally valid or invalid. Far from it: 'This pure tolerance of sense and nonsense' (Marcuse 1965: 94) practiced under the conditions prevailing in the United States today is contemptible and repressive inasmuch as it 'cannot fulfill the civilizing function attributed to it by the liberal protagonists of democracy, namely protection of dissent' (Marcuse, 1965: 117). As Marcuse recognized:

the conditions of 'tolerance' are loaded... the active, official tolerance granted to the Right as well as to the Left, to movements of aggression as well as to movements of peace, to the party of hate as well as humanity. I call this non-partisan tolerance 'abstract' or 'pure' inasmuch as it refrains from taking sides – but in doing so it actually protects the already established machinery of discrimination. (Marcuse, 1965: 84–5)

When tolerance mainly serves the protection and preservation of a repressive society, when it serves to neutralize opposition... then tolerance has been perverted. (Marcuse, 1965: 111)

This critical refusal to tolerate abusive speech/action constitutes one of the most timely aspects of Marcuse's critique today. One key premise of the free-speech hardliners is their contention that democratic institutions must maintain deference toward, and an absolute tolerance of, abusive and even assaultive speech – as protected forms of

dissent. The New Right is now using '[t]he charge of imperiling free speech... to silence oppressed and marginalized groups and to push back against their interests' (Stanley, 2016). Marcuse's partisanship is clear:

The small and powerless minorities which struggle against the false consciousness and its beneficiaries must be helped: their continued existence is more important than the preservation of abused rights and liberties which grant constitutional powers to those who oppress these minorities. (Marcuse, 1965: 110)

Right-wing writers like Kors and Silverglate (1998) assert that Marcuse's theory of repressive tolerance is the intellectual progenitor of what they deplore as the contemporary tendency toward political correctness in higher education today. In sharp contrast to this reactionary approach, a strategy for the defense of minority civil rights and solidarity with subaltern victims of hate speech has been developed by authors like Calderón (2009), Sleeter and Bernal (2003), Delgado and Stefancic (1997), Matsuda et al. (1993), and Wilson (1995). These proponents of critical race theory argue that freedom of speech is not absolute and must be viewed in the context of its real political consequences. 'The reality of ongoing racism and exclusion is erased and bigotry is redefined. ... The powerful anti-racists have [purportedly] captured the state and will use it to oppress the powerless racists' (Matsuda et al., 1993: 135).

Conservative reform approaches to the humanities and a liberal-arts education traditionally see them as serving universal aims and goals but fail to acknowledge that a discriminatory politics of race, gender, and class has distorted not only the curriculum but also patterns of faculty hiring and student recruitment and support. As Marcuse knew, this is doubly ironic because the liberation movements which resisted each of these forms of political oppression were inspired primarily not by a politics of difference and special interests but rather an intercultural politics of solidarity and hope for human rights

*universally* (Fuchs, 2005: 107–8). In his essay 'Marxism and Feminism', for example, he writes: 'There can be discrimination against women even under socialism. ... But the very goals of this [feminist] movement require changes of such enormity in the material as well as intellectual culture that they can be attained only by a change in the entire social system' (Marcuse, 2005b: 166).

## ART IN THE ONE-DIMENSIONAL SOCIETY (1967)

Marcuse lectured at the School of Visual Arts in New York City in March of 1967 on 'Art in the One-Dimensional Society'. He held that art provided a definite negation to the social status quo in that it remained committed to an instinctually fulfilling and emotionally gratifying socioeconomic order.

If we can do everything with nature and society, if we can do everything with man and things – why can one not make them the subject-object in a pacified world, in a non-aggressive, aesthetic environment. The know-how is there. The instruments and materials are there for the construction of such an environment, social and natural. ... for the creation of the beautiful not as ornaments, not as surface of the ugly, not as museum piece, but as expression and objective of a new type of man; as biological need in a new system of life. (Marcuse, 1973: 65)

Marcuse argued for the redirection of the course of technological progress and for the subordination of scientific-technical goals to the fulfillment of the mature, material, sensual, and aesthetic needs of the human race. 'Not political art, not politics as art, but art as the architecture of a free society' (Marcuse, 1973: 65–6). Art acts against alienation and dehumanization; aesthetic activity is a starting point for the rehumanization of history. This is a strong statement of the interventionist mission of the artist to transform society. Of course, 'The rest is not up to the artist. The realization, the real change which would free men and things, remains the task of political action' (Marcuse, 1973: 67).

## DEMONSTRATION, CONFRONTATION, REBELLION (1969)

What the aesthetic dimension *does* offer is a *new sensibility* (Marcuse, 1969a: 23), an insight into an *aesthetic ethos* (Marcuse, 1969a: 24) that subverts the existing one-dimensional order. The aesthetic reality recovers a sense of the human species' essence in its universal aspects. 'The universal comprehends in one idea the possibilities which are realized, and at the same time arrested, in reality' (Marcuse, 1964: 210). The concrete and critical dimension of art discloses the inevitably conflicted condition of human culture. The aesthetic ethos restores humanity's most rational enterprise: seeking the convergence of gratification and universal human need, society and human dignity, art and politics: 'the development of the productive forces renders possible the material fulfillment of the *promesse du bonheur* expressed in art; political action – the revolution – is to translate this possibility into reality' (Marcuse, 1961: 115). This is the promise of bliss, good fortune, genuine civic satisfaction, and success in life. Yet art unites the opposites of gratification and pain, death and love, freedom and repression. Only because of this can art seriously represent what Marcuse takes to be the conflicted, tragic, and paradoxical substance of human life.

*An Essay on Liberation* (1969a) is Marcuse's most militant and hopeful work. It is a scorching attack on the culture of corporate capitalism and the destructiveness of imperialist aggression:

This society is obscene in producing and indecently exposing a stifling abundance of wares while depriving its victims abroad of the necessities of life; obscene in stuffing itself and its garbage cans while poisoning and burning the scarce food-stuffs in the fields of its aggression; obscene in the words and smiles of its politicians and entertainers; its prayers, in its ignorance, and in the wisdom of its kept intellectuals. (Marcuse, 1969a: 7–8)

Marcuse dedicated the book to the protesters who took to the streets of Paris in May and

June 1968. He emphasized the need for a 'radical change in consciousness' (Marcuse, 1969a: 53) as a prerequisite to emancipatory social activity:

Historically, it is again a period of enlightenment prior to material change – a period of education, but education which turns into praxis: demonstration, confrontation, rebellion. (Marcuse, 1969a: 53)

Economic processes today divest us of our own creative work, yet these also form the sources of our future social power. A comprehensive critical social theory must stress the centrality of labor in the economy. It must theorize the origins and outcomes of economic and cultural oppression and be engaged politically by the labor force to end these abuses. Within this context, Marcuse also theorizes the 'aesthetic ethos of socialism' (Marcuse, 1969a: 48):

Released from the bondage to exploitation, the imagination, sustained by the achievements of science, could turn its productive power to the radical reconstruction of experience... the aesthetic... would find expression in the transformation of the *Lebenswelt* – society as a work of art. (Marcuse, 1969a: 45)

Marcuse's aesthetic ethos was to function also as a '*gesellschaftliche Produktivkraft*' a social and productive force (Marcuse, 1969a: 126). Marx's 1844 *Paris Manuscripts* poignantly highlighted that human beings also produce in accordance with the laws of beauty, and Marcuse would likewise stress that: 'The socialist universe is also a moral and aesthetic universe: dialectical materialism contains idealism as an element of theory and practice' (Marcuse, 1972: 3).

## COUNTERREVOLUTION AND REVOLT (1972)

Global economic polarization and growing immiseration have brought to an end the 'comfortable, smooth, democratic unfreedom' that Marcuse theorized. Neoliberalism

replaced it with something more openly vicious.

Marcuse warned 40 years ago of the economic and cultural developments that are now much more obvious given capitalism's crescendo of economic failures since 2008. Political and philosophical tendencies that are often referred to as 'neoliberalism' and/or 'neoconservatism' today were clearly understood back then as *organized counter-revolution* (Marcuse, 1972). This political development was a pre-emptive strike undertaken by an increasingly predatory capitalism against liberal democratic change, not to mention the radical opposition (Marcuse, 1987a: 172).

The Western world has reached a new stage of development: now, the defense of the capitalist system requires the organization of counterrevolution at home and abroad. ... Torture has become a normal instrument of 'interrogation' around the world. ... even Liberals are not safe if they appear as too liberal. (Marcuse, 1972: 1)

The news media recently brought us almost daily disclosures about the US military's use of torture and prisoner abuse (Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo), civilian massacres and war crimes (Fallujah, Haditha), and the loaded intelligence that the US Defense Department desired as a pretext for the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Today, the pre-emptive counterrevolution entails the police-state USA Patriot Act, global Terror Wars, a 'money-is-speech' Supreme Court, and intensifying political-economic inequalities (Kellner, 2003, 2012).

## TRANSVALUATION OF VALUES AND THE RADICAL GOALS OF SOCIALISM (1972–4)

New Left radicals were conscious of the economy's potential to eliminate want and misery, and they had a new emphasis on quality of life, not just a secure subsistence. Marcuse prized this 'emergence in the

individual of needs and satisfactions which can no longer be fulfilled within the framework of the capitalist system, although they were generated by the capitalist system itself' (Marcuse, 2015a: 53). These included the struggle for the restoration of nature, women's equality, racial equality, and reduction in profitable waste.

[W]hat is at stake in the socialist revolution is not merely the extension of satisfaction within the existing universe of needs, nor the shift of satisfaction from one (lower) level to a higher one, but the rupture with this universe, the *qualitative leap*. The revolution involves a radical transformation of the needs and aspirations themselves, cultural as well as material; of consciousness and sensibility; of the work process as well as leisure. (Marcuse, 1972: 16–17)

This New Left was *radical* because it represented the Great Refusal and because it projected the potentialities in the objective conditions; it anticipated possibilities not yet realized:

The inner dynamic of capitalism changes, with the changes in its structure, the pattern of revolution: far from reducing, it extends the potential mass base for revolution, and it necessitates the revival of the radical rather than minimum goals of socialism. (Marcuse, 1972: 5)

Socialism is a philosophy of authentic human existence and the fulfillment of both human needs and the political promise of our human nature, where creative freedom provides the foundation for satisfaction in all of our works. For a start, human emancipation requires the decommodification of certain economic minimums: healthcare, childcare, education, food, transportation, housing, and work, through a guaranteed income. These are *transitional* goals. *Revolutionary* goals envisage a more encompassing view of liberation and human flourishing flowing from a transvaluation of values.

In a 1968 lecture on education at Brooklyn College, Marcuse (2009) taught on this transvaluation:

[It is] no longer sufficient to educate individuals to perform more or less happily the functions they are supposed to perform *in this* society or extend

'vocational' education to the 'masses.' Rather... [we must]... educate men and women who are incapable of tolerating what is going on, who have really learned what *is* going on, has always been going on, and why, and who are educated to resist and to fight for a new way of life. (Marcuse, 2009: 35)

Teachers and students in the liberal arts and sciences were admonished to be critically engaged with the materials under study, to '*become partisan*' that is, *against* oppression, moronization, brutalization' (Marcuse, 2009: 38) and *for* the better future condition of the human race, as Marcuse characterized the Enlightenment goal of Kant's educational philosophy (Marcuse, 1972: 27).

## GLOBAL CAPITALISM AND THE RADICAL OPPOSITION (1974–5)

Marcuse's recently discovered *Paris Lectures at Vincennes University* (2015a) possess an uncanny applicability today. Given the crisis of global finance capital, higher education must encourage students and faculty alike to examine the conditions that serve to perpetuate the increasingly volatile realities of political, economic, and cultural life in the United States and the militarized processes of US-led global polarization. Marcuse's analysis discerns a dialectic of *ripening and rotting*:

I suggest to analyze this problem in the classical Marxian terms, namely, that the very forces which make for the preservation and for the growth of the capitalist system are also the forces which make for its decline and eventual collapse. This is the classical dialectical conception, and I've found that it is the only one that gives, or may give us, an adequate understanding of what is going on. (Marcuse, 2015a: 37)

US society represents the 'highest stage in the development of monopoly capitalism' (Marcuse, 2015a: 21): the US is exporting *production itself* from the metropolitan countries to other capitalist and pre-capitalist countries with lower production costs. There is a fusion of *political, economic, and*

*military power* in which the representatives of particular corporate interests lead the government. The population, generally managed without overt force through advanced forms of political-economic manipulation, is controlled through *the systematic increase in the power of the police*. Enforcement keeps itself within the framework, although reduced framework, of the patterns of unfreedom that pass for American democracy. Further, 'You know too well, I suppose, the progress which by virtue of the electronic industry has been made in surveilling an entire population secretly, if desired' (Marcuse, 2015a: 23). These points are quite prescient, given, as mentioned earlier, our new awareness of the regularity of police killings of unarmed black men and of Edward Snowden's revelations.

These lectures valorize a classical Marxian view of political economy. Today this has won wide acceptance among a range of anti-globalization activists and in the more radical circles of the Occupy movement and Black Lives Matter. Marcuse's comprehensive view of the Left sees in it: 'the opposition in the labor movements, the opposition among the intelligentsia, and the opposition in the women's liberation movement. They all have one thing in common, namely... new motives for revolution, new needs for revolution, and new goals for revolution' (Marcuse, 2015a: 53–4). He argues that abundance and peace, as revolutionary goals, are attainable and realistic.

The key question he poses is whether oppositional forces are gaining power. Increasing numbers of individuals are no longer adhering to the operational values that essentially help keep the system going. Prospects for radical change and the 'possible advent of a free socialist society' are warranted expectations (Marcuse, 2015a: 69).

Marcuse warned against the theory that 'knowledge workers' were becoming a new class. While knowledge was becoming a decisive productive force, 'the application of knowledge in the process of production remains dependent on the actually ruling

class' (Marcuse, 2015a: 15). In contrast, he thought the women's liberation movement was key to the transformation of civilization's traditionally patriarchal values, and central to the 'new goals and possibilities of the revolution' (Marcuse, 2015a: 60; 2005b).

Consistent with these lectures, a 1975 type-script, 'Why Talk on Socialism?', maintains:

capitalism destroys itself as it progresses! Therefore no reforms make sense. The notion that the society, as a *whole* is sick, destructive, is hopelessly outdated, has found *popular expression*: 'loss of faith' in the system; decline in the work ethic, refusal to work, etc. (Marcuse, 2015b: 304)

The general form of the internal contradictions of capitalism has *never been more blatant*, more cruel, more costly of human lives and happiness. And – this is the *significance of the Sixties* – this blatant irrationality has not only penetrated the consciousness of a large part of the population, it has also caused, mainly among the young people, a radical *transformation of needs and values* which may prove to be *incompatible* with the capitalist system, its hierarchy, priorities, morality, symbols (the counter-culture, ecology). ... The very achievements of capitalism have brought about its obsolescence *and* the possibility of *the alternative!* (Marcuse, 2015b: 307)

In the last publication of his lifetime, 'The Reification of the Proletariat', Marcuse announced a valorization and vindication of the proletariat: 'Can there still be any mystification of who is governing and in whose interests, of what is the base of their power?' (Marcuse, 1979: 23).

## THE AESTHETIC DIMENSION (1977–8)

Near the end of his life, Marcuse reconsidered the emancipatory potential of great art. His final book, *Die Permanenz der Kunst* – originally published in 1977, and in English as *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978a) – moves away from the radical notion of the aesthetic as *gesellschaftliche Produktivkraft*. Great art is revolutionary instead because it is 'an indictment of the established reality [and] the

appearance of the image of liberation' (Marcuse, 1978a: xi). '[T]he world formed by art is recognized as a reality which is suppressed and distorted in the given reality' (Marcuse, 1978a: 6). The *aesthetic form*, as such, invalidates an oppressive society's dominant norms, needs, and values:

The aesthetic transformation is achieved through a reshaping of language, perception, and understanding so that they reveal the essence of reality in its appearance: the repressed potentialities of man and nature. The work of art thus re-presents reality while accusing it. (Marcuse, 1978a: 8)

Great works of art disclose life's dialectical permanencies and universals and are always and permanently a manifestation of the struggle for liberation (Tauber, 2015). The aesthetic form preserves the unchanging internal conflicts of human life, spanning the contradictions between illusion and reality, falsehood and truth, joy and death. This inner aesthetic dimension involves a sensitivity to the 'inexorable entanglement of joy and sorrow, celebration and despair, Eros and Thanatos' (Marcuse, 1978a: 16). These contradictory forces constitute reality 'for every human being' (Marcuse, 1978a: 6). The sensuous power of beauty imaginatively subordinates death and destructiveness to non-aggressive life instincts and heralds a logic of gratification that is required precisely because of its societal absence.

Where art is estranging and transcendent its ambivalence may be taken as escapism, yet it retains its power of opposition (Guadalupe Silveira, 2010). Critique and protest are inherent in the separation of art from life:

If art were to promise that at the end good would triumph over evil, such a promise would be refuted by the historical truth. In reality it is evil which triumphs, and there are only islands of good where one can find refuge for a brief time. Authentic works of art are aware of this: they reject the promise made too easily; they refuse the unburdened happy end. (Marcuse, 1978a: 47)

Art's critical task is the disclosure of the tragical-beautiful paradox in life, and this is the hallmark of its truth.

## ECOLOGY AND THE CRITIQUE OF MODERN SOCIETY (1979)

It is not aestheticism but a militant defense of the earth and its people that occupied much of Marcuse's final year of life. See his essay 'Ecology and the Critique of Modern Society' (Marcuse, 2011; Kellner and Pierce, 2011):

Under the conditions of advanced industrial society, satisfaction is always tied to destruction. The domination of nature is tied to the violation of nature. The search for new sources of energy is tied to the poisoning of the life environment. (Marcuse, 2011: 209)

Marcuse had written earlier of ecological ruin in 'Ecology and Revolution' (2005b). Given the general destructiveness of modern society, Marcuse recognizes the need for a reconciliation of alienated humanity with the natural world, a pacification of the struggle for existence. This requires a change in the conditioned needs of individuals – away from that generated by the mechanism of repressive desublimation, which promises compensatory satisfactions for a totally commercialized and commodified life – toward new sensibilities. The existing structure of needs is being subverted:

[Changed] needs are present, here and now. They permeate the lives of individuals. ... First the need for drastically reducing socially necessary alienated labor and replacing it with creative work. Second, the need for autonomous free time instead of directed leisure. Third, the need for an end of role playing. Fourth, the need for receptivity, tranquility and abounding joy, instead of the constant noise of production. ... The specter which haunts advanced industrial society today is the obsolescence of full-time alienation. (Marcuse, 2011: 211)

'Marcuse rooted his philosophy in the early Marx's philosophical naturalism and humanism' – and 'the struggle for a society without violence, destruction, and pollution

was part of Marcuse's vision of liberation' (Kellner, 2011: 217, 219).

## MARCUSE'S CHALLENGE TO EDUCATION

Marcuse's social philosophy and aesthetic philosophy have become quite widely known (Miles, 2012), his work on ecology and women's liberation less so. His philosophy of education deserves much wider recognition. Recent contributions include the booklet by Kellner, Lewis, and Pierce, *On Marcuse: Critique, Liberation, and Reschooling in the Radical Pedagogy of Herbert Marcuse* (2009); the essay collection *Marcuse's Challenge to Education* (edited by Kellner, Cho, Lewis, and Pierce, 2009); works by Arnold Farr (2015) and Reitz (2016a, 2016b, 2015, 2009a, 2009b, 2000).

Marcuse's critical theory has led to a recovery of the emancipatory dimension of philosophy in key sectors of the humanities and social sciences. A 'Legacy of Herbert Marcuse' conference was held at UC Berkeley in 1998, and the contributions published (Abromeit and Cobb, 2004) offer a rich context of critical scholarship. The International Herbert Marcuse Society, founded in 2005, conducts bi-annual conferences attracting theorists and activists from the United States, Canada, Europe, Mexico, and Brazil ([marcusesociety.org](http://marcusesociety.org)). A substantial online resource – 'Herbert Marcuse Official Homepage' (<http://marcuse.org/herbert/index.html>) – is maintained by Marcuse's grandson, Harold Marcuse. *The Radical Philosophy Review* (2013, 2016) has published two double issues devoted to new Marcuse studies, of which the general editor maintains: 'The revival of interest in Marcuse's work in recent years is occurring amidst a resurgence of radical politics and radical theory testifies to its continuing relevance for conceptualizing and challenging the forces of oppression and domination' (Lamas, 2016: 2). Marcuse's critical theorizing continues to rouse political ingenuity and

action to advance materially toward humanity's non-alienated character, conscience, and culture.

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# Theodor W. Adorno and Negative Dialectics

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Translated by Cat Moir

Theodor Ludwig Wiesengrund was born in Frankfurt am Main on September 11, 1903. He was the only child of assimilated Jewish wine merchant Oscar Alexander Wiesengrund (1870–1946) and the Catholic singer Maria, born Calvelli-Adorno (1865–1952). When later, in exile, he obtained American citizenship, Theodor took his mother's maiden name, 'Adorno', as his own last name. Adorno grew up well looked after in his educated middle-class home, and developed an almost limitless passion for music under the influence of his mother and her sister Agathe Calvelli-Adorno (1868–1935), who lived with the Wiesengrunds. In his early childhood, Adorno received piano lessons; later he would learn composition and begin to write his own music. In the 1920s, he published several pieces of music criticism under the pseudonym Hector Rottweiler in Vienna. Into the 1960s he was a guest lecturer at the 'summer courses for new international music' in Kranichstein near Darmstadt.

In 1925, Adorno left his hometown to study composition with Alban Berg in Vienna. However, he immersed himself not only in music but also in philosophy, and Berg expressed the view that Adorno would not be able to carry out the two pursuits concurrently forever. 'Because you're someone who is only interested in the whole (thank God!)', he said, 'one day you will have to decide for Kant *or* Beethoven'.<sup>1</sup> Adorno's professional path eventually led him to university, but he could not accept the alternative of philosophy and composition that Berg put forward. Although he became a philosopher and sociologist in post-Nazi Germany, categorization according to a division of labor between specialist academic disciplines never suited Adorno's approach, nor his diverse intellectual activities, which cut across traditional academic boundaries. Adorno considered the usual distinction between philosophy, sociology and aesthetics artificial. It expressed the need of a classificatory science for academic order; instead of giving itself over to objects

and pursuing the moments that indicate the unity of the object, it tears the object apart by whatever method is applied and it does so on the basis of questionable and externally imposed norms of scientific conduct. The 'question of all music', he writes in fragmentary notes about Beethoven, is 'how can a whole exist without doing violence to the individual part?'<sup>2</sup> – this question motivated not only Adorno's music theory but also his philosophy.

According to Adorno, the objective historical development of society tends towards a total system which imposes itself on people objectively, as a force that is independent of and indifferent to them and which reproduces itself through violence towards them. Adorno therefore understood the need to allow the sufferings that emerge from this repressive, formally abstract generality of objective force to speak as the condition of all truth. 'For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed'.<sup>3</sup> While music and non-conceptual language can help to express suffering, and promise the redemption of a non-violent whole more immediately, the philosophical concept must first be purged of its absolutization and self-limitation through insistent reflection and intellectual mediation. Common to true music and philosophy today, therefore, is the insight into the inaccessibility of any form of systematic thinking of the kind that reached its philosophical zenith in Hegel and its musical apogee in Beethoven. Once the harmonious unity of the real system has been exposed as an ideology, and its reproduction acknowledged as constituted by antagonism, music and philosophy are only possible as a negative system. Just as Adorno already called the Marxian system of the critique of political economy a 'negative or critical system',<sup>4</sup> truth can no longer be achieved as a self-enclosed whole but only as an 'anti-system' oriented towards openness,<sup>5</sup> which does not acquire its binding character from the

stringency of the systematic but rather from thinking in and through historically concrete constellations.

The world is systematized horror, but therefore it is to do the world too much honour to think of it entirely as a system; for its unifying principle is division, and it reconciles by asserting unimpaired the irreconcilability of the general and particular. Its essence is abomination; but its appearance, the lie by virtue of which it persists, is a stand-in for truth.<sup>6</sup>

This way of doing philosophy goes back to Adorno's youth. As a fourteen-year-old, he read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* together with Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966), a highly formative experience, as he himself much later testified: 'I do not exaggerate in the least when I say that I owe to this reading more than to my academic teachers'.<sup>7</sup> Under Kracauer's guidance, Adorno learned to read the work of Kant not just in a specialized philosophical way as theory of knowledge but as 'a kind of coded writing out of which the historical conditions of the spirit could be read'.<sup>8</sup> Kracauer encouraged Adorno not to let himself be impressed by the unity and systematic univocality of the philosophical text but rather to seek 'the play of forces working together under the surface of every closed doctrine':

He enabled me to see the critique of reason not just as a system of transcendental idealism. Rather, he showed me how objective-ontological and subjective-idealistic moments battle within it; how the most eloquent passages in the work are its wounds that the conflict in the doctrine left behind. Under a certain aspect, the fractures in a philosophy are essential because of the continuity of the context of meaning, which most people emphasise on their own initiative.<sup>9</sup>

According to Adorno, philosophy is, after Hegel's definition, 'its own time captured in thought';<sup>10</sup> therefore the current state of the world can be reflected in historical consciousness. In codified philosophies, Kant's and those of the early twentieth century, both the unconscious inaccessibility of the philosophical system and the tendencies to decay

of the real are articulated; they are ultimately expressed in irredeemably ideological positions.

The idea of a logic of disintegration, Adorno recalled decades later in a note to *Negative Dialectics*, is his oldest philosophical conception and goes back to his days as a student. The experience of the First World War, the failed revolutions of the postwar years and the experience of the failure of culture are articulated in it. Suitably impressed by Walter Benjamin's (1892–1940) theses on the philosophy of history, in the early 1940s Adorno discussed them in a letter to Max Horkheimer (1895–1973). None of Benjamin's work showed him 'closer to our own intentions', and there could be no doubt about the 'great pull of the whole'.<sup>11</sup> Adorno makes Benjamin's position on culture, that 'there is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism', his own.<sup>12</sup> Benjamin's idea of culture as barbarism coincides almost literally with one of the last formulations of an essay of Adorno's about the cultural pessimist Oswald Spengler, who from on high both longed for and defamed the *Decline of the West*. It is not sufficient, Adorno writes, to defame barbarism and rely on the health of culture: 'Rather, the element of barbarism in culture must itself be penetrated. Only such thoughts have a chance to survive Spengler's verdict, which challenge the idea of culture no less than the reality of barbarism'. Compared to the fatal entanglement of culture and barbarism, according to Adorno, the refuge of the better is alone the termination of any allegiance to this life, this culture, its brutality and grandeur:

The powerless, according to Spengler's command cast aside by history and destroyed, incarnate negatively in the negativity of this culture, that which promises, however weakly, to break its diktat and put an end to the horrors of history. The only hope lies in their opposition, may fate and power not have the last word. Against the decline of the West stands not culture resurrected, but the utopia that resides decisively within the image of what declines, questioning wordlessly.<sup>13</sup>

Adorno published the first of his reflections diagnosing the ills of his age while still a high-school student. In the 'Frankfurt School Newspaper', for example, which Adorno co-edited, he wrote an essay in 1919 on the psychology of the relationship between teachers and students and analyzed this in view of the 'will to renewal, which has an effect in our time in all forms, in the most extreme phenomena' and '[seeks] the basics in the need of the present, and [finds] ultimate questions behind every slogan'. Behind the contemporary, sometimes superficial talk of materialism, Adorno identifies a 'longing for ultimate liberation' and is thrilled that 'perhaps what is truly great in our time' is that

we have again learned to argue an idea, that is what our time has in common with the greatest epochs of world history. Without a doubt, a time in which people fight for the sake of their belief, without any external thoughts of power, with actions, even up to the horrific destruction of the personality of the other, represents a vast improvement over one in which cowardly and self-satisfied tolerance bypass one another intellectually and ultimately the deepest questions of our lives face indifference.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, he confesses to 'eschew[ing] the dogmatic'<sup>15</sup> and regrets that the questions that generally excite our tempers and contemporary debate, as well as the ideas at work in them, 'are often identified with party political goals' and are 'degraded to points on a programme'.<sup>16</sup>

While Adorno was still at high school he began a close friendship with Leo Löwenthal (1900–93), who, along with Kracauer, introduced him to the avant-garde, intellectual milieu of Frankfurt, which gathered not least around the *Jüdische Volkshochschule*, founded in 1920 – later the *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus* – as well as the Institute for Social Research, founded in 1923. The three friends flirted with the slogan of the 1920s, 'transcendental homelessness', which they appropriated from Georg Lukács' (1885–1971) *Theory of the Novel*, published in 1916. This

work, Löwenthal would later recall, 'was for us all a cult book, we knew it almost by heart'.<sup>17</sup>

In 1923, Adorno was introduced to Benjamin, through whom he also met Margarete 'Gretel' Karplus (1902–93), whom Adorno married in England in 1937; Gretel would make an immeasurable contribution not only to the genesis of his works but also to the preservation of his estate. After completing his school education in 1921, Adorno began studying philosophy, music theory, sociology and psychology at the University of Frankfurt. His teachers included the sociologist Franz Oppenheimer (1864–1943) and the philosopher Hans Cornelius (1863–1947). In 1924, the latter would examine Adorno's doctoral thesis on *The Transcendence of the Reified and Noematic in Husserl's Phenomenology*; his attempt in 1927 to habilitate under Cornelius with a study of *The Concept of the Unconscious in the Transcendental Theory of the Soul* was, however, unsuccessful – his teacher found the study too light and advised Adorno to withdraw it. He would finally habilitate after just over a year of intensive work on his study *Kierkegaard. Construction of the Aesthetic* in February 1931 under the Protestant theologian and Professor of Philosophy at the University of Frankfurt Paul Tillich (1886–1965).

The young *Privatdozent* Wiesengrund's teaching activity, following his inaugural lecture on *The Actuality of Philosophy*, did not last long. After the Nazis took power in January 1933, the Institute for Social Research was first searched on March 13, 1933 by the police then, on the orders of the secret state police (Gestapo), closed from May 26, based on a Law on the Confiscation of Communist Assets. The accusation: promoting 'subversive activities'.<sup>18</sup> Adorno, who at that time was not a permanent employee of the Institute, known pejoratively as the Castle of Marx, and by sympathizers as Café Marx, and who was also not politically active, could no longer give the lectures he had planned

for the summer semester; in September, the National Socialists officially revoked his authorization to teach.

In April 1934, Adorno moved to London and, in June, with the help of the Academic Assistance Council (AAC), he enrolled as an advanced student in philosophy at Merton College, Oxford. As far as the precarious circumstances of exile, worries about friends and family in Germany and uncertainty about his own future would allow, Adorno began to study Husserl's phenomenology intensively; in view of the context in which he studied academic philosophy in England, Adorno would later say of his Husserl studies: 'Here nobody understands them'.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, he assured Horkheimer,

I'm not getting myself into any academic shenanigans, as you have apparently suspected me to do; or do you think that despair about the situation has stupefied me so much that I'm considering adding a hundred-and-first to the hundred existing epistemological standpoints? In any case, the object of work is not at the front, but at the stage, I hope, that it will contribute something to the supplies.<sup>20</sup>

The study – later entered as the third chapter in the *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique* – was at first to be titled 'The Phenomenological Antinomies. Prolegomena to Dialectical Epistemology' and would attempt to 'push the inherent contradictions of the phenomenology up to the point of self-dissolution, thus as it were to thoroughly dialecticise the least dialectical of all philosophies (and nevertheless the most advanced bourgeois epistemology)'.<sup>21</sup> For all the relevance Adorno ascribed to the Husserl studies, he saw them above all as preparatory work for a future project that he wanted to tackle with Horkheimer. Meanwhile, he hoped that the studies would 'be of benefit as a real prolegomena to our actual and common theoretical task, namely the dialectical logic'.<sup>22</sup> The idea of collaborating on a book about dialectical logic is first mentioned in a letter of Adorno to Horkheimer in November 1934. He described the Husserl studies as 'a kind of

critical-dialectic prelude to a materialistic logic' and noted that 'the work thus stands in the closest connection with your own'.<sup>23</sup> Adorno declared: 'It is a very exciting task to strike the sparks of historical concretion out of philosophy just where it is at its most abstract, and of course it is a kind of test of the applicability of the dialectical materialist method; one that seems to me so far to succeed'.<sup>24</sup> Adorno leaves no doubt that he saw the materialist dialectic neither as a mere corrective to idealism, nor as its externally opposed antithesis, but rather as something to be developed only through immanent critique. The transition to the materialist dialectic consisted for Adorno only in the critical self-reflection on idealist philosophy, so that the former is mediated by the latter.

I believe I am able to say so much in any case: that it is not enough, materialistically to establish such and such structures in idealist thinking and thus to constitute more or less the plane of a materialist history of ideas, but that the problem can be solved only by entering into the substantive discussion and *immanent* resolution of idealist theses and developing the materialist theory in a binding way out of the criticism of idealism's errors, in the strictest sense. This is anyway what I imagine for our great work, and also a little for my current one, which tries everywhere to reach precisely the points at which one tips over into materialist dialectics.<sup>25</sup>

Adorno and Horkheimer discussed the planned book about dialectical logic frequently in the following years. From early 1938, they searched for a specific problem from which the materialist dialectic could be unfolded; they considered the concept of autonomy, the relationship between dialectics and totality, between dialectics and positivism, the critique of psychology and of psychologism, art, the theory of society and the relationship between the labor movement and culture. Their own position on the proletariat was for some time the most pressing problem that the staff of the Institute for Social Research had to clarify. Thus Adorno still stressed in 1936 'what seems to me to be the most important task of the Institute with

regard to the theory of dialectical materialism, namely a theoretical analysis of the current situation of the class struggle'.<sup>26</sup> Adorno actually provided such an analysis in 1942 under the title *Reflections on Class Theory*. The nine theses are however far more than that. Adorno stated that the immense pressure of rule would so dissociate the masses that the negative unity of oppression, through which workers in the nineteenth century first constituted themselves as a class, would be torn apart and that class rule was accordingly preparing itself to survive the anonymous, objective form of the class. As necessary as Adorno thought it was to consider the concept of class in such a way that it was both maintained and transformed, he also emphasized the historical-philosophical draw of Marxian class theory over a merely economic understanding. In his inaugural lecture of 1931 on 'The Actuality of Philosophy', Adorno stressed that 'the images of our life are still guaranteed through history alone';<sup>27</sup> in a lecture of 1957 on the *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* he still speaks of his 'attempt [...] to make philosophy of history in a radical sense the center of philosophy'.<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, Adorno insists in the *Reflections on Class Theory* that even if the concept of class was bound up with the emergence of the proletariat, Marx's theory that all previous history is one of class struggle extends it into prehistory and is therefore itself directed against prehistory: 'By exposing the historical necessity that brought capitalism into being, the critique of political economy is the critique of history as a whole'.<sup>29</sup> According to Adorno, Marx's observation that all history is one of class struggle, because history until today has always been the same, namely prehistory, constituted an instruction as to how to recognize history as such: 'From the most recent form of injustice, a steady light reflects back on history as a whole'.<sup>30</sup>

With the increasing radicalization of anti-semitism in Nazi Germany, however, the subject of a critical theory that takes seriously the idea of the temporal core of truth – a theory

that Adorno takes over from Benjamin – also shifts. Adorno confessed in a letter from the summer of 1940:

Gradually, and under the influence of the latest news from Germany, I am unable to free myself at all from thoughts of the fate of the Jews. Often it seems to me as if everything we were used to seeing from the point of view of the proletariat have been passed on today in terrible concentration to the Jews. I wonder whether we should not [...] say the things that we really want to say in connection with the Jews, who now represent the counter point to the concentration of power.<sup>31</sup>

This proposal eventually found approval with Horkheimer, and in October 1941 he wrote summarily to Adorno that antisemitism signifies

today really the focus of injustice, and our kind of physiognomy must return to the world where it shows its most horrific face. Ultimately, however, the question of antisemitism is the one in which what we write can most quickly enter into a context in which it is effective, without us betraying anything in it. And I could imagine even without chimerical optimism that such a study would have such an impact that it would help us further. In any case, I would certainly dedicate years to realising it, without hesitation.<sup>32</sup>

In fact, Adorno had dedicated himself since the late 1930s to comprehensively investigating and criticizing antisemitism. Adorno left Europe in 1938, relocating to New York City as an official employee of the exiled Institute of Social Research, and simultaneously taking up a position in the radio research project directed by Viennese sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld (1901–76). The Institute, partly in cooperation with the American Jewish Committee (AJC), then began to plan various research projects related to antisemitism, with Adorno's considerable input. During this period, Adorno and Horkheimer collaborated intellectually as well as maintaining a close personal friendship. Once they had agreed on antisemitism as the concrete starting point of their book on logic, both intensified their work on the common project, the results of

which would finally be published in 1944 under the title *Philosophical Fragments* and in 1947 as *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Already by September 1940, Adorno had sent a theoretical outline to Horkheimer, which the latter still found inadequately formulated and reckless; but despite all the required modifications, Horkheimer thought it indicated how a real theory of antisemitism must be articulated. According to Horkheimer, the depth and tenacity of hatred against the Jews left the usual explanations of antisemitism appearing rationalistic and therefore inadequate. Antisemitism dates back, he argued, 'to a period in which many of the "rational grounds" for its emergence, such as the participation of Jews in capitalism and liberalism, were not yet in effect. Antisemitism itself bears some archaic traits that point beyond the usually specified causes'. Therefore a 'sufficient theory of antisemitism that goes beyond the pluralism of individual "reasons for hatred of the Jews" depends on the success of a prehistory of antisemitism'.<sup>33</sup> Horkheimer replied approvingly to Adorno's outline that contemporary antisemitism 'is grounded in prehistory', and confessed: 'I am convinced that the Jewish question is the question of contemporary society – here we are in agreement with Marx and Hitler, but otherwise as little as with Freud'.<sup>34</sup> In March 1941, in a draft letter to Harold Laski (1893–1950), Horkheimer once again stressed the special relevance of antisemitism not only for understanding contemporary society but history as such:

It appears to me as if the old instruments would no longer suffice – not even that treatise 'On the Jewish Question'. As true as it is that one can understand Antisemitism only from our society, true as it appears to me that by now society itself can be properly understood only through Antisemitism. It demonstrates on the example of the minority which is, as a matter of fact, in store for the majority as well: that change into administrative objects. The reasons for Antisemitism itself are probably much deeper, historically, than they are supposed to be. They cannot be explained solely by money economy.<sup>35</sup>



The idea of a prehistory of antisemitism takes up the idea of a theory of society based on a philosophy of history, which Adorno and Horkheimer now considered key to understanding current conditions. Reflection on the archaic and prehistoric follows the impulse to be true to the unconscious foundations of modernity and to turn the enlightenment reflexively on itself. By comprehending what is simultaneously repressed through enlightenment, as well as what continues to exist, every historical spell chained to barbaric prehistory was to be broken with the expressed aim of exploding the continuum of immanent history – it is the attempt, by immersing oneself in contemporary phenomena, to read the history sedimented within them. As Adorno later wrote in *Negative Dialectics*, ‘Becoming aware of the constellation in which a thing stands is tantamount to deciphering the constellations which, having come to be, it bears within it’.<sup>36</sup> Prehistory does not enter into Adorno’s work as something that has elapsed but as something still present. It is not a matter of illuminating prehistory as such but its relationship to modernity: this was the task of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In it, every relationship of prehistory to modernity is elevated as the relationship of myth to enlightenment, and the authors intend to recognize ‘why humankind, instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism’.<sup>37</sup> To that end, they followed the process of civilization as one of the mastery of inner and outer nature to its historic beginnings, and the book’s fragmentary considerations and digressions finally culminate in theses-like explanations of some elements of antisemitism. The theses, as is stressed in the preface, are developed in close cooperation with Löwenthal and are ‘directly related to empirical research carried out at the Institut für Sozialforschung’, applying to

the actual reversion of enlightened civilisation to barbarism. Not merely the ideal but the practical

tendency of the self-destruction has always been characteristic of rationalism, and not only in the stage in which it appears undisguised. In this sense we offer the main lines of a philosophical prehistory of anti-Semitism. Its ‘irrationalism’ is deduced from the nature of the dominant *ratio* itself, and the world which corresponds to its image.<sup>38</sup>

Shortly after his return from American exile to Frankfurt in November 1949, Adorno published *Minima Moralia*. He had completed the book when still in the United States, and dedicated it to Max Horkheimer ‘as thanks and promise’. The ‘reflections from damaged life’ – the subtitle – are expressly based on ‘the narrowest private sphere, that of the intellectual in exile’.<sup>39</sup> Adorno made no secret of what was questionable in the attempt, but he believed that critical theory remained in the sphere of the individual, and not only with a bad conscience. Specifically, critical theory referred to the social substance of the individual; social analysis could therefore take more from individual experience than the philosophical tradition recognized. According to Adorno, in relation to the totalitarian tendencies of those societies that retained some residues of bourgeois freedom even as bourgeois liberalism declined, something of the liberating social forces in the sphere of the individual had temporarily contracted:

Nevertheless, considerations which start from the subject remain false to the same extent that life has become appearance. For since the overwhelming objectivity of historical movement in its present phase consists so far only in the dissolution of the subject, without yet giving rise to a new one, individual experience necessarily bases itself on the old subject, now historically condemned, which is still for-itself, but no longer in-itself.<sup>40</sup>

Though the individual was the point of departure for *Minima Moralia*, Adorno stayed abreast of the ‘changes in the rock strata of experience’<sup>41</sup> effected through National Socialism and Auschwitz and continued the conception of a logic of decay associated with a negative philosophy of history. In reference to the drama *The Last Days*

of *Mankind*, in which the Viennese writer and critic Karl Kraus (1874–1936) pilloried the atrocities of the First World War, Adorno writes: ‘What is being enacted now ought to bear the title: “After Doomsday”’.<sup>42</sup>

The thought that after this war life will continue ‘normally’, or even that culture could be ‘rebuilt’ – as if the rebuilding of culture were not already its negation – is idiotic. Millions of Jews were murdered, and that is to be seen as an interlude and not the catastrophe itself. What is this culture waiting for? And even if countless people still have time to wait, it is inconceivable that what happened in Europe will have no consequences, that the quantity of victims will not be transformed into a new quality of society at large, barbarism? As long as blow is followed by counter-blow, catastrophe is perpetuated.<sup>43</sup>

In *Negative Dialectics*, the reflection on the logic of decay of the individual and society, as well as the experience of the failure of culture, finally culminates in the presentation of the objective dilemma of the impossibility of cultural criticism itself:

All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage. In restoring itself after the things that happened without resistance in its own countryside, culture has turned entirely into the ideology it had been potentially – had been ever since it presumed, in opposition to material existence, to inspire that existence with the light denied it by the separation of the mind from manual labor. Whoever pleads for the maintenance of this radically culpable and shabby culture becomes its accomplice, while the one who says no to culture directly furthers the barbarism which our culture showed itself to be. Not even silence gets us out of the circle. In silence we simply use the state of objective truth to rationalize our subjective incapacity, once more degrading truth into a lie.<sup>44</sup>

Adorno began work on *Negative Dialectics*, one of the most radical writings of the last century, at the end of the 1950s, and it was completed and published in 1966. It was the realization of a plan that he and Horkheimer had pursued since the late 1940s. They planned a second volume of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, to continue the project of a dialectical logic. ‘[O]ne had to cross the

frozen waste of abstraction’ – Adorno recalls a comment by Benjamin about his study of Husserl (1937) – ‘to arrive at concise, concrete philosophizing’.<sup>45</sup> *Negative Dialectics* would retrospectively carve such a path. With it, Adorno may not have substantiated the procedure that permeates his material works, and which can neither be called strictly scientific nor traditionally philosophical, but he did justify it; he laid his cards on the table, which, however, is not the same thing as playing. If he did not want to acknowledge the usual distinction between method and objectivity, his opposition to the intellectual division of labor had to reflect this, not ignore it. Thus he decided to exclude from his main work the polemic, originally conceived as a part of *Negative Dialectics*, against the ‘jargon of authenticity’, which was in the meantime being spoken and written in Germany and, as Adorno saw it, was by no means limited to Heidegger and Jaspers as heads of a particular philosophical school but, far beyond that, represented the latest manifestation of the German ideology in the democratized national community. According to Adorno, elements of the physiognomy of language and sociological elements of the jargon of authenticity no longer fitted properly into the plan of the book:

Certainly in intention and in theme, the Jargon is philosophical. As long as philosophy was in line with its own concept, it also had content. However in retreating to its ideal of pure concept, philosophy cancels itself out. This thought was only developed in the book which was then still unfinished, while the Jargon proceeds according to this insight without, however, grounding it fully.<sup>46</sup>

This is why Adorno excluded it from *Negative Dialectics* and published *The Jargon of Authenticity* earlier, in 1964, as a kind of propaedeutic. ‘The only thing that could be controversial’, he emphasized to Max Horkheimer when *Negative Dialectics* was published, ‘is whether one should let oneself enter the sphere of so-called professional philosophy; but that corresponds to my passion for immanent critique, which is no mere

passion, and is probably also justified itself to a certain degree in the book'.<sup>47</sup>

The work on *Negative Dialectics* can be followed in Adorno's university lectures. As well as those on *Negative Dialectics* (1965–6), the lectures on *Ontology and Dialectics* (1960–1), *On the Doctrine of History and Freedom* (1964–5) and *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems* (1965) borrowed from the notes on his philosophical magnum opus. Adorno justified this with reference to his academic commitments:

the quantity of teaching and administrative chores that I have gradually accumulated render it almost impossible to continue with my research during term time – if indeed we can speak of research in connection with philosophy – with the diligence that is not only objectively indicated but would above all reflect my own inclination and disposition. In such a situation, and given such compulsion and pressure, one tends to develop qualities that are best described by the words 'peasant's cunning'. My solution to this problem one that I have had recourse to during the last two semesters and shall do so again this semester, is to take the material for my lectures from a voluminous and somewhat burdensome book that I have been working on for six years now with the title 'Negative Dialectics', the same title I have given to this lecture course.<sup>48</sup>

According to Adorno, such a procedure corresponds to the notion of philosophy better than the objective of positivist consciousness for academics to teach their students results. A question does not exhaust itself in its result, as Hegel stressed in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*; becoming is also essential to it.<sup>49</sup> Adorno insists therefore 'that philosophical thinking is an element of the tentative, experimental and inconclusive, and this is what distinguishes it from the positive sciences'. Philosophical cognition contains a moment of play as a corrective against the total rule of method. A moment of uncertainty and therefore also of possible failure is proper to it, which imposes on it a permanent self-reflection, so that it does not tip over into ideology – admittedly without ever being fully immune to it. Therefore Adorno would

encourage his students 'to think your own way through what I have to say to you and to assemble your own ideas on the subject matter rather than for me to transmit definite knowledge for you to take home with you'.<sup>50</sup>

The term 'negative dialectics' itself gives pause for thought. If dialectics has always sought to create a positive via the medium of negative thought, then it violates the philosophical tradition that has been handed down. This is the dynamic encapsulated in the Hegelian figure of the negation of the negation. Admittedly negativity, the irreconciled character of thinking and what is thought, is recognized as the impulse of dialectical movement, and yet the contradiction is transfigured into mere 'difference', which serves the 'progressive development of truth'.<sup>51</sup> Contradictions should be overcome in the totality of the philosophical system, the epitome of all negativity, as something positive; the task of philosophy in this view is 'to grasp the affirmative'.<sup>52</sup> Need, compulsion and the unhappiness of negativity, which the particular, individual, limited subject experiences in confrontation with the general, with social objectivity, is elevated by Hegel to a virtue. Because the subject is not immediate but is mediated by relations, Hegel takes the side of the objective needs of the existing against the arbitrary interests of the subjective particular. As a result, he reinstates reconciliation within the whole. 'The history of the world is not the ground of happiness',<sup>53</sup> Hegel explains dispassionately. Rather it is considered as the enforcer of inevitable catastrophe and decline, and should be justified as reason manifesting itself. Ruthlessly adhering to this single purpose, history must as an active force 'crush some innocent flowers, smash some things in its way'.<sup>54</sup> If the history of the world may seem violent and destructive to particular people (*besondere Menschen*), is it not the general idea,

which embarks in contradiction and struggle, in danger; it remains unchallenged and undamaged in the background. This is to name the *cunning of reason*, that it allows the passions to work for it,

whereby that through which it comes into existence suffers loss and damage. For it is the appearance of which part is destructive, another affirmative. The particular is generally too small against the general, individuals are sacrificed and abandoned. The idea pays the tribute of existence and transitoriness not from itself, but from the passions of individuals.<sup>55</sup>

The spirit that represents itself in world history as the general and the active genus is considered the 'sole absolute judge',<sup>56</sup> and Hegel thus secretly admits the failure of his philosophy to solve the problem of how

on the one side, reason can liberate itself from the particularity of obdurate particular interests but, on the other side, fail to free itself from the no less obdurate particular interest of the totality. How this problem is to be resolved is a conundrum that philosophy has failed to answer hitherto. Even worse, it is a problem which the organisation of the human race has also failed to solve.<sup>57</sup>

After countless social disasters, two world wars and, in particular, Auschwitz, the repetition of which could not be excluded, Adorno saw the claim of reason in history as ideology. Such reason would have to prove, Adorno argued, '*for whom* [history] has reason. If reason, a concept based on an understanding of the self-preservation of the individual, ceases to have a human subject, it lapses into unreason'.<sup>58</sup> After Auschwitz, history is unreasonable and meaningless; to claim the contrary would be merely to protect a consciousness which is not able to look the horror in the eye and which would therefore perpetuate this horror. Adorno insists

that every thought that fails to measure itself against such experience is simply worthless, irrelevant and utterly trivial. A human being who is not mindful at every moment of the potential for extreme horror at the present time must be so bemused by the veil of ideology that he might just as well stop thinking at.<sup>59</sup>

On the contrary, according to Adorno, the look into the not-past past of Auschwitz is in no way a mere idiosyncrasy owed to a particular biography, as some academics triumphantly declared of critical theory. 'The

splinter in your eye', notes Adorno in *Minima Moralia* 'is the best magnifying-glass'.<sup>60</sup>

*Negative Dialectics* denied the affirmative transfiguration of the negative into a moment of the positive whole – the fraudulent reconciliation in theory – but Adorno argued that the hoped-for reconciliation could be achieved through social liberation. Revolutionizing the relations of production in order to satisfy material needs is its necessary but insufficient condition: 'Realized materialism is at the same time the *abolition* of materialism as the dependency on blind material interests'.<sup>61</sup> Critical theory wants to criticize, in the name of materialism, the process that society must continually fuel for the sake of its reproduction and survival. A decent society would be one that does not, and in which its members do not, fight for *survival*. The eating and being eaten that humanity has copied from nature and accepted as fate – the subordination of the weaker to the stronger – shall not have the last word. Critical theory is materialist in its diagnosis of existence so that it need not remain materialist only. In fact, a materialism that posits itself abstractly in abandonment from its connection with idealism would be what Adorno calls 'myth': that ever sameness, which produces thinking in systems, as well as the systematic reason of immanent necessity. Critical theory 'cannot be science as Marx and Engels postulated',<sup>62</sup> because, as a representative of reason, it has become one productive force among others. This possibility was always in it, because the principal, unique, identitarian capacity of reason fits in very well with a totally capitalist world: identification is domination of nature. Adorno tries to avoid every form of identity thinking, which has found its practical purpose in systematically administered capitalist exchange relations, by criticizing every 'identity philosophy' by means of a negative dialectic, which includes the blind spots of previous knowledge, that which was not included in philosophy because it resisted identification for the purpose of integration into the systematic. The impulse of historical

movement is the 'irreconcilable power of the negative', the force of 'what exploiters do to the victims',<sup>63</sup> including all that which in the historiography of the victor presents unfillable gaps and through which the historic is expressed as a 'trace of former suffering'.<sup>64</sup> 'The expression of history in things is no other than that of past torment',<sup>65</sup> Adorno writes in *Minima Moralia*, and he adds:

What transcends the ruling society is not only the potentiality it develops, but also all that which did not fit properly into the laws of historical movement. Theory must deal with cross-gained, opaque, unassimilated material, which as such admittedly has from the start anachronistic quality, but is not wholly obsolete since it has outwitted the historical dynamic.<sup>66</sup>

In 1957, Adorno formulated this same thought in a letter to Horkheimer:

in all movements, which would change the world, there is always something ancient, retarded, anachronistic. The measure of what is desired is always to some extent happiness, which is lost by the progress of history. Whoever is not quite up to the standards of the time is always quite well adapted, and would not have it any other way. But this anachronistic element is at the same time also the attempt at change itself, precisely because it is just as much behind conditions as it is in front of them, always most seriously in danger, and is always open to the charge of being reactionary from among those who need it the least.<sup>67</sup>

Thus, according to Adorno, the true interest of philosophy is in

non-conceptuality, individuality and particularity – things which ever since Plato used to be dismissed as transitory and insignificant, and which Hegel labelled 'lazy existence'. Philosophy's theme would consist of the qualities it downgrades as contingent, as a *quantité négligeable*. A matter of urgency to the concept would be what it fails to cover, what its abstractionist mechanism eliminates, what is not already a case of the concept.<sup>68</sup>

Adorno conceived of negative dialectics not as a dialectics of identity; rather, it is 'the consistent sense of nonidentity'.<sup>69</sup> That is, 'we are concerned here with a philosophical project that does not presuppose the identity

of being and thought, nor does it culminate in that identity. Instead it will attempt to articulate the very opposite, namely the divergence of concept and thing, subject and object, and their unreconciled state'.<sup>70</sup> Under the spell of the principle of identity – the law of real abstraction, which presents itself in the form of an equivalence exchange between unequal values, of value as more value, and the law of identity thinking as the thought form of the latter (commodity-form and thought-form) – non-identity appears as contradiction; it 'indicates the untruth of identity'.<sup>71</sup>

The farewell to Hegel becomes tangible in a contradiction that concerns the whole, in one that cannot be resolved according to plan, as a particular contradiction. Hegel, the critic of the Kantian separation of form and substance, wanted a philosophy without detachable form, without a method to be employed independently of the matter, and yet he proceeded methodically. In fact, dialectics is neither a pure method nor a reality in the naive sense of the word. It is not a method, for the unreconciled matter – lacking precisely the identity surrogated by the thought – is contradictory and resists any attempt at unanimous interpretation. It is the matter, not the organizing drive of thought, that brings us to dialectics. Nor is dialectics a simple reality, for contradictoriness is a category of reflection, the cogitative confrontation of concept and thing. To proceed dialectically means to think in contradictions, for the sake of contradiction one experienced in the thing, and against that contradiction. A contradiction in reality, it is a contradiction against reality.

But such dialectics is no longer reconcilable with Hegel. Its motion does not tend to the identity in the difference between each object and its concept; instead, it is suspicious of all identity.<sup>72</sup>

Non-identity is thus involuntarily constituted by the identity principle. It posits what has vanished – that is, identitarian thought cuts off from the thing what does not go into its concept, and what does not go into it is in fact that which makes the thing essential. Essence appears in the form of its constituted denial – a real abstraction. Concerning the equivalent exchange relations, they posit as commensurable incommensurable social

qualities – that is, essence (*Wesen*) appears qua its disappearance, which is the fatal mischief (*Unwesen*) of a world that degrades ‘men to means’ of real abstractions that rule over and prevail in them.<sup>73</sup> Therefore the ‘cognitive utopia’, as it says in *Negative Dialectics*, would be ‘to use concepts to unseal the non-conceptual with concepts, without making them their equal’.<sup>74</sup> Society emancipated from the impulse of identity would correspondingly

not be a unitary state, but the realization of universality in the reconciliation of differences. Politics that are still seriously concerned with such a society ought not, therefore, propound the abstract equality of men even as an idea. Instead, they should point to the bad equality today, the identity of those with interests in films and in weapons, and conceive the better state as one in which people could be different without fear.<sup>75</sup>

In the condition of unfreedom, all talk of pluralism, ubiquitous today, is, on the contrary, the ideological expression of the fact that the ‘centrifugal tendencies of a society that threatens to disintegrate into unreconciled groups under the pressure of its own principles’ are presented ‘as if it were a state of reconciliation in which people lived together in harmony while in reality society is full of power struggles’. Adorno expressed the greatest skepticism towards concepts such as pluralism, since they fit into the general ideological tendency to obscure moments of social antagonism in such a way

that the very factors that threaten to blow up our entire world are represented as the peaceful coexistence of human beings who have become reconciled and have outgrown their conflicts. This is a tendency which barely conceals the fact that mankind is beginning to despair of finding a solution to its disagreements.<sup>76</sup>

Only in a truly reconciled condition that no longer knows fear would the concept of communication come into its own. ‘The present concept is so shameful’, emphasized Adorno,

because it betrays what is best – the potential for agreement between human beings and things, to

the idea of imparting information between subjects according to the exigencies of subjective reason. In its proper place, even epistemologically, the relationship of subject and object would lie in a peace achieved between human beings as well as between them and their Other.<sup>77</sup>

Peace is accordingly the state of difference without rule, in which the differentiated participate together, without repressively equalizing one another; only in such a peace could the idea of a non-authoritarian communication be realized, which today degenerates into ideology if it does not want to know anything about the antagonistic relations of production that create the antagonistic structure within which communication, albeit one not yet free of domination, is possible. Therefore Adorno designates first and foremost the condition of reconciliation as neither the undifferentiated unity of subject and object, nor as its hostile antithesis, but as ‘communication of what is differentiated’.<sup>78</sup> The dialectic serves such reconciliation, serves remembrance of the no-longer-hostile multiplicity, the release of the non-identical and the diversity of the different over which the dialectic no longer has any power. Were the principle of identity to dissolve, non-identity would also be no more and dialectics themselves would find their end in reconciliation. Critical theory knows about the openness of dialectic, the negative design of which defies any positive closure; it knows that dialectic is no eternal value but the ‘ontology of the wrong state of things’.<sup>79</sup> As ‘the self-consciousness of the objective context’, dialectics according to Adorno has not escaped the latter: ‘Without a thesis of identity, dialectics is not the whole; but neither will it be a cardinal sin to depart from it in a dialectical step. It lies in the definition of negative dialectics that it will not come to rest in itself, as if it were total. This is its form of hope’.<sup>80</sup>

In the consciousness of the non-identity of concept and thing, subject and object, dialectics refuses the affirmative, the doubling of that identity principle that is already

predominant in the medium of the spirit (*Geist*). Rather, it behaves critically. In the strict sense of the term critique – even if this is ‘nothing other than discrimination, i.e. the confrontation of moments that differ from one another’<sup>81</sup> – Adorno insists that dialectics is the thinking confrontation of what is separate, of concept and thing together, in which both moments claim what respectively exceeds them against one another: ‘Reciprocal criticism of the universal and of the particular; identifying acts of judgement whether the concept does justice to what it covers, and whether the particular fulfills its concept – these constitute the medium of thinking about the non-identity of the particular and the concept’.<sup>82</sup> Thus Adorno stresses that the terms ‘critical theory’ and ‘negative dialectics’ mean the same thing, ‘with the sole difference that critical theory really signifies only the subjective side of thought, that is to say, *theory*, while negative dialectics signifies not only that aspect of thought but also the *reality* that is affected by it’.<sup>83</sup> Critical theory is therefore by no means, as is commonly assumed, a simple nominalist name for a moralistic attitude, a pessimistic whining or arbitrary philosophical doctrine, which under the name of the ‘Frankfurt School’ would even be integrated into the culture-industrial machinery of exploitation of the academic apparatus. It is rather a reflexive moment within the dialectic itself. Without its self-conscious involvement in the dialectic the theory would collapse through unconsciousness of itself and its subject, and it would be hopelessly incorporated in the real process of negative-dialectical socialization; it would be traditional, affirmative, finally uncritical theory. The term ‘critical theory’ is determined precisely in the confrontation of thought with experience, mediation thought with the experience of reality, which also means that no critical theory is possible which is not also negative dialectics.

Adorno emphasizes that the objectivity of dialectical cognition needs, as opposed to the

usual scientific ideal, ‘not less subjectivity, but more. Philosophical experience withers otherwise’.<sup>84</sup> The subjective moment is given an extraordinary importance, but only the subject is able to experience the negativity of the objective constitution of the world – and Hegel explicitly calls the *Phenomenology of Spirit* a science of experience, just as Adorno understood his *Negative Dialectics* as a theory of reflexive experience – and to turn the medium of critique against this world. Such importance accorded to the subject within dialectical cognition is by no means to be confused with relativism and subjective arbitrariness: dialectics is not a case of a simple method that approaches the subject matter from without. ‘For instead of dealing with the matter itself, such an act is always beyond it; instead of dwelling in it and forgetting oneself in it, such knowledge always reaches for an Other and remains rather with itself, than being with the object and giving itself to it’.<sup>85</sup> Therefore Adorno and Hegel always polemicize decisively against the lifeless triplicate scheme of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. The monochrome formalism is

the shapeless repetition of one and the same, which is applied topically only to the different material and acquires a dull glow of controversy. The for itself probably true idea remains in fact always only in its beginnings if development consists in nothing other than such a repetition of the same formula.<sup>86</sup>

The affinities of philosophical knowledge and playful mimesis with the object to be known require ‘going over to the life of the object, or, which is the same, having the inner necessity of the object before oneself and expressing it’. The philosopher must hold back, must not intervene arbitrarily or on other grounds in the process of cognition, but must recognize the ‘effort of taking on the concept’<sup>87</sup> as well as one’s own abstinence as an essential element of this attention to the concept. But despite this primacy of the object, which in Hegelian philosophy is

the same as the priority of the concept, in the process of cognition in opposition to a mere conversation of the philosopher with themselves, the subjective moment of cognition must by no means be missing: 'The life of God and divine cognition may therefore probably be pronounced as a play of love with itself; this idea sinks into mere edification, and even decreases to insipidity when the seriousness of the pain, the patience and work of the negative is missing from it'.<sup>88</sup> The work of the concept is always at the same time work of the subject: a performance of the knowing human being. Subject and object are both to be understood as moments within the dialectic. Already by 1945, Adorno had noted in this sense:

the subjective enlightenment dialectic, which derives the concept of truth from the soul and finally the life process, is only one side: the objective dialectic, which only determines the individual and the life process from the concept of truth itself, belongs to that concept as well, if it is to have a meaning at all. Perhaps we should hold that for dialectical logic.<sup>89</sup>

The primacy of the object requires reflection on the subject, which is itself also an object, and at the same time it requires subjective reflection. This subjectivity is retained as a moment in the dialectic in contrast to naive realism and dogmatic materialism. There is the 'primacy of the ob[ject] only *in* dialectics', notes Adorno; 'it is at this point that [we see] the fragile nature of truth'.<sup>90</sup> Otherwise there is a relapse into *prima philosophia*:

The turn to the subject, though from the outset intent on its primacy, does not simply disappear with its revision; this revision occurs not least of all in the subjective interest in freedom. The primacy of the object means rather that subject for its part is object in a qualitatively different, more radical sense than object, because object cannot be known except through consciousness, hence is also subject. What is known through consciousness must be something; mediation applies to something mediated. But subject, the epitome of mediation, is the 'How', and never, as contrasted to the object, the 'What' that is postulated by

every conceivable idea for a concept of the subject. Potentially, though not actually, objectivity can be conceived without a subject; but not likewise object without subjectivity. No matter how subject is defined, the existent being cannot be conjured away from it. If subject is not something, and 'something' designates an irreducibly objective element, then it is nothing at all; even as *actus purus* it needs to refer to something that acts. The primacy of the object is the *intentio obliqua* of the *intentio obliqua*, not the warmed-over *intentio recta*; the corrective of the subjective reduction, not the denial of a subjective share.<sup>91</sup>

The critical examination of the Hegelian dialectic proves tricky as not only this but also other closed systems of thought perceive the dubious advantage of sealing themselves off against any criticism:

All criticism of the details, according to Hegel, remains partial and misses the whole, which in any case takes this criticism into account. Conversely, criticizing the whole as a whole is abstract, 'unmediated,' and ignores the fundamental motif of Hegelian philosophy: that it cannot be distilled into any 'maxim' or general principle and proves its worth only as a totality, in the concrete interconnections of all its moments.

Thus according to Adorno only those who do not let themselves 'be intimidated by the virtually mythological complexity of this critical method...and instead of graciously or ungraciously listing or denying his merits, go after the whole, which is what Hegel himself was after' can do Hegel justice.<sup>92</sup> The difference between negative dialectics and dialectics that affirm the whole as a positive is manifest in the judgement and critique of this whole. According to Adorno, Hegel himself had directly attacked the idea of positivity in his early writings and referred mainly to theological positivity, 'in which the subject is not "at home" [*bei sich*] and in which theology confronts him as being something alien and reified. And since it is reified and external and particular, it cannot be the absolute that religious categories claim it to be'. Even later, Hegel 'abandoned or rejected very few of his ideas. What he mainly did was to change their emphasis, albeit sometimes in a



way that turned them into their opposites'.<sup>93</sup> The greatness of the Hegelian philosophy was expressed by Marx, who is generally considered the antipode of Hegel; even if the founder of the materialist dialectic had, according to one statement, turned the idealist philosophy on its head. Against naive realism and merely intuiting materialism, Marx emphasized the immense importance of the subjective moment of dialectics when he wrote in his *Theses on Feuerbach*:

The chief defect of all hitherto materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*; but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the *active* side was developed abstractly by idealism – which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such.<sup>94</sup>

Conscious of the subjective moment in the dialectic, in the consciousness of this negative and non-identical denied, the young Marx also denied the possibility of the transfiguration of the status quo for the better and called for the '*ruthless criticism of all that exists*';<sup>95</sup> he formulated the categorical imperative to '*overthrow all relations*, in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being'<sup>96</sup> and understood the importance of 'revolutionary, of practical-critical activity'. His philosophical critique culminates in the critique of philosophy itself; finally in the thesis: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways, the point is to change it'.<sup>97</sup> If the world proves to be unreasonable to philosophy, there is no need for interpretations and systematic structures that will eventually claim the opposite but rather for a change in the world, such that it finally corresponds to its concept of a rational and humane place. The possibility of this change was for Marx, in the Hegelian tradition, located in the immanent powers of society; he trusted hopefully – too optimistically, as Adorno would see it – in the dynamics of bourgeois socialization itself, that everything would become worse

and thereby turn towards the better. '[T]he fact that the transition to practice that has been implicit in philosophy ever since Hegel has failed, contains the further implication that philosophy itself should be subjected to the most rigorous process of self-criticism, a self-criticism that must self-evidently take its lead from the latest forms assumed by philosophy'.<sup>98</sup> Accordingly, 'philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on' – these are the opening words of *Negative Dialectics* – 'because the moment to realize it was missed'. Practice is postponed into the indefinite future; it is no longer 'the forum for appeals against self-satisfied speculation' but rather the 'pretext used by executive authorities to choke, as vain, whatever critical thoughts the practical change would require'.<sup>99</sup> Because no continuum exists between theory and practice – their unity is not possible in the present society – critical theory is the fragile placeholder of the realized happiness of mankind in the universal calamity. 'The remaining theoretical inadequacies in Hegel and Marx became part of historical practice and can thus be newly reflected upon in theory':<sup>100</sup> 'Perhaps it was an inadequate interpretation, which promised that it would be put into practice. ... Having broken its pledge to be as one with reality or at the point of realization, philosophy is obliged ruthlessly to criticise itself'.<sup>101</sup>

On August 6, 1969, Adorno went 'gently to sleep' during a holiday in Visp (Switzerland), as it says in the death notice signed by Gretel Adorno. Two weeks later, Herbert Marcuse wrote: 'I think there is no one who, like Adorno, radically opposed existing society, who has known and recognized it so radically. His thinking was so uncompromising that he could even afford to succeed in this society. This success has in no way compromised his thinking'.<sup>102</sup> There was no one, according to Marcuse, 'who represented Adorno and can speak for him'; and thus he predicted 'that the discussion of his work is still yet to come, must come, that it

has not even started'.<sup>103</sup> Adorno may have been a last genius – a term that Horkheimer considered adequate in his obituary and which one of Adorno's students used as the title of a biography. His thinking, however, pursued the force that holds sway in things themselves, and his work will therefore persist for as long as those conditions he insistently criticized persist.

Theodor Wiesengrund-Adorno is deceased. His work will live as long as there are people whose thinking is committed not only to exact knowledge, but also to truth, truth in the sense of expressing knowledge in such a way that its formulation leads to the right judgement about the falsely existing. He was a philosopher, not as if philosophy had been applied to him as a discipline, a profession, a specialism; it was to him the effort to form science and art, society and politics in their relation to that Other that cannot be conclusively determined, but is present in the great intellectual and artistic works as the desire of autonomous human subjects.<sup>104</sup>

## Notes

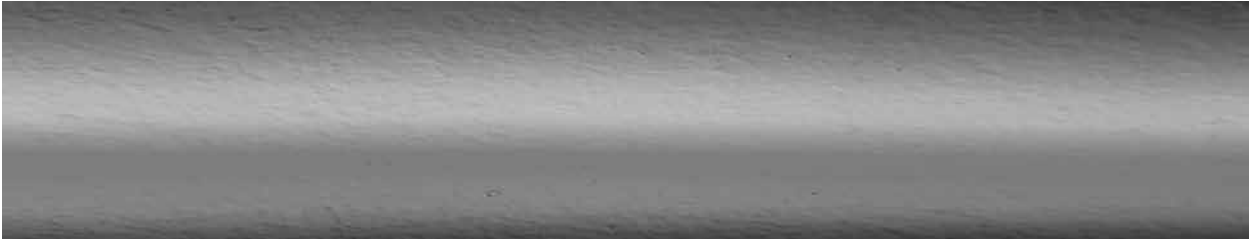
- 1 Alban Berg to Adorno, January 28, 1926, in: *Adorno, Briefe und Briefwechsel*, vol. 2, Suhrkamp, 1997: 66. Translations of German language texts are by Cat Moir.
- 2 Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, Stanford University Press, 2002: 34.
- 3 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, Routledge, 1997: 18.
- 4 Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie – Zur Einleitung*, vol. 2, Suhrkamp, 1974: 262.
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- 6 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, Verso, 2005: 113.
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- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Adorno to Horkheimer, November 24, 1934, in: *Adorno, Briefe und Briefwechsel*, vol. 4.I, Suhrkamp, 2003: 41.
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- 25 Adorno to Horkheimer, May 26, 1936, in: *Adorno, Briefe und Briefwechsel*, vol. 4.I, Suhrkamp, 2003: 148.
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- 98 *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*: 57.
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PART II

# Theoretical Elaborations of a Critical Social Theory



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# Ernst Bloch: The Principle of Hope

Cat Moir

## INTRODUCTION

Ernst Bloch is an ambivalent figure in the tradition of critical theory. He was never a member of the Frankfurt School, and his fidelity to the idea of utopia (the dream of an ideal society or a perfect state of humanity), which he doggedly maintained despite the atrocities committed in its name, set him apart both politically and philosophically from many of his contemporaries.<sup>1</sup> Yet Bloch nevertheless made a bold and original contribution to critical theory in the twentieth century. No other thinker went so far in insisting on the continued importance of hope and optimism in defiance of disaster. When Adorno claimed that Bloch was ‘one of the very few philosophers who does not recoil in fear from the idea of a world without domination and hierarchy’ (Geoghegan, 1996: 162), he acknowledged the courage Bloch showed in defending utopia’s promises despite its many dangers.

Adorno was one of many critical thinkers on whom Bloch’s work made a lasting impact. In the 1970s, he claimed that Bloch’s *Spirit of Utopia* (2000) had made such a significant impression on him when he read it as a young man that he had never written anything since then that did not refer to it (Adorno, 1992: 212). Meanwhile, when Walter Benjamin read the book in 1919 he insisted that, despite its deficiencies, it was the sole work by which he could take his own measure philosophically. In a letter to Gershom Scholem, Benjamin maintained that Bloch was the only one of his contemporaries whose work was not ‘derivative and adulterated’, thus acknowledging the extraordinary force and originality that continues to make Bloch a compelling if sometimes exasperating thinker (Benjamin, 1994: 148).

This chapter begins by situating Bloch’s life and work in the context of a twentieth century dominated for good and for ill by the pursuit of utopias. It then explores Bloch’s key contribution to critical theory,

*The Principle of Hope* (1986), as an attempt to fuse the twin traditions of utopianism and Marxism more tightly than ever before. It concludes by considering some key criticisms of Bloch and reflecting on his significance today. The chapter argues that although Bloch was on the margins of the Frankfurt School, his speculative materialism remains central to critical theory's attempt to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them (cf. Horkheimer, 2002).

## LIFE AND WORK

Until not long before Bloch was born on 8 July, 1885, in the industrial port town of Ludwigshafen am Rhein, the German nation itself had been a utopia: a cultural ideal that existed in the mind but was nowhere to be found on a map. In 1795, Goethe and Schiller, who wrote in high German but spoke disparate dialects and were born as citizens of independent states, were still able to ask, ironically, 'Germany? But where is it? I know not where to find such a country. Where the learned begins, the political ends'. With the foundation of the German Reich in 1871, increasing German unity at the cultural level was translated into a political reality, and German history became a space in which various attempts to realize utopia would be played out. Bloch lived through much of that history, and his life and work bear witness to the magnificent promises and catastrophic failures of the utopian dream.

The world into which Bloch was born was in the grip of rapid change. The rise of industrial capitalism in imperial Germany had brought prosperity to many and misery to many more. Nowhere was this contrast more apparent than in the glaring difference in living standards between the workers' town of Ludwigshafen and the more affluent Mannheim across the bridge. Liberal social reforms gave Jewish families like Bloch's rights and opportunities they had never

enjoyed before, but they had come at a price: thorough cultural assimilation, which, however, did nothing to offset increasing anti-Semitism among those resentful of the newly found wealth and social standing of many Jews. When the First World War broke out in 1914, Bloch was disappointed to see German nationalism on display among Jews, including his former teacher Georg Simmel, with whom Bloch broke after Simmel donned the uniform of an imperial reserve officer.

Like many of his generation, Bloch believed that an apocalyptic renewal was needed to secure humanity's salvation from what G.W.F. Hegel (2007: 21), one of Bloch's most important philosophical influences, once called the slaughter-bench of history. Yet, unlike some of his contemporaries, Bloch did not see war as the solution: while in exile in Switzerland after 1917, he moved in pacifist circles and wrote anti-nationalist opinion pieces in the émigré press. Bloch looked to Russia and the promise of socialist revolution as the foundation of a new society, though the utopian future he envisaged was not one cut off from tradition. His first major published work, *Spirit of Utopia*, combined the romantic force of German expressionism with a brand of Marxism that emphasized Christian values. It advocated a utopian fusion of art and life in order to overcome alienation, though it was an art that valorized craft and ornament over the minimalism of modernist design.

If Bloch sought to mobilize folk culture in the service of social emancipation, he nevertheless vehemently opposed the *völkisch* nationalist ideas that nourished the growth of fascism in Weimar Germany. In his 1919 pamphlet, *Vademecum für heutige Demokraten* (Bloch, 1985c: 475–531), Bloch called to the like-minded among his generation to oppose the reactionary forces that would, he was sure, unleash fresh disaster in Europe if the last vestiges of the agrarian Prussian military regime were not dismantled. He predicted that, failing a 'social revolution of the heart' (Bloch, 1985c: 404), chimerical notions



of 'blood' and 'race' would be triumphant (527), and he advocated the establishment of a 'fully realised moral world parliament' to facilitate 'reconciliation' between Germany and the rest of the world (521).

Bloch's predictions were prescient. As fascist ideas took hold during the 1920s and 30s, he watched in frustration as the German left seemed capable of talking only in numbers and figures while the fascists appealed to hearts and minds by appropriating the messianic language of *Reich* and *Führer*. In *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution* (1969b), Bloch sought an example for the modern left in the history of the radical current of the Reformation, an event he saw as representing a foundational split in Germany's pre-history between revolutionary and reactionary tendencies. *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (1985a) developed this idea further with a critique of National Socialism that explained its rise partly in terms of a fundamental non-synchronicity [*Ungleichzeitigkeit*] between different sectors of modern society. Bloch identified the Nazis' uncanny ability to fuse the values and symbols of a traditional, pre-capitalist way of life with those of a modern, technologized industrial society as a defining factor in their appeal.

Soon after Hitler came to power, a warrant was issued for Bloch's arrest, and in 1934 he and his wife, Polish architect Karola Piotrkowska, went into exile. They fled first to Paris, then to Prague, then finally in 1938 to the United States, where they remained for 11 years. It was here that Bloch wrote *The Principle of Hope*, a phenomenological exploration of what he called our 'anticipatory consciousness': an awareness of the possibility of a different, better world, so often the subject of art and religion, but which Bloch also glimpsed in everyday life, from the utopia of romantic love to the pursuit of advances in medicine. The 'principle of hope' means seeing in things as seemingly banal as the fairground or the lottery the longing for something more, even if their utopian promise remains abstract. The 'American

Dream' – 'To each his chicken in the pot and two cars in the garage' – was thus for Bloch also a 'revolutionary dream' (Bloch, 1985c: 35), though it was far from the utopia he sought. 'In America', Bloch would later claim, 'millionaires begin washing dishes, while philosophers finish up doing it' (Zudeick, 1987: 352), his irony barely concealing a certain contempt for a society which, in his view, mistakenly valued monetary wealth above culture and ideas. Unable to speak English, Bloch led an isolated life in the United States, though his isolation was undoubtedly somewhat cultivated: he longed for the language and traditions of his homeland, or *Heimat*, a figure which was elevated in *The Principle of Hope* to the utopian symbol *par excellence*.

It was particularly fortuitous, therefore, when in 1949 Bloch was offered a Chair in Philosophy at the University of Leipzig in the newly established East German state (GDR). As he reported to the Party newspaper *Neues Deutschland* in August that year, Bloch was initially full of enthusiasm for the project of building a socialist utopia on German soil. However, the honeymoon period did not last long. Bloch's choice to teach 'bourgeois' philosophy in Leipzig was a political decision in a context in which philosophy itself had become an ideological battleground. Bloch's insistence on the importance of Marxism's Hegelian legacy made him a subversive figure. Following the publication of his book *Subjekt–Objekt. Erläuterungen zu Hegel* in 1951 (Bloch, 1969a), a debate erupted that would eventually see him forced to step down from his position. With Bloch accused of revisionism by Party Chairman Walter Ulbricht, his students were openly harassed and his publications blocked. Following his address to the 20th Party Congress of the Communist Party in Moscow, in which he called on the SED government to abandon the Soviet Union's Stalinist education policy and promote academic freedom, Bloch's position as a critic of the GDR regime was beyond doubt. In December 1957, he was summoned before a tribunal where his philosophy was

denounced as un-Marxist, and he himself was declared unfit to teach.

It is hardly surprising, then, that when the Blochs were visiting West Germany in 1961, and they heard the news that a wall had been erected overnight in Berlin, they decided to seek asylum in the Federal Republic. In his inaugural lecture as honorary Professor at the University of Tübingen, Bloch, now 76, admitted that his hope in the GDR had been 'disappointed' (Bloch, 1998: 339–45). Unfettered by the constraints of (self-) censorship, in Tübingen Bloch's critique of the East became more explicit; later he would claim that 'those who are now jumping over the wall from East to West Berlin are truly making a leap from the kingdom of necessity into the kingdom of freedom' (Traub and Wieser, 1975: 20). However, the disappointment of hope was not sufficient reason, Bloch argued, to give up on socialist ideals altogether. Until the end of his life, he continued to campaign tirelessly for social justice and freedom of speech, and against fascism and war. With long experience as one of the last remaining of the pre-1918 generation, Bloch was active during the student-led unrest of 1968 in Germany, aligned with figures like Rudi Dutschke and with something of a cult profile himself. Just two weeks before he died at home aged 92 on 4 August, 1977, he wrote a letter to the German anti-nuclear lobby which described the neutron bomb as 'one of the greatest perversions that human beings have ever created' (Zudeick, 1987: 310). Bloch never lived to see the 'end of history', but even if he had, it is unlikely it would have shaken his faith in utopia – in its critical power to shine a light on the deficiencies of the present state of things and in its ability to inspire us to fight for something better.

### **Key contribution: *The Principle of Hope***

*The Principle of Hope* is undoubtedly Bloch's best-known work, in which the fullest

expression of his utopianism can be found. Written between 1938 and 1947, and published in three volumes in 1954, 1955, and 1959, this 'encyclopaedia of hopes' (Bloch, 1986: 17) attempts to archive the many manifestations of utopian longing, from our efforts at 'making ourselves more beautiful than we are' (339) to our religious dreams of everlasting life. Yet this is more than a mere catalogue of wishes great and small. In the spirit of the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and Voltaire, *The Principle of Hope* attempts to 'change the way people think' about utopia in three main ways: first, Bloch reconceptualizes utopia as a drive or tendency within the fabric of reality itself towards the achievement of ultimate perfection; second, he argues that human culture is both a product of this tendency and can be used to read and realize the world's latent potentials; finally, Bloch maintains that by activating the unfulfilled claims of the past in this way, we can work towards creating a future of peace, plenty, and harmony with nature.

### **HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND UTOPIA**

The relationship between historical materialism and utopia is complex and contradictory. In many ways, historical materialism – a theory based on the idea that class conflict is the prime motor of historical change – is the ultimate utopian theory. The materialist conception of history, as its originators Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels called it, emerged at the end of a process that Bloch called the 'transformation of the [utopian] topos from space into time' (Bloch, 1988: 3). During the period from approximately 1750 to 1850, which historian Reinhart Koselleck (2005) has dubbed the *Sattelzeit* (saddle-time), a series of revolutionary changes unsettled the classical European idea that the future would always look more or less like the past. Industrialization, secularization, the French

Revolution, scientific discovery, and the emergence of a public sphere, by means of which awareness of the cultures of the 'New World' also spread, combined to produce the idea of a new time, in which history was moving towards the goal of human perfection.

Under the pressure of this historical transformation, the early modern spatial utopias of figures like Thomas More, Tommaso Campanella, and Francis Bacon gave way to temporal utopias, in which a perfect society was no longer imagined as existing on an undiscovered island but rather in the future. The first example of a futuristic utopia in literature is Louis Sebastian Mercier's *L'An 2440, rêve s'il en fut jamais*, published in 1770, the same year Cook explored the east coast of Australia, heralding the limits of European expansionism. Its nameless protagonist dreams of a future Paris that is spatially continuous with the one Mercier inhabited but in which the injustices he perceived in his own time have been eradicated. Such visions were mirrored in the progressive philosophies of history that also emerged during the *Sattelzeit*, of which historical materialism can be seen as perhaps the most encompassing and sophisticated. After all, one of its central claims is that by establishing communism through revolutionary class struggle, human beings can create a society that is equal, just, and free to a far greater extent than is the case in capitalist societies.

Yet Marx and Engels explicitly contrasted the materialist conception of history, which they also called 'scientific socialism', with the 'utopian socialism' of some of their near contemporaries, reformers such as Charles Fourier, Henri de Saint-Simon, and Robert Owen, who, they claimed, attempted to build model societies based on their own abstract, personal visions rather than the careful analysis of actual conditions and possibilities. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels conceded that because the utopian socialists had perceived class antagonisms and attacked the miserable status quo, many

valuable insights were to be gained from them (Marx and Engels, 2010a). However, at the time utopian socialism emerged, they argued, the proletariat was not sufficiently developed to be a credible force for social change. This meant that the utopian socialists had confined themselves to small-scale experiments, which ended up reproducing rather than revolutionizing oppressive social relations. Marx and Engels aimed to go beyond utopian socialism by providing the critical tools with which to transform society on a grand scale.

If the materialist conception of history thus originally contained both utopian and anti-utopian elements, it was above all anti-utopianism that prevailed in its reception in both the Soviet and Western Marxist traditions. Soviet Marxists typically saw themselves as the legitimate heirs to the legacy of *scientific* socialism, and they branded their opponents, Bloch included, pejoratively as utopians. Meanwhile, critical thinkers in the West also maintained that social change could only be brought about by sober critique and largely rejected utopianism as impractical at best and dangerous at worst.

Bloch's utopianism met with resistance even among his Frankfurt School contemporaries, whose concern with developing a critical theory aimed at the 'emancipation and [...] alteration of society as a whole' (Horkheimer, 2002: 208) made them largely amenable to the idea of utopia. The relationship between Bloch's and Adorno's positions is particularly interesting in this respect. For both thinkers, the ultimate or total perspective characteristic of utopian thinking is in fact implied in all critical thought. In an interview with Adorno in 1964, Bloch explained this idea as follows: 'every criticism of imperfection [...] already without a doubt presupposes the conception of, and longing for, a possible perfection' (Bloch, 1988: 16). Adorno's claim that Bloch comes close to the 'ontological proof of God' here was not a dismissal. Rather, he argues that were there 'no kind of trace of truth' in the ontological argument, 'there could not only be no utopia but

there could also not be any thinking' (Bloch, 1988: 16).

The fundamental agreement between Bloch and Adorno that utopia's key function is its capacity for critique was derived from the shared influence of Jewish messianism on their thinking. As Scholem (1976: 287) acknowledged, Bloch and Adorno were among those 'ideologists of revolutionary messianism' in whose work 'acknowledged or unacknowledged ties to their Jewish heritage' were evident. Both were what Russell Jacoby (2007: 35) has called 'iconoclastic utopians', in the sense that they were influenced by the Jewish prohibition on graven images of a divine, ultimate, or highest good.

Adorno's commitment to the ban on images of utopia remained more rigorous than Bloch's, however. For while Adorno argued that '[o]ne may not cast a picture of utopia in a positive manner', Bloch (1988: 11) insisted on the *need* to 'cast a picture' of utopia, which he saw as partly coming into being through its portrayal. Such an idea was antithetical to Adorno, whose fidelity to the image ban was motivated by his concern to avoid the kind of aberrant politics that, as he saw it, had so often followed from 'blueprint utopianism' (Jacoby, 2007; Truskolaski, 2014).

It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that the one moment in which it becomes possible, perhaps even necessary, for Adorno to cast a picture of utopia is in the context of class struggle. The tipping point is reached at a point in the discussion with Bloch when the pair discusses the possibility of proletarian revolution (Bloch, 1988: 13), and Adorno finds himself assuming 'the unexpected role of attorney for the positive'. If the prospect of revolution, Adorno concedes, cannot 'appear within one's grasp', then 'one basically does not know at all what the actual reason for the totality is, why the entire apparatus has been set in motion' (Bloch, 1988: 13). Here Adorno's commitment to social transformation comes up against the limits of his relentless negativity. Herbert Marcuse

acknowledged this problem explicitly in 1979 when he outlined what he saw as the value of Bloch's utopianism vis-à-vis Adorno's negative dialectics.<sup>2</sup> According to Marcuse, Bloch had 'noticed that mere negation in the present world can lose its critical strength' (Marcuse, 2014: 421). Marcuse saw Bloch as the 'real Marxist of the twentieth century' precisely because he 'could see in Marxism more than political orientation', and more than only ruthless critique (422).

For Bloch, utopia was essential to historical materialism as a theory that 'posits the transformation of the world from within itself' (Bloch, 1986: 267). As he writes in *The Principle of Hope*, historical materialism allows us to envisage the real, historical possibility of creating 'another world beyond hardship' (267), a 'real democracy', 'beyond expropriation and alienation', in which human beings can live in harmony with each other, and with their environment (1376). To achieve this, Bloch believed that more than analysis and critique were needed. He distinguished between what he called the 'cold stream' of Marxism, concerned with the 'unmasking of ideologies' and the 'disenchantment of metaphysical illusion', and the warm stream, which he described as the 'liberating intention and materialistically humane, humanely materialistic real tendency, towards whose goal all these disenchantments are undertaken' (209). Bloch saw both analysis and vision as necessary for social and political emancipation but argued that the warm stream of Marxism had been historically neglected. He saw utopianism as belonging to that warm stream and set himself the task of revitalizing it.

Yet Bloch's understanding of utopia also went much further than anything to be found in Marx. Indeed, Bloch saw utopian theory and revolutionary action as manifestations of a more encompassing phenomenon: a drive within the world itself towards the realization of utopia on a cosmic scale. The scope and substance of Bloch's vision prompted Jürgen Habermas (1969) to describe him in a

critical review of *The Principle of Hope* as a 'Marxist Schelling', and not entirely without cause: what Habermas dubbed Bloch's 'speculative materialism' (Habermas, 1969: 323) combines a Romantic philosophy of nature with Aristotelian categories of possibility and Hegelian dialectics in a theory whose central premise is that the 'world-process itself is a utopian function with the matter of the objectively Possible as its substance' (Bloch, 1986: 177).<sup>3</sup>

For Bloch, material reality is utopian in the sense of being literally not (yet) 'there' in a finished form. Drawing on Schelling's concept of the 'eternal urge and primal ground of all creation' (Schelling, 1988: 273), which paradoxically unites nature and freedom, Bloch (1986: 306) posits the ontological incompleteness of a reality produced by a 'Not with which everything starts up and begins, around which every Something is still built' (cf. Žižek, 2012: 905). As both a 'lack of Something and also escape from this lack', the Not initiates a 'driving towards what is missing', or what is 'not yet' in the world. 'Not-yetness' thus becomes for Bloch the motive force of a materialist process ontology in which matter is no 'mechanical lump' (Bloch, 1986: 1371) but rather a dynamic material process that tends towards the realization of possibilities latent in its capacity.

Bloch's concept of matter derives its dynamism from its dialectical construction. Like Hegel and Marx, Bloch understood dialectics as the method of development through contradiction. Yet if for Hegel dialectics described a process that takes place primarily at the logical or discursive level, and for Marx at the socio-historical level, Bloch followed Engels in conceiving of the material world itself as dialectically constructed. He drew on Aristotelian categories of possibility and entelechy to develop a concept of matter with two complementary and contradictory aspects. On the one hand, Bloch's matter is 'What-Is-in-possibility, i.e. the real substratum of possibility in the dialectical process'; this is the subjective factor in

matter, something akin to Schelling's 'subject of nature', an unconscious yet constitutive driving force that generates, produces, and creates. On the other hand, his matter is 'What-Is-according-to possibility, i.e. that which is defined in terms of conditions by what is in each case capable of appearing historically' (Bloch, 1986: 1371). This corresponds to the limits or conditions matter creates for itself in the process of its self-realization. Bloch's concept thus maps onto the Spinozist distinction between subjective and objective nature, or *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, which Schelling would later take up in his nature philosophy (Schelling, 1988: 50).

Bloch conceptualized human subjectivity, and the historical struggle for freedom and equality, as emerging from this dialectical struggle within unstable matter towards a state of possible self-identity. He thus integrates the Marxist project to create a classless society into a much more comprehensive cosmology, in which the potential goal is what the young Marx once described as the 'naturalization of man and humanization of nature' (cf. Bloch, 1986: 313).

Bloch captures this enigmatic idea in the figure of *Heimat*, in which *The Principle of Hope* culminates (Bloch, 1986: 1376). *Heimat* is a complex concept, which also underwent radical change during the *Sattelzeit* (Bastian, 1995). Originally referring to a person's place of origin, or to an inheritable estate, under the pressure of industrialization and dislocation in the German-speaking territories during the nineteenth century, *Heimat* began to connote an idealized past of childhood innocence and rural idyll.<sup>4</sup> Romantic writers, such as Novalis and Hölderlin, projected fantasies of an unalienated pre-modernity onto the idea of *Heimat*, creating a complex that would (in convoluted ways and jettisoning the constituent irony the image enjoyed among the Romantics) be taken up via the *völkisch* movement into the blood and soil ideology of National Socialism (cf. Blickle, 2002).

What distinguishes Bloch's utopian *Heimat* from the *völkisch* myth is that he recognized that the origins we seek in nostalgic images of the past were never really there in the first place. For those who would see in Bloch an uncomplicated teleology, his use of irony here is instructive. *The Principle of Hope* begins with a series of questions – 'Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? What are we waiting for? What awaits us?' – and ends with a single word: *Heimat*. If there were any doubt that the meaning of the text resides in its last word, the key sentence, which stands out because it is italicized, draws our attention to the fact: '*True genesis is not at the beginning, but at the end*' (Bloch, 1986: 1376). Yet precisely as genesis, *Heimat* connotes a search for origins that have never truly existed. The childhood of *Heimat* is one in which 'no one has yet been', since 'all and everything still stands before the creation of the world as a right world' (1376). Thus the semantic content of the word returns us to the opening questions in a manner that recalls Austrian satirist Karl Kraus' aphorism 'Origin is the goal'. Bloch's text performs both linear and cyclical movements at the formal level, puncturing any premature illusion of totality or achieved finality. Rather the 'goal' of origin is created in the process of working towards it.

The purpose of history, according to Bloch, is to create a world in which human beings are at home in the way in which they frequently, but erroneously, imagine themselves to have been in the past. He claims this utopian dream is materially possible, not only through human practice but because its very possibility resides in matter itself. Bloch's vision of utopia was thus infused with the spirit of revolutionary Romanticism (cf. Löwy and Sayre, 2001), particularly in its emphasis on a possible ultimate identity between human beings and the 'hypothetical' subject of nature (Bloch, 1986: 255). Bloch speculates that this goal can be reached because the 'human house not only stands in history

and on the foundation of human activity, it also stands above all on the foundation of a mediated natural subject [*Natursubjekt*] and on the building site of nature' (290). Unlike the Romantics, however, for whom the process of history could only ever be an 'infinite approximation' [*unendliche Annäherung*] of utopia, Bloch's Marxism encouraged him to hold open the possibility of creating a utopian *Heimat* in the finite realm of human history (cf. Hölderlin, 1946–77: 558). For 'the opposite of the infinite approximation is not in fact sheer presence', he claims, 'but rather [it is] the finiteness of the process and of the consequently at least surveyable anticipated distance from the goal' (Bloch, 1986: 188).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the achievement of ultimate victory remained a 'task' for Bloch, and thus 'the happy present is simultaneously grasped as pledge for the future' (188). Revolutionary politics, and cultural production and analysis, are the main means by which Bloch sees this pledge best pursued.

## HOPE AND DESIRE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Bloch's understanding of human history as continuous with natural history allowed him to read cultural products as the concretization of desires that exist within the material world itself (at least insofar as they exist within us as material beings). He thus maintained a certain transitivity between the structure of matter as a creative striving, organized around a central lack, and the creative subjectivity of human beings, organized around what he called the 'darkness of the lived moment'. Already in *Spirit of Utopia*, Bloch had articulated a theory of experience according to which human beings exist in this the darkness. '[W]e live [*leben*] ourselves', he writes, 'but we do not 'experience' [*erleben*] ourselves' (Bloch, 2000: 191). Only through processes of memory, anticipation, and the confrontation with products of human creativity does the 'self-encounter' take place (7).

Like Freud, Bloch believed that human culture is the result of a process through which our unconscious desires are diverted and captured (Freud, 1961). However, Bloch resisted the privileged place memory and repression enjoy in Freudian theory. He argued that another 'edge' of our unconscious becomes visible in art, which he called the not-yet-conscious in opposition to the 'no-longer-conscious' of psychoanalysis. The not-yet-conscious is 'the preconscious of what is to come, the psychological birthplace of the new' (Bloch, 2000: 116). However, since human consciousness and its products are part of the material world, Bloch claimed that the 'not-yet-conscious' desires of human beings correspond to the not-yet-realized utopian contents of the world process itself. The 'Not-Yet-Conscious in man', Bloch writes in *The Principle of Hope*, 'belongs completely to the Not-Yet-Become, Not-Yet-Brought-Out, Manifested-Out in the world. Not-Yet-Conscious interacts and reciprocates with Not-Yet-Become, more specifically with what is approaching in history and in the world' (Bloch, 1986: 13).

If art is the product of not-yet-conscious (as well as no-longer-conscious) desires, according to Bloch, it is also always produced under specific socio-historical circumstances. When it came to the relation between art and society, Bloch broadly agreed with Marx's basic insight in his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* of 1859, that it is 'not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but their social being that determines their consciousness' (Marx, 2010a: 263). Insofar as art is a product of social labour, which has always been divided according to interests, Bloch saw in it, too, the manifestation of ideology. Yet he resisted the reductionist reading of culture, prevalent among Soviet Marxists, according to which art and other 'superstructural' elements simply reflect a specific form of social relations or mode of production. Instead, Bloch understood the 'being that conditions consciousness, and the consciousness that processes

being [...] ultimately only out of that and in that from which and towards which it tends' (Bloch, 1986: 18). In other words, both social reality itself and the cultural products of that reality always contain more than simply oppression, violence, exploitation, and their expression. The 'blossoms of art, science, philosophy', Bloch writes, 'always denote something more than the false consciousness which each society, bound to its own position, had of itself and used for its own embellishment' (155). Bloch calls this 'more' culture's 'utopian surplus', and he sees it as at bottom always the same: an expression of the still unfulfilled desire for utopia and the anticipatory consciousness of its possibility.

It is thus primarily through art and culture that, according to Bloch, human beings can become conscious of that which Marx once said the world has long dreamed of possessing, even if something more than art is needed to realize that dream. In this respect, Bloch's view of Schiller's political aesthetics can be seen to apply equally well to his own: 'It is utopian to wish to overcome humanity's social fragmentation, and to restore its wholeness, by no other means than aesthetic consciousness. Yet nevertheless there is utopia, even if it is somewhat high-flown, in this idealism, and not just resignation, not just ethereal unworldliness' (Bloch, 1998: 89).

Bloch's interest in Schiller reflected his broader interest in the question of why some works of art speak down the ages, allowing themselves to be reinterpreted anew. For Bloch, this was not merely a matter of culture being infused with ruling-class ideas. As his friend and contemporary Walter Benjamin (2006: 392) would later put it, 'there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism', and indeed, since utopia has never existed, all culture up to now must be understood as the product of exploitative social relations. In Bloch's view, however, this does not prevent us from perceiving in it a utopian trace, to a degree roughly commensurate with that to which the work in question can be seen to embody

the potential for the radical novelty that utopia represents. Thus, although the Acropolis 'belongs to slave-owning society, Strasbourg cathedral to feudal society', Bloch writes, 'as we know, they did not disappear with their social base, and they carry with them nothing deplorable, in contrast to the base, in contrast to the conditions of production at the time' (Bloch, 1998: 155).

What becomes visible in such artworks is not only a will-to-utopia executed by the labour of the oppressed; precisely by confronting the product of that labour, we can recognize the possibility of utopia's very achievement. This is what makes an artwork valuable, makes it a classic, for Bloch. As he writes in *The Principle of Hope*, '[t]he classical element in every classicism... stands before each age as revolutionary Romanticism, i.e. as a task that points the way forward and as a solution that approaches from the future, not from the past, and, itself still full of future, speaks, addresses, calls us on' (Bloch, 1986: 155). This remains the case even in works ostensibly created by a single individual 'genius', since the potential achieved by one individual under circumstances favourable to their development only gives cause to wonder what would be possible if the free development of each were truly the condition for the free development of all. As Bloch puts it in the context of a discussion of the not-yet-conscious:

Mastery in the work of genius, a mastery which is foreign to what has normally become, is also comprehensible only as a phenomenon of the Novum. Every great work of art thus still remains, except for its manifest character, impelled towards the latency of the other side, i.e. towards the contents of a future which had not yet appeared in its own time, if not towards the contents of an as yet unknown final state. For this reason alone great works have something to say to all ages, a Novum pointing onward in fact, which the previous age had not yet noticed. (Bloch, 1986: 127)

Yet Bloch was far from seeing 'high art' as the exclusive province of the utopian trace. Anticipating the work of thinkers such as

Henri Lefebvre, he also took everyday life seriously as a space worthy of consideration and critique, and, unlike Lefebvre (1991), he resisted the idea that the everyday has been entirely colonized by capitalism. Instead, by analysing everyday practices and objects, he sought to decode the utopian desire that can still be seen to reside there despite the dynamics of commodification.

The daydream is Bloch's point of departure for his analysis of the utopian everyday (Bloch, 1986: 77–113). Here again, he conceives of his insight into the character of the daydream as a complement to Freud's theory of the night-dream. Whereas Freud focused on the libido as the primary drive behind the nocturnal dream, Bloch sees the daydream as driven by hunger and the arising expectant emotions, including hope. Contrary to Freud, for whom the 'night-dream is basically nothing other than a daydream which has become serviceable through the nocturnal freedom of the impulses, and distorted by the form of mental activity', according to Bloch, daydreams 'always come from a feeling of something lacking and they want to stop it, they are all dreams of a better life' (87). He discerns five key features of the daydream that distinguish it from the Freudian night-dream: an active ego, manifested among other things in the ability to daydream by choice, are its first and second characteristics, the desire for world-improvement its third. The fourth characteristic of the daydream, according to Bloch, is the drive for completion, as opposed to the often scattered, fragmented character of the night-dream. Unlike 'the spooks of the night', Bloch claims, the daydream 'has a goal and makes progress towards it' (99). To be sure, Bloch's distinction between day and night-dreams is heuristic rather than scientific: it seeks to highlight the aspects of the unconscious overlooked in Freud's theory of dreams as expressing repressed, mostly taboo, desires.

In *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch finds the daydream assuming 'symbolic form' in everything from fashion to fairy tales



(Bloch, 1986: 333). If for Marx human beings 'begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence', so Bloch would perpetually emphasize the significance of the creative dimension of human labour (Marx, 2010b: 31). 'Clothes which can be chosen distinguish men from animals', he writes, 'and jewellery is even older than these clothes, it sets them off even today by standing out' (Bloch, 1986: 341). Even the fetishized commodity is not without its utopian promise for Bloch, for it 'always still needs a label which praises it', and advertising not only makes products 'shine in the shop window' (343), it also 'transforms man into the most sacred thing next to private property, into the consumer' (344). Despite his irony, Bloch's insight reminds that even commercial products can hold out, and occasionally partly keep, a utopian promise. One might think of the way in which the mass availability of household appliances in 1950s America did in fact contribute to emancipating women from the domestic sphere, even if the tropes used to market them now appear hopelessly retrograde.

If Bloch sees a kernel of utopia almost everywhere, he nevertheless distinguishes between what he calls abstract utopia – dreams that either do not truly challenge the status quo, or are mere fantasy divorced from any sense of how to realize them – and concrete utopia – those dreams that are mediated by objective possibility. Thus for Bloch the sense of premonition encapsulated in the French Revolutionary song 'Ça ira!' articulates the desire for a concrete utopia, because the 'driving images' of revolution it contains 'were attracted and illuminated by a real future place: by the realm of freedom' (Bloch, 1986: 143). Meanwhile, 'the so-called power to foresee deaths or even winning lottery numbers is obviously of a less productive order', precisely because the 'happy end' it envisages remains abstract and purely contingent (143). Yet Bloch defends the happy-end motif even in what he sees as

its most corrupted and corruptible everyday forms, identifying in it the desire for more than the mere appearance of utopia, in whose interest it is co-opted. 'The deceivability of the happy end drive', he claims,

merely says something against the state of its reason [...]. The deception represents the good end as if it were attainable in an unchanged Today of society or even the Today itself. [...] More than once the fiction of a happy end, when it seized the will, when the will had learnt both through mistakes and in fact through hope as well, and when reality did not stand in too harsh contradiction to it, reformed a bit of the world; that is: an initial fiction was made real. (Bloch, 1986: 443)

## NOT-YET AND REVOLUTION

There can be little doubt that Bloch was committed to the significance of aesthetic practice in attempting to realize utopia, yet he also knew that something more than art is required to achieve this task. Wishful images in themselves 'do nothing', he conceded. Rather they 'depict and retain with particular fidelity what must be done' (Bloch, 1986: 47). It is in this sense that Bloch (1988: 11) saw utopia as already partly achieved when it is portrayed in a book: not that utopia is realized through its mere representation, but rather that the images of the past collectively constitute a repository of cultural surpluses that can be activated and mobilized in the pursuit of utopia. Thus Bloch understands cultural tradition as in part the archive of a revolutionary tradition concerned with attempting to realize the not-yet.

Bloch's insistence on the importance of cultural heritage for social and political struggle went against a certain tendency within the socialist movement to reject what Marx in his *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* referred to as the poetry of the past (Marx, 2010b: 106). For Marx, whereas 'former revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to smother their own content', proletarian revolution could not 'begin with

itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past' (Marx, 2010b: 106). Of course, Marx was speaking of the 'social revolution of the nineteenth century', which had failed to materialize in its hoped-for form by the time Bloch was writing *The Principle of Hope*. Nevertheless, orthodox Marxists largely maintained that entirely new forms of art, culture, and thought were required to express the desires of the workers of the world. This was one reason why Bloch's (1986: 9) definition of 'Marxist philosophy' as 'that of the future, therefore also of the future in the past' was explicitly rejected by the GDR regime. In the tribunal held to denounce Bloch in December 1957, the Secretary of the Central Committee, Kurt Hager, stated in no uncertain terms that Bloch's philosophy was judged to be a 'non-Marxist philosophy' (Bloch, 1991: 2). Extracts from Rugar Otto Gropp's damning indictment of *The Principle of Hope* were marshalled against Bloch, with Gropp condemning his philosophy as 'a mystical-irrationalistic conglomeration of components of all possible idealist systems from Antiquity to the most recent present' (20). The 'particularly strong impact of the Romantic school' on Bloch was found to be just as damning as that of 'existentialism' (20). Most 'un-Marxist' of all, though, was deemed to be Bloch's inheritance of religious thought. Indeed, Gropp found that the 'basic themes of Bloch's philosophy are of a religious nature'.

To be sure, Bloch's fondness for religious language and his insistence on the emancipatory power of religious images may seem perplexing given that he himself was an avowed atheist. In an interview from 1974, just three years before he died, Bloch was frustrated by the suggestion that his ideas had enjoyed their most extensive reception among theologians, because, as he put it simply, he himself was not a theologian (Bloch, 1974). Yet Bloch, whom Oskar Negt once called the 'German philosopher of the October Revolution' (1975), also claimed in no uncertain terms that religious messianism is the 'red secret

of every revolutionary' (Bloch, 2009: 1). If we consider that Bloch's work, as Eduardo Mendieta (2005: 12) has noted, 'was determinant for the development of the Frankfurt School's thinking about religion', then it is all the more pressing to grasp the meaning of his complex reception of religious, and particularly messianic, thought.

Benjamin's 1930 fragment 'Capitalism as Religion' provides a useful insight into the context in which he, like Bloch and other messianic Marxists, repurposed theological concepts for political ends.<sup>6</sup> Benjamin argues that in modern societies, capitalism itself has become a religion, even as it has eroded traditional forms of faith largely by assimilating them. Capitalism is a 'purely cultic religion' Benjamin claims, 'without dogma' in which 'everything only has meaning in relation to the cult' (2002: 288). In such a context, the language of religion proper can be seen to become a kind of weapon with which to critique that totality from within. This insight was key to Benjamin's late work, which refunctioned concepts of messianic time for a philosophy of history that demands justice for the oppressed. It is also at the heart of Adorno's negative theology, which sought to adumbrate the possibility of utopia without imagining it in positive or programmatic terms. Yet it is also central to the way in which Bloch reclaimed religious ideas in the service of his own social critique. 'The best thing about religion', according to Bloch, 'is that it makes for heretics' (2009: viii). When the religion is secular capitalism, however, the heretic must become a prophet.

Insofar as religion expresses desires for universal freedom and eternal peace, Bloch saw it as perhaps the oldest and most widespread form of utopianism, albeit one which had frequently been enlisted in the service of oppression rather than of liberation. 'Religion', Bloch argues, 'is superstition wherever it is not what in terms of its valid intention-content it has increasingly come to mean in its historical manifestations: the most unconditional utopia, utopia

of the absolute' (1986: 1200). In other words, the truth of religion as Bloch sees it is the desire for another world than the one of violence, death, suffering, and exploitation that we inhabit. 'Certainly', Bloch argued in *The Principle of Hope*, 'the wishful image in all religions, and even more powerfully in those of the messianic invocation of homeland, is that of feeling at home in existence' (Bloch, 1986: 1196). Its only mistake, he claims, is to project the image of a new world into a transcendent beyond rather than recognize the need to realize it historically.

Seeing the material world as hopelessly flawed beyond normal powers of human correction, the Jewish and Christian messianic traditions posit divine intervention through a specially selected human being. According to Bloch, Marxism inherits this messianic impulse, immanentizing the eschaton to envisage a 'utopia of kingdom' that 'destroys the fiction of a creator-god and the hypostasis of a heavenly god, but not the end-space in which ens perfectissimum contains the unfathomed depth of its still unthwarted latency'. Thus it is through Marxism as a form of atheism that, paradoxically, the messianic idea can be realized: '*without atheism messianism has no place*' (Bloch, 1986: 188). 'Non-existence, non-becomeness is the real fundamental definition of the ens perfectissimum', Bloch argues, but he also posits that historical struggle and political revolution bring us closer to realizing this age-old longing (188).<sup>7</sup> 'Revolutions realize the oldest hopes of mankind', he writes, and 'for this very reason they imply, demand the ever more precise concretion of what is intended as the realm of freedom and of the unfinished journey towards it' (188).

According to Bloch, the same thing is attempted again and again in every revolution, namely the pursuit of utopia. For that reason, the 'good New is never that completely new' (Bloch, 1986: 7). The fight for freedom and equality binds each successive revolution to the last, creating not only a sense of spatial solidarity among contemporaries struggling

alongside one another but 'most especially temporal solidarity as well, extending most presently to the victims of the past, to the victors of the future' (1174). This revolutionary consciousness, Bloch argues 'means that the immortal element in the individual is the immortal element in his best intentions and contents' (1174). Revolutionary practice activates the not-yet fulfilled demands of the past not only out of a sense of debt to those who have gone before; it is also motivated by the hope that the 'men of the future for whom the hero sacrifices himself will have far easier deaths', that their lives will be 'no longer violently cut short', and that 'the fear of life itself, insofar as the ruling class caused it, not least and most comprehensively through war', will finally be 'dead and gone' (1174).

As Bloch (1988: 17) admits, 'Hope is not confidence', and 'Nothing and All are still in no way decided as utopian characters' (1986: 12) – in other words, it is difficult to say from the perspective of the present what a historically redeemed future would look like. Yet the knowledge that our present struggles for freedom, justice, and equality are part of a larger history is a powerful motivation for action. Bloch puts his case eloquently when he says that 'we need the most powerful telescope, that of polished utopian consciousness, in order to penetrate precisely the nearest nearness' of the present as the concrete moment when historical change can begin (1986: 12).

## CONCLUSION: UTOPIA NOW

The reception of Bloch's work has shifted according to the changing fortunes of utopianism and, for that matter, of Marxism. David Kaufmann's (1997: 35) criticism that there 'is perhaps too much Schelling in *The Principle of Hope*, and far too much Stalin' is rather insufficiently nuanced but nevertheless raises some important questions concerning what use Bloch's thought might be for us today. Isn't Bloch's 'speculative

materialism', drawing as it does on what Habermas (1969: 325) called the 'great breath of German Idealism', not hopelessly outdated in our 'post-metaphysical' age? Moreover, given the historical failures of communism, isn't utopianism as such, with its universalist, teleological intimations, bound to be 'totalitarian'?

Perhaps the first step in a response must stem from the observation that, despite the most confident expectations and assertions, the kinds of metaphysical question Bloch poses in *The Principle of Hope* – Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? – refuse to disappear. Indeed, there is a certain paradox in the fact that the apparent triumph of 'postmetaphysical thinking' heralded by Habermas (1992) has been accompanied almost everywhere by the expansion of a post-secular order in which questions about the purpose of existence are once again, or still, or increasingly, being met with religious answers. Even in parts of the world where Marxism-Leninism appears to have done its ideological work most successfully, such as the former GDR, a spirituality that once appeared thoroughly undermined is resurfacing (Pollack and Pickel, 2000). The reasons for this are undoubtedly far too complex to be addressed adequately here. Bloch certainly believed that religious longing had to be grasped as a 'sigh of the oppressed creature', and that to transcend our present, inadequate socio-historical horizon 'without transcendence' of the religious variety was humanity's true hope (Bloch, 2009: 57).

Yet he also understood that the persistence of metaphysical questions, and therefore of the kind of utopian thinking that seeks answers to them, has to do with the limits of human knowledge. Immanuel Kant argued that metaphysical speculation would continue even if the other sciences 'were swallowed up by an all-consuming barbarism' (1999: 1) if only because we have no 'experience' of the future, and therefore cannot know it in the scientific sense of the word. That does not mean, however, that we do not have any

relation to the future at all. Indeed, there is always a weakly teleological expectation that there will be future generations of human beings to pursue emancipatory goals not yet achieved. Just because the Kantian definition of knowledge 'destroys rotten optimism', as Bloch puts it,

it does not also destroy urgent hope for a good end. For this hope is too indestructibly grounded in the human drive for happiness, and it has always been too clearly a motor of history. It has been so as expectation and incitement of a positively visible goal, for which it is important to fight and which sends a Forwards into barrenly continuing time. (Bloch, 1986: 443)

Bloch makes an implicit distinction here between the 'barrenly continuing time' of cosmic chronology and the historical time of human life from which the goal or 'forwards' is derived and in and through which it has meaning.

To be sure, Bloch speculates when he claims that the darkness of the lived moment reveals and brings us into contact with the constitutive lack at the heart of reality itself. Yet as Marx revealed, *what* we speculate has implications for questions of a social and political nature, a fact that is not to be dismissed easily if we accept that knowledge has limits beyond which speculation cannot be avoided. This is not only the case when it comes to 'world views' in the classical sense. At this level, Marx showed how Hegel's mistake as a philosophical idealist was to believe that the existence of the concept of universal freedom at the level of historical institutions meant that universal freedom had actually been achieved, when it was and still is plain to see that unfreedom is everywhere.

Yet thinkers such as Hayden White (2014) have shown how the root metaphors we use all the time to interpret and describe reality have implications in the social and political spheres. Writing about the use of root metaphors in the life sciences, Kaoru Yamamoto (2007: 92) has claimed that 'life will look very differently to a person whose root metaphor is that of a ruthless, gladiatorial combat

to the bitter end than to another who perceives an aspen grove in which each tree grows individually while sustained by a common network of roots'. Bloch's root metaphor – of matter as the 'self-bearing womb' of a historical process of alienation in which human beings are capable of realizing a dream of identity latent within their power – may be speculative, but as Bloch and Adorno, taking their lead from Hegel, recognized, all thought necessarily has a speculative element.

In light of such considerations as these, I argue Bloch's legacy is best served today by interpreting his work as a politically engaged form of scepticism. We do not know whether utopia of the scale and nature Bloch envisages is achievable, but that is not entirely the point. Rather, in a situation in which people clearly still do need theories that can help orient our questioning about who we are and how we should live, Bloch's speculative materialism is one among many, but, crucially, one that is concerned to underpin a progressive and emancipatory politics. Of course, one might argue that we ought to avoid indulging this kind of grand speculation altogether, which even Antonio Gramsci called 'the opium of the labour movement'. Then again, history shows that the attempt to suppress the human imagination is just as dangerous as the desire to follow it blindly. Ultimately, the fact that Bloch seems to have personally believed even some of his own most ambitiously speculative claims does not mean that we have to. Perhaps, for those of us who would like to imagine a world beyond the end of capitalism, the *hope* that something else is really objectively possible is enough.

## Notes

- 1 That Bloch failed to secure a position at the Institute for Social Research during his time in exile in the United States was largely due to irreconcilable political and theoretical differences with Max Horkheimer, for whom he was 'too communist', and Theodor Adorno, who objected to what

he saw as Bloch's 'irresponsible philosophical improvisation' (Geoghegan, 1996: 19; cf. Schmieder, 2012: 133).

- 2 For more on the nuanced relationship between Bloch's and Adorno's conceptions of the speculative, see Moir (2017) 'Speculation, Dialectic and Critique: Hegel and Critical Theory in Germany after 1945' in *Hegel Bulletin*, Volume 38, Issue 2 (Hegel and Critical Theory), pp. 199–220.
- 3 Habermas' article was originally published as 'Ein marxistischer Schelling: Zu Ernst Blochs spekulativem Materialismus' in *Merkur* (1960), Vol. 153, 1078–91.
- 4 The positions of both Novalis and Hölderlin were more complex than is possible to reconstruct here. For more on their relationship, see Charles Larmore, 'Hölderlin and Novalis' in Ameriks (ed.) (2017), *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) pp. 207–226. For more on their relationship to Bloch, see Moir (2016), 'Casting a Picture: Utopia, Heimat, and the Materialist Conception of History' in *Anthropology and Materialism* 3 (Utopia: The Elsewhere and Otherwise), <http://am.revues.org/573>.
- 5 Cf. Bloch 1985b: 126, where he refers to the 'Phantom bloßer unendlicher Annäherung ans Ideal'.
- 6 I am grateful to the combined insights of Sami Khatib, Sebastian Truskolaski, and Jacob Bard-Rosenberg for this aspect of my interpretation of Benjamin's and Bloch's critical refunctioning of religious concepts.
- 7 Cf. Quentin Meillassoux's thesis on 'divine inexistence' – that it is only because God does not yet exist that we should believe in him (Harman, 2011).

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# Georg Lukács: An Actually Existing Antinomy

Eric-John Russell

## A LIFE OF DIREMPTION

Appraising a life of discord is no easy task when suffering comes in innumerable currencies. Fichte spoke of his own time as an epoch of ‘absolute sinfulness’. Ours has been arguably better assessed as the ‘new mediocrity’. The former verdict, often cited by Georg Lukács, signified a modernity that, in a word, rewarded the renouncement of instinct with chronically poor posture. International Monetary Fund Managing Director Christine Lagarde diplomatically provided the second, more uninspired, estimate of a society whose economic prospects are barely worth its name. Indeed, everywhere the blind forces of the economy drive society towards an abyss and are incessantly given rational justification. The antinomic essence at the center of such decrees need not, however, only be surmised from the grandiose macrocosm that is global political economy. Even the tiniest individual detail is not exempt from the possibility of disclosing

a wealth of objective determinations. It might even be suggested that within the seemingly arbitrary subjective flights of consciousness, the essence of a society appears more completely than when the essential questions are posed directly.

How, then, to assess a social existence teetering between the compulsion of opposite directions? Like an Ibsen play, the structure of life is full of intrigue and yet ends in indifference; we are fuming with ambition and yet hold fast to a colorless palette. The universality of this antinomy finds an overwhelming world of things antagonistically coupled with a subjectivity scarcely able to gain a foothold and yet not without the misplaced confidence to declare its supremacy.

If the contours of this contradiction are given personification within the history of Marxism, the figure of Hungarian Marxist and Soviet theoretician Georg Lukács is exemplary, and not simply because he dreamed as a child of writing plays in the spirit of Ibsen. His life and work reveal



the irresolvable antinomy between internal freedom and external necessity. From the 'transcendental homelessness' (Lukács, 1971b: 41) of his early years to his tumultuous acquiescence to official Bolshevik mandates, Lukács was a figure that illustrated the dilemma of being both held up by the neck and yet capable of wielding an incisive theoretical mind. A life notoriously wrought with recantation, self-repudiation and self-disavowal, Lukács internalized party criticism under the realpolitik moniker of 'tactical expediency'. His habitual equivocations forestalled an official excommunication from the party, or worse.<sup>1</sup> Adjusting himself to the immediate exigencies of the day, there remains a fundamental ambiguity between the stature of his own ideas and his subordination to party directive.

Living a life of diremption, Lukács remained stuck in the throat of party officials: 'They can't swallow me and they can't spit me out' (Lukács, 1983: 10). The quintessential bitter pill of this position, bringing him into direct conflict with nascent Soviet orthodoxy, is the collection of essays written between 1919 and 1923 under the title *History and Class Consciousness* (1971a). This seminal work stood as a fundamental break with Second International Marxism by both returning to the Hegelian dimension of Marx's thought and engaging the question of alienation. Lukács placed subjectivity at the center of the book, a heretical approach differing greatly from the economic determinism of doctrinal Marxism under the influence of positivism and mechanical interpretations of history. Taking these theoretical developments to task, Lukács sought to undermine their philosophical presuppositions, derived from the impasse set by the twin pillars of nineteenth-century bourgeois philosophy: materialist ontology and empiricist epistemology. For Lukács, the epistemological framework that posits an individual knowing subject against an equally ahistorical and independent object reflects the historically specific determination social form of

the commodity. Lukács thereby pursued the way in which German Idealism contained the rational kernel for overcoming positivism, ultimately leading him to the critique of epistemology in favor of a social ontology.

## REIFICATION AS A FAILURE OF MEDIATION

Alongside Karl Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*, published the same year, *History and Class Consciousness* captured the Hegelian dynamism of Marx's thinking. The return to Hegel, with particular emphasis on the dialectical method and its eminent category of totality, allowed Lukács to reexamine the interaction of subject and object as an historical process that generates a mode of consciousness adequate to itself. However, when the sole criterion of thought is its agreement with an impervious reality, it fails to think its own historical present and falls under the phenomenon famously theorized by Lukács as reification [*Verdinglichung*]. At the center of *History and Class Consciousness* stands the essay 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' (1923), wherein Lukács uncovers the forms of thought mimetic to the historically specific social form of the commodity, which carries with it a particular epistemological structure adequate to the abstraction of exchange relations. Reification refers to the prevailing index of social objectivity casting its shadow over both proletariat and bourgeoisie, the subjective register of an objective fury under the abstract domination of the capitalist mode of production.

Lukács adopts the fetish-character of the commodity structure from Volume 1 of Marx's *Capital* as the model for reification. Through the production and exchange of commodities, relations between people are subordinated to the social form of the commodity, inverting their subjective relations to the supremacy and autonomy of the object.

The commodity stands over and against its creators and instantiates their practice within its own automatic circuit. The social world of commodity exchange thereby produces what Marx calls an objective domination [*sachliche Herrschaft*]: human activity becomes subordinated to objective forms of social mediation, specifically that of abstract labor, which is constituted by determinate modes of real, concrete practices and objectified through the categories of commodity, money and capital.

Through the historical transformation of the production process with its increasing fragmentation through the division of labor, Lukács distills a process of abstract and formal rationalization, effectively synthesizing the work of Max Weber<sup>2</sup> and Georg Simmel<sup>3</sup> within the framework of Marx's analysis of the commodity form as the structuring principle of society as a whole. Lukács' fundamental question is stated as such: 'how far is commodity exchange together with its structural consequences able to influence the *total* outer and inner life of society?' (1971a: 84). As 'a multivalent term of social analysis' (Bernstein, 1984: 7), the category of reification allows Lukács to disclose the universal form of the commodity within the social spheres of, for example, bureaucracy, juridical relations, journalism and marriage. Reification is not therefore simply a problem of the economy but 'the central structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects' (Lukács, 1971a: 83). In his generalization of Marx's critique of political economy, Lukács makes explicit what was often unarticulated in Marx – the *critique of society* in which the commodity yields determinate forms of being [*Daseinformen*] and determinations of existence [*Existenzbestimmungen*] (cf. Postone, 2009).<sup>4</sup>

As a social critique, Lukács' theory of reification fundamentally concerns an inverted relation between subject and object, in perpetual antinomy, leaving subjectivity with little recourse other than to either hold fast to objective forces regarded as immutable and

timeless or defensively project rational categories onto all that surrounds it. On one side sits the irrevocable and immediate facticity of reality, as if operating by absolute necessity, while the subject of this fatalism finds only inward impotence as the world appears as a moment within and created by its rational faculties. As will become clear, a tenet of reification is therefore the failure of adequate mediation between a knowing and acting subject dragged along by the objectivity of its world. Lukács outlines a series of particular antinomies that give both sociological and epistemological expression to this fundamental condition for which the antinomic relation between subject and object is given only a reflective or, at best, a mechanically mimetic relation. Indeed, it is with different *Reflexionskategorien* that Lukács articulates reification as a failure of mediation for which a knowing subject sees, represents, reflects, imagines or pictures the world as its external object. The failure of mediation as reflection emerges as a mirroring of reality in thought which sets subject and object interminably apart.

What follows will examine Lukács' pre-eminent essay from the perspective of the irreconcilability of the antinomies, or, more precisely, from *the failure of mediation* as a perennial condition of reified social life. I will conclude with remarks on the antinomic status of subjectivity in Lukács' theory of reification. I contend that the primacy of the antinomy as the social ontology of reification – the unmediated separation of subject and object as both an epistemological and ontological problem of modern social life – remains the central theoretical core of Lukács' work. Furthermore, placing the failure of mediation at the center of the analysis will accentuate a set of dichotomies found in Lukács' own methodology – that is, an extraneous formalism that saturates his own account of the movement between each reflective structure of subject and object. Without an account of the immanent development of the antinomies of reification, Lukács is never able to fully

reconcile his epistemological analysis as a social theory. Instead, he is left to hold the sides apart while bestowing upon a particular agent the possibility of social egress that is nevertheless methodologically structured through reflective epistemology. It is therefore in Lukács' 'labyrinth of irresolvable ontological antinomies' (Lukács, 1978: 33) that we find both the failure to immanently develop the structure of his own object and his paramount contribution to what will only after him fall under the name of critical theory through its critique of modern epistemology.

### THE HEGELIAN TURN

The merit of a blade is in the incision. However, the importance of *History and Class Consciousness* is to be firstly understood from the intellectual and political climate from whence it came. Lukács' intellectual development consists in a constellation of influences that predominantly derived from the opposition to the scientific rationalism, empirical sciences and positivist philosophy that had in fact been waning since the mid nineteenth century. Here, in the prewar aestheticism and heirs of *Bildungsbürgertum* among Central European intellectuals, Lukács found himself caught between a certain irrationalist *Lebensphilosophie* and a prevailing neo-Kantianism split between Marburg and Heidelberg. Mediating the two tendencies was the influence of Wilhelm Dilthey, who adhered to the methodological separation of philosophy and the social sciences from the natural sciences. By 1912, Lukács had settled in Heidelberg and would come under the influence of Weber and Emil Lask, through whose work he would acquire a more thorough knowledge of Kant, Fichte and Hegel.

Lukács' approach to cultural questions prior to *History and Class Consciousness*

remained largely within the framework of Dilthey's *Geisteswissenschaften*. Considering Lukács' *Soul and Form*, for example, 'its tentative and fragmentary nature captures the painful reality that Simmel characterized as the "tragedy of culture," the inability of subjective and objective meaning to coincide' (Jay, 1984: 86). The antinomies of *History and Class Consciousness* appear here in the realm of culture, in the division between system and life, ethics and soul, form and wholeness, etc. It took World War I and the Russian Revolution, however, to extinguish Lukács' existential anguish and overcome the Romantic *Weltschmerz* of his student years. As long as an unbridgeable gap remained between reason and the allegedly metaphysical questions beyond the empirical sciences, both neo-Kantianism and irrationalist vitalism could not overcome the presumptions set by the positive sciences. From this point on, Lukács was beginning to transition from Kant to Hegel and would finally arrive at a more extensive understanding of Marx by the time he joined the Communist Party in 1918.

While also the period that saw him give greater attention to the works of Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, the fundamental Hegelian thinking that would come to saturate *History and Class Consciousness* originates from the start of the war. Although a renewed interest in Hegel had emerged as early as 1900, it either tended to ignore his unrelenting critique of Romanticism and absorb him wholly within philosophical irrationalism or place him in the service of neo-Kantianism and, as exemplified in the works of Windelband, simply collapse him into Kantian agnosticism (Lukács, 1975: xi–xxx).

Prior to the publication of *History and Class Consciousness*, the reputation of the dialectic, when it wasn't dogmatized into a positivistic philosophy of nature, drowned in a sea of Kantianism and irrationalism. It was for this reason that Lukács' return to Hegel scandalized both the dominant philosophical tendencies and their political counterparts.

Lukács understood Hegel's thought as an investigation into the reality of cognition acutely aware of 'the contradictory structure and dynamic of all objects, relations and processes' (Lukács, 1978: 22). In the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Lukács found a new ontology in the dialectical exposition of knowledge that, while explicit in Hegel's method, is obscured by his rational system (1978: 72). This ontology consisted in the concrete becoming of true reality, for which objectivity produces its own immanent genesis. The greatest lesson of the *Phenomenology* for him was that the objectivity of thought and reality are genetically produced through the dialectical dynamic of experiential and historical development. The truth of this movement consists in the mutual penetration of subject and object, whose identity in the transformation of substance into subject elicits 'the great demand [...] that man should live in a world understood as adequately as possible' (1978: 65). In the exposition, the subject gains 'conscious insight into the untruth of phenomenal [or appearing] knowledge' (Hegel, 1977: 50) and in so doing, ultimately comprehends both itself and the world as mutually implicated and constitutive of one another. Importantly, it is the *immanent* determinations of an object of thought that are the guidelines for its dialectical apprehension. This approach stands in glaring contrast to an *a priori* or formalist approach to an object of cognition for which the knowing subject either stands over and against its object or simply applies a standardized procedure irrespective of the content of the object.

The immanent criticism of Hegel's dialectical method inherited by Marx is how Lukács grasps the essence of Marxism, described most starkly in the opening essay of *History and Class Consciousness*, 'What is Orthodox Marxism?'. For Lukács, Marxist 'orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*' (Lukács, 1971a: 1), whereby the categories of thought are themselves conditions of existence of the knowing subject.

Fundamental to the dialectic is the category of totality. As a category that attempts to capture a system of contradictory relations, totality is always in the process of its becoming.<sup>5</sup> Hegel's ontological supremacy of a contradictory process raised this unitary conception of reality to a qualitatively new level. Never a *fait accompli* of deterministic locus or simply an accumulated set of facts, totality is instead the categorial precondition for an individual moment to unfold its universal truth. This is precisely what Lukács does in his theory of reification as deriving from the elemental form [*Elementarform*] of the commodity structure:

For here we can see in operation the truth that in the dialectical totality the individual elements incorporate the structure of the whole. This was made clear on the level of theory by the fact that e.g. it was possible to gain an understanding of the whole of bourgeois society from its commodity structure. (1971a: 198)

Hegel's contradictory ordering of the categories through their own imminent determinations for the unfolding of a totality of thought and being is inherited by Marx's critique of political economy. Marx shares with Hegel the perspective that knowledge is by no means mere description but the expression and self-knowledge of a social process by which the world is transformed. It is a genetic exposition [*Darstellung*] of the whole in its concrete determinations, a system that is necessary from the point of view of the logical reconstruction of the whole. The *Darstellung* of *Capital* proceeds in a double manner: firstly with the movement from the *immediacies* of phenomena to their essential and *mediated* determinations, and secondly by working back and developing the forms of appearance [*Erscheinungsformen*] as necessary manifestations of those essential forms. It is the totality of capital as 'value-in-process' that gives determination to each of the immediacies. In reversing directions and moving from essential categories to their necessary forms of appearance, the *Darstellung*

grasps the forms of appearance, such as wages and profit, as transformed forms of essential categories, namely labor-power and surplus-value respectively.

The dynamic of immediacy and mediation illustrated through the categories of appearance and essence derives directly from Hegel and remains a conceptual cornerstone of *History and Class Consciousness*. For Lukács, facts as immediately given must be subject to an historical and dialectical examination that distinguishes between their real appearing existence and their inner essence. While the immediacy of the given differs from its essential determinations, appearance is the mediated mode of existence of the essence rather than an illusory veil that conceals the truth of essence; it is in and through the appearance that essence acquires objectivity. Immediacy and mediation are both aspects of a dialectical process that refer to the objects of reality (Hegel, 1991: 35–7). The objectivity created by mediations necessarily yields its own immediacies.

As a central dialectical concept, mediation [*Vermittlung*] is a category of relationality. It is in fact the relating term itself, either between two other terms or a relation of one term to itself by way of a second. Against the immediate and extrinsic relation of, for example, a juxtaposition, mediation makes explicit the *internal* relation between appearance and essence, or between a seemingly independent object and a knowing subject. It is the mode of existence of the related terms and the contradictory distance given positive form between a concept and its object. The implicit contradictions contained within immediacy disclose a further development of the given object, a self-identity propelling itself forward as a reflection into itself. For this, mediation is the truth of *becoming* over any static configuration of a separate subject and object independent of one another. The category of mediation thereby contains a knowing subject – upon entering the content of its object, implicated into the structure of

its object – not as a simple relation of identity devoid of distinction but as a processual becoming. Immediacy is only one moment of the becoming of totality grasped in its isolation, a necessary appearance from the perspective of the whole rather than merely an error to be epistemologically corrected. To go beyond the immediacies of empirical reality means to comprehend objects as aspects of a totality wherein the category of mediation exposes a structurally objective reality implicated in its cognition.

## THE ANTINOMIES OF REIFICATION

The category of reification discerns in different facets of social life ‘the entrapment in the limits of immediacy and its forms of thought’ (Lukács, 2000: 126); it conceptualizes a world of inert objectivity standing over and against a subject accommodating itself merely as a functional piece of that world. On the whole, this amounts to ‘the reified disintegration of the subject and the – likewise reified – rigidity and impenetrability of its objects’ (Lukács, 1971a: 141). It is from both the subjective and objective side of reification – the antinomy between subject and object – that all other antinomies derive. ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat’ forms the theoretical nucleus of *History and Class Consciousness*, incorporating many of the elements found in its surrounding essays. It is divided into three parts: the first part sociologically grounds the reified separation of subject and object; the second extends this primary antinomy into the critique of epistemology; and the third part provides the historical solution in the standpoint of the proletariat. Together, these three sections inherit the insight of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* that epistemology remains false insofar as it is obstructed from developing into a social theory, an idea that would become foundational for the first generation of the Frankfurt School.

## THE ANTINOMY OF QUALITY AND QUANTITY

When the commodity becomes internal to society rather than a means of relating extra-neous communities to one another, its structure begins to penetrate 'society in all its aspects and to remould it in its own image' (Lukács, 1971a: 85). This shift marks the universalization of the commodity form in contrast to being just one social regulating principle among others and wielding arbitrary quantitative ratios between exchanged products. Both objectively and subjectively, the universality of the commodity structure is the social abstraction from all qualitative determination within both the objects produced and the activity of their production. Objectively, the commodity form facilitates the commensurable exchange of qualitatively different products through the social validation of formal equality. Subjectively, this formal equality of abstraction permeates the inner recesses of individuals. As Lukács writes, the activity of the worker 'becomes less and less active and more and more *contemplative*', conforming to the mechanically fixed laws of exchange.

The pure form of exchangeability depletes commodities of their sensuous content. For Lukács, this dynamic extends throughout society, degrading the very content of life into commensurable abstract units. The result is that the wealth of concrete use-values acquires a new objectivity and substantiality through value's forms of appearance. It is in this way that the objectivity of land, for example, assumes the form of ground-rent. Within the immediacy of the commodity, 'the relations between men that lie hidden [...], as well as the relations between men and the objects that should really gratify their needs, have faded to the point where they can be neither recognised nor even perceived'. Indeed,

the reified mind has come to regard them as the true representatives of his societal existence, sub-

sisting in opposition to the concrete world it nevertheless produces out of its abstractions. Its abstract and quantitative mode of calculability is seen by the reified consciousness 'as the form in which its own authentic immediacy becomes manifest'. (Lukács, 1971a: 93)

## THE ANTINOMY OF PART AND WHOLE

Lukács demonstrates the antinomy between part and whole through an abridged genealogy of the increasing rationalization of labor over time. The development from handicraft to manufacture and machine industry witnesses the greater rationalization of the labor process and a progressive extinguishing of the qualitative and individual attributes of the worker. Labor is gradually 'broken down into abstract, rational, specialised operations so that the worker loses contact with the finished product and his work is reduced to the mechanical repetition of a specialised set of actions' (Lukács, 1971a: 88). In sum, one finds both a greater rationalization and fragmentation of labor while its temporal measure becomes more objectively abstract and calculably independent of the qualitative dimensions of the work process itself. For Lukács, the principle of rationalization is based on predictive calculability, which requires the breakdown of any complex into a series of component parts with its own special laws of operation. This 'rational mechanisation extends right into the worker's "soul": even his psychological attributes are separated from his total personality and placed in opposition to it so as to facilitate their integration into specialised rational systems and their reduction to statistically viable concepts' (Lukács, 1971a: 88). Through this process, the objectivity of the world and its inhabitants are reduced to an aggregate of atomistic facticity, in turn affirming the schism between subject and object as a perpetual disparity connected through a relation

of causal instrumentality inherited from the methods of the natural sciences.

The antinomy of part and whole resulting from the process of fragmentation witnesses the dissolution of the unity of both the product and its creator. Extending the strife between quality and quantity, the separation of part and whole finds expression in a condition for which ‘objectively all issues are subjected to an increasingly formal and standardised treatment and in which there is an ever-increasing remoteness from the qualitative and material essence of the “things”’ (Lukács, 1971a: 99). For Lukács, increasing specialization – itself stemming from the division of labor – results in ‘the destruction of every image of the whole’ (1971a: 103). Nevertheless, he contends that, at least conceptually, the whole can never be fully extinguished. The splintering of social life stands in glaring contrast to a conception of wholeness that achingly subsists within Lukács’ analysis. For example, throughout *History and Class Consciousness* the reified subject is set in distinction to what he frequently refers to as either the ‘total’ or ‘whole personality’, a shorthand which directly invokes the antinomy between part and whole operative within both the ontology of reified life and Lukács’ own method of analysis (1971a: 88, 168, 171, 319, 320).

### THE ANTINOMY OF FORM AND CONTENT

A rational systematization regulating life in all of its possible and imaginable situations subject to predictive calculation is what, for Lukács, the structure of modern legal reality shares with the structure of the commodity. The social need for exact calculation harmonizes the structure of the exchange relationship and the system of law. Largely informed by Weber, Lukács’ passages on the structural affinity between the commodity and state mechanism concern a mode of rational

formalism capable of anticipating all content. Understanding qualitative content in terms of rational calculation – that is, understanding content through form – has as its framework the cohesion of purely formal laws. The legal system of jurisprudence serves ‘purely as a means of calculating the effects of actions and of rationally imposing modes of actions’ (Lukács, 1971a: 109). Lukács extends this tendency of formal standardization to the concept of modern bureaucracy and journalism,<sup>6</sup> for which both life and consciousness are adjusted to the same commensurable premises as the commodity economy, outlined above.

### THE ANTINOMY OF RATIONALITY AND IRRATIONALITY

The antinomy between rationality and irrationality forms the contradictory essence of the capitalist economy, specifically with regards to the problem of the realization of surplus value and economic crisis. The substantive irrationality of the economy for Lukács can be discerned in moments of economic distress, which reveal the utter contingency of a society on the brink of ruination despite the rationality of its individuated parts. For Lukács, the formalism of commodity abstraction contains its own internal contradiction, a rationalization unable to completely subdue its own concrete content.

Lukács further clarifies the antinomy between formalized rational parts and the irrational whole of its content by referring to Engels’ characterization of the ‘natural laws’ of capitalist society as ‘laws of chance’: while society may appear to be held together by ‘natural laws’, the experience of their dislocation reveals the arbitrariness that in truth governs the unified bonds of partial systems. While a systematic formal necessity seems to regulate all social life, the concrete reality to which those laws pertain frequently exceeds such rationalization. In terms of

economic phenomena, there is an accidental rather than necessary connection between, for example, the amount of social labor expended on commodities and the amount of commodities available to satisfy social need. Laws of necessity are in truth fortuitous. Methodologically, the antinomy between a partialized lawful rationality and a total irrationality is displaced onto the antinomy between chance and necessity. While individually fragmented moments are ruled by formalistic rationality, the totality itself is ruled by sheer chance (cf. Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 1, 69, 117, 159).

### THE ANTINOMIES OF BOURGEOIS THOUGHT

In the second section of his essay on reification – ‘The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought’ – Lukács transposes the sociological antinomies to the critique of epistemology. Specifically, he reconstructs the tradition of modern German philosophy from the perspective of the reified structure of consciousness as a universal mode of experience between subject and object. The previous pair of antinomies, between form and content and rationality and irrationality, now coalesce into the single antinomy between a rational form and its irrational content traced through a development in German Idealism. Here, philosophy is by no means merely an epiphenomenal or ‘superstructural’ problem to the travails of social life. While the section intends to establish a more comprehensive analysis of the *subjective* dimension of reified social life, it examines this terrain through the further diremption of subject and object within the realm of thought, a division that marks the actuality of the sociological antinomy outlined in the previous section.<sup>7</sup> The antinomies of bourgeois thought are the antinomies of society itself. Their irresolution is the irresolution of a historically specific situation wherein subjectivity either

collapses the world into its own immutably rational categories or, in what amounts to the same condition, fixates itself to a world outside of its control as its mere appendage. While the impulse to overcome the reified disintegration of the subject and the correspondingly reified impenetrability of objects extends beyond the issue of possible forms of cognition, Lukács nevertheless intends to give expression to the reified nature of bourgeois life through the developmental dilemmas of German Idealist philosophy, since it is there that an effort to reconcile the chasm between the antinomies is most rigorously attempted.

Lukács begins the section by recapitulating the antinomy of rationality described above and outlining a form of modern philosophical rationalism largely informed by the positive sciences. Here, a new method of human thought prevails by affirming the continuity of all phenomena and the pre-eminence of causal connections. It is an epistemic framework for which mathematical and formally rational categories envelop all heterogeneous phenomena. The positivism of its direction held philosophy to develop in tandem with the development of the exacting natural sciences and, as a result, philosophical knowledge became synonymous with systemization. The novelty of modern rationalism is its unrelenting claim to have discovered the *principle* that connects the entirety of phenomena in both nature and society. The sense of system provided by rationalism has no meaning outside the subordination of partial systems whose connections must always be postulated as necessary and are rendered predictable and calculable.

The distortion of the world into its rational systemization is, however, no mere masquerading semblance or epistemic error. In a fragment in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer formulate the objectivity of rationalism accordingly: ‘The essence of the world coincides with the statistical law by which its surface is classified’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 183).



The truth of reality confirms its positivist contortion. The contemplative stance which bears witness to its own formalistic constructions is itself the actual condition of society (Lukács, 1971a: 128). In other words, these are *actually existing antinomies*. Human relations are assimilated to the level of natural laws, assuming the objective form of abstractions modeled upon the conceptual systems of the natural sciences. Subjectivity is reduced to the stance of a purely contemplative observer and the irrational forces of nature are replaced by the second nature of social objectivity.

### THE ANTINOMY OF A RATIONAL FORM AND ITS IRRATIONAL CONTENT

For the principle of systematization, all content is reduced to the immediate facticity regulated by formal structure and 'must be wholly absorbed into the rational system of the concepts of the understanding' (Lukács, 1971a: 118). Formal rationality thereby contains the implicit split between an empirical datum and a rational form. The heterogeneity of the given world therefore remained a challenge for all-encompassing rational systems in which the irrationality of matter was pushed into formal mathematical models. From the perspective of omnipotent rational categories, the material substratum of existence remains a liability on their universal claims. Lukács thereby argues that when rationalism claims to be the universal method by which to obtain knowledge of the whole of existence, the necessary correlation between the rational and the irrational dissolves. The irrationality of rational formalism finds its consummate expression in the concept of the thing-in-itself of Kant's philosophy. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant erects a relation between subjective knowledge and the appearance of an objective world

that is explicable in terms of its causal laws. The world *appears* as such through the forms of human knowledge, by categories imputed to the world so that knowledge about it can be possible. The law-like objectivity of the world thereby originates within the freedom of the knowing subject. The *is* of the world is subordinated to a subjective *ought*, which is the former's transcendental ground. Kant's categories of the understanding [*Verstand*] are thereby necessary for the possibility of experiencing the world at all. The fundamental antinomy within Kant's system concerns the division of the knowing subject into a transcendental self governed by the law of freedom and an empirical self administered by the law of causality. The resulting *interiority* of human freedom corresponds to the *inaccessibility* of the world as it exists in-itself. The transcendental subject which prescribes regularity to the objectivity of the world is schematically denied access to that world.<sup>8</sup>

The Kantian antinomies hold an unbridgeable gap between the noumenal thing-in-itself [*das Ding an sich*] and our knowledge of appearing phenomena organized for the possibility of experience. The non-sensuous origin of our ideas remains unknowable, a transcendental object and 'a *priori* and valid prior to all experience' (Kant, 1998: 283). Relating sensuous content to rational forms evokes the problem of irrationality insofar as there is an impossibility of reducing content to their rational elements. The problem of irrationality is the impossibility of penetrating objects without the aid of rational categories. Kant's concept of the thing-in-itself thereby solicits the limit of rational systematicity and is central for any mode of thought seeking to bestow universal applicability on rational categories.

The tension between the rational form and its irrational content derives from the displacement of the possibility of knowledge from the external world onto the knowing subject. To know the world is to know its representation through a subject ordering

and connecting perceptual manifolds. For Lukács, the limits of this knowing subject express the determinate forms of existence of bourgeois society for which the world is wholly unrecognizable outside of its rationalist mutilation. Kant's antinomies are themselves the antinomies of social life within capitalist society, the philosophical articulation and consecration of reified consciousness (Adorno, 1998: 255).

## THE ANTINOMY OF *IS* AND *OUGHT*

The antinomy between freedom and necessity within Kant's system finds resolution in the sphere of ethical practice. Nevertheless, for Lukács, this is the contemplative subject turning *further inward*. Lukács thus pursues a potential solution to the antinomy through the principle of practice exemplified in both Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* and in the work of Fichte. Thought grasps a world it itself has created. It then, however, confronts the problem of the thing-in-itself. Its recourse, specifically with Fichte, was to turn inward – beyond irrationality, beyond the transcendental thing-in-itself, beyond the given, beyond mere contemplation. In Fichte's systematic philosophy, the seeming solution to the antinomy is discovered in the subject of action, which posits the objectivity of the world as an internal moment of itself. In this identical subject-object, all of reality is synthesized through the activity of an absolute subject.

Lukács recognizes that with Fichte a concept of the subject emerges 'which can be thought of as the creator of the totality of content. [...] Fichte's task, therefore, is to exhibit the subject of the "action" and, assuming its identity with the object, to comprehend every dual subject-object form as derived from it, as its product' (Lukács, 1971a: 123). The duality of subject and object transcends into a unity through the activity or 'positing' [*setzen*] of the subject. As Lukács observes, however, the primacy of activity can already be seen in

Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*. Through Kant, the active subject was provided with a capacity for grounding objectivity within its Categorical Imperative for ethical action, a law that the moral subject gives to itself as a condition for its own freedom. However, like its knowledge of the world, Kant's ethical subject remains purely formal without penetrating its material content.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the dislocation between subject and world translates into the separation between *ought* and *is*, which remained unresolved as long as the thing-in-itself represented a limit to reason. The introduction of a new subjectivity on the level of ethical practice also succumbs to the problem of the thing-in-itself. Kant's formal ethics prohibits the *ought* of the individual and internally free subject to externalize itself in the world – that is to say, to challenge the necessity of the *is*. What *is* remains categorically encapsulated within a deterministic system of causal laws.

While Kant posits a free subject of activity, that subject is deprived of a world in which to act. As a result, the previous antinomy between subject and object reappears within the realm of ethics. For Lukács, the contradiction of the thing-in-itself has not been overcome but only displaced insofar as the *ought* remains cut off from the world of appearances. Moral sanction ultimately derives from a realm inaccessible to the understanding, and freedom does not belong to the world of appearances. The resulting ethic becomes purely formal and without content. When this ethic tries to make itself concrete, it must borrow its content from its own conceptual system, which absorbs all contingency. As such, 'practical norms can only have bearing on the inward forms of action' (Lukács, 1971a: 124). There remains no unity of the world, or, worse yet, the duality of the world between an inward subject and impenetrable object is sublated into the subject itself and split between an empirical and transcendental ego. The empty freedom of the subject cannot avoid the abyss of fatalism.

## THE ANTINOMY OF HISTORY AND GENESIS

Before turning to Hegel as a subsequent attempt at resolving the antinomies, Lukács takes a slight detour into the philosophical sphere of aesthetics, since, after developing the antinomic fracturing of the subject through Kant's epistemic and moral philosophy, it provides yet another domain for addressing social fragmentation. Aesthetics seems to offer a solution to the antinomy as the mediation between the contemplative attitude and ethical practice insofar as the faculty of the 'intuitive understanding' yields content that is not passively received but spontaneously created. However, for Lukács, this faculty only anticipates how it might be possible to complete a perfected system whose postulate of 'intellectual intuition becomes the cornerstone of systematic philosophy' (1971a: 138), most notably in the work of Schelling. Kant's aesthetic aims to deepen the rationalism of the knowing subject while Schiller's 'play-instinct', in an attempt to restore the wholeness of man, seeks to overcome the antinomy of social life by aestheticizing the world into an absolute identity between subject and object, effectively 'mythologis[ing] the discovery of intuitive understanding' (Lukács, 1971a: 140).

The unity of subjectivity with its world can only be conceived for Lukács through the dialectic, whereby all of the previous ossified antinomies are sublated through their own immanent determinations. In both the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Science of Logic*, Hegel was the first to

set about the task of consciously recasting all problems of logic by grounding them in the qualitative material nature of their content, in matter in the logical and philosophical sense of the word. This resulted in the establishment of a completely new logic of the *concrete concept*, the logic of totality'. (Lukács, 1971a: 142)

Through the category of totality, the dialectic evokes the problems of the genesis of

the epistemic subject and the dissolution of the irrational thing-in-itself. For Hegel, the knowing subject is no longer an unchanged and contemplative observer. Instead, the dialectic is enacted between subject and object, undermining all rigid opposition. With Hegel, we find the first thorough interpenetration of the subject with the object itself – the truth of Substance and Subject. Dialectics destroys reification by calling into question the tenability of absolute separations: reification thus becomes a moment superseded within dialectics (Feenberg, 2011: 183; 1981: 243). With Hegel, the riddle of reason becomes its own solution.

Lukács does not, however, rest content with the antinomies reconciled under Hegel's philosophy. There, the unity of subject and object, of thought and existence, is fulfilled *only in the determinations of thought*. The task remains to discover the concretely historical terrain from which to grasp this unity and to elucidate the *concrete we* of the subject of history. For Lukács, the subject–object as *Weltgeist* cannot fulfill the methodological and systematic function Hegel assigned to it as a concrete subject of genesis; it allegedly remains a metaphysical power instantiating the lives of empirical individuals through its own logical supra-historical movement. Hegel's philosophy, then, is driven into mythology. Nevertheless, the progressive aspect of Hegel's new path to knowledge pushes more strongly towards objective reality than Kant's epistemology of transcendental subjectivism. In Hegel's ontological advancement towards the intrinsic relation between subject and object, the identical subject–object dynamically concretizes as a process in which substance becomes subject and subject becomes substance (Hegel, 1977: 9–10).

After having grounded the antinomy of subject and object within the structure of the commodity, Lukács confronts German Idealism's attempted solutions to the Kantian aporia. German philosophy took the antinomies of society to their furthest extreme

while leaving them insoluble insofar as it could not penetrate their social origin. For Lukács, the dialectical method as the true historical method is reserved not for a superior philosophical tendency but ‘for the class which was able to discover within itself on the basis of its life-experience [*Lebensgrund*] the identical subject–object, the subject of action; the “we” of the genesis: namely the proletariat’ (1971a: 149).

### THAT INCORRIGIBLE IDENTICAL SUBJECT–OBJECT

Reification abandons mediation and is the stunted affirmation of immediate knowledge – it is the failure of the subject to impinge upon the structure of its object. However, for Lukács, the *standpoint* of the proletariat, rather than the proletariat in its empirical existence, contains the implicit potential to make explicit the mediations of immediate existence and resolve the antinomy between subject and object. Lukács thereby unfolds a theory of praxis from the standpoint of the proletariat as the free and self-conscious subjective constitution of objective forms. The relation of consciousness to reality is what the dialectic is meant to uncover, whereby the proletariat, in coming to know itself, comprehends society as a whole and thereby overthrows it. Only in this way does the proletariat become both the subject and object of knowledge – that is to say, the proletariat comprehends reality through the very act of transforming it.<sup>9</sup>

However, it has been argued that Lukács’ understanding of the proletariat as the identical subject–object is predominantly Fichtean, likely informed by the influence of Lask (Lukács, 1918). Here, objective reality is the object of human activity – not an impenetrable given but ultimately derived from the subject. For Fichte, the absolute self is the ultimate subject–object of thought and action from which everything flows; according to

this interpretation, the proletariat appears as an historically produced transcendental ego. As an identical subject–object, it is said that Lukács’ proletariat appears as an anthropological instantiation of Fichte’s subjective idealism, a self-positing subject that contains within itself all objectivity. For Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*, Lukács’ proletariat signifies a complete constitutive subjectivity that collapses the objective world into itself. Similar criticisms can be found in the work of Postone, according to whom Lukács conceives the proletariat as a totalizing subject of Hegel’s *Geist* (Postone, 2009).

If, however, in Lukács’ concept of the identical subject–object the concept of *identity* is to have any affinity with Hegel’s concept of identity, then the manner in which identity immanently demands and maintains the category of *difference* cannot be disregarded. For Hegel, identity is not simply the cancellation of differing sides. As Lukács writes in *The Ontology of Social Being*:

Hegel demonstrates the difference in identity itself, and the implicit presence of contradiction in simple distinction; the reflection character is discovered in the apparently logical and tautological category of identity, while, and closely connected, Hegel discloses the indissoluble reality of the reference to the other. (Lukács, 1978: 84)

The determinations of reflection found at the center of the *Science of Logic* salvage the complete and absolute identification of subject and object. Here, identity does not eliminate difference and that ‘the logical form in which Hegel expresses this is that “the law of identity itself, and still more the law of contradiction, is not merely *analytic* but of *synthetic* nature”’ (1978: 85). The persistence and loss of identity, as the mediation of difference through reflection, is a real process that does not simply nullify the distinctions of a relation. The possibility of adequation between subject and object without either an abstract identification or refuge within an absolute separation comes to signify for Lukács the revolutionary meaning of the standpoint

of the proletariat in the overcoming of the antinomies.<sup>10</sup>

### THE ANTINOMY OF FATALISM AND VOLUNTARISM

While the antinomies of reification in *History and Class Consciousness* acquire a predominantly sociological and philosophical form, there is an additional political manner in which the antinomies find expression. There, reified consciousness remains trapped within the two extremes of objective facticity and subjective caprice. Lukács relates 'the dilemma created by the pure laws with their fatalism and by the ethics of pure intentions' (1971a: 39) to the ideas of Austrian and German Social Democracy. For example, in the neo-Kantianism of Eduard Bernstein facticity either reigned or was reduced 'to the status of a subjective, ethical imperative' (Lukács, 1971a: 182). For Lukács, however, the dialectic between subject and object theoretically overcame the inevitability of historical law and the rigidity of empirical facticity through which neo-Kantian Marxists inferred the need to import ideals from moral philosophy.

Particularly in the essay 'The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg', Lukács establishes the reconciled antinomy between an economic fatalism in which capitalism possesses the capacity for limitless accumulation, irrespective of its historical determinations, and that of the Social Democratic petty-bourgeois perspective that socialism can be achieved by a series of ethical choices enacted by individual intention. This political antinomy consists firstly in the mere strategic utilization of what are viewed as eternally valid economic laws, and secondly in activity that is solely directed inward – that is, 'the attempt to change the world at its only remaining free point, namely man himself' (Lukács, 1971a: 38). This latter recourse finds apt expression in an abstract Kantian ethics in

which man remains isolated from the world, operating by means of invariant normative laws applicable in all situations and at every historical moment.

The dualism of economic fatalism and ethical utopianism or voluntarism is the political correlate of the antinomies of bourgeois thought. For Lukács, fatalism and voluntarism are complementary opposites. On the one side lies the fatalistic regard for an objective reality that has the character of an impenetrable thing-in-itself; on the other stands an overestimated moral subject that regards itself as a power able of its own volition to ascetically achieve inner mastery while presuming an empirical world of unalterable structure.

Aside from the antinomy of fatalism and voluntarism, the most arresting political antinomy of *History and Class Consciousness* is the ambiguous relation between the proletariat and its representation in the form of the party. The party and the proletariat interchangeably bear responsibility for the cultivation of class consciousness, capriciously alternating between the *effect* and *cause* or *premise* and *result* of the revolutionary process. On the one hand, the party appears as the *articulation* of the proletariat, as the objectification of its own will, or as 'the visible and organised incarnation of their class consciousness' (Lukács, 1971a: 42). The party mediates between the subjectivity of the proletariat and its objective conditions (1971a: 327). However, the party is 'sometimes forced to adopt a stance opposed to that of the masses; it must show them the way by rejecting their immediate wishes. It is forced to rely upon the fact that only *post festum*, only after many bitter experiences, will the masses understand the correctness of the party's view' (1971a: 329). The party promises the overcoming of the division of labor and yet through its autonomy from the proletariat, reproduces a division of labor (1971a: 336). While the party is the alleged intermediary between empirical and class consciousness, it often appears as the mere *substitution* of

the proletariat, which only widens the chasm between empirical 'trade-union' consciousness and the class consciousness of the proletariat. All in all, the autonomy of the party (1971a: 330) from the proletariat elicits the overarching problem of antinomy in *History and Class Consciousness*.

## THE APORETIC STANDPOINT OF SUBJECTIVITY

The preceding analysis offered an exposition of Lukács' theory of reification from the perspective of a set of antinomies whose shared structure is the failure of mediation between subject and object. This structure derives from the social form of the commodity with epistemic implications illustrated through the conceptual developments of German Idealism. This has left the standpoint of subjectivity in a somewhat uncertain position, with individuality in particular consisting of little more than an abbreviated footnote to a society outside of its control. The following conclusion will thereby briefly assess the status of subjectivity in Lukács' analysis.

For a tendency within Marxism that stretches back to Kautsky, the perspective of subjective experience falls into disrepute insofar as the objective forms of the capital-labor relation cannot be reduced to individual psychologies and intentions. Lukács indeed follows in this tradition at least partially and repudiates the immediate givenness of inner experience as unconditioned and primary. Those curious to know the truth about life in its immediacy are rightly implored to scrutinize its objectively estranged form, which vindicates individual existence in its most intimate recesses. Subjective reflection thereby falls into the realm of the sentimental, arrested in a condition of lamenting the course of the world. For Lukács, class consciousness is therefore 'neither the sum nor the average of what is thought or felt by the single individuals who make up the class'

(1971a: 51) but the 'objective possibility' (1971a: 51–2, 79, 234, 327) of overcoming immediacy and thereby 'the transformation of the objective nature of the objects of action' (1971a: 175).

However, given the serene indifference with which exchange-value liquidates that which is particular, the standpoint of individual subjective experience ostensibly offers critical theory a place to linger without bad conscience. Despite all of Lukács' criticisms of the primacy of individual thought and his rejection of any individual or psychological solutions to the fragmented condition of reified life, subjectivity remains the center of gravity of *History and Class Consciousness*, most notably in the theory of reification for which the stakes of the proletariat are set. Lukács nevertheless took seriously the peril of exaggerating the importance of individuals (1971a: 193). Under reification, the individual is both destroyed and reconstituted as an empirical ego facing an unchanging objective reality or a transcendental ego of cognition without a world to inhabit. The cleft between the two poles becomes the last damaged reminder of subjectivity and solicits a tension within its standpoint. Here, Lukács gives to the proletariat the possibility of agency whose inverted form is reified consciousness. In both cases, and even under the prescribed necessity of the Leninist vanguard party, the role of consciousness thereby acquired an unprecedented prominence within Marxist theory. Rather than conceiving class consciousness as a mechanical process written into the immediate economic position of the proletariat, immediacy is superseded through the development of subjectivity, and the real dialectical forces bringing forth that immediacy are overturned within the social totality.

## EPILOGUE

The prominence of antinomies in the work of Lukács serves not only to grasp the continuity

between the alleged rift between his 'pre-Marxist' period and the work from *History and Class Consciousness* onward. Placing the antinomies at the center also indicates the continuity of some of his most enduring criticisms of his work. For example, in *Negative Dialectics* Adorno takes issue with Lukács for romantically elevating use-value as an essential substratum externally straddled by the formalism of exchange-value (Adorno, 2014: 146–8). Further, Postone provides a related criticism by calling attention to the unmediated relation between the abstract form of the commodity and its concrete content in Lukács' concept of reification (Postone, 2003: 91). The methodological failure to carry the concept of internal mediation through to the end extends throughout *History and Class Consciousness*. All of the antinomic binaries – between quality and quantity, use-value and exchange-value, form and content, the fragmented subject and the 'total personality', individual and class consciousness, etc. – have their basis in a dualism of immediacy and mediation that lacks any demonstrative internal relation of mutual constitution through a process of *becoming*. We thereby reach the remarkably counterintuitive conclusion that Lukács was *not Hegelian enough*. The question remains of how to comprehend *objective* distinctions in their immanently developing mediation without succumbing to a simple arbitrary correlation characteristic of reflective epistemology and its mechanical mimesis, in which epistemological problems extrinsically cohere with social ontology. Nevertheless, the failure of mediation, which can be assuredly said to capture the essence of Georg Lukács, remains indicative of the same reification to which he provides the key.

## Notes

- 1 On the cusp of his death in 1971, an interview with Lukács revealed a solemn breath of clarity when he was asked about a dubious historical

analogy he made to illustrate the Stalinist purges: 'Int: Do you think that the analogy between Robespierre and Danton and Stalin and Bukharin can still be upheld? G.L.: No. But I do think that it was an excusable way for a Hungarian émigré living in Russia to have thought about it at the time' (Lukács, 1983: 107).

- 2 Lukács appropriates Weber's concepts of formal rationality, modern science and industrialization pivoting upon the mechanisms of quantification and calculability. His employment of the concept of 'objective possibility' also derives from Weber's methodological writings on 'adequate causation' (Weber, 1949: 49–112, 166–88; Arato, 1972: 62).
- 3 Since the term *Verdinglichung* is only seldom used by Marx – most notably in volume three of *Capital* – it remains the case that one of the prominent ways in which the influence of Simmel appears in *History and Class Consciousness*, aside from the residual *Lebensphilosophie* and neo-Kantian separation of form and content, is the frequency with which *The Philosophy of Money* (1900) utilizes the category in varied forms, albeit as a predominantly subjective phenomenon (Simmel, 2004: 127–8, 174–5, 186, 195, 211, 278, 472–4).
- 4 It might be said that Lukács' background in the critique of modern social life and culture assisted his interpretation of Marx as a critic of social form rather than as simply a critic of an economic system (Lukács, 1970: 4).
- 5 Further, the parts to a dialectical whole do not 'interact' in a one-way causal sequence or as a functional aggregate. Lukács provides the example of how hitting a single billiard ball changes the configuration of the entire table. However, even this example is insufficient insofar as the ball itself remains in-itself unchanged. The relation of moments determines the objective form of every object of cognition (Lukács, 1971a: 13).
- 6 For Lukács, journalism is almost always the most vulgar and 'grotesque' expression of reification (1971a: 100, 172). Its recurrent debasement interestingly anticipates Debord's comments in *The Society of the Spectacle* – a book that in many ways is the theoretical heir to Lukács' theory of reification – wherein the reification of the spectacle has only its most superficial expression in the forms of mass media (Debord, 1970: §24).
- 7 Lukács briefly describes bourgeois attempts to comprehend the phenomena of reification as simply 'ideological'. This consists in divorcing the manifestations from their capitalist foundation and making them into timeless problems of human relations that offer detailed descriptions without identifying the social foundation (1971a: 95). While Lukács here makes explicit

reference to Simmel, a similar concern, beyond the scope of the present essay, could be reproached on Axel Honneth's interpretation of the concept of reification whereby the category is adapted to a theory of normative intersubjective recognition without an analysis of the sociological structure of the social form of the commodity (Honneth, 2008).

- 8 It is in this regard that Lukács at one point fittingly describes reified consciousness as the 'schematic' or 'stereotyped' consciousness [*Schematisierung des Bewußtseins*] (1971a: 334).
- 9 It is worth emphasizing that the distinction between the standpoint of the proletariat and its empirical instantiation is hardly a negligible difference in Lukács' analysis. The former refers to a potential in the structure of society bereft of the necessity for its actualization. In this way, the standpoint of the proletariat is the revolutionary capacity yet to be realized or even experienced, since such a fulfillment would weigh overwhelmingly upon the empirical world while abolishing reified facticity. It is in this way that it can be said, following Adorno, that a 'standpoint' of experience is no experience at all: 'Any standpoint it were asked to have would be that of the diner regarding the roast. Experience lives by consuming the standpoint' (Adorno, 2014: 30).
- 10 More difficult to contest than the objections to the Fichtean interpretation of Lukács' concept of the proletariat (Bernstein, 1984: 25; Feenberg, 1981: 124, 202–12, 242–4) is the influence of Lask's understanding of Fichte under which irrationality remains as an internal tension that expresses a form of thought inadequate to its object. The intrinsic irrational limit to human knowledge has it that objects can never be fully known, and it is this restriction which, for example, Rockmore cites as demonstrative of Lukács' neo-Kantian methodology insofar as German Idealism is immanently obstructed from grasping the inner social and concrete truth of its object as the proletariat and is thereby incapable of truly knowing, never mind solving, the problem of its antinomies (Rockmore, 1992).

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# Siegfried Kracauer: Documentary Realist and Critic of Ideological 'Homelessness'

Ansgar Martins  
Translated by Lars Fischer

Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966) was born into a Jewish family in Frankfurt.<sup>1</sup> Following his parents' wishes, he studied architecture, yet even then his true interests lay elsewhere, as his early engagement with Georg Simmel and phenomenology indicates. Already as a student, Kracauer wrote substantial philosophical texts, yet these would be published only in 2004. Viewed as a maverick by most established academics throughout his professional life, Kracauer enjoyed broad acclaim in the 1920s as a journalist working for Germany's then foremost (liberal) daily, the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. In this prestigious capacity, he developed meaningful intellectual relationships with Benjamin, Bloch, and Adorno, and it is principally as their associate that he is still cited.<sup>2</sup> His relationship with Adorno, whom he had mentored in his early years, though often conflicted, would remain particularly fond. Having encountered the turmoil of the disintegrating Weimar Republic in the early 1930s in Berlin, he and his wife Elisabeth left Germany immediately

after the Reichstag fire. The *Frankfurter Zeitung* dropped him soon after. It was during his years of extreme disillusionment and poverty in Paris that Kracauer, hoping for a position in the United States, developed the broad outline of the film theory that he would later publish to considerable acclaim. Only in 1941, at the eleventh hour, were Kracauer and his wife able to leave Europe via Marseille and Lisbon for New York. Though their financial situation remained precarious for another decade, Kracauer soon felt at home in the United States. He decided henceforth to publish only in English and devoted all his energy to enemy reconnaissance. Keeping himself afloat with precarious fellowships, he was initially affiliated with the MoMA Film Library. Later, he regularly served as a consultant for empirical social-science research projects and evaluated research proposals for various foundations. Kracauer gradually found new interlocutors in the likes of Erwin Panofsky, Paul Lazarsfeld, Hans Blumenberg, and the 'Poetics and Hermeneutics' circle.<sup>3</sup>

His more substantive works include a discussion of the transcendental foundations of sociology (1922); metaphysical reflections on the 'trivial' genre of the detective novel (1922–5); a sociological and literary study of the salaried employees in Weimar Germany under the spell of the early culture industry (1929–30); two autobiographical novels, of which only the first, *Ginster* (1928), was published during his lifetime; a generally under-rated 'social biography' of the composer Jacques Offenbach and the Second Empire (1938), in which he paid precious little attention to Offenbach's compositions; studies on the functioning of 'totalitarian propaganda' in Germany and Italy (around 1940); group-psychological accounts of the German character, drawing on Weimar cinema as a case study (1947), and people's 'satellite mentality' in countries in the Soviet sphere of influence (1956); a work of film theory focusing on the possibilities of representing 'physical reality' from the 'perspective of the camera' (1960); and an unfinished epistemology of history.

The biographical caesura of his emigration is imprinted on the evolution of his theory. Kracauer scholarship tends to distinguish between his earlier, more political works published in Germany and his later, more strongly empirical and aesthetic works that came out in the United States.<sup>4</sup> His politics, however, do not lend themselves to any straightforward characterization. One might say that he began as a cultural critic influenced by vitalism, subsequently became a Marxist, and then a liberal humanist – and yet none of these labels truly seem to fit. Not least, one can identify numerous continuities that cut across these outward distinctions. Overall, his texts from the later Weimar years, written between 1926 and 1933, are the ones that connect him most intimately with the development of critical theory. Kracauer was, for many years, categorized unquestioningly as a proponent of critical theory.<sup>5</sup> In the 1960s, it was his association with Adorno and Benjamin (as well as Bloch) that secured him

a readership. Especially in the eyes of the 'younger critics', Kracauer noted in 1964, the four of them formed 'a group that stands out. I would have thought that we can only welcome this state of affairs'.<sup>6</sup> Yet this all too neat association with critical theory has detracted from a fuller understanding of his entirely idiosyncratic approach and its transformations over the years.

### **'THE FIGURE OF THE COLLECTOR': CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY IN KRACAUER'S WORK**

Throughout all his texts, Kracauer insisted on the need to argue in a concrete phenomenological manner and maintain a strict focus on the object at hand. His 'empathic method'<sup>7</sup> fundamentally challenged the validity of systematic conceptual dispositions and instead focused on the heterogeneity of empirical experience and the world of objects ('According to his theory, Columbus had to land in India').<sup>8</sup> His critical contribution, then, lies in his micrological insistence on the logic of the slightest object or phenomenon. As an empathic observer, he directed his gaze towards the usually overlooked pathologies, promises of happiness, and demands of everyday life and the 'lifeworld' [*Lebenswelt*],<sup>9</sup> which for him formed the blind spot of the grand theories. 'How is everyday life supposed to change if even those qualified to put the cat among the pigeons ignore it?'<sup>10</sup>

It is a reflection of Kracauer's *realism* and *pluralism* that he deployed a range of media and modes of expression in approaching the motley assortment of coexisting objects. Their philosophical sophistication notwithstanding, his acclaimed texts from the 1920s were recognizably journalistic in character; indeed, they decisively helped shape the genre of the political feuilleton.<sup>11</sup> Kracauer's writings also reflect the gaze of the trained architect. He frequently presented systematic

problems in the form of geometrical allegories and 'topographical' images, not to mention those texts which dealt explicitly with street maps, streets, buildings, and interiors.<sup>12</sup> Writing articles from the vantage point of a monocle or the apparently doomed umbrella, or offering an account of his all too human and crisis-ridden relationship with his typewriter,<sup>13</sup> he transcended the conventional realms of journalism, literature, and theory. With enormous plasticity he demonstrated what, on his reading, the period after the First World War had itself confirmed with enormous plasticity – namely, that the objects humans had created were turning into independent beings with a life of their own that interacted with one another and with the humans. In the meantime, Kracauer also wrote two autobiographical novels in which he developed the same critical diagnosis of his time and portrayed the abandonment and insecurity of the contingent subject in the 'Age of the Masses'. The principal protagonists, Ginster and Georg, frequently seem to be only passive participants who merely respond to an environment that cajoles them into taking on certain roles.<sup>14</sup> This speculative literary social philosophy stands in marked contrast to Kracauer's focus on empirical social research following his emigration. In his late film theory, the cinema screen eventually emerged as a far more reliable means of conveying the experience of physical-sensory reality.

What united these differing methodological and stylistic approaches was their phenomenological focus on the objects at hand. Against this backdrop, Kracauer was consistently concerned with the *indirect* juxtaposition of phenomena: 'To focus directly upon ideas is at any rate a sure means never to grasp them... Ideas manifest themselves rather in by-ways, in unobtrusive facts'.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, general problems too could be approached only circuitously, by sounding out contingent phenomena and their *surface appearance*. Like the notion of the anteroom, the term 'surface appearance'

was among Kracauer's central theoretical concepts. It points to the transitory and relative nature of human knowledge and insight. Yet Kracauer went further and argued that the most profound and substantial problems actually revealed themselves in the surface appearance *of the object at hand*. To give one example, Kracauer rejected the notion that National Socialism was a masked bourgeois-capitalist counter-revolution. If fascism masked anything it was the goals and interests of the concrete gang of rulers. Yet this should not detract from the need to take its ideology seriously on its own terms. Instead of tearing off the 'mask', 'as though one obviously knows already who has deigned to hide behind it',<sup>16</sup> one needed to dissect the mask itself. 'Only the character of the mask may, at best, reveal the nature of the monster wearing it, provided, that it is actually possible to tear off its mask'.<sup>17</sup>

One of the results of Kracauer's vigilance in this regard was his immediate insistence, in 1933 – when many on the left still considered it a propagandistic red herring – on the centrality to National Socialism of anti-semitism and the 'force of the annihilatory intent' it reflected.<sup>18</sup> Yet Kracauer's approach pertained not only to major ideologies such as National Socialism. For him, the symptoms allowing for a valid diagnosis articulated themselves, as a matter of principle, in 'inconspicuous surface appearances'. It was 'precisely because of their nescience' that they offered 'direct access to the basic content of social reality'.<sup>19</sup> The streamlining character of the capitalist mode of production, for instance, was, to his mind, revealed paradigmatically by the Tiller Girls. This dance troupe presented not individual human beings but 'indivisible clusters of girls' as 'ornaments'.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the displacement of umbrellas by light waterproof raincoats with hoods bore testimony to the dwindling of the bourgeois generosity of spirit.<sup>21</sup>

In his unfinished and posthumously published study on the writing of history, Kracauer took stock of the continuity of his

work, which he saw precisely in the recording of *discontinuities*. The book, he wrote, was

another attempt of mine to bring out the significance of areas whose claim to be acknowledged in their own right has not yet been recognized. ... So at long last all my main efforts, so incoherent on the surface, fall into line – they all have served, and continue to serve, a single purpose: the rehabilitation of objectives and modes of being which still lack a name and hence are overlooked or misjudged.<sup>22</sup>

He owed this focus on symptomatic details and novel phenomena to his first teacher, Georg Simmel. In the course of the 1920s, against the backdrop of his exchange with Bloch, Benjamin, and Adorno, Kracauer developed his mode of essayistic narration into an entirely new and stringent method of socio-philosophical critique.<sup>23</sup> In 1930, Benjamin famously praised his friend Kracauer as

a rag collector... recovering rags of speech and linguistic snippets with his stick. Mumbling cantankerously and a little boozily, he tosses them into his cart, not without, on occasion, derisively letting one of these faded calico rags... flutter in the morning breeze. A rag collector out at the crack of dawn on the day of revolution.<sup>24</sup>

Yet the revolutionary political perspective Kracauer still shared with Benjamin in 1930 gradually receded after 1933 and no longer featured in his later work (although he did continue to acknowledge Marx's qualities as a historian). In the late monographs on film and historiography, he is 'merely' concerned with adequate ways of approaching concrete individual phenomena in their diversity, without any revolutionary backdrop. As he noted in 1966 in a letter to Rolf Tiedemann, he still valued Benjamin's messianic plea 'that nothing should ever be lost'.<sup>25</sup> In *History*, he drew on this demand to ground his insistence on the viability of forms of historiography that stay close to the sources, but he now viewed this not as a political but as a 'theological argument': '[T]he "complete assemblage of the smallest facts" is required for the reason

that nothing should go lost. It is as if the fact-oriented accounts breathed pity with the dead. This vindicates the figure of the *collector*'.<sup>26</sup> How far removed this sorrowful collector was from the Marxist Kracauer of the 1920s is illustrated by a letter to Bloch. Back in 1926, when he first conceived of the plan to write a philosophy of history, Kracauer had complemented the notion 'that nothing should ever be forgotten' with the claim that 'nothing that is unforgotten will remain untransformed'.<sup>27</sup> This 'motif of transformation',<sup>28</sup> located in the utopian abyss between theology and revolution, was not lost without trace, though. His experience as a refugee and his encounter with US democracy formed the counterpoint to its disappearance from Kracauer's horizon.

## DIALECTICS AND THE PARTICULAR: KRACAUER'S CONTROVERSY WITH CRITICAL THEORY

Philosophers have frequently found Kracauer's realism, pluralism, and documentary approach too imprecise.<sup>29</sup> In his reckoning with his former mentor, Adorno noted in 1964 that Kracauer felt no 'desire for the rigorous mediation within the object itself, no urge to evince the essential at the heart of individuation processes'.<sup>30</sup> Yet paradoxically, Adorno added, this was precisely the source of Kracauer's strength: 'The greater the blindness and abandon with which he devoted himself to the subject matter... the more fecund was the result'.<sup>31</sup> Since Kracauer did in fact draw out the 'essential' – by which Adorno meant the social relations refracted in the slightest detail – in his texts well into the 1930s, this was a tendentious claim on Adorno's part. The phenomena he sought out with abandon were characterized precisely by the fact that they revealed the state of society at large.

There can be no doubt that Kracauer's Weimar-era texts directly prefigured Adorno's

mode of philosophizing, be it in terms of the critique of language,<sup>32</sup> the predilection for the essayistic form,<sup>33</sup> or – as an (anti-) methodology – the ‘construction’ of systematic problems in the form of a ‘mosaic’<sup>34</sup> of characteristic individual features in which the logic of the whole shines through. Both methodologically and in terms of its content, Adorno’s own *Habilitation* (postdoctoral thesis), *Kierkegaard*, which he dedicated to his mentor Kracauer, still reflected this micrological montage technique and the ‘motif of transformation’. Yet the impulse that for Kracauer was a way out of conceptual philosophy Adorno directed back into philosophy, albeit a philosophy intensely critical of concepts. This move resulted not least from his engagement with Hegel, which Horkheimer initiated in the context of their dialectics project. For Adorno, it was the further differentiation of his dialectics that led him away from the bifurcated dialectical and social perspective of the 1920s; for Kracauer, it was his continued questioning of dialectics on behalf of dispersed and overlooked phenomena. The counterpart to Adorno’s critique of Kracauer’s neglect of ‘mediation’, then, was Kracauer’s critique of Adorno’s universalization of dialectics. The latter, on Kracauer’s reading, was no longer connected to individual sensate objects, yet they alone could provide the point of departure for critical judgements. Adorno’s ‘rejection of any ontological stipulation in favour of an infinite dialectics which penetrates all concrete things and entities’, Kracauer wrote, ‘seems inseparable from a certain arbitrariness, an absence of content and direction’.<sup>35</sup> Kracauer reproached the sort of universally mediating dialectics he attributed to Adorno for creating precisely the night in which, as Hegel had warned, all cows were black.

For Kracauer, then, respect for the boundary set by real objects was indispensable if one was to avoid being trapped by the tautological immanence of dialectical logic and stand a chance of explaining why sensory experience exceeds abstract generalizing

judgements. Adorno’s critique of the identity principle came up against the same boundary, but he responded to it negatively. Rather than resorting to ontology, he developed the relational category of the ‘non-identical’.<sup>36</sup> Adorno acknowledged the problematic nature of an all-encompassing form of dialectics yet recognized in it a real problem of capital (as a social relation), a problem that genuinely pervaded ‘all concrete things and entities’ or produced them in the first place. In his historiographical monograph, *Kracauer*, by contrast, in order to establish a connection to the object and the viability of the writing of history, resorted to material and thus to ‘positive’ solutions. It is in this dispute between Kracauer and Adorno over the unbounded character of dialectics, the significance of the damaged individual phenomenon, and the claims of immediate experience that Kracauer’s role in the context of critical theory ultimately lies. Do the individual phenomena reveal the non-material and yet pernicious nature [(Un-)Wesen] of society that reproduces itself within them, or does the crucial task lie in defending that which is irredeemably atomized against the reductionist social ascription of meaning? In fact, if one understands the essence of society as a pernicious, non-sensuous essence that disregards concrete objects and individuals, Kracauer’s and Adorno’s perspectives converge.<sup>37</sup> Both sought to defend the concrete objects against this being. Their disagreement concerned the extent to which the latter pervaded the former. For all that Kracauer subjected the Horkheimer circle to polemical criticism, especially in the 1930s, and they, in turn, viewed him with derision, their approaches continued to intersect in terms of their micrological focus. The enthusiasm Kracauer showed in 1964 for Karl Heinz Haag’s essay ‘Das Unwiederholbare’ [The Non-repeatable] is a case in point.<sup>38</sup> Nor did Kracauer ever lose sight in his late works of the fact that he was dealing with ‘constructions’ of reality. Both the camera and the work of the historian obviously represent

mediated forms of access to physical and historical reality. What truly set his German and US writings apart was the more pronounced social criticism in his earlier accounts of reality.

Kracauer's stance regarding the relative significance of dialectics and the individual case found its paradigmatic expression in the works he wrote during the Second World War. In *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947),<sup>39</sup> like Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, he developed a historiosophical scheme that culminated in National Socialism. Its frame of reference, however, was not the history of civilization; instead, he sought to portray the authoritarian disposition of the specifically German unconscious, an undertaking for which he has drawn considerable flak. Ultimately, then, he was a theoretician not of the dialectic of enlightenment but of the German *Sonderweg*. The pessimism of his focus on Germany stood in marked contrast to his much more positive assessment of Hollywood, indicating considerable optimism regarding the course of the enlightenment in the democratic West.

Already in his essay 'Das Ornament der Masse' [The Mass Ornament], of 1927, long before his orientation shifted from the critique of capitalism to democratic concerns, he categorized capitalist rationalization as a form of 'turbid' reason, implying that the latter could be distinguished from a positive, enlightened impulse, no matter how precarious. '[A]nd as history proceeds, nature, subject to ever more disenchantment, may become increasingly permeable to reason', he suggested.<sup>40</sup> For Kracauer, then, it was an increase in rationality that would effect the disintegration of the 'turbid nature' of society. Almost 20 years later, Horkheimer and Adorno's take on this demythologization process was much more skeptical and the domination of nature one of the main butts of their critique. From this perspective, it would be misleading to suggest that Kracauer was a proponent of the Frankfurt School's critical theory. Yet the controversies concerning

dialectics and micrology and the mediation and immediacy of experience were of fundamental significance to the Frankfurt School, and Kracauer was party to them, both directly and indirectly. From the vantage point of critical theory, Kracauer's gaze – like Benjamin's – stood for the 'obligation to think dialectically and undialectically at the same time'.<sup>41</sup>

While much can be gained from drawing out the controversy concerning dialectics and micrology so sharply, the concrete historical process was altogether less heroic. The dispute between Kracauer and the protagonists of critical theory sprang primarily from personal disagreements during his exile in Paris. He was commissioned to write a study on propaganda, which Adorno rejected and then rewrote, effectively creating an entirely new text (though this was actually an indication of professional rather than personal disdain). The Institute provided him neither with a living nor with an opportunity to flee Europe, and Kracauer eventually viewed it with bitter disappointment. Although 'this Institute is the only one... that... might have seemed an obvious choice all this time', he wrote to Richard Krautheimer in 1936, it was also 'the only institution in the whole world with which we neither can nor want to be involved'.<sup>42</sup>

## SENSUOUS AND SOCIAL REALITY AS KRACAUER'S PRINCIPAL THEME

Kracauer's sustained attention to individual sensuous data, to surface phenomena, and to objectification took on distinct guises during his respective ideological phases. In his first published monograph, *Soziologie als Wissenschaft* [*Sociology as a Science*], he illustrated his critique of scientific conceptual abstraction with the image of a cone that represented the ideal scientific order.<sup>43</sup> The contingent empirical world formed its base and pure consciousness its tip. In between lay the various levels of conceptual

abstraction in hierarchical order. Ideally, one should be able to move from any given individual phenomenon to the general laws and vice versa. At the very end of the book, Kracauer rejected this construction. Such a correspondence between thought and empirical reality had existed only in a lost 'era of sense' in which thought and world, subject and object had not yet been separated.<sup>44</sup> The harmony and order on which a 'scientific' – which in the spirit of the nineteenth century meant 'objectivistic' – form of sociology was predicated in fact no longer existed. All one could do was describe the fluid physical and social reality while maintaining a critical awareness of how things 'really' ought to be.

Together with Adorno, Kracauer intensified his focus on the contingent world of appearances by engaging Kierkegaard's apology of the 'individual'. In Kracauer's posthumously published monograph, *Der Detektiv-Roman* [*The Detective Novel*], the cone was replaced by a recasting of Kierkegaard's theory of stages as a theory of spheres. The ethical and religious spheres had become inaccessible and the theoretician – indeed, humanity in general – had been banished to the shady sphere of aesthetics. In the highest sphere, the religious sphere, the 'names' were still accessible in the form of metaphysical entities. Down below, this divine substance remained 'inexorably in force', but here it was scattered: 'all names are distorted to the point where they are unrecognizable'. Given its contemporary popularity, the genre of the detective novel permitted a precarious analysis of this distorted truth.<sup>45</sup> The extent and character of the distortion corresponded to the rules of the 'thoroughly rationalized society'.<sup>46</sup> Here, too, as he had done in the sociology monograph, Kracauer constructed a collapsed metaphysical-philosophical order with a hierarchy of planes, only to conclude that the sphere of individual sensuous and social phenomena was the only one still epistemically accessible.

As far as Marx was concerned, Kracauer argued in the mid 1920s that one needed to

dig a tunnel beneath the 'mountain massif Hegel' towards the naturalistic and sensualist materialism of the French Enlightenment.<sup>47</sup> While he had admired Georg Lukács's *Theorie des Romans* [*The Theory of the Novel*], Kracauer felt that *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* [*History and Class Consciousness*], in which Lukács had brought Hegel back into Marxism, remained unduly caught up in idealistic concepts.<sup>48</sup> For Kracauer, the experience of physical, sensuous reality was a crucial corrective to the 'abstract' character of the capitalist world of commodities. In his essay 'Die Photographie' ['Photography'], of 1927, he explained his approach. He contrasted two photographs, one of a world-famous diva whom one could see everywhere in magazines and on billboards, the other of somebody's grandmother, portrayed when she was the same age as the diva was now. The second photograph was totally inaccessible to her grandchildren and, from their vantage point, could just as well show any other person in traditional costume. They had to take their parents' word for it that the photograph really showed their grandmother as a young woman. It was the 'memory image' of the grandmother, bequeathed to them by their parents or other contemporaries, that lent meaning to the photo. Yet, inevitably, what the camera had caught was in various respects at odds with this 'memory image', much more (noticeably) so than was the case with photos whose meaning seemed instantly self-evident. In the discrepancy between the 'mere surface cohesion' of the photograph and the 'memory image' (or its ostensibly self-evident meaning), seemingly meaningless 'remnants of nature' – in other words, sensuous physical reality – became visible, rendering this discrepancy the (potential) locus of emancipation. Reality only became visible in the photographs once the status of the diva and the 'memory image' of the grandmother were forgotten. The emancipatory potential of photography lay precisely in this ability to expose the



'mere surface cohesion', because, in contrast to the hermetic ideological meanings produced by society, reason could reassemble the uncovered remnants of nature and give them a new order.<sup>49</sup>

In his monograph on salaried employees, *Die Angestellten*, Kracauer collated tableaux, as the book's subtitle indicated, 'from contemporary Germany'. Here, physical reality featured predominantly as the locus of floundering sociation, as the surface appearance of the corporeal *lifeworld* of the Weimar-era cult of sport, the body, and youth. To his mind, this idealization of the corporeal represented a form of false concretism, a fetishization of 'mere vitality'.<sup>50</sup> Here, too, the implication would seem to be that reason had to destroy this fetishization. The praise of the youthful body and debasement of age (not least on the job market) demonstrated 'indirectly that under the current economic and social conditions humans are not living life'.<sup>51</sup>

For Kracauer, the conformist 'cult of diversion' that he saw at work in Berlin's Weimar-era cinemas diverted attention away from social reality and colonized sensuous reality.<sup>52</sup> In his relevant studies from the late 1930s onwards, he argued that National Socialist propaganda went one step further: 'The Nazis utilized totalitarian propaganda as a tool to destroy the disturbing independence of reality'.<sup>53</sup> The power of the fascist images emerges as the diametrical opposite of the emancipatory capacity for sensuous experience in which Kracauer placed his trust. In 'totalitarian propaganda', decontextualized elements of reality were instrumentalized, and reality was 'put to work faking itself'.<sup>54</sup> Real bodies of knowledge and traditions were transformed into malleable narratives that could be randomly deployed. Goebbels's understanding of propaganda as a 'creative art' had to be taken literally in the sense 'that a world shaped by the art of propaganda becomes as modelling clay – amorphous material lacking any initiative of its own'.<sup>55</sup> This form of propaganda was creative in the worst possible sense and lent a new meaning

to existing orders, a form of meaning that was capable of violently asserting itself against the previous reality.

Kracauer addressed the manipulation and deletion of reality in Nazi films with his own *Theory of Film*, which, as the subtitle indicated, promised *The Redemption of Physical Reality*. This redemption was facilitated by the perspective of the camera that records physical life in motion. The camera's documentary capacity, he argued, reached beyond the human apparatus of perception and abstract thought. Successful films therefore provided people with 'a chance of finding something we did not look for, something tremendously important in its own right – the world that is ours'.<sup>56</sup> At its best, film could effect in the viewer – who was half in a dream-like state, half awakening to actual reality – an awareness of the logic and language inherent in the objects that surrounded him, of 'the murmur of existence'.<sup>57</sup>

On Kracauer's account, the epistemology underlying the writing of history was like the redeeming eye of the camera. In *History*, it was the 'micro' and 'macro dimensions' in the 'structure of the historical universe' that corresponded to the different layers of the cone of abstraction and the collapsed Kierkegaardian spheres.<sup>58</sup> Kracauer primarily argued the case for microhistory. Only the inherent logic of the slightest objects could be recorded and represented responsibly. To be sure, to do so one also needed cautiously to extend one's scope and venture into broader contexts. Yet the emphasis always needed to lie on allowing the idiosyncrasies and specific temporality of the sources and objects to emerge. Kracauer thus clarified the meaning of his focus on the 'figure of the collector': like the camera, the historian salvages the hopeless fragments of physical reality and in so doing gains a form of contemplative access to that reality and to the conditions of his or her own human existence.

Physical reality was not yet the ultimate point of reference, though. Films, Kracauer suggested, 'penetrate ephemeral physical

reality and burn through it'. Yet where that took them, 'their destination', he hastened to add, his study could not determine.<sup>59</sup> Kracauer's relativism, then, did not precipitate a critique of all epistemic claims that detract from the heterogeneous world of objects. Rather, it led him to bracket this world of objects as the 'anteroom'.<sup>60</sup> Hence the subtitle of *History: The Last Things before the Last*. Kracauer wanted to refer to the 'last things', the objects of metaphysics and eschatology, only *ex negativo*. This negation nevertheless indicates a theological dimension in the deep structure of Kracauer's thought that runs through all his writings from the Weimar era onwards. It was both as constant and mutable as his concept of sensuous reality.

### **'TRANSCENDENTAL HOMELESSNESS': THE SHOCK OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR AND THE RELIGIOUS REVIVAL MOVEMENTS OF THE WEIMAR ERA**

In much of the secondary literature, Kracauer's religious early works (roughly up to 1926) are distinguished from his irreligious later work. Yet initially, religion was in fact of no great interest to Kracauer. It only became a substantive concern after the First World War. The form of liberal Judaism he encountered in his parental home evidently instilled no pious sentiments in him. As he noted in one of the few early diaries that have survived, in 1907 he demonstratively read a biography of Nietzsche on Yom Kippur (though he did not take to Nietzsche, either).<sup>61</sup>

The isolated modern subject and its attempts to come to some form of accommodation with its environment formed a central focus in his early writings (which, as mentioned, were not published during his lifetime). Here, too, he was already grappling with the problem posed by the 'manifoldness' of reality. However, he still saw a way from the Spirit to the world. 'The relativist',

he wrote in 1916, 'is a relativist only because he wants to be a dogmatist'.<sup>62</sup> From the fact that there is no one all-encompassing truth, the relativist concluded that there was no point in even trying to attain the manifold truths that could be determined on the basis of experience. The dogmatist, by contrast, failed to comprehend the manifoldness of reality and assumed that truth could be found only where basic human experience clustered around extant concepts. For Kracauer, the goal was a sense of rootedness in the world and of 'community' [*Gemeinschaft*] attained by the subject by arranging its experiences in the radiant light of 'concepts'. This forging of ideational links between the subject and the environment and community within which the isolated individual found itself was Kracauer's concern, *inter alia*, in 'Über das Wesen der Persönlichkeit' [On the Essence of Personality], written in 1913–14. He characterized the human personality as a cosmos of concepts gravitating around one core concept.<sup>63</sup> In the only text of this corpus of largely neglected early philosophical works published (in part) at the time, 'Vom Erleben des Krieges' [On Experiencing the War], which came out in the *Preußische Jahrbücher* in 1915, Kracauer applied this scheme to patriotism [*Vaterlandsliebe*] and argued that the latter was only genuine and durable if it formed the core of the personality.<sup>64</sup>

In the event, patriotism did not offer a successful path towards either the Spirit or the community. Instead, the First World War turned out to be a catastrophe. Consequently, *Ginster*, in stark contrast to this early text, became an anti-war novel. Against this backdrop and the sense of crisis it generated, Kracauer's categories became more reflexive. One of the thematic implications of this development was his 'departure from inwardness'.<sup>65</sup> In the early writings, he had lamented the loneliness of the modern subject, sought a sense of belonging through the attachment to grand ideas and ideals, and experienced the manifoldness of external reality as dolorous. In his subsequent works he identified

'objectless inwardness' as a form of idealistic ideological deception: 'The fact that the artistry with which the book elucidated mental states was praised', he wrote in *Georg*, 'led Georg to suspect that it obscured the external circumstances all the more intensely'.<sup>66</sup>

Kracauer focused on the question of why the extant forms of human sociation were so deficient, resorting to a new discipline and an old promise: sociology as the quest for the logic of sociation, on the one hand, and the quest for a religious community that would transcend the mundanities of earthly existence, on the other. In the early 1920s, like Erich Fromm and Leo Löwenthal, Kracauer was drawn to the charismatic Frankfurt Rabbi Nehemias Anton Nobel and subsequently, for a short while, to the *Freie Jüdische Lehrhaus* [Free Jewish Academy], established, also in Frankfurt, by Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber. In his features, he reported critically on other neoreligious movements and prophetic figures such as Hermann Keyserling, Eugen Diederichs, Rudolf Steiner, and their esoteric 'circles'. Kracauer's novel *Georg* also bears eloquent testimony to the Weimar smorgasbord of worldviews. Its principal protagonist jauntily moves through various religious and political sects before finally blurting out, mid-conversation, the tenets of a social critique tinged with Marxism.

In the end, Kracauer viewed all religious attempts to lend meaning to human life with skepticism. Yet in the early 1920s, he was convinced that only religion could provide a solution to the crisis of modernity. As he wrote in 1922, philosophy could only point to the chaotic and lawless present in self-critical terms and thus 'help prepare, within narrow limits, the transformation, which can already be sensed faintly on occasion and will lead an expelled humanity back into the new-old realms suffused with divinity'.<sup>67</sup> For life that still *had* meaning, this had not been a concern. Kracauer's point of reference for this idea was a neoromantic notion Lukács had developed in *Die Theorie des Romans*. It concerned periods in which the deity had melded

the world into a meaningful totality and in which subject and object, content and form were still coextensive. Lukács called these 'blissful times' [*selige Zeiten*];<sup>68</sup> Kracauer referred to them as 'meaningful eras' [*sinnerfüllte Epochen*].<sup>69</sup> Yet this holistic unity of a mythical golden antiquity had fractured. This notion implied a pessimistic theory of modernization as a process of anomic differentiation. For the implications of this development, Lukács had coined the term 'transcendental homelessness';<sup>70</sup> Kracauer's utopian notions in these years were authoritarian and reactionary to match. Given his desire for an objective and irrefutable footing and his yearning for meaning anchored in attempts at religious restoration and revival, he in fact had more in common with the modern prophets he criticized than he would have cared to admit.<sup>71</sup>

Kracauer's quest for a meaningful footing in the absolute ultimately clashed with the insight that the religious revivalist movements never delivered what they promised. He remained an agnostic who, despite wanting to, could not believe. Every spiritual proposition seemed to short-circuit the issues it claimed to address.<sup>72</sup> In Ernst Bloch's 1918 theosophical narrative of illumination, *Geist der Utopie* [*Spirit of Utopia*], for example, he saw 'God running amok',<sup>73</sup> and he soon concluded that new religious formations were 'illusory and romantic' and that 'the positive word' was therefore 'not ours'. Instead, one needed to be 'a thorn' in others' sides; it was better 'to drive them, with us, to desperation than to give them hope'.<sup>74</sup> The only contribution one could make to redemption lay in the forthright denunciation of false promises of redemption. Kracauer thus initiated the *Bilderverbot* [prohibition of the image] that would later feature prominently in critical theory. As Kracauer put it in 1926 in his critique of Buber and Rosenzweig's 'Germanization' [*Verdeutschung*], i.e., their German translation, of the Tanakh, the religious revivalist movements merely immobilized the vexing heterogeneity of the world, substituting

a false harmony for the totality of meaning that had been lost. Precisely because of their conceit that the translation should make the word of God audible in a new way, Buber and Rosenzweig resorted to neoromantic phraseology.<sup>75</sup> Kracauer directed the same critique at the *völkisch* religious publisher Eugen Diederichs, who claimed that the germanizing 'word agglomerations' with which he advertised his 'religious propaganda weeks' originated organically in the very essence of the German people [*Volk*].<sup>76</sup>

In order to uncover the original meaning of the religions, one needed to take a detour that entailed secular criticism. Kracauer's critique of Buber and Rosenzweig hinged on a theoretical assumption he shared with Adorno and Benjamin – namely, that of the 'migration' of theological 'truth' into the 'profane'. 'Economics instead of explicit theology!' he demanded in 'Zwei Arten der Mitteilung' [Two Types of Communication]. 'First the outrage in the material realm, then the contemplation which, for heaven's sake, must not detract from that realm'.<sup>77</sup> Those categories in the religions and myths in which truth had once inhered now had to be demythologized, and the content of theological categories had to change in tandem with social transformations until it could 'hold its ground... in the face of the lowliest needs... One would need to come across theology in the profane and point to the holes and fissures of the profane into which the truth has sunk'.<sup>78</sup> Only on rare occasions did Kracauer clarify that the 'indirect path' of profanity implied not only a critique but also a practical attempt to establish this-worldly truth. Thus Kracauer argued that the 'concept... of the classless society', for instance, 'represents not least a contemporary transformation of theological fixations'.<sup>79</sup> Drawing on Kafka, Kracauer described the structure of capitalist society as a 'burrow' and a self-created prison of humanity. For the time being, only its critique was indirectly preparing the way for its destruction, which would amount to the uncovering of the obscured reality.

The articulation of social criticism was thus equated with the Kafkaian 'theological' perspective: 'The true law is thrown into relief only by the untruth that surrounds it'.<sup>80</sup>

If one takes the theological discourse between Benjamin, Kracauer, Adorno, and Bloch into account, the conventional account that has Kracauer swap his religious for a political stance in the mid 1920s turns out to be imprecise. Both phases were in fact political and religious at once. The conservative-authoritarian episode, with its historico-metaphysical notion of the shattered absolute and the yearning for community, was superseded by a vision of utopia that drew on both Marxism and messianism. As he wrote to an author whose book he reviewed in 1929: 'But theology exists and, like you, I acknowledge the reality of the term eternal'.<sup>81</sup>

### **'HOMELESS SHELTER': THE MASSES OF SALARIED EMPLOYEES AND THE CULT OF DIVERSION**

Like the implicit theology, the concept of 'homelessness' he had appropriated from Lukács's *Theorie des Romans* also ran through Kracauer's subsequent work. The way in which his utilization of this concept changed over time allows us to chart the development of his philosophy overall. In the early 1920s, he still used the concept as a means of expressing the metaphysical pessimism with which he viewed his own situation. By the end of the decade, the concept had gone from being an expression of his vantage point to forming the object of his investigation. Kracauer now pointed to the authoritarian potential that lay in the desire for a definitive footing and used the concept to characterize the socially unaware and historically hopeless salaried employees of the Weimar Republic.<sup>82</sup> As Kracauer added later, it was precisely the middle-class salaried employees in their state of homelessness who formed the first and principal target audience

of 'totalitarian propaganda'. Their quest for an absolutely secure shelter was a precursor of the conformist rebellion of the Nazis.<sup>83</sup>

In the essays on the salaried employees he wrote in 1929 and 1930, Kracauer's philosophy reached its initial apex, both in terms of style and acuity. In the introduction to the book version, he juxtaposed his account both to merely descriptive reportage and to merely deductive 'idealism', and emphasized its constructed, mosaic-like structure.<sup>84</sup> He had condensed, once again indirectly, ethnographic observation of the relevant milieux, advertisements and death notices, leisure opportunities, the self-promotion of certain associations, and the content of personal conversations to arrive at a comprehensive cultural diagnosis. Kracauer portrayed a new class, which, in the eyes of both the right and the left, should never have emerged and which no longer trusted in the utopian promises of either left-wing or bourgeois-liberal politics. The number of salaried employees had grown exponentially after the First World War, and they formed a 'new middle class': the 'white-collar proletarians' and petty bourgeoisie of the Weimar Republic. They were in fact proletarianized but superficially aspired to bourgeois cultural values. It was the task of the emerging culture industry to meet these aspirations. Kracauer illustrated this by pointing to Berlin's nightlife. In the popular entertainment venue 'Haus Vaterland' he saw a 'homeless shelter'. 'Nothing is more characteristic of this life, which can only be called life to a limited extent', he wrote, 'than the way in which it perceives of higher things. In them it sees not substance but glamour. It grasps them with the means not of concentration but of diversion'.<sup>85</sup> The 'geography of the homeless shelters' was shaped by dance-hall music, enthusiasm for sport, cinemas, and the allure of fairground booths: in short, by the 'cult of diversion'.<sup>86</sup> As the erosion of traditional modes of sociation gathered pace, the salaried employees epitomized the transformation of human beings into appendages of capital. They became more and more

streamlined and atomized at the same time. Where the repressive authority of tradition had died away, images from films and magazines came to define culture.<sup>87</sup> From its analysis of the pseudo-authenticity required at job interviews ('virtuous pink complexion') to its focus on the integration of leisure activities as workplace amenities, *Die Angestellten* is Kracauer's most topical book.

For Kracauer, the concurrence of conformism and atomization was closely connected to the – at the time much discussed – sociological concept of the masses. The First World War and the rapidly rising number of salaried employees in the cities were widely seen as the dawn of an age of the masses. Unwittingly, the atomized individuals – for whom the ideologically malleable salaried employees stood paradigmatically – lined themselves up as a 'mass ornament'.<sup>88</sup> The organic solidarity of the pre-capitalist eras had been shattered by the capitalist mode of production. What remained were subjects who were like dots clustered into pseudo-geometrical structures that matched the functions of economic rationality. The Tiller Girls or the assembly-line workers laboring in perfect synchronicity were cases in point.

As Kracauer noted elsewhere, the largest mass was the proletariat. Its emancipation had to consist precisely in the shedding of its state as an amorphous agglomerate of 'mass particles'.<sup>89</sup> Fascist propaganda intentionally treated human beings as masses within which the individual was interchangeable and which, in their entirety, were easily manipulable.<sup>90</sup> From Kracauer's point of view, the transition from the capitalist 'cult of diversion' to reactionary propaganda, then, was a fluid one. The atomized individuals were diverted so they did not congregate, the masses so they did not rally. In the first part of *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* [*Heritage of Our Times*], published in 1935, Ernst Bloch discussed Kracauer's *Die Angestellten* and the 'cult of diversion' in detail. 'Cinema or race', he concluded succinctly, were apparently two homologous modes of that cult.<sup>91</sup>

Kracauer's notion of the ornament formed by the masses was underpinned by a description of the ways in which socially produced economic forms became second nature, placing human beings at the mercy of its laws and the structures it stipulated. To be sure, compared to pre-modern organic forms of association the geometry of the mass ornament amounted to a form of rationalization. Yet given that people were unaware of its functioning and it was not instituted by reason, it still belonged to the realm of nature; indeed, from the perspective of reason it represented a 'relapse into mythology so massive that a greater one seems inconceivable'.<sup>92</sup> His strong concept of reason notwithstanding, then, in *Das Ornament der Masse* Kracauer observed elements of the dialectic of enlightenment: phenomena and relations that have developed historically, specifically economic ones, gain a momentum of their own that determines human existence no less comprehensively and mercilessly than did fate in the mythical mindset.

In keeping with the theological concept of the migration of truth into the profane, which could not simply be leapfrogged but needed to be subjected to critique, Kracauer warned against a premature quest for an alternative praxis in the existing order or in the context of escapist forms of community. This would amount to 'disrespect for our historical locus'. The only viable way led 'right through the mass ornament, not backwards from it'.<sup>93</sup> Against the bourgeois critique of the thoroughly capitalized mass culture Kracauer consequently insisted that 'aesthetic enjoyment of the ornamental mass movements is *legitimate*'.<sup>94</sup> At least this form of mass entertainment was in touch with the current state of reality, which was more than could be said for the elitist enjoyment of high culture.

This also helps explain Kracauer's focus on film as a modern, mechanized art form. The screen was the paradigmatic surface on which the logic of society – from the Tiller Girls to totalitarian mass rallies – could quite

literally be watched. Traces of this ideology-critical understanding of the cinema were still present in his later film theory; for instance, when he wrote: 'The film screen is Athena's polished shield'.<sup>95</sup> By watching her reflection in this shield instead of looking at her directly, Perseus was able to approach Medusa without turning into stone. For Kracauer, this allegory implied that, even where the human apparatus of perception and conceptualization had shut itself off ideologically, say, in the face of the unimaginable horror of National Socialism, that horror could still be confronted with the gaze of cinematic realism.

### AHASVER, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, AND JACQUES OFFENBACH AND THE EPISTEMIC SUBJECT IN KRACAUER'S THEORY

Whether Adorno was right in assuming that Kracauer had derived his idiosyncratic 'gaze', which viewed even the familiar as 'an object of amazement', from the sublimation of a 'childhood trauma of dubitable belonging' is a moot point.<sup>96</sup> Certainly, it was not only his contemporaries and subsequent scholars who described him as a loner and a maverick. As his early self-identification as 'transcendentally homeless' indicates, he too saw himself in these terms. Later, he would describe his existence as 'exterritorial'. This sense of alienation was owed not least to the antisemitic animosity he encountered at school.

This outsider perspective has repeatedly been interpreted as a specifically Jewish form of subjectivity. It should be borne in mind, though, that the characterization of 'the Jew' as an alien and outsider resonates profoundly with fundamental antisemitic tropes. Kracauer grappled with this problem in an intensely reflective manner.<sup>97</sup> His references to the anti-Judaic Christian myth of the 'eternal Jew' Ahasver are a case in point. An early unpublished note bore the title 'Die ewigen

Juden' [The Eternal Jews]. Here, Kracauer described the Jews as isolated and displaced, as 'vagrant souls'. They ought to find their 'realm' [*Reich*] among their fellow human beings yet are not granted access to them.<sup>98</sup> Ahasver repeatedly turned up again at crucial junctures. In the theses on antisemitism Kracauer published anonymously in 1933, he cited the eternal Jew as the exemplary cosmopolitan who transcends humanity's natural separation into races and classes. He characterized this 'explosion of an existence beholden entirely to nature' and reorganization of nature with the means of reason (which he had also outlined in 'Die Photographie' and 'Das Ornament der Masse') as a 'Jewish trait directed towards redemption'.<sup>99</sup> In *From Caligari to Hitler*, Kracauer interpreted Paul Wegener's second *Golem* film (1920) as one of the few attempts in the history of Weimar film to leverage reason and liberate the oppressed. In the film, Ahasver is among those whom the legendary Rabbi Löw invokes in defense of Prague Jewry. For Kracauer, both the eternal Jew and the Golem symbolized reason.<sup>100</sup> In *History*, finally, Ahasver represented the dialectic of time and historical nonsimultaneity.<sup>101</sup> Condemned for all eternity and wandering through all ages, he embodies the paradoxical unity of continuity and discontinuity in history.<sup>102</sup> Ahasver was just one of the allegorical figures with which Kracauer illustrated systematic problems in his late work. Uniquely, though, he can also be interpreted in autobiographical terms. The way in which Kracauer's Ahasver changed over time perfectly encapsulates the development of his theoretical and political point of view, from his early lament about the rootlessness of modernity via the 'explosion' of social relations beholden to nature to the involuntary witness of the involute course of history that leads to no redemption.

Within the context of Kracauer's changeable theory, the empathic outsider was the epistemic subject and, in turn, inseparable from the empirical subject. As opposed to the deluded people who aligned themselves

with the mass ornament, the gaze of the outsider focused on the essential surface appearances and recognized their patterns. The principal protagonists of his two novels, Georg and Ginster, also embody this vantage point. There is one caveat, though. Elsewhere, Kracauer portrayed the objects of his investigation as clear-sighted outsiders of this kind. In 1919, Kracauer credited his first teacher, Georg Simmel, with the gaze of the rootless stranger, who, for that very reason, can observe the state of the world with the requisite distance.<sup>103</sup> In 1926, he ascribed this estranging gaze to 'the Jew Kafka', whose writings brought 'dread into a world' from which 'the countenance of truth is withdrawing'.<sup>104</sup> This is exactly the position of Adorno's later 'inverse theology', which can reveal no divine secrets but only the utter negativity of the existing order.<sup>105</sup>

For Kracauer, nobody represented this figure of the outsider more incisively than (the non-Jew) Charlie Chaplin. Kracauer's take was in some ways similar to Hannah Arendt's claim on Chaplin for her hidden tradition of the Jew as pariah.<sup>106</sup> To Kracauer's mind, Chaplin demonstrated that the experience of one's hostile environment could be processed aesthetically and reflected upon in an emancipatory manner. As the (ostensible) preacher in *The Pilgrim*, Kracauer wrote in 1929, Chaplin discredited sectarianism by outwardly imitating it.

Finally, he walks off, one foot in the USA, the other in Mexico. Religion is no more his home than any fatherland. Nor do his fellow humans offer him a genuine home... One has to fear and outwit them like the things... for him, organic and inorganic nature are one and the same thing... He simply does not know his way around life; he has no religion and no fatherland.<sup>107</sup> And yet, for all that, he does still have a home, one that seems palpable to anyone who sees him.<sup>108</sup>

Kracauer's construction of Chaplin reflected his assumption of a form of human impotence that was experienced involuntarily by Jews and that everybody could grasp on the screen.<sup>109</sup> In film, he found the

epistemological reliability he had sought in vain elsewhere. Through Chaplin's performance, a trace of rootless rootedness could be experienced in a tangible manner all over the world, or at least wherever the film was shown.

In his second-most controversial book, after *From Caligari to Hitler*, his monograph *Jacques Offenbach und das Paris seiner Zeit* [*Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of His Time*], written while in exile in Paris, Kracauer took a similar approach. His major concerns throughout his work converged in this 'social biography' [*Gesellschaftsbiographie*]. It too was a product as much of construction as of reconstruction. It comprised historiosophy, assemblages of single frames, sociology, and indirect-allegorical contemporary analysis. Given that the book focused on a Jewish immigrant in Paris and Kracauer portrayed Napoleon III as a tyrannical dictator, one can even discern an autobiographical dimension to the project.<sup>110</sup> Written when he was in great financial difficulties, it was pitched at a broad readership. This, and the fact that Offenbach's music barely featured in his account, precipitated profoundly polemical responses from both Adorno and Benjamin.<sup>111</sup>

Like Kafka, Chaplin, and Ginster, Kracauer's Offenbach achieved a satirical estrangement from the society that surrounded him, whose contours he threw all the more sharply into relief for it: 'He is a mockingbird'.<sup>112</sup> As such, he did not destroy or profane the lofty and sacred, but he did discredit that which unjustly donned the mantle of sanctity. From the perspective of the mockingbird, one saw an inversion 'of the customary image of the world. Many things that seem to be at the bottom are in fact on top; many things generally considered great turn out to be small'.<sup>113</sup> Later on in the book, Kracauer described Offenbach's qualities in terms of the confluence of two Jewish backgrounds: emancipation in the spirit of the tolerance that Offenbach's father represented, on the one hand, and an inclination Kracauer ascribed to Jewish bandmen

and occasional and wandering musicians [*Spielleute*], on the other – namely, that 'they played and engaged in tomfoolery at worldly festivities with the same dedication they displayed when performing their duties in the synagogue'.<sup>114</sup> Kracauer also invoked the problematic Jewish motif of peregrination [*Wanderschaft*]<sup>115</sup> and a form of homesickness with metaphysical connotations for which the boulevards of Paris – as a 'home for the homeless'<sup>116</sup> akin to the 'homeless shelter' – offered poor compensation. Kracauer attributed Offenbach's operettas to a society that had itself become operetta-like under the dictatorship of Napoleon III. They offered 'intoxicating illusions' to the citizens who, having been expelled from politics, were now confined to the private sphere.<sup>117</sup>

Here, then, all the characteristic tenets of Kracauer's early theory – emancipation, sensuousness, homelessness, and ideological diversion that serves authoritarian domination – were assembled. Kracauer's mockingbirds – the principal protagonists of his novels and Chaplin, Kafka, Simmel, Offenbach, and Ahasver – had (at least) three functions: the first was epistemological, the second directed towards the critique of society, and the third existential. Their status gave rise to social criticism and as excluded figures they were credited with a gaze well suited to that criticism. At the same time, their quest for a 'home for the homeless' reflected Kracauer's grappling with his own existence.

Today, Kracauer is discussed predominantly as a pioneer of film and media studies. A second line of reception takes the perspective of intellectual history and reads him as a critical social philosopher akin to Benjamin and the proponents of critical theory. In both cases, he is considered a classic. Yet this generally leads to his no longer being engaged as a thinker who has a genuine contribution to make to current debates. He continues to be discussed in university seminars and doctoral dissertations, and a first biography was published to mark the fiftieth anniversary of his death. Whether he really could be used to



initiate broader debates seems a moot point, though. On the one hand, his fundamental critique of theoretical endeavors on behalf of the individual objects has lost nothing of its topicality. The ignorance of academic and ideology-critical analyses regarding inconspicuous everyday phenomena remains a constant challenge. Taking up Kracauer's legacy means learning to engage in exacting observation rather than simply allowing explanatory patterns and concepts to click into place. On the other hand, the work of this 'collector' radiates a sense of cultural anti-quarianism. One encounters typewriters, tatty umbrellas, silent movies, forgotten micro-historical events, and missed opportunities. Where Kracauer offered thick phenomenological descriptions rather than engaging in theoretical argument, his texts appear irrecoverably historical. The question, then, is not whether they can be short-circuited with the current state of academic thinking but what current readers can learn from them about their own conditions.

## Notes

- 1 For good general surveys, see Gertrud Koch, *Kracauer zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 1996); Graeme Gilloch, *Siegfried Kracauer* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015); Gerd Gemünden and Johannes von Moltke (eds.), *Culture in the Anteroom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2012); Jörn Ahrens et al. (eds.), *Doch ist das Wirkliche auch vergessen, so ist es darum noch nicht getilgt* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2016).
- 2 His lifelong friendship with Leo Löwenthal has received rather less attention.
- 3 See Jörg Später, *Siegfried Kracauer* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016).
- 4 See Inka Mülder, *Siegfried Kracauer* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1985); Johannes von Moltke, *The Curious Humanist* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).
- 5 See Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), xi.
- 6 Theodor W. Adorno, Siegfried Kracauer, *Briefwechsel 1923–1966* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2008), 658–9. On relations between the four men, see Später, *Siegfried Kracauer*, chapters 15, 21, 38.
- 7 Später, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 605.
- 8 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Ginster', in *Werke* vol. 7 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004), 1–256, here 37.
- 9 See Später, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 532–3.
- 10 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Die Angestellten', in *Werke* vol. 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2006), 211–310, here 304.
- 11 See Helmut Stalder, *Siegfried Kracauer* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2003).
- 12 See Henrik Reeh, *Ornaments of the Metropolis* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).
- 13 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Das Monokel', 'Falscher Untergang der Regenschirme', 'Das Scheibmaschinchinchen', in *Werke* vol. 5.2 (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011), 495–7, 364–5, 585–9.
- 14 See Sven Kramer, 'Vergesellschaftung durch Sprache', in *Doch ist das Wirkliche auch vergessen*, 59–80.
- 15 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Notes on the Planned History of the German Film', in Volker Breidecker (ed.), *Siegfried Kracauer – Erwin Panofsky: Briefwechsel, 1941–1966* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1996), 15–18, here 16.
- 16 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Totalitäre Propaganda', in *Werke* vol. 2.2 (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012), 17–173, here 20.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Conclusions', in *Werke* vol. 5.4 (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011), 467–73, here 470.
- 19 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Das Ornament der Masse', in *Werke* vol. 5.2, 612–24, here 612.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 See Kracauer, 'Falscher Untergang der Regenschirme', 364.
- 22 Siegfried Kracauer, *History* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1995), 4.
- 23 See David Frisby, *Fragmente der Moderne* (Rheda-Wiedenbrück: Daedalus, 1989); Mülder, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 103–15.
- 24 Walter Benjamin, 'Ein Außenseiter macht sich bemerkbar', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 3 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 219–25, here 225.
- 25 Quoted in Später, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 551.
- 26 Kracauer, *History*, 136.
- 27 Ernst Bloch, *Briefe 1903–1975* vol. 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985), 281.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 See, for example, Axel Honneth, *Vivisektionen eines Zeitalters* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014), 141.
- 30 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Der wunderliche Realist', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 11 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 388–408, here 394.
- 31 Ibid., 397.
- 32 See Max Beck and Nicholas Coomann, 'Adorno, Kracauer und die Ursprünge der Jargonkritik', in *Sprachkritik als Ideologiekritik* (Würzburg:

- Königshausen & Neumann, 2015), 7–27. See also Kramer, 'Vergesellschaftung durch Sprache'.
- 33 See Mülder, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 103–15.
- 34 Kracauer, 'Die Angestellten', 222.
- 35 Kracauer, *History*, 201.
- 36 See the contribution by Nico Bobka and Dirk Braunstein (Chapter 11) to this *Handbook*.
- 37 See also Karl Marx, 'Ökonomisch-Philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844', in *Marx Engels Werke* vol. 40 (Berlin: Dietz, 2012), 465–588, here 578–9. The usage of the term *Unwesen* here plays on the double meaning of the term. In common parlance it denotes unruly, mischievous and pernicious behavior. At the same time, it denotes the logical opposite of (though possibly also dialectical counterpart to) *Wesen* (meaning being, nature or essence).
- 38 Karl-Heinz Haag, 'Das Unwiederholbare' [1963], in *Kritische Philosophie* (Munich: etk, 2012), 97–107. See also Später, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 552.
- 39 Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* [1947] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).
- 40 Kracauer, 'Das Ornament der Masse', 617.
- 41 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Minima Moralia', in *Werke* vol. 4 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 173.
- 42 Quoted in Momme Brodersen, *Siegfried Kracauer* (Rowohlt: Reinbek, 2001), 117.
- 43 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Soziologie als Wissenschaft', in *Werke* vol. 1, 9–101, here 39.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 95.
- 45 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Der Detektiv-Roman', in *Werke* vol. 1, 103–209, here 109.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 143.
- 47 Bloch, *Briefe*, 282.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 283.
- 49 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Die Photographie', in *Werke* vol. 5.2, 682–98.
- 50 Kracauer, 'Die Angestellten', 211–54, here 248.
- 51 *Ibid.*
- 52 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Kult der Zerstreuung', in *Werke* vol. 6.1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004), 208–13.
- 53 Kracauer, *From Caligari To Hitler*, 295.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 299.
- 55 *Ibid.*
- 56 Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 296.
- 57 *Ibid.*, 165.
- 58 Kracauer, *History*, 105–6 and *passim*.
- 59 Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 311.
- 60 Kracauer, *History*, 191–217.
- 61 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Aus dem Tagebuch des Studenten (1907)', in *Marbacher Magazin* 47 (1988), 9–13, here 10.
- 62 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Von der Erkenntnismöglichkeit seelischen Lebens', in *Werke* vol. 9.1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004), 121–68, here 157.
- 63 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Über das Wesen der Persönlichkeit', in *Werke* vol. 9.1, 7–120, here 41 and *passim*.
- 64 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Vom Erleben des Krieges', in *Werke* vol. 5.1 (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011), 11–24.
- 65 See Dirk Oschmann, *Auszug aus der Innerlichkeit* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1999).
- 66 Kracauer, 'Georg', in *Werke* vol. 7, 257–516, here 488.
- 67 Kracauer, 'Soziologie als Wissenschaft', 11.
- 68 Georg Lukács, *Die Theorie des Romans* [1920] (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2009), 21. On the context, see Gerhard Scheit, 'Der Gelehrte im Zeitalter der "vollendeten Sündhaftigkeit"', in Nicolas Berg and Dieter Burdorf (eds.), *Textgelehrte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 39–64.
- 69 Kracauer, 'Soziologie als Wissenschaft', 12.
- 70 Lukács, *Theorie*, 30.
- 71 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Georg von Lukács' Romantheorie', in *Werke* vol. 5.1, 282–8.
- 72 See Siegfried Kracauer, 'Die Wartenden', in *Werke* vol. 5.1, 383–94.
- 73 Siegfried Kracauer and Leo Löwenthal, *In steter Freundschaft...* (Münster: Zu Klampen, 2003), 31.
- 74 *Ibid.*, 54.
- 75 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Die Bibel auf deutsch', in *Werke* vol. 5.2, 374–86.
- 76 See Siegfried Kracauer, 'Volkheit! Goethe! Mythos!', in *Werke* vol. 5.2, 371–2.
- 77 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Zwei Arten der Mitteilung', in *Werke* vol. 5.3 (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011), 180–7, here 180–1.
- 78 Kracauer, Letter to Bloch, in Bloch, *Briefe*, 274.
- 79 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Theologie gegen Nationalismus', in *Werke* vol. 5.4, 344–9, here 347–8.
- 80 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Franz Kafka', in *Werke* vol. 5.3, 65–7, here 67.
- 81 Kracauer, 'Zwei Arten der Mitteilung', 181.
- 82 See Kracauer, 'Die Angestellten', 288.
- 83 See Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 107, 132, 288; 'Notes on the Planned History of the German Film', 17.
- 84 Kracauer, 'Die Angestellten', 222.
- 85 *Ibid.*, 288.
- 86 *Ibid.*, 293; 'Kult der Zerstreuung'.
- 87 See Henri Band, *Mittelschichten und Massenkultur* (Berlin: Lukas, 1999).
- 88 See Kracauer, 'Das Ornament der Masse'.
- 89 Kracauer, 'Totalitäre Propaganda', 91–2.
- 90 *Ibid.*, *passim*.
- 91 Ernst Bloch, 'Erbschaft dieser Zeit', in *Gesamtausgabe* vol. 4 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985), 31.
- 92 Kracauer, 'Das Ornament der Masse', 621.
- 93 *Ibid.*, 623.
- 94 *Ibid.*, 615.
- 95 Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 305.

- 96 Adorno, 'Der wunderliche Realist', 399.
- 97 See Matthew Handelman, 'The Dialectics of Otherness', in *Yearbook for European Jewish Literature Studies* vol. 2.1 (2015), 90–111.
- 98 Ibid., 96–7.
- 99 Kracauer, 'Conclusions', 471–2.
- 100 Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 112–13.
- 101 Kracauer, *History*, 148. It is worth noting that Kracauer's explicit point of reference for this concept, even in this late work, was Karl Marx.
- 102 Ibid., 163.
- 103 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Georg Simmel', in *Werke* vol. 9.2, 139–280, here 270–1.
- 104 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Das Schloß', in *Werke* vol. 5.2, 491–4, here 494.
- 105 See the contribution by Julia Jopp and Ansgar Martins (Chapter 41) to this *Handbook*.
- 106 Hannah Arendt, 'The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition', in *Jewish Social Studies* 6, 2 (1944), 99–122, here 110–13. For a similar approach, see also Leo Löwenthal, 'Judentum und deutscher Geist', in *Schriften* vol. 4 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984), 9–56. Löwenthal did not discuss Chaplin, though.
- 107 Kracauer referred to Chaplin as 'ein religions- und vaterlandsloser Geselle', playing on the pejorative term 'vaterlandslose Gesellen', which was historically used to denounce the Social Democrats, especially in imperial Germany.
- 108 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Chaplin als Prediger', in *Werke* vol. 6.2, 312–14, here 314.
- 109 See Siegfried Kracauer, 'Chaplins Triumph', in *Werke* vol. 6.2, 492–5, here 492.
- 110 See Harald Reil, *Siegfried Kracauers Jacques Offenbach* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).
- 111 See Später, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 330–3.
- 112 Siegfried Kracauer, *Jacques Offenbach und das Paris seiner Zeit* [1937] (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994), 11.
- 113 Ibid.
- 114 Ibid., 50–1.
- 115 Ibid., 22.
- 116 Ibid., 67.
- 117 Ibid., 187.

# Alfred Seidel and the Nihilisation of Nihilism: A Contribution to the Prehistory of the Frankfurt School

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Translated by Jacob Blumenfeld

In a lecture on *Negative Dialectics* on December 7, 1965 that dealt with the relationship between Marxism and idealism, Theodor W. Adorno mentioned the name of Alfred Seidel, a ‘late friend from my youth’, who introduced the concept of the ‘metaphysics of the forces of production’ into the critique of Marxism. This concept, according to Adorno, claims that within a certain Marxist theoretical tradition, ‘a simply absolute potential is attributed to the productive forces of human beings and their extension in technology’ (Adorno, 2008: 96). The critique of this metaphysics of the forces of production, along with its accompanying absolute belief in progress, became a central theme in the formation of critical theory, at least from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It is all the more surprising that the name Alfred Seidel never appears in this context. The casual mention within the lecture of 1965 – which was never intended for publication – remains Adorno’s only reference to the ‘friend from youth’. And even the

commentary by the editor of the lecture, Rolf Tiedemann, contains only sparse information on ‘the now almost forgotten Seidel’ (Adorno, 2008: 240). It is worthwhile, however, to take a closer look here, because the social philosopher and cultural critic Alfred Seidel (1895–1924) has been described not without reason as a figure whose ‘character and themes’ at one time captivated the young Adorno; furthermore, ‘many of the philosophical peculiarities that Adorno later brought to the subject matter and methodology of “Critical Theory” [...] can be traced back’ to Seidel (Frese, 2001/2: 51).

Seidel is interesting not only as an unappreciated friend from Adorno’s youth but as a remarkable representative of the intellectual milieu that was, as Alfred Sohn-Rethel once wrote, the Marxist reaction to the ‘theoretical and ideological superstructure of the German revolution that never happened’ (Sohn-Rethel, 1978: xii). During the 1920s, this milieu was grouped around the southern German university town of Heidelberg, where

Seidel had studied economics and sociology since 1919. This milieu formed one of the main reservoirs from which, at the beginning of the 1930s, the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research and, in a wider sense, critical theory as it is known today was to be recruited. Following the traces that Seidel left behind in Heidelberg therefore promises insights into both the theoretical and intellectual prehistory of critical theory. When Seidel became acquainted with Adorno at the beginning of the 1920s, he had already made a name for himself as an ambitious left-wing partisan of Mannheimian sociology at Heidelberg and a determined but not at all orthodox communist. He was regarded as an eccentric, brooding person and an original social theorist, and he was in contact with numerous representatives of Western Marxism and the later Frankfurt School. He was on friendly terms with Walter Benjamin, Leo Löwenthal, and Siegfried Kracauer. He belonged to the circle of pupils of Karl Mannheim, Alfred Weber, and Emil Lederer; he knew Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukács, whose Hegelian Marxism was a guiding principle for his own thinking. Plagued by mental and physical ailments, Seidel took his own life in 1924, without leaving behind an authoritative testimony of his thinking. Although it is reported that he published some smaller works in his lifetime, as far as I can see there is only a brief outline of the 'History of the Socialist Student Movement in Germany', which provides little insight into Seidel's theoretical position (Seidel, 1919). He successfully completed a doctoral thesis on 'Productivity and Class Struggle' in 1922, supervised by Alfred Weber. Even though Adorno refers to this dissertation in his remarks on the 'metaphysics of the forces of production', it remained unpublished, and it circulated only as a typescript in the Heidelberg circle of friends. Seidel worked intensively throughout the early 1920s on a book about the disastrous aspects of rational knowledge, which in more than one sense anticipates the methodological and thematic motifs of critical theory, yet

he could not complete it. Published posthumously by the Heidelberg psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn under the title *Consciousness as Doom* [*Bewußtsein als Verhängnis*], the book briefly acquired some fame and was evidently read by Benjamin, Adorno, Sohn-Rethel, Löwenthal, Bloch, and Kracauer, before it quickly fell into oblivion.

At the point when Adorno remembered his former friend, Seidel was, in fact, largely forgotten. Although *Consciousness as Doom* was reissued in 1979 by Impuls-Verlag (Bremen) at the suggestion of Sohn-Rethel (Seidel, 1979), and although Seidel's dissertation, which is still worth reading, was published in 2008 in the *Archiv für die Geschichte des Widerstandes und der Arbeit* (Seidel, 2008), the official historiography of critical theory has hitherto largely ignored him. In the following, I would like to present the life and theory of Alfred Seidel and, above all, to elaborate more closely the biographical and theoretical references that connect Seidel to critical theory. The biographical portrayal has to be given a relatively large amount of space for two reasons. In the first place, Seidel's tragic life journey and experience seems to have been in certain regards archetypical for the first generation of critical theory. Second, Seidel's theory is peculiarly characterized by the fact that it makes one's own experience and position within society the starting point of comprehensive historical diagnosis. Indeed, this approach forms part of the prehistory of a theoretical formation which invariably grants 'the realm of idiosyncrasy, usually conceived as the individual sphere par excellence' (Adorno, 2005: 15) a central function in the knowledge and criticism of the existing state of affairs. The questions as to whether and in what way Seidel should be included as a forgotten influence in the history of the early Frankfurt School cannot be answered conclusively within this short essay. It is merely a question of tracing the genuine links that connect Seidel with the later protagonists of critical theory, in order to at least prepare the material with which

this question can be answered. This material is widely dispersed and difficult to access, especially in the English-speaking world. A translation of Seidel's work has not yet taken place.

## WHO HE WAS

Alfred Seidel was born in 1895 into a Silesian family of merchants who had reached modest prosperity in the mid-nineteenth century. In addition to a small fortune, which later enabled him to focus exclusively on his studies, Seidel also inherited the genes of an exceptionally weak physiognomy, bone abnormalities due to rickets, and a melancholic temperament from which he suffered his entire life. In 1897, his father committed suicide, leaving the mother with four children, the youngest of whom was two-year-old Alfred. Later in his life, one of his two brothers died of tuberculosis at 16 years old; the other committed suicide at the age of 23. We know nothing about the life of the only sister. After his mother died in 1907, Seidel came into the care of an aunt in southern Germany. There, in Freiburg, he joined the youth movement and, among other things, began studying the philosophy of Heinrich Rickert. Shortly after he volunteered for military service in 1914, Seidel was dismissed because of his unsuitability. He was thus able to continue his studies in Freiburg, where, from 1916, he heard the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, whose lectures he later appreciated as his philosophical awakening. Seidel probably met Walter Benjamin there for the first time, since he was also active in the milieu of the Freiburg youth movement.

After completing his studies, Seidel first went to Berlin, where he became involved with the Berlin *Wandervogel*<sup>1</sup> and worked on the youthful, anti-bourgeois journal *Der Anbruch* [*The Dawn*]. All the while, he was drawn into the vortex of the revolutionary events of the day. He devoted himself to the

communist idea and actively participated in the November Revolution, although his life had hardly prepared him for revolutionary street battles. Already in Freiburg, Seidel had pacifist tendencies, which were not exactly popular in that boy-scoutish milieu. His siding with the revolution finally led to an open break with the youth movement and its protagonists. Similar to Walter Benjamin a few years earlier, in 1919 Seidel turned away disappointed from the youth-movement circles in which he had been active, hanging his hopes instead on the ideal of a classless society. Even after the defeat of the Spartacus revolt, Seidel emerged as a determined communist. He did not want to accept the failure of revolution, which he considered not only possible but necessary. Thus it was no coincidence that he went from Berlin to Heidelberg, which around 1920 was one of the centres for the renewal of Marxist philosophy in the German Reich. Alongside Walter Benjamin, who spent the summer of 1921 in Heidelberg, Seidel met Karl Mannheim, Georg Lukács, and Ernst Bloch. He befriended Leo Löwenthal, Siegfried Kracauer, and Sohn-Rethel, with whom he temporarily lived. In 1922, Kracauer acquainted him with the then 19-year-old Theodor Wiesengrund, which resulted in a rather intense friendship. Seidel is mentioned repeatedly in Adorno's correspondences of the early 1920s in a manner whose casualness indicates how naturally he belonged to that Heidelberg/Frankfurt circle of friends around Kracauer, Löwenthal, and Adorno. There is also an unpublished letter to Adorno, which bears witness to a lively exchange of ideas.

Seidel became politically involved in the Heidelberg socialist student union, where he temporarily served as the head of its science division. The Catholic-baptized atheist described his position as that of a 'Renowned Goy' (Seidel, 1927: 32), which indicates the prevalence of Jewish students in the socialist student body, in stark contrast to the youth movement and, above all, the fraternities of this time. The political events of the early

1920s, however, increasingly unsettled him, and his relationship to communism was not free from doubts. In 1920, he confessed in a letter to a friend (Seidel, 1927: 30–2) that his ‘scientific socialism’ was ‘collapsing’. He described his attitude to communism in the following way:

Politics will be wild, decision; I stand on the side of the ruthless communists and respect the believing fanatics, even if I can not be one myself [...]. It will be bleak, but it must be, terrorist bolshevism or terrorist reaction will be the cruel alternative, and I am on the side of the former. (Seidel, 1927: 32)

Although he was loyal to the communist idea – yet not without some doubts – Seidel occasionally sought out the Heidelberg George Circle, a cultural-conservative grouping around the poet Stefan George, whose elite worldview was difficult to reconcile with the ideal of a classless society. Seidel was fascinated by the contemporary criticism and intellectual ideals of the group, but he could not gain a foothold there and later contemptuously expressed his opinion about the ‘pseudo-culture’ of the Georgians (Seidel, 1927: 179).

In Emil Lederer and Alfred Weber, two of the most important representatives of an economics-based, interdisciplinary approach within Heidelberg’s social sciences, Seidel found supportive supervisors for his doctoral thesis on the philosophical structure of historical materialism. This work is particularly noteworthy as it intended to ‘understand Marx’s historical materialism much more from Hegel than it has been so far’ (Seidel, 2008: 187). Here, Seidel was referring to Georg Lukács’ article ‘The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg’, included in the 1922 collection of essays *History and Class Consciousness*, which was crucial for the philosophical development of critical theory. Seidel reacted relatively early to the failure of the German revolution with an attempt at a philosophical revision of Marxism, at the centre of which he placed, along with Lukács, the category of totality. Although his dissertation

was not published, some copies circulated in the wider circle of friends and took effect there, because the work also contains that critique of the ‘absolutisation of the productive forces’ (Seidel, 2008: 185) which left a mark on Benjamin<sup>2</sup> and Adorno and was also noted by Sohn-Rethel and Leo Löwenthal.

At the beginning of the 1920s, Seidel had settled in the (socialist-oriented) Heidelberg intellectual scene. He worked as a private tutor and gave public lectures on the literature of Dostoevsky and Goethe as well as on psychoanalytic and sociological topics. These lectures obviously required some effort from the shy Seidel, who had been plagued by self-doubt. Although he prepared for them months beforehand, he could not count them as successes. The psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn reports stylistic clumsiness and a disjointed, soliloquizing manner of speaking; he notes, with all due sympathy, that it was often difficult to follow the argument. Seidel must have also been an exhausting conversation partner: tireless, erratic, and driven by a radical pessimism, depressing negativity, and a propensity for pedantry. Nevertheless, he seems to have made a lasting impression on people. Sohn-Rethel, for example, thought of his ‘unforgettable friend Alfred Seidel’ as one of the most lively spirits of the time (Sohn-Rethel, 1978: xii); he remembers that Seidel stood at the centre of a ‘very close working and living community’ which had developed out of the student circle of Emil Lederer. The writer Carl Zuckmayer, who had also studied in Heidelberg, wrote about this community, which included Seidel, Sohn-Rethel, and Leo Löwenthal: ‘The most intelligent personalities of the student youth belonged to this circle, I remember Alfred Seidel, who later took his life in a fit of world despair’ (Zuckmayer, 1966: 353–4). Just how well known Seidel was at the time is apparent from the fact that Thomas Mann, who neither lived in Heidelberg nor had socialist inclinations, responded in detail to Seidel in his 1932 *Address to the Youth*. Against Seidel’s ‘intellectual despair’, Mann proposed his own

notions of youth, education, and culture (Mann, 1932: 326 ff.).

Seidel thus left a lasting impression even outside his close circle of friends. Zuckmayer's talk of a fit of world despair, however, does not really ring true, because Seidel suffered his whole life from recurring states of depression, which played an increasingly significant role in his life. Prinzhorn became an important caregiver early on, outside the university. Whenever Seidel's mood turned suicidal, which was apparently regularly the case in autumn, he was admitted to Prinzhorn's clinic. Otherwise, Seidel maintained a lively, close relationship with the psychiatrist, whose records give us the most detailed description of Seidel and his time in Heidelberg (Seidel, 1927: 7–29).

After graduating in 1922, Seidel took a position at the Sociological Institute of the University of Frankfurt. Here he held propaedeutic courses for Gottfried Salomon (later Salomon-Delatur), one of Adorno's academic teachers, who was also involved in the protracted quarrels surrounding Walter Benjamin's *Habilitation* thesis as one of his supporters. At this time, Seidel was in close contact with Kracauer and Adorno. When he was invited to dinner with Adorno's family in September 1922, however, there was an incident to which the only handwritten letter passed down by Seidel bears eloquent testimony. Seidel must have given the evening dinner discussion such a depressing turn with his long monologue that, a few days later, he felt compelled to ask not only Adorno but also his mother and aunt to forgive him for the 'catastrophic condition' he was in – not without mentioning that he was right in the matter.<sup>3</sup> Such lapses were also reported by Prinzhorn and can probably be regarded as characteristic for Seidel in the 1920s. During this period, Seidel was trying to develop and clarify his thoughts in talks and lectures, demanding much, perhaps too much, from his conversation partners and listeners. These ideas were connected to a manuscript that he had been working on intensely since at least 1922.

The themes of this work had already been developed by 1920 (Seidel, 1927: 30–1) and were even in the background of his dissertation. But whereas in *Productivity and Class Struggle* Seidel still largely operated within the framework of historical materialism, he now aimed at a broader critique of the historical tendency. He now increasingly incorporated aspects of psychoanalysis, *Lebensphilosophie*, existentialism, and contemporary cultural criticism into the manuscript, which had the programmatic working title of *Consciousness as Doom*. It not only questioned the practical value of scientific knowledge of the world but ultimately denied the value of consciousness.

In 1923, while oscillating between Frankfurt and Heidelberg, Seidel was working on his manuscript, for which he had already found a publisher. He discussed the thesis of disastrous consciousness at every opportunity and was seemingly relatively capable of meeting his professional and private obligations. In the winter of 1923, he went back to Freiburg, where he wanted to finish writing *Consciousness as Doom*, but his inheritance had meanwhile fallen victim to inflation, like so many small- and medium-sized fortunes at the time, forcing Seidel to look for work, which did not go so well. Furthermore, his depression worsened. Nevertheless, Prinzhorn, with whom Seidel maintained contact by letter in his absence, noted a phase of emotional stability in Seidel's life in the autumn of 1924. He was thus surprised when, on October 20, 1924, Seidel declared *Consciousness as Doom* to be finished, and then hung himself in a mental hospital in Erlangen. In his last letter to the psychiatrist, marked by paranoid delusions and a deep world-weariness, Seidel writes: 'The book is completely finished, my purpose in life, for which I lived under great torment for many years, is fulfilled. [...] Ensure the publication of the work. I give it to you warmly. You contributed to its development. I thank you' (Seidel, 1927: 45–6).



Prinzhorn took up the task, fundamentally revising the unprintable manuscript left by Seidel in order to produce 'in complete familiarity with Seidel's intentions and his mode of expression' an 'absolutely correct version of the text, characteristic of the author and valid in a deeper sense' than Seidel 'himself had accomplished by then' (Seidel, 1927: 9). Since the original manuscript has to be considered lost, it is not possible to trace just how deeply Prinzhorn reworked the material. *Consciousness as Doom* appeared in the spring of 1927, accompanied by a detailed report on the manuscript and an extensive foreword by the editor. At any rate, it stirred quite some attention. Prinzhorn advertised the book in a press release with the announcement that it was the life testimony of a type of person 'characteristic of the face of this period and of considerable structural importance' (Seidel, 1927: 3–4). The book was also received in this sense. A number of reviews agreed that Seidel's life journey was representative of his generation. The Nietzschean Ludwig Klages, to whom Prinzhorn had sent a copy, disparagingly criticized *Consciousness as Doom* as the work of a person typical of the times – that is, weak (Klages, 1928: 629). Siegfried Kracauer stated that the obvious inadequacies of the book were not based on individual weakness but reflected the 'disappointment of a whole generation'. He valued the book of his friend as a 'document of the time' in which the 'present situation is exemplarily experienced and decidedly rejected' (Kracauer, 1927: 521–3). The poet and journalist Margarete Susman, who had met Seidel in Frankfurt, made a similar point. In the 'self-dissolution' to which Seidel had pushed a fatal encounter of objective and subjective factors, she saw the 'genuinely exemplary, representative' aspect of his work and postulated that by his suicide he had 'attempted to overcome [the analysis] not only for himself, but also for his generation' (Susman, 1927: 338). Ernst Bloch too, who recalled Seidel in hindsight from 1938, remarked that he was 'only a seemingly

absent type'; in fact, he expresses himself in his fate, 'which many suffered at the time', and like 'many people of bourgeois existence alienated from life, the truth became disgusting' (Bloch, 1938: 67–8).

Altogether, Seidel's posthumous 'main work' was interpreted as a unique coupling of theory with epochal despair and a final report on life, all of which took on representative significance. This assessment may have been influenced by Prinzhorn's announcement that the book was the testimony of 'self-sacrifice as warning to the Zeitgeist' (Seidel, 1927: 4). However, it primarily corresponds to Seidel's self-stylization, for he didn't want to allow any programmatic distinction between theory and lifestyle. He even interpreted his own suicide as a consequence of the thought of decomposition. After the nihilisation of all ideals of the epoch, the only prospect left was 'nihilising oneself' (Seidel, 1927: 46).

## HIS THEORY

Although *Consciousness as Doom* was undoubtedly the more influential book, the unpublished dissertation on *Productivity and Class Struggle* played a significant role in the context of critical theory. The apocryphal status of the work, however, refers, strictly speaking, to speculative deliberations on its reception history. Evidence of readings can be found in Adorno, Benjamin, Sohn-Rethel, and Löwenthal, as noted already, but these are limited to the mention of keywords, usually 'the metaphysics of the forces of production'. Although these hints do not necessarily signify a detailed familiarity with the work, they at least show that Seidel's text had been read. It makes sense, therefore, to consider some of the themes developed there.

First of all, the historical index of the work should be stressed, which, as Seidel clarifies, emerged 'from a [lost, CV] work on the sociology of modern revolutions' (Seidel, 2008: 187). Its composition dates from the second

half of 1922, with Georg Lukács' 1921 article 'The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg' being its first reference. Seidel's work is thus one of the earliest reactions to Lukács' Hegelian Marxism, which began to have a wider effect only after 1924. Seidel had already finished his work before Lukács published *History and Class Consciousness* in the winter of 1922. He could not, therefore, take into consideration the ideas Lukács presented in the preface and in the essay 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' – that is, Lukács' own confrontation with Marxist philosophy. The correspondences between *History and Class Consciousness* and Seidel's work are clear. Seidel agrees with Lukács' desire 'to understand the essence of Marx's method and to apply it *correctly*' (Lukács, 1971: xlii). As opposed to Lukács, who was forced to take care because of his position within the Communist Party, Seidel, whose communist attitude never led him to join the Communist Party, was more clearly critical of Marx and contemporary Marxism-Leninism. Overall, *Productivity and Class Struggle* can be understood as a redemptive critique of historical materialism, one that attempts to explain in particular why Marx's prognoses have not (yet) come to pass – why the proletarian revolution failed in Western Europe. In the first place, Seidel holds the metaphysics inherent in Marxism philosophically responsible for this failure. He sees this in the way that Marx and Engels' 'historical-philosophical question' calls for *one* 'primacy' and proceeds from 'one history-moving agent' (Seidel, 2008: 192). Seidel identifies this primacy in the productive forces, to whose development Marx subordinated all other historical factors from 1847 onwards (*Poverty of Philosophy*). While his philosophy of history began from two historical-structural moments, namely the development of the productive forces and the dynamics of class struggle, Marx eventually moved on to consider class struggle as simply a 'means to expand the productive forces'. As telos of history, therefore, the 'development

of the productive forces' takes the place of the 'actualization of reason'. On the one hand, Seidel criticizes this for weakening the mobilizing function of historical materialism, and, on the other hand, he analyses it as a problematic relapse to Hegel's idea of the cunning of reason. It is as though class struggles are not really concerned with their declared goal – the abolition of the class society – but rather with the hidden *telos* of developing the productive forces (Seidel, 2008: 194). Against this backdrop, he emphasized the need to read Marx – even against his self-understanding – radically from the perspective of Hegel. At the same time, he criticized the fixation on the development of the productive forces for turning the *idea* of a classless society into a *historical* necessity – something not worth fighting for, since it will happen anyway.

According to Seidel, then, 'metaphysical teleology' and one-sidedness of historical materialism in connection with the late Marx deprives said materialism of its persuasive force as a mobilizing ideology, because it no longer regards classless society as an idea to fight for but a historical necessity that will be self-realized – if need be, 'behind the backs' of the actors. At the same time, Seidel also sees the reason for the philosophical strength of Marx's conception in the one-sided fixation on the development of the productive forces: 'Though great mistakes and shortcomings may spring from this metaphysical system of Marx's philosophy of history, they enabled Marx to conceive of his philosophy of history and not to fall into the now popular eclecticism' (Seidel, 2008: 231). Seidel thus calls for an understanding of Marxism as a philosophy of history precisely in its philosophical reductionism, yet he opposes a 'causal-mechanistic view' that is 'so often interpreted into historical materialism'. This applies in particular to the relationship between base and superstructure, which, in contrast to the more traditional approaches of Marxist theory, Seidel interprets 'neither causally nor functionally' but rather draws

upon Hegel to understand it in terms of the category of 'totality, that is, of whole and part' (Seidel, 2008: 205). Here, Seidel comes very close to Lukács. While Lukács wants 'to adhere to Marx's doctrines, then, without making any attempt to diverge from them, to improve or correct them' (Lukács, 1971: xlii), Seidel tries to uncover the limits of knowledge in Marx's philosophy, which he sees in the fact 'that historical materialism is almost devoid of any psychology' (Seidel, 2008: 231). Lukács sought an answer with Hegel in Marx to the question of why the consciousness of the proletariat did not (yet) lead to the practical overcoming of capitalism, despite the fact that the objective possibility was given. Seidel, however, attempts to provide sociological and psychological elements through an *expansion* of the theory of historical materialism. In *Productivity and Class Struggle*, this expansion remains a demand not fully worked out, but it indicates in particular the attempt to synthesize Marx with Freud, which will eventually become a key strategy in critical theory.

Seidel tries to accomplish this synthesis in *Consciousness as Doom* in his own distinctive way, basing it on a Marxist analysis of the economic basis of society, an extensive reading of the Freudian theory of the unconscious, and the fundamental assumption of *Lebensphilosophie* that life is appropriately conceived of only as a blind drive. With these tools, Seidel develops a dialectically conceived critique of rationalism that denies neither the truth content nor the integrity of scientific and rational knowledge but rather analyses how culture, by means of scientific knowledge of the world, is gradually revealed as the adventitious masking of deeply libidinal and economic processes. Referencing the 'state of research' of his time, Seidel states that culture essentially means sublimation, displacement, and diversion: sublimation of the *hypertrophied sexual drive*, repression of the productive basis of capitalist socialization in the cultural *superstructure*, and diversion on the way to goals that, in the last instance,

*the will to power* determines, as Nietzsche interpreted it. Seidel tries to establish the connection between historical materialism and psychoanalysis in a structural analogy. He sees the basis of the capitalist economic order as a blind drive, which corresponds to sublimation or neurosis on the surface of cultural phenomena. They are often difficult to separate from each other. Seidel postulates that one 'could address individual cultural phenomena more as neurosis than as sublimation, it is often only a matter of circumstances, and is probably only a question of judgment' (Seidel, 1927: 96).

The problem is that in the course of analysis, though neuroses can indeed be resolved through consciousness of the underlying motives, at the same time, according to Seidel, culture itself dissolves. The clearer the consciousness of the repressed, sublimated, and deferred motives becomes, the weaker the binding force it can develop. This discovery, which Seidel relates to both the individual and the society, leads his thinking to the following alternative: 'either one affirms sublimation, that is, the repression of impulses, and thus accepts the neuroses – or, one defends the right of the drive and the cure of neuroses regardless of cultural sublimation, and thereby hands over to mankind the dynamics of its instinctual life' (Seidel, 1927: 94). The anxiety common among Seidel's contemporaries – that although certain neuroses can be healed through the psychoanalytic method, this nonetheless deprives one of potential and creativity – is thus transposed to the social field. Seidel understands Max Weber's expression about the *disenchantment of the world*, which he quotes frequently, in the sense that sciences and modern reason have not substantially changed the world but simply brought to light what the unconscious foundations of culture have always been – blind drives. This movement, however, runs systematically contrary to the cultural-social production of sublimation, according to Seidel. In fact, sublimation can only function as an unconscious operation; as a consciously

performed act, it becomes a logical self-contradiction, which manifests itself as a necessarily violent execution of (self-)deception.

Unyielding, because driven by good intentions, the modern sciences are therefore pushing towards the self-dissolution of culture by revealing blind drives as the hidden motive of cultural institutions:

The dethroning of absolute ideas by the affirmation of realities – these are now called life, power, sexuality on the one hand, or nation and class on the other – is a sign of the dissolution of culture. The tension between idea and reality is overcome [*aufgehoben*], reality itself is raised to the idea, the dynamics of the life process amplified; but in so doing, cultural fulfilment is made impossible. (Seidel, 1927: 202)

By abruptly adjusting consciousness to being, and becoming the mere doubling of what already is without any *tension*, culture dissolves itself in the process of becoming aware of its basic drives. The culture that sees through itself thus proves to be a self-dissolving culture. Therefore, as Seidel diagnosed in 1924, murder and suicide would inevitably become the epochal signature of a fully enlightened age. The driving forces are those ‘movements, which under the talk of positivity have only a de facto nihilistic effect’ (Seidel, 1927: 203) – that is, those sciences involved in different fields that seek to discover what culture fundamentally is, and in so doing, reveal nothing but blind drives.

This clearly sounds like the critique of positivism that Adorno and Horkheimer will develop in their works of the 1930s and 1940s, especially in its tone. Like the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* following him, Seidel manoeuvred within an argumentative jam. What does the critique of progress really entail and what is its critical standpoint? For this critique is neither an enemy of progress nor fundamentally denies that scientific progress furnishes valid knowledge, i.e., that it actually is progress. Seidel forbids himself from retreating from what is already known and at the same time denies the vulgar Marxist illusion according to which the

development of scientific knowledge, as an expression of the further development of the productive forces, leads inevitably to social progress. Already in his dissertation, Seidel had subjected such thought to severe criticism and characterized it as *Marxist chiasm*.

The idiosyncratic severity and paradoxical structure of Seidel’s thinking results from the fact that he cuts the ground away from an irrationalist, conservative critique of culture with the argument that one simply cannot *not* know what one knows. At the same time, he abandons the perspective of a quasi-automatic self-consummating revolution in which the world once again fills up with meaning. Against the contemporary, neo-romantic tendencies of a rationally based retreat into irrationality, exemplified by Ludwig Klages or Stefan George, on the one side, and against traditional Marxism’s optimistic belief in progress, on the other, Seidel proposes a programme of immanent critique – that is, determinate negation: ‘You must dissolve the enemy by applying his own theory to himself’ (Seidel, 1927: 203). Analysis should be driven against analysis, clear consciousness set against clear consciousness, all without falling into a new faith, in order to ‘free the way for a growing positivity without being positive or wanting to be positive’. The negation of the negation alone still assures Seidel of hope in positivity, although it threatens to result in a ‘potent negativity’ at any moment (Seidel, 1927: 204).

Already in his lectures from the early 1920s – which we only know of second-hand – Seidel had repeatedly postulated the necessity of a *psychoanalysis of psychoanalysis* and a *sociology of sociology*. He continued this self-reflexive programme with his idea of a *nihilisation of nihilism*, yet he took it a decisive step further. In the pathos of a tragic delirium, simultaneously described as the delusions of an individual and typical of the era, Seidel elevates himself to the status of the self-conscious subject-object of history, following the dialectical laws of motion which have hitherto turned into

irreconcilable negatives, as reason and freedom have irrevocably diverged. In light of this, Seidel declares his own psychological disposition – which precluded every feeling of community, every positive reference to his time, and thus, ultimately, any possibility of affirmation and belonging throughout his life – the predestined starting point of critical reflection. He calls for a new, contemporary type of intellectual, one whom he alone believes can stop the nihilising tendencies of the positive sciences: ‘In his activity, based on his essential nature and from inner necessity, this type must be negative, but against negativity, nihilistic against nihilism’ (Seidel, 1927: 204). Thus only by using one’s own damaged life is it possible to drive ‘the practical nihilist type’, i.e., the positivist scientist, ‘to despair’ and, at the same time, to realize ‘redemption, if only temporary, from individual despair’ (Seidel, 1927: 204). The objectivity that comes from taking a critical distance is therefore made possible by the radical, absolutely negative subjectivism of the depressive outsider, like Seidel himself. Theory and practice thus merge into one, fuelled in equal measure by disposition and lifestyle.

In fact, Seidel’s idiosyncrasy and negativity afforded him critical insights, often ahead of his time. By rationally turning against reason – ‘in a way that actually costs something’, as Ernst Bloch wrote (Bloch, 1938: 67) – Seidel the theorist invariably fought his intellectual battles for the sake of humanity as a whole. He put his life in the service of a theory of unconditional negativity. So the obvious question – whether insanity was really the mother of thought, whether negative dialectics was ultimately nothing but the cultural transformation of an endogenous depression – is irrelevant. For Seidel, his theory can only be the self-conscious negation of depression, insofar as depression is nothing but a blind, chemical process. In this context, however, negation concretely means ‘integrating psychopathies in one’s life plan’ (Seidel, 1927: 214). The *nihilisation of nihilism* that Seidel conceived

in *Consciousness as Doom* thus functions as both a heuristic intended to provide theoretical access to contemporary cultural phenomena and an intellectual survival strategy which enables a type, as Seidel represents it, to ‘be honest and genuine, that is, [to] develop his essence and even lead a meaningful life, at least for a while’ (Seidel, 1927: 203).

In a retrospective note on the *Problem of Genius and Insanity*, Seidel writes that the constant ‘sublimation of suicide’ is the ‘only possible psychological basis for more accurate knowledge’ (Seidel, 1927: 214). The fragments left behind testify to this unbroken struggle for *more accurate* knowledge. In this way, *Consciousness as Doom* can seem like the journal of an intellectual self-experiment undertaken with the utmost commitment. Just how intricate the relationship between work and life became in Seidel need not be seen only from the perspective of the interweaving of his further work and further life, assigning a direct life-preserving function to theoretical reflection: it is already there in the way that Seidel structures his book entirely along the lines of his own experiences, which were typical of his entire generation. By way of example, he wants to walk along the path of his generation’s development and philosophically *work through it* by means of determinate negation. The beginning is marked by the youth movement, which functions, on the one hand, as an early experience and, on the other hand, as the first ‘classical example’ (Seidel, 1927: 89) of the thesis of doomed consciousness. Seidel analysed the youth movement’s self-deceptive romanticism as a long since transparent – and therefore impossible – sublimation of homoerotic impulses. ‘In today’s youth, poisoned by psychology, it has become all too common for erotic relationships with each other, or better, against each other, to be analysed, talked to death’, he writes. He laments the fact that raising awareness of this hidden motive has led to the dissolution of the ‘delicate spiritual transformations’, for which male homosexuality is precisely appropriate.

In Seidel's experience, raising awareness resulted, on the one hand, in a 'much more dangerous' repression of the second order, 'packed full of neurotic traits' and, on the other hand, in an 'open affirmation of inversion', which led to a 'weakening of the transformations on which the spiritual content' of the youth movement is based. By 'making conscious their unconscious motives', the movement forfeited the driving force of unconscious sublimation, and thus lost that 'authenticity and impact' which at one time had distinguished it (Seidel, 1927: 89).

This critique of his own experience within the German youth movement reflects the pattern according to which Seidel, in the mode of immanent critique, subsequently disputes with Freud, Marx, Oswald Spengler, and various contemporary ideologies. For instance, Seidel criticizes Freud's psychoanalysis against the backdrop of his theses on desublimation: though it may have healed some neurotics, 'this saving of individuals' ends up 'surely costing too much [in its] disintegrating effect on the totality of culture' (Seidel, 1927: 93). He reproaches the political, class-struggle Marxism of his time for making a 'resentment filled class hatred and will to power' into the driving force of action, which runs exactly counter to the 'spiritual basis of socialism'. Moreover, Seidel revisits a thought he had already developed in his dissertation. There, he accuses Engels, especially his attempt at a realistic psychological supplement to Marxism in his late writings, of depriving Marxism of its one-sidedness and thus of its historical philosophical impact. The argument in short: what a philosophical idea gains in scientific quality, it loses in mobilizing potential. In contrast to other ideologies, Marxism has the merit of using 'historical necessity [...] not in defence of the status quo'; but by implying that progress is anchored in this necessity, it also pays homage to the blind drive, not to the idea: 'In this way, it may have perpetuated the class division of every society, and thus class struggle as well, both of which it

wanted to practically overcome by theory' (Seidel, 1927: 167).

Following this pattern, Seidel goes through a series of contemporary phenomena, frequently making both the phenomenon and the (conservative) critique of it into the object of his own critique. Against the notion, for example, that modern expressionism is a web of psychopathic and schizophrenic minds, he argues that the weakness of this artistic movement is not due to its madness but, 'on the contrary', to the 'inauthenticity and health of these schizophrenic components' – in the knowledge, therefore, of its own 'mad' effect (Seidel, 1927: 182). He similarly dealt with Spengler, whose historical pessimism and cultural criticism captivated not only Seidel but his entire generation. Seidel does not take this pessimism seriously but acknowledges that 'if his philosophy would have been more open to pessimism and nihilism', then Spengler's work could have been 'bigger, bolder and more impressive'. In the allegedly 'uninvolved' affirmation of technology, monopoly capitalism, caesarism, and nationalism, however, this pessimism falls victim to an 'abuse of its creator', which it then uses as an 'ideological justification for our time' and thus lags behind possible insights (Seidel, 1927: 199). In 1955, Adorno analogously writes that Spengler wanted to do 'nothing at all, but usurped the standpoint of the uninvolved spectator, which in truth is not so uninvolved. By watching only, he helps in his own way to push what falls' (Adorno, 1955: 145).

Overall, Seidel develops the thesis of doomed consciousness consistently with the stages of intellectual influences and experiences that shaped him and his generation. The youth movement, psychoanalysis, Marxism and revolutionary socialism, reactionary cultural criticism, and various aesthetic strategies and avant-garde movements of the 1920s are analysed as lived-through stations on his own path of life and thought. Thus Seidel thoroughly makes his own experience – particularly the experience of suffering

(threatening) madness and the resulting position of the outsider – into the basis of a method to enable objective insights through radical subjectivism. Many of the unfinished, (self-)critical sketches that comprise long stretches of *Consciousness as Doom* seem nervous and erratic. They approach a lamenting, reactionary critique of culture rather than meet their own demands of carrying out a sober criticism of scientific knowledge of the world. But what prevents them from losing themselves completely in tragic speculation and what guarantees their analytical sharpness throughout all the nervousness is the proximity from which they are written. Seidel himself went through the doctrines that he so relentlessly dissected: through psychoanalysis, for example, whose potency he learned both theoretically and practically, and through the (deceptive) sense of community of the youth movement or Marxist theory, including the practice of class struggle. As the invectives against the romanticism of the youth movement were fuelled by the disappointment of those hopes which Seidel had once placed in them, so his reckoning with the resentment of applied Marxism can only be adequately understood against the backdrop of the shocked horizon of expectations of that time. '[T]he German proletarian revolution should have occurred and tragically failed', as Sohn-Rethel retrospectively concluded, in line with Seidel (Sohn-Rethel, 1978: xi).

Critique, therefore, always remains oriented to and legitimized by the unfulfilled and betrayed promises to which the criticized is committed. The youth movement and Freud, Marx and class struggle, Spengler's degenerate pessimism as 'ideological justification', and many of the other phenomena that Seidel makes into objects of critique in *Consciousness as Doom* appear as the final stages of an intellectual biography that culminates in a relentless self-analysis – a self-analysis which claims to be the analysis of an entire epoch. On behalf of his generation, Seidel wants to reflectively work through

his formative journey, and he thereby shows what underpins the 'obsessive brooding' of individuals in terms of a philosophy of history: 'Hamlet-like types' like him, perpetually inhibited and disastrously predisposed through compulsive reflection, are 'of course possible at any time, [...] but will be represented particularly strongly in certain epochs'. Only when they are no longer 'embedded' 'in the circle of the bound community of which they are borne and by which their destructive qualities are suppressed', does their liberated disposition become doom, while their speech acquires an 'exemplary' character'. Their 'truth sadism' will then become the 'symptom of a certain epoch and not only individual types' (Seidel, 1927: 100 ff.).

## WHAT REMAINS

Seidel attempted to accomplish the *nihilisation of nihilism* by identifying his own depression with the fate of an epoch increasingly drifting into objective madness; from the outset, it was aimed at the perspective of tragic failure. In the mid 1920s, the promise that the generation born around 1890 linked with the self-conscious entrance of *youth* onto the stage of history seemed to be dead. The youth movement had lost its innocence in a world war that some already referred to as the *first* one; the revolution in the German Reich had failed and fascism was on the rise all over Europe. Moreover, to the critical communist Seidel, the consolidation of Stalin's pre-eminence at the XIII Party Congress of the CPSU (May 23–31, 1924) may have appeared as bitter confirmation of his thesis that the communist movement was on the way to forcibly perpetuating class hatred and class relations instead of finally abolishing them. In the Weimar Republic, political events constantly threatened to explode into open violence, thus verifying Seidel's pessimistic predictions. The dissolution of the Reichstag on October 20, 1924, which marked a new

degree of escalation, coincided with the last manifestation of the depressive episodes that plagued Seidel every year in autumn. Subjective and objective symptoms of crisis came together in such a sinister manner that the *persistent sublimation of suicide* could no longer be maintained. Against this background, Siegfried Kracauer judged: 'If the value of a book is determined by the degree to which it has been lived, then Seidel's book would be of unimpeachable validity' (Kracauer, 1927: 521).

But what is the theoretical value of the book? This should also only be judged in its historical context. Jürgen Frese has rightly pointed out that Seidel will 'certainly not be able to be brought out of his historically marginal position with regards to philosophy and science' (Frese 2001/2: 61). The weaknesses of the book are too obvious, and it is entirely unclear what sections in the published edition are from Prinzhorn – whether we are even dealing with an 'authentic' Seidel at all. The differences between the clearly structured dissertation on questions of Marxist philosophy of history and the often confused *Lebensphilosophie*-based cultural critique of *Consciousness as Doom* are certainly substantial. Seidel's dissertation, however, is very interesting in terms of the history of ideas, for at a very early stage, it criticized instrumental views of technology, of Marxist faith in progress, and of schematic interpretations of historical materialism. Furthermore, it suggested a deeply psychological complement to Marxism. These approaches have become fundamental pillars of critical theory and are reflected in almost all the work done in and around the Institute for Social Research. Accounting for the fact that Seidel's work was never published yet circulated precisely in the milieu from which critical theory developed, it thus makes perfect sense to regard *Productivity and Class Struggle* as a document which, together with Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*, exerted an early influence on the theoretical development of the Frankfurt School. At least the critique of Marxism presented there

seems to have been ground-breaking, and it found a clear echo, too, for example, in the critique of the social-democratic ideology of progress developed by Walter Benjamin in the 1940s.

Benjamin turns out to be a good reference point, since – although he only began to read Marx relatively late – contrary to Horkheimer and Adorno, he expressly avowed again and again 'the political practice of communism... as a binding attitude' without, however, drawing practical consequences from it (Benjamin, 1994: 248). In this sense, Seidel's plea for a terrorist Bolshevism if necessary was located at a rather abstract level; it did result, however, in a theory that made stronger reference to aspects of class struggle than to the Marxist *metaphysics of the productive forces* – a theme which also played a role in Benjamin's late works. In contrast, the theoretical development of Horkheimer and Adorno's version of critical theory was strongly marked by a disappointment of the hopes that had first been placed in communist movements. In the 1920s, Seidel faced the choice between 'terrorist bolshevism' and 'terrorist reaction'. After the experience of National Socialism and the extermination of the Jews, critical theory became more concerned with salvaging the bourgeois remnants of reason, barely noticing the real struggles of the proletariat. This circumstance has been occasionally criticized as the bourgeoisification of Marxism through critical theory. However, this relies on a development of the proletariat – especially in the German Reich – which could not have been foreseen in the 1920s.

If we concentrate on the just mentioned developmental line within critical theory – that is, the critique of enlightenment, which acquires its first comprehensive formulation in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – then the question as to Seidel's theoretical contribution is less related to his dissertation than to *Consciousness as Doom*. In Prinzhorn's edition, the book appeared to be so obviously a theoretical reflection of a tragic individual



fate that it was received as a symptom of crisis rather than as a diagnosis of crisis. Yet theoretical positions are developed there which share a family resemblance to the critical theory of Adorno and Horkheimer. Besides the theoretical attentiveness to (its own) idiosyncrasies and outsider positions, a central theme in Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, what is noteworthy is Seidel's fundamental shift of the historical-materialist method from economic questions to ideology critique, which later became characteristic of critical theory as a whole. Seidel's revision of the theoretical position of the (negative) subject of history, a position assumed by the proletariat in classical Marxism, also belongs to the thematic spectrum of critical theory. Methodologically speaking, Seidel's contribution lies in his insistence on unconditional negativity and his critique of a thoroughly transparent enlightenment as self-critique, which met an (unnamed) afterlife within critical theory, especially in Adorno. While Lukács' Hegelian Marxism was still bound by the scheme of a positive dialectics in which the Communist Party was to carry out the final synthesis, Seidel proposed a model of critical reason that operates purely negatively and does not derive its legitimacy from either a transcendent goal or a privileged position, except that of the isolated outsider. It is therefore hardly a coincidence that Adorno mentions his 'late friend from youth' in 1965, as he himself was busy 'retrospectively' tracing his own path of thought in *Negative Dialectics* and 'justifying' his previous philosophical procedure with an abstract text, in the centre of which stands the 'concept of philosophical experience', marked by negativity (Adorno, 2003: xx).

Thus motifs of Seidel's thought continue to live on within critical theory. And they are not found only in Adorno and Benjamin but in Sohn-Rethel, whose lifelong project of philosophically relating the commodity form and the form of thought dates back to his time in Heidelberg. Nevertheless, the material presented above does not seem enough to defend the thesis that Seidel is a forgotten founding

figure of critical theory. According to Jochen Hörisch, critical theory tries to discover 'a repression-free consciousness of crises [...] not by attempting to freeze the specifically modern "mobility of thought," but rather by releasing it' (Hörisch, 2010: 83). If this is true, then Seidel's extremely radical attempt to do just that belongs indeed to the ancestral halls of the Frankfurt School, but it is difficult to say how original his thinking actually was for the time and for the Heidelberg milieu. What survives from Seidel's work should therefore not be used as material for the construction of a linear history of influence but rather as a testimony to the theoretical development and scope of an intellectual milieu, which as a whole had a considerable influence on the development of critical theory. Seidel's notes, incompletely concluded in 1924, conserve in a peculiar manner the then intact status quo of an ongoing development within the intellectual history of Germany, which would eventually differentiate and divide from the common experience of awakening in the youth movement and the shared canon of literary and scientific sources into theoretically and politically irreconcilable camps. Seidel declares that his entire work is primarily intended to synthesize the thinking of Freud and Marx, and to that end he relies on Goethe, Hegel, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Stefan George, Ludwig Klages, Alfred Adler, Henry James, Georg Simmel, Max Weber, Karl Jaspers, and Oswald Spengler (Seidel, 1927: 72). He thus provides the reader with a representative list of those authors who were significant for building community and directing their generation. Yet, even more importantly, he constructs a panorama that will soon be unacceptable within the framework of a *single* theory. The theoretical, ideological, and political trenches that have opened up between these thinkers and schools of thought, and that will open up, are evidently too deep. Frese rightly sees Seidel's 'significance' primarily in the fact that his work makes possible the 'analysis of theoretical elements and motives of a theory' that came before the 'differentiation'

of sociological theories, 'whose seemingly disparate origins were still grasped as a unity', and thus makes this differentiation 'objectively, temporally, and socially identifiable' (Frese, 2001/2: 48). In Seidel's work, therefore, one can still see the whole whose differentiation then led, among other things, to what is today understood as critical theory.

In a certain sense, this could also be applied to more decidedly communist theory and to communism understood as the 'real movement which abolishes the present state of things' (Marx and Engels, 1975–2004: 5/49). Since the October Revolution did not prompt world revolution and since the social revolutions in Western Europe failed, communism and communist theory lost its unity and consequently forfeited its mobilizing effect, as Seidel would say. Seidel tried to maintain this unity through a firm commitment to the 'ruthless communists' and 'believing fanatics' – in whom he could no longer count himself – and failed. What remains is a testimony of this failure, a condensation of that 'agitated, beat down spirit [...] running through the streets at the time' that became the 'impetus' for 'the new development in Marxist thought' to which 'the Frankfurt school testifies' (Sohn-Rethel, 1972: 10).

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## Notes

- 1 Translator's note: *Wandervogel* was the name of a German youth movement from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that focused on hiking, adventure, being outdoors, and getting back to nature.
- 2 Benjamin records the dissertation as item 778 on his reading list, but under the wrong title: *Alfred Seidel: The Metaphysics of the Forces of Production* (Benjamin GS VII.1: 449). Esther Leslie (2000: 35) points out that Benjamin could have received important impulses for his own philosophy of technology from the dissertation, especially as regards his critique of the optimism of progress.
- 3 The letter is dated September 8, 1922 and is located at the Adorno Archive in Frankfurt am Main. A partial print can be found in Voller, 2014: 312.

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# Arkadij Gurland: Political Science as Critical Theory

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Arkadij Gurland<sup>1</sup> worked at Max Horkheimer's Institute of Social Research (ISR) from 1940 to 1945 and had previously contributed to the review sections of its journal *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. During his years at the ISR, he became an important voice in the controversy within the Frankfurt School group about state capitalism.<sup>2</sup> But Gurland's understanding of critical theory was not focused on the ISR. Before his years with the Frankfurt School in exile, as a translator and political journalist he followed his own independent ideas about Marxist political and social criticism. After he left the ISR, he developed a unique program for a critical political science in the early days of the new academic discipline in West Germany. Even though Gurland failed to be successful as the manager of a research institute in Berlin, the substance of his ambitions put him in a special position within the tradition of critical theory.

Arkadij Gurland was born in Moscow on September 1, 1904.<sup>3</sup> The families of his parents, Isaak and Debora Gurland, were of German descent and had lived in Poland and Lithuania. Gurland's father worked as an engineer in Moscow and Sebastopol. In the early days of the Russian Revolution, he was deeply impressed as a teenager by the mass assemblies following the revolutionary outbreak. As a Moscow high-school student, he participated in revolutionary mass demonstrations and he heard Lenin, Kamenev, Trotsky and other leaders of the Bolsheviks speak in person. In 1920, his father decided that the family had to leave the Soviet Union, and they moved into exile to Berlin, where he obtained his *Abitur*. Gurland and his parents never received German citizenship. Although the son of a rich and respectable family, he became a member of the *Sozialistische Proletarierjugend* [Socialist Proletarian Youth] and of the radical left USPD [Independent Social Democratic Party] during his time at the *Gymnasium*.

After completing his *Abitur*, he began to study at Berlin's Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität in late 1922 and became a member of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). Officially a student of mathematics and physical chemistry, Gurland used his time as a student mainly to provide an academic foundation for his socialist views, taking lectures and classes with Gustav Mayer, Arthur Rosenberg and Heinrich Cunow. He continued his studies in Leipzig in 1924 in the subjects of economics, philosophy and history. As a student, Gurland translated several books by leading Russian Mensheviks like Aron Jugow and Theodor Dan into German. His critical view of Soviet politics and economy brought him in contact with Max Horkheimer's closest personal friend at the ISR, Friedrich Pollock,<sup>4</sup> who was working on a book about the planned economy in the Soviet Union. Gurland finally graduated with a doctoral dissertation on the theory of dictatorship in 1929.

From 1924 to 1928, Gurland also taught at the Leipzig *Arbeiterbildungsinstitut* [Institute for Workers' Education], and from then until the collapse of Weimar, at the Berlin *Arbeiterbildungsschule* [School for Workers' Education]. In addition to his academic and teaching interests, Gurland started a successful career as a political journalist. From 1924 on, he contributed to practically the entire socialist press – for example, the *Außenpolitische Wochenschau*, the *Kulturwille*, the *Jungsozialistische Blätter* and Paul Levi's influential *Sozialistische Politik und Wirtschaft*; and from the beginning of 1932, he worked as editor-in-chief of the *Marxistische Tribüne*, a paper on the left wing of the SPD.

After the Reichstag fire in February 1933, Gurland first believed that the new coalition government with Chancellor Adolf Hitler would not last long. Urged by friends, he decided to leave the country in March of 1933, and he made it just in time: in early April 1933 an arrest warrant was issued for him by the Gestapo. Gurland first went to Belgium,

and in the summer of 1933 he moved to Paris, then one of the capitals of German emigrés. Gurland continued to maintain conspiratorial contacts with his comrades and friends in Germany, some of whom also supported him financially. He earned additional income as a translator, a sales director and an accountant in a newspaper distribution company, and as an employee of the French weekly *La Documentation de Statistique Sociale et Economique*. After the German invasion of France in May 1940, he was lucky enough to escape the Nazis again. He first fled to England and from there he was able to emigrate to the United States. His cousin by marriage, Henny Gurland, was with the group of Walter Benjamin who found their way – after Benjamin's suicide – through Spain finally to the United States (Brodersen, 1997: 252). It was A.R.L. Gurland from whom Horkheimer and Adorno first heard the details of Walter Benjamin's death in Port Bou (Horkheimer, 1996: 713–16, 727–30). Gurland's sister and mother also succeeded in leaving for England, but his father had already been deported to Poland in 1938 and was murdered in the Vilna ghetto in 1941.

In New York, Gurland was one of the emigrés whose political interest remained fixed on Germany. Together with the influential social-democratic journalist Max Sievers, he unsuccessfully attempted to revive the exile newspaper *Freies Deutschland* (Kaiser, 1981). In the fall of 1940, he was hired as a research assistant at the ISR by Max Horkheimer. Horkheimer and Gurland hardly knew each other beforehand. Joseph Maier, also a former doctoral student of Hans Freyer in Leipzig, who had started to work at the ISR, established contact with Horkheimer. Gurland stayed on the payroll of the ISR on a part-time basis until 1945. His two main fields of work were economic studies about Nazi Germany and antisemitism in Germany and the United States. Gurland also managed to get money for research projects under the roof of the ISR from other sources. After the ISR in New York was slowly dissolved in

1942, Gurland continued his research independently in New York for the American Jewish Congress (AJC), the Library of Congress and the Department of Labor. He also briefly worked with Neumann and Kirchheimer for the OSS (Office of Strategic Services) in 1945. Being stateless since his family had left Russia, Gurland achieved US citizenship in 1946 and changed his name to Arcadius Rudolf Lang Gurland. From time to time he still worked with members of the ISR. Alongside Adorno and Löwenthal, he collaborated with Horkheimer for his book *Eclipse of Reason*, which was published in 1947 (Wiggershaus, 1994: 344).

Two years after the war, Gurland made his first attempt to return to Germany. In the spring of 1947, he traveled throughout the British and American zones of occupation as a Visiting Expert Consultant to the US Department of Labor in order to observe the development of trade unions in Germany (Gurland, 1949). In 1950, he decided to move to Germany. His former colleague at the ISR, Franz L. Neumann, had offered him the directorship of a new political-science research institute to be founded in the Western sectors of Berlin, the *Institut für politische Wissenschaft* (IfpW, Institute of Political Science). Gurland stayed at the IfpW for four years. After personal conflicts with other members of the IfpW, he went back to New York in 1954. Although considered briefly for a sociology chair at Marburg University in 1957, he did not return to Germany until 1962, when he was appointed to the Chair for Political Science at the Technical University in Darmstadt, with the help of Adorno.<sup>5</sup> After his arrival in Darmstadt, however, Gurland did not intensify his contact with Horkheimer and Adorno in nearby Frankfurt. Politically, he was closer to Wolfgang Abendroth, the supporter of Jürgen Habermas's *Habilitation* in Marburg. In the late 1960s and 1970s, Gurland sympathized with those groups of the student protest movement who wanted to engage with the left wing of the social democratic party. A.R.L. Gurland died on March 27, 1979.

## MENSHEVISM, REVOLUTIONARY HEGELIAN-MARXISM AND SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

As a high-school student in Berlin, Gurland sympathized with the left wing of the Russian Mensheviks. He translated a number of their brochures into German. At 21, in his first book, *Der proletarische Klassenkampf in der Gegenwart* [Proletarian Class Struggle Today], he promoted Marxism as a 'method of thinking and doing research' (Gurland, 1925).<sup>6</sup> He finished his doctoral dissertation three years later, with Freyer, one of the most prominent sociologists in Germany, as his advisor in Leipzig. Freyer was an outspoken right-wing Hegelian. In his understanding of sociology as a *Wirklichkeitswissenschaft* [science about reality], Freyer tried to combine empirical social research with Hegelian dialectics and attracted a number of left-wing students in the 1920s.

The topic of Gurland's doctoral dissertation was the concept of dictatorship in the materialist approach to history. The book offers a Marxist counterargument to Carl Schmitt's book on dictatorship, which had appeared in 1921. In his predominantly philological work, Gurland sought to differentiate between a 'bourgeois' and a 'socialist' understanding of dictatorship, thus 'exposing' the Weimar parliamentary democracy as a bourgeois dictatorship (Gurland, 1930). Arguably the most exciting theoretical parts of the dissertation are the passages on the theory of science in which Gurland undertakes a kind of synthesis of Georg Lukács's theory of reification and Max Adler's empiricism as a starting point for a theory of class consciousness in late capitalist societies (Gurland, 1930: 32–46).

Due to his Russian connections, Gurland was in contact with Dawid Rjazanov, the editor of the collected works of Marx and Engels in Moscow, and was invited to collaborate on the new critical edition. This plan fell short after Rjazanov was purged by the Stalinist regime in 1931. Gurland's political positions

placed him on the left wing of the SPD, and he sought to influence the party to become part of a movement for revolutionary struggle. In the years of Social Democratic government participation in the Weimar Republic after 1928, he was one of the most vocal critics of the policy of entering into coalitions with the 'bourgeois' parties. Although he changed course in the early 1930s, he did so only for tactical reasons. Gurland considered the reformism of the German labor movement to be a result of its historic development, and believed that this stance could be overcome by means of revolutionary agitation that connected with workers' everyday experiences, as he detailed in his best-known Weimar piece, *Das Heute der Proletarischen Aktion* [The Actuality of Proletarian Action] (Gurland, 1931). Gurland was a socialist who propagated a mixture of Luxemburgism and cultural revolutionary activities within the working class. The theory of fascism he developed using the example of Italy and presented in the same piece is probably the most interesting part of the book. Gurland did not consider fascism the product of capitalism at a new level but as an expression of economic and social backwardness. Fascist ideology would seep into the working class only when crisis-driven deindustrialization on a large scale takes place. Gurland considered the ideological power of both the socialists and the fascists as being fairly high. Later, this perspective permitted him to take an unbiased approach to Marxist economic categories and to revise them.

Gurland's main contributions to the political thought of the Weimar republic are his Marxist concept of dictatorship, his theory of fascism and his emphasis on culture and education as means to mobilize the working class.

## RESEARCH ON THE NAZI SYSTEM

After his escape to France, Gurland soon made contact with the Paris branch of the

ISR, via Friedrich Pollock.<sup>7</sup> Gurland contributed reviews for the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, using different pseudonyms.<sup>8</sup> Looking back at the collapse of the Weimar Republic, Gurland castigated the Social Democratic policies of the Weimar years as 'the most abominable capitulation that the history of class struggles (...) has ever seen' (Gurland, 1935: 184). His main activity in his French exile was political journalism. From 1937, he directed the ongoing reports on Germany's economic development for Max Sievers's weekly paper, *Freies Deutschland*. He wrote more than 400 articles, mostly on questions of economic policy, until the paper was discontinued in the summer of 1939. The overarching theme of his articles and theoretical deliberations was the question of why the labor movement in Germany had been defeated without a struggle.

In his Paris exile, he started to compile material for a larger academic project in order to find an answer to the enduring question of why the German working class had been defeated by the Nazis. According to his application to the American Guild for German Cultural Freedom, he wanted to work on a 'comprehensive study of the sociology, history of ideas, and critique of ideology of the modern – primarily the German – socialist labor movement'.<sup>9</sup> The five-part analysis was to summarize socialist theory and practice in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and elaborate on the ideological situation of socialism following the victory of fascism in Germany. The most innovative part of his project was the plan to analyze the 'new capitalism' under state-interventionist conditions and the economic order of National Socialism. In taking up the question of 'state capitalism' or 'monopoly capitalism', Gurland began to address the problems that he extensively dealt with years later in New York at Max Horkheimer's ISR. Indeed, the outline of his work displays parallels with the later analysis of fascism in Franz L. Neumann's *Behemoth*. However, Gurland's

application to the Guild was unsuccessful, and he had to continue making at least some money from his work as a journalist. In September 1939, he briefly published in the *Pariser Tageszeitung*, an emigré newspaper, together with Friedrich Torberg (Peterson, 1987). In his articles in newspapers and journals about the Nazi system, Gurland emphasized the fragility of the social compromise among the leading social groups and insisted on the continuity of the capitalist system in Germany (Gurland, 1938a, 1938b).

After Gurland was hired by the ISR in 1940, he concerned himself with two areas of work: the economic analysis of German Nazism and research on antisemitism. In his work on economics, he cooperated closely with Franz L. Neumann and Otto Kirchheimer, as the three had been hired to fill the political-economy gap of the ISR. But instead of orienting their work toward Pollock's and Horkheimer's theory of state capitalism, as had been expected of them, the three ignited a controversy about how the ISR's core members had placed National Socialism within their theory of capitalist society.<sup>10</sup>

Horkheimer and Adorno's theory on National Socialism was grounded in Friedrich Pollock's concept of 'state capitalism', which understood the Nazi regime as one among other cases of an emerging new economic and social order that had transformed monopoly capitalism into a totalitarian 'command economy' (Pollock, 1941: 454). They were inclined to the view that the Nazi regime was like the Soviet regime. In contrast to these members of the inner core of the Frankfurt School, Gurland agreed with Franz L. Neumann, Otto Kirchheimer and partly with Herbert Marcuse (Jay, 1973: 143–72; Wiggershaus, 1994: 223–36, 280–91), viewing National Socialism as a monopoly capitalistic system, which was founded on the capitalist relations of private property. The economic imperatives of monopoly capitalism were intact, and the compromises among the elites of economy, party, military

and administration that had come about were based on an economic system of private capitalism. The debate between the IRS members on this issue turned out to be the last intensive and truly interdisciplinary debate at the Institute.

In this debate, Gurland was – from the beginning and in contrast to his earlier views – a proponent of the theory of continuity, according to which fascism was the appropriate political organizational form for developed monopolistic capitalism. In his best-known work from his years in exile, an essay in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, published by the ISR in English in 1941, he opposed Horkheimer's and Pollock's theory of state capitalism on empirical grounds (Gurland, 1941).<sup>11</sup> The manuscript was discussed within the ISR a couple of times and only after a number of revisions, which downplayed the dispute with Pollock and Horkheimer, was the article finally allowed to go to print.<sup>12</sup> Although Gurland agreed that technological rationalization had been advanced under the Nazi system, he did not turn this observation into a statement about the end of private capitalism. According to Gurland, the centralization and the bureaucratization of the economy had already started in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century. Gurland saw these huge private companies and cartels as still being much more powerful than the Nazi state companies like the Hermann Goering Stahl Werke (steel-works). The technological progress and innovations that Pollock had emphasized in his article were more the result of the activities of these big private conglomerates than those of the government. Again, he used empirical data from the chemical industry to prove his case. According to Gurland, the German economic system was still monopoly capitalist, based, however, on a social 'compromise' (Gurland, 1941: 252) between economic managers and state leaders. In this connection, Gurland saw it as highly important to recognize that the social position of the political machine which runs the state – the



party – had undergone considerable changes. First, the party elite was no longer a gang of *déclassés* but had become the leading group of organizers within the governmental set-up. And second, the active rank and file's claim for security and prosperity had been fulfilled. The party supporters participated in the universal prosperity as capitalists, managers or corporate officers.

In this context, Gurland focused his attention on the importance of economic expansion as a means to prevent conflict within competing social groups in the Nazi system. He opposed Pollock's argument that the power of big business had been crucially reduced. The government, he asserted, represented the anti-monopolistic resentment of the petit bourgeoisie; the Nazis had made plenty of anti-capitalist propaganda. But after they had come to power they did not attack the social power of the entrenched business interests. He argued that the discontented middle classes – small-business owners, petty bureaucrats and white-collar workers – had always had more interest in security and participation in prosperity than in destroying the big capitalist companies. According to Gurland, this yearning had been fulfilled to the benefit of both the Nazi government and big business by German imperialist expansion. Opposing Pollock's statements about state capitalism, Gurland suggested that the expansion guaranteed the realization of the capitalist profit motive, and the profit motive stimulated further German expansion. Gurland also opposed the pessimistic view held by Horkheimer and Pollock that saw state capitalism as an ultra-stable social system: the monopolist capitalist system in Germany 'maintains the pluralism in the social and political set-up, and preserves the inconstancy of the balance of power' (Gurland, 1941: 263).

In a lengthy letter to Leo Löwenthal of November 29, 1941, Horkheimer expressed his concern that the ISR would rapidly decline if it continued to operate with Neumann, Kirchheimer and Gurland – that

the Institute would simply explode into different groups (Horkheimer, 1996: 223–30). Further, Horkheimer explained to Neumann in a letter of February 1, 1942 that the profound theoretical and political differences concerning the nature and structure of National Socialism had led to unbridgeable disputes between the members of the ISR (quoted in Laudani, 2014: 3–4). The social climate at the ISR became even colder than before.

In this situation, Gurland's collaboration with Neumann and Kirchheimer at the ISR became even closer. In 1943, the three authored a study on the fate of small businesses in Hitler's Germany for the Special Committee to Study Problems of American Small Businesses of the United States Senate (Gurland et al., 1943). Most of the empirical work for this book was done by Gurland, as the drafts and letters in his papers indicate.<sup>13</sup> The vast empirical evidence about the decline of small businesses in Germany and the ever growing economic and political power of big business was interpreted by them as supporting their view of the monopolist capitalist character of the Nazi system. Gurland also contributed his economic analyses to *Behemoth*, Franz L. Neumann's voluminous study of National Socialism.<sup>14</sup>

The controversy within the IRS about the alleged emergence of state capitalism could not be settled. The different implications for political action drawn from the two contrasting positions were profound. The state-capitalism theory stated that the contradictions of the capitalist system had been suspended, whereas the monopoly-capitalism theory argued that these contradictions were actually intensified. Gurland and his collaborators' empirical challenge for the state-capitalism theory was not taken up by the core group at the ISR. Neither Horkheimer nor Adorno had any real interest in empirical economic research. In 1943 and 1944, Horkheimer's circle began to close ranks. Apart from the intellectual differences over the economic basis of German National

Socialism, the financial situation of the ISR in exile had become difficult.<sup>15</sup> Horkheimer dismissed most of the ISR's staff and moved with Adorno to the west coast.

## RESEARCH ON ANTISEMITISM

Research on antisemitism became the second field of research for Gurland in New York. The American Jewish Committee (AJC) had already started to fund Gurland's research on antisemitism in 1943. Officially, it had been undertaken by the ISR. Gurland collaborated with Paul Massing on preparing the section on the economic and social origins of antisemitism. Franz Neumann had initiated some of these projects, and he and Gurland wanted to enlarge the project to include research into antisemitism among the American labor movement (Wiggershaus, 1994: 333–5). This idea, however, provoked Horkheimer's harsh opposition. In a letter to Neumann dated November 8, 1942, Horkheimer proclaimed that the labor study was pointless insofar as labor did not represent a 'hotbed' of antisemitic trouble (Worrell, 2006). This, however, was part of the reason why Neumann and Gurland were interested in the topic. Thanks to the intervention of a personal friend at the American Labor Committee (ALC), Gurland was finally able to secure financing for a separate project on antisemitism that dealt specifically with the topic 'labor and antisemitism'.<sup>16</sup>

When reading Gurland's research reports today, it is striking to discover how strongly he disagreed with the pessimistic outlook taken by Horkheimer and Adorno. Whereas the philosophical heads of the Frankfurt School presented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944/7) a diagnosis of their times which described the emergence of authoritarian capitalist societies and growing antisemitism (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1994), Gurland's empirical findings made him much more optimistic with respect to the future of Western

capitalist societies. The labor and antisemitism study examined the attitudes of 566 workers in New York, Detroit, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Philadelphia who belonged to the two main unions at that time – the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) – as well as unorganized workers. The study's methods were innovative because they partially referred to 'screened interviews', which meant that fellow workers on the shop floor gathered some of the material and conducted follow-up interviews.<sup>17</sup> Gurland concluded that younger workers, women and workers with higher education could be identified as being basically immune to antisemitism. In particular, American white-collar workers possessed 'amazingly liberal' attitudes, which pointed to a crucial difference from their counterparts in Europe. African-American and Hispanic workers also emerged from the study as being relatively free of antisemitism. Since those groups were growing in number among American labor, their political attitudes were to be understood as foreshadowing a more democratic (and not fascist) future in modern capitalist societies.<sup>18</sup> In the words of Mark P. Worrell: 'The labor report postulated that the future of American labor was heading, decisively, away from authoritarian ideology and that important segments of the working class were resistant or allergic to antisemitism' (Worrell, 2006: 281). The research was supposed to be published along with the outcomes of another empirical project at the ISR, which later became the famous book *The Authoritarian Personality*. However, Gurland's empirical labor project was not published by the ISR. In the internal discussions, Adorno asked for a theory which distinguished between middle-class antisemitism and working-class antisemitism. Horkheimer complained that the research emphasized the quantitative findings too much while neglecting qualitative analysis and philosophical considerations.<sup>19</sup> Segments of the study have only recently been published, under the title 'Social Power and the Fetishization of Jews:

American Labor Antisemitism During the Second World War' (Gurland, 2008).

After the dissolution of the ISR in New York, Marcuse, Kirchheimer and Neumann, members of the group in opposition to Horkheimer, soon obtained long-term positions with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Gurland succeeded only in working for the OSS on a short-term basis. As a result, the American Jewish Committee (AJC), the largest and oldest of the major Jewish defense agencies in the United States, became the main sponsor of his work in 1946 and 1947. He went on producing studies on antisemitism in Germany and the Soviet Union as a freelance researcher for the AJC and composed a number of research reports, which together amounted to more than 3,000 pages.<sup>20</sup>

### THE PROGRAM FOR A CRITICAL POLITICAL SCIENCE IN POSTWAR GERMANY

After the collapse of the Nazi regime, Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Friedrich Pollock soon returned to Frankfurt University, where they became influential academics in German philosophy and sociology. In political science, the case was different. Although a number of former emigrants took part in the founding of the new academic discipline in West Germany, the emigrés with a political-science background from the former ISR were reluctant about returning to Germany. Otto Kirchheimer and Franz L. Neumann stayed in the United States, where they became acclaimed political scientists. Gurland took a different path: he immediately looked for opportunities to participate in the new and growing discipline of political science in West Germany.

Gurland arrived in November 1950 with an ambitious research plan for the new IfpW in Berlin.<sup>21</sup> He wanted to break with the tradition of German *Geisteswissenschaften* and

create a new and critical political science in Germany.<sup>22</sup> In *Political Science in Western Germany*, he exemplifies with great flair the battles that lay ahead. In this large-scale book review for the Library of Congress, he reviewed more than 1,000 books by 384 German authors who had commented on political issues since the end of the war. His verdict was scathing. Affinities with National Socialism, pan-Germanism and a lack of analysis of the National Socialist era were only a few of his charges (Gurland, 1952a). Gurland contrasted the existing literature with the state of political science in the United States. The traditions of a 'Mohl, a Stein, a Marx and a Gneist' had emigrated there, and that was where the requisite modernization of the subject of political science had taken place. In a further publication later that year, he emphasized how the nascent German political science could employ approaches developed in the United States (Gurland, 1952b).

Gurland's own conceptual ideas of that time were published only in part during his lifetime. But the contours of these ideas can easily be reconstructed if we take an additional look at the internal papers he produced for the IfpW. Gurland intended to redefine the relationship between empirical research on the one hand and social and political theory on the other. Political science was to take on the task in terms of a critique of ideology, not in the Hegel-Marxist sense of deciphering 'necessarily false consciousness' but simply with an empiricist understanding. Political science would be in a position to hold its own as a discipline in its own right and stake its claim vis-à-vis the existing social sciences to the extent that it elaborated on procedures that would increase empirical knowledge of political structures, processes and functional relationships and permit a precise description of phenomena about which previous theory formation had made 'for the most part only ideological statements'.<sup>23</sup> German political science was lacking such empirical data to a serious degree. The goal was to capture reality by means of theory, just as in all other

social sciences. Theoretical work could not be accomplished 'in the seclusion of a retreat', but 'derives the decisive impulses from empirical research' (Gurland, 1952c: 35).

According to Gurland, 'political science [...] should first and foremost observe and classify the facts and sift the evidence; at a later stage hypotheses would be formulated, to serve as starting points for theoretical evaluation'.<sup>24</sup> In this construct, empirical research has the function of delivering data. Gurland envisioned a broad palette of methods of empirical social research, including clinical analyses and analyses rooted in depth psychology, methods for precisely measuring politically relevant means of influencing the masses (qualitative semantics), representative statistics and participant observation. Introducing these procedures, some of which were unknown in Germany, was so important to him that he taught several classes on methodological problems and encouraged his Berlin colleagues to participate in the training he offered.

In keeping with his empirically oriented program, Gurland referred to Max Weber's postulate of a 'value-free' social science time and again. To him, however, political science was not a value-free undertaking, as it almost always automatically argues in favor of freedom and democracy. The political scientist's preference for democracy was neither the consequence of external normative considerations nor the result of a dialectical historical truth. On the contrary, Gurland hypothesized that political science had an internal normative center, as scientific discourse itself is essentially bound to the existence of political freedom. Scientific progress was founded on the possibility of correcting mistakes. That is the case only where science enjoys the freedom to test itself time and time again. Political science was a kind of litmus test of political freedom because of its subject: politics. As a consequence, under the existing historical conditions, there could be no political science without freedom of speech (Gurland, 1952c: 35).

By tying it to freedom and democracy, Gurland also sketched out the critical object of political science: political power. From the perspective of freedom, it was never a science of the supposedly correct use of power in terms of a 'science of governance' but rather served to ruthlessly decipher power relationships. At the center of the discipline's epistemic interest, therefore, are 'society's power structures that determine political decisions as active factors, and the social, economic and psychological processes from which political power in modern society emerges, in which it develops to form an order and through which it is subverted' (Gurland, 1952c: 25). Gurland derived this epistemic interest not least from the National Socialist past: 'Under the impact of the last decades' cataclysmic events, the study of politics has become to a large extent an inquiry into the nature, the sources and the functions of power' (Gurland, 1952a: 2). Governance in mass democracies was hiding under the cloak of common interests. The task was to tear this cloak apart in order to reveal the actual relationships of power: 'In democracies, too, processes of forming power are increasingly characterized by the anonymity of the power of control, the lack of transparency of political decisions and the concealment of power'.<sup>25</sup> According to Gurland, political science is the restless search for the societal conditions of political power.

### **THE CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL RESTORATION IN WEST GERMANY AND BERLIN**

Political parties were at the center of Gurland's restless search for power structures during his four years at the IfpW. All of his works, even if they covered other topics, had the same theme: to criticize the tendency to restore capitalism in the Federal Republic and to express concern about the emergent character of West German democracy.

Gurland criticized three aspects in particular. First, he declared denazification a complete failure and bitterly called its factual results 'renazification'.<sup>26</sup> Second, the Western allies had neglected to override the power of the 'bureaucratic caste'. This was particularly worrying, as the German civil service had been nothing less than a bastion of anti-democratic policy since the establishment of the Reich and had paved the way for fascism (Gurland, 1947b). Third, he accused the occupying powers of having done nothing to prevent capitalist monopolies from attaining key positions anew: 'The political power of [...] big business – pro-Nazi, semi-Nazi, or profiting from the Nazis – rests on its close links to the Bizonal and Land Bureaucracies and the CDU party machine' (Gurland, 1949: 242), he complained in an article in *Commentary* in September 1949, which was widely discussed among the old Frankfurt School group. Gurland painted a dark picture of the young republic, articulating the fears and anxieties of a large part of the political left at that time. A growing unemployment rate, an intensifying economic crisis and monopoly capital rejecting full-employment policy, Gurland saw this situation as a breeding ground for National Socialist forces. Alarmed, he reported to his US readership about neo-Nazism and the resurgence of antisemitism.

During his years at the IfpW, Gurland did not retract any part of this diagnosis. He considered the IfpW's political function to be the detection of any form of restoration, down to its most subtle manifestations, thereby exposing it to public criticism. A study on the history of the founding of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) developed into one of his most ambitious projects. Originally conceived as an essay for an edited volume on the West German political parties, his manuscript rapidly grew beyond that framework. But it was not only its unforeseen expansion that explained why the partially finished manuscript was not published in the IfpW's book series: a commission at

the IfpW rejected the publication due to the work's content and language, saying the study lacked the necessary effort to be scientifically objective, thus falling to the level of social-democratic propaganda.<sup>27</sup> Gurland gave up, leaving the IfpW in anger, and never finished the manuscript. The extensive study was finally published after his death 25 years later by Dieter Emig (Gurland, 1980) and is today seen as one of the best empirical studies about the early phase of the German party system.

The study presents the history of the founding of the CDU in seven sections. The first three chapters are compilations of the dates, background and personnel of the various CDU organizations that were established after the war; next is a description of the party programs from the *Cologne Principles* to the *Hamburg Program* of 1953; and, finally, Gurland examined the ideological bases of the founding circles, focusing on the stream of 'Christian socialism'. In the next three chapters, in which he himself took a stand most distinctly, Gurland reconstructed the debate about the formation of the first Bonn government as well as the course of the legislative process regarding socialization in Hesse and North Rhine-Westphalia. He made a detailed attempt to show how Konrad Adenauer's followers had taken over power within the CDU step by step. Gurland believed he could detect that the will of the founding circles to accomplish a new socio-political orientation was dissolved in a process encompassing five phases. Little by little, the CDU had degenerated from 'socialism carrying Christian responsibility' to a party intended on 'restoration' (Gurland, 1980: 417). The party's rejection of controlling monopolies and its dedication to the philosophy of the market were the logical end points of its development into a political force oriented toward large corporations. He expressed his concern about the CDU's future development, fearing that the 'hierarchical influencing of the masses and leadership' would return in dangerous form because of the 'charismatic authority of

the party leader' Adenauer (Gurland, 1980: 464). In other words, he anticipated so-called chancellor democracy.

But Gurland also found little to praise about the SPD, his own old party. For example, he accused it of bearing a large part of the responsibility for Adenauer's victory regarding the legislation on socialization. His accusation was as such: 'Basically, the SPD didn't know what to do with the coal industry; even if the best case of socialization had simply fallen into its lap, the party still wouldn't have known what to do: it had no stated goals in terms of production policy, technology or economic geography' (Gurland, 1980: 325). Two years before, he had taken the Berlin party association to task. The first volume of the IfpW book series, *Wahlkampf und Machtverschiebung* [Election Campaign and Power Shift] was an exhaustive empirical analysis of the election in Berlin's Western sectors in December 1950. The election study, the first in the young Federal Republic, was headed by Stephanie Münke, but Gurland, as editor-in-chief of the book series and as director of the IfpW, intervened in the preparation of the manuscript, at times rewriting entire chapters. In the foreword, he explicitly took responsibility for the content of the sections on the SPD. He explained the party's massive losses – from 64% to 45% – by asserting that the SPD had neglected to go on the offensive: it had failed as a party of a new socialist beginning.<sup>28</sup>

Gurland, not a person to shy away from disputes, knew what he was getting into in uttering such criticism. In spite of all the rhetoric that political science in Berlin was politically neutral, it had close ties to the SPD; and even though Gurland did not need to fear direct consequences because of his criticism, influential party members were no longer prepared to protect him. The atmosphere began to turn against Gurland in late 1953, and he finally had to leave the IfpW as personal conflicts and disputes about research projects became more intense.<sup>29</sup> The price of these disputes was that Gurland did not

finish his voluminous study on the CDU that had grown to 700 pages. In 1954, Gurland returned to New York.

## LATE WORK

During his time at the IfpW, Gurland reconsidered his thoughts about the economic theories of Marxism and about the rise of fascism in Europe. He defended the importance of an economic theory to explain the success of fascism in Europe but criticized the dismissal of the role of the middle classes in traditional Marxist thought (Gurland 1953a, 1953b). Before he returned to New York, Gurland contacted Horkheimer to figure out whether he would get the opportunity to work on these topics with the ISR in Frankfurt.<sup>30</sup> When this attempt failed, he sought longer-term academic employment in the United States. He continued his research as a freelancer on political parties in Germany, anti-democratic thought in Germany and on Soviet ideology for the Library of Congress, the Harvard Russian Research Center and the Rand Corporation.<sup>31</sup> At one point, when he felt desperate because he was unable to find appropriate employment in the United States, he saw, as he put it in a letter to Max Horkheimer, 'really no other alternative to becoming an academic civil servant in Germany'.<sup>32</sup> After he took up a professorship at Darmstadt University in 1962, he attracted significant attention one more time, at the 16th Congress of the German Sociological Association in Frankfurt in April 1968. Confronting Adorno, who painted a picture of an integrating cultural system in late capitalist societies (Adorno, 1969), Gurland held fast to the use of Marxist economic categories and the critique of capitalism. In contrast to Adorno, Gurland was optimistic about possible changes in the direction of a democratic and socialist society (Gurland, 1969). His arguments and political ambitions found positive resonance among the younger

generation of critical theory such as Claus Offe. Gurland invested most of his time in Darmstadt in teaching and on translations of academic books into German. He spoke and wrote fluently in seven languages. Thanks to him, Otto Kirchheimer's *Political Justice* got a superb German translation (which is still in print to this day); the same holds for *Revolution and the Civil War in Spain* by Pierre Broué and Émile Témime.

### GURLAND'S LEGACY

From the perspective of today's historiographies, it may appear as if Gurland placed himself between two distinct scientific fields in the 1950s – the returning Frankfurt School and the emerging discipline of political science in Germany – and that he nearly got lost in this position. This may be the reason why historians both of the Frankfurt School and of political science have often portrayed Gurland as a marginal figure. It was only very recently that he was rediscovered as an important author within the tradition of critical theory, aptly called a representative of 'the other Frankfurt School' (Worrell, 2006, 2008; Amidon and Worrell, 2008), and championed as an original figure among the founding fathers of German political science (Buchstein, 2010; Keßler, 2010; Detjen, 2016: 315–25). His work at this crucial time is worth a second look because it hints at the loss of an important alternative critical-theory approach within the newly founded discipline.

A closer look at Gurland's life, his intellectual development and his academic projects in the early 1950s indicates that he did indeed work at a particular crossroads between critical theory and political science which has been overlooked until today. Retrospectively, the historical significance of his work can be found in the fact that he championed an academic project which broke with the philosophical positions held by members of

the returning Frankfurt School on the one hand and by the new professors of political science in Germany on the other, both on political and methodological levels. The legacy of Gurland's work in the 1950s could be understood as an early contribution to a critical theory as a critique of political power structures in modern democracies. In order to fulfill this goal, Gurland argued for a political science based on empirical findings on the distribution of political power in modern societies that does not shy away from outspoken critique.

The three former political scientists at the ISR followed different intellectual paths after 1950. Whereas Neumann and Kirchheimer integrated the critique of reification and consumer society by the core group of the ISR into their political thought, Gurland insisted on a Marxist analysis of society which was primarily based on empirical analysis. Gurland's significance in terms of the history of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School can be found on substantial and on methodological levels. On the methodological level, Gurland integrated positivist empirical research into his approach and broke with his own and the Frankfurt School's Hegel-Marxist tradition. In addition, he presented a rigorous critique of the *geisteswissenschaftliche* and primarily normative orientations of most of his colleagues in early German political science.<sup>33</sup> On the substantial level, during the disputes at the ISR in the early 1940s with Pollock and Horkheimer, he insisted on the monopoly-capitalist character of German Nazism based on his empirical economic analysis. Gurland did not change his position on this controversy at all. Following his old line of argument after the war, he championed positions that were uncompromisingly outspoken in their critique of economic and political restoration in West Germany. Neither the members of the Frankfurt School in West Germany – at least in their statements to the public – nor his colleagues within the newly founded community of political scientists found sharper words against 'renazification'

in postwar West Germany than Gurland. Within the field of the next generation of critical theorists, the empirical research by Claus Offe in the 1980s and 1990s probably comes closest to Gurland's ambitions.

Today, after the empirical turn in mainstream political science, Gurland's criticism of the speculative and normative biases in social research has lost its sting. More interesting are his considerations of different stages of capitalist development. In his article 'Technological Trends and Economic Structure under National Socialism' (Gurland, 1941), he argued that the correlation of technology policy and political systems can be observed at three levels: liberal capitalism corresponded to the steam engine, bourgeois mass democracy to electricity, and the new chemical industry required a fascist state to develop under capitalist conditions. It might be worthwhile to consider the contemporary meaning of Gurland's idea. What would the thesis of the correlation of technology policy and political systems hold in the light of nuclear technology, alternative energies or the information technology of today?

## Notes

- 1 This article is based in parts on Buchstein, 2010. I would like to thank Eno Trimcev and Kerstin Pohl for critical comments. Gurland's papers are available at Goethe Universität Frankfurt (Universitätsarchiv, Na5, Nachlass A.R.L. Gurland). Additional biographical information can be found in 'Promotionsakte A. Gurland' in Universität Leipzig, Universitätsarchiv, Philosophische Fakultät, Promotionsakte 1701. For a bibliography of his publications see Gurland, 1991: 419–36.
- 2 See the references to Gurland in Jay, 1973; Wiggershaus, 1994; Demirovic, 1999; and Wheatland, 2014.
- 3 On Gurland's Weimar years see Emig and Zimmermann, 1988. Unless otherwise indicated, additional biographical information in this essay is based on conversations with Leo Löwenthal, Ossip K. Flechtheim, Hertha Zerna, Karl-Dietrich Bracher and in particular with Dieter Emig.
- 4 Information from Leo Löwenthal in a conversation with the author on October 5, 1988.
- 5 For the support of Adorno, see Demirovic, 1999: 238.
- 6 All German quotations have been translated by the author.
- 7 Information from Leo Löwenthal in a conversation with the author on October 5, 1988.
- 8 See Emig, 2013. Not all of his pseudonyms have been figured out. Under the name W. Grundal he reviewed books on French sociology, English socialist thought and American criminology (Gurland, 1934a, 1934b, 1934c).
- 9 Application by A.R.L. Gurland to the American Guild for German Cultural Freedom as of May 5, 1938, in Deutsche Bibliothek at Frankfurt am Main. Collection Deutsches Exilarchiv, 1033–45, EB 10/117.
- 10 For detailed studies on this controversy, see Wilson, 1982 and Dubiel and Söllner, 1984.
- 11 See Dubiel and Söllner, 1984: 18–20.
- 12 Information from Leo Löwenthal, the main editor of the journal, in a conversation with the author on October 5, 1988.
- 13 See the drafts on *The Fate of Small Business in Nazi Germany* in Goethe Universität Frankfurt, Universitätsarchiv, Nachlass Gurland.
- 14 Information from Ossip K. Flechtheim – Neumann's former research assistant – in a conversation (February 13, 1988). See also the acknowledgments of Gurland's extensive contributions to the economic sections of the book, Neumann, 1942 and Erd, 1985: 113 about Neumann's enthusiasm for Gurland's work.
- 15 About the frictions among the members of the ISR see Schmidt, 2007.
- 16 See Wiggershaus, 1994: 367. Gurland's research on antisemitism has only recently been more carefully discussed. See Worrell, 2008 and Amidon and Worrell, 2008.
- 17 More details about the methodology can be found in Worrell, 2008.
- 18 For a closer analysis of Gurland's findings on this point see Worrell, 2008: 286–8.
- 19 See Wiggershaus, 1994: 369.
- 20 See the reports by him: Gurland, 1947a, 1947b, 1948a, 1948b.
- 21 The founding of the IfpW in Berlin was orchestrated by Franz L. Neumann. On the early history of the IfpW in the context of the founding era of German political science, see Buchstein, 2011: 35–62.
- 22 On Gurland's approach within the context of postwar German political science, see Buchstein, 1992: 282–96.
- 23 A.R.L. Gurland, *Empirische Wissenschaft von der Politik: Forschung und Lehre* (1950) in Goethe Universität Frankfurt, Universitätsarchiv, Nachlass Gurland.



- 24 A.R.L. Gurland, IfpW – Organization and Research Program (1951) in Freie Universität Berlin, Universitätsarchiv, Collection Otto-Suhr-Institut, Archiv und Dokumentation, Sigel ID 1.6. (12).
  - 25 A.R.L. Gurland, Die Parteien als Forschungsobjekt (1953) in Interner Rundbrief Nr. 2 der Deutschen Vereinigung für die Wissenschaft von der Politik (DVPW). Freie Universität Berlin, Universitätsarchiv der FU Berlin, Collection DVPW-Archiv, Rundbriefe.
  - 26 A.R.L. Gurland: Between Reaction and Democracy – Western Germany after Five Years under Occupation Rule in Goethe Universität Frankfurt, Universitätsarchiv, Nachlass Gurland.
  - 27 Vorstandsprotokoll IfpW vom 20 Januar 1955 in Universitätsarchiv der FU Berlin, Sammlung ZI 6, Institutsarchiv, Akte Vorstandsprotokolle.
  - 28 'It [the SPD] did not succeed in constructing a concrete image of the socialist reestablishment of society and a clear picture of the opportunities of a mass party to effect change in a democratic order. Liberal ideas in the tradition of 1848 were cobbled together with unclear ideas of a planned economy in which the practice of the totalitarian regimes with controlled economies and war economies, which had not yet been dealt with intellectually, had left its mark' (Münke and Gurland, 1952: 23).
  - 29 For the details of these personal as well as political conflicts, see Buchstein, 2011.
  - 30 Letter by Gurland to Max Horkheimer of December 1, 1954, in Frankfurter Stadt- und Universitätsbibliothek. Nachlaß Max Horkheimer, V 92/4–5.
  - 31 See the mimeographic reports: Gurland, 1955, 1956, 1957.
  - 32 Letter from Gurland to Max Horkheimer of November 12, 1957, in Frankfurter Stadt- und Universitätsbibliothek. Nachlaß Max Horkheimer, V 92/1d–i.
  - 33 For an overview of the methodological orientations in early German political science, see Mohr, 1988: 285–8 and Bleek, 2001: 289–99.
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# Alfred Sohn-Rethel: Real Abstraction and the Unity of Commodity-Form and Thought Form

Frank Engster and Oliver Schlaudt  
Translated by Jacob Blumenfeld

'In exchange the action is social, the mind is private'.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Alfred Sohn-Rethel (January 4 1899, Neuilly sur Seine, France – April 6 1990, Bremen, Germany) was a trained economist, but he is known first and foremost as a Marxist philosopher. He lived in the UK for more than three decades and published in both English and German. He earned his PhD under the supervision of the Austromarxist economist Emil Lederer in 1928 at Heidelberg. During this time, he was also introduced to the early sociology of knowledge by Karl Mannheim. After his doctorate, he worked as a writer for a lobby group of Rhenish heavy industry in Berlin. In 1936, he emigrated via Lucerne and Paris to the UK, where he earned his living as a teacher in Birmingham. Only in 1972 did he finally get a position at the newly

founded university of Bremen (Germany), where he spent most of his time during the last 20 years of his life. During this period, he published most of his writings (written much earlier), among them his best-known book, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*. Sohn-Rethel is often regarded as close to the Frankfurt School. He was indeed friends with Adorno before World War II and exerted a certain influence on him; he also had contact with Bloch, Kracauer, Horkheimer and Benjamin. Reichelt (2002) and Bonefeld (2016) suggest that Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* in particular is indebted to Sohn-Rethel's concept of 'real abstraction'. Horkheimer, on the contrary, was hostile to him and his work, ultimately preventing him from receiving financial support from the Institut für Sozialforschung.<sup>2</sup>

Sohn-Rethel has the peculiarity of being the only philosopher close to the Frankfurt School who systematically attempted a Marxist philosophy of science. Similar to Lukács and others in the strand of Hegelian

Marxism, he understood science as a mode of bourgeois thinking, i.e., as a non-transparent, deficient mode of thought tied to bourgeois society. But contrary to Lukács and similar thinkers, he also wanted to understand the *validity* of scientific knowledge and how it derives its origins in capitalist society. He tried to do so by synthesising Kantian epistemology with Marx's critique of political economy, in particular Marx's analysis of the value-form. Sohn-Rethel's approach owes much to the influential tendency around 1900 (say, from the 1870s to the 1930s) to 'naturalise' or 'de-transcendentalise' Kantian epistemology by naturalistically reinterpreting the categories which, according to Kant, shape the way the world and empirical objects appear to the epistemic subject. Sohn-Rethel's idea was to 'derive' the categories of scientific thinking from the exchange of commodities. In a nutshell, Sohn-Rethel thought that an unconscious and unintended 'real abstraction' takes place through the exchange of commodities, reducing them to pure physicality and quantity. This abstraction takes place *in* the action, not in thought (hence 'real' abstraction as opposed to 'ideal' or purely mental). The abstraction crystallises in money and is eventually translated into definite forms of thought. Thus money in the literal sense 'coins' our thinking about nature. The deficiency of this kind of thinking resides, according to Sohn-Rethel, in its being unaware of its social origins and hence of its social boundedness.

Sohn-Rethel's approach to the philosophy of science can best be located at the intersection of three currents. (1) Neo-Kantian epistemology, i.e., a Kantian-style constructivist epistemology combined with a historical reading of Kant's categories. Cassirer, for example, with whom Sohn-Rethel occasionally studied at Berlin between 1919 and 1922, identified the categories with some basic concepts of science (like causality, energy, inertia). These basic concepts of physics act like Kantian categories because, according to Cassirer, they do not simply

serve to picture the objects of experience but rather have the function of organising our experience.<sup>3</sup> Sohn-Rethel retained this notion of scientific concepts from Cassirer and also inherited his rationalist notion of science. (2) Early sociology of knowledge, which was largely neo-Kantian and shared the historical interpretation of the categories but tried to overcome the latter's internalism by offering an external, sociological explanation of the historical development of the categories. This is true not only for the seminal contribution by Durkheim and Mauss on 'primitive classifications'<sup>4</sup> but also for Karl Mannheim, with whom Sohn-Rethel studied at Heidelberg. Sohn-Rethel retained from Mannheim in particular the idea that sociological explanations do not apply only to 'false consciousness', as it was understood in a more traditional reading of the critique of ideology, but also to valid insight.<sup>5</sup> Unsatisfied, however, by Mannheim's hesitations vis-à-vis the mathematical sciences, Sohn-Rethel explicitly aimed at pushing the sociological approach to these realms of knowledge. (3) Marx's critique of political economy, from which Sohn-Rethel adopted two basic elements. First, unlike in the positivist sociology of knowledge, the sociological approach should not only apply to valid knowledge but also explain in which sense and to what extent it is valid. Second, he adopted Marx's analysis of the value-form, which provided the basis for his 'derivation' of the categories of scientific thinking.

Sohn-Rethel emphasised that his approach cuts Marx's theory in two, retaining his analysis of the value-form but suspending his labour theory of value. It is true that Sohn-Rethel's approach presupposes that the value-form is completely determined by exchange and that labour (and capitalist production) only accounts for the *substance* of value, i.e., its nature in general and its amount in each specific commodity. Under this presupposition, the value-form (and its consequences) can be studied without taking into consideration capitalist production.

Moreover, identifying the substance of value with abstract labour runs the risk of establishing a new fetishism insofar as it does not acknowledge that there is no 'pure' substance of value outside or above the substance in its historically determined form. According to Sohn-Rethel, there is no substance of value without a particular value-form and no abstract labour without exchange. Labour transforms into abstract labour and determines value only if the labour products are to be sold on a market, i.e., only if the labour produces commodities. Hence the primacy of exchange in Sohn-Rethel.

This peculiar reading of Marx also determines Sohn-Rethel's particular position *within* Marxist philosophy of science. Albeit a minority, there were nevertheless a number of scholars who tried to understand the link between the rise of modern science and the rise of capitalism, in particular the industrial revolution. Before explaining Sohn-Rethel's approach in more detail, it might be useful to locate him not only on the general plane of intellectual history, as we just did, but also to sketch his positioning vis-à-vis other Marxists' approaches.

Marxist philosophers of science in the 1920s and 30s shared the idea that modern science was a result of the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism. There was, however, no consensus on which characteristics of capitalism were decisive for the emergence of modern science.<sup>6</sup> A dividing line may be drawn *grosso modo* between two camps. On the one side are those who refer to factors stemming from the sphere of production (i.e., manual labour, division of labour, manufacture, and technology), and on the other are those of a more Lukácsian bent, including Sohn-Rethel, who seek the origins of science exclusively in the sphere of circulation and the form of social mediation (i.e., exchange, money and the commodity-form). As a consequence, Sohn-Rethel rejected some insights of the 'production camp' which had made their way into contemporary sociology of science, in particular

the Zilsel thesis and the Hessen–Grossmann thesis. Edgar Zilsel argued that the rise of capitalism allowed the social barrier between rational, mathematical skills and more experimental skills to break down. Previously, both types of skill were strictly associated with two socially separated groups, academics and craftsmen, and thus could not combine in one individual as would be necessary for modern science. Accordingly, the emergence of science would be due to a synthesis or merging of manual and intellectual labour in the renaissance figure of the artist–engineer.<sup>7</sup> Sohn-Rethel, however, understood science as essentially a mode of 'pure theory' and thus as a product of the complete separation of 'head and hands' in capitalist production. Boris Hessen and Henryk Grossmann, as well as Robert K. Merton, for their part argued that the focus of science was determined by contemporary technology and its urgent problems.<sup>8</sup> The Hessen–Grossmann thesis stipulates that, at least in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, science was the outcome of technology and not the other way around. Sohn-Rethel explicitly contested the Hessen–Grossmann thesis. To do so he draws upon the distinction between the form and content of scientific knowledge.<sup>9</sup> In a first step he insists that the sphere of production may at best affect the *contents* of science, but that its characteristic *form*, i.e., mathematisation, can only be derived from the exchange of commodities. (The distinction between form and content of scientific knowledge thus parallels that between value-form and value-substance.) At this level Sohn-Rethel could still have accepted the Hessen–Grossmann thesis at least as an approach complementary to his own. But in a second step he rejects their thesis entirely, calling the claim that science resulted from technological problems in early capitalism simply an 'absurdity'.<sup>10</sup> Sohn-Rethel thus can be seen as an adversary of any historical materialism that sees progress in science and knowledge as determined by resolving technological problems.

In the following, we will (1) develop the two 'great ideas' Sohn-Rethel claimed for himself, then (2) present the critique they provoked, before we (3) finally show how Sohn-Rethel's ideas could be further developed with help of the recent Marxist discussion around the value-form and money.

## THE VALUE-FORM AS TRANSCENDENTAL SUBJECT

Long before the reappropriation of Marxism that began in the 1960s, the analysis of the commodity-form had already undergone a significant reinterpretation in the 1920s and 30s by Sohn-Rethel. This reinterpretation contains, on the one hand, the critical-epistemological implications of commodity-exchange in the subject of exchange, and, on the other hand, it leads to a theory of 'synthetic' and 'functional socialisation' (Sohn-Rethel).<sup>11</sup> The major claim is no less than to establish the commodity-form as the constitutive social condition of pure reason and natural science.

For the reconstruction of the genesis of pure forms of validity, Sohn-Rethel relates Kant's questions about the conditions of possibility of pure knowledge, pure natural science and *a priori* synthetic judgments directly to Marx's analysis of value. As part of a materialist critique of the forms of pure knowledge, he attempts to develop the unity of commodity-form and thought form within a single context of explanation.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, the Kantian *apriorism* of subjectivity and the purity of reason's validity are to be 'critically liquidated'. On the other hand, however, it is necessary to establish *with* Kant the determinate forms of intuition and categories of thought, together with their pure validity, from sources other than empirical experience and sensory-objective practice.<sup>13</sup>

For both Sohn-Rethel and Kant, a form of knowledge characterised precisely by the empirical purity of its objective and timeless

validity cannot be founded on sensory-empirical experience. Rather, it is always based on the *a priori* and transcendental. Nevertheless, unlike Kant, Sohn-Rethel wants to uncover the *social* and *historical* origin for this form of knowledge. Taken together, the task is to show how a form of knowledge arises from a specific socio-historical foundation, a knowledge characterised by the ahistorical and unsocial status of its universal validity; it claims truth precisely through the implicit denial of its social origin.

Sohn-Rethel believed that the solution to this paradoxical problem is to be found in 'real abstraction', the pivotal point of his entire critique of epistemology.<sup>14</sup> Real abstraction takes place *practically* in commodity exchange and at the same time realises a purely social synthesis; it is this synthesis that underlies cognition of scientific knowledge of nature. Sohn-Rethel traces the form of objective scientific knowledge back to the synthesis consummated in the exchange of commodities which underlies the socialisation of Kant's '*a priori* synthesis'.

Even though Sohn-Rethel, following the Marxist tradition, does not deny the dependencies that result from the metabolism with nature, production and the division of labour, commodity owners still only realise their sociality as 'practical solipsists' synthetically through exchange. Indeed, the abstraction that constitutes social as well as empirical purity is precisely the real abstraction *from* material nature, *from* work and production, *from* the use and utility of things; this abstraction gives rise to the abstraction of thought.<sup>15</sup>

According to Sohn-Rethel, the logic of appropriation and the form of exchange alone establish the unity of commodity-form and thought form and consequently the connection between the sociality of being on the one hand and the sociality of consciousness on the other. With this argument, he decisively breaks from almost the entire Marxist tradition and, with restrictions, even from early critical theory. The universality and necessity of the determinations of thought should not

be based explicitly on the natural determinacy of matter and its appropriation and mediation through labour; they should also not be based on successful, productive practice. With 'real abstraction', a concept not explicitly present in Marx's work but always there in substance, according to Sohn-Rethel,<sup>16</sup> the mind's capacity for abstraction can be explained by social practice, as required by any materialist critique. For social practice is the practice of *abstracting* from practice.

This real abstraction is intended to ground both conditions of Kantian transcendental subjectivity: first, its empirical purity,<sup>17</sup> and second, its status as an *a priori* condition of all empirical experience. According to Sohn-Rethel, the purity of forms of knowledge is based on the social practice of a real abstraction that unconsciously renders things identical through exchange. On the one hand, this occurs in the absence of all qualitative properties and in the quantitative equalisation as pure values,<sup>18</sup> and, on the other hand – which is often overlooked in the interpretation – in the absence of all *acts of use*, so that things are also qualitatively treated as objects identical in time and space. Thus the purity produced qua abstraction from everything empirical brings forth a corresponding pure mode of knowledge on the part of the exchangers but without immediate recognition of the social and historical origin of its own validity. The real abstraction of *activity* immediately assumes the *form* of thought,<sup>19</sup> taking effect with validity as it vanishes in abstract thought forms.<sup>20</sup> One must pay close attention here to the status of genesis and validity. For Sohn-Rethel, it is *not* that the forms of cognition negate and forget their genesis from material conditions and social practice, as Adorno suggests. Rather, such validity takes effect precisely *with* the negation of its social conditions and *in* the negation of its genesis.<sup>21</sup> As much as both Adorno and Sohn-Rethel take their point of departure for epistemological critique from the logic of exchange and abstraction, they go in almost opposite directions.<sup>22</sup> Both of them base the unity of social critique and

critique of epistemology on the mediation of the commodity-form, and thus both pursue a kind of socialisation of German Idealism and an enlightenment of Enlightenment. But while Sohn-Rethel stresses the objective, scientific validity of forms of thought, and explicitly attributes them to the abstraction *from* labour, *from* production and even from sociality, Adorno emphasises the reduction and harm that this abstraction *from* sociality causes *in* society. Sohn-Rethel's critique of the commodity-form seeks to elucidate the constitutive conditions of natural as well as purely social objectivity and believes that socialist society should develop this rationality in an affirmative manner; for Adorno, the objectification of society (de)generates into the domination of a second nature, directed against society itself, with enlightenment and rationality fatally turning into their immediate opposites, irrationality and delusion.<sup>23</sup> The socially accomplished real abstraction does not return in a cognitive synthesis or in an empirically pure form of scientific rationality, as in the case of Sohn-Rethel; rather, it turns into coercion of a second nature which asserts itself against the individual as objective coercion and higher necessity.

For Sohn-Rethel, contrary to Adorno's critical theory, society does not undergo a violent adjustment and hermetic closure in a false immanence through its commodity-form mediation. Rather, society experiences its own mediation through a form that produces an objective experience of nature with the practical mediation of things. Thus Sohn-Rethel's historical-materialist reconstruction is 'only' supposed to explain why the forms of validity, which have disappeared without a trace in the social synthesis as well as in the individual mind and in its effects, truncate their own genesis as much as enforce their validity.

Through this disappearance of genesis in validity, according to Sohn-Rethel, the second characteristic of Kant's transcendental subject, after its empirical purity, can be socialised: *apriorism*. Kant not only interpreted



the purity of forms of knowledge in a one-sided subjective sense; he also posited them as 'originally acquired' *already* in this subjectivity and imputed them to the mind as a spontaneous achievement. This semblance of an *a priori* capacity for reason results from the fact that blindness to its social origin is inscribed in the developmental process of thought forms from real abstraction; the origin of thought is a blind spot for it.<sup>24</sup> While the real abstraction of the act of exchange provides a *practical* synthesis of society, the mind carries out a *theoretical*, purely mental, intellectual synthesis which functions like Kant's transcendental subject.<sup>25</sup> The real abstraction of the act of exchange is the condition of possibility for *subjective* knowledge yet with *objective* validity; the abstraction, however, has disappeared into a separate mind, reflected in itself, just as it reappears in a seemingly given, *a priori* faculty, attaining validity as the individual mind literally thinks *for* society: 'For this mind acts intellectually for society'.<sup>26</sup>

Yet this 'translation' of the real abstraction of activity into thought remains unclear. Sohn-Rethel sometimes implies that practical activity 'imposes' itself on consciousness and translates into a thought form in an immediately spontaneous yet causal manner. He does not unambiguously clarify whether the mind reflects the unconscious yet real abstraction, and consciously adopts this abstraction, or whether this adoption is not conscious but immediately shapes the form of consciousness itself.<sup>27</sup> Whatever the case may be, what needs to be grasped is a causal yet spontaneous-immediate translation, sustained in the thought form by the generalisation of commodity exchange and the practical 'solipsism'<sup>28</sup> of the commodity owner. The 'usual flow of commodities' is 'thus very much entrenched in the routine of its institutional tracks', and it is 'so little the place for philosophising, that on the spot consciousness of the underlying structures remains impossible'.<sup>29</sup>

Real abstraction for Sohn-Rethel is individually, subjectively put into effect in a way

that is functional not only for the practical synthesis of society and the intellectual-theoretical synthesis of the mind but also for the scientific knowledge of *nature*. The real abstraction of social acts of exchange treats things like the exact natural sciences do, namely as objects identical in space and time; the determination of things through their relations as mere magnitudes of value corresponds to how objects are treated in natural science, which also quantifies qualities and determines natural properties through value relations. Thus, by ignoring all subjectivity and sensuality, and as much through social practice as in the translation to thought forms, the exchange abstraction constitutes an identical space of validity, in which objects, according to the scientific view, must appear desubjectivised and de-sensualised with the strict necessity and universality of *a priori* forms. The empirical purity of natural science is thus possible, according to Sohn-Rethel, for one and the same reason that the purely functional and synthetic socialisation is possible; or, rather, the mode of exchange and logic of appropriation in acts of exchange accomplishes the same pure 'physicality' (Sohn-Rethel) in which objects stand in compliance with the scientific view.<sup>30</sup>

This social mode of knowledge, broken by its form, makes nature appear as the other of society and turns it into an object. Sohn-Rethel develops this into its own independent thought: the domination of the logic of appropriation over the logic of production.

### **DOMINATION OF THE LOGIC OF APPROPRIATION OVER THE LOGIC OF PRODUCTION: THE ORIGIN, CRISIS AND OVERCOMING OF 'FUNCTIONAL SOCIALISATION'**

By his own estimate, Sohn-Rethel had a 'second great idea' alongside his 'semi-intuitive insight' to identify Kant's transcendental subject with the value-form: the

domination that the logic of appropriation exerts over the logic of production. He explicitly examines this idea in his first major exposé, written in Lucerne in 1936, published only in 1985 under the title *Sociological Theory of Knowledge*,<sup>31</sup> although it runs throughout his other writings, too. The 'logic of appropriation' refers to the whole of social relations of exchange and its laws, while the 'logic of production' corresponds to the whole of production. According to his 'second idea', even the historically earlier class divisions within communities occurred together with those forms that, in turn, functionally mediate these divisions for the sake of domination. The fundamental division of society running throughout history is the separation into producers and appropriators, with the domination of the form of appropriation over production and consequently the appropriators over the producers.

If, however, socialisation follows a definite logic of appropriation and takes place according to its laws, then this logic must be decisive for the *historical* development of society. In his writings on the relation between the logic of appropriation and the logic of production, Sohn-Rethel has in fact developed a philosophy of history that operates teleologically with a beginning, a contradiction throughout and an end. This philosophy begins (1) with the division of primitive communities as the origin of a functional socialisation in the service of economic exploitation and political domination, which, however, (2) ultimately produces and develops the possibility and even necessity of another socialist socialisation, yet remains (3) contradictory and crisis-ridden, as Sohn-Rethel shows in his writings on National Socialism.

### THE HISTORICAL ORIGIN OF THE COMMODITY-FORM AND LOGIC OF APPROPRIATION

With regard to the determination of the historical origin of the value-form, Sohn-Rethel's

fixation on the exchange process and the primacy of the logic of appropriation over the logic of production breaks not only with the Marxist tradition but with Marx himself. Marx traced his critique of the commodity-form to the form of capitalist commodity production and began it both historically and logically with 'primitive accumulation' – that is, with the liberation of the two components of valorisation and its commodification: on the one hand, labour time and labour-power itself, and, on the other hand, the means of production and the conditions of production (land, tools and machinery, work materials). Sohn-Rethel traces it historically further back, to the 'original sin'<sup>32</sup> of the first relation of exploitation, simple commodity-exchange.<sup>33</sup> He assumes that the transformation into a 'functional socialisation' begins with the first forms of commodity exchange and that this emerged with the 'original division of primitive communities' through the 'relation of exploitation'.<sup>34</sup> The appropriation of products of labour as commodities by means of money is a social form of the division of society into classes, of domination and exploitation through appropriation.

For Marx, unlike Sohn-Rethel, commodities and their values are not the result of an exchange. Rather, this is a semblance on the surface of society, which Marx makes transparent through the development of the capital-form of money on the one side and the valorisation of labour and capital on the other. Through this development, commodities and their exchange-values are posited as products of the valorisation of labour and capital, purely logically; conversely, Sohn-Rethel derives the capitalist determination of labour and production from the logic of the commodity-form, both logically and historically. The logic of exchange and appropriation is the timelessly valid *a priori* of the socialisation of labour and production; both take place under this form and thereby obtain their determinacy, entirely in line with Sohn-Rethel's idea of socialising Kant's transcendental subject.<sup>35</sup>

## **CAPITALIST COMMODITY PRODUCTION AND THE TRANSITION TO SOCIALISM**

The historical implementation and social generalisation of the functional mediation of this logic of exchange and appropriation ultimately leads to the specifically capitalist production of commodities. However, only in the capitalist phase of commodity production does the logic of appropriation begin to take effect in the modern sciences. From there, it in turn dominates labour and production, bringing a productive application of science to commodity production, especially through the Taylorist and Fordist disassembly of production and the composition of its elements according to abstract, quantifiable time.<sup>36</sup> This scientification of labour and production should ultimately overcome the commodity-based mode of appropriation and sphere of circulation through a 'full socialisation of labour',<sup>37</sup> leading to a totally social, socialist synthesis. In the course of the scientification of production according to real abstraction, an equality of the scientific form of thought and the process of labour should be advanced, culminating in this 'full socialisation of labour'. The social synthesis could thereby become the formal law of the entire society as well as of classless production; in fact it *must* become it, but without the detour through an appropriating logic, which is neither necessary nor capable of reproducing the society anyway.<sup>38</sup> It is the final consequence of Sohn-Rethel's idea that the purely social forms of validity in the natural sciences, despite and yet due to the mistaking of their socially constitutive conditions, provide for a kind of self-reflection of nature. The 'main achievement of intellectual labour in bourgeois society' is the 'encounter of nature with itself'.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the scientification of labour and production ensures that the separation of the socialisation and science of nature ceases to be necessary; the social process of reproduction can be organised as a natural process. Since the labour and

production processes are organised as natural processes, the individual producer can activate the synthetic unity of society, accomplishing it naturally *a priori*, so to speak, always with the consciousness of the social totality of labour.<sup>40</sup>

## **CRISIS OF THE LOGIC OF APPROPRIATION AND THE RISE OF NATIONAL SOCIALISM**

Sohn-Rethel ties the great economic crisis at the end of the 1920s and the rise of National Socialism to the contradiction between the logic of appropriation and the logic of production. His critique of the economics of National Socialism is the third strand of his theory, although he only worked on it intermittently; he wrote it between 1932 and 1948.<sup>41</sup> Here again, the separation of the logic of production and the logic of appropriation is central. On the eve of fascism, the capitalist mode of production was ripe for a socialist takeover due to its Taylorist labour organisation and Fordist assembly-line production. Fascism was a reaction to the already quasi-socialist flow of socialised production, pushing the bourgeois logic of appropriation into a crisis without any corresponding socialist planning. If the capitalist logic of appropriation was to remain the basis of production, then it could only be maintained by the concerted centralised power of a state-corporatist mode of exploitation and appropriation. According to Sohn-Rethel, in this hopeless situation National Socialism implemented a state-corporatist military Keynesianism to replace the failing market and the lack of purchasing and consumption power (especially on the part of the workforce and the population) that accompanied the vastly increased productive capacity (especially on the part of the rationalised heavy industry). Disastrously, and not just because of its use-value, defence production, with its non-reproductive war goods, was directed to destruction and war instead

of productive consumption. The actual exchange-value was also oriented towards war, because the goods were not produced for the market and the (expanded) reproduction of capital, but were first of all valued by the state, ultimately through war – and that meant direct predatory appropriation. The deficient circulation between the armaments industry and the state could either implode or turn its inner-crisis dynamics outwards imperialistically into direct appropriation through plunder.

In National Socialism, Sohn-Rethel saw a ‘twofold social syntheses’ break down, no longer converging in the direction of socialism, as is the case with the reproductive capacity of capitalism. The military Keynesianism of National Socialism was a reaction to the crisis and breakdown of business and production economics as well as to the crisis and breakdown of appropriation and market logics; to Sohn-Rethel, it was also closely tied to the development of monopoly capitalism and imperialism in general.

## CRITIQUE AND ASSESSMENT

To critique Sohn-Rethel it makes sense to begin with his deliberate deviations from Marx. Following this critique, and in conjunction with the insights of the Marx discussion since the 1960s, it will be shown how the idea of a unity of social critique and epistemological critique, which Sohn-Rethel links to the relation between the commodity-form and thought form, can be developed further.

## SOHN-RETHEL’S HISTORICAL-MATERIALIST ‘GROUNDING’ OF VALUE-FORM ANALYSIS

Sohn-Rethel’s grounding of the social constitution of pure knowledge and modern natural

science in the logic of appropriation and exchange goes together with some crucial departures from traditional Marxism and from Marx himself.

As far as traditional Marxism is concerned, Sohn-Rethel explicitly breaks with the substantialism and essentialism of the concept of labour that appeared in the form of a left-Ricardian, objective labour theory of value and was also essential to politics ‘in the name of labour’. This departure was crucial for critical theory as well as the various new readings of Marx and need not be considered in greater detail here.<sup>42</sup> It is important, however, that Sohn-Rethel also makes a conscious departure from Marx himself, particularly in regards to his concept of ‘abstract labour’.<sup>43</sup> Sohn-Rethel not only saw this difference but also proceeded to differentiate himself from Marx in a deliberate, albeit cautious way. He talks of finding ‘certain ambiguities’ in Marx, especially in the ‘relation of the form of value and substance of value’. Marx tried to ‘short-circuit the value-form with abstract labour’, and thus ‘the epistemological implications of abstraction remained closed off’.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the problem of the value of labour in Marx ‘occurs doubly, in the form of an essence logic and in a functional logic’.<sup>45</sup> Sohn-Rethel makes a far-reaching distinction: he separates the substance and magnitude of value from the form of value.<sup>46</sup> He does this for two reasons: first, in order to develop the critical epistemological implications – in the sense of the aforementioned functional logic – from commodity exchange alone, independently of labour, even granting logical priority to exchange; second, he does so in order to maintain labour as *chronologically* first in the sense of a necessary mediation with nature (especially against the subjective theory of value).<sup>47</sup>

Value, the magnitude of value and the value-form stem from different sources. Labour gives them value, but only in consequence of the real abstraction of exchange by taking on, the purely social quality of ‘abstract human labour’ in its value-creating capacity. The value-form is reduced to the

real abstraction of exchange, which alone confers on commodity exchange its social-synthetic efficacy, thus enabling the 'private exchange of individual products of labour' to 'assert the relation of social labour.' The exchange process thus produces the value of the commodity; labour, on the other hand, determines its *magnitude of value* according to the socially necessary average labour time expended on commodities. This separate derivation of the value-form from exchange, or rather, real abstraction is fundamental; it is absolutely necessary to adhere to it.<sup>48</sup>

Sohn-Rethel here acknowledges the existence of the form of value independently of the substance and magnitude of value. According to Sohn-Rethel's separation of substance and form, the substance of value emerges from the practical relation of human beings to nature and things. The exchange abstraction, however, cannot arise from the material nature of commodities, neither from their 'nature as use-values nor their nature as products of labour'.<sup>49</sup> It is a *pure relation* between human beings as well as between things as commodities; thus the *form* of value, in contrast to its *substance*, is the purely social synthesis between human beings and their context of appropriation and exploitation. Since the form results from the equalisation of things qua abstraction, it is purified of all material qualities and use-value determinations, and it puts owners via things into a social relationship that is empirically 'pure' in the Kantian sense.

While Sohn-Rethel admits that Marx orients the nexus of socialisation around labour, he insists that labour does not spontaneously exist in the abstract-general form that underlies the social synthesis. Society is not a relation of labour but of exchange and appropriation.

Here, Sohn-Rethel's interpretation directly reverses the determination, common in traditional Marxism, of the relation between substance and form of value. The value-form imposes its form-determining logic *a priori* on production as well as on its results, and *that is why* labour first of all receives the

character of an abstract-universal substance of value.<sup>50</sup>

Therefore the real abstraction of the exchange act and the appropriation logic of commodity exchange are constitutive only for the *semblance* of abstract labour as the substance of value; against this semblance, processes of exchange and circulation are held up as an autonomous sphere with logical priority and historical force.<sup>51</sup> An 'abstractified' labour and substance of value are thus a kind of misrepresentation, created by the effective equalisation of commodities in exchange, and only have reality in the imagination of the subject.<sup>52</sup> Hence the concept of abstract labour has no further, substantial meaning for Sohn-Rethel. It is consequently dismissed as a 'fetish concept owed to Hegel's legacy'.<sup>53</sup>

However, this status of abstract labour and the coming apart of substance and form of value point to a real problem in Sohn-Rethel: the substance and form of value can only be adequately related and Sohn-Rethel's dualism can only be overcome by an adequate determination of *money*. But, as will be explained in more detail below, money is underdetermined for Sohn-Rethel because it ultimately derives from an immediate exchange of commodities and is nothing more than a mere reification of the commodity-form. The abstract form of exchange can be disclosed not only separately in the mind but also in money. But, like the mind, 'money' for Sohn-Rethel remains 'a diversion, or more precisely, a materialisation of the commodity-form with respect to its intrinsically reciprocal appropriation of exchange'.<sup>54</sup> The mediating function of money is necessary for social synthesis; in money, the commodity-form even becomes 'independent'. But ultimately for Sohn-Rethel money remains external to the actual social mediation, similar to bourgeois economic theory; as he declares in his later writings, money is the 'bare coin of the *a priori*'.<sup>55</sup> Therefore what 'thinks for society' without knowing it – as much unconsciously as functionally, whether understood as an individual form of thought and necessary

concept or as a quasi-independent, supra-individual and blind-automatic subject – is precisely *not* money; rather, it is the synthesis of the individual abstract mind, which originates from real abstraction but remains ‘conceptually independent’.<sup>56</sup>

These so-called divergences from Marx are already the consequence of an even more fundamental break: Sohn-Rethel develops the commodity, value, labour and money through a completely different *method* from Marx. Sohn-Rethel’s divergences follow from the fact that he takes up Marx’s *systematic-categorical* analysis of the value-form of the commodity as an *empirical* process; he wants to *derive* the categories of the economy and the intellect, together with their objective and timeless validity, from this empirically conceived process.<sup>57</sup>

Therefore, the determinations Marx gains in the analysis of the value-form through conceptual-logical *critique* are quickly transformed by Sohn-Rethel into the empirical, action-theoretical groundwork for a materialist *theory* of knowledge. Marx’s analysis of the simple value-form ‘x commodity A = y commodity B’<sup>58</sup> is interpreted as a practical, empirical activity. Sohn-Rethel (mis)interprets the logical equation of Marx’s analysis as exactly that practical act of exchange whose unconscious equalisation of things as values must nevertheless become conscious, namely in a cognitive faculty that cannot recognise its own validity nor its functionality for social synthesis.

### **THE ACTUALITY OF SOHN-RETHEL’S QUESTION CONCERNING THE ORIGIN OF PURE KNOWLEDGE, AND THE LOGICAL-CATEGORICAL INTERPRETATION OF VALUE-FORM ANALYSIS AS A CRITIQUE OF PRE-MONETARY THEORIES OF VALUE**

Sohn-Rethel has been criticised from at least two different sides. Traditional Marxism, as expected, insisted that the identical quality of

commodities is ultimately constituted by labour and its capitalist valorisation, and that Sohn-Rethel could only grasp the substantial essence of labour from the deficient idealist standpoint of exchange and circulation. Knowledge too should have its basis in the material process of labour and production and arise from empirical, practical experience.<sup>59</sup> Sohn-Rethel has also been criticised in the Marx discussion which, like him, departed from a theory of knowledge or reflection based on labour and practice and sought the constitution of determinate forms of consciousness, thought and conceptual necessities in the form of social mediation.<sup>60</sup> This shift in the foundation of a critique of knowledge away from labour and production and towards the social forms of mediation had already taken place in the first generation of critical theory and Western Marxism, albeit mostly in the sense of a critique of consciousness and ideology instead of a materialist theory of epistemology.

But the decisive objection to Sohn-Rethel was first formulated with the help of the key findings of the Marx discussion of the 1960s and 70s. In contrast to Sohn-Rethel’s interpretation – and here Sohn-Rethel stands for a widespread interpretation – Marx’s value-form analysis should not be interpreted as a direct exchange of commodities, neither in a purely systematic-logical sense nor even in a historical-logical sense, but should be read as a critique of all pre-monetary theories of values – as a critique of a pre-monetary and pre-value commodity. Accordingly, value-form analysis obtains the necessity of money in a logical-categorical way. This reading of value-form analysis was first achieved in the course of the new Marx appropriations which began in the mid 1960s almost simultaneously in several industrialised nations of the West and a few of the East, prepared as it was by ‘Western Marxism’ (the young Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, Henry Lefèbvre, Merleau-Ponty, Galvano Della Volpe, Lucio Colletti and others, as well as the authors of critical theory).<sup>61</sup>

From the perspective of this reading, Sohn-Rethel even missed the fact that with Marx such ideas of direct commodity exchange – which are ironically characteristic of bourgeois economic theory – can be criticised in at least two respects.

On the one hand, Marx wants to reveal the exchange of commodities as a necessary semblance: what seems to be a mere money-mediated exchange of commodities is in fact the realisation of their *production*. On the other hand, Marx traces this production of commodities back to the valorisation of labour and capital. Marx thereby wants to show the capitalist determination of both commodity *and* money: ‘The whole difficulty arises from the fact that commodities are not exchanged simply as *commodities*, but as *products of capitals*’.<sup>62</sup> Hence the values of commodities and their magnitudes are due to the capital-determined movement of money on the one hand and the valorisation of labour and capital on the other, rather than any abstraction in exchange.

Money realises on the part of the commodity a relation of valorisation, not exchange, but it creates precisely this *semblance*, as if a direct exchange of commodity for commodity was carried out. Marx wants to critique this semblance, which fools both bourgeois economic theory and Sohn-Rethel. Although in his later writings, Sohn-Rethel opens up his interpretation of the commodity-form more towards money, and even calls money ‘the bare coin of the *a priori*’, his concept of money remains problematic in the same two respects that the concepts of value and the commodity-form are problematic. On the one hand, he logically and historically derives money from a direct exchange of commodities, which in fact should be criticised as the false semblance of money; on the other hand, Sohn-Rethel simply has no capital-determined concept of money and consequently no capital-determined concept of value, abstract labour or the commodity.

If one wishes to develop further Sohn-Rethel’s approach along the lines of the

sketched-out results of the more recent Marx discussions,<sup>63</sup> then, instead of real abstraction, what should determine money is the social relation between labour and commodity, the substance and form of value; money is necessary in order to posit labour and the commodity as the substance and form of a *value*-relation. On the one hand, money would be traced back to its capital form, and, on the other, the values of commodities along with the substance of value and the concept of abstract labour would be attributed to the valorisation of labour and capital. In the course of the development of the capital form of money and the valorisation of labour and capital, Marx recovers the capitalist determination of the categories with which he entered into the development. He thus shows that money, value, commodity and labour receive their determinations through capitalist valorisation. When Marx develops the relations of money and value, commodity and labour towards the capital form on the one hand and valorisation on the other, he is thus attributing them less to a real exchange-abstraction or the *a priori* of a transcendental social synthesis. Rather, he resolves them in a common process in which money realises the results of the capitalist valorisation of labour in commodities and their values – that is, a valorisation in which money itself was advanced and entered anew. Marx understands the ‘automatic subject’<sup>64</sup> developed in this capital-determined movement of money more as an immanent critique of Hegel’s spirit than as the socialisation of Kant’s transcendental subject.

Sohn-Rethel received greater attention only in the 1970s, mostly in West Germany. In the critique of him, the view prevailed that he resolved the relationship of substance and form one-sidedly towards form, and, according to his own claim to have socialised Kant’s transcendental subject, that he ends up in nominalism with a circulationist theory of value. According to this critique, Sohn-Rethel is characterised by a dualism as thorough as it is consistent. In Kant, the

dualism was the result of critical distinctions. In Sohn-Rethel's attempt to socialise the Kantian critique of reason, the dualism reappears in the separation of the value-substance from the value-form; it continues in the relation between the logic of production and the logic of appropriation as well as in the unresolved transition from the real abstraction of activity to the purity of thought form; and, finally, it can be found in a philosophy of history and critique of economics in which the political and ideological-critical implications remain almost entirely external.

But even if Sohn-Rethel could not fulfil his powerful claim to have grounded the forms of scientific knowledge through the form of social mediation in a historical-materialist manner, the task remains open. Social critique has not only disregarded a materialist theory of knowledge and a critique of (natural) science; it does not even realise that this is its task.<sup>65</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 43.
- 2 Hörisch, 1996: 241; Sohn-Rethel, 1990: 9 ff.; for Sohn-Rethel's relation to critical theory in general, see Breuer, 1992.
- 3 Cassirer, 1923.
- 4 Durkheim and Mauss, 2009; cf. Bloor 1982.
- 5 Cf. Bailey, 1994, chapter 4.
- 6 Cf. Freudenthal and Schlaudt, 2012.
- 7 On the Zilsel thesis, cf. Zilsel, 2003.
- 8 On the Hessen-Grossmann-thesis, cf. Merton, 1939, and for Hessen and Grossmann, Freudenthal and McLaughlin, 2009.
- 9 Sohn-Rethel, 1976: 45.
- 10 Sohn-Rethel, 1972: 85, fn. 20 (not in the English version).
- 11 Sohn-Rethel makes a distinction between 'social synthesis' [*gesellschaftliche Synthesis*] that concerns socialisation in general, and 'socially synthetic' [*synthetische Gesellschaft*], which specifically applies only to commodity societies. See Sohn-Rethel, 1972: 61; Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 37; on social synthesis in general, cf. Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 4–8. In the early writings, the term 'functional socialization' was still central; cf. Sohn-Rethel, 1985: 39–44.
- 12 Sohn-Rethel, 1989b: 158–63.
- 13 Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 7, 33–9.
- 14 The terms 'value abstraction', 'commodity abstraction' and 'exchange abstraction' are occasionally used synonymously with 'real abstraction'. The term 'real abstraction' [*Realabstraction*] is preferred here, because it was strongly emphasised by Sohn-Rethel and also shaped by him. 'Real abstraction' [*Reale Abstraction*] was, however, first used by Simmel; cf. Simmel, 2004: 80. Where Marx himself speaks of 'real' [*reeler*] and 'actual' [*tatsächlicher*] abstraction, he usually refers to labour and, unlike Sohn-Rethel, not to the abstraction from the material and use-value characteristics of commodities in exchange. Sohn-Rethel first saw this and emphasised it in distinction from Marx; cf. Sohn-Rethel, 1971a: 22. Nevertheless, he also refers to points in *Capital* where Marx argues along his own lines – for example, 51 ff.
- 15 Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 18–34; Sohn-Rethel, 1990: 16–17.
- 16 Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 19.
- 17 'I call all representations *pure* (in the transcendental sense), in which nothing is to be encountered which belongs to sensation'. Kant, 1998: A20.
- 18 Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 30 ff.
- 19 'The act of exchange is not thought, but it has the *form* of thought'. Sohn-Rethel, 1972: 99; similar to Sohn-Rethel, 1971b: 47.
- 20 Sohn-Rethel could not decide on a definitive and unequivocal determination of his method. In *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, his method amounts to a 'genetic reconstruction' of the abstraction of thought from real abstraction in the sense of a historical-materialist grounding of the pure validity of forms of knowledge (Sohn-Rethel, 1972: 33 ff.; Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 195 ff.). In this period, he even considered 'form-genetic explanation' as an 'acceptable synonym for dialectics' (Sohn-Rethel, 1971a: 6). He consistently maintained the claim that he did not want to make a mere analogy with the unity of commodity-form and thought form but to develop a single explanatory framework.
- 21 Concerning Adorno's statement from a conversation with Sohn-Rethel that historical materialism is the 'anamnesis of Genesis' (Gödde, 1991), see the revealing notes in the afterword of Sohn-Rethel, 1985: 265 (also Sohn-Rethel, 1989c; Sohn-Rethel, 1978b: 137–41).
- 22 It is undeniable that Sohn-Rethel had an inspiring effect on the young Adorno. It is controversial how far the influence went, and whether Adorno even makes the link between the commodity-form on the one side and subjectivity, consciousness and thought on the other, since the opposite interpretation has also been defended. For a critique of the influence of Sohn-Rethel on Adorno,



- see Müller, 1988: 177. Jürgen Habermas makes the general conclusion that Adorno (and Horkheimer) did not derive the thought form from the commodity-form, in the sense of Lukács and Sohn-Rethel; cf. Habermas, 1981: 506. In contrast, see Fetscher and Schmidt, 2002. Adorno explicitly refers to Sohn-Rethel only once in his writings; cf. Adorno, 1973: 177. Sohn-Rethel, however, who was always proud of his contact with Adorno, did not fail to cautiously but decisively contradict his interpretation; cf. Sohn-Rethel, 1972: 90 ff. (not in the English version). On Adorno's relationship to Sohn-Rethel, cf. Freytag, 2006.
- 23 Cf. Adorno, 1973; Horkheimer and Adorno 2002.
  - 24 Sohn-Rethel, 1972: 22, 89 ff., 99; Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 7, 19–22, 30–79.
  - 25 Real abstraction and its manner of functioning is developed in almost all of Sohn-Rethel's writings, but the most prominent is Sohn-Rethel, 1978b; cf. also Toscano, 2014: 1226–9; Tsogas, 2012: 380–3.
  - 26 Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 77. German version: 'The synthetic society itself is the one which, in short, thinks in the form of the separate intellect'. Sohn-Rethel, 1972: 115.
  - 27 For discussion and critique of this ambiguity, see Bahr, 1973: 65, who calls Sohn-Rethel's theory an 'implicit reflection theory'. Sohn-Rethel also *explicitly* states at one point in his main work that the possibility of a theoretical knowledge of nature 'arises from the conceptual reflection of the exchange abstraction' (Sohn-Rethel, 1972: 104). In one of his last texts, he opts for the variant, that real abstraction is 'imposed' on consciousness by means of money. Here, too, Sohn-Rethel also states that he considers the term 'identification to be more appropriate than the familiar expression "conceptual abstraction", which is reminiscent of the indeterminacy of "reflection" in my book [*Intellectual and Manual Labour*] and already presupposes the conceptual faculty, whose very emergence is at stake' (Sohn-Rethel, 1974: 192).
  - 28 Sohn-Rethel, 1972: 64 ff.; Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 39 ff.
  - 29 Sohn-Rethel, 1972: 68 (not in English version; cf. Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 44 ff.).
  - 30 More explicitly on the physicality of real abstraction and its connection with modern science, see Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 35–57; Sohn-Rethel, 1990: 28 ff. On the history of the emergence of modern science, see Sohn-Rethel, 1987.
  - 31 It is his most thematic early writing; cf. Krüger, 1990: 114–232. On the logic of appropriation, see Franz, 2006.
  - 32 Sohn-Rethel, 1972: 34 (not in English version).
  - 33 Correspondingly, he assumes simple commodity production before capitalist commodity production, in Engels' sense (see Sohn-Rethel, 1989b: 161; Sohn-Rethel, 1990: 17; Sohn-Rethel, 1971a: 28 ff.). It is to be noted, however, that Sohn-Rethel does not proceed from an immediate, 'primary' or 'primitive' (natural) exchange in either the historical or logical determination of the commodity-form; that is, he does not accept the kind of exchange that economic theory and the subjective theory of value today still use to underlie their model-theoretical assumptions and the 'robinsonades' of their homo oeconomicus (see Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 98). Rather, he starts from a 'secondary' exchange that already refers to values (Sohn-Rethel, 1985). Yet, concerning the historical origin and genesis of money, Sohn-Rethel remains thoroughly captured by the idea of a direct exchange, from whose logic certain ideas of rationality, identity, etc. should arise, as was the political economy and Marxism of his time (and, for the most part, the authors of critical theory).
  - 34 For Sohn-Rethel, the beginning of coinage in Greek antiquity is decisive for the separation of intellectual and manual labour, for the formation of the intellect as well as for the concepts of being and mathematics; European capitalism then has only a 'specific significance' (Sohn-Rethel); cf. Sohn-Rethel, 1972: 228–40, especially 230 (not in the English edition; cf. here Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 47, 58–60, 65–7). This has led Sohn-Rethel, among other things, to almost equate the money of antiquity (or rather the coin) with the money of capitalist society – although coins in antiquity and money in capitalist society, as the latest anthropological and ethnological research has shown, perform completely different functions and thus mediate completely different social relationships.
  - 35 Sohn-Rethel, 1972: 123–73 (part II); Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 80–135 (part II); Sohn-Rethel, 1987.
  - 36 On the relation between the logic of appropriation and the logic of production, see Sohn-Rethel, 1972: 174–227 (part III), especially, 186 ff., 212 ff., 255 ff. (appendix B); in the English version, see Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 139–85 (part III).
  - 37 In the English edition: 're-socialised labour'; cf. Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 139–85.
  - 38 For more details, see Sohn-Rethel, 1971; Sohn-Rethel, 1972a.
  - 39 Sohn-Rethel, 1972: 169.
  - 40 On the idea of a social labour that has an 'immediately social-synthetic function' (Sohn-Rethel, 1972a: 47) and takes place according to the measure of an immediately given total labour,

- instead of disintegrating into disparate private labours and becoming synthesised only in exchange according to real abstraction, see Sohn-Rethel, 1972: 206; Sohn-Rethel, 1971b: 55 ff.
- 41 Sohn-Rethel, 2015, first published 1973; English excerpts: Sohn-Rethel, 1978c.
  - 42 Cf. Breuer, 1977; Postone, 1993; Gorz, 1980.
  - 43 The discussion of abstract labour can be positioned against Sohn-Rethel's understanding of the relation between the form and substance of value, if they are based on Hegel's dialectic; cf. Elson, 1979; Arthur, 2011.
  - 44 Sohn-Rethel, 1990: 31.
  - 45 Sohn-Rethel, 1971c: 69.
  - 46 Various parties have criticised Sohn-Rethel for this separation, maintaining that one can mediate the substance and form of value; this leads to a similar dualism which Hegel criticised in Kant and which he claimed to have overcome by a dialectical mediation of form and content.
  - 47 Sohn-Rethel presented an independent, historical-materialist motivated critique of the theory of marginal utility in his own dissertation in 1928.
  - 48 Sohn-Rethel, 1990: 30 ff. This is also made clear in Sohn-Rethel, 1978b: 122, 113–116; Sohn-Rethel, 1971a: 37 ff. Sohn-Rethel presented 'the deepest of discrepancies' with Marx most clearly in three appendices: Sohn-Rethel, 1971c: 65–74; Sohn-Rethel, 1970: 183–93; Sohn-Rethel, 1972: 228–40. (Here, Sohn-Rethel explicitly corrects his critique of Marx from the two previous appendices, which may be the reason why they are not included in the English edition. In any case, his critique of Marx here is already modified and much more restrained. See, for example, Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 22 ff.)
  - 49 Sohn-Rethel, 1978b: 114.
  - 50 'The abstraction does not spring from labour but from exchange [...] and it is through exchange that the abstraction imparts itself to labour, making it abstract human labour'. Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 6.
  - 51 Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 60–79.
  - 52 According to Helmut Brentel, Sohn-Rethel developed a 'unique compromise formula between Marxian and subjective value theory'; Brentel, 1997: 131. Sohn-Rethel explicitly criticised the subjective theory of value, even devoting his dissertation topic to it. He argued that the subjective theory of value does not conceive of exchange as a practical *activity* but rather reduces it entirely to the economic rationality of a single economic subject, ignoring its critical epistemological implication; cf. Sohn-Rethel, 1972: 79; Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 69; and, for more detail, Sohn-Rethel, 1989a and Sohn-Rethel, 2012.
  - 53 Sohn-Rethel 1971c: 70. For Sohn-Rethel, abstract labour also appears as labour under Taylorist-Fordist conditions. This simply means that concrete labour is disassembled into its individual processes and reduced to simple, repetitive work and formalised accordingly.
  - 54 Sohn-Rethel, 1972: 23.
  - 55 Sohn-Rethel, 1990.
  - 56 Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 77; Sohn-Rethel, 1972: 21; similarly, Sohn-Rethel 1971b: 48.
  - 57 In all of Sohn-Rethel's writings, the value-form analysis is regarded as an empirical process of exchange, and real abstraction as an activity, especially in Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 19–45; Sohn-Rethel, 1978b: 116–122; Sohn-Rethel, 1989: 210 ff. Sohn-Rethel even explicitly calls for the double character of the commodity and commodity-form to be conceived as a practical-sensuous activity according to Marx's theses on Feuerbach, contrary to the conceptual-logical development of *Capital*; cf. Sohn-Rethel, 1971c: 69.
  - 58 Marx, 1976: 138.
  - 59 For the Marxist-Leninist perspective, see Sandkühler, 1973; Brand et al., 1976.
  - 60 Dombrowski et al., 1978; Wassmann, 1979; Heinz and Hörisch, 2006; Engster, 2014: 517–81.
  - 61 Elbe, 2008: 12–87; Hoff, 2009. In the German-speaking world today, Michael Heinrich's call for a 'monetary theory of value' is pertinent; Heinrich, 1999. For France, see de Brunhoff, 1967; for the Anglophone world, see Elson, 1979; Moseley, 2015; for Italy, see Bellofiore, 1989.
  - 62 Marx, 1991: 275.
  - 63 Cf. Chapter 80 on critical theory and economic theory. See also Engster, 2016.
  - 64 Marx, 1976: 255.
  - 65 Even more rare are attempts to develop modern science from the logic of money rather than exchange as part of a unified critique of society and knowledge; see Thomson, 1955; Müller, 1977; Pietilä, 1981; Seaford, 2004; Engster and Schröder, 2014; Engster, 2014.

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# Alfred Schmidt: On the Critique of Social Nature

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Translated by Jacob Blumenfeld

From the early 1960s onwards, Alfred Schmidt (May 19, 1931, Berlin – August 28, 2012, Frankfurt am Main) provided a decisive impulse for the critical reappropriation of Marx's theory and the further development of critical theory in West Germany and beyond. His work on the philosophical-historical presuppositions of the critical theory of Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse, and his confrontation with French structuralism, especially the Althusser school, attracted attention even beyond academic philosophical debates. In addition, Schmidt focused on the history of philosophical materialism, the philosophy of Schopenhauer, Goethe's philosophy of nature, Sigmund Freud's philosophy and – in light of his interest in the intellectual history of Freemasonry – the modern Deism of the Enlightenment. Furthermore, from the 1960s he translated or published numerous works by Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Henri Lefebvre and Anton Pannekoek. As the editor of Max Horkheimer's collected

works (together with Gunzelin Schmid Noerr) and the editor of the republished *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, he laid the decisive foundations for the reception of original critical theory.

In contrast to his teachers Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, Schmidt did not come from an upper-class or educated middle-class home. Born in Berlin as the son of a mechanic, he spent his youth in the North Hesse province of Rotenburg an der Fulda, where the family ended up as a result of the war. There, in the spring of 1952, he passed the school-leaving examination. In the summer semester of that year, he began his studies at the Faculty of Philosophy in the University of Frankfurt, initially studying History, English and Latin. Attending the lectures of Max Horkheimer sparked his academic interest in philosophy. He chose philosophy as his main subject, sociology as his second and English philology as his third; he also studied classical philology. From 1957 to 1961, Schmidt was a graduate assistant

and from 1961 onwards a research assistant for Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno at the University of Frankfurt (Jeske, 2015).

On July 13, 1960, Schmidt graduated with a doctorate in philosophy with the topic 'The Concept of Nature in Marx's Conception of Society'. His thesis, supervised by Horkheimer and Adorno, was published for the first time in 1962 under the title *The Concept of Nature in Marx* as the eleventh volume of the 'Frankfurt Contributions to Sociology' series, edited by Adorno and Walter Dirks. The work attracted international attention. It was translated into 12 languages and went through a total of four editions in Germany during Schmidt's lifetime, as well as a series of pirated prints. In the summer semester of 1965, Schmidt received a university teaching position in the Philosophical Seminar at the University of Frankfurt on Lessons in the History of Philosophy, in particular the Enlightenment and its Tradition. In the following semesters, he dealt with the themes of Left-Hegelianism, the sociology of Auguste Comte, Karl Marx's critique of political economy and the philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean Paul Sartre. In 1972, after the departure of Jürgen Habermas to Starnberg as co-director (alongside physicist and philosopher Carl-Friedrich von Weizsäcker) of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of the Living Conditions of the Scientific and Technical World, Schmidt was appointed to Horkheimer's former chair as Habermas' successor. Schmidt held this chair until his retirement in 1999 (when Habermas returned to Frankfurt in 1983, a new chair had to be established for him in Social Philosophy and the Philosophy of History).

According to the official dedication of this Professorship for Philosophy and Sociology, Schmidt lectured in both subjects during the first years but then limited himself to courses in the field of philosophy. He remained faithful to his listeners as an emeritus professor, giving lectures on Herbert Marcuse, Ludwig Feuerbach, Heine, Spinoza, Lessing, Nietzsche and Richard Wagner. In addition,

he wrote studies on Goethe, in whom he was primarily interested as a natural scientist and natural philosopher; he was also especially fascinated with the philosophy of Schopenhauer. Schmidt continued lecturing and reading about the history of materialism, the sociology of worldviews in the nineteenth century, the German Enlightenment and the philosophy of German Romanticism. Furthermore, Schmidt was active in the university's interdisciplinary Institute for Research in the Philosophy of Religion, which he co-founded; he worked as a lecturer in adult education in Frankfurt, in trade union education at the Academy of Labour and in the context of the Masonic movement (Jeske, 2015; Schmidt, 2014a). In November 2012, the Archive Center of the Johann Christian Senckenberg University Library of the Goethe University Frankfurt am Main received his entire estate, including correspondence, manuscripts, electronic documents from three computers and his extensive private library.

The manner in which the Frankfurt School is usually presented, which divides the representatives of critical theory into a first, second, third and now even fourth generation, makes it difficult to elucidate Schmidt's specific contribution. In the 1960s at the Philosophical Seminar at the University of Frankfurt, Schmidt was teaching together with his teachers, like Karl-Heinz Haag (1924–2011) and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (1928–2015). As a student of Horkheimer and Adorno, he saw himself primarily committed to the continuation of their thought. He did not partake in Habermas' critique of the 'philosophy of consciousness' and its rejection of the critical potential of Marx's concept of labour. Nor did he take part in the communicative turn in critical theory. The primary goal of his philosophical work was to explicate the theoretical motives and philosophical-historical presuppositions of the critical theory of Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse. In this way, he embodied a counterbalance to the linguistic-analytic, action-theoretical or

system-theoretical ‘reconstructions’ of critical theory, which, in his opinion, ran the risk of missing the specific impetus of critical theory. In contrast, his aspiration was to preserve and convey the original content and authentic form of critical theory.

## ON THE CONCEPT OF NATURE

Schmidt’s 1962 thesis on the concept of nature in the teaching of Karl Marx had an unusually strong resonance. On the one hand, it was directed against a dogmatic dialectics of nature taught as state doctrine at that time in the Soviet Union, the GDR and the countries of Eastern Europe; on the other hand, it went against a pure philosophy-of-praxis perspective, which tends to dissolve history into a dynamic of interaction detached from the metabolic process between humans and nature, thereby ignoring the natural constraints of human existence.

In their preliminary remark, Horkheimer and Adorno summarise Schmidt’s work within the ‘Frankfurt Contributions to Sociology’ as follows:

Even where nature is not a topic [in Marx; H.K.], conceptions of nature are implied in the theories of labour, value and commodity. Thus the responsible presentation of the concept of nature also illuminates other parts of the theory. For example, Schmidt corrects the conception of a radical opposition between idealist and materialist dialectics, and thus also straightens out the often cited phrase of Marx that his method merely flirts with dialectics. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2003: 9)

Schmidt drew upon the entire corpus of Marx available at that time, including documents from different phases of his theoretical development, particularly the *Grundrisse*, whose philosophical significance Schmidt recognised early on.

In contrast to the philosophical discussion of Marx in the West at that time, Schmidt’s thesis studied Marx’s early writings intensively in order to establish the connection

with certain themes of the middle and mature Marx. He did not, therefore, reduce the *philosophical* thought of Marx to the anthropology of the Paris manuscripts. On the contrary, Schmidt stressed that Marx is by no means at his most philosophical when he employs the traditional academic language of philosophy, and so Schmidt thoroughly incorporates the political and economic writings of the middle and mature Marx into the discussion. He thus clarifies the philosophical significance of Marx’s critique of economics, which is crucial for a critical concept of materialism; at the same time, he notes that Marx’s critique of political economy is not exhausted by a technical-economic analysis. Indeed, Marx’s critique is fundamentally a critique of economic categories. To illustrate Marx’s position, Schmidt repeatedly draws upon individual writings by Engels – for example, with reference to the concept of the dialectics of nature – and does not shy away from bringing out the differences between the authors.

According to Schmidt, the problem of nature and the dogmatic conception of the dialectics of nature could not be solved by elegantly avoiding the entire subject and sticking to a half-baked Marx concerned only with the philosophy of praxis. This tendency could be read in Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, Antonio Gramsci, and the philosophers grouped around the journal *Praxis*. Although arising from legitimate opposition to the dogmatic ‘diamat’ worldview prevailing in Eastern Europe, but also among many communist intellectuals in the West, these philosophers risked throwing out the baby with the bathwater by eliminating the theme of nature, thus reducing Marxism to a philosophy of history. For Schmidt, the task was to critically incorporate nature into reflection as a historical category mediated by human practice. From the *Holy Family*, Marx and Engels’ first joint text, published in Frankfurt in 1845, to Friedrich Engels’ *Anti-Dühring* in 1878, nature is regarded as mediated by social practice: nature is developed and constituted by human practice, but it cannot be



dissolved in this way without a remainder. It is the object of human appropriation and yet does not arise through it. The nature-mediating social-labour process, as a metabolic process between humans and nature, is itself a part of nature. Society is not a mere communication system; rather, it is a specific mode of human social reproduction.

In addition to the simultaneous emphasis on the social mediation of nature and the irreducibility of nature, which is not completely absorbed in this mediation through social practice, we find in Marx the notion borrowed from Hegel of a second nature of incomprehensible coercive social forces. Even though, in knowledge as well as in practical appropriation, we nowhere encounter nature in itself, but always only nature already mediated by human practice, it would be ill-conceived to absolutise this aspect of mediation. Such an absolutised mediation, which makes the irreducible particularity of nature and individuals into practically subordinate moments of a universal system of mediation, represents for Marx the capital relation, which asserts itself as the 'automatic subject' of the processes of social reproduction. The objection against such an absolutised mediation formed a crucial motive for critique, which saw in this totalisation of mediation new natural constraints at work, precisely the constraints of a socially produced second nature.

Against a mere standpoint philosophy, which believes it can reach truth through the unwavering absolutisation of isolated ideological certainties, Schmidt always claimed that knowledge can only be attained in the critical passage through conflicting positions – that is to say, neither as a middle position between extremes nor through the simple affirmation of one side. This is best exemplified in his portrayal of the relation between Hegel and Feuerbach:

It was not Marx's intention simply to replace Hegel's 'World Spirit' with a material 'World Substance' which would be an equally metaphysical principle. He did not reject Hegelian idealism abstractly like Feuerbach, but rather saw in it truth

expressed in an untrue form. Marx accepted the idealist view that the world is mediated through the Subject. He considered however that he could bring home the full significance of this idea by showing what was the true pathos of 'creation' as presented by philosophers from Kant to Hegel: the creator of the objective world is the socio-historical life-process of human beings. In modern times extra-human natural existence has been reduced more and more to a function of human social organization. The philosophical reflection of this is that the determinations of objectivity have entered in greater and greater measure into the Subject, until at the culminating point of post-Kantian speculation they become completely absorbed in it. (Schmidt, 2014b: 27)

The aim of critical materialism is to help human beings escape the self-made prison of economic determinations in which they let themselves be degraded into objects of a blind and mechanical economic dynamic. The laws of economics for Marx do not form a universal metaphysical principle of explanation:

The 'materialist' character of Marxist theory does not amount to a confession of the incurable primacy of the economy, that anti-human abstraction achieved by the real situation. It is rather an attempt to direct men's attention towards the ghostly internal logic of their own conditions, towards this pseudophysics that makes them commodities and at the same time provides the ideology according to which they are already in control of their own destinies. (Schmidt, 2014b: 41)

At this point, Schmidt refers to Horkheimer's diagnosis: 'The process is accomplished not under the control of a conscious will but as a natural occurrence. Everyday life results blindly, accidentally, and badly from the chaotic activity of individuals, industries and states' (Horkheimer, 1986, cited in Schmidt, 2014b: 41).

In Marx, materialism does not entail the identification of the prevailing conditions, and similarly the concept of nature does not aim at romantic transfiguration.

Hegel described the first nature, a world of things existing outside men, as a blind conceptless occurrence. The world of men as it takes shape in the

state, law, society, and the economy, is for him 'second nature', manifested reason, objective Spirit. Marxist analysis opposes to this the view that Hegel's 'second nature' should rather be described in the terms he applied to the first: namely, as the area of conceptlessness, where blind necessity and blind chance coincide. The 'second nature' is still the 'first'. Mankind has still not stepped beyond natural history. This fact explains the closeness of the method of Marxist sociology to that of natural science [*Naturwissenschaft*]. Many critics of Marx regard this method as inappropriate, but in fact the 'nature-like' constitution of its object of investigation ensures that it is not a human science [*Geisteswissenschaft*]. When Marx treated the history of previous human society as a 'process of natural history', this had first of all the critical meaning that 'the laws of economics confront men in all... planless and incoherent production as objective laws over which they have no power, therefore in the *form of laws of nature*'. (Schmidt, 2014b: 42)

With regard to the natural basis of human life, Schmidt acknowledges the ineliminable requirement of a metabolism between humans and nature: even if hunger, poverty and exploitation are overcome, and the human being confronts the material world in a qualitatively new way as 'overseer and regulator' (Schmidt, 2014b: 147), as Marx put it in the *Grundrisse*, this does not overcome the relationship with the natural foundation of human life (Marx, 1986). Even after the economic compulsions of commodified labour are abolished, freedom remains dependent on the interaction with nature.

The philosophical themes of his dissertation also characterise Schmidt's further works. In his essay 'On the Relation between History and Nature in Dialectical Materialism', originally written for the book *Existentialism and Marxism* (1965) and from 1971 onwards attached to the new editions of the thesis as an appendix, he again takes up the question of a dialectics of nature. He develops his argument into a critique of the complementary yet one-sided thesis of Lukács and Western Marxism, according to which dialectics is strictly bound to human practice. This thesis, according to Schmidt,

threatens to conceive of nature only as a social category and thus lose sight of the natural basis of human existence, the metabolism with nature.

In a postscript from 1971, Schmidt emphasises again that Marx's 'critique of political economy' should not be understood simply as a positive theory of economic development and some law-governed transition to socialism, as is often the case in the official Marxism of the labour movement. In the new edition of 1993, he adds the preface from the French version, which appeared in the same year, and carries the subtitle 'For an ecological materialism'. Schmidt points out that Marx is not a consistent apologist for the development of the productive forces but rather in the early writing criticises the 'degradation of nature'. Also in *Capital*, Marx refers to the 'natural limits of the exploitability of nature' and emphasises that the productivity of labour itself is bound to natural conditions. Nevertheless, Schmidt critically finds an anthropocentrism in Marx's conception of nature. What Marx and Engels criticised in their time as a defect of 'contemplative materialism' has today to be rediscovered for the sake of regaining an unobstructed understanding of nature (Schmidt, 1993: xi; see also 1973a). If we want to experience nature not only as an object of science or as raw material, then this 'requires a *philosophical approach* that goes beyond the separation between humans and nature established by the subject-object-schema of the process of labour and knowledge' (1993: xii). The perspective oriented to human practice and history is not invalidated, but it is certainly relativised. The question of an 'ecological materialism' thus arises from within the context of contemporary experience.

## CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

While Schmidt's thesis was published in the official 'Frankfurt Contribution to Sociology'

series of the Institute for Social Research, and while other important works from the 1960s appeared in *edition suhrkamp*, which was important for the intellectual development of West Germany, the *Critique of Political Economy Today: 100 Years of Capital*, which Schmidt co-edited with Walter Euchner, was somewhat removed from public attention. This book, which was published in 1968 by the *Europäische Verlagsanstalt*, recorded the presentations and discussion remarks of a colloquium organised by the Institute for Political Science in Frankfurt in September 1967. The director of the institute, Iring Fetscher, succeeded in gathering experts on Marxist theory from West and East Germany, the United States, France, Belgium, Austria, Yugoslavia and Poland. The speakers ranged from Wolfgang Abendroth to Oswald von Nell-Breuning, from Ernest Mandel to Nicos Poulantzas, from Roman Rosdolsky to Elmar Altvater. While the hundredth birthday of Marx's *Capital* provided the occasion for the colloquium, remarkably the subtitle of *Capital* was chosen as the title for the event: *critique of political economy*. The underlying vision can be found in Schmidt's paper 'On the Concept of Knowledge in the Critique of Political Economy' and also in many of his published discussion remarks. Its implied reading of Marx was soon to become significant for what was later called the 'new reading of Marx' (Elbe, 2008) in West Germany and beyond (especially in the works of Hans-Georg Backhaus, Hans-Jürgen Krahl and Helmut Reichelt). Indeed, Schmidt's discussion with Nicos Poulantzas already anticipates the confrontation of a Frankfurt School-inspired reading of Marx and the Marx interpretation of the Althusser school, as formulated in the extensive critical essays 'The Structuralist Attack on History' (Schmidt, 1969) and 'History and Structure: An Essay on Hegelian-Marxist and Structuralist Theories of History'. In fact, the discussions at the colloquium can be regarded as the starting point for the development of

critical theory outside the academic and institutional framework exemplified by the intellectual histories of the Frankfurt School by Martin Jay, Helmut Dubiel, Hauke Brunkhorst and Rolf Wiggershaus.

After the presentation of Roman Rosdolsky, who was unable to deliver in person his 'Comments on the Method of Marx's *Capital* and Its Importance for Contemporary Marxist Scholarship', and following Nicos Poulantzas, Schmidt took a pointed stand on the question of Hegel's role in the method of Marx's critique of political economy. For Schmidt, there is something like an 'ironic' repetition of certain passages of Hegel's logic in Marx's *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. For Schmidt, this does not mean, however, that Marx is simply a Hegelian. On the contrary, it is a question of thinking with Marx

the extent to which the specific character of bourgeois society, which in reality ultimately underlies Hegel's philosophy, does not compel ideas of an 'existing abstraction,' and the extent to which the value-form [...] does not represent an abstraction carried out by the empirical world itself. The social world contains a conceptual element insofar as it reduces the concrete labour of individuals and their products to quantifiable expressions of general human labour. Although this 'conceptual' character of tangible empirical processes brings to the fore certain theoretical parallels to Hegel's thought, one should not be tempted to consider Hegelian and Marxist dialectics as homologous. (Euchner and Schmidt, 1968: 26)

What initially looks like the adoption of the speculative premises of Hegel's logic thus does not entail endorsement of absolute idealism, according to Schmidt, but rather the conceptual doubling of a real process occurring in social practice:

When Marx says that human beings would be portrayed by him as personifications of economic categories, this obviously sounds 'idealist', but it is an idealism that the world itself forces on people every day. For the 'materialist' aspect of Marx's economy, if we are to speak in these terms, is precisely the domination of individuals by incomprehensible abstractions, which determines empirical reality as capitalist. One could say that Hegel's

philosophy – which Marx famously accused of making the second into the first and the first into the second – is bourgeois society conceived as ontology. Hegel posits what is already present in the bourgeois mode of production, namely, the demotion of the genetically first, use-value creating concrete labour, to an appendage of what derives from it, abstract labour. (Euchner and Schmidt, 1968: 27)

How can one comprehend this rule by abstractions without falling into a circle, such that reality can only be described with the aid of Hegel's categories, which, in turn, are legitimised through their congruence with the very reality that they posited in thought? Hegel's logic does not reconstruct the thoughts of God before the creation of the world, as Hegel himself wanted, but rather unintentionally expresses the secret of bourgeois society, albeit as ontology. In this manner, and despite its transformation into ontology, Hegel's philosophy already provides the conceptual means for grasping the objective structures of social reality. Schmidt formulates the critical point of Marxist theory with reference to the theme of his thesis:

The methodologically most important thought of materialist dialectics seems to me to consist in the distinction between nature as first nature – in the sense of the metabolism which grounds human existence – from second nature. This forms the specifically capitalist problem of materialism, while the metabolism between humans and nature is a material fact that can indeed change, yet traverses mankind's history in general. I believe that we should keep this double foundation of Marx's argument in mind, and think about whether we are discussing second or first nature. Therefore, whether we are discussing the problematic of alienation, that is, commodity fetishism, or materialism in a much more elementary sense, as is also found in Marx. (Euchner and Schmidt, 1968: 29)

In his own paper, 'Zum Erkenntnisbegriff der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie' (On the Concept of Cognition in the Critique of Political Economy), Schmidt defends Marx against the accusation of economism: 'As the investigations of *Capital* show, the one-sided, idealistically deplored "economism" is

an abstraction which is accomplished not by the theorist but by social reality on a daily basis' (Euchner and Schmidt, 1968: 33). With the characterisation of his theory as a 'critique of political economy', Marx makes his specific intention clear:

He understands it in a double sense, first as a critique of the real, political-economic relations which necessarily arise from the capitalist mode of production, and second as a critique of political economy as the comprehensive science of the whole life-process – *le monde moral* as it was called in the 18th century – in which the theoretical self-understanding of bourgeois society expressed itself most adequately. The empirically given relations of production form the immediate object of Marx's investigation. But – and Marx emphatically pointed this out against *Lassalle* – it is not possible to conceptualise this given object in its immediacy. The actual 'system of bourgeois economy' is apprehended by means of a 'critique of economic categories' as they appeared in the history of economic thinking. In this respect Marx's critique of capitalism is largely a critique of the theories of political economy, from *William Petty* to *David Ricardo*. By keeping the intellectual premises of bourgeois economy in tight focus, he exposes the contradictions between these premises and their social reality, and through them the objective contradictions of social reality itself. Dialectics, therefore, is by no means 'ontologically' asserted by Marx. Dialectics is not simply a matter of the process of thought, but of reality, too. However, this reality is not independent of the concepts through which it is grasped. But – different from Hegel – reality is not reducible to its very concept. One should neither suppress the mediation of Marx's object of 'critique' through theory and its historical interest nor deny the fact that the object is mediated *in itself*, which makes the theory into an objective one. (Euchner and Schmidt, 1968: 34)

While in Hegel's logic, 'the method is the form of movement of the absolute itself and the total sequence of categories coincides with the eternal object' (Euchner and Schmidt, 1968: 34), for Marx, the method and object are not identical. Modes of inquiry and modes of presentation must therefore be 'formally' distinguished for Marx. Indeed, in his *Philosophy of Nature* and in certain parts of the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*,

Hegel too distinguishes between inquiry, the ‘path of emergence of science’ and presentation, the ‘path in itself when it is complete’, as Schmidt vividly points out. This distinction arises where the material analysed with the aid of ‘concepts of the understanding’ must be converted into ‘concepts of reason’. In summary, Schmidt states ‘that the correct understanding of Marx’s method in *Capital* stands and falls with the concept of “presentation”’ (Euchner and Schmidt, 1968: 35). It is at this point that he refers to *Lire le Capital* [Reading Capital], published in 1965, highlighting the contribution of Jacques Rancière’s ‘The Concept of “Critique” and the “Critique of Political Economy”’: From the 1844 *Manuscript* to *Capital*’ (Althusser et al., 2016). With reference to Horkheimer’s 1934 article in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, ‘The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy’ (Horkheimer, 1993), Schmidt points out that the distinction between inquiry and presentation, between isolated analytical dissection and the integrating presentation of the dissected material, which brings the living whole – grasped by the individual sciences only one-sidedly – to ‘concrete’ unity, corresponds with the methodological self-understanding of the Institute for Social Research at that time (Euchner and Schmidt, 1968: 36).

Logically, the presentation does not simply follow the course of history. On the contrary, it pursues ‘a path opposite to the real development’. It begins with the finished product of the process of development (Euchner and Schmidt, 1968: 37). Here, Schmidt provides an important correction to a long-held view that assumes, with Engels, that in the opening chapters of *Capital*, Marx wanted to depict by means of historical summary a phase of pre-capitalist ‘simple commodity production’. Marx’s presentation does not follow the course of history; it often takes the opposite path: chronological sequence and logical order of presentation do not coincide.

For the Marxist understanding of science as well as for the self-understanding of the

founding generation of the Frankfurt School, the distinction between inquiry and presentation as well as the distinction between essence and appearance is constitutive: ‘all science would be superfluous if the form of appearance of things directly coincided with their essence’ (Marx, 1991: 956; see also Marx, 1998: 804). The distinction between essence and appearance, between the ‘apparent and real movement’, has direct consequences for both the methodological self-understanding of the theory and its substantive content. This becomes clear in contrasting classical political economy and so-called ‘vulgar economics’. Schmidt argues that Marx presents a twofold opposition against classical economics on the one hand and ‘vulgar economics’ on the other hand, starting with Say. This contrast is based on the distinction between society in its immediate appearance and law, appearance and essence, which Marx identifies with the scientific approach:

He acknowledges that the classical economists, and especially *Ricardo*, despite their class standpoint which regarded the capitalist mode of production as natural and constant, all sought to systematically investigate its ‘inner connection,’ while vulgar economics (that is, all economics since the dissolution of the Ricardo school) moved only within the context of appearance, falling into the crude empiricism of ideological consciousness. (Euchner and Schmidt, 1968: 40)

However, Schmidt does not declare the difference between essence and appearance formulated here as a methodologically universal principle, but ties it back to a historically specific form of social relations. The non-identity of appearance and essence, constitutive for Marx, does not reside in society as such but rather in capitalist social relations. Pre-capitalist forms of domination are thus more transparent because they ‘are not abstract, but based on personal relations of dependency’ (Euchner and Schmidt, 1968: 42).

Against the claims to objectivity of economic analysis, particularly by scientists from the Soviet Bloc at the aforementioned meeting, Schmidt asserts alongside the early Engels

that the natural laws of capitalist development ultimately depend on the unconsciousness of the participants. According to Marx, the

purpose of economics is precisely for human beings to consciously shape their conditions and not be bound by any second nature, which is much more violent than the first, inasmuch as the subject has objectified itself in it. The more subjectivity is embodied in objectivity, the more 'consciousness-independent' it is – thus requiring its critique and abolition. (Euchner and Schmidt, 1968: 57)

Here, it is easy to see that the Frankfurt School reading of Marx took its starting point from very different themes from those of the Parisian Althusser group, which conceived of Marx's theory as a breakthrough to a scientific analysis of social processes. Schmidt follows a philosophical interpretation, characteristic of critical theory in general, according to which Marx's theory is to be seen as an attempt to overcome philosophy by its practical realisation (Schmidt, 1973b). The aim of overcoming philosophy is emancipation and liberation, not scientification. From this understanding of Marx's critique, Schmidt's argument establishes connections to a philosophy of praxis and, in particular, to the existentialist interpretation of Marx by the early Marcuse (Marcuse and Schmidt, 1973). In contrast to Habermas, Schmidt was not primarily concerned with making certain elements of Marx's theory scientifically 'compatible' through an attempt at reconstruction or through their translation into another theoretical language. His aim was, in essence, to liberate Marx's theory from the ideological ballast of traditional party Marxism in order to lay bare the critical character of Marx's theory.

## **HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AS CRITICAL THEORY**

Leaving aside the debate with Nicos Poulantzas at the Frankfurt Colloquium and

the mentioning of Althusser and Rancière in a footnote to his own paper at the seminar, Schmidt's first reference to French structuralism comes in an essay from 1967, titled 'On History and Historiography in Materialist Dialectics', published as a contribution to the book *Consequences of a Theory: Essays on Karl Marx's Capital* (Schmidt, 1967). Following Lucien Goldmann, Henri Lefebvre and Jean-Paul Sartre, Schmidt understands structuralism, and in particular Lévi-Strauss' contribution, as proof that the empirical methods of social sciences were gradually displacing the critical role of philosophy for public discourse in France, too. Structuralism was not yet perceived as a rival interpretation of Marx's theory but as a 'new eleatism', an unhistorical form of sociological thinking. In Schmidt's argument, the new eleatism corresponds to a historical period of state intervention for the sake of preventing the eruption of major conflicts and crises. The structuralist method proceeds from the most general mental structures – supposedly common to all cultures, peoples and societies – and then prescribes them to acting subjects; this runs the risk, in a ciphered idealist form, of turning what Marx critiqued – that is, the rule by abstractions, reified society – into an affirmative normative stance. With Sartre, Schmidt arrives at the conclusion that structuralism would ultimately serve the ideological defence against historical materialism (Schmidt, 1967: 106). Already in 1923, in *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács had formulated the crucial objections against the unhistorical or anti-historical essence of bourgeois thinking (Schmidt, 1967: 107). At this point in Schmidt's intellectual development, he treated structuralism as an object for ideology critique rather than an intellectual challenge.

This changes in 'The Structuralist Attack on History', in the volume edited by Schmidt himself, *Contributions to Materialist Epistemology*. In particular, Althusser's theoretical rejection of philosophical humanism, his definition of humanism as an ideology, and the

dichotomising division of Marx's work into an ideological phase and a scientific phase are not acceptable to Schmidt. Althusser's doctrine of ideology (which Schmidt criticised even before Althusser formulated his theory of ideological state apparatuses and the concept of 'interpellation') appears to Schmidt as a hardly original recapitulation of Mannheimean ideas. It is at any rate incompatible with the idea of liberating human beings from domination by incomprehensible economic abstractions. Althusser, in fact, discards everything that embodies the emancipatory message of Marxism for Schmidt, and Schmidt places Althusser close to the functionalist systems theory of Talcott Parsons (Schmidt, 1969: 209). Schmidt's essay, however, focuses mostly on the work of Lévi-Strauss, although he identifies Althusser with Lévi-Strauss' stance through the collective singular term 'structuralism'. The key points of his critique originate primarily from Sartre, Lefebvre and Goldmann.

In his 1971 book *History and Structure*, Schmidt considers Althusser's reading of Marx as a positive challenge, even though he notes that 'the "constructive" aspect of the method of *Capital* can be more adequately grounded in a materialist interpretation of Hegel' (Schmidt, 1981: 6). At the centre of the debate with the 'Althusser school' is the relationship between the logical and the historical. Schmidt emphasises – with Althusser and against traditional Marxist orthodoxy – that the process of cognition is characterised by relative autonomy in the face of its object and does not simply reproduce its historical process (Schmidt, 1981: 32). He combines this with the thesis of the cognitive primacy of the logical rather than the historical. In this context, Schmidt returns to his earlier argument about the difference between the mode of inquiry and the mode of presentation, referring to analogous distinctions between analysis and dialectics in Hegel's philosophy of nature. In Marx, as in Hegel, the 'material' gathered in the individual sciences is to

be presented in a rational, i.e., philosophical, form (Schmidt, 1981: 37 ff.).

On the whole, Schmidt agrees with the Althusserians on one of their fundamental concerns: the critique of historicist interpretations of Marx's work. In *Capital*, Marx advocates anything but an unreflective historicism that makes knowledge run directly parallel with the chronological sequence of events. Schmidt concurs with structuralist interpreters like Althusser and Poulantzas up to this point. The consensus ends when they deny the *constitutive* role of Hegel's *Logic* for Marx's economic work (Schmidt, 1981: 61). Indeed, in spite of itself, concerning value-form analysis, Althusser's pointed formula, according to which the 'simple only ever exists within a complex structure', can easily be reformulated into Hegelian terms (Schmidt, 1981: 63).

In the final part of his book, Schmidt discusses the role of Gaston Bachelard and the historical-epistemological work of Cavaillès, Canguilhem and Foucault for Althusser's understanding of science and the history of science. He highlights the primacy of the logical in the reconstruction of historical processes. Against chronological sequence, Marx himself considers the anatomy of man as a key to the anatomy of the ape (Marx, 1986: 42). Schmidt, however, points to the danger that this methodological principle tends to solidify underhandedly into ontological certainties: 'What is theoretically secondary for the present becomes null and void' (Schmidt, 1981: 106). As Marx writes in 1858, 'The dialectical form of presentation is right only when it knows its own limits' (Marx, 1987: 505).

Schmidt never published the second volume of *History and Structure*, to which he repeatedly refers. In *Critical Theory as a Philosophy of History* (1976), which dates back to a lecture he gave in June 1974 on the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Institute for Social Research, he revisits the decisive themes of his debate with Althusser and structuralism. Starting from Horkheimer's

confrontation with Dilthey, Heidegger and the Baden school of Neo-Kantianism, including Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, he explains the thesis of the 'natural law' character of history hitherto and the consequences that result for its (action-theoretical) 'intelligibility'. Finally, his account turns to the historical-materialist notion of supersession [*Aufhebbarkeit*], which he develops against structuralism as the central historical-philosophical category of critical theory. For a critical theory of society, it is necessary to subordinate the hitherto blind natural power of the process of social production to human consciousness (Schmidt, 1976: 104). With Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, Schmidt stressed that 'those laws can be abolished' and that the coming realm of freedom would be released from them (Adorno, 1973: 346). Schmidt's argument is not unique as such. For Rosa Luxemburg, too, political economy comes to a close once the anarchic economy of capitalism makes way for consciously organised relations of social reproduction. That is why, according to Luxemburg, Marx conceived of his economic doctrine as a critique of political economy (Luxemburg, 1955: 491). Similarly, as Bukharin explained in 1920, 'Theoretical political economy is the study of a social economy based upon the production of commodities, i.e., the study of an unorganized social economy' (Bukharin, 1979: 57). Only where production is anarchic does social life manifest itself in the form of 'elementary laws of nature' independent of the will of individuals or communities, and thus function with the same 'blind' necessity as the law of gravity. Schmidt thus recalls that both the older critical theory and even the more reflective authors of orthodox Marxism at the beginning of the century by no means advocated a consistent historical determinism. The laws of capitalist development, as analysed by Marx, do not imply that social analysis should ultimately be pursued with the methods of natural science; rather, they point to a problem. According to Schmidt, critical theory conceptualises the

socially constituted lawfulness of historical development that characterises the inverted [*verkehrte*] and perverted [*verrückte*] world of capitalist social relations.

In Schmidt's philosophical works, undogmatic materialism, sensuality, corporeality and the social mediation of nature remain key, as does his insistence on the irreducibility of naturalness to social mediation. He places Marx in a tradition of materialism that does not reduce nature to the dimension of instrumental control but, with recourse to Feuerbach and Goethe, traces another approach to nature. As Horkheimer and Adorno emphasise in their preliminary remark to his thesis:

The dissolution of all reality into mere nature, into atomic particles, or whatever counts as the last component according to the state of science, is by no means unconditional... The quantifying conception of nature as it must prevail in laboratories today cannot immediately be the same as the concept of nature in a humanity no longer divided in itself, no longer entrapped in nature. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2003: 7)

Schmidt's return to the subject of materialism was not primarily concerned with the reconstruction of Marx's critique of political economy as a critical analysis of domination by incomprehensible abstractions. Rather, it was concerned with the very idea of materialism as the underlying premise of the critique of political economy. In his later dialogue with Feuerbach, Goethe, Schopenhauer and Freud, Schmidt continued his argument for a non-reductive materialism. He thus remained faithful to the topic of his thesis, where he turned his back on the then dominant debates about Marx. Similarly, his engagement with Werner Post in 1975, titled *What Is Materialism?*, furthered this trend (Post and Schmidt, 1975). For Schmidt, the touchstone of materialism is not its accordance with the latest state of research in the natural sciences but its capacity for insight into human suffering. When Schmidt deals with nature beyond human control, he is not concerned with a romantic idolatry of



nature – this remains ultimately bound to its counter-image in the form of unbridled natural domination – but the insight that nature, in the here and now, must not be hypostatized into a norm.

## ON DIALECTICS

Schmidt's philosophising is characterised by an unpretentious proclivity for dialectical formulations. He does not discuss dialectics from the outside – from the perspective of traditional logic, for instance. Rather, he *thinks* dialectically, formulating his thoughts in dialectical terms, thereby expounding the social nature of capitalist society from within. He was sceptical of attempting an analytical reconstruction of dialectics without dialectical means. Dialectics for Schmidt is a medium of thought, not an object for rational reconstruction separate from the human condition.

What comes into play with Schmidt against Althusser and structuralism as a science of society (which cannot seriously deny the presence of Hegelian motifs and their genetic significance in Marx, but, rather, to put it pointedly, follows motifs of linguistic structuralism for the sake of appropriating Hegel's objective spirit without Hegel's metaphysics) is also implicitly directed against certain tendencies within contemporary critical theory. Axel Honneth and Ulrich Oevermann also defend a theory of objective spirit, which they developed by different conceptual means. In their argument, social objectivity does not stand for social domination by incomprehensible economic abstractions. Rather, they treat it as an institutional order or objective structure of meaning. Schmidt, in contrast, keeps the occasionally uncomfortable memory of the negativism of critical theory alive. A theory of social objectivity, spelled out by means of speech-act theory, structuralism or variants of neo-pragmatism, risks resulting in a reified ontology that lacks

critical consciousness and emancipatory insight. The step from the negative ontology of social nature to an apologetic ontology of social objectivity would in this manner be misunderstood as a theoretical advance. Against this, and beyond the critique of social objectivity as second nature, Schmidt develops a concept of nature unconstrained by the narrow confines of positivism, even if this means incorporating the metaphysical tradition of Spinoza and its reception by Goethe (Schmidt, 1984) or Schopenhauer's 'cryptomaterialism' (Schmidt, 2004) into the argument.

## CONCLUSION

Schmidt's critical materialism of second nature opposes both traditional Marxism and the structuralist reading of Marx. The objectivity of the social is not an indication of its rationality but of its socially coercive character. In the concept of a second nature, however, conflicting contemporary interpretations of Hegel's conception of objective spirit collide, and their tension-ridden character cannot simply be removed by decree. The objectivity of the social – which renders society an object of causal analysis – can be understood in terms of institutions, rules and conventions that acquire their own existence in opposition to the subjective ideas and intentions of individuals, yet without being completely separable from their actions. This raises the question of the extent to which the critical concept of social objectivity and social laws of nature can be extended into a generalised critique of linguistic rules, social conventions and institutional orders, without ultimately reproducing the methodological individualism of liberal theory as a utopian perspective of critique. Schmidt strictly binds the theory of social laws of nature developed by Marx to the structural features of a society characterised by capitalist commodity production. He thus rejects all attempts to

understand this critical theory of the social nature of capitalist social relations as an ahistorical doctrine of invariants.

Another question arises in connection with the concept of second nature in light of John McDowell's discussion of 'naturalised Platonism' (McDowell, 1996): how must nature be constructed so that it can be conceived not only as a space of causal relations of determination but also of socially embodied freedom and reason? This is not primarily a question about the conditions under which meaningful action, symbolic structures and normative orders can be causally effective (and how constraints of social nature can be overcome through rational practice). Rather, if we want to follow the conviction that, at least in principle, not only blind natural laws but also insights, reasons and arguments can be effective, then the question at issue is how to conceive nature in a way that makes this possible.

The critical theorist does not conclude that wherever human practice follows rules, these must be forms of alienation and socially produced unconsciousness. However, it is distinctive of this theory that it does not let itself be taken in by the socially objective character of institutions, rules and norms. On the contrary, it uncovers their coercive character and exposes them to critique. Social orders do not constitute an unquestionable primacy; they are philosophically on trial. When Marx describes capital as an 'automatic subject', this also implies a fundamental critique. This is true even if the depersonalised social relations of capitalist exchange and exploitation, when compared with pre-modern relations of bondage, are considered as 'progress in the consciousness of freedom' (Hegel) or 'normative progress' in Honneth's sense (Deranty, 2009). A critical materialism of second nature is no ahistorical universalised negativism, which from the very start conceives every form of social objectivity only as an expression of reification. It implies, however, an important corrective against the social-theoretical gullibility currently

shaping the debate on second nature, as can be seen, for example, from the call for abstracts for the 2017 International Hegel Congress on 'Second Nature' (Internationale Hegelvereinigung, 2017).

In his philosophical-historical studies, Schmidt did not strive for superficial topicality. He did not shy away from pursuing allegedly esoteric detours through the history of materialism, working through now almost forgotten debates and reintroducing medieval heretics, ostracised precursors and lost strands of the Enlightenment. His works on the intellectual history of critical theory and its political-historical realm of experience are particularly important today, especially if we want to see Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse not just as precursors and instigators of contemporary varieties of critical theory (from communicative reason to recognition theory) but take them seriously in their own – nowadays seemingly old-fashioned – philosophical profiles, even though neither the philosophical materialism of the French Enlightenment nor the philosophy of Schopenhauer are currently en vogue. Schmidt's engagement with Marx makes it clear that philosophical insights can often be won from intensive examination of the texts themselves and their material content rather than by superficial attempts at bringing them up to date, a task primarily concerned with the adaptation of relevant themes to the guiding ideas of the academic zeitgeist. Schmidt has supplied important impulses for the international discussion of Marx and for a critical concept of materialism. Even though these have not been mentioned in the official track record of critical theory until now, or figure only in the margins, their importance can be found in works outside the narrow specialist community of philosophy. In contrast to both the Althusser school and representatives of the 'new reading of Marx' (Elbe, 2008), Schmidt is not simply concerned with the internal reconstruction of the original programme of a critique of political economy. His reference to Marx is not blinded by the systematic character of Marx's

analysis: the grandiose systematic architecture of his theory is the expression of the tragedy of individuals.

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# Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge: From the Underestimated Subject to the Political Constitution of Commonwealth

Richard Langston

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT, OVERVIEW AND BIOGRAPHIES**

Already a celebrated filmmaker on account of his internationally acclaimed feature film *Yesterday Girl* (1966), writer, filmmaker and jurist Alexander Kluge first encountered Jürgen Habermas's gifted assistant Oskar Negt from afar when in late May 1968 Negt, whose tutorial on Marx's Parisian manuscripts later that year would draw between 700 and 800 activists, contributed to the Extra-Parliamentary Opposition's transformation of Frankfurt's Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University into the short-lived Karl Marx-University (Kluge, 2001: 12). As Negt tells it, a year later Kluge stood out among the many students (many of whom were Theodor W. Adorno's or Habermas's pupils), unionists and community members sitting in his philosophy of law seminar in Frankfurt's newly opened Juridicum (Negt, 1991: 89). 'I noticed him in several class meetings', Negt recalled decades later, 'especially

since he took notes so diligently' (Negt, 2012b: 299). Only momentarily taken aback by Kluge's fame, Negt was quickly entranced by Kluge's unanticipated introduction one day and the sudden intensity of their discussion about the protest movement and the public forms it assumed and exploited. After several 'theory marathons' between the two, Negt invited Kluge to coauthor a book that would become the first of three interlocking treatises spanning three decades (Kluge, 2001: 15). *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (1972) and everything published and broadcast in its wake bears the mark of this tumultuous transition in West German society and politics that originally brought these unlikely bedfellows together. In the preface to their third and final volume, from 1992, the essay collection *Maßverhältnisse des Politischen* [Measured Relations of the Political], Negt and Kluge appraised their 30 years of thinking and writing together as a 'joint effort [...] to analyze what [they] call the *political*' – a category distinct

from professional politics – by interrogating not only the metamorphic ‘elements and components’ of but also the necessary conditions for emancipation, subjective autonomy and commonwealth [*Gemeinwesen*] building (Negt and Kluge, 1992: 9–10). Echoing their mentor Adorno’s posthumous exhortation that ‘theory is a form of praxis’, this political dimension subtending all of Negt and Kluge’s ‘joint philosophy’ [*gemeinsame Philosophie*] is best grasped in terms of what they elsewhere call ‘theory labor’, the production of radical critiques of the existing social order that not only engender missing historical contexts and therefore measurable forms of orientation but also anticipate objective possibilities for confronting the ‘unbearable relations’ of what Sigmund Freud originally called the ‘reality principle’ (Adorno, 2005: 261; Negt and Kluge, 2001b: 480–5; Kluge and Negt, 2014: 139). However, Negt and Kluge parse reality much more with an eye to Marx. Whereas the permanence of primitive accumulation has long defined what counts as reality, the misery engendered by this historical process intent on leaving out ‘essential portions of history’ – the unfulfilled, genuine needs and interests of history’s losers – also harbors antagonistic feelings that form the phantasmagorical basis of a ‘practical critique of [this] alienation’ (Kluge and Negt, 2014: 86, 139; Negt and Kluge, 2016: 33). The task of theory – anti-realist critique – is thus rooted in and driven by misery. At the core of all of their work, then, lies an exacting attention to the conditions of possibility for imagining individual freedom and genuine social happiness. But of all the attendant keywords commonly associated with their sustained collaboration – one need only recall the concepts populating the titles that constitute their trilogy – Negt is quick to remind their readers that ‘only the impetus for independent thought and the expansion of the political power of judgment are meaningful contributions for the peaceful configuration of society. Therein lie the basic themes of [their] joint thinking’ (Negt, 2012b: 305).

‘Critique’, Adorno exclaimed at roughly the same time Negt and Kluge first met, ‘cannot be restricted to a narrow political field’ (Adorno, 2005: 281). Insistent themselves that ‘Critical Theory is and always was a political theory’, Negt and Kluge conceive of the political in their three formal contributions to the Frankfurt School (along with their some 60 television interviews recorded since 1988) broadly (Kluge, 2001: 16n2). Yet each installment is tethered to the very same questions that compelled them to write *Public Sphere and Experience* in the first place: ‘where do people get their self-consciousness? What brings people to trust their experiences? How is autonomy engendered in the individual?’ (Kluge, 2001: 15). Far from pursuing a linear trajectory of thought, Negt and Kluge double back with each ensuing collaboration to ever more fundamental questions. Whereas *Public Sphere and Experience* interrogates the ‘dialectic of the bourgeois and proletarian public spheres’ and, more specifically, the historical production of alienated experience, their follow-up, the monumental *History and Obstinacy*, addresses a lingering question, namely the individual’s persistent ‘need’ to articulate its otherwise repressed, disorganized experiences (Negt and Kluge, 1993: xliii; Negt and Kluge, 2001b: 88). In their words the compliment to Karl Marx’s political economy of capital, this second book burrows downward from societal matters of class experience into ‘the nature of cells, the skin, bodies, the brain, the five senses, and the social organs constructed on top of them’ in its pursuit of a political economy of labor power, a microscopic account of the political potential for protest inherent in the human species that Marx himself never wrote (Kluge and Negt, 2014: 98, 121; Knödler-Bunte, 2014: 60–1). Given all the many intricacies to their account of this obstinate need within every human being, Negt and Kluge bring the political back into view with *Maßverhältnisse des Politischen* by zooming out and delineating the conditions of possibility for honing the political faculty of judgment, especially

in times of epochal upheaval, such as at the dawn of the millennium, when human powers of differentiation were overwhelmed like never before.<sup>1</sup> This red thread coursing through all three collaborations notwithstanding, commentators Hansen and Fore are right to point out that Negt and Kluge's first two works are very much products of their respective decades. The same can be said for their third volume. In the shadow of the student movement's collapse, *Public Sphere and Experience* not only revised Marxian orthodoxy's notion of organization for emergent new social movements but also liberated the concept of experience from the confines of the autonomous aesthetic as Adorno defined it posthumously (Hansen, 1993: xv–xxvi). Written amid a pall of domestic terrorism, counterinsurgency measures and leftist disillusionment in the second half of the West German 1970s, *History and Obstinacy* ekes out its political economy of labor power in the face of what Negt later describes as an era of unprecedented 'socio-association [Vergesellschaftung] from above' that expropriated individual life contexts, or, framed in the language of Habermas, governmental-corporate regimes that thoroughly colonized the life-world of the Federal Republic under Chancellor Helmut Schmidt's rule (Fore, 2014: 19–22; Negt, 2010: 292–3). Written in the wake of major political upheavals marking the dawn of a new post-Cold War era – the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown in 1986; German reunification in 1989; the thoroughly televised, seven-month Gulf War that ended in early 1991; the failure of German intellectuals in the Gulf War; and Francis Fukuyama's case for neoliberalism – *Maßverhältnisse des Politischen* sets out to reclaim for everyday social life a communal notion of the 'political' neither subsumed by professional politics nor complicit in the obliteration of a commonwealth as advocated by proponents of postmodern agonistic pluralism.<sup>2</sup>

Like no other collaborative team within the Frankfurt School, or outside it for that

matter, Negt and Kluge's work together is unique precisely because of what makes each of them so different. Born to prominent middle-class parents in the town of Halberstadt in 1932 and raised by his divorced mother in Berlin from 1946, Kluge trained as a lawyer in Marburg in 1949 and slogged through several internships before moving to Frankfurt, where that university's trustees employed him on account of his 1956 dissertation on self-governance in higher education (Combrink, 2009: 294–300). With Adorno's help, whose acquaintance Kluge made by coincidence in 1955, Kluge apprenticed under film director Fritz Lang in 1958 and then, disillusioned by both law and the studio system, turned to writing prose, to Adorno's dismay. By 1962, he had published his first collection of stories (*Attendance List for a Funeral*, 1966); co-authored a study on financing cultural politics with his legal mentor Hellmut Becker; co-directed two documentary shorts; co-signed the Oberhausen Manifesto that paved the way for German auteur cinema (Rentschler, 1988: 2, 10–13); spoke before the influential West German literary salon Gruppe 47; and laid the foundation for and taught at West Germany's first film school, based at the Ulm School of Design (Hörmann and Eder, 1995).<sup>3</sup> By the end of the 1960s, Kluge's notoriety as author, filmmaker, legal counsel to Adorno, film theoretician, media lobbyist and public intellectual was irrefutable. In the ensuing decades, he maintained his influence within all these parallel fields while shifting, adapting and expanding his praxis to account for transformations in technology, culture and politics. Kluge wrestled, for example, with the problem of television as early as *Public Sphere and Experience*, but it was the advent of West German cable television in the 1980s that brought him to bid farewell to film after making 14 features and invest in private broadcasting instead. In the late 80s and 90s, Kluge and his production company DCTP hunkered down to furnish his three separate television programs (*News & Stories* on Sat.1 and *10 to 11* and *Primetime/Late Edition*

on RTL) with original material every week. Since 2000, he has made an unprecedented literary comeback, beginning with *Chronik der Gefühle* [Chronicle of Feelings] (Kluge, 2000); released swaths of his long out-of-print work in print and on film (Kluge, 2007, 2009); returned to filmmaking; expanded into online streaming video; and most recently collaborated with renowned visual artists on books and museum exhibitions.<sup>4</sup>

While Kluge fondly regards himself as critical theory's gardener, committed to curating its ideas in poetic and aesthetic form – the gardener is but one of two types, says Kluge, characteristic of writers and artists – Negt arguably is that other type, namely the lion tamer at work in the center ring of social politics and theory (Kluge, 2012: 26). Two years Kluge's junior, Negt was the youngest of seven children born to working-class parents who farmed on an East Prussian estate (Negt, 1997: 298; Negt, 2016: 107–25). Evacuated via Denmark to Oldenburg due to Soviet military advances in early 1945, Negt briefly studied law in Göttingen at his father's request before transferring in 1956 to Frankfurt to study philosophy with Max Horkheimer (Negt, 1991: 76). Already a member of West Germany's Social Democratic Party by 1954, Negt assumed leading roles in the party's Socialist German Student Union in 1958 and taught at a trade-union school outside Frankfurt in 1960; the outcome of these early pedagogical experiences was Negt's first, best-selling publication, *Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen: Zur Theorie der Arbeiterbildung* (1968) [Sociological Fantasy and Exemplary Learning: Toward a Theory of Labor Education]. After completing his dissertation on Auguste Comte and G.W.F. Hegel under Adorno's direction in 1962, Negt followed Habermas to Heidelberg as his assistant in philosophy and then returned to Frankfurt, where in 1970 he was briefly considered for the deceased Adorno's chair before he accepted an appointment in sociology at the Leibniz University of Hanover.

There he and colleagues like the social psychologist Regina Becker-Schmidt, sociologist Detlev Claussen and interdisciplinary psychoanalyst Alfred Lorenzer established a Hanoverian School of Critical Theory (Açıkgöz, 2014: 195, 211–15). His academic calling and concomitant publishing certainly did not preclude the continuation of his previous political commitments. An early member of the Socialist Bureau committed to organizing the frayed New Left (Negt, 1973), Negt advocated in the early 1970s for alternative schools like the Glocksee-Schule of Hanover (Negt, 1997, 2014); battled in the 1980s for the 35-hour working week (Negt, 1984) and for unions (Negt, 1989); and championed the SPD and its coalition with the Green Party, as well as European integration (Negt 1983b, 1998, 2012a, 2008). He even advised Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Negt, 2002).

Negt's and Kluge's familial backgrounds, theoretical training, vocations, experiences and temperaments could not be more different. In fact, Kluge once fondly labeled himself and Negt 'incompatible opposites' (Kluge, 2001: 7). This contrast applies equally to their respective relationships to philosophy and theory; whereas Negt is far more apt to ground his thinking in ancient Greek and modern German philosophical traditions (not to mention works from the Frankfurt School's first generation), Kluge, certainly no stranger to Negt's influences, has long demonstrated a curiosity, if not appreciation, for contemporary French and Anglo-American thought, developments that Negt himself has regarded over the years as misled 'theoretical fads' (Knödler-Bunte et al., 2014: 36; Negt, 2014: 71; Negt, 1983a). Yet even the most superficial of differences, like Kluge's penchant for associative montage, best exemplified by his films, and Negt's drive for concentrated logic, typical of his finely honed academic speeches, never express themselves in any predictable division of labor (Kluge, 2001: 8). 'It was typical in *History and Obstinacy*', Negt once explained, 'that I introduced the literary examples while Kluge was much more



oriented toward Marxist orthodoxy. [...] An inversion took place that made for a very satisfying cooperation' (Negt, 1991: 90–1). Of central importance for every installment in their entire theoretical project, cooperation for Negt and Kluge involved forging every sentence together while nevertheless allowing room for both individual differences and mutual trust to thrive (Kluge, 2001: 9).<sup>5</sup> The resultant trilogy stands out, with respect to their respective outputs. While Negt occasionally references his collaborations with Kluge in his own major publications – e.g., his own trilogy *Kindheit und Schule in einer Welt der Umbrüche* (1997) [Childhood and Schools in a World of Upheavals], *Arbeit und menschliche Würde* (2001) [Labor and Human Dignity] and *Der politische Mensch* (2010) [Political Man] – these works address more his own immediate political interests than they do ideas developed with Kluge. And while Kluge's literature, films and videos resonate with ideas developed with Negt and even occasionally riff on Negt's own independent publications, they are more likely to mediate this 'theory labor' on the aesthetic plane than to engage in it directly (Streckhardt, 2016). All in all, appreciation of Negt and Kluge's joint contributions to critical theory must recognize not only the thematic thread coursing through each of their three publications but also the decade-long pauses in between that have afforded each thinker opportunities to pursue his own interests in works which themselves must be regarded as just as much a part of the Frankfurt School canon as their principal collaborations.

In spite of their direct involvement in the Institute of Social Research and close acquaintance with its major players since the 1950s – above all but certainly not limited to Adorno, Horkheimer and Habermas – Negt and Kluge's theoretical relationship to their elders of the first generation and their peers from the second generation of the Frankfurt School is not as self-evident as it might appear. Although the authors frame

the outset of their debut, *Public Sphere and Experience*, as a corrective to Habermas's *habilitation* thesis, the actual impetus for their first and subsequent collaborations was certainly not any formal, sustained tangle with Habermas or, for that matter, his subsequent reconstruction of critical theory, a shift Negt and Kluge certainly keep at arm's length (Negt and Kluge, 2016: 1; Negt, 1991: 91). While they have occasionally awarded others from their own generation, like Karl-Otto Apel, Claus Offe, Alfred Schmidt and Albrecht Wellmer, cursory attention, thinkers associated with the School's third generation, like Axel Honneth, Christoph Menke and Martin Seel, appear nowhere in their more recent work. (In fact, these 'grandchildren' have little if anything to say about Negt and Kluge; Honneth's 1980 essay on work, for example, is entirely oblivious to Negt and Kluge's longstanding attention to matters of production (Honneth, 1982).) When Negt and Kluge do engage the Frankfurt School directly, they are, more often than not, in dialogue with their aforementioned mentors, as well as Walter Benjamin. Nevertheless, neither their repeated reliance on Horkheimer's landmark study of the authoritarian family (Negt and Kluge, 2016: 75–7; Kluge and Negt, 2014: 345–7) nor their stated adherence to Adorno's new categorical imperative after Auschwitz (Kluge and Negt, 2014: 198); neither their adoption of Benjamin's constellative method and reliance on his philosophical theses of history (Kluge and Negt, 2014: 93; Negt and Kluge, 2001a: 909; Negt and Kluge, 2001b, 282–3); nor even the centrality awarded to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a foil for the whole of their interventions (Kluge and Negt, 2014: 267–94) encapsulates the definitive point of continuity between them and their mentors. Although a wide net cast for a broad theme like that of experience, its loss and sought-after redemption – one of the oldest motifs in all of critical theory – could certainly establish a conceptual lineage passing between Benjamin's and Adorno's opposing views,

Negt has repeatedly insisted that his collaborations with Kluge were never motivated by any doctrinal sense of loyalty to already established subject matter, let alone any need to remedy their mentors' oversights and omissions (Jay, 2005: 313, 357; Negt, 2007: CD 3, lecture 19, track 16). Contrary to the strictures typical of academic philosophy, Negt has contended that it was always the Frankfurt School's unparalleled toolkit for thinking philosophically about 'the weal and woe of a commonwealth' that fueled their collaborations, even if it meant parting ways with Adorno, Horkheimer and Habermas (Negt, 1991: 92). A 'central epistemological entry point' into the problems facing contemporary societies, critical theory was an inherently political project insofar as 'theory labor' always 'strives to provide praxis with a measurable amount of orientation' for steering clear of imminent danger and suffering (Negt, 2007: CD 3, lecture 19, track 17; Negt and Kluge, 2001b: 483).

## PUBLIC SPHERE AND EXPERIENCE

*Public Sphere and Experience* emerged less as a theoretical corrective to Habermas's 1962 *habilitation*, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, than as a response to, if not intervention into, the vicious circle of violence that began plaguing West Germany in the late 1960s. 'Life that reacts with violence', they implored in the final chapter of *Public Sphere and Experience*, 'is not able to organize itself as life' (Negt and Kluge, 2016: 186). This menace first emerged with the shooting of student protesters incited, in part, by inflammatory language in the yellow press, and soon begat counter-violence in the form of vandalism and arson (Negt, 1995: 78–97). Domestic terrorism ensued and democracy in the Federal Republic suddenly seemed in jeopardy. Originally a book contracted to address public spheres excluded by both

media cartels and Habermas's account of the dominant bourgeois one, *Public Sphere and Experience* did nonetheless take exception to Habermas's insistence that what he calls the 'plebeian public sphere' is a mere 'variant' of the classical bourgeois sphere, one presumably oriented toward the latter's intentions (Negt, 2012b: 299; Habermas, 1989: xviii). Departing from Benjamin's conviction that history is always written by the victors, Negt and Kluge maintained that Habermas's concept fails to account for two key constituents of real human life – labor (i.e., the production process) and the family (i.e., the realm of socialization) – and therefore inadvertently occludes all non-bourgeois experience, a 'block of real life' they subsumed under the intentionally anachronistic category of the 'proletarian context of living' (Negt and Kluge, 1993: 57, xlvi). Making Habermas's account even more problematic for Negt was its omission of National Socialism's "'strong" public sphere', a historical caesurae when the reign of the classical bourgeois public sphere waned and the collusion of capital and ideology steamrolled proletarian experience entirely by valorizing and mobilizing the aforementioned precluded realms of work and familial life altogether (Negt and Kluge, 2016: 12n22, 166–9; Negt, 1991: 91). What distinguishes pre-fascist and fascist imperialisms from the imperialism characteristic of the contemporary 'capitalist global public sphere' in which Negt and Kluge found themselves is the latter's inward turn (Negt and Kluge, 2016: 166). In this new 'public sphere of production', where public and private are blurred, human beings have become the 'raw material' with which capital, operating on the plane of multinational consciousness industries, ensures its future growth (2016: 18). 'The libidinal fantasies of human beings, their hopes, wishes, needs, are no longer set free', Negt and Kluge summarize, 'are no longer capable of developing themselves in accordance with random interests, but are concretely occupied with use-values, with

commodities' (2016: 172). This alienating homogenization and the attendant synchronization of family life, education and work block full class consciousness, extirpate proletarian experience and foreclose critique. Yet even the most advanced forms of capital allow for contradictions like the student insurrections of 1968 and therefore draw attention to the structural limits of its desired subsumption of the mind: 'The overall organization of the human being resists being reduced to *one* interest that presents itself as the whole. In this respect there is a difference between [...] the technical enlistment of the human brain, and its real mode of functioning, which has its foundation in the libidinal economy' (2016: 185). This limit, they insist, reveals the proverbial silver lining where a 'most progressive solution' could be found, where the utopian quotient of Negt and Kluge's social theory emerges (2016: 171; Negt and Kluge, 1993: xliii; Jameson, 1988: 157). The Herculean task for emancipation would entail nothing short of reclaiming fantasy itself, such that dispossessed classes are capable of reorganizing themselves according to their own interests and needs. To this end, an effective counter-public sphere would necessarily have to pit its own ideas, products and production sectors against those of private capital and its co-conspirator, the 'illusory public sphere' (Negt and Kluge, 2016: 79–80). Against Habermas's distributive model of the classical bourgeois public sphere, Negt and Kluge imagine a model rooted in production capable of articulating otherwise repressed experiences that, when collectively organized, could constitute resistance in the form of a proletarian public sphere (Knödler-Bunte, 1975: 65–7). This program has been the theoretical structure upon which Kluge has erected his entire aesthetic project.

That *Public Sphere and Experience* struck a chord with sympathizers of West Germany's New Left caught in the throes of its deterioration had less to do with any reunification of their bygone cause or

identity than with the potential of the concept of experience, which Negt and Kluge's book had shot through with 'openness, inclusiveness, multiplicity, heterogeneity, unpredictability, conflict, contradiction, [and] difference' (Hansen, 1993: xviii). In other words, Negt and Kluge delivered a sorely needed remedy for the 'hunger of experience' plaguing myriad constituencies (feminist, environmentalist, pacifist, LGBT) associated with West Germany's 'new social movements' (Hansen, 1993: xix). Shortly before the English-language translation appeared in 1993 Anglo-American scholars interested in matters of the public sphere chided Negt and Kluge for their perceived 'romantic' emphasis on production – for cultural studies scholars, consumption was then the locus of subversive agency – as well as their blindness to gender (Polan, 1990: 39). Others underscored just how prescient the book's authors were with respect to the coming of 'electronically mediated' 'postliberal, postliterary public formations' comprised of 'unstable mixtures of different types of publicity' that 'cut across [...] the traditional opposition of public and private' (Hansen, 1993: xxviii–xxx). The relevance of *Public Sphere and Experience* was reinvigorated yet again when Negt, writing in the shadow of appalling right-wing violence against asylum seekers in newly reunified Germany, conjectured that in spite of recent structural shifts in electronic media their account of the debilitating effects of 'public spheres of production' on experience and democracy still holds (Negt, 1995: 94–103). Addressing whether their argument conceived in the era of print journalism and television still applies to the digital age, Negt and Kluge contended in 2014 that the media oligopolies of yesterday, so central to their original account of the consciousness industry, now struggle against innovations emerging out of Silicon Valley; and yet the questions and concepts underpinning their first book are not so much invalidated as 'merely *radicalized*' by recent technological advances

(Negt and Kluge, 2016: xliii–xliv). The validity of their original claims applies equally to the possibility of counterpublic spheres in the twenty-first century: ‘The fact remains that people, on account of their very nature, cannot adapt completely’, Kluge recently insisted. ‘On the contrary, their very nature makes them insubordinate’ (Kluge, 2015: 123).<sup>6</sup> However, for every claim to its continued relevance – some North American sociologists have even identified Negt and Kluge as models for ‘public sociology’ (Krause, 2006: 119–20) – there are other related discourses for which *Public Sphere and Experience* remains a negligible footnote to Habermas, if at all. Fraser’s important challenges, for example, to the nationalist framework subtending public-sphere theory in the name of illuminating ‘emancipatory possibilities of the present “postnational constellation”’ overlook Negt and Kluge’s prescient account of global public spheres of production, their case for multiple publics and their emphasis on human sensuality as the basis for collective social production (Fraser, 2005: 45–7).<sup>7</sup>

## HISTORY AND OBSTINACY

Assaying the outcomes of their first collaboration almost a decade later, Negt and Kluge emphasized that their first was, in fact, ‘not a book written about the proletarian public sphere, but rather one about the bourgeois public sphere’ (Negt and Kluge, 2001b: 88). (In fact, they say as much at the close of *Public Sphere and Experience*, too, when they write that it can only be ‘defined *negatively*, as a context of blockage wherein experience, needs, wishes, and hopes do concretely come into being but cannot develop in an autonomous fashion’ (Negt and Kluge, 2016: 296).) Originally intended just to ‘illuminate a few obscure points’ from their first book – like the brain’s aforementioned ‘real mode of functioning’ – *History*

and *Obstinacy* evolved to seek out ‘what constitutes the opposite pole to capital’ (Knödler-Bunte et al., 2014: 37). Work on the book mushroomed into a massive 1,245-page tome divided into three four-chapter books comprised of a dizzying array of illustrations, footnotes, excursuses, addenda and commentaries (Negt and Kluge: 2001b: 5).<sup>8</sup> The authors regarded the final product as an exhausting, incomplete fragment full of gaps that readers would need to decipher themselves (Negt and Kluge, 2001b: 1245). Formally the culmination of Kluge’s experimentation with collage in his storybooks *Neue Geschichten: Hefte 1–18* ‘Unheimlichkeit der Zeit’ [New Stories: Notebooks 1–18 ‘The Uncanniness of Time’] (1977) and the revised 1978 edition of *The Battle* (*Schlachtbeschreibung*) (Kluge, 1967, 1978), the content of Negt and Kluge’s follow-up swelled into a rigorous critique of the historical character of labor at a moment in time when the interest in labor both within and without the Frankfurt School was at an all time low.<sup>9</sup> Right when Habermas zeroed in on communicative action (in lieu of purposive-rational action, i.e., work) and not long after Michel Foucault and others left of the Rhine renounced Marxism altogether, Negt and Kluge committed themselves to answering politically pressing questions first raised during the student movement, using, in large part, Marxian tools increasingly out of favor on the increasing post-Marxist Left (Langston, 2013: 52–8; Knödler-Bunte, et al., 2014: 35). Book one, the theoretical linchpin of the entire volume, begins with the historical process of primitive accumulation itself. In accordance with Marx’s critique of political economy, the defining feature of capitalism’s imprint on human history is first established as humankind’s separation from its original property and the imposition of unnatural mandates on its labor capacities. This is the moment when historical labor characteristics (like the sense of having) are imposed on top of the human body’s natural, self-regulating ones. Yet for Negt and Kluge,

the 'exploitative potency' of capital also gives rise to a 'generative potency', a capacity residing within humankind's 'essential powers' for finding 'ways out of the historical structures' of work (Kluge and Negt, 2014: 83). The counterpoint to the preceding account of history as the catastrophic permanence of primitive accumulation, the second chapter establishes self-regulating processes in a wide range of phenomena, from human cells to social history, as the elemental action subtending all obstinacy. In chapter three, Negt and Kluge interrogate references in the mature Marx to a political economy of labor (or the working class) in order to work open the first of several long-ignored contradictions. Whereas the mature Marx only sees the laborer 'like someone who has brought his hide to market', Negt and Kluge identify two simultaneous, contradictory processes quite different from Marx's account of labor as both exchange-value and use-value (Marx, 1990: 280; Martin, 2015: 28). On the one hand, laborers toil outwardly according to the dictates of capital that require self-exploitation, obedience and instrumental reason. On the other, their cells, organs and bodies toil according to an inner law – that of the self-regulating metabolism – effective both in and outside of the workplace such that they either comply or resist the demands of *Kapitallogik* (Kluge and Negt, 2014: 124–5). A fourth chapter struck from the English-language edition details the actual reciprocal give and take – Negt and Kluge advance here a concept of the dialectic as the 'actual shape of cohesive material processes' – between 'historical faculties for laboring' and the obstinate 'capacity for maintaining organic relationality [*Zusammenhang*]' (Negt and Kluge, 2001b: 226, 241).

As much as it resurrects the young Marx's humanist anthropology as a corrective for the mature Marx's de-emphasis on the human factor in his critique of the political economy of capital, *History and Obstinacy* is neither a work of philosophical anthropology nor a philosophy of life, nor is it a contribution

to the sociology of work (Martin, 2015: 26, 32–3, 36n5; Knödler-Bunte et al., 2014: 68). Speaking in 1983, Negt aptly summed up their objective as an inquiry into the contemporary subject in a late capitalist world, a time and place when more and more nature is de-objectified and humans are self-estranged like never before:

The agenda of the analysis of capital has certainly been completed; incomplete is the agenda concerning the constitution of the Subject. Everything that Marx said is correct, but he did not say everything that we need in order to comprehend the modern world [...] How could [Marx] speak scientifically about the constitution of the Subject when in his lifetime there was no psychology of internal development or of compulsive drives? (Negt, 1988: 220; cf. Knödler-Bunte et al., 2014: 58–62)

Far from simply championing the modern subject that Horkheimer and Adorno disparaged in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* for its self-sacrificing tendencies, Negt and Kluge set out to remedy this agenda from the standpoint of Marx's appropriation of Hegel's account of subject–object relations.<sup>10</sup> In order to substantiate this constellation in which modern, chameleon-like subjects find themselves and therewith throw into relief the conditions of possibility for resistance to capital, Negt and Kluge weave a rich tapestry in book one ('The Historical Organization of Labor Capacities') that also calls upon a wide array of thinkers and disciplines, such as Hegel's Logic; Lenin's and Adorno's concepts of the dialectic; Benjamin's aforementioned theses on history; Freud's theory of the drives and culture and the developmental psychology of Piaget; postwar and contemporary French thought (Levi-Strauss, Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze and Guattari); as well as sundry references to the natural, biological and social sciences.

With the second formal section of *History and Obstinacy*, originally entitled 'Germany as a Public Sphere of Production', the authors put their theory of a political economy of labor to the test by framing German history as a two-centuries-old industrial production center

of dead labor that eventually led to the killing factories of Auschwitz (Kluge and Negt, 2014: 83). Why is it, they ask, 'that throughout the entirety of German history the inorganic whole [of historically produced labor capacities] has something deadly about it'? (Negt and Kluge, 2001b: 363.) In pursuit of just some of the characteristics involved in the making of this long tragic history, Negt and Kluge delineate the geographical boundaries of German experience – landlocked Central Europe in contradistinction to the Mediterranean coast prominent in Horkheimer and Adorno's reading of Odysseus – and reach back to the 'ur-trauma of German history', the Peasants' War (1524–5), when capital violently overturned the unique habitus of peasant life (Jameson, 1988: 168). Explicated in part using the tenth-century experiences preserved in the Grimms' fairy tales, this defeat resulted in a recurring set of individual and collective losses (of consciousness, the capacity for differentiation, reality, identity, nation, etc.) that resurface with every major caesura in modern German history: World War I, the rise of National Socialism, Auschwitz, Stalingrad and the terrorism of the Red Army Faction. The fact 'that the actual energies of labor power in Germany never found their own adequate object', they sum up, 'but instead always an object that retracted itself' resulted in an intensification of energies such that the total destruction of both the perceived enemy and part of the self always ensued (Negt and Kluge, 2001b: 368). (Although not entirely denuded of its German focus, the second third of the English-language translation refrains from illuminating in full the unique historical trajectory of Germany's labor capacities and instead underscores just some of the key concepts and characteristics (individual life spans, primitive property, reliability, obstinacy) both valid for a German history of labor power and serviceable for other unwritten local, regional and national histories that lurk beneath the transnational flows of twenty-first-century globalization (Kluge and Negt, 2014: 218; Miller, 2015: 84–5). In the final

third, entitled 'The Violence of Relationality', the authors hark back to the beginning of *History and Obstinacy*, originally a prelude subtitled 'Violence as a Labor Characteristic', and examine those forms of violence – direct, indirect, precise, powerful, physical, structural – characteristic of the work involved in the three primary sites where social exchange transpires: everyday experience from below (versus capital from above), the political economy (of war labor) and intimate personal relationships (i.e., 'love politics'). A final chapter on the centrality of orientation once again takes exception to the geohistorical applicability of Horkheimer and Adorno's diagnosis of modernity. Unlike the sailor Odysseus who navigated the seas according to the starry heavens, we moderns find ourselves in a 'fogbank' and must therefore rely on indirect alternatives ('introversion, discourse, curiosity' (Negt and Kluge, 2001b: 1004, 1012)). When the authors then underscore that they are 'primarily interested in the juxtaposition [of such alternatives] especially since no single form of orientational labor can achieve relationality', they conclude *History and Obstinacy* not with any nostalgic appeal to Lenin's or Lukács's organizational party politics; rather, this practical orientation – 'when every [available alternative] cooperates together' – must arise from the free expression of interests and needs and for that a counterpublic sphere is once again essential (Negt and Kluge, 2001b: 1010; Negt, 1973: 48).

For all its grandiose ambitions, *History and Obstinacy* has long struggled to find a lasting audience, let alone a substantive resonance within academic discourses. Considered an essential 'cult book' in its own day, critical reception among its most obvious addressees – historians and philosophers, economists and sociologists – did not materialize even after the three substantial editions of 1981, 1993 and 2001 (Siebers, 2005: 214; Stollmann, 2005: 235). (Steidl Verlag has planned yet another edition for late 2016 as part of Negt's 20-volume collected works.) The reasons for this lapse are myriad and

can be partially traced back to the book's unwieldy form as well as the untimeliness of its interdisciplinary content. Whereas historians, for example, rejected the book's speculative nature at precisely that moment in the early 1980s when their discipline underwent an empirical paradigm shift (Stollmann and Schulte, 2014: 71), some philosophers engaged with *History and Obstinacy* charitably early on but took issue with the book's bagatelles (like its occasional tautologies, pleonasm and inaccurate synopses of concepts borrowed from the natural sciences), its flirtation with (and disavowal of) questionable discourses (Engels's *Dialectics of Nature*, cybernetics) and its unresolved contradictions and omissions (Burger, 1982: 118–24). Although many within their ranks had begun to question the viability of the subject around the time Negt and Kluge made their case for the subjective factor of obstinacy, German and Anglo-American literary and film studies have from the start been a cornerstone of those speculative disciplines with the greatest investment in *History and Obstinacy*. Still a tendency within Kluge scholarship to this day (Schulte, 2012a, 2012b), early German-language analyses of Kluge's prose and feature films (e.g., Carp, 1987; Bosse, 1989) sought out correspondences between Kluge's poetics and his second collaboration with Negt. Anglo-American scholars later expanded upon this by applying tools developed in *History and Obstinacy* to a wider range of modern and contemporary texts (Adelson, 1993; Langston, 2007; Pavsek, 2013; Schiesser, 2008). Another dominant line of inquiry among Anglo-American critics has sought to identify *History and Obstinacy* as an innovative intervention in contemporary theoretical currents. Bowie contended early on, for example, that Negt and Kluge's appeal lay in their rebuke of Horkheimer and Adorno's negative dialectic as well as Lacan's negative ontology (Bowie, 1985/6: 190), while Jameson drew attention to their 'original and complex' case for multidimensional

forms of resistance that transcend even the dualisms subtending what was then still considered Deleuze and Guattari's cutting-edge schizoanalysis (Jameson, 1988: 173). Others like Pavsek have asserted that Negt and Kluge provide an important corrective to post-Marxist projects (e.g., Laclau and Mouffe and Žižek) intent on reinvigorating socialist strategy under the star of postmodernity (Pavsek, 1996: 152–63). Writing on the occasion of the 2014 English-language translation, some reviewers dug up bygone reservations about Negt and Kluge's conceptual expansion of labor and struggled to size the work up against the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* (allegedly a glaring omission on Negt and Kluge's part) (Wilding, 2015; Langston, 2015: 56–9), while others championed the authors' historiography of human characteristics as the crux of their innovative break with Marx (Martin, 2015: 30–1). Thirty years after his original review of *Geschichte und Eigensinn* Andrew Bowie echoed others in arguing that *History and Obstinacy* is more relevant today than ever before, especially in light of financial capital's global ascendancy, the Great Recession and, most importantly, the metamorphosis of labor into new postindustrial forms of work (Bowie, 2015: 77–8; Langston, 2013; Fore, 2014: 65).

## MEASURED RELATIONS OF THE POLITICAL

A collection of thematically related essays, many of which Negt penned himself, *Maßverhältnisse des Politischen*, sets out to make a claim for the concept of the 'political' at exactly the moment – the aftermath of the fall of the Iron Curtain – when its currency, as Carl Schmitt had defined it in 1927, was on the rise among post-Marxist Leftists (e.g., Hirst, Mouffe, Derrida, Hardt and Negri) (Wolin, 2006: 246–7). In contradistinction to the antagonism between nation states characteristic of Schmitt's treatise, Negt and Kluge

forge in the shadow of German unification a concept of the political relevant for fostering solidarity *within* what they, borrowing from Ferdinand Tönnies, call a commonwealth [*Gemeinwesen*], an inclusive, durable social unit comprised of mutual understanding, organized life interests and collective agency (Negt and Kluge, 2001a: 695, 757–8; Tönnies, 2001: 227–9). In lieu of Schmitt's keywords 'foe' and 'war', Negt and Kluge advance their account of the political with an emphasis on 'friend' and 'peace'. What Negt and Kluge do share with Schmitt is the conviction that politics as Max Weber defined it – a vocation synonymous with the state and its functionaries, professional politicians and their parties – is inherently separate from the affairs of the political. In fact, the pragmatism of institutional realpolitik, Negt and Kluge insist, is rarely if ever organized according to the vital interests of members of the community it purports to represent. In this respect, realpolitik is devoid of any reality and therefore leaves no space for the political to unfold. Like Schmitt, Negt and Kluge frame the political as a function of intensities. But whereas Schmitt sites this affective dimension in the space between friends and foes, they situate it in an 'intensity of feelings' (Negt and Kluge, 2001a: 757).<sup>11</sup> Harking back to their account of labor capacities in the third chapter of *History and Obstinacy*, Negt and Kluge regard feelings rooted in either bodily sensations or 'the social organs constructed on top of them' – in other words, lived unalienated experiences – as the front-line where prevailing conditions in the political economy of labor are either tolerated or protested (Kluge and Negt, 2014: 98, 139). These feelings comprise the raw materials of the political. Far from promoting the manufacture or governance of actual feelings – feelings can only emerge and form associations with one another of their own accord – Negt and Kluge turn instead to Hegel's concept of measured relations [*Maßverhältnisse*] in order to underscore the quantitative and qualitative conditions and

forms through which these raw materials find expression. When the forms and measured relations that feelings assume fail to express their sense of protest adequately, then 'violent explosions regularly occur' (Negt and Kluge, 2001a: 721). And when they do take shape, what differentiates an outcome like National Socialism from the French Revolution is not its intensity but rather the forms and measured relations it assumes. 'Political energies and qualities require', the authors underscore in the foreword to the first edition of *Maßverhältnisse des Politischen*, 'time, recognizable places, [and] the subject's capacity for autonomy' (Negt and Kluge, 1992: 10–11). Without sufficient spare time, for example, the affective capacity for differentiation never matures; the political faculty of judgment fails to materialize; feelings cannot integrate themselves into the organic fabric of a commonwealth; and, as a consequence, any political response is all but certain to fail. Central to the conditions of possibility for any collective praxis is making enough time for raw materials to transform into collective learning processes. For this, the temporal relations under late capital typified by stretches of boredom, on the one hand, and imperceptible high speeds, on the other, must be arrested or at the very least challenged. 'Incubation periods are necessary', they had already declared in *History and Obstinacy*: 'These pauses are time sluices [and] make it possible that [...] velocities adapt to one another, that subjective and objective relations unify into one subjective-objective relationship' (Negt and Kluge, 2001b: 212). Kluge scholars have long held that his montage is an exemplary aesthetic praxis intent on fashioning such sluices.

### **NEGT AND KLUGE'S 'STRUCTURE OF THOUGHT'**

Ten years after the publication of *Maßverhältnisse des Politischen*, Negt and



Kluge published transcriptions of what must be considered their fourth and most recent collaboration.<sup>12</sup> Entitled *Suchbegriffe* [Search Terms], the first third of volume one of their ‘joint philosophy’ contains 26 televised interviews reaching back to 1988 that address a multitude of topics ranging from globalization to the ideology of flexibility, from the Enlightenment’s interest in encyclopedic knowledge to the West German student movement, from Kant’s categorical imperative to Verdi’s operas.<sup>13</sup> Neither garden-variety television interviews nor an underlying concession to Habermas’s case for communicative rationality, Negt and Kluge’s dialogues demonstrate their very ‘structure of thought’, not for passive consumption but with the open invitation to spectators to actively think alongside them and join in the production of thought itself (Langston, 2010). Negt and Kluge’s dialogues are, Negt once explained, ‘not about reiterating philosophical treatises and certainly not about mulling over texts by members of the Frankfurt School’. ‘Our thinking’, he added, ‘rebels against that, against limitations arising from disciplines, academic training, unconsidered traditions, or imitation’ (Stollmann and Schulte, 2014: 72). So while Negt and Kluge have indeed resorted to thinkers like Kant and Marx in order to move beyond both Adorno’s underestimation of fantasy and his patently bourgeois notion of individual emancipation (Negt, 1991: 92), it is also indisputable that they have ‘radicalize[d] Adorno’s [...] insights into the non-identity presupposed by capitalist identity’ by shining light on the historical emergence of labor power’s obstinacy (Martin, 2015: 27). And while Negt and Kluge are both quick to admit their gratitude to Habermas’s thought – their recurrent attention to the concept of interests culled from his *Knowledge and Human Interests* is just one example of such indebtedness – they purposefully refrain from following him down his path toward communicative action; in matters dear to Negt and Kluge, like labor power, the psychic constitution of subjects

and the actuality of utopian thinking in the new millennium, Habermas has been a negligible influence (Langston, 2010: 273–5; Langston, 2015: 66–7). Negt and Kluge were never ‘orthodox devotees’ of any one Frankfurt School figurehead or line of inquiry (Stollmann and Schulte, 2014: 72). ‘I actually made a point of not writing about the Frankfurt School’, Negt once confessed (Negt, 1991: 80). Instead, he and Kluge have sought to apply the Frankfurt School’s original mode of thinking – Negt invokes the image of ‘*bohrendes Denken* [thought that bores holes] – to topics untouched by their mentors and peers (Stollmann and Schulte, 2014: 72). Critical thought for Negt and Kluge entails ‘assimilating the “humane implications” [of the Frankfurt School] and putting them to the test on historically different objects’ (Negt, 1991: 82). Underlying all their intertwined topics – counterpublic spheres, human obstinacy, the political potential of everyday feelings – lies the conviction that in spite of the history of misery engendered by capital, human subjects are still capable of producing their own happiness.

## Notes

Unless otherwise noted, all translations into the English are those of the author.

- 1 A concept that first gains momentum in their political economy of labor, the faculty of differentiation [*Unterscheidungsvermögen*] advances, especially in Kluge’s own essay on the privatization of mass media from the 1980s, as an answer to what Habermas called in an essay from 1985 the postmodern predicament of ‘obscurity’ (cf. Kluge, 1985: 88). The loss of this faculty in the German history of social experience is expounded best in the English-language translation in the twelfth commentary to chapter 5 (Kluge and Negt, 2014: 268–96). See also Negt’s enumeration of the five most pressing flash points (globalization, labor crises, education, the ethical dimension of technological progress, depoliticization) facing Europe in the twenty-first century (Negt, 2010: 161–77).
- 2 In the preface to his storybook *The Devil’s Blind Spot* (2004), Kluge encapsulates the sense of

- despair that quickly clouded over the initial euphoria associated with German reunification: 'After 1991, following the disintegration of the Russian imperium, as we looked forward to the year 2000, I had the feeling that the new century would take the bitter experience of the 20th century and turn it around into something hopeful. But are we now seeing instead a relapse into the era of the Thirty Years' War?' (vii).
- 3 For the most thorough English-language biography of Kluge published to date, see Lutze, 1998: 33–61. Select biographical details about Negt in English can be gleaned from Stollmann and Schulte, 2014.
  - 4 For an overview of the historical context, development and inner workings of Kluge's television programs, see Uecker, 2000. See also the essays in Schulte and Siebers, 2002 and Lämmle, 2013. On Kluge's post-televisual foray into the digital, see Ekardt, 2011. Kluge's online portal for streaming video can be found at [www.dctp.tv](http://www.dctp.tv).
  - 5 See Philipp's engrossing interview with Negt and Kluge (Philipp, 2007) for further details on their remarkable working method.
  - 6 The technological grounds for this radicalization, says Kluge, not only put the remaining representatives of the classical public sphere on the defensive but also foreclose 'individually produced modes of experience'. See Kluge's account of the internet's 'bewildering expansion of public spheres' in Kluge, 2015: 121–3.
  - 7 Morris's recent critical account of the Occupy Wall Street movement throughout the United States and its reliance on cellphone technology is a notable exception to this tendency to disregard Negt and Kluge (Morris, 2013).
  - 8 Pared down to roughly a third of its original size, the 2014 English-language translation retains the theoretical essentials while either updating or jettisoning material on German history deemed irrelevant for non-German readers. The ensuing discussion pays particular attention to the translation but nevertheless includes salient references to the original from 1981. Both the 1993 and 2001 editions of *Geschichte und Eigensinn* include revisions, some slight and others substantial.
  - 9 On the relationship between form and content in *History and Obstinacy*, Negt concurred that the book's fragmentary collage is, on the one hand, 'a critique of systematic thinking'. On the other, their reverence for systematic thinking as exemplified by Kant, Hegel and Marx leaves its traces throughout the book (Stollmann and Schulte, 2014: 84). For an account of the photograph's role within the network of illustrations in *History and Obstinacy*, see also Harris, 2014.
  - 10 In one of many scattered methodological commentaries transplanted from an original chapter on the subjective–objective elements of Germany's public sphere of production, mostly excised for the English-language translation, Negt and Kluge underscore the importance of subjective–objective relations as theorized by Hegel and Marx and insist that such relations in societies must be grasped not in terms of any given appearance but rather how subjects and objects 'always depend upon a constellation' (Kluge and Negt, 2014: 243). See also Langston, 2015: 51.
  - 11 The tenth commentary from the 1981 German edition of *History and Obstinacy* entitled 'The Political as Intensity of Everyday Feeling' was originally the title of Kluge's 1979 acceptance speech on receiving the Fontane Prize for Literature; it counts as a cornerstone of Kluge poetics. See Negt and Kluge, 1981: 1175–84 and Kluge, 1986. An entirely different text, the tenth commentary (as well as the sixteenth) is republished verbatim as chapter three in *Maßverhältnisse des Politischen*.
  - 12 Only occasionally cited in German-language scholarship, and in cursory fashion, *Maßverhältnisse des Politischen* boasts no substantial reception compared to its two predecessors. Ganahl suggests that this may be due to incongruities between Negt and Kluge's humanism, rooted in nineteenth-century philosophy and tethered to a 'structural Eurocentrism', and a growing number of contemporary theorists like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and others interested in a subaltern politics 'trans-continental, trans-ethnic, and trans-cultural' in outlook (Ganahl, 1992: 176).
  - 13 A selection of 30 of Negt and Kluge's interviews are available to the general public through the Cornell University online portal 'Alexander Kluge: Cultural History in Dialogue': <https://kluge.library.cornell.edu/conversations/negt>. [Accessed 1 May 2018].

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# Hans-Jürgen Krahls: Social Constitution and Class Struggle

Jordi Maiso

Hans-Jürgen Krahls (1943–70) has fallen into oblivion. If he is ever mentioned, it is usually as the rebellious student of Theodor W. Adorno who turned against his teacher during the student demonstrations of the late 1960s, and in so doing, revealed a supposed rupture between critical theory and emancipatory praxis. The tipping point of the conflict was the occupation of the Institut für Sozialforschung in January 1969, led by Krahls, which eventually caused Adorno to call the police.<sup>1</sup> It is said that Adorno asked for a can of spray paint during the occupation, as he also wanted to write graffiti that read: ‘This Krahls is inhabited by wolves’. This story fits the clichés that have become established since then about the ‘protest movement’ labelled as ‘1968’, as well as those related to Adorno’s alleged contradictions. However, strictly speaking, these commonplaces do not provide an accurate understanding of what was at stake in the frictions and affinities between some politicised students and the various generations of

lecturers in Frankfurt, who were, above all, their mentors.<sup>2</sup> These platitudes are even less helpful in understanding the figure of Krahls himself, who was undoubtedly the most prominent head of the student movement in Germany. His premature death in a car accident on the night of 13–14 February, 1970, at the age of 27, abruptly curtailed an intellectual career that had barely begun. ‘He is irreplaceable, and I am convinced that he would have been a remarkable person’, Max Horkheimer wrote to his parents after hearing the news of his death (Horkheimer, 1970). ‘He was the cleverest of us all’, Rudi Dutschke said at some point (quoted by Reinicke, 2013: 282).

Krahls was, along with Dutschke, the main figure of the anti-authoritarian movement in the Federal Republic of Germany. Both of them were decisive at the height of the protests between 1967 and 1969. But Krahls essentially stood out as the movement’s theoretician, constantly standing guard for theory against the anti-intellectualism and hostility

within his own ranks, while Dutschke emphasised political agitation (Claussen, 1985: 427; Reinicke, 2010). The brief life of the movement was marked by the tragic fate of both figures. Dutschke was shot on the Berlin Kurfürstendamm in April 1968, and he would die 11 years later as a consequence of his injuries. Krahls sudden demise in February 1970 was a real blow. The protest movement was undergoing a seemingly unstoppable breakdown process into small sectarian groups. In fact, the main student association during the protest movement, the SDS (*Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund* [Socialist German Student Federation]), would informally dissolve immediately after Krahls burial and officially a few weeks later. But it could be said that his demise sealed not only the breakdown of the student movement in West Germany but also the phase in which Frankfurt was the epicentre of critical social theory. Adorno had died of a sudden heart attack barely six months before, and his theoretical positions were not pursued further at the University of Frankfurt; Horkheimer had been retired in Montagnola for some time. Among the youngest, only Schmidt would stay in Frankfurt. Oskar Negt would soon move to Hanover in order to establish a new focus of critical social theory there; Jürgen Habermas, for his part, would leave for Starnberg to develop his theory of communicative action at the Max Planck Institute. His return to the University of Frankfurt in 1983 was the beginning of a different phase.

But who was Hans-Jürgen Krahls? Although he did not receive as much media attention as Dutschke, his intellectual and political potential was extraordinary. If Günter Grass came to refer to the student revolt as the 'well-read revolution' (Wesel, 2002: 39), given that its main members had a solid theoretical background, this was especially true for Krahls. There is no shortage of evidence of his extensive scholarship, which was not limited to the Marxian tradition, since he has also been shown to be familiar with the philosophical work of Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche,

Plato and Aristotle, with literary Classicism and German Romanticism (Hölderlin, Jean Paul) and with authors such as G. Büchner, S. George and G. Benn.<sup>3</sup> Adorno described him as one of his most brilliant students, and he was perhaps the only one capable of holding his own not only with Habermas, Negt and Schmidt but also with Ralf Dahrendorf and Alexander Mitscherlich. However, Krahls barely published during his lifetime. The period of heightened politicisation and protests between 1967 and 1969 left no time for a conventional academic career. His doctoral thesis on the 'natural laws of capitalist development', supervised by Adorno, had been put on hold with the emergence of the protest movement. What has come to us from his work is irrevocably fragmented and bears witness to the fact that his thought was abruptly interrupted: he left mainly unfinished papers, texts and transcriptions of seminar presentations, teach-ins and other speeches, as well as some notes and reflections.

His main book, *Konstitution und Klassenkampf. Zur historischen Dialektik von bürgerlichen Emanzipation und proletarischer Revolution* [Social Constitution and Class Struggle. On the Historical Dialectic of Bourgeois Emancipation and Proletarian Revolution] (Krahls, 1971), edited by some of his comrades a year after his death, consists of 400 tightly written pages containing writings and presentations from 1966 to February 1970. As Detlev Claussen has pointed out (Maiso, 2009: 121), this volume brought together texts that were produced at a time when theoretical work was conceived as being part of a process of political intervention – a conception which arose in the midst of the student movement – and it cannot be evaluated according to the conventional criteria for a theoretical work. It was down to Krahls friends and comrades that his mainly spoken or scrawled words would take the form of a printed book.<sup>4</sup> This should be borne in mind when reading these writings, as most of them were not intended to be fixed and exposed, or to be made available to readers



who today can barely guess what was at stake in each utterance. Hence, the book has remained largely an 'historical document' of a theoretical-political path that was inextricably linked to the anti-authoritarian movement and would disappear with it.

However, these writings may also offer something more. For they reveal Krahls search for a theoretical and political position capable of living up to the demands of his time; he was aware that the tradition that had emerged from the labour movement was no longer useful, and that the priority of critical theory was to articulate the potential for social transformation available within advanced capitalism. Undoubtedly, Krahls language and interests were marked by the anti-authoritarian movement from which they emerged, but his search remained and remains central to any living critical theory. The aim was to grasp social reality from the point of view of its transformation (Krahl, 1971: 248). Theory was to be once again a 'material force' in history. Krahls therefore embodied an understanding of critical theory that was completely alien to the academic drifts that have prevailed since his death, starting mainly in the 1970s. What constituted this understanding was mainly its partisanship, its rejection of 'pure' knowledge, as well as an eminently political drive. 'Krahls death in 1970 symbolised the death of this political orientation in West Germany, something that could only be suspected at the time: the 1970s were marked by spontaneous, vertically structured parties and the RAF' (Claussen, 1985: 426). The historical understanding of the anti-authoritarian phase of the protest movement has been overshadowed by what followed: the dissolution of the movement into small sectarian groups of Maoist or Marxist-Leninist bent and into factions that opted for armed struggle. In German public discussion, the protest movement, sometimes including Krahls himself (Kalitz, 2007: 127 ff.), has been reduced to a mere 'antecedent' of the armed actions of the Red Army Faction or the 2 June Movement in the 1970s.

Together with Krahls untimely death and his scattered and fragmented oeuvre, this is perhaps the greatest difficulty in understanding the relevance of his contributions and his political and intellectual physiognomy.

## THE FORGING OF 'ROBESPIERRE FROM BOCKENHEIM'

Krahls himself provided significant testimonies about his political and intellectual path. The main document in this regard is his famous 'Angaben zur Person' [Personal information], an improvised speech delivered at the trial of the demonstrators against the granting of the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade to the Senegalese president, Léopold Senghor. In this speech Krahls showed off his abilities as an orator, and recounted how his 'odyssey through the forms of organisation of the ruling class' (Krahl, 1971: 20) had led him to the anti-authoritarian movement. When Krahls gave this speech, in October, 1969, he was barely 26 years old, and was already a public personality. This pale and fragile young man with a glass eye (he lost his right eye in a bombing when he was barely one year old) exhibited here a rhetorical style that was self-assured, precise and scathing. Barely two years earlier, in June 1967, the complicated Adornian-Hegelian jargon used in the speech he delivered in a protest over the murder of the student Benno Ohnesorg in Berlin emptied the campus (Claussen, 1985: 427). He had now become a brilliant orator and a figurehead for the movement, and had managed to gain the respect even of those who did not share his political positions (Schütte, 1970: 711). Given his talent as an agitator, the media would refer to him as the 'Robespierre from Bockenheim', alluding to the Frankfurt district where the university was based. For Krahls was not only the major figurehead of the movement: like Dutschke, he was right at the forefront, both in the teach-ins and

assemblies and in the confrontations with the police.

A sort of personal legend began to emerge around Krahls, which he himself would help to create.<sup>5</sup> Although he did not care much about his appearance and did not at first stand out among the stylised and subversive looks that prevailed in the movement, Krahls embodied an existential radicalism. The attempt to give birth to new forms of individuality after the historical decline of the bourgeois subject became a way of life for him. He had no fixed address and often no money either. He slept in friends' houses, shared flats or student lodgings, always accompanied by his bag filled with books and notes. He had no library, but he had read a lot and had a prodigious memory. He did not hide his homosexuality, and his stamina with alcohol was legendary (he drank quadruple shots of *Korn*). Despite coming from a humble family from Lower Saxony, which had allowed him to have a good education, he often alluded to a presumed aristocratic origin, and even mentioned the dynasty of the von Hardenbergs, which would make him nothing less than a descendant of Novalis (zur Lippe, 1989: 122; Rabehl, 1997: 42). These attempts to devise a character, however, were probably above all a kind of armour, an attempt to protect himself. He was an intelligent and sensitive young man who had quickly become a public figure and who, despite his many admirers and adepts, was rather lonely (Wesel, 2002: 130).

But Krahls knew that his personal path was also symptomatic, as it gave a voice to the politicising process of a young generation in post-Nazi Germany. In his 'Angaben zur Person', he shed light on the hidden side of the Adenauer restoration and the economic miracle in West Germany, which led this generation to grow in an atmosphere of tacit continuity with the national-socialist past:

In Lower Saxony, at least in the places where I come from, what can be called the ideology of the soil still dominates to a large extent, so in my political education process I could only move within a spectrum that ranged from the German Party to

the Guelph Party. I could not even access the ideologies of liberalism and parliamentarism. It must be borne in mind that in the villages where I grew up, meetings still retained that non-public sphere reminiscent of the rituals of witchcraft trials in the Middle Ages. (Krahls, 1971: 19)

His journey would lead him to pass through mystical and ultranationalist groups such as the Luddendorffbund, close to the ideology of blood and soil, until in 1961, when he was only 18 years old, he founded the youth section of the Christian Democrat Union (CDU) in his native town. It was through the church that he heard, for the first time, news of the resistance against Nazism. But even in his earliest years at university, in Göttingen, he frequented elitist student associations that practised fencing. Intellectually, he would first come into contact with Heidegger's philosophy ('a philosophy that was given to imperialist adventures': Krahls, 1971: 21), then with logical positivism, before finally discovering Marxist dialectics. What Krahls described here was an education process understood as a process of individual emancipation, a gradual break with the oppressive and authoritarian environment that prevailed in the German society where he grew up.

It is not surprising, therefore, that a young man on such a path might be attracted to the figure of Adorno, as he raised a solitary, non-conformist voice in the 'castrated' political environment of German restoration (Adorno, 2003: 18). Books such as *The Jargon of Authenticity* had been crucial in warning of the dangers of a new German ideology in which the echoes of the *Volksgemeinschaft* still reverberated (Krahls, 1971: 22). It was precisely Adorno's critical theory that led Krahls to move to the University of Frankfurt, a decision that he himself described as 'eminently political'. It would not take him long to become Adorno's doctoral student and to gather around him a group of politicised students with a strong interest in theoretical work. For this young generation of students, the need to understand the reality they

lived in was linked to the search for social transformations, and certainly what could be learned in the environment of the Institute of Social Research responded to these longings. Adorno and Horkheimer also represented a living connection with the critical tradition of the 1920s and 1930s, which had been buried by National Socialism and exile. But Frankfurt was not only the city for critical theory: it was also the seat of the federal leadership of the SDS, the association of socialist students that was to become the centre of the anti-authoritarian movement. The city of Frankfurt am Main was to be their main focus in West Germany, behind only West Berlin. Students who were considered to be disciples of Adorno and Horkheimer set the tone there, and Krahel was undoubtedly one of the most prominent among them if not the most prominent of them all.

Krahel had joined the association in 1965: 'In the SDS, I learned for the first time what solidarity meant, namely: building ways of relating to each other that allowed a detachment from the oppression and subjugation of the ruling class' (Krahel, 1971: 22). In this student association Krahel would find the culmination of the process of individual emancipation that he would narrate in his 'Angaben zur Person'. The collaborative work in discussion and reading groups, as well as the political activities at the university and outside it, enabled many young people to overcome their feelings of isolation and understand the political dimension of their individual life stories. It was a generation that grew up in the tacit concealment of the National Socialist past, was marked by the suffocating atmosphere of the Cold War and which in the 1960s would become aware of the terrible burden of unbroken German continuities and awake to world politics through national and decolonial struggles (Cuba, Algeria) as well as the horror of the Vietnam War. These experiences would lead Krahel's generation to confront the Cold War climate and institutions, which seemed outdated in their eyes.

The history of the SDS was to some extent an illustration of such conflicts. Until 1961 it had been the student organisation of the Social Democrat Party (SPD). But its support for campaigns against atomic weapons and insistence on recognising the existence of the GDR resulted in the SPD cutting off the SDS's funding and expelling its members. However, against all expectations, the SDS did not disappear. The political conjuncture of the 1960s allowed it to survive, and by the middle of the decade it had members who were not aligned with social democracy or communism and who considered 'actually existing socialism' to be an undesirable alternative. This was the origin of the new left and the anti-authoritarian movement, which, from June 1967, would become hugely significant in the Federal Republic. Its figureheads would be Dutschke and Krahel, who – from essentially minority positions – would manage to steer the course of the association away from the currents of orthodox Marxism closely related to the Communist Party.

The 'anti-authoritarian' label did not only refer to the movement's refusal to submit to the state, teachers or public opinion. It also involved a critique of traditional politics and authoritarian socialism, of the traditional system of education and of German continuity, and it was a symptom of an uneasiness about the traditional family and forms of intimacy (Claussen, 1988: 52). It was driven by subverting social norms and oppressive institutions which no longer seemed legitimate. In this way, the movement pointed to a new way of life, the kernel of which was to be anticipated in the very forms of political organisation: 'The *pathos* was to develop a concept of emancipation that would not appeal to pre-established norms in order to guide action' (Demirovic, 1989: 73). But the designation of the movement as 'anti-authoritarian' was also a nod to the influence of critical theorists who had carried out studies on 'authority and the family' and the 'authoritarian personality'. Some of their writings from

the 1930s and 1940s – chiefly *Dialectic of Enlightenment, Dawn and Decline* and ‘The Authoritarian State’ – circulated among students as pirated copies. They had discovered an implacable critique of both National Socialism and Soviet Communism that was directly linked to the political drives of the movement (Claussen, 2000: 155 ff.).

Krahl’s theoretical understanding was undoubtedly based on Adorno’s critical theory, although his texts also show the strong influence of Marcuse and the young Horkheimer. For Krahl, these theorists had provided critical categories that enabled an understanding of the logics of domination in advanced capitalism, which could no longer be interpreted from within the framework of pauperisation and material misery provided by traditional Marxism (Krahl, 1971: 292). Critical theory emphasised the indissoluble link between advanced capitalism’s forms of socialisation and the configuration of living subjects, who internalised the relations of domination at the expense of seeing their potential stunted and having their social relations reified in impoverished life. Individuals were reduced to being mere character-masks, incapable of acting autonomously or articulating the critical instances of the self, which the bourgeois family nurtured within its bosom. The capitalist system could develop a high degree of sophistication in its means to satisfy needs, but it reduced social life to the mere struggle for physical subsistence and ultimately brutalised human relations (Krahl, 1971: 25). What critical theory had recorded was precisely the historical significance of the collapse of bourgeois individuality, which was also to mark the rise of the protest movement:

In fact, its anti-authoritarian origin was a mourning for the death of the bourgeois individual, for the definitive loss of the ideology of the bourgeois public sphere and the domination-free communication, which arose from the solidarity which the bourgeois class had promised to humanity in its heroic period, for instance, in the French Revolution, and which it never successfully fulfilled, and which now has finally collapsed. (Krahl, 1971: 25)

Krahl shared with Horkheimer and Adorno the awareness that the end of bourgeois society had not only involved an emptying of democracy but also the end of a revolutionary horizon. His divergence from his mentors was that they had offered a clear diagnosis of the breakdown of the bourgeois subject but to a certain extent had been remained imprisoned in its ruins (Krahl, 1971: 291). Leaving these ruins behind required the articulation not only of forms of theoretical reflection but also of emancipatory praxis. The diagnosis of the defeat of the labour movement at the hands of Nazism and its integration into post-war capitalism seemed certain. However, the question then posed was ‘how is a transformation of social relations possible, ultimately under more difficult circumstances’ (Krahl, 1971: 242). When nothing in the logic of capitalism seemed to point beyond systemic immanence, Krahl asked how was it possible to move towards the realm of freedom. His position has been interpreted as a sort of immanent critique of the Frankfurt tradition (Spaulding and Boyle, 2014; Reinicke, 1973). But, strictly speaking, this transformative drive of critical theory was in perfect harmony with the tone that Horkheimer had set when he proposed the collective project. In his prologue to the long-awaited reprint of his writings from the 1930s, published in 1968, Horkheimer had written: ‘To extract from critical theory consequences for political action is something that those who take it seriously yearn for’ (Horkheimer, 1968: 14). The theoretical differences with his mentors would come from Krahl’s voluntarist approach, which emphasised the roles of spontaneity, consciousness and will in social transformation.<sup>6</sup> The conflict, however, resulted from the strategies to unify the movement in its decline, which would turn the ‘critical authorities’ into symbols to be capitalised on in the political struggle, as was also understood by Adorno (Adorno, 2000: 95). But to understand Krahl’s relationship to ‘classical’ critical theory requires

an analysis of the focus he attempted to give to the anti-authoritarian movement and how he sought to articulate in it the relationships between critical theory and transformative praxis.

## POLITICISING CONSCIOUSNESS IN ADVANCED CAPITALISM

The great coalition which united the CDU and the SPD at the end of 1966 under Chancellor Kiesinger and left the German government virtually unopposed in parliament gave rise to the growing student mobilisation for an 'extra-parliamentary opposition'. But the movement would not gain major impetus until June 1967. During a large demonstration against the visit of the Shah of Persia to West Berlin, the police brutally repressed the demonstration and allowed the Shah's guard to beat the students. A policeman shot an unarmed and peaceful student in the back and killed him. The Berlin government and the mainstream media closed ranks and defended the police action. The police officer who carried out the shooting would even be acquitted a few months later. This provoked general outrage and reinforced support for the extra-parliamentary opposition among intellectuals, students and the liberal press. Many students joined the SDS in the following weeks, to the extent that its organisational infrastructure could barely cope with the influx of new members. This new situation of political effervescence would be the framework within which Dutschke and Krahls, from the autumn of 1967, would turn the SDS into the centre of the anti-authoritarian revolt.

However, Krahls was aware that post-war capitalism posed a historically new situation for an opposition movement. The population was fully integrated into the system of labour and consumption, and after Nazism and the war, there was no politicised labour movement. Within capitalist societies, the economic struggle to gain access to livelihood

assets (wage claims and labour rights) had ended up being separated from the political struggle. This involved renouncing any transformation of social relationships in which survival is at stake:

The purely economic struggle integrates the masses into the relationships of economic domination and condemns them to apathy in the face of extra-economic violence. The suppression of categories of political perception, ignorance in the face of brutalisation in all spheres of social life, is something that this reformism has helped to produce. (Krahls, 1971: 161)

In this context, the organisational forms of traditional politics were no longer useful. However, the population continued to have expectations of peace, freedom and a full life that were incompatible with their integration into the system (Krahls, 1971: 248). This showed a potential for social politicisation the movement could try to connect with, which would become its aim. But this also required an understanding of the existing balances of power and their evolutionary tendencies.

The first step to elaborate the movement's positions was the celebrated *Organisationsreferat* [Paper on the organisation], which Dutschke and Krahls jointly authored for the SDS federal assembly in September 1967. The starting assumption was that the period of the economic miracle (with its high growth rates and a level of employment close to full employment) was over. The historical moment was interpreted as entering an economic crisis. In this context the alternative between emancipation and barbarism took an unprecedented shape. Krahls had already noted that the 'natural laws' of capitalist development did not lead by themselves to socialism but rather to 'relations of domination which may be adequate for the development of production forces, but of pure barbarism: an industrial fascism' (Krahls, 1971: 88). This seemed to be confirmed now under the form of a 'system of integral statism' (Dutschke and Krahls, 1980: 288). Under this system, capitalist

relations could be stabilised but only thanks to state intervention that reduced the role of the sphere of circulation and exchange and imposed a command economy. The influence of Horkheimer's 'authoritarian state' on this diagnosis was very clear: Horkheimer pointed to the establishment of an increasingly tight and centralised control of production, which would eliminate free competition and the model of the liberal market economy. What maintained the social order and made the accumulation of capital possible was an increase in state coercion, unfiltered by market mechanisms (Dutschke and Krah, 1980: 288 ff.). The authoritarian state, rather than being a mere state form, referred to a phase of advanced capitalism that was a 'historically new constitution of the system of social totality' (Krah, 1971: 222).

The appeal to Horkheimer's text to signal the risk of an authoritarian takeover was not gratuitous: the great coalition between the CDU and the SPD had left the Federal Republic unopposed in parliament, and in May 1968 the government was to issue Emergency Acts that would restrict democratic rights significantly. As the 1929 crisis had favoured the brutal fascist power structure, the thesis here was that this coercion had not disappeared from the economic-miracle society, but that it had been internalised by individuals. The direct violence of the fascist phase had been replaced by the guarantees of the social state and by new forms of manipulation, in the style of the cultural industry, which attached the consciousness of wage-earners to the conditions of capitalist life (Krah, 1971: 351 ff.). The influence of the Springer publishing group was symptomatic of this. Domination no longer operated as external coercion but as the production of a conformism that delegated all satisfaction of needs to the social apparatus. This is why Krah warned of an authoritarian element in the 'welfare state', since its guarantees of material security repressed the social articulation of needs that went beyond

survival within the given social framework. Improvements in living conditions were introduced at the cost of plunging the population into a system of apathy (Krah, 1971: 239). In a society where the vast majority of the population could acquire television sets and refrigerators, and where many had access to 'cultural goods', 'exploitation means the complete, radical annihilation of the development of needs in the dimension of human consciousness. [Exploitation] means that human needs, despite their capacity for material satisfaction, are attached to the most elementary forms for fear that the State and capital might take away the minimum guarantees' (Krah, 1971: 30). This also involved a transformation of the temporal horizon of existence, which undermined the continuity of life histories and evidenced a new level of impotence against concentrated social power: 'Today, instead of long-term hopes, desires, expectations and fears, we have sudden reactions, expectations of immediate gratification and sanctions, and very short-term forms of instinctive satisfaction' (Krah, 1971: 322). This transformation of the forms of social consciousness should not be considered at the level of mere cultural critique – of 'superstructure', so to speak – but should be interpreted as a constitutive element of the social system of advanced capitalism.

Clear consequences were identified: 'If the structure of integral statism, with all its institutional mediations, constitutes a huge manipulative system, this leads to the suffering of the masses acquiring a new quality' (Dutschke and Krah, 1980: 289 ff.). The population was still thrown into the struggle for material subsistence in a society whose technical capacities allowed much greater degrees of freedom. The internalisation of the forms of domination made it very difficult to self-organise interests, needs and desires, since the population perceived reality from within the schemes of the dominant society. The prevailing logic of social rationality promoted a passive life, one withdrawn

into the private sphere; and the importance of SDS laid precisely there. Its function was, above all, the politicisation of intelligence. The students' position gave them the opportunity to transcend the conformist horizon of the 'golden age of capitalism', because their task as intellectuals was the understanding of the ins and outs of society. Undoubtedly, this opportunity was based on a privileged social position. But the goal was not to abolish privileges but to try to expand them beyond the universities, giving rise to processes of political awareness that would allow new ways of intervention and collective learning in which waged labourers and students could participate together. It was emphatically about enabling new forms of political experience.

The first objective was to make visible the latent, abstract violence that pierced the forms of socialisation of advanced capitalism and shaped the very psyche of individuals, threatening to seize even their internal nature. The new forms of political action and agitation, which were conceived as a process of social awareness carried out by 'active minorities amid passive, suffering masses' (Dutschke and Krahll, 1980: 290), should be aimed at achieving this purpose. In other words, a 'guerrilla mentality' capable of revealing 'the system of repressive institutions' was demanded.<sup>7</sup> The methods for this were taken from the student struggle in Berkeley that had started in 1964; as was the case there, the university was seen as the 'social base' of the movement. The protest consisted of various forms of 'civil disobedience', from sit-ins to teach-ins, which forced the consensus of the liberal public sphere and often its rules of play. Provocation was not an end in itself but a strategy to initiate reflection processes that broke the pre-reflexive connivance with the social system. Dutschke and Krahll wanted to direct the new organisational strategy of the SDS – which for them could not be content with being a traditional political organisation but should demand a transformation of

daily life and the forms of political struggle – towards this end: 'the problem of organisation is raised today as the problem of revolutionary existence' (Dutschke and Krahll, 1980: 290).

The ultimate aim of Dutschke and Krahll was to test how a politicised *intelligentsia* could become a material force in history – how it could reach a broad stratum of the population and transform their way of understanding reality. Undoubtedly, the movement failed in his most emphatic ambitions. It was overwhelmed by its own evolution, and was too weak and precarious to deal with an increasingly branched and complex social and political situation (Claussen, 1988: 51 ff.). Its verbal radicalism also had an impact on this, as it contributed to generating its own conformism; Krahll was also a lucid and implacable critic of the movement in this sense (Krahll, 1971: 309–16). However, the student association became the epicentre of an extra-parliamentary opposition that would transform German society: 'A social democracy lives only thanks to the enlightened activity of the politically mature masses' (Krahll, 1971: 156). In this sense, with no means other than leaflet distribution, demonstrations and constant processes of collective discussion, the movement managed to raise awareness of the importance of an active defence of its own interests. The intention was to go beyond the sphere of leftist ghettos in the conditions of advanced capitalism, and they succeeded in politicising a broad section of society without falling into the mechanisms and patterns prescribed by institutionalised politics (Claussen, 1988: 24). But Krahll's theoretical and political drive was not limited to the defence of a radical democracy. His main interest was to analyse the objective conditions for an emancipatory social transformation within advanced capitalism. His writings are permeated by the need to go beyond the spectacular logic of protest with a view to articulating forms of organisation that would enable a transition towards the realm of freedom.

## CRITICAL THEORY AND EMANCIPATORY PRAXIS

The core element that runs through Krahls reflections is the analysis of the conditions for the constitution of a political subject commensurate with the capitalism of his time (Reinicke, 1973: 6). The purpose is to test the ground in order to move from 'prehistory' to history. In this sense, the title 'Social Constitution and Class Struggle' points to the very core of his theoretical proposals. But his notion of 'class' should not be understood in the traditional sense. It is not a reference to the industrial proletariat or to a social group with a certain level of income. What Krahls means by 'proletariat' cannot be considered as a 'given' in the existing social order, but has a strong utopian dimension: it is something that is constituted from within the enlightened activity of the dispossessed and salaried, emancipating themselves from the forms of coercive organisation in the classic institutions of the labour movement (Claussen, 1985: 429). The question therefore was: how could this new subjectivity be constituted in Western European societies in the late 1960s? Krahls noted that there was no revolutionary theory that was commensurate with the conditions of advanced capitalism (Krahls, 1971: 256). He would direct much of his theoretical effort to this, starting with an analysis of the social constitution of the capitalism of his time.

A first step in this direction came from his interest in Marxian approaches. The work for his doctoral thesis, entitled 'On the Natural Laws of Capitalist Development in Marx's Theory', aspired to a current understanding of the dynamics of capitalism based on a new re-appropriation of the critique of political economy. His famous text 'On the Logic of the Essence of the Marxian Analysis of the Commodity' (Krahls, 1971: 31–83), based on a presentation at an Adorno seminar in 1966–7, was fundamental. In it he sought to track down the role of abstraction in Marx's

critique of political economy in relation to Hegel's *Wesenslogik*. It is an analysis focused on the social forms of capitalism, essentially concerning value, abstract labour, commodities and money.<sup>8</sup> These abstract economic categories were understood as the 'forms of being' and 'determinations of existence' of bourgeois society (Krahls, 1971: 32). They also revealed the objective forms of social domination. Without doubt, the central category is value, which constitutes 'the automatic and pseudo-natural [*naturwüchsig*] engine of capitalist development' (Krahls, 1971: 84). Value is therefore revealed to be the true subject of the social process. Its abstraction becomes a tangible force, since the material and concrete being of commodities increasingly conforms to the pure form of value. In this way, it appropriates the materiality of the world and converts use values and human needs into a mere allegory: 'it lets them die' (Krahls, 1971: 58). Faced with the totalitarian and destructive predominance of the abstraction of value, the emancipatory interest consisted in re-appropriating human capacities to give rise to history as a conscious process. But Krahls stressed: 'Understanding the fatal necessity of the law of value... is not yet freedom in act, but it provides a theoretical basis for its conditions of possibility' (Krahls, 1971: 56).

But the conditions for this possibility to materialise also need to be understood. The 'natural laws' of capitalist development, laid out in the critique of political economy, necessarily lead to recurring crises, but not to emancipation. Emancipation cannot be the result of a predetermined historical process, resulting from objective mechanisms or needs. Rather, it requires a conscious political intervention, capable of breaking with this 'natural necessity', because only in this way can it open access to the 'realm of freedom'. In this sense, in his later texts Krahls focuses on Marx's insufficient links between the objective forms of capitalist domination and a theory of emancipation (Krahls, 1971: 392–415). For emancipation, in order to put an



end to 'prehistory', must come from the conscious will of organised human beings, not from processes imposed on agents from outside. This was also applicable to the Marxian notion of 'class consciousness', which could not be understood as being purely objective (Krahl, 1971: 398 ff.). Ultimately, it was a question of purging the Marxian tradition of its mechanistic elements, of all objective determination that might constrain the spontaneity of a transformational political subjectivity. But merely affirming this subjectivity was not enough: its historical and social conditions of possibility also needed to be investigated.

Grasping capitalism from the perspective of its transformability [*Veränderlichkeit*] required going beyond the very immanence of the system to probe the conditions of possibility of a transformative subjectivity. Hence his defence of the concept of a 'concrete utopia' (Krahl, 1971: 350). His proposals are tentative, sketches left in a fragmentary state due to his early death. One of their key aspects is in the category of production, which is clearly fundamental in capitalist socialisation. Production encompasses both labour and its social organisation. But a purely economic interpretation would overlook its political potential, for labour is not only a 'misfortune that valorises capital' but also – at least potentially – 'a productive force of emancipation that denies capital' (Krahl, 1971: 396). In this sense, Krahl's approach can be read as a rejection of the Habermasian separation of labour and interaction, which ontologises social metabolism with nature and confines it to the realm of necessity. Labour, as an 'objective activity' [*gegenständliche Tätigkeit*], cannot be reduced to mere 'instrumental action' (Krahl, 1971: 401 ff.). The development of human abilities, and even the capacity for enjoyment, is also part of the productive forces. In this sense Krahl developed a concept of production with a strong emancipatory potential. Production is understood by him as the 'beginning of history'

and therefore as the end of 'natural history': 'Production is what enables human beings to develop an active relationship with nature and means that they are able to emancipate themselves from it' (Krahl, 1971: 393). It is linked to the development and emancipation of human needs, even beyond self-preservation, is what enables 'an autonomous life activity' and, as such, 'is inextricably linked to political spontaneity' (Krahl, 1971: 344).

But how does this potential materialise in advanced capitalism? When labour becomes subsumed under capital, production is socialised. In capitalism, the productive process itself, the social metabolism with nature, is socialised – albeit not consciously. But this makes the contradiction between socialisation and private appropriation increasingly apparent. In this sense Krahl detected a key process by which, with the growth of productivity, scientific and technical knowledge becomes a production factor. Intellectual labour, increasingly necessary in a productive process based on automation and on the growth of fixed capital, is subsumed under the demands of capital. This transforms the very character of social antagonisms (Krahl, 1971: 340). On the one hand, intellectual and scientific labour loses its special character and is subject to the same criteria that govern productive labour, becoming subordinate to the demands of capital profitability. On the other hand, this makes possible an alliance between manual and intellectual labourers.<sup>9</sup> This alliance would be inscribed within the relations of production of advanced capitalism, and it opened up new possibilities for Krahl. First, it meant that the 'class' to be politically articulated could no longer be identified with the industrial proletariat. Without including scientific intelligence, it was no longer possible to construct a class consciousness commensurate with the conditions of advanced capitalism (Krahl, 1971: 341). In his opinion, this meant that the 'movement of scientific intelligence' could now be expected to become a 'collective theorist of proletarian praxis' (Krahl, 1971: 351).

These formulations, and especially the text 'Thesis on the General Relationship between Scientific Intelligence and Proletarian Class Consciousness' (Krahl, 1971, 336–53), have had a considerable influence on the approaches of Italian post-operatism (Berardi, 2016; Negri, 1976). But perhaps it would be excessive to consider Krahl as a pioneer of the post-worker condition. It has already been highlighted that some of these formulations, closely linked to the crumbling phase of the student movement, were somewhat problematic (Cavazzini, 2010; Reinicke, 1973: 54). To a large extent these theses are marked by Krahl's opposition to the 'proletarian turn' within the movement, which after some defeats and disappointments had led to the predominance of pseudo-working-class positions among students (Kocyba, 2010). Moreover, the later course of capitalism revealed that the emancipatory possibilities that Krahl had predicted were not realised: the incorporation of co-operation and human relationships into the productive process has not broken the realm of necessity, nor has the division between labour and thought really been overcome. However, this does not detract from his search for ways to disrupt the objective logic of socialisation and articulate new forms of political subjectivity. In this regard, the core aspect that runs through his proposals seems to be the question of organisation. His purpose was not so much to develop a strategy for taking political power as to constitute forms of life and struggle that anticipated a way towards emancipation within actual existing reality. Krahl's merit lies in having noticed the centrality of this issue for all emancipatory theory, pointing to the need to go beyond the positions of 'classic' critical theory in this regard (Krahl, 1971: 292, 300).

For Krahl, the constitution of a transforming subjectivity amounts fundamentally to a question of organisation. In his view the objectivist character of Marx's notions of class and class consciousness prevented him from adequately addressing this question (Krahl, 1971: 400). Leninism, for its

part, with its confidence in the vertical structure of the party, took for granted what had to be built: class and the organisation itself. Krahl believed that only through the praxis of struggle could a political subjectivity with transforming consciousness be articulated. His approach would therefore be linked to Walter Benjamin's observation that organisation is the medium in which the reification of social relations is reflected, but also the only medium in which this could be overcome (Benjamin, 1930: 221). This is where the centrality of self-determination comes to the forefront, as opposed to the imperatives of the constituted logic of socialisation. The aim was to anticipate the realm of freedom in the struggles carried out in the midst of a world marked by coercion. This was undoubtedly the point at which the dissolution of bourgeois individuality was bound up with the utopian dimension of the movement. But the new subjectivity, which required spontaneity and solidarity, could not be considered as a given in capitalist conditions, as atomisation, strategic relationships and a conformist attitude prevailed in them. Giving rise to new ways of living also required discipline. It was a 'concerted effort to overcome the de-individualised status of individuals' (Berndt, 1988: 182). In Krahl's words: 'For us in the SDS the question arises as to how to build a form of organisation which, under conditions of coercion and violence, could generate individuals who were both autonomous and able to submit to struggle demands under conditions of coercion. This problem is completely unresolved' (Krahl, 1971: 262).

Certainly, Krahl did not succeed in solving this problem, but he unequivocally noted its centrality. The question of organisation also had to do with attempts to go beyond the individual experience of impotence in advanced capitalism. It was a reality that had to be faced, because 'everyone tries to escape this experience of impotence and the pressure of the social relations because it is something painful' (Claussen, 1985: 429). This became apparent in the breakdown of the movement,

in its degeneration into sectarian and self-referential groups, whose radicalism was purely verbal and did not allow for the articulation of a significant social force. In his later writings, Krah1 repeatedly pointed to the need to reflect on the contradictions of a movement of young intellectuals increasingly turned to actionism, acting from within an 'action-based, sectarian and blindly selfish' consciousness (Krah1, 1971: 311). But an emancipatory movement required the establishment of long-term solidarities and an understanding of the coercive framework involved in social logic. If Adorno had confronted students with the critique of pseudo-activity, Krah1's later texts revealed that he was aware that the movement's emancipatory reason had become self-destructive. For Maoist or neo-Stalinist groups, indoctrination in their respective worldviews became a substitute for praxis and ultimately prevented them from understanding the capitalist reality they lived in:

The closed canon of systematic theorems and a disciplined organisation are symptomatic of a substitute for strategy and for the need of security and bonding that blocks the development of revolutionary praxis and emancipatory needs of freedom; of revolutionary needs in a political struggle that demands results and is fraught with risks. (Krah1, 1971: 318)

In his later writings, Krah1 repeatedly pointed out that the movement suffered from the lack of a political reality principle. This principle should take into account both power relations and the social forms of consciousness (Krah1, 1971: 284–90). Only on the basis of the reality principle could strategies and organisational imperatives be developed for survival in late capitalism. Undoubtedly, 'the anti-authoritarian revolt was dashed by this lack, not by external repression' (Claussen, 1985: 429). For Krah1, therefore, the priority was to connect with diffuse social needs in which an emancipatory impulse could be seeded. The integration of the working class into capitalism meant that the impulse for politicisation was no longer hunger and material misery.

This broke the certainties of the traditional revolutionary movements, but it opened up new possibilities: articulation of emancipatory interests that aimed beyond the mere sphere of survival, of the struggle for 'rough and material things' (Benjamin, 1997: 694); awareness of the mutilation of human opportunities at the centre of the socialising logic of advanced capitalism, as well as the administered reduction of opportunity and the mutilation of experience; evidence that the technical sophistication of society, its progress in the mastery of nature, had not been accompanied by a development of individual and social potential but rather by their brutal atrophy. Hence Krah1's insistence on formulating widespread emancipatory needs at the social level, even using precarious and insufficient categories. Otherwise, critical theory would succumb 'to the technification process of the sciences' (Krah1, 1971: 323).

The sudden death of Krah1 cut short the potential for a model of critical theory that had barely emerged. 'The life of Krah1, who physically and psychically walked a steep and deadly path, bears witness to the existential seriousness with which an emancipatory reality principle was developed as a collective possibility of living hope for the individual' (Claussen, 1985: 429). What followed was a process of breakdown into sectarian fractions, armed struggle and the repressive brutality of the German state. It would be naive to think that Krah1 could have stopped this historical drift, but he would certainly have been able to theoretically articulate the *movens* of defeat and seek new perspectives of emancipatory struggle in them. What remains of him are only a few writings, some transcripts of talks and annotations rescued from oblivion.<sup>10</sup> These are little more than fragments, and they contain the imprint of a life in turmoil, marked by the intensity of a movement that left little respite for theoretical work. Nevertheless, they make possible the recognition of an enormous theoretical and political potential that continues to offer stimuli that deserve to be pursued.

## Notes

- 1 For background on the occupation, cf. Negt, 1995: 177 ff. For an elaboration of the events by a participant who was close to Krah! see Claussen, 1985: 230.
- 2 First and foremost were Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, intellectual authorities with whom they were constantly in contact. At a greater geographical distance but closer to the politicised students was Herbert Marcuse. An intermediate generation was composed of Jürgen Habermas, Oskar Negt and Alfred Schmidt (and to a lesser extent Karl-Heinz Haag), who were at that time young lecturers and assistants at the University of Frankfurt. An interesting testimony of Adorno's relationships with his students can be found in Claussen, 1988: 267–71.
- 3 In 1965, Heinz Ludwig Arnold commissioned him to co-ordinate an issue for the *text + kritik* journal about Jean Paul. The volume would be published in 1970 and would contain many of the authors and articles proposed by Krah! (Sassmanshausen, 2008: 432). Rolf Tiedemann, editor of the works of Benjamin and Adorno, told how, in 1968, during the controversies of the Congress of the German Sociological Society on 'Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?', in which Krah! took the lead, the young SDS leader introduced himself in one of the breaks and sat down with him to discuss Benjamin's concept of allegory (Tiedemann, 2011: 56).
- 4 This is also true of the rest of Krah!'s edited texts. The book published as *Erfahrung des Bewusstseins* [Experience of Conscience] (Krah!, 1979) is the transcript of a recording of Krah! in a 1968 workgroup on the introduction to Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. *Vom Ende der abstrakten Arbeit* [On the End of Abstract Labour] (Krah!, 1984) contained different fragments of his work on Marx and the state of advanced capitalism. Other texts mainly contain transcripts of collective discussions about Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* (Cerutti et al., 1971) and about the relationship between sensitivity and abstraction for a materialist epistemology (Brinkmann et al., 1978).
- 5 Among the biographical profiles of Krah!, those by Detlev Claussen (1985) and Uwe Wesel (2002: 127–34) are especially valuable. The notes of Sassmanshausen (2008) are also very useful but contain some inaccuracies. In contrast, Gerd Koenen's (2008) attempt to re-evaluate his trajectory from an unpublished private notebook that Krah! wrote at the age of 17, suggesting affinities with a kind of ultra-conservative mysticism, is unconvincing and highly suspicious.
- 6 In fact, the most pronounced theoretical differences would not be with Adorno or Horkheimer but with Habermas (Krah!, 1971: 248–260, 401 ff.).
- 7 The language used in the text has often led to misunderstandings: 'The "propaganda of shots" (Che) in the "Third World" should be supplemented with the "propaganda of action" in the metropolis, which historically makes urban guerrillas possible. An urban guerrilla fighter is the organiser of an irregularity understood as the destruction of the system of repressive institutions (Dutschke and Krah!, 1980: 290). But it would be wrong to see in this 'guerrilla mentality' an intellectual anticipation of the RAF: 'Not only because it is false in a strictly historical sense, but also because between this call in the autumn of 1967 and the praxis of the RAF in the 1970s, there was a clear qualitative difference. Dutschke and Krah! defined the urban guerrilla as an element of an awareness strategy. The importance of militancy came from its propaganda function, not the other way around. The meaning of irregular action would therefore not lie in the materially destructive force of violence, but in the specificity of abstract violence, in order to turn it into a sensitive certainty, something that, through action, can become an object of experience' (Kraushaar, 1987: 23).
- 8 Krah!'s relationship with the 'new reading of Marx' undertaken by Hans-Georg Backhaus and Helmut Reichelt has often been pointed out (Spaulding and Boyle, 2014; Kocyba, 2010). Undoubtedly there are points of convergence, and Backhaus himself has underlined his influence on Krah!'s approach (Backhaus, 1997: 31, 216 ff.), but the priorities diverge. Krah!'s interest does not focus on a thorough understanding of capitalism at a high level of abstraction but on an attempt to conceive it from the perspective of its transformability.
- 9 'By this I mean that, on the one hand, the adaptation of intellectual labour to the norms of capitalist labouring time hinders mediating thinking, which understands society as a whole. But, on the other hand, as scientific labour is subsumed under capital, the bourgeois cultural consciousness in the classical sense (to which the scientific intelligence of the bourgeois class subscribed, precisely in the realm of natural sciences and technical intelligence) becomes annihilated. This opens up the possibility, not the necessity, that scientific intelligence conceives and experiences the products of its scientific labour as the alien and non-mystified power of capital' (Krah!, 1971: 325).
- 10 Since 2005 several initiatives have been launched to rescue the memory of Krah!, ranging from a

file and an institute in his name to several web-pages. A number of unpublished documents were also published in issues 3 and 4 of the *Digger Journal* (<http://www.digger-journal.net/>).

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# Johannes Agnoli: Subversive Thought, the Critique of the State and (Post-)Fascism

Stephan Grigat

Translated by Adrian Wilding

## **BY WAY OF A BIOGRAPHY: 'NEGATION AS *DESTRUCTIO*'**

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin recommended that revolutionaries practice 'patience and theory' during periods of counter-revolution (Lehmann, 2013). The left-wing communist/anti-authoritarian critic Johannes Agnoli, by contrast, counted upon patience and irony. To the objection that in so doing he was making himself comfortable within the false whole, Agnoli, who taught political science as a professor at the Otto Suhr Institute of the Free University of Berlin from 1972 to 1990, responded shortly before his death: 'one does not have to be a Jesuit, Jacobin, or Bolshevik just because one intends to destroy the state. The true revolutionary must always preserve a vestige of irony and self-irony. Communism is important, but so is *osso bucco*' (Agnoli and Bruhn, 2003). With this ironic distance, Agnoli attempted as much as possible to

keep the stupefying impositions of capitalist social constitution at bay until his death.

As both a mentor to and activist in the protest movement at the end of the 1960s, Agnoli rejected Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's sympathetic skepticism toward the '68 movement. This was reflected in a text published in 1969 that aimed a pointed critique at the supposed rejection of revolutionary praxis by critical theory (Agnoli, 1998: 51 ff.). In the last years of his life, however, Agnoli expressed a far more nuanced view of the exiles who had returned from America to Frankfurt after fleeing Nazi persecution. 'In the larger historical context' (Agnoli and Bruhn, 2003), he regarded the works of Adorno and Horkheimer as exceptionally important and vehemently opposed the 'uncritical theory' (Bolte, 1989) of Jürgen Habermas, whom he accused of 'betraying' Adorno and Horkheimer's radical social critique. He found it 'outrageous' that Habermas 'is still regarded as a representative of critical theory' (Agnoli and Bruhn, 2003).

What united Agnoli with critical theory was his insistence that social theory could only exist as social critique, that the presentation of social categories and ideologies, their conceptual reconstruction, always implies their condemnation. In stark contrast to a traditional understanding of theory, Agnoli's reflections are committed to Horkheimer's dictum that a critical theory of society must be 'the unfolding of a single existential judgment' (Horkheimer, 1937: 227). As in the case of Adorno and Horkheimer, Agnoli's preoccupation with society does not result from purely academic interest but rather from dissatisfaction with existing conditions and an interest in the universal emancipation which arises therefrom, from a 'longing for the completely other' (Horkheimer, 1970). For critical theory, as well as for Agnoli, materialism is not a transhistorical method but a socially and historically determined form of critique. A materialist concept of materialism thus implies the necessity that it pursue its own abolition (Adorno, 1992: 277; Demirović, 1999: 460 ff.) in that it realizes an 'association of the free and equal' (Agnoli and Bruhn, 2003).

Johannes Agnoli died in 2003 at the age of 78 in the Italian city of Lucca, where he had retreated after his retirement from the Free University of Berlin in 1990. Born in 1925 in Valle di Cadore in Northern Italy, in his youth, as a 17-year-old, Agnoli was engaged in the *Gioventù Italiana del Littoria*, the fascist youth organization, which earned him a place on the list of those to be shot by the Italian Partisans. Later, as a left-wing communist and anti-fascist, he repeatedly argued with the different currents in Benito Mussolini's movement and with philosophical pioneers of fascism such as Ugo Spirito and Giovanni Gentile. Immediately after completing his Matura, Agnoli reported to the Waffen-SS, which in Italy was responsible for the recruitment of foreign volunteers, and ended up in the mountain infantry of the Wehrmacht. He fought against partisans in Yugoslavia and ended up as a British prisoner of war in

Egypt. Later in life Agnoli spoke very openly and publicly about his membership of the fascist youth (Burgmer, 2002: 18); he was less public about his time in the Wehrmacht, however, something which earned him sharp reproaches (Kraushaar, 2007; Aly, 2009).

In 1948, Agnoli was released to Germany from British military imprisonment and worked as an unskilled laborer in a wood factory in south-west Germany, where he maintained close contact with an old member of the Communist Party. He studied in Tübingen, where an intensive reading of Marx opened up a new world to him. In 1957, he joined the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), from which he was expelled in 1961 for cooperating with the Socialist German Student League (SDS), the movement which later played a decisive role in the revolt of 1968. Earlier, in 1959, Agnoli, together with Ernst Bloch's assistant, had formulated a radical alternative manifesto for the SPD party congress in Bad Godesberg. Despite dissenting voices such as Agnoli's, the congress ultimately adopted the Bad Godesberger Program that would remain doctrinal until 1989 and saw the SPD bid farewell to its tradition as a Marxist-inspired class party and become a 'party of the people' [*Volkspartei*]. Here, one also sees a parallel between Agnoli and critical theory: after the Second World War, Adorno and Horkheimer took up a discussion they had begun on the need for a new *Communist Manifesto* (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1956; Quadfasel, 2013), and in the early 1960s, Adorno voiced a plan to write a critique of the Godesberger Program in the spirit of Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program*, which would identify the social democratic reconciliation with the false society (Braunstein, 2011).

After finishing his PhD in 1956, Agnoli taught at the University of Tübingen and from 1958 at the Stuttgart University of Applied Sciences, proceeding to take up an assistantship in Cologne in 1960, which he quickly lost due to his engagement with a campaign to recognize the GDR. At this time,



he became an assistant at the Free University of Berlin, where he gained his *Habilitation* in 1972. In 1966, along with other prominent thinkers of the extra-parliamentary opposition (APO), he helped to found the November Society, which became the Republican Club in 1967 and where decisive discussions took place concerning the orientation of the APO and SDS. In West Berlin he disconcerted his employer, the judicial system, and his academic colleagues when, while under investigation for 'denigrating the state', he regularly transformed courtrooms into lecture halls, tormenting the audience with texts such as the 'Attempt to Enlighten the Criminal Court and Public Prosecutor about the Fascistic and the State Form', his defense statement from the Mescalero trial, in which several professors had been put on trial for publishing a commentary on the Red Army Faction's murder of the Attorney General Siegfried Buback (Agnoli, 1998: 165 ff.).

Agnoli was repeatedly concerned with criticizing the 'objectively coercive character of social reproduction' guaranteed by the state (Agnoli and Mandel, 1980: 19). He viewed social reproduction's coercive character as emerging historically and socially and therefore as capable of being overcome with a view to emancipation. At the same time, in contrast to many of the protagonists of the revolts of the 1960s and 1970s, he had no illusions about the immediate chances for such radical change. Agnoli factored in the failure of revolutionary awakening from the outset and counted on the patient work of critique and negation, the 'laborious work of the mole' (Agnoli, 2000), on subversive thought and the enactment of collective self-reflection. He would promote such work in practical ways – for example, regular talks for an audience of Italian immigrant laborers in the car factories of Wolfsburg or discussions with Fiat workers in Turin. In theoretical terms he took inspiration from Baruch de Spinoza, Immanuel Kant, the young Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx, turning these thinkers against the grain of

academic political science: 'the abolition of the objectively and one-sidedly (that is to say, expedient to certain interests) coercive character of society: this is the aim which political science should pursue' (Agnoli, 1990: 20). Political science does not refer 'to the dysfunctional relationship between politics and the constitution. Rather, it demonstrates that the constitution is the regulation of a dysfunctional social relation' (Agnoli, 1990: 17).

Agnoli saw Marx not as a positivist economist but as the thinker of revolution, and he shared Horkheimer's view that the point is 'not to see Marx with the eyes of the professional economist, but rather with those of a person who knows he is living in an inverted society and who desires the right society' (Horkheimer, 1988: 325). When Agnoli dealt with the classics of political thought, he was concerned not with philology but rather with the extent to which they could help 'promote thinking about another form of social synthesis' (Agnoli and Bruhn, 2003). Just as critical theory never allowed itself to go with the flow of the world or 'constructive critique' (Löwenthal, 1980), Agnoli felt wholly obligated to destructiveness. On the one hand, he did not participate in the search for alternative political forms to better administer capitalism. On the other hand, he also declined to offer concrete alternatives for a potential post-capitalist society. The 'actually existing' socialist and party-communist notion of a society emancipated from capital, and the organizations designed to achieve such a society, along with alternative radical leftist forms of organization, each appeared to him as deserving of critique – even if his sympathies for the latter were beyond question. Against the 'actually existing socialism' of the Eastern Bloc and the 'super state' of the Soviet Union (Burgmer, 2002: 68), he constantly invoked Marx's postulate that in a liberated society, 'the freedom of each individual' must be 'the precondition for the freedom of all' (Burgmer, 2002: 28).

It was precisely the negative orientation of his critique which was an abomination to

those on the traditional left and which make his objections to the ruling order so fruitful. Just as in the critique of political economy, where the sense, necessity and possibility of abolishing the commodity-form of the products of human labor (and thus money and capital) result from an analysis of the historical emergence, function and analytic-logical derivation of value, money and capital, so in Agnoli's critique of politics the sense, necessity and possibility for abolishing the state results from an analysis of politics, the state and its contemporary constitution and not from some utopia painted in fine detail. Agnoli made precisely this analysis his task. In a conversation with the newspaper *Arbeiterkampf* in 1988, he asserted that he was 'incapable of constructive thought' (Agnoli, 1998: 237); he later described himself as 'impossible to organize' (Agnoli and Bruhn, 2003). In rejecting the painting of utopias he was in agreement with Adorno's dictum that 'the false, once determinately known and precisely expressed, is already an index of what is right and better' (Adorno, 1997: 793).

Protagonists of postmodernist and post-structuralist theories, who triumphed within universities at the end of the 1980s, must have felt provoked by Agnoli's materialism, with its straightforward yet crucial insights into the practice of exploitation and rule in societies based on the valorization of capital and organization by the state. Adorno already had an inkling of the need to avoid being tricked of the fundamental insights of a Marxist inspiration by fashionable theoretical approaches: 'In all its versions, materialism has always had (in contrast to chic or subtle philosophies) an aspect of backwardness, of the rustic' (Adorno, 1992: 175). In an article first published in 1968, and wholly in line with Adorno, Agnoli had said of fashionable theories of language: 'Certainly, it is only the rulers who are able to impose themselves linguistically; but not because they use language, but because they rule' (Agnoli, 1997: 62). He regarded 'PC language rules'

as a 'hypocritical attempt to semantically whitewash deplorable social conditions' (Agnoli, 1998: 10). Conservatives consistently regarded Agnoli as an anarchist-communist troublemaker disrupting the academic establishment. During an examination, a professorial colleague allegedly admonished him: 'When you come to power, you'll probably put me up against the wall!', to which Agnoli impishly and dryly responded: 'What an imagination, Herr Professor. When we come to power you'll be on our side. You're always on the side of power' (Markl, 2003).

For somebody who was active for many decades as a public scholar, Agnoli left behind a comparatively small oeuvre. His 'personal right to be lazy' was important to him, and he regarded himself as a 'friend of the small format' (Agnoli and Bruhn, 2003). He concentrated on writing essays, which were often published in non-academic publications (frequently journals of the Italian left), instead of writing thick doorstops fated to remain unread or collect dust in libraries. He preferred to read rather than turn himself into a professorial word-processing machine as had many of his university colleagues. The latter once led him to state: 'reading takes time, time during which Habermas writes' (Agnoli and Bruhn, 2003).

An impression of Agnoli's activity as a teacher is provided by *Subversive Theory*, a transcript of his penultimate lecture at the Free University of Berlin, published as the third volume of his *Collected Writings*. Reading these expositions, it becomes clear that the academic boredom that almost all of today's students endure need not dominate the lecture halls and places of learning. Agnoli stood in stark contrast to the academic administrators of theory and the university functionaries who have robbed even Marx of his political and polemical sting. Agnoli remained a thinker capable of empathy, who was always concerned with engaged critique, even self-critique. He was not concerned with theoretical coherence for its own sake but rather with reflective experience,

conceptually grasped, with the aim of intervening in social reality.

In *Subversive Theory*, Agnoli attempts to trace the history of subversion, both intellectual and practical, from the days of ancient and Christian myths through the Middle Ages up to the modern era. His approach and examples provide a very different model to the traditional history of political ideas, and show how certain recalcitrant, subversive or even just uncomfortable thinkers (particularly women) were (and still are) disregarded, falsely interpreted or labeled as pathological by the academic mainstream. He defines the concept of subversion as a form of human emancipation undertaken in gloomy (that is, repressive and counter-revolutionary) periods. This has implications for academic work, too, for which Agnoli recommends *Destruction as the Determination of the Scholar in Miserable Times*, to use the title of a piece first published in 1990 in the leftist monthly magazine *konkret* (Agnoli, 1995: 10 ff.; Agnoli, 2003a). Though subversion does not amount to revolution itself, it prepares revolution's way. It involves 'negation *sans phrase*, negation as *destructio*, as obstinate reason' (Agnoli, 1999: 16). Subversion is both a theoretical and practical activity which attacks the existing order without demanding a 'more orderly order' (Agnoli, 1999: 14) as do fascists and other protagonists of conformist revolt.

## THE CRITIQUE OF THE STATE AND DEMOCRACY

In Agnoli's forays into the history of philosophy, one sees again and again the key elements of his critique of the state and politics as developed in his more well-known texts such as *Die Transformation der Demokratie* [*The Transformation of Democracy*] (Agnoli, 1990). First published in 1967 and originally co-written with the social psychologist Peter Brückner, it is regarded as 'the Bible of the

extra-parliamentary opposition' (Kraushaar, 2008: 143) and as having had an enormous influence upon the students in revolt at the end of the 1960s. Until the early 1990s, *The Transformation of Democracy* enjoyed a reception in German-speaking countries far beyond leftist academic circles. Since then it has been a focus of diverse left-wing debate: in 'ideology-critical' and 'anti-German' circles, for instance, and among autonomists, libertarian socialists and anarchists, whereas Agnoli's reflections receive hardly any discussion in mainstream German-language political science. If they are engaged with, they are at best described as 'products of their time' and at worst disqualified as 'left-fascist', imputing an affinity between a leftist critique of the state that aims at an association of free human beings and fascist contempt for democracy. Agnoli reacted to such accusations by making clear that he did not criticize 'the bourgeois constitutional state because the bourgeois constitution is what Carl Schmitt thinks of it, namely an institutionalized talking shop' but rather as 'the state of capital' (Agnoli and Bruhn, 2003). To criticize the state thus is not to disdain the bourgeois civil liberties that the constitutional state usually guarantees.

The fact that the majority of former '68 activists choose not to heed Agnoli's words is all too understandable: if they had taken his critiques of democracy, state and institutions seriously they could not have embarked upon their beloved 'long march through the institutions' nor participated in such great numbers and with such enthusiasm in the project of the Green Party and, later, the Left Party [*Die Linke*]. Agnoli attributes to them a 'drive to institutional power', toward reconciliation with capitalist society and affirmation of its state (Agnoli, 2000).

If it is part of the essence of subversion that human beings always resist becoming a pure object, then subversion must also be directed against politics, since human beings, as Agnoli puts it, 'are never at the center of politics (as the parties proclaim), but only a

means used by politics – so that, for example, voting at elections becomes a mere means of distributing power among the parties’ (Agnoli, 1999: 29). Arguing against the institutionalization of subversion, Agnoli set out a critique of parliamentarism and the state, by pointing out a tendency toward ‘involution’ in modern democracies. This involves the originally revolutionary-emancipatory institutions which developed out of the French Revolution being transformed into institutions of domination and administration in the modern authoritarian-constitutional state of the second half of the twentieth century. According to Agnoli, these institutions became useless for the general human emancipation at which society’s ‘negative potential’ aims (Burgmer, 2002). For Agnoli, parliament is a special form of the representation of domination, which, via the ballot box, maintains the illusion of self-determination on the part of the dominated. In order to carry out this function, it requires the presence of actual social power in parliament but not necessarily the actual power of parliament. Parliament plays a decisive role in transforming ‘conflicts of domination’ into ‘conflicts of leadership’. A conflict of domination occurs between two antagonistic groups who follow mutually exclusive aims. Here, Agnoli primarily has in mind the conflict between labor and capital, which he regarded – following a very traditional Marxist understanding of Marx (Grigat, 2007) – as embodying a contradiction that points beyond the existing system. A leadership conflict, by contrast, is the competition between leading elites conducted in a system-immanent way. An essential element in the transformation of democracy into an authoritarian-constitutional state, according to Agnoli, is the transformation of the conflict of rule emanating from the contradiction between labor and capital into a conflict of leadership, the content of which is mere competition over the best way to supervise the contradiction between capital and labor.

Using the example of the ‘anti-institution’ of the Roman tribune of the plebs, Agnoli

explains that power can never be effectively checked, and certainly not sabotaged, when subversion gets involved with the institutions of power, but only ‘when reason is permanently on the streets’ (Agnoli, 1999: 79). For this reason Agnoli remained a strict opponent of that march through the institutions by which many of the ‘68 activists whom he had earlier inspired later justified their adaptation to the existing state of affairs. He knew that, as a rule, institutions are stronger than the people who enter into them: ‘The state is a palace one can enter but which has no rear exit’ (Burgmer, 2002: 21). As a consequence of this critique and against the background of a narrow concept of politics, Agnoli was not concerned (as are many today who discuss globalization and the loss of the regulatory capacity of the state that it has supposedly caused) with rescuing politics or defending the political sphere against the economic sphere but instead simply with abolishing politics and thus a society necessarily constituted and reproduced by the state. Agnoli conceived politics as statist *per se*. Against the mainstream of the left in the 1970s and 1980s, he did not call for a ‘general politicization’ but demanded the liberation of the private from the political in the sense of pushing back against the statification of society (Nachtmann, 2003a) to achieve the liberation of society from political domination. Against the bourgeois equation of politics with the public sphere, he held onto Marx’s conception of communism: ‘a public sphere without political character, that is to say a public sphere without structures of domination’ (Agnoli, 1999: 73), which means a ‘society of the free and equal’ (Agnoli, 1995: 115).

In contrast to the Marxist critic of the state and law, Eugen Pashukanis, Agnoli was not primarily concerned with the various forms of the state and their institutions but rather with the ‘state form’ (Neupert, 2013: 191), which in the various epochs of the capitalist mode of production has always been necessary to bestow an organizing authority (admittedly diverse in appearance, mediation

and organization) on contradictory economic and social relations. This authority is not identical with the business that it ultimately seeks to protect. Agnoli saw the various disputes about good and bad governance, about corruption and the misbehavior of individual politicians, as mere forms of appearance of the political. By contrast, he saw the essence of politics as consisting in the fact that it is 'a system of conquering, maintaining, and exercising power', an 'institutional, partially constitutional form of statehood into which social and economic rule is translated' (Agnoli, 2000).

The political means of power – above all the state's monopoly on the use of force – were interpreted by the traditional left as the ruling class's instruments of oppression. The maintenance of the political, economic, social and cultural power of the bourgeoisie was seen as the essence of bourgeois politics but not as the essence of politics as such. As a rule, it was assumed that politics was something neutral that had to be filled up with content and which was merely instrumentalized by the ruling class for its own aims. The traditional left provided only a critique of bourgeois politics, not a critique of politics as such. Agnoli, by contrast, wanted to formulate a fundamental and radical 'critique of politics' – a phrase that is already found in the work of the young Marx (Marx, 1843/44: 379) but which had not received much consideration in traditional Marxism.

No materialist critique of the state and politics can exist without reference to Marx's critique of political economy, and Agnoli also repeatedly described his program of a critique of politics as 'a continuation of the critique of political economy' (Agnoli, 1998: 220). Agnoli analyzes the act of voting and state rule in *The Transformation of Democracy* with direct reference to the categories of Marx's *Capital*. Voters see themselves as conscious consumers of political goods offered on the market, 'which the consumers themselves regard as use-values, whereas in reality these goods absolutely

constitute real exchange values. They are realized as exchange values on the market of power, in order to make the political power invested in elections profitable' (Agnoli, 1990: 45). The election of a parliament is a central moment of the legitimation of domination. By consummating the act of voting, voters accept domination over themselves, because they adhere to the illusion that they could also abolish that domination in the same manner if necessary.

In his critique of the state, Agnoli distances himself from notions that see the state in modern capitalism as an all-encompassing organizer which itself directly takes over the function of capital, as well as from theories that do not admit of any autonomous activity on the part of the state. He breaks with the dogmatically posited base–superstructure schema and resists a view of the state as a mere superstructural phenomenon. Instead, the state is 'firmly rooted [...] in the social base' (Agnoli and Mandel, 1980: 26).

The state is more than just a vicarious agent of the economy. Agnoli emphatically pointed out that the state in capitalism is not just the state of the capitalists but rather the state of capital, whereby capital needs to be understood as a social relationship and not as a monolithic power bloc. According to Agnoli, in light of the crisis-prone nature of capitalist societies, the state must not only put itself in the position of the ideal 'total capitalist' in the sense Marx and Engels used the term, but also in the role of the ideal total proletarian (Nachtmann, 2003b). The political sovereign in the form of the state mediates the contradictions of an antagonistic society based upon the valorization of capital, and to secure the 'fundamental, objective conditions of capital accumulation' it must 'take hold organizationally of the social existence of the worker and partially support it economically' (Agnoli, 1995: 35). The state molds the bourgeois class into a unity, which it does not have in the spheres of circulation and production. On the one hand, it implements specific class interests of capital

and balances out opposing interests between individual fractions of capital. On the other hand, it takes into consideration general interests, transcends class-specific demands, condenses social contradictions and acts like the guarantor of the commonweal. According to Agnoli, the state

cannot be an 'agent of capital', since total capital is not a real magnitude, but is however a real mediation [...] it only directs itself selectively according to individual pressure; essentially it organizes total social reproduction according to the general lines of the common interest of all individual capitals in accumulation. (Agnoli, 1995: 48)

In the 'immanent anarchy of the movement of capital' with its 'double conflict' between individual capitals on the one hand and the classes on the other, it is solely the state that is able to act as the 'real total organizer' (Agnoli, 1995: 46).

Agnoli points to a close connection between theoretical assessments of the state and political orientation. Viewing the state as a purely superstructural phenomenon already involves, as he elaborates, using the example of the Italian Communist Party, the danger of a reformist orientation, which aims at mere participation in domination rather than its overcoming. In the concept of a transitional society organized by the state, which is still propagated today by many party-oriented Marxists, Agnoli recognizes a problem 'that [...] precisely the state which is supposed to ensure the transition begins to wither away from the very start' (Agnoli and Mandel, 1980: 19).

Here he makes a distinction between a 'fundamental opposition' and an 'integrated opposition'. The integrated opposition, which would like to participate constructively in shaping the existing system, evolves in almost every case out of the fundamental opposition. However, not only the integrated opposition but also the fundamental opposition tends to accept the given rules of society. It hopes that by accepting these rules it will have a chance to make its own radical

critique more widely known and more convincing. For Agnoli, however, this overlooks the fact that the critique of political rules was originally an integral component of the substantive critique formulated by every emancipatory fundamental opposition. Each time an oppositional force makes a merely formal adaptation to the rules, a substantive adaption also occurs.

Agnoli emphasizes that a radical opposition also fulfills a central control function within the false whole, in the sense of a democratic-critical public sphere, since a moderate left tends to voice some but by no means all social grievances. He emphasizes that 'only a fundamental opposition is interested in relentlessly uncovering all political and social grievances. The constitutional opposition will always remain within a tight framework: grievances are only uncovered if they are advantageous to a change in government, or influence the periodic distribution of mandates' (Agnoli, 1990: 89).

Against reformist conceptions of politics, Agnoli points out the structural impossibility of system-transformational reform: the material foundation of politics is the success of capital producing under the aegis of a particular state. The economic condition of a state's existence is its maintenance of the production of surplus value. The state must guarantee and improve as much as possible the conditions of successful accumulation of capital. By taxing both the surplus value produced and wages, the state secures its own material foundation and thus maintains the possibility of politics. The structural problem for emancipatory politics consists in the fact that the state, as soon as its political measures attain a quantity and quality that allow them to be understood as a contribution to general emancipation and not just as a different distribution of misery, tends to deprive itself of its own material basis. Emancipatory politics limits the possibilities for capital accumulation. The amount of surplus value shrinks and conservative politicians and business leaders are correct, despite all their ideological

and strategic rigmarole, when they state that where there is nothing, nothing can be redistributed. If the state intervenes so energetically in production that the production of surplus value is reduced, it already scrapes away at its own ability to intervene further, since it begins to threaten the conditions of its own existence (Agnoli, 1995: 43 ff.). Agnoli thus points out the 'logical dilemma of all "progressive regulation" of capitalism: no politics without valorization – and vice versa' (Schlemmermeyer, 2010).

The question regarding the extent to which politics can be understood exclusively as conscious behavior to secure domination had already appeared in debates in the 1970s. Agnoli was accused of overestimating the role of self-consciously acting subjects at the pinnacle of bourgeois society. The transformation of conflicts of domination into conflicts of distribution was not, according to this criticism, the result of conscious strategies but rather

the result of the inversion of the class relation in the production of value and surplus value through relations of competition. Class relations only appear in this inverted form and are structurally or unconsciously reproduced through it. It is the relations of competition that constitute the foundation for the conflicting and compromise-laden coexistence of social interests in politics. (Blanke, 1976: 210 ff.)

This criticism, which calls to mind Marx's critique of the fetishism and mysticism of capitalist society from the three volumes of *Capital*, nevertheless provoked only incomprehension on Agnoli's part. Asked by the Trotskyist Ernest Mandel, who was not unversed in Marxist terminology, 'What does that mean?', Agnoli replied: 'I don't know either'. Despite this, Agnoli himself raised the issue of the contradiction between conscious political action aimed at implementing the interests of capital and the state on the one hand, and the blind operation of the law of value through activity rooted in fetishistic consciousness on the other. He was concerned with the connection between the

apparent naturalness of capitalist society, the permanent possibility of crises and the state's efforts at planning which necessarily arise from this, which he summarized as 'the political synthesis of social coercion' (Agnoli and Mandel, 1980: 19). The laws of value Marx had in mind 'are nowhere transformed into a mystical demiurge with total power' and it is therefore possible that it is suspended quite consciously by, for example, monopoly power. Because of this, the state is compelled to act as the concentrated power of the law of value to secure its legitimacy (Agnoli, 1995: 68).

The apparent contradiction between conscious action and the blind action of the law of value dissolves once the economic character of society, its commodity-form and the subjective will to political power are conceived as mutually dependent but distinct spheres. Shifts in political power as well as the control and regulation of social relationships are by no means blind processes. They result from conscious strategies on the part of individual power groups. Nevertheless, one can also speak here of 'subject-less domination': the existence of fetishized consciousness is 'total' in the sense that it is not consciously placed in the world by any class or social grouping. Rather, it tends to confine all subjects who live in developed commodity-producing and exchanging societies in a false reflection of social reality, which at the same time is a correct reflection, since it accords with those subjects' everyday necessities. Unawareness of the internal laws of movement of capitalist society – 'they do this without being aware of it' (Marx, 1990: 166–7) – and conscious political action for the maintenance of capital accumulation and its political framework exist simultaneously: 'In this way it is possible to speak of a link between the blind law of value and the deliberate political choices and decision-making of ruling groups' (Agnoli, 1995: 69).

Nevertheless, the charge cannot be denied that despite all his anti-authoritarian anti-dogmatism and his critique, formulated early

on, of Marxism-Leninism as the legitimating ideology of Stalinism, Agnoli has carried some traditional Marxist baggage along with him. Peter Klein has pointed out shortcomings in Agnoli's theory, and though Klein's tone is sometimes ungenerous, even acrimonious, his criticisms are in some respects quite justified. Klein accuses Agnoli of viewing democracy as nothing but a fraud. Agnoli's approach in *The Transformation of Democracy*, he argues, reduces democracy to a 'strategic maneuver of the executive "ruling class"' (Klein, 1991: 143). Leaving aside the brusque nature of Klein's critique, it is useful to see it as an expression of the ambiguities in Agnoli's critique of democracy and the state, because Agnoli also refers again and again to the subject-less character of domination in capitalist society: he talks of the 'derivative, instrumental character of the "rulers" of production' (Agnoli, 1998: 109), and capital is for him not simply a monolithic power bloc standing over and against the dominated but a phenomenon which manifests itself as 'a social given, whose highest goal is its own valorization' (Agnoli, 1998: 110). Even if Agnoli never excluded from his critique the respective 'masters' who are the concrete appearance of social 'character masks', he never understood domination as personal rule but rather as a 'reified and juridified encapsulation of the objectively compulsive character of capitalist production and reproduction in the form of the state' (Nachtmann, 2003b).

## FASCISM, POST-FASCISM AND POST-NAZISM

Agnoli's works explore the reversal of liberalism – the 'classical form of a class-state of the liberal-police type' (Agnoli, 1995: 43) which appears in economic terms as 'night watchman' but in domestic-policy terms as 'day policeman' against the rebellious proletariat (Agnoli, 1995: 44) – into fascism, a development whose beginnings he dates to

the age of classical imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century. Referring to Alfred Sohn-Rethel's analyses of class structure under German National Socialism, Agnoli conceives fascism as a political rearguard action that resorts to absolute (as opposed to relative) surplus-value production in the face of manifest difficulties of capital valorization and the collapse of the world market. The fascist 'war of plunder and conquest' is a 'necessary element of solving the crisis' (Agnoli, 1997: 102). Whereas in a bourgeois constitutional state political violence is directed against the revolutionary workers' movement, in a fascist state it is directed even against the reformist workers' movement, which Agnoli describes as the '*differentia specifica* of the fascist form of bourgeois domination' and which simultaneously recalls the 'common denominator of all bourgeois forms of rule' (Agnoli, 1997: 111).

According to Agnoli, Italian fascism was much more significant for the development of post-war bourgeois-capitalist societies than was German National Socialism, whose mania for annihilation he saw falling outside of capitalist logic: the 'destruction of labour power is not part of this logic, even if German capital has been its beneficiary' (Agnoli, 2003b: 19). In contrast to National Socialism, Italian fascism did not have an ideology of *Volksgemeinschaft*; it was instead characterized by

an ideology of the neutralization of class relations. Class conditions were recognized as real, but they were to be institutionalized – which was not the case in Germany, because there the class structure was simply denied and subsumed by the *Volksgemeinschaft*. It was not by chance that trade unions were banned in Germany. In Italy, on the other hand, they existed, albeit in fascist disguise. Corporatism...meant an attempt to neutralize the class structure by incorporating the exponents of these classes into joint institutions under the aegis of the state. (Agnoli, 2003b: 19)

Fascism was 'not a dictatorship in the usual sense of the word' in that it 'tried to establish a general consensus beyond social conflicts' (Agnoli, 2003b: 19).



Here, however, Agnoli seems to give too much emphasis to an apparent manipulation of the so-called ruled by the apparently self-conscious rulers. While his writings on the theory of fascism never make unqualified reference to a merely 'incited' working class, people or masses (as is typical on the nationalist left), Agnoli nevertheless talks primarily (even when discussing antisemitism) of 'techniques of domination'. This bears similarities to certain problematic formulations in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: they allege that the Antisemitism's 'high commissioners' who knew what was really at stake did not hate Jews. Similarly to Agnoli, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that antisemitism serves domination by means of distraction and corruption of character. While the ruling elite talked about antisemitism, the ruled would put it into practice (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1947: 179).

Agnoli admits, however, that he is unable to comprehend the Shoah 'by means of any categories, rational, Marxist or otherwise' (Agnoli, 1997: 10), and he maintains that the correct characterization of mass extermination is as an expression of the 'total irrationality of domination' (Agnoli, 1997: 52). Antisemitism itself, *before* the National Socialists' creation of a bureaucratically organized system of industrialized mass murder, is construed as a means to other ends. He does not conceive of the notion of a 'Jewish-Bolshevik worldwide conspiracy' as a lie that its proponents themselves believed, as some extreme pathological projection of the madness of capitalist commodity production and state domination. Instead he understands it as one of the 'main instruments of integration and manipulation at the level of the masses' (Agnoli, 1997: 127). It is not hard to see here a risk of downplaying the gravity of antisemitism: it becomes merely a particularly insidious means of domination that is (given the right circumstances) available to rulers to ensure they (apparently consciously) stay in power. The ruling class's real antisemitism

and the actions which result from it risk being overlooked and underestimated, as does the widespread antisemitism of the dependent classes, which exists without significant persuasion or manipulation 'from above'.

Agnoli has repeatedly emphasized the fact that in the European post-war states we are by no means dealing with societies that have emerged *ex nihilo* but with post-fascist societies, which have taken up numerous components of fascism (for instance, corporatism) in modified form. Fascism should not be reduced to 'the formalized barbarism of "totalitarian rule"' and in particular not to the National Socialist practice of extermination, otherwise it would no longer be possible to analyze the extent to which the fascist corporatist model of state integration of labor and capital was partially taken up in the corporatist models of post-war societies under the aegis of social planning. Agnoli did not simply equate the socio-partnership models of post-war Europe with the fascist social pact but attempted to show what, 'for example, in the West German program of social symmetry or the policy of French *planification* displays technocratic and especially fascist-corporatist characteristics' (Agnoli, 1997: 28 ff.).

The specific manifestations of the post-fascist social pact, the institutional organization of the contradiction between capital and labor in most European post-war societies that followed the experience of fascism, did not 'emerge naturally from the laws of the market' but rather involved 'the attempt to put those market laws back on the right tracks: conscious intervention in the relationship between labour and capital in order to restore its "natural character" (capitalistically understood) and to regulate the labour market in a way conducive to renewed accumulation' (Agnoli, 1990: 198). In post-fascist societies, it is not only that the capital relation is present in the state but that the state – in contrast to the liberal state of the early bourgeois epoch, which largely trusted in the compulsion of economic laws – enters the capital relation

and acts as a social planner and preventive crisis manager (Nachtmann, 2003b).

The late capitalist state in the second half of the twentieth century is founded on the experience of the ruling personnel of fascist times, who were not simply expunged by the military defeat. Fascism, with its economic and socio-political forms of organization and its institutional strategies for the prevention of radical upheavals, had developed components that were then preserved in the bourgeois state and made irreversible: 'If an epoch ceases to be fascist, this does not mean that fascism ceases to exist and to have effects' (Agnoli, 1997: 27 ff.). Rather, according to Agnoli, 'it becomes an irreversible component of capitalist society' (Agnoli, 1997: 74). The West German state of the post-war period thus appears as a political expression of 'permanent crisis prevention' (Nachtmann, 1995: 87). In an attempt 'to circumvent the need for open terror in times of crisis' it had resolved 'the ambivalence of representative bodies and the representatives' parties', which in his view was characteristic of early liberalism and pre-fascist bourgeois society (Agnoli, 1990: 41).

By emphasizing the persistence of fascism, while rejecting any equivalence between state repression in the democratic constitutional state and the practices of Italian fascism or German National Socialism (Agnoli, 1997: 28), Agnoli formulated a warning similar to that given by Adorno when he maintained that the afterlife of fascist tendencies within democracy is potentially more menacing than the afterlife of fascist tendencies against democracy (Adorno, 1997): 'The insight that Fascism is not a sort of "alternative superstructure", but that, once established as a form of domination, it changes qualitatively and irreversibly the conditions which it encounters, links Agnoli's analyzes with those of Adorno and Horkheimer's Critical Theory' (Nachtmann, 1995: 87).

Unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, however, Agnoli set little store by the fact that the Federal Republic of Germany is not only a

post-fascist state but above all a post-Nazi state. Even though Agnoli pointed out (earlier and more forcefully than other theorists) the differences between Italian fascism and German National Socialism, he lacks an incisive critique of post-Nazi German society, which would need to focus on the modified continuation of the nation-socialist *Volksgemeinschaft* within the constitutional consensus of the Federal Republic of Germany. This continuation, which is strikingly different from Italian post-fascist society, involves the *Volksgemeinschaft* as both persecuting and persecuted.

If we consider the many critiques of a revolutionary automatism, which identifies the goals of emancipation in each and every action of the working class, then Agnoli's texts from the 1960s and 70s must, from a contemporary perspective, be viewed as workerist or as romanticizing the masses. True, Agnoli rightly points out that the worker is neither 'per se a reformist' nor 'per se a revolutionary' (Agnoli, 1998: 130 ff.), yet he seems to express mere wishful thinking (and confuses the wishes of a relatively small part of the proletariat with the general will) when he argues that 'the proletariat wants communism as emancipation and not as state power' (Agnoli, 1998: 93).

Against the backdrop of such 'lingering legacies of traditional labour-movement Marxism' (Vogt and Benl, 1998: 113), the question arises as to the actuality of Agnoli's critique, especially that contained in his *Transformation der Demokratie*. Agnoli himself has taken several positions on this question. On the one hand, he has pointed out that his critique is to be understood as a *fundamental* critique such that its enduring validity would have to be measured against the basic structure of society and the state. In Western societies the mode of production, social structure and political form, which Agnoli called the 'three basic elements... grounding the critical analysis in *Transformation der Demokratie*' (Agnoli, 1990: 182), remain essentially unchanged, even 20 years after

the appearance of his magnum opus. For this reason, he surmised that his critique has lost none of its validity. On the other hand, Agnoli refers to political developments, such as the integration and de-radicalization of the German Green Party during the 1980s, which 'despite all accusations and counter-arguments verifies the theory of involution' (Agnoli, 1990: 183).

Similarly, it could be argued that the integration of the German Left Party [*die Linke*] that has occurred since 1990, and the transformation of Western democratic societies into 'tougher forms' of political constitution (Agnoli, 1997: 7) remain highly topical, especially in the light of a twenty-first-century crisis of accumulation that is not only economic but structural. According to Agnoli, fascism and the liberal rule of law aim at the same goal: maintaining the conditions for accumulation in capitalist society. The method in each case is repressive but the means are terrorist in the former and constitutional in the latter; only 'special circumstances' force civil society 'on the road to terror' (Agnoli, 1997: 24). Both roads always remain open for bourgeois society. 'Capitalism doesn't want fascism, it only wants to secure profit' (Agnoli, 1997: 43). The question 'Which political form does capital need?' (Agnoli, 2003b: 23) must always be answered anew. At the beginning of the twenty-first century Agnoli assumed that a 'much tougher political form' would be necessary to 'reproduce global capital', not least to maintain the 'privileges of the metropolises... against the rest of the world, [...] which indeed belongs to the world market, but lies completely outside of prosperity and of every capitalist blessing' (Agnoli, 2003b: 25).

Alongside this 'hardening of the objectively compulsive character of society' (Burgmer, 2002: 19) by which the wealthy defend their privilege against the impoverished masses, Agnoli toward the end of his life also saw Islamic jihadists as important protagonists of social regression, speaking of them as a similar threat to general human

emancipation as the fascists had been: 'They too [...] don't want freedom. On the contrary, their dream is to Islamize the entire world. That this goes under the banner of "liberation" is down to an ideological use of concepts' (Burgmer, 2002: 19).

The debates over nation and nationalism, antisemitism and *ressentiment*-fueled capitalism critique, which have been conducted especially on the left in the German-speaking world since the early 1990s, and which should play a decisive role in a discussion of future 'tougher forms' of socialization, have nonetheless received barely any impetus from Agnoli's texts. This is primarily due to the fact that the average nationalistic and commodified monadic individual who feels permanently deceived and outsmarted has a diffuse hatred of those 'at the top' and, at worst, fantasizes about secret powers in the background who are to blame for their misery. These are not the object of Agnoli's critique but, on the contrary, serve as proof of the fundamental capacity of the dependent masses for resistance.

With regard to Agnoli's critique of representative democracy and its mediating institutions, and his positing of a popular emancipatory impulse which seeks to become directly sovereign, it seems appropriate, in light of the experience of National Socialism and the renewed agitation of right-wing and far-right parties, to be highly skeptical of the procedure of direct democracy. Though Agnoli's critique is diametrically opposed to anti-emancipatory versions of the attack on representation and instead has recourse to a diffuse 'healthy popular feeling' on the part of mature, rational individuals, it seems that in late-capitalist post-fascist or post-Nazi societies these qualities no longer exist in any collective agent and seem ever more hard to find in the individual.

Agnoli's critique is based on the Marxian categorical imperative of abolishing all relationships 'in which man is an abased, abandoned, enslaved and contemptible being' (Marx, 1843/44: 385; Agnoli, 1990: 20). By

contrast, Adorno's categorical imperative, which adapted Marx in the wake of National Socialism and maintains that 'in the state of unfreedom' it is a matter of 'thinking and acting in such a way that Auschwitz does not repeat itself, that nothing similar ever happens again' (Adorno, 1966: 358), plays only a subordinate role for Agnoli's theory and political judgments. Agnoli's distance from Adorno's and Horkheimer's critical theory is exemplified in his significantly less skeptical assessment of the revolts of 1968, a point which Joachim Bruhn made clear in an interview with him:

Adorno and Horkheimer always reflected out of the experience of national socialism, out of the reversal of bourgeois society into barbarism, whereas you understand Nazism in terms of Italian fascism. The consequence of this is that the role of antisemitism is ignored or misunderstood. As I see it, the difference between you and Horkheimer and Adorno in the matter of the student movement arises from this. (Agnoli and Bruhn, 2003)

### 'BASSO CONTINUO OF IRONY'

Johannes Agnoli, 'Marxist, anarchist and communist in one' (Narr, 2003), never submitted to any dogma, preferring to take on 'the power of doubt' (Agnoli and Bruhn, 2003). He led a 'non-ascetic life', a life that 'fell between the cracks' (Dahlmann, 2003). With his heretical form of critique, he espoused (always with a wink in his eye) a 'Marxist Agnolism', aiming to reverse the historical divide between communist and anarchist ideas and to show Marx was a 'better anarchist' than he himself knew. At the same time, he declared that 'if Marxism-Agnolism ever became the political program of any group', he would promptly 'quit his own theory' (Agnoli and Bruhn, 2003).

Agnoli's critique of the authoritarianism of the constitutional state; his reflections on the need for fundamental opposition despite the integrating power of the existing order;

on the continuing hold of fascist ideology and fascist techniques of domination and on the state as a social planner, as discussed in the volume *Der Staat des Kapitals* and in his writings on the theory of fascism; and his characterization of the post-Nazi party political landscape of West Germany as a 'pluralist version of a one-party State', along with his predictions of a future hardening of the political form, have lost none of their topicality. After all the criticism of his romanticizing of 'the dominated', of his sometimes traditionally Marxist interpretation of the critique of political economy, of the functionalist concept of antisemitism in his theory of fascism and of his praxis-fetishizing objections to the work of Adorno and Max Horkheimer, one cannot deny the simultaneously serious and charming critical theory of this 'partisan professor' (Bruhn, 2003) who refused to bow to false authorities, even in the face of the state-idealizing conformism of large parts of today's left, and who, finally, offered a welcome antidote to their humorlessness: 'the melody which should make petrified social relations dance requires the *basso continuo* of irony' (Agnoli, 1995: 20).

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# Helmut Reichelt and the New Reading of Marx<sup>1</sup>

Ingo Elbe

Translated by Jacob Blumenfeld

## BIOGRAPHY AND POSITION IN THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL TRADITION

Helmut Reichelt, born in 1939, studied political science in Freiburg from 1959 to 1961 and subsequently in Frankfurt under Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, graduating in 1966. He completed his political science dissertation in 1968, supervised by Iring Fetscher among others, and published it in 1970 as *On the Logical Structure of the Concept of Capital in Karl Marx*. In 1972 he became a Professor in Frankfurt, and in 1974, he received a position at the University of Bremen as Chair of ‘Scientific and Social Theory with specific focus on Dialectics in the Critique of Political Economy’.<sup>2</sup> The University of Bremen, founded in 1971, can be regarded as one of the academic centres for the development of Marxist theory in West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Alfred Sohn-Rethel, Freerk Huiskens, Margaret Wirth, Heide Gerstenberger, Hans Jörg Sandkühler, Hansgeorg Conert,

Lothar Peter). Reichelt taught in Bremen until his retirement in 2005.

Alongside Hans-Georg Backhaus, Helmut Reichelt represents the new reading of Marx [*neue Marx-Lektüre*] that developed in West Germany from the mid 1960s onwards.<sup>3</sup> This new reading opposed both the Marxist-Leninist and Social-Democratic orthodoxy of Marx, and undertook a comprehensive reconstruction of the object and method of the critique of political economy, at least from the Frankfurt Colloquium on *Capital* (1967).<sup>4</sup> The basic thesis concerns the utterly inadequate interpretation of Marx’s work, first established by Friedrich Engels and then adopted by party officials, and reflected in an empiricist methodology<sup>5</sup> and a value theory indistinguishable from classical economics.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it was not until the mid 1970s that this critique of traditional Marxism was worked out clearly. Also beginning in the 1970s, Marx’s scattered and sometimes contradictory positions on the state and history were subjected to the same effort of critical reconstruction

beyond the confines of traditional Marxism.<sup>7</sup> Helmut Reichelt took part in all these debates, in a more or less decisive manner.

Both Reichelt and Backhaus were students of Adorno, but they explicitly distanced themselves from what they considered to be his largely superficial reading of Marx and his idea of critical social theory, which slipped into civilizational critique. As Peter Ruben notes, the Frankfurt School of the new Marx-reading begins 'as a self-negation of the culture-critical orientation' of classical critical theory.<sup>8</sup> Instead, the new Marx-reading addresses problems about the method and object of the critique of political economy, a task already identified by Horkheimer in his 1937 essay *Traditional and Critical Theory* as a prime example of critical social analysis,<sup>9</sup> although it was not systematically followed through by him or his colleagues. Reichelt thus states in his dissertation 'that critical theory to date has contributed nothing essential to elucidating the dialectic in *Capital*' and it is 'characteristic' of critical theory that 'it is only able to formulate dialectical theory as a program, and, at the same time, assumes a standpoint in the material investigation of capitalist society (and also in the reception of Marx's late work) which Marx criticized as a positivism unclear to itself' (Reichelt, 1973: 17 ff.).

At the same time, however, Reichelt and Backhaus draw on a whole range of ideas from Adorno as guiding principles for their reconstruction of Marx's understanding of the object of economy. *First*, there is Adorno's identification of economic objectivity as 'conceptuality holding sway in reality itself', of 'exchange value' as 'merely thought',<sup>10</sup> and his associated diagnosis of the 'domination of the universal over the particular'.<sup>11</sup> Also in this context stands the theory of real abstraction by Alfred Sohn-Rethel,<sup>12</sup> with whom Reichelt collaborated in Bremen, according to his own account (Reichelt, 2009: 3). These themes carry on for Reichelt into his later theory of validity, which seeks to decipher value as a 'thing of

thought' [*Gedankending*]. *Second*, Adorno's idea of an 'inverted form of the primacy of objectivity'<sup>13</sup> returns in Reichelt's theory of the predominance of objectivity (Reichelt, 1973: 37; 1982: 168) and signifies the real independence of capitalist society in relation to the intentions and needs of the actors. *Third* is the critique of methodological individualism and objectivism in social theory. According to Adorno, the real independence of the capitalist economy cannot be made transparent to the intentions of the actors in a 'social nominalist' way, but neither is it an in-itself which exists independently of the actions of the individual.<sup>14</sup> *Fourth*, there is the critique of 'positivism' as a naïve empiricist methodology, which ignores the historical-social mediation of 'facts' and inverts 'the mediated into something immediate'.<sup>15</sup>

This lineage from Adorno through Alfred Schmidt to Reichelt and Backhaus is not mentioned at all in the classic overviews of the Frankfurt School, such as those by Martin Jay, Rolf Wiggershaus, or even the more recent works on the development of the Frankfurt School, like that of Alex Demirović.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, however, there is a tendency, among Backhaus and Reichelt themselves<sup>17</sup> as well as both their pupils<sup>18</sup> and critics<sup>19</sup> to equate the new Marx-reading in West Germany with the contributions of the late Frankfurt School.<sup>20</sup>

### **ON THE LOGICAL STRUCTURE OF THE CONCEPT OF CAPITAL – BEGINNINGS OF THE WEST GERMAN NEW MARX-READING (1970)**

Helmut Reichelt describes in retrospect his investigation into the logical structure of the concept of capital in Marx as the 'first attempt at a reconstruction of the [...] dialectical method in *Capital*' (Reichelt, 2001: 7). In the following, I present the fundamental theses of his work alongside criticisms of it within the West German debate.



### ***On the continuity of the critical-genetic method***

Reichelt identifies substantial evidence in Marx's early work of the methodological concept of the critique of economy, whose social-theoretical complements content can be 'deciphered only against the background of the late work' (Reichelt, 1973: 24). Reichelt's main thesis is that Marx's analysis of value should be understood as the 'fulfilment of the program of the fourth thesis on Feuerbach at the level of political economy' (Reichelt, 1973: 151).<sup>21</sup>

What Feuerbach practised in his critique of religion – the dissolution of the (apparent) independence and substantiality of God through his analytic reduction to the unified but unhistorically understood essence of man – is found in the political economy of Smith and Ricardo as the reduction of the independent forms of wealth to the uniform but unhistorically understood principle of human labour.<sup>22</sup> Marx's project was to carry out a *genetic reconstruction* of the necessity of these independent forms and their objective appearance from *historically specific* social conditions of labour. Reichelt thus makes an implicit parallel of the theoretical difference between Marx and Feuerbach with that between Marx and Ricardo.<sup>23</sup> The characteristic doubling in capitalism – of the product into use-value and value, of the commodity into commodity and money, of bourgeois society into society and the state, and so on – should be understood from 'the intrinsic contradictoriness' of the 'secular basis'.<sup>24</sup> Already in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, Marx's first attempt at a systematic explanation of the fundamental forms of alienation in bourgeois society, he criticizes the central failure of political economy in that it does not derive the genesis of the forms of wealth and coercion from the structural contradictions of this society. Instead, it starts 'with the fact of private property'<sup>25</sup> without explaining it, thus assuming what it first has to develop. In this 'standpoint of the finished phenomena',<sup>26</sup>

which Marx later accused of 'economistic one-sidedness', the alienated mechanisms of reproduction in bourgeois society are therefore uncritically accepted as 'final, no longer derivable' and thus no longer conceived as historical-social forms (Reichelt, 1973: 43).

According to Reichelt, Marx criticized the 'positivism' (empiricism) of political economy at the programmatic level in his early writings. In the value theory of the later period, Marx overcomes this 'external grasping procedure of the bourgeois subject' insofar as 'no category is introduced which is not completely legitimized' (Reichelt, 1973: 142). For Reichelt, Marx's 'positive science', understood as 'the first unadulterated knowledge – not preformed through what can be known – of social reality', presents itself as a critique of positivism in a double sense (Reichelt, 1973: 65). The 'positivism' of the bourgeois condition consists not only in the apparent naturalness of economic objectivity but also in the real independence of social relations in the form of the domination of economic objects over the human beings who have, under specific conditions, produced them (Reichelt, 1973: 62, 266). However, Marx's theory can only reconstruct the process of constitution of this 'predominance of social objectivity' (Reichelt, 1973: 37; 1982: 168) from the historically generated perspective of unalienated socialization (Reichelt, 1973: 38 ff., 58). Only modern productive forces therefore create the conditions for overcoming the inversion of subject and object and form the historical-philosophical anchor of Marx's science (Reichelt, 1974a: 39; Reichelt, 1995: 56 ff.).

In 1971, Project Class Analysis (PKA) criticized this position. The outlines of a definition for an emancipated society become recognizable only at the *end* of Marx's process of inquiry. Before Reichelt's presupposed anticipation of this condition can acquire any determinate content, the social causes, structures, and conditions of the possible abolition of 'alienation' must be clarified.<sup>27</sup>

The anticipation of communism therefore 'does not enter "into the theoretical penetration" [...], but only into the presentation' of the capitalist mode of production. Ulrich Müller introduced the opposite approach in 1974. In a way typical of the times, Müller accuses Reichelt of not 'referring to any class standpoint' but rather to an anticipated human subject and thus indulging in a 'phil-anthropic alienation lament', which is due to the placement of his work within the 'transitional phase of the student movement from the positions of the Frankfurt School and Marcuse to Marxism'.<sup>28</sup>

Whereas Reichelt claims a strong continuity between the *Theses on Feuerbach* and Marx's later work, Michael Heinrich radically calls this into question. In 1845–6, accordingly, Marx and Engels replace the abstractions of Feuerbach's 'human essence' and Stirner's 'unique one' with 'real individuals' and their historical-economic relations as 'empirically confirmable' presuppositions of a materialist theory of society. This materialism, however, is empiricist; the 'practice' from which all independent and mystified entities are derived, according to *Theses on Feuerbach*, is 'nothing more than an empty formula'.<sup>29</sup> It was only in the course of the so-called epistemological break of 1857 that the understanding of the method and object relevant to the critique of political economy really emerged. 'Practice' moved from the explanans to the explanandum in a strategy of presentation divided into structure, action, and function. The actions of the commodity owners were now understood on the basis of the gradually unfolding structure of the mode of production and were 'no longer the transparent reason for explanation'.<sup>30</sup> In departure from empiricist methodology, cognition is grasped as the conceptual reproduction of the object rising from the abstract to the concrete.<sup>31</sup> With this, Marx first explicitly recognizes the necessity of a 'non-empirical level of theory'<sup>32</sup> due to the existence of real abstractions as the object of theory. Heinrich's remarks are surely correct as a warning against

the empiricist- 'praxeological' shortcomings of the *Theses on Feuerbach* and value-form analysis. However, he ignores every reference to historical structural categories in the *German Ideology*, such as the concept of the 'mode of production', which encourages Reichelt to see 'no naive empiricism' at work here (Reichelt, 1973: 46).<sup>33</sup> It is also significant that Heinrich does not consider the *fourth* thesis on Feuerbach, upon which Reichelt essentially bases his claim of the continuity of the critical-genetic method. At the least, he would have been attentive to the salient parallels with *Capital*,<sup>34</sup> which can hardly be dismissed.

From the standpoint of an analytical theory of science, Christof Helberger in 1974 criticized Reichelt's elaboration of Marx's critique of economic empiricism. Reichelt's objection to a merely empirical approach, instead of as a complete legitimation or explanation of economic categories, is initially understood as a reproach against bourgeois science, insofar as it is unable to supply 'historical-genetic explanations'.<sup>35</sup> The object of the 'logical analysis' unnoticed by Helberger and first postulated by Reichelt is the systematic re/production of determinate forms of wealth under given but at the same time historically specific social conditions of labour. Reichelt's accusation therefore consists neither in the assumption of a supposed 'bourgeois' inability to make *historical* explanations nor in assuming the inability to make causal analyses of social facts in general. Marx's anti-empiricism is, according to him, a critique of political economy (not a statement in the philosophy of science about 'bourgeois' thought per se) for failing to take into account the difference between theoretical and empirical concepts, and ultimately for succumbing to the object-induced semblance of the naturalness of historically specific relations. The structural-analytic explanation of political economy is therefore not pushed far enough (incomplete abstractions), the empirical and the theoretical are confounded (false abstraction or lack of an intermediary between the theoretical level and the empirical level) (Reichelt, 1973: 115, 117)<sup>36</sup> and

finally the historicity of the object is missing (economic one-sidedness). This breakdown in explanation, or the fact that these explanatory approaches remain within the framework of *specific* uncritically presupposed categories, is not a problem of the arbitrary 'selection of questions'<sup>37</sup> from which Helberger derives the differences between 'bourgeois' and Marxist approaches, but is materially grounded: the object leads the scientific observer to certain evidential assumptions about the nonhistory of the capitalist mode of production. This epistemological dimension of the material analysis in *Capital*, however, does not occur to Helberger. His positivistic conception of ideology stems from the deviation of 'subjective ideas [...] from actual reality' and the blurring of descriptive statements with normative expectations.<sup>38</sup> Helberger sees another possible interpretation of Reichelt's critique of the empirical assumption of categories in the idea of a 'complete explanation',<sup>39</sup> i.e., the demand for an explanation of *everything* that can be explained. But neither Marx nor Reichelt pursue this goal, even though Reichelt may sound like this sometimes. In contrast to Hegel, Marx does not investigate an absolute system but a finite system based on presuppositions which it itself did not create, and which therefore cannot and must not be explained within the framework of the system. This is precisely what Marx calls the limits of dialectical presentation, which Reichelt repeatedly points out (Reichelt, 1973: 132, 252; 2000b: 119).

### ***Critique of the rule of abstractions***

According to Reichelt, it is the *Grundrisse*, with its inner 'relations of economics and dialectics', that first opens up 'access to the real contents of Marx's economic critique and thus also the logical structure of *Capital*'. Even in his rather unphilosophical, 'extremely sober language' (Reichelt, 1973: 75), there are traces of a second Hegel reception here, something already emphasized by Alfred

Schmidt.<sup>40</sup> This suggests that Marx's recourse to a dialectical sequence of categories as the expression of a 'compulsion' from the object itself indicates a 'structural identity' (Reichelt, 1973: 76) between Hegel's notion of spirit and Marx's concept of capital. The rule of an abstractum (i.e., value) adopting various forms (i.e., the value-forms) and reproducing itself therein (i.e., as the accumulation process of capital)<sup>41</sup> is considered by Reichelt to be the objective foundation for the workability of dialectical presentation: 'It has validity only where a universal is asserted at the expense of the individual'. In its idealist variant, it is the mystifying doubling of this real subject-object inversion; as materialist, it reflects upon itself as a historically limited 'method of recall' (Reichelt, 1973: 81).

As PKA pointed out in 1971, Reichelt reaches just as little beyond 'merely abstract references to parallels'<sup>42</sup> between Hegel and Marx as Roman Rosdolsky did before him. Ulrich Müller argues that Reichelt's Adorno-influenced critique of abstraction has a tendency to absolutize the critique of science, which is suggested through equivocations of the formula of the 'domination of the universal', and whose final consequence would be manifest irrationalism.<sup>43</sup> Thus, in the manner of a romantic critique of the abstract also found in Adorno, Reichelt claims: 'When individuals first come into their own, and are no longer subsumed under one abstract-universal produced by themselves in this form, then general statements become impossible. With the abolition of social objectivity, the abstract negation of real individuality, the object of all theory disappears' (Reichelt, 1973: 40).

### ***Dialectic of value-form***

It is above all the reconstruction of the dialectical structure of value-form analysis that distinguishes Reichelt's work from similar works of his time. He specifically draws attention to the program of value-form analysis, still clearly formulated in the first edition of *Capital*. There, Marx's point is 'to prove

that the value *form* arises out of the value-*concept*.<sup>44</sup> What was regarded with suspicion by previous commentators as a 'merely' conceptual dialectic, to which a historical proof should be attached,<sup>45</sup> is thus recognized as the real problem posed by Marx: the transition from value to value-form, from the simple to the general form of value and finally the money-form presented as the conceptual unfolding of the existing necessary connection between commodity and money (Reichelt, 1973: 139). The motor of presentation is the 'contradiction [...] between the universality of value and the inadequate form of its appearance' (Reichelt, 1973: 159). In the universal equivalent, according to Reichelt, not only does each commodity by itself distinguish its value from its use-value, but all commodities do together. The value which is common to commodities – socially universal form – is actually expressed first here, namely 'simply (in a single commodity-body) and homogenously (in the same commodity-body of another)' (Reichelt, 1973: 158). 'The commodities are all qualitatively equated, all are expressed as the material of the same labour and can now be compared quantitatively. Thus, if labour-time in general should operate as the regulating law of production, then abstract-human labour itself must exist alongside and outside all particular commodities in natural form' (Reichelt, 1973: 159). It is thus clear that – contrary to Engels – the 'law of value' and 'commodity exchange' cannot be spoken of before the existence of money; the pre-monetary concept of the commodity has no empirical correlate. Reichelt also explains Marx's distinction between the 'analytical' and 'real' relationship of commodities to each other. He shows that within value-form analysis, the commodity in the shape of the value-form gains 'only a double existence in the head'. The independent existence of abstract labour in the shape of a specific concretum here is only the result of an 'ideal doubling' on the part of the scientific observer. The 'real doubling' of the commodity (into commodity

and money) is tracked in the chapter on the exchange process. Here the contradiction between use-value and exchange-value (value) drives the conceptual analysis (Reichelt, 1973: 159 ff.).

This division is put into question by Dieter Wolf, who argues that Reichelt artificially separates the commodity-immanent contradiction (W1) between use-value and value from the contradiction between the value of the commodity in the relative value-form and use-value of the commodity in the equivalent-form (W2), and then assigns them incorrectly to the levels of presentation in chapters 1 and 2 of *Capital*. Reichelt finds the former contradiction only in the second chapter, and the latter one only in the first chapter, and he thinks that the second contradiction (W2) drives the independent expression of value. This assertion, however, presents a logical contradiction, for the commodity-immanent (W1) contradiction is the basis for the distinction between the poles of value-expression (W2), and this is already the first form of solution for that;<sup>46</sup> but it is only *after* this solution that Reichelt encounters a 'contradiction [...] at all' at the level of the still insufficient, objective expression of value.<sup>47</sup> According to Wolf, the immanent contradiction (W1) as the basis of the simple form of value remains the foundation of the further expressions of value, since these are only the developed forms of the simple ones; nevertheless they differ from that which drives the development of the value-form (W2). The contradiction of the simple value-form no longer exists between the value and use-value of the first commodity (which has just found its form of movement here), but rather, as Reichelt describes, it exists between the social-universal character of the value of the first commodity and the unsocial-particular character of the use-value of the second commodity.<sup>48</sup> But only after contradiction 1 has been 'solved' immanently does contradiction 2 arise externally, which Reichelt disregards.

### ***Simple circulation or simple commodity production?***

In *On the Logical Structure*, Reichelt distances himself from Engels' claim that Marx, in the first three chapters of *Capital*, traces the historically independent phase of 'simple commodity production'. Reichelt, like Rosdolsky before him, draws attention to Marx's definition of simple circulation (C–M–C) as an 'abstract sphere' of the overall capitalist reproduction process. Only in capitalism, then, is commodity production the universal form of social metabolism: simple circulation *presupposes* capitalist production relations (Reichelt, 1973: 130). Therefore, the logical-conceptual mode of presentation exhibits simple circulation as a moment of the production relations and destroys the harmonic semblance 'of the encounter between free and equal individuals in the sphere of circulation' (Reichelt, 1973: 165). The dialectical entanglement of both levels furthermore implies a critique of the projection of the laws of appropriation for commodity exchange, and the semblance of appropriation through labour produced by them, onto pre-capitalist social formations (Reichelt, 1973: 129 ff., 166).<sup>49</sup> Starting from this understanding of simple circulation as a level of abstraction in Marx's development of the concept, Reichelt argues that the transition from money to capital is 'carried out more smoothly' (Reichelt, 1973: 244) in the *Grundrisse* than in *Capital*,<sup>50</sup> based on the deficiencies of the money-form. Marx's critique of the economy thus turns out to be a theory of the constitution of the forms of alienated socialization and its characteristic doubling in the shape of a logical-conceptual explanation of material reproduction's independence from its real systematic context: capital as 'self-perpetuating' value in process (Reichelt, 1973: 244–9).

Nevertheless, *On the Logical Structure* remains captive to Engels' historicist methodological orthodoxy, thereby obscuring the above-mentioned insights. Reichelt speaks

diffusely of a 'peculiar intertwining of the historically-descriptive and immanent-genetic method' (Reichelt, 1973: 166), assigning a historical-empirical correlate to the logical transition from the undeveloped to the general form of value (Reichelt, 1973: 167), thus conceding the correctness of Engels' historicizing methodological reflection, if only 'approximately' (Reichelt, 1973: 133). As Bader et al. criticized in 1975, this confuses Marx's talk of the 'real movement through which capital comes into being' with a historical process (Reichelt, 1973: 136).<sup>51</sup> As the PKA noted in 1971,<sup>52</sup> Reichelt ultimately falls back into a logical-historical parallelism, in which the unfolding of the categories in the critique of economy is to be understood as the 'abstract form of presentation of that process which historically leads to capitalism' (Reichelt, 1973: 136).<sup>53</sup> Characteristic of Reichelt's ambiguity with respect to the mode of presentation is his 'peculiar', contradictory, mixing of logical and historical elements. He points to a passage in *Capital* where Marx emphasizes that one must assume a phase of 'primitive accumulation' preceding capitalism – in which the conditions of the capitalist form of the material reproduction process were first created – if one does not want to run into the vicious circle of saying that capital originally brought itself into the world.<sup>54</sup> Alongside this reflection on the *limits* of the dialectical presentation of the movement of capital, however, Reichelt suddenly adds the claim that Marx in the *Grundrisse*<sup>55</sup> describes the presupposition of capitalist production, the separation of direct producers from the means of production, 'as also a result of the movement of capital' (Reichelt, 1973: 260). It is unclear which capital he is talking about here. Peter Römer has therefore rightly pointed out that Reichelt's thesis, taken literally, entails the belief in a 'mystical self-generation' of capital.<sup>56</sup>

The only explicit critique of Engels in his book comes in the following context. Engels interprets Marx's remarks on the transformation of the laws of appropriation

as a historical presentation of the emergence of the capitalist mode of production from the laws of simple commodity production *without any direct violence* (Reichelt, 1973: 257 ff.). Reichelt rightly criticizes this as a 'grotesque distortion' of Marx's ideas. But what he blames on Engels is not the historicist interpretation of the transformation – on the contrary, he reiterates his commitment to precisely this interpretation – but only his 'abstract opposition between violence and economic dynamics'. Here, Reichelt once again confuses the fundamental difference between the constitutive violence of class relations as external historicity (which in the chapter on so-called primitive accumulation Marx clearly separates from the analysis of the movement of capitalism on its own basis) and the reproduction of the founding violence of separation (of direct producers from the means of production) through structural coercion as a 'contemporary' dynamic of the capitalist mode of production. This confusion happens because his only argument is that even in capitalism, labour-power is compelled 'if necessary, with brutal violence' to produce surplus value (Reichelt, 1973: 259).

### **ON THE CRITIQUE OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY: PRODUCTIVE FORCES AND PRODUCTION RELATIONS (1975/83)**

Marx and Engels' conception of history was also the subject of the reconstruction debate in West Germany. Helmut Reichelt provided important contributions with his annotated *Texts on the Materialist Conception of History* (1975) and especially his essay *On the Dialectic of Productive Forces and Production Relations: Attempt at a Reconstruction* (1983). In these writings, he observes an ambivalent conceptualization of the relationship between productive forces and production relations in Marx. Accordingly, a *causa sui* concept of productive forces<sup>57</sup> stands

immediately opposed to the analysis of the development of productive forces as a result of the capital relation (Reichelt, 1975: 80 ff.; 1983: 41).

Marx developed the first concept primarily in his early writings.<sup>58</sup> Here, *first*, the productive forces (labour-power and means of production) are regarded as an automatic universal-historical motor of progress, which presupposes production relations (above all, property ownership) as the merely reactive variable of social development. Marx, according to Reichelt, 'postulates [...] the determining function of the productive forces' (Reichelt, 1983: 42) as 'the basis of the [...] entire history'<sup>59</sup> of mankind. According to Marx (and Engels), the character of the means of production itself suggests specific property relations or determines them directly (Reichelt, 1983: 41):<sup>60</sup> 'The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist', writes Marx in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847).<sup>61</sup>

*Second*, according to Reichelt, Marx, before he even begins any historical research, expands his diagnosis of a present contradiction between productive forces and production relations<sup>62</sup> to the developmental logic of universal history. The productive forces now bestow the unity of history, and their contradiction of the property relations determines the social progress of the mode of production: 'With the acquisition of new productive faculties', Reichelt quotes Marx, 'man changes his mode of production and with the mode of production he changes all the economic relations which were but the necessary relations of that particular mode of production'.<sup>63</sup>

*Third*, the thesis, formulated in the context of overcoming capitalist structures, that revolutionary change 'supposes the existence of all the productive forces which could be engendered in the bosom of the old society',<sup>64</sup> eventually becomes hypostasized by Marx into a universal-historical truth in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859).<sup>65</sup>

Reichelt understands this approach as heir to the bourgeois-fetishistic evolutionary theories in which 'technology' and 'knowledge' are taken as autonomous factors of modernization. Ever since the *Grundrisse*, Marx had conceived of this 'inability to analytically separate the material side and the formal side and to reconstruct it in its complex unity' (Reichelt, 1983: 53) as the 'crude materialism of economists' who 'regard people's social relations of production, and the determinations acquired by things [...] as *natural properties* of the things'. They thus fall into a 'crude idealism, indeed a fetishism which ascribes to things social relations as determinations immanent to them, and thus mystifies them'.<sup>66</sup>

Against the fetishizing of historical processes through a technicist idea of a 'basis of the base',<sup>67</sup> Marx's mature economic critique shows, according to Reichelt, that the industrial mode of production is the *result* of capitalist production relations and does not precede it. The tendency to develop productive forces results 'from the competitive structures of capital reproduction [...] since individual capitals can only maintain themselves in a competitive situation if they secure advantages'.<sup>68</sup> With insight into the dynamics of relative surplus-value production and its accompanying real subsumption of the labour process under capital, Reichelt sees a reversal of the correlation between productive forces and production relations (Reichelt, 1983: 49 ff.). Since the *Grundrisse*, Marx had understood the industrial process of modernization as 'the self-induced movement of capital' (Reichelt, 1983: 44). Production relations now bring about corresponding productive forces and thus form the material side of the production process. 'In machinery', Reichelt cites Marx's *Grundrisse*, 'objectified labour confronts living labour in the labour process itself as the power which dominates it, a power which, in terms of its form, as the appropriation of living labour, is capital'.<sup>69</sup> The formal and material dimension, to Marx, should not be confused.<sup>70</sup> But it remains an

open question if Reichelt means something more than an external conceptualization of the difference between machinery in itself and its capitalist application.<sup>71</sup> It is unclear whether the productive forces, despite their pre-formation, must be conceived as 'form-specific and form-transcending at the same time'.<sup>72</sup> In any case, it is certain that in the *Grundrisse*, 'a theory of history is presented which cannot easily be reconciled with that of the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*' (Reichelt, 1983: 50). Reichelt finds this diagnosed ambivalence again in *Capital*,<sup>73</sup> even if the idea of the primacy of production relations – the conclusion that the 'explosive development of the productive forces' is due 'to the bad infinity of capital in process' (Reichelt, 1983: 52) – clearly prevails there. Thus, Tobias Reichardt notes that in *Capital*, Marx recognizes that only the 'technical basis' of capitalism is 'revolutionary, while all earlier modes of production were essentially conservative',<sup>74</sup> and so no dynamic predominated then, let alone a self-dynamic of the productive forces. But if one maintains a *causa sui* model of the productive forces, this leads to an 'aporia'. Marx 'argues that pre-capitalist societies differed from capitalism in that they were *not* based on the development of the productive forces, and that just such a development of the productive forces *necessarily* led to the dissolution of all previous forms of society'.<sup>75</sup>

Reichelt's Bremen colleague Heide Gerstenberger asks what conception of the unity of history remains after the universal-historical hypothesis of early historical materialism turns out to be a residue from the philosophy of history? What happens when the 'question as to the historical causes for the inauguration of a new historical formation' is no longer 'solved once and for all'?<sup>76</sup> Since Marx's more mature theory, as Andreas Arndt observes, could no longer be 'a theory of history',<sup>77</sup> historical continuity would only be 'produced through the development of labour, its means, and its organization in the simple continuity of the generations.

Labour, however, can neither be abstractly generalized nor considered the subject of history'.<sup>78</sup> Beyond the assumption of supra-historical laws of motion, as can be seen in the *causa sui* model of the productive forces, but also beyond the dissolution of history into a 'smorgasbord of arbitrarily arranged data', there remains 'a concept of social formations as the units in which history structures itself, i.e., transpires within a determinate context'.<sup>79</sup>

### THE VALIDITY THEORY OF VALUE (2007)

In his later work, *The New Marx-Reading* and related essays, Reichelt declares that the reconstruction efforts of the 1970s failed. No longer must one contrast Marx with Marxism and reconstruct an authentic Marxian theory. Rather, Marx's critique of political economy itself demonstrates irreparable 'discrepancies and flaws already in the core theoretical arguments' (Reichelt, 2008: 42). Reichelt's project thus shifted towards a 'new new' Marx-reading, so to speak. To this end, he draws upon Adorno's intuition of a dialectical theory of society that renders discernible the emergence *and* independence, subjectivity *and* objectivity of the social (Reichelt, 2008: 24, 26).<sup>80</sup> 'Bourgeois' social theory, on the other hand, does not develop an adequate concept of its object but merely interprets different levels of experience found within capitalism. On the one hand, Reichelt diagnoses in methodological individualism the hypostatization of subjects' private dissociation into the primary, irreducible fact of the semblance of autonomy; on the other hand, he diagnoses in objectivism the hypostatization of experience with the independent dynamic of capital into a collective, transcendently presupposed entity (Reichelt, 2008: 17 ff., 38, 178 ff.). To avoid the classical dualism between theoretically constitutive individualism and collectivism, Reichelt now refers to another idea in Adorno: the interpretation of

a specifically economic-social objectivity as 'conceptuality holding sway in reality itself'. To work through these unfulfilled aims of Adorno, Reichelt, like Backhaus in 1978, turned to Jürgen Habermas' concept of reconstruction: the theoretical material at hand, above all the Marxist critique of economics, should be taken apart and reassembled in a new form in order to better achieve the goal it set itself (Reichelt, 2008: 42).<sup>81</sup>

Habermas, maintains Reichelt, abandoned the debate on economic-theoretical problems with his project to reconstruct historical materialism. He criticizes Habermas for replacing a genetic analysis of money as a form of wealth from certain production relations with a neoclassical and functionalist approach that conceptualizes money solely as a symbolic medium of generalized communication. Thereby, money is grasped linguistically and endowed by Habermas (without any justification) with a capacity for symbolizing *utility*-quantities (Reichelt, 2008: 375). Moreover, Habermas artificially separates the idea of the money-mediated economy from its class-specific implications and thus turns out to be an ideologist of simple circulation.<sup>82</sup> When the money medium is seen as a supposedly harmless means to facilitate the coordination of material reproduction and relieve the risk of disagreement in linguistic negotiation, it can no longer be conceived as the independent, crisis-prone end of the capitalist economy, which entails exploitation. In so doing, Habermas also misses the systemic character of the capitalist economy.<sup>83</sup> 'Habermas' favoured conceptual framework for the economy', Reichelt concludes, 'implies the romantic image of an exchange society of free and independent equals' (Reichelt, 2000a: 124, 144). The business of critical theory for Habermas thus lies merely in criticizing the 'colonialization' of the sphere of norm-regulated socialization through the medium of money, and to relegate it to 'its rightful' systematic domain.

Reichelt, on the other hand, tries to solve the aporias of social science and economics



simultaneously with the central problems of Marx's theory by linking economic phenomena with norm-regulated socialization in a completely different way. Reichelt assumes the task of clarifying the question of the ontological status of value and money within the framework of a new theory of validity, which he considers to be implicit in the first edition of *Capital* (Reichelt, 2007: 11 ff.). In order to theorize value as an independent, 'incomprehensible' social relationship (i.e., irreducible to the rational motives of individuals or groups), but also to de-naturalize it at the same time, Reichelt uses Adorno's terminology of value as objective 'conceptuality holding sway in reality itself'.<sup>84</sup> Value is thus considered the result of a real abstraction generated in exchange but not reducible to conscious acts of abstraction by subjects. Reichelt now regards it as his task to explicate and concretize this concept of real abstraction, since it is only in this way that the specific social objectivities of value, money, and capital are scientifically knowable (Reichelt, 2007: 8). Proceeding from this specific interpretation of the exchange abstraction<sup>85</sup> as a theory of the 'objective concept', Reichelt begins constructing his premises by 'taking apart' and 'reassembling' Marx's theory. However, in decontextualizing and reframing Marx's quotations, which he does, Reichelt does not mean to reinterpret Marx's central theses. Rather, Reichelt presents this as the explication of Marx's own systematic intentions and concepts, albeit not yet formulated precisely enough (Reichelt, 2007: 10 ff.).

Three hermeneutical operations on Marx's text lead Reichelt to his conception of value as the product of an abstraction existing unconsciously in the head of the commodity owner.<sup>86</sup>

First of all, Reichelt quotes from Marx's appendix on 'The Value-Form' in the first German edition of *Capital*: 'Equivalent means here only *something equal in magnitude*, both things having been silently reduced in our heads to the abstraction *value*'.<sup>87</sup>

The context of this statement in the presentation of *Capital* shows that Marx is speaking here about the *analytical apprehension* of value by scientific consciousness. The point is that the value-magnitude of a commodity existing in the equivalent form is 'measurable' within the value-relation 'only indirectly'<sup>88</sup> by reversing the relation of polarity. That is to say, the polarity relation 'x commodity A is the value of y commodity B' is also an equivalence relation ('x commodity A = y commodity B'), but the value of the relative value-form and the equivalent-form cannot be expressed ('measured') in it at the same time. Understood *merely* as a relation of equivalence (as in the later first and second subsections of the first chapter of *Capital*),<sup>89</sup> the equality in magnitude of the two commodities holds only theoretically 'for us' in the head. This assertion is only about the theoretical *presentability* of the value of both commodities beyond the value-form, and therefore, in contrast to Reichelt's interpretation, it does not contain a thesis about the supposed mental construction of value. A similar meaning also lies behind the formulation that value (in the later first and second subsection) is still merely a 'thing of thought'.<sup>90</sup> Since the real abstraction of value does not take place outside the exchange process, the specific social character of the 'individual' commodity (from the beginning of the presentation in *Capital*) can only be conceived of as a mental category.<sup>91</sup> Value *as such* is only conceivable, not observable. Reichelt now takes such statements as descriptions of the ontological status of value per se. He can thereby invoke Adorno when he writes that exchange-value, compared to use-value, is 'a mere thought' which 'dominates humans needs and replaces them'.<sup>92</sup>

Second, Reichelt draws a distinction between economic forms and the categories in which these forms are described. Marx's statement that 'the categories of bourgeois economy' consist in the objectively induced semblance of the material characteristic of direct exchangeability as 'objective forms of

thought<sup>93</sup> is removed by Reichelt from the reference to the fetishistic *semblance* [*Schein*] that the forms produce in the expression of value, as well as to its treatment in the discourse of political economy. No longer are the 'perverted forms'<sup>94</sup> described as *mystified and fetishized* real forms, but rather these forms are now considered to be objective forms of thought (Reichelt, 2007: 25; 2001: 17). Thus, Reichelt describes the *objects* of economy as 'categories', distancing himself from Marx's materialism in which neither value nor money as economic forms are 'objective forms of thought'; only the *mental reproduction* of these forms in their finished, material shape, which no longer exhibits the social processes of mediation of their production, are designated as such forms of thought.

The revocation of the difference between object-theoretical ('value is...') and metatheoretical reflections ('value is here only conceptually intelligible...') as well as between form and fetish leads Reichelt to his validity theory, which, *third*, also leaves behind Marx's distinction between the levels of presentation of value-form analysis and exchange analysis. Reichelt presents the constitution of economic objectivity as follows: under social conditions of private, specialized labour ('due to the initially structured situation'), commodity owners are 'compelled' to carry out an 'act of equating unaware to themselves' (Reichelt, 2007: 24) to produce value through a 'logically unconscious' (Reichelt, 2007: 16) movement of thought that occurs in the minds of all individuals independently of each other, thus presenting itself as a socially necessary nominal abstraction.<sup>95</sup> Thus, in Marx's talk of the 'objective equalisation of unequal quantities of labour forcibly brought about by the social process',<sup>96</sup> Reichelt reads the fact that products of labour, in their capacity as indiscriminate products of labour, obtain the social function of being the ground of exchangeability – the socialization of products under conditions of private-specialized labour – as cognitive performances of the actors. At first, this 'subjective' equalization

of commodities (described in Form II of the value-form analysis)<sup>97</sup> is explained through an 'inversion' – which also takes place in the minds of the actors before their social contact – of the developed form of value to the general value-form and into the 'objective' (equal) positing of commodities. Value-form analysis thus shows the 'change from subjective to objective "form of thought"' (Reichelt, 2007: 27). The genesis of money occurs through the combination of this unconscious production of the general equivalent with the conscious selection of the commodity fulfilling the equivalent-function. Marx's concept of money should be distinguished from the technologically neutral theories of money as a 'cunningly devised means of information'<sup>98</sup> by the fact that the 'universal acceptance' (of money) – which 'universalises and standardises' subjects' movements of thought (Reichelt, 2007: 25) – is tied back to the unconscious 'universal validity'. For Reichelt, the explanation of the 'change' (Reichelt, 2007: 27) from subjective to objective cognitive activity separates this from subjectivist theories.

Dieter Wolf subjected this conception to a detailed critique, which Reichelt ignored in his later works. Although Reichelt ostensibly makes a distinction between the theoretical and actual relationships of commodities with each other (Reichelt, 2007: 24), he puts into practice a mixture of both levels of abstraction. In so doing, the findings of the scientific consciousness are ascribed to the unconscious of the commodity owners. In the specifically social relation of things (in which they are placed involuntarily by people under certain social conditions of their labour), what happens in an extra-mental process – the equalization and presentation as values – is projected into the minds of the commodity owners. This transforms the genesis of economic objectivity from a materially mediated relation between human beings into a direct relation between them with respect to a thing. Even more: according to Reichelt, the production of a specifically

*social* objectivity (value and general equivalent) *precedes* every social contact in the minds of each individual commodity owner, since, as he himself emphasizes, the actual relation of commodity owners first becomes the topic in the chapter on exchange. In this way, the *socially valid* form of value, the universal equivalent, emerges in *presocial* acts of thought,<sup>99</sup> and the actual relationship of commodity owners to each other is reduced to the conscious choice of a special money-commodity. In systematically abstracting from commodity owners, value-form analysis shows that value is the formal nexus of social matter as products of labour, determining the agents' logic of action.<sup>100</sup> Yet even there Reichelt operates with the psychological acts of commodity owners. When the actual genesis of the universal equivalent *and* money should be explained by an unconscious social act, in the second chapter,<sup>101</sup> Reichelt limits the act to a conventional determination of the natural form of the *already assumed as real* equivalence function. Thus, Reichelt not only picks up all the constitutive problems of social-contract theories, he also remains in the dualism of matter and spirit and can only imagine objectively mediated social relations as pure ideas or norms.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, I presented three main strands of Helmut Reichelt's work as well as their critical reception in West Germany. Looking back over more than 40 years of theoretical work, it must be stressed that Reichelt carried through a move away from the economic abstinence of the classical representatives of critical theory. He retained, however, the young Hegelian social ontology of Adorno – which ultimately understood all social phenomena as things of thought and nurtured a sceptical relation to emergent social qualities<sup>102</sup> – and systematized them in his contributions from the year 2000 onwards.

Historically, his contributions to the individual strands of the West German reconstruction debate were crucial.<sup>103</sup> With all their criticisms of Reichelt, especially with regards to his reconstruction of the mode of presentation in Marx's critique of economy and its object-theoretical implications, researchers like Dieter Wolf, Helmut Brentel, and Michael Heinrich<sup>104</sup> have been able to build up the new Marx-reading. Reichelt's ideas have been carried forward in contemporary sociological theory mainly by his students Christian Girschner, Lars Meyer, and Hanno Pahl.<sup>105</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Some parts of the following text derive from my book, published in German as *Marx im Westen* (Elbe, 2010).
- 2 See Meier-Hüsing, 2011: 265.
- 3 Alfred Schmidt, an intermediary between the older critical-theory generation and these more recent representatives, occupied himself with methodological questions about Marx's work at the beginning of the 1970s, especially in the context of Louis Althusser's structural Marxism. But he did not subsequently intervene in the specifically Marxological debates. See Elbe, 2010: 68–73.
- 4 See Euchner and Schmidt, 1972.
- 5 Engels interprets the different levels of abstraction in the presentation of the laws of the capitalist mode of production in *Capital* as equally important empirical models of historically different modes of production (Engels, 1859: 475 ff.). He therefore thinks that Marx begins his account with a pre-capitalist, neatly arranged moneyless exchange of commodities according to quantities of clearly evident 'abstract' labour expenditure (Engels, 1894: 16; 1895: 885 ff.).
- 6 See Brentel, 1989: 138–46; Backhaus, 1997b; Backhaus, 1997c: 69 ff., 74, 80.
- 7 For the entire effort at reconstruction, see Elbe, 2010.
- 8 Ruben, 1977: 44.
- 9 Horkheimer, 2002: 244.
- 10 Adorno, 1976: 80.
- 11 Adorno, 1969: 148; 1973: 311f.
- 12 Sohn-Rethel, 1978: 20f, 28, 67ff.
- 13 Adorno, 1973: 194 (tr. amended); 1969: 148.
- 14 Adorno, 1969: 147.
- 15 Adorno, 1976: 76.

- 16 Jay, 1973; Wiggershaus, 1995; Demirović, 1999.
- 17 Backhaus, 1997a; Reichelt, 2007: 142 ff.; 2008: 11.
- 18 Kirchhoff et al., 2004.
- 19 Haug, 1984: 60 ff.; Kallscheuer, 1986: 226, 234; Henning, 2014: 170 ff., 332, 341.
- 20 Reichelt suggests that the new Marx-reading is a pure 'Frankfurt product', due to Hans-Georg Backhaus' accidental discovery of the first edition of *Capital* in a Frankfurt student centre in 1963 (Reichelt, 2008: 11; 2009: 1). Backhaus, trained in Adorno's social theory, recognized at first glance the crucial differences between the first and second editions and laid the foundations for the efforts of critical reconstruction. However, in my view this is an unacceptable reduction of the sources of the new Marx-reading; see Elbe, 2010, chapter 1.1.
- 21 Backhaus (1997d: 405 ff.) draws attention to the fact that Marx, as early as 1843, in the course of his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, stressed the critical-genetic method: 'So the truly philosophical criticism of the present state constitution not only shows up contradictions as existing; it explains them, it comprehends their genesis, their necessity' (Marx, 1843: 91).
- 22 Later, Reichelt also emphasized some parallels between Feuerbach and Marx himself. The latter conceived of money in an analogous way to Feuerbach's concept of God – as a sensual individualization of a universal and as an alienated form of social interaction through an independent third (Reichelt, 1975: 15 ff.).
- 23 Backhaus also pointed out these parallels and even modified the fourth thesis on Feuerbach in a manner critical of Ricardo: 'Ricardo starts from the fact of economic self-alienation, of the doubling of the product into a value-thing, an imagined and an actual thing. His theory consists in dissolving value into labour. He overlooks that the main thing still remains to be done. Namely, the fact that the product contrasts itself with itself and fixes itself as an autonomous realm of economic categories beyond consciousness is only to be explained precisely from the self-distortion (*Selbstzerissenheit*), and the self-contradiction of social labour. This must first be understood in its contradiction and then be practically revolutionised by the abolition of the contradiction' (Backhaus, 1980: 108).
- 24 Marx, 1845: 4.
- 25 Marx, 1844: 270 (cited in Reichelt, 1973: 24).
- 26 Marx, 1885: 218 (tr. amended).
- 27 Projekt Klassenanalyse (PKA), 1971: 100.
- 28 Müller, 1974: 283 ff.
- 29 Heinrich, 2004: 261.
- 30 Heinrich, 2004: 263.
- 31 Heinrich, 2004: 262. See also Heinrich, 1999: 155.
- 32 Heinrich, 1999: 157.
- 33 See also Arndt, 1985: 61, which emphasizes that in the *German Ideology*, reality is regarded as a 'context of mediation', as a 'structure of relations which escape the immediacy of an intuitive understanding'; see also Kittsteiner, 1977: 10, 15.
- 34 See also Marx, 1867/72: 375 n2: 'It is, in reality, much easier to discover by analysis the earthly core of the misty creations of religion, than, conversely, it is, to develop from the actual relations of life the corresponding celestialised forms of those relations. The latter method is the only materialistic, and therefore the only scientific one'.
- 35 Helberger, 1974: 177.
- 36 See also Marx, 1861–3: vol. 31, 338, 401; Marx, 1861–3: vol. 32, 500.
- 37 Helberger, 1974: 177.
- 38 Helberger, 1974: 163.
- 39 Helberger, 1974: 177.
- 40 For more detailed information on this thesis of a second Hegel reception, see Kittsteiner, 1980: 65–9.
- 41 See also Reichelt, 2001: 14.
- 42 PKA, 1971: 102 n. See also the critique by Müller, 1974: 281.
- 43 Müller, 1974: 283.
- 44 Marx, 1867a (cited in Reichelt, 1973: 156).
- 45 Rosdolsky, 1989: 113 ff.; Zelený, 1980: 35 ff.
- 46 Even Projektgruppe Entwicklung des Marxschen Systems (PEM), 1973: 201 recognizes this: 'What Reichelt [...] misses is that [...] the value-form is already based on the opposition between use-value and value', so the latter cannot be first introduced after it.
- 47 Wolf, 1985: 181.
- 48 Wolf, 1985: 178.
- 49 With this critique, Marx not only challenges Locke and Smith but also implicitly Engels' model of 'simple commodity production'. This model also assumes the political-economic construction of an 'undistorted' effect of the law of value in pre-capitalist epoch, regards abstract labour as an empirical measure of value and conceives money merely as a technical instrument to facilitate exchange.
- 50 In fact, there is nothing else in *Capital* about the transition. See Heinrich, 1999: 253 ff.
- 51 Bader et al., 1975: 78 n; Marx, 1857/8: vol. 28, 236.
- 52 PKA, 1971: 96.
- 53 W. F. Haug thanks him later with a positive mention: Haug, 2004: 360.
- 54 Marx, 1867/72: 704.

- 55 Marx, 1857/8: vol. 28, 183 (cited partially in Reichelt, 1973: 135).
- 56 Römer, 1978: 146 n. Ulrich Müller (1974: 281; 1977: 138 n) also sees an idealistic tendency in Reichelt's work, which takes 'the automatic subject qualities [of capital] at face value'.
- 57 The notion of the *causa sui* concept of the productive forces stems from Ritsert, 1988: 69 ff.
- 58 See Marx, 1847: 175; 1846: 96 ff.; 1849: 212. However, there are also statements to the contrary: 'Till now the productive forces have been developed by virtue of this system of class antagonisms' (Marx, 1847: 132).
- 59 Marx, 1846: 96 (cited in Reichelt, 1983: 42).
- 60 Reichelt points to Marx, 1845/6: 85 ff.
- 61 Marx, 1847: 166 (cited in Reichelt, 1983: 42).
- 62 Marx, 1845/6: 85 ff.
- 63 Marx, 1846: 97 (cited in Reichelt, 1983: 42).
- 64 Marx, 1847: 211 (cited in Reichelt, 1983: 43).
- 65 Marx, 1859: 263: 'No social formation is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society' (cited in Reichelt, 1983: 43 ff.).
- 66 Marx, 1859: 77 (cited in Reichelt, 1983: 53).
- 67 On this concept, see Weber, 1995: 34. It posits the productive forces as the basis of the economic base. It was a fundamental ideologeme of Marxism-Leninism, e.g., Walter Tuchscheerer, who says that according to Marx, 'the productive forces of society form the basis of production relations' (Tuchscheerer, 1968: 254).
- 68 As Reichelt's Bremen colleague Heide Gerstenberger (2007: 9) notes.
- 69 Marx, 1857/8: vol. 2, 83 (cited in Reichelt, 1983: 49).
- 70 Marx, 1857/8: vol. 2, 84.
- 71 Marx, 1867/72: 444 ff.
- 72 Zech, 1983: 63.
- 73 See Marx, 1867/72: Vol. 35, 190: 'It is not the articles made, but how they are made, and by what instruments, that enables us to distinguish different economic epochs'. And in a footnote, Marx praises the division of 'prehistory' into 'the stone, the bronze, and iron ages'. This is strongly reminiscent of some 'crude materialist' passages from the early period. On the other hand, there are such statements as: 'The essential difference between the various economic forms of society, between, for instance, a society based on slave labour, and one based on wage labour, lies only in the mode in which this surplus labour is in each case extracted from the actual producer, the labourer' (226–7).
- 74 Marx, 1867/72: 489 (cited partially in Reichardt, 2006: 209).
- 75 Reichardt, 2006: 209.
- 76 Gerstenberger, 2007: 8.
- 77 Arndt, 1985: 65.
- 78 Arndt, 1985: 63.
- 79 Arndt, 1985: 65.
- 80 See the comments by Reichelt's student Lars Meyer on Adorno's sociology in Meyer, 2005.
- 81 Habermas, 1990: 9.
- 82 See in connection with Reichelt: Rakowitz, 2000: 174, 335.
- 83 See in connection with Reichelt: Pahl, 2004: 202–7.
- 84 Adorno, 1976: 80.
- 85 The concept of real abstraction comes from Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1978: 20 ff.), but Marx also speaks of real abstraction (Marx, 1859: 272). What is meant is that commodities in the act of exchange are reduced to what is common to them – to be products of social labour.
- 86 See, first of all, Backhaus and Reichelt, 1995: 89: 'Since value concerns a process of abstraction, in which commodity owners and their heads participate, value can only be formed only in consciousness'. Incidentally, in 1987 Robert Kurz similarly presented the thesis of value as a thing of thought [*Gedankending*] (Kurz, 1987: 85–99). Reichelt's theory of validity is largely a reformulation of Kurz's approach.
- 87 Marx, 1867b, cited by Reichelt, 2007: 8.
- 88 Marx, 1867b.
- 89 Marx, 1867/72: 45–56.
- 90 *Gedankending*; see Marx, 1867a.
- 91 See also Wolf, 1985: 108, 132, 175 ff.
- 92 Adorno, 1976: 80, tr. amended.
- 93 Marx, 1867/72: 87, tr. amended.
- 94 *Verrückten*: Marx, 1867/72: 87, tr. amended.
- 95 'Nominal abstraction' means a 'generic concept nominalistically formed' through subjects' cognitive acts of abstraction; see Heinrich, 1999: 210 n.
- 96 Marx, 1859: 299.
- 97 'z commodity A = u commodity B or = v commodity C or = w commodity D', etc.: Marx, 1867a.
- 98 Marx, 1859: 291, tr. Amended.
- 99 A social universal, however, is not justifiable from individuals' subjective cognitive performances before their social contact. In addition, Marx can show that the various interests within the pre-monetary starting condition of exchange could generate as many universal equivalents as commodities (owners), which would thus rule out the existence of an actually universal equivalent. See Wolf, 2004: 85 ff.
- 100 Wolf, 2004: 51.

- 101 According to Wolf, the unconsciousness is 'a non-knowledge about what is happening in the social relation of things' (Wolf, 2004: 33). So it is not an internal psychological process, but the act of human beings relating to each other through the inclusion of their products of labour.
- 102 On Marx and Engels' critique of Young Hegelian social ontology, which conceptualizes all supra-individual entities only according to the model of religion as a 'thing of thought', see Marx, 1845/6: 29 and 91 n: 'For the philosophers relationship = idea'.
- 103 Reichelt also contributed two essays to the reconstruction of Marx's theory of the state: Reichelt, 1974b, 1974c.
- 104 Wolf, 1985; Brentel, 1989; Heinrich, 1999.
- 105 Girschner, 1999; Meyer, 2005; Pahl, 2004, 2007.

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# Hans-Georg Backhaus: The Critique of Premonetary Theories of Value and the Perverted Forms of Economic Reality

Riccardo Bellofiore and Tommaso Redolfi Riva

Hans-Georg Backhaus was born in Remda, Germany (later the German Democratic Republic) in 1929. In the 1950s he emigrated from East to West Germany where he studied philosophy, sociology, and political economy in Heidelberg and then in Frankfurt. In 1965 he presented the fundamentals of his own interpretation of Marx's theory of value in Adorno's advanced seminar [*Oberseminar*] at the University of Frankfurt. In 1969 he wrote his best known and widely translated article *Zur Dialektik der Wertform* [*On the Dialectics of the Value-Form*] (Backhaus, 1969), which can be considered the founding document of what is now known as the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* [*New Reading of Marx*].<sup>1</sup> From then on, in an enduring process of self-criticism and self-correction, carried out over the course of many articles (now partially collected in the volume *Dialektik der Wertform: Untersuchungen zur Marxschen Ökonomiekritik* (Backhaus, 1997b), he developed his interpretation of Marx's critique of political economy.

## THE NEW READING OF MARX AS CRITICAL THEORY OF SOCIETY

As Backhaus himself acknowledges, his reading of the critique of political economy is profoundly indebted to Adorno's critical theory of society. Adorno conceived of society on the basis of the concept of socialization [*Vergesellschaftung*]: 'when we speak of society in the strong sense [...] we are referring essentially to the element of "socialisation", which does not apply in the same manner to the [pre-bourgeois] societies' (Adorno, 1969b: 29). What marks the difference between the different forms of society is the form in which 'we, born as separate biological entities [...] are able to become *zoon politikon*' (Adorno, 1969b: 114). From this perspective, Marx's critique of political economy is interpreted by Adorno as the unfolding of a definite form of socialization that is specific to capitalist society.

## EXCHANGE, SOCIALIZATION, AND TOTALITY

For Adorno, the specific form of socialization in bourgeois society is entailed in the exchange relationship. It establishes an objective, total connectedness among the social subjects. In this form, society presents itself as autonomous from the subjects that comprise it. Adorno describes the relationship between object and subject as 'the domination of the universal over the particular' (Adorno, 1969a: 14). In the analysis of exchange, Adorno underlines the contradiction between individuals and society: while individuals act according to intentional and free actions, they create an objective [*gegenständlich*] process that imposes itself as if by nature on them. Society is a human construction that imposes itself on individuals that have created it. As Adorno says, 'society – what has been made autonomous [*Verselbständigung*] – is, in turn, no longer intelligible [*verstehbar*]; it is only the law of becoming autonomous' (Adorno, 1969a: 15, trans. mod.).

For Adorno society is thus a totality, and the totality character is an objective property of society itself:

This latter use of the term implies that there exists between people a functional connection, which varies considerably, of course, according to the historical level of development of the society, and which leaves no-one out, a connectedness in which all the members of the society are entwined and which takes on a certain kind of autonomy in relation to them. (Adorno 1969b: 29–30)

## REAL ABSTRACTION, CRITICAL THEORY, AND THE CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

This totality character of society has to be understood in connection with exchange as the specific form of capitalist socialization. In this context Adorno turns to the idea of real abstraction, an idea he borrows from

Alfred Sohn-Rethel. Exchange is where real abstraction takes place, in the abstraction from the concreteness of the objects which are reduced to a common and abstract value dimension. Such an abstraction is not a subjective process carried out by social individuals in the act of exchange. It is a real abstraction, independent of their consciousness. The process of the socialization – exchange – entails social individuals as character-masks of their own social world: it is here that society becomes autonomous. The real and objective reduction of commodities to their common dimension, to their essence, shows exactly what Adorno means when he talks about 'the conceptuality of social reality', 'not merely the constitutive conceptuality of the knowing subject but the conceptuality which holds sway in the thing itself [*Sache selbst*]' (Adorno, 1957: 80).

Consequently, for Adorno, the critical theory of society has the task of understanding the process of autonomization: how relationships among men have become autonomous from human beings themselves. More specifically, the task is to understand how these social relationships have become autonomous from the individuals that comprise society.

In a dialogue with Sohn-Rethel, Adorno expresses the necessity of a 'systematic-encyclopaedic analysis of the abstraction of the exchange' (Adorno, 1965: 226), a task Adorno accomplished only in a fragmentary way. It is possible to find openings in his sociological writings and in his lectures that suggest the manner in which he might have developed the critique of the capitalist exchange relations further. Backhaus' transcription of a seminar held by Adorno in 1962 is most decisive in this context (Adorno, 1962).

Here Adorno's analysis of exchange is developed in two connected directions. On the one hand, according to the idea of an immanent critique of society, he wants to show 'the semblance' and superficial character of the equality in the exchange between

two equal values; on the other hand he wants to describe the fetish character assumed by social relations of production in the exchange of commodities – that is, to understand their social nature. When Adorno describes the process of reduction of commodities to their common dimension, i.e. the process of real abstraction embedded in every exchange of commodities, he explicitly refers to Marx's theory of value. For Adorno, Marx's notion that 'it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness' (Marx, 1859: 263) finds its explanation in comprehending the commodity form as the *Urform*, the original form of bourgeois ideology; in fact, the commodity 'is not the simple false consciousness but results from the structure of political economy' (Adorno, 1962: 508). In other words, the ideological forms, by means of which social agents understand the process of production and reproduction of capitalist society, are not simply misleading categories: they are objective forms in which the relations of production manifest themselves. Fetishism is real. That is, 'the theory of ideology [*Ideologielehre*] has its gravity only in the fact that false consciousness manifests itself as a necessary figure [*Gestalt*] of the objective process which holds together society' (Adorno, 1962: 508).

Adorno explains the objective form of capitalist social relations by turning to the concept of abstract labor. 'The unity of socially necessary labor-time' [*die Einheit der gesellschaftlich notwendigen abstrakten Arbeitszeit*] is what makes the commodities exchangeable. This real and objective abstraction is an abstraction from 'the conditions [*Bedingungen*] under which a commodity comes into being [*zustande bekommen ist*]' . The social conditions, under which a product of human labor acquires the form of a commodity, manifest themselves as qualities of the objects exchanged: 'the concept of commodity fetishism is nothing but this necessary process of abstraction. By performing the operation of abstraction, the commodity

no longer manifests itself as a social relation, but it seems as if value was a thing in itself' (Adorno, 1962: 507). In the form of the commodity, social relations manifest themselves as natural qualities belonging to exchange relations between economic things of ostensibly equal value. Exchange entails a process of the realization of profit. In this context Adorno asks himself how to understand profit on the basis of an exchange between equal values. For Adorno, 'the semblance [*der Schein*] is not exchange, because exchange really takes place. The semblance in the process of exchange lies in the concept of surplus-value' (Adorno, 1962: 508) – that is exactly where the process of production assumes the form of the process of valorization.

Adorno conceives of Marx's critique of political economy as an explication of the process of autonomization of society. The critique of commodity fetishism is the theoretical tool to understanding the social nature of capitalist social relations. It amounts to an 'anamnesis of the genesis' (Adorno, 1965: 223) of autonomized social forms, its task is to understand their social origin. According to Adorno, the anamnesis of the genesis lies in the process of exchange as a real abstraction – the objective reduction of the concrete quality of human labor to social abstract labor – that conceals the specific social character of capitalist economic relations.

## SHORTCOMINGS

However, in Adorno's critical theory of society the relation between abstract social labor and the fetish character of the commodity remains undetermined. What has to be explained – that is, why the reduction of commodities to their unity in abstract social labor assumes an objective form – is assumed from the beginning as a character of exchange. The fetish character of the commodity seems to be the result of exchange.

Even if Adorno's analysis often refers to the concept of surplus value and to the process of exploitation, the link between the private expenditure of labor and the process of socialization in exchange remains unspecified. The questions that have to be asked, if the task of the theory is to understand the 'anamnesis of the genesis', are why the processes of socialization assume the form of a system of the private monetary exchange of commodities, and why labor privately expended has to assume the form of money in order to count as social abstract labor.

This is exactly where Backhaus' reading of Marx begins. From Adorno, Backhaus gained a clear insight into the importance of social form in Marx's thinking. This insight was fundamental to his elaboration of value as a social form. For Backhaus, the autonomization of capitalist social relationships, that Adorno linked to the process of exchange, has to be brought back to Marx's theory of the form of value and to the contradiction between the private expenditure of labor and the process of socialization by means of exchange in the form of monetary circulation. Backhaus thus argues that money is the objective social form of privately expended labor. Adorno's idea of historical materialism as the 'anamnesis of the genesis' is thus actualized by Backhaus through the analysis of the form of value – as the central moment of Marx's critique of political economy – by means of which he grounds the constitution of money in the social relation of production.

In Adorno's critical theory, the money form – the 'media [...] accepted by naïve consciousness as the self-evident form of equivalence and thus as the self-evident medium of exchange' – is understood only insofar as the real abstraction of exchange 'relieve[s] people of the need for such a reflection' (Adorno, 1969b: 32); but according to Backhaus, what remains unexamined is the analysis of the form of labor that has to assume the form of money in order to count as socially abstract labor. If money is the social medium that relieves people of the need for

subjective abstraction in the act of exchange, what needs to be understood is why money assumes that social role, and the answer lies, Backhaus argues, in Marx's analysis of the form of value. The real abstraction achieved in exchange is only a consequence of the specific capitalist form of labor. Private labor expended in production is valid as social abstract labor only by assuming the form of money. The process of exchange confirms the social character of privately expended labor by means of a particular and at the same time universal form: money. Money manifests that social dimension which Marx calls value.

## RECONSTRUCTION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

Backhaus' elaboration of Adorno's insightful interpretation of social form begins with a close analysis of value as a social form. This leads to a critical evaluation of the readings of Marx that neglected the problem of form as well as to his own reconstruction and then interpretation<sup>2</sup> of the critique of political economy as a critique of the social constitution of perverted social forms.

In his first essays Backhaus proposes a reconstruction of Marx's theory of value on the basis of a logical reading of Marx's method of presentation [*Darstellungsweise*]. He also identifies a misunderstanding that has plagued the reception of Marxian value theory. Both inside and outside Marxism, Marx's theory of value has been read in continuity with the Ricardian labor theory of value. This misses the problem of form and Marx's subsequent critique of Ricardo and classical political economy.

As Marx himself pointed out:

It is one of the chief failings of classical economy that it has never succeeded, by means of its analysis of commodities, and in particular of their value, in discovering the of value which in facts turns value into exchange-value. Even its best

representatives, Adam Smith and Ricardo, treat the form of value as something of indifference, something external to the nature of commodity itself. The explanation for this is not simply that their attention is entirely absorbed by the analysis of the magnitude of value. It lies deeper. The value-form of the product of labour is the most abstract, but also the most universal form of the bourgeois mode of production; by that fact it stamps the bourgeois mode of production as a particular kind of social production of a historical and transitory character. If then we make the mistake of treating it as the eternal natural form of social production, we necessarily overlook the specificity of the value-form, and consequently of the commodity-form together with its further developments, the money-form, the capital-form etc. (Marx, 1872: 174)

The misunderstanding in the reception of Marx's theory of value is linked to the lack of insight in regard to the problem of *Capital's* method of presentation and to its dialectical nature, which is often reduced to a simple logical mirroring of an historical process or to a mere rhetorical ornament. Backhaus' program endeavors to understand the specific differences between the critique of political economy and classical political economy through a deep examination of the method of presentation. To accomplish it, Backhaus critically examines the changes in Marx's method of presentation from *Grundrisse* and *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* to the last edition of *Capital*.<sup>3</sup> These different drafts of the theory of the form of value are used as a tool to underline the defects of Marx's presentation. Moreover, Backhaus utilizes them to argue for the presence of an esoteric and an exoteric theory of value. The latter is traced back to Engels and traditional Marxism; the former requires a dialectical interpretation of the method used by Marx in his presentation.

Backhaus maintains an *intentio operis* of the critique of political economy that exceeds the *intentio auctoris*, as Althusser and his school had already expressed from a different perspective some years before. In his first essays Backhaus is convinced that a textual comparison between Marx and his erroneous interpretations can reconstruct 'the real Marx's' method of presentation.

In 1978, in the third part of the essay *Materialen zur Rekonstruktion der Marxschen Werttheorie* (Backhaus, 1978a), Backhaus' perspective changes. He now identifies the logical readings of Marx which intend to develop a 'fair' interpretation of the texts as a new form of orthodoxy. He also states that it is impossible to ground a logical reading of the theory of value solely on a textual basis. The idea of the reconstruction he developed in his first essays is thus defined 'an unbearable simplification of the problem of the presentation [*Darstellung*]' (Backhaus, 1978a: 133). Instead, it is necessary to recognize the multilayered obscurity of Marx's text as an actual problem that cannot be set aside by a logical interpretation. The problem of the 'logical' and of the 'historical' is then not only a problem of the interpretations of Marx's works: it is a problem Marx himself did not solve univocally. While the logical interpretation is prevalent in *Grundrisse* and the first edition of *Capital*, the logical-historical interpretation is prominent in the second edition of *Capital* and in the *Appendix* of the first edition. Focusing attention on the different layers of Marx's work can thus produce opposing interpretations.

However, Backhaus does not abandon the logical reading of Marx: he only discards the idea that it can be reclaimed through a univocal textual reconstruction. Instead, he focuses on substantiating a logical reading in regard to the core theoretical questions Marx's critical theory was focusing on. Along the lines of this new perspective Backhaus develops his reading of Marx in a continuous confrontation with the different economic traditions (classical, neoclassical, neo-Ricardian, etc.) and with the essential epistemological and methodological problems that lie at the core of economic theory. His interpretation of Marx's critique of political economy, and especially of his theory of the form of value, addresses on the one hand the unreflected assumptions of economic theory, and on the other it addresses the perspective opened by Adorno: the comprehension of the social

constitution and autonomization of the economic realm as the terrain in which the unreflected assumptions of economic theory have their root.

### **SIMPLE COMMODITY PRODUCTION AND THE HISTORICIZATION OF MARX'S METHOD**

The first step of Backhaus' reading of Marx is the critique of the historicization of Marx's method of presentation. According to Backhaus, Engels' review of *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and his 1895 'Supplement' to the third volume of *Capital* represent the key writings for understanding the reception of Marx's theory of value and the historicization of the method of the presentation (Engels, 1859, 1895). The idea of the theory of value as a premonetary and pre-capitalist theory of exchange, and the idea of the method of presentation as a logical mirroring of an historical process, have their roots in these two writings. According to Engels, the first three chapters of Marx's *Capital* are devoted to the explanation of 'simple commodity production' in which workers are not separated from the means of productions and are the owners of commodities, which are exchanged on the basis of the quantity of labor expended in their production. Engels' historicist interpretation of the theory of value is based on the interpretation of Marx's method that he sketches in his review of *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. He maintains that critique of political economy amounts to a critical science of bourgeois society that could be developed in two ways: historically and logically. Marx decided on the logical method only accidentally, because of the lack of preliminary works on the history of economics. Nonetheless, according to Engels, the logical method of presentation is 'nothing but the historical method, only stripped of the historical form and of interfering contingencies'

(Engels, 1859: 475): logical presentation is interpreted as a conceptual mirroring of the historical development of capitalism.

The critique of the notion of 'simple commodity production' and of the related interpretation of the theory of value is the point of departure for Backhaus' reading of Marx. For Backhaus, two complementary interpretative tendencies originate from Engels' interpretation: logical-historical and mythodological. The logical-historical interpretation explicitly assumes Engels' reading of Marx's theory and recognizes the development of the form of value as the logical unfolding of an historical content: the theory of value is the logical concretion of 'simple commodity production' and the analysis of the form of value is the logical reflection of the historical process of the birth of money. Backhaus criticizes not only the philological pertinence of the interpretation but also the *historical* applicability of the argument. If Engels had no ethno-logical data on the forms of production and reproduction of ancient communities, actual existing logical-historical interpreters should confront historical investigations and realize that the results of their method are 'neither logically free from contradictions, nor historically *plausible*' (Backhaus, 1978a: 165). Mythodological interpretation understands 'simple commodity production' and the law of value as an ideal representation from which Marx's analysis has to begin in order to reach the mode of capitalist production where commodities are sold at their prices of production. According to this interpretation, the theory of the form of value is only an historical *excursus* on the evolution of the exchange from barter to the advent of money as a means of circulation.

### **THE CRITIQUE OF PREMONETARY THEORIES OF VALUE**

Backhaus says that at the basis of both interpretations there is an implicit assumption of

generalized commodity exchange. Without a proper understanding of money as the universal equivalent, these premonetary theories of value analyze the substance and the magnitude of value without considering the form of value. According to these theories, it is necessary to 'abstract' from money in order to examine exchange and grasp its essence in isolation from money. He charges that this approach overlaps with the neoclassical subjective theories of value, which try to explain exchange according to subjective utility, abstracting from monetary mediations. According to Backhaus, what neoclassical economics names the 'monetary veil' and the Marxist tradition the 'phenomenon' that conceals the structure of exchange, for Marx's theory of the form of value is the process of the manifestation of the essence of what lies behind the veil.

For Backhaus therefore it is not possible to separate the theory of value from the theory of money: Marx's theory of value is a monetary theory of value, and the fact that this has not been taken into account is the origin of that odd situation according to which many Marxists agree upon the theory of value and struggle over the theory of money.

According to Backhaus, Marx's development of the form of value, from the 'simple' through 'expanded' to 'universal' form, has to be explained as a critique of premonetary theories of value: what Marx wanted to show is that the concept of a premonetary market economy or the concept of a premonetary commodity is quite impossible. The notion of a generalized commodity exchange without money amounts to an untenable hypothetical model since in this model commodities present each other as products and use-values, not as commodities that, in distinction to their concrete quality as use-values, have a common social substance that becomes visible in the money form. From this perspective, Backhaus proposes an original reading of Marx's concept of exchange: it is a universal and transhistorical concept, like labor or product, yet from the beginning of

Marx's presentation it has to be understood as monetary circulation – a specific form of exchange, different from barter, in which the products of labor figure as commodities that assume the form of money and the form of price. This is the reason why it is neither possible to see non-monetary exchange in the first section of *Capital* Volume I, nor to read it, like Engels, as an historical stage in which exchange relations are regulated by the labor-time contained in the commodities exchanged.

As a critique of premonetary theories of value, Marx's theory has to understand the immanent link between the private expenditure of social labor and its appearance in exchange in the form of money. Backhaus takes Marx's use of the Hegelian categories of the logic of essence into serious consideration, expressing that 'dialectical method cannot be restricted to leading the form of manifestation back to the essence' (Backhaus, 1969: 102) – that is, discovering social labor behind exchange-value. Hegel's sentence that 'essence must manifest itself' becomes for Marx the necessity of showing 'why the essence assumes precisely this or that form of manifestation' (Backhaus, 1969: 102), 'why this content has assumed that particular form, that is to say, why labor is expressed in value, and why the measurement of labor by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of the value of the product' (Marx, 1872: 174). According to Backhaus:

Marx obtains [*gewinnt*] the concept of 'social labour' and discovers a contradiction between this form of labour and the 'actual' [*wirklichen*] form of labour which has a private character. This contradiction is considered by Marx the reason of the presentation of labour in value, i.e. the reason of the existence of money. (Backhaus, 1979: 265)

For Backhaus, an interpretation of Marx's theory of value that does not understand the link between value and money – that is, how capitalist wealth (value) manifests itself in money as the form of value – can be reduced to a theory in which labor is interpreted as



subjective disutility, as in neoclassical economics. Interpreting the first section of *Capital* according to the model of simple commodity production leads necessarily to assuming a subjective measurement of labor-time expended in the production and to understanding commodity exchange as a conscious comparison of the subjective sacrifices of producers. It is the way classical political economy created its 'Robinsonades', starting the analysis of exchange from the primordial fisher and hunter exchanging their products according to labor expended in the production. Such a reading of the theory of value eludes the contradictory character of capitalist production in which 'a priori, no conscious social regulation of production takes place' and the social character of labor 'asserts itself only as a blindly operating average' (Marx, 1868: 69). For Backhaus, the law of value is a supraindividual [*überindividuell*] process that manifests itself objectively [*gegenständlich*] behind the backs of social individuals. Every productive unit expends a certain quantity of labor in the production of its own commodities, but it is not possible to know before the metamorphosis with money the amount of private labor which will be confirmed as social. Marx's theory is the unfolding of the law of value, its actualization behind the backs of the social agents. According to Marx's critique, the pre-monetary labor theory of value either posits as a subject a social organization of labor different from the one characterizing the capitalist mode of production or it does not understand the basic contradiction of the mode of capitalist production.

## THE PROBLEM OF THE SOCIAL CONSTITUTION OF ECONOMIC OBJECTS

The critique of the historicization of Marx's method together with the critique of the pre-monetary interpretations of the theory of

value lead Backhaus to understand value as a supraindividual process and to connect Adorno's idea of the autonomization of society with money as the specific, autonomized form labor has to assume to count as social.

In the light of this, Backhaus relates Marx's theory of value as a supraindividual process with the method of critique of political economy as the critique of the categories of political economy. Backhaus often repeats the idea Marx expressed in 1858 in a letter to Lassalle, according to which the critique of political economy represents a '*critique of economic categories* [...] a critical exposé of the system of bourgeois economy. It is at once an exposé and, by the same token, a critique of the system' (Marx, 1858: 270). Since the theory of value is a supraindividual process in which social individuals appear as personifications of seemingly independent economic categories, Marx develops his method as a critique of *the categories* of political economy. For Backhaus, the latter express the reality of the capitalist mode of production. The task of the method of the critique of political economy is to show the process of the constitution of the forms, i.e. of the categories of political economy. Marx's critique of political economy is an analysis of the social constitution of the categories of political economy and at the same time an analysis of the genesis of the objects to which political economy refers scientifically.

Marx's critique develops the economic categories as 'forms of being, the characteristics of existence' [*Daseinsformen, Existenzbestimmungen*] or 'socially valid and therefore objective thought forms' [*gesellschaftlich gültige, also objektive Gedankenformen*]. In this his account is entirely at odds with the construction of models of behavior in economic theory. It is not the behavior of agents that determines the law of value; inversely, it is the law of value that imposes itself through economic agents. As Backhaus states, in Marx's theory we deal neither with 'ideally typically modelled economic subjects nor economic subjects actually exchanging with

one another in pre-capitalist society; rather, we deal with the analysis of the *structure* and of the *form* of commodity-money relation' (Backhaus, 1979: 277). The point of departure of Marx's theory lies in the categories of political economy as 'non-conceptual representations' [*begriffslose Vorstellungen*] of a reality, which, through the dialectical presentation, show their own connections and allow conceptual access to their contents:

it is not possible to assert that at the beginning of the conceptual development there are axioms and fundamental presuppositions from which it is possible to deduce other propositions. At the beginning there are the categories [Marx] found in bourgeois political economy handbooks, categories which are themselves an element [*ein Stück*] of the social reality. (Backhaus, 1975: 101)<sup>4</sup>

Marx's distinction between classical and vulgar political economy – the first determining value starting from labor expended in the production of the commodities, the second solely interested in the superficial connections of the sphere of exchange – can be sublated starting from the contradiction characterizing the connection between commodity and money. While classical political economy absolutizes the moment of the process of production of commodities, immediately reducing value to labor, vulgar political economy absolutizes the moment of the exchange between commodity and money, reducing value to utility in exchange. Both classical and vulgar political economy are unable to understand the connection between production and circulation in the capitalist mode of production: if the commodity is the product of private labor that is validated as social (according to socially necessary labor-time) only in the metamorphosis with money, it is necessary to understand that the specific form of labor arrives in money as a social connection in the form of things. This logical development from the substance of value to its own form of value characterizes Marx's presentation of the value form and the fetish character of the commodity. According to Backhaus,

this account of social constitution is the *differentia specifica* of the critique of political economy. It represents the analyses of the constitutive conditions of a peculiar objective [*gegenständlich*] dimension of a society in which the objects have supernatural attributes. All the commodities have a price and the aim of the critique of political economy lies in understanding the genesis of this objectively [*gegenständlich*] valid dimension. In distinction, political economy does not concern itself with the social constitution of the economic categories. The question of genesis is outside the horizon of political economy.

## THE PERVERTED FORMS OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

To further explore Backhaus' account, let us turn to the extremely important discussion Backhaus undertakes with the Austrian economist Gottl-Ottlilienfeld and his notion of the 'economic dimension'. Gottl-Ottlilienfeld is a strong opponent of every theory of value. In his methodological works he shows the aporetic condition of political economy which is implicitly obliged to presuppose the existence of an ontological dimension that allows the economic object to acquire an objective magnitude. As Backhaus says: 'when we speak of the commodity [...] we are also obliged to think about the absurd condition according to which a supersensible quality inheres in sensuous things, so that, it is reasonable to talk about an economic dimension like the natural dimensions of distance, weight, temperature etc.' (Backhaus, 1978b: 495).<sup>5</sup> According to Backhaus, Marx's theory of the form gives us the tools to think about the autonomization of that peculiar dimension of mediated sociality – value – that asserts itself as if by nature over the individuals who comprise sociality itself. This is what is achieved through Marx's theory of value, which is able to understand the genesis of a supraindividual structure constituted

through the actions of individuals themselves. As Gottl-Ottlilienfeld states, without clarifying the question, we are obliged to think an inversion in which ‘something personal becomes something impersonal’ (Backhaus, 1978b: 495).

With regard to Joan Robinson’s appeal to translate Marx’s terminology into ordinary economic language, so that Marx’s contributions would be included in scientific academic discourse, Backhaus develops the problem of commensurability between Marx’s concepts and economic science. It is a problem that the Frankfurt School faced from the 1930s on:<sup>6</sup> Marx introduces philosophical categories into economic discourse not because he coquetted Hegel’s mode of expression but because of the very nature of the economic object. According to Backhaus, the objects of political economy are ‘more than just economic’, and this is the reason why Marx developed ‘a critique of economic concepts in the narrow sense’ (Backhaus, 1992: 55). Thus, in contrast to Robinson, Backhaus expresses the impossibility of fully translating Marx’s theory into the language of economic science. This is due to the double nature of the economic categories – that is, their sensuous-supersensible character, which is always presupposed by economic analysis.

In this context Adorno’s conceptualization of society both as subject and as object plays a pivotal role in Backhaus’ argument. The idea of supraindividual social objectivity [*Gegenständlichkeit*] as something that asserts itself behind the backs (and through the actions) of the economic agents is the means Backhaus exploits in order to understand the sensuous-supersensible character of the economic realm. He expounds on Adorno’s critique of traditional Marxism and the trivialization of the architectonic analogy of base and superstructure as the key to understanding the role of ideology:

The difference between the object of traditional theory, that of the natural sciences in particular, and the objectivity of critical theory can be made clear in the following manner. Society is not merely

object, but at the same time subject. Its autonomy [*Eigengesetzlichkeit*] is thus paradoxical. Society is only ‘objective’ insofar as and ‘because’ its ‘own subjectivity is not transparent’ to it. (Backhaus, 1992: 57)

Thus, what in Simmel’s reflection on money assumes the feature of ‘an originary phenomenon and hence an *a priori* factor’ (Backhaus, 1992: 60–1), what Schumpeter assumes as ‘ultimate ground’ and as a ‘given’ and what Gottl-Ottlilienfeld named the ‘economic dimension’ as a presupposition of every economic analysis has its origin in the specific character of economic objects: it is the ‘economic objectivity or the “objectivity of value” [*Wertgegenständlichkeit*] which has a “*sui generis*” objectivity that can be pictured as a “second nature” [...] concealed behind what is in itself’ (Backhaus, 1992: 61). The supersensible character of economic objects is presupposed and not recognized by these approaches to economic theory. The presupposition of economic objects is an aspect of economic reality itself, which hides supersensible character under the appearance of the concrete materiality of objects. This is what Backhaus terms the ‘objective semblance’ [*gegenständliche Schein*] of economic objects. They possess this social character because economic forms are perverted. Marx here intentionally makes use of the ambiguity of this word, an ambiguity which is innate to the German language alone. Thus on the one hand money is a ‘deranged [*verrückte*] form’ in the sense it is the ‘most nonsensical, most unintelligible form’ – that is, it is ‘pure madness’ [*reine Verrücktheit*]. On the other hand money is a deranged form in the other, spatial sense of ‘derangement’ [*Verrücktheit*], as an object which is de-ranged [*verrücktes*], displaced out of its natural locus. It is not merely a ‘sensuous’ but also a ‘supersensible thing’, and as such it is a thing which has been transferred and dis-placed into the external world which is independent from consciousness (Backhaus, 1992: 61–2).

Hence the task of Marx’s theory of the form of value is to show the genesis of the

supersensible character of economic objects and at the same time the genesis of the perverted form of political economy: on the one hand it is the understanding of the social constitution of value; on the other it is a critique of the lack of methodological reflection of political economy. According to Backhaus, Marx explains the social dimension in which objects have a value objectivity [*Wertgegenständlichkeit*] only because he recognizes the contradiction between the private expenditure of labor and the process of socialization established by means of separate (in time and space) private exchanges of commodities and money. While the private expenditure of labor is something individual – something that can be recognized in the conscious consideration of the producer – the process of the socialization of this labor is something accomplished in the sphere of circulation, a supraindividual process that imposes itself behind the backs of economic agents.

## THE ECONOMIC DIMENSION

In the dialogues Backhaus undertakes with economists and sociologists who have acknowledged the peculiarity of the economic realm, it is possible to distinguish a particular topic. Simmel, Amonn, and Gottl-Ottlilienfeld are praised for having shown the duality that characterizes the objects of political economy. In their analysis it is possible to find the problem every subjective theory of value is obliged to face: the separation between individual esteem, as the basis of the utility theory of value, and the validity of the supraindividual unities of account, the passage from the individual to the supraindividual dimension in which objects already *have* an *objective* [*gegenständlich*] value and a price. Hegel is applauded as the first thinker to develop the dual nature of the economic realm, but at the same time since he ‘blends [*kontaminiert*] continuously subjective and objective [*objective*] determinations of value,

he was not able to accomplish, in a consistent manner, his doctrine of the double, dialectic, character of the commodity’ (Backhaus, 1984: 302).

According to Backhaus, these thinkers were not able to systematize their intuitions of the duality of the economic realm, because it is impossible ‘to develop the objective structures [*objektiven Strukturen*] of the commodity and money from the elements of a subjective theory of value’ (Backhaus, 1984: 303): ‘there is no step that can lead from the concept of value of the subjective school to the concept of money. Subjective economics is obliged to treat the theory of value and the theory of money as two heterogeneous doctrines that cannot be referred to one another except extrinsically’ (Backhaus, 1975: 96).

In this context Backhaus emphasizes the meaning of Marx’s critique of Samuel Bailey. Bailey developed a criticism of Ricardian value theory. According to Bailey, value is the mere relation commodities have in exchange. Value is ‘power of purchasing’ and it is a relational category: it is impossible to talk about a substance of value just as it is impossible to establish the value of a commodity outside of its relation with another commodity. The concept of value is only a fiction created by Ricardo and Ricardian economists who substantialize the relation of exchange between commodity and money: ‘it is not the determination of the product as value which leads to the establishment of money and which expresses itself in *money*, but it is the existence of money which leads to the fiction of the concept of value’ (Marx, 1859: 332). Since Bailey’s concept of the ‘power of purchasing’ indicates the lack of mediation between value and exchange-value in Ricardo and his followers, he is obliged to introduce the concept of subjective value in order to explain that power, but he is not able to deduce the objective power of purchasing from the subjective esteem of the exchangers. The problem for Bailey’s theory is the unbridgeable gap between the individual and

the supraindividual – that is, between individual exchange determined through subjective evaluation and the objective determination of price which a commodity has before every subjective esteem. Backhaus explains that the subjective theory of value, with the use of the concept of ‘objective exchange-value’, is obliged to recur unconsciously as a ‘transcending’<sup>7</sup> relationship that represents a logical structure extraneous to its systematic principles: the subjective theory of value can explain a single act of exchange having place *hic et nunc*, but it cannot analyze a supraindividually valid category (Backhaus, 1978b: 524).

Bailey is right when he criticizes Ricardo and the gap between the two measures of value: labor as the theoretical measure and money as the actual and objective measure. But his subjective theory of value cannot determine money as supraindividual unity. According to Backhaus, it is only possible to deduce this concept of money from a labor theory of value; Marx’s theory of the form of value is the process of money as supraindividual unity of the private labor expended in production. It is here that the theory of the fetish character of the commodity shows its explicative power, not only as a critique of classical and vulgar political economy and of the naturalization of the forms of the capitalist relations of production, but as the actual exposition of the process in which social relationships assume the form of a relationship between things. Money is the means through which the social connection of private labor is achieved; it constitutes society independently of the consciousness of social agents. Private labor achieves social validity in exchange with money and money is the form of manifestation of that social dimension that Marx calls value. While the subjective theory of value can explain the relationship between men and things, what is absolutely outside its perspective is the idea of a social relationship among things as the specific form of socialization of the capitalist mode of production.

## ANTHROPOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

Backhaus’ reading is not limited to the interpretation of the critique of political economy as developed by Marx from 1857 onwards. He also outlines an original reading of the young Marx, especially of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, developing a ‘backward reading’ of Marx as proposed by Helmut Reichelt and Alfred Schmidt.<sup>8</sup> He individuates the primitive forms of the critique of the economic categories from the perspective of his mature work. What economic readings of Marx set aside as a philosophical residue and Althusserians consider as the pre-scientific humanistic approach, Backhaus considers the initial effort to put forth a critical method that acknowledges ‘the isomorphic structures of the onto-theological, social-metaphysical objects or the isomorphic structures of the political and economic objects’ (Backhaus, 1989: 18). The isomorphic structure of theological and economic objects is what induces Backhaus to praise the Feuerbachian anthropological standpoint of the early Marx. The anthropological critique of religion brings back theological disputes to their human-social foundation: a critique of theology is not possible on a theological basis. The same argument is used by Backhaus to understand Marx’s first attempts to criticize political economy. The critique of political economy cannot be developed on an economic basis, because the economic standpoint presupposes as valid those same categories that need to be comprehended. It presupposes value and exchange-value; and it presupposes the economic object without analyzing its social genesis. It is necessary to bring the objects of political economy back to their human-social basis and to establish ‘the social relationship of “Man to Man” the basic principle of the theory’ (Marx, 1844: 328). Backhaus (1992) thus stresses the limits of the economic perspective and maintains that Marx’s critique lies ‘between philosophy and science’. It carries the philosophical categories into the domain of political economy and

transforms the economic categories into philosophical concepts.

The young Marx is still far from the wholly developed and conscious critic of the mature works. He is still influenced by the criticism of economic science proposed by Fourier and Proudhon, according to which economics is unconscious of both itself as a discipline and its object: 'the crux of economics, that is, its inability to determine its economic object, is [...] a central topic of the early socialist critique of economics, and was later reiterated by Auguste Blanqui' (Backhaus, 1989: 16). Differently from socialist criticism of economics, Marx can develop a 'determinate negation' of political economy thanks to anthropological critique, as stated explicitly by Marx in 1844: 'Besides being indebted to these authors who have given critical attention to political economy, positive critique as a whole – and therefore also German positive critique of political economy – owes its true foundation to the discoveries of Feuerbach' (Marx, 1844: 232). The 'determinate negation' and not 'the abstract negation of economics' is the standpoint of Marx's approach based on Feuerbach's anthropological critique of theology. According to Backhaus, at its core the critique of political economy is an *ad hominem* critique: it is the understanding of the human basis of the autonomization of the economic realm, the comprehension [*Begreifen*] of the constitution of the economic dimension and the presentation of the genesis of the object of economic science. The anthropological critique Marx develops in the early writings on the basis of Feuerbach's approach is linked by Backhaus to the concepts of 'critique', 'comprehension', 'inner genesis', and 'presentation', which characterize the mature works.<sup>9</sup> Even if Backhaus is never wholly explicit, Marx's *reductio ad hominem* should not be confused with Feuerbachian essentialism. The reduction of the social economic world to the human being itself and the genesis of the process of autonomization that distinguishes the economic realm is achieved by starting from

the specific social relations of the mode of capitalist production, not from a presupposed human essence: the 'return' [*zurückführung*] of the second nature to Man [*Mensch*], not as an abstract individual, but as a member of a 'definite form of society', this *reduction ad hominem* is the most important principle of his [Marx] mature critique or analysis of economic categories. Marx demands the 'return' of 'a *relation of objects to one another*' – that is, of economic categories to 'relation between Men [*Menschen*]'. This is the anthropological core of economic analysis (Backhaus, 1989: 20).<sup>10</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Backhaus' reading of Marx represents an extraordinary effort to develop the critique of political economy along the lines opened by Adorno's critical theory of society. It is at once an attempt to elaborate and to deepen the critical theory of society and an original interpretation of the critique of political economy. The in-depth analysis of Marx's theory of value and the critique of historicist and economic interpretations go side by side with the presentation of the categories of economic theory as socially constituted forms arising from the definite social relations of production that impose themselves on social individuals (and social scientists) as a social nature, as if it were an objective external economic realm.

Marx's critique of political economy represents for Backhaus the comprehension of the genesis of that objective economic realm in which social relations take on the form of a relationship between the products of labor as commodities. If for Adorno the 'anamnesis of the genesis' of the autonomization of society had its root in exchange as the real and objective abstraction imposed on social agents, for Backhaus exchange has to be determined through the analysis of the form of value and hence the 'anamnesis of the genesis' has

to be brought back to that specific form of exchange in which privately expended labor becomes social only by assuming the form of money. Once the genesis of the social relations of production is accomplished, and at the same time concealed in the system of exchanges between commodities and money, that socially constituted reality becomes the objective domain of economic science. The critique of political economy has the task of taking back the social form to a specific human practice, and to reveal the perversion of a form of society in which human 'relations of production [...] assume a material shape [*sachliche Gestalt*] which is independent of their control and their conscious individual action' (Marx, 1872: 187).

## Notes

- 1 On the New Reading of Marx see Backhaus, 1997a; Reichelt, 2008; Elbe, 2008; Fineschi, 2009; Heinrich, 2012; Bellofiore and Redolfi Riva, 2015.
- 2 For Backhaus, the 'reconstruction' is the removal of the supposition of 'interpretations' in order to unfold the specific proper textual meaning of Marx's work.
- 3 The first was published in *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, the second in the first edition of *Capital*, the third as an *Appendix* to the first edition of *Capital*, the fourth as the third paragraph of the second edition of *Capital*, Volume I. Backhaus himself says that he could only develop this perspective thanks to reading the first chapters of the first edition of *Capital*: the different presentations of the theory of the form of value allowed him to focus his attention on dialectical structures of the argument that in the second edition were only sketched.
- 4 Backhaus was inspired by an insight of Alfred Schmidt's into Marx's concept of knowledge: 'The immediate object of Marx's investigations, it is true, is empirically given conditions of production. But [...] it is impossible to master this immediate object in a direct way. On the contrary, the factual "system of bourgeois economy" is grasped by means of criticism of bourgeois categories' (Schmidt, 1968: 95).
- 5 The quotation comes from the essay 'Zur Problematik des Verhältnisses von "Logischem" und "Historischem" in der Marxschen Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie' (Backhaus, 1978b). It is an unpublished German manuscript that has been published in Spanish (*nueva política*, 1978) Danish (*Kurasje*, 1980) and Italian (*Marx 101*, 1984) translations. We quote from the Italian translation, by Emilio Agazzi, collected in Backhaus, 2016.
- 6 Both Horkheimer and Marcuse showed the peculiarity of the critique of political economy in comparison with philosophy on the one hand and political economy on the other. Backhaus quotes the essays *Traditional and Critical Theory* by Max Horkheimer and *Philosophy and Critical Theory* by Marcuse, both published in 1937: 'It was Horkheimer who first attempted to clarify the unique methodological status of the Marxian critique of political economy in terms of its position "between" philosophy and science. For this very reason he drew the distinction between traditional and critical theory as the "difference between two modes of cognition; the first was grounded in the *Discours de la Méthode*, the second in the Marxian critique of political economy" [Horkheimer]. The paradoxical intermediary position of the latter is articulated in the fact that, on the one hand, Marx's critique of economy opposes philosophy by insisting that it "is an economic, not a philosophical system" and moreover that "philosophy appears in the concepts of economy" [Marcuse]. On the other hand, however, the critique of economy is adamantly opposed to "economism", stipulating that the "critical theory of society, as critique of economy, remains philosophical" [Horkheimer]. Precisely because "philosophy appears in the concepts of economy", "every single one of these" is "more than an economic concept" [Marcuse]' (Backhaus, 1992: 55).
- 7 Marx employed *übergreifen* with a double emphasis. Following the translators of Hegel's *Encyclopaedia Logic*, the first emphasis may be rendered as 'to overgrasp': the reference is to the *Aufhebung*, the speculative comprehension, which 'reaches back and embraces within its scope' the opposition of the moments in its dialectical stage. In the same way that universality 'overgrasps' particulars and singulars, thought 'overgrasps' what is other than thought, so the *Subjekt* developing into *Geist* includes objectivity and subjectivity within its grasp. The second emphasis is 'overreaching' and 'overriding', bordering on 'dominant'.
- 8 Reichelt expresses the need to read Marx's work employing the same methodology used by Marx in his study of 'previous social formations (i.e. the fact that Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape. The intimations of higher

development among the subordinate animal species, however, can be understood only after the higher development is already known. The bourgeois economy thus supplies the key to the ancient, etc.) and to interpret earlier formulations from the point of view of later works' (Reichelt, 1970: 24). It is the same perspective proposed by Alfred Schmidt: 'the early writings of Marx and Engels, which for a long time were considered to contain the Marxist philosophico-humanist content proper, can only be fully understood by a historico-economic analysis of *Das Kapital*' (Schmidt, 1968: 94). The idea of reading Marx backwards is also proposed by Bellofiore, 2013.

- 9 The expression *ad hominem* with this meaning can be found in Marx himself: 'The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism by weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses. Theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon as it demonstrates *ad hominem*, and it demonstrates *ad hominem* as soon as it becomes radical' (Marx, 1843: 182). It has been used by Adorno: 'The *reductio ad hominem* which inspires all critical enlightenment is substantiated in the human being who would first have to be produced in a society which was master of itself. In contemporary society, however, its sole indicator is the socially untrue' (Adorno, 1961: 122).
- 10 This lack of distinction between Marxian and Feuerbachian anthropological standpoints led Werner Bonefeld to criticize Backhaus' critical perspective: 'According to Backhaus, the critique of fetishism deciphers economic categories on a human basis. It reveals the human content of seemingly extramundane economic things. This argument, however suggestive in its critical intension, comes at a price. The anthropological standpoint is not the critical standpoint. "Man" in general does not do anything. Does not work, does not eat, does not truck and barter and has no natural tendency, needs, consciousness, etc. Man in general does also not alienate herself in the form of value. In distinction to Backhaus, Man has needs only as concrete Man and the "determinate character of this social man is to be brought forward as the starting point, i.e. the determinate character of the existing community in which he lives". Neither economic nature nor anthropology but the "definite social relations" that manifest themselves in mysterious economy forms are "the point of departure". That is to say, the reified world of economic necessity is innately practical – it entails the actual relations of life in their inverted economic form' (Bonefeld, 2014: 8).

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# Jürgen Habermas: Against Obstacles to Public Debates

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Translated by Max Henninger

Jürgen Habermas (born 1929) is a leading figure associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory and is best known for advancing the linguistic or communicative turn in critical theory in the 1970s and 1980s. Before the turn to communication, Habermas developed epistemological and social-evolutionary approaches to critical theory in an effort to find an empirical approach that was equivalent to the role that political economy had played in earlier, more radical versions of critical theory. In later years, Habermas turned towards legal studies and democratic theory, while, today, his work is discussed in disciplines as diverse as bioethics and theology. Across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Habermas's sophistication of thought and his wide influence on other thinkers has earned him a reputation that is presently unmatched by any other left-leaning German intellectual. He is consistently open to many schools of thought, some of which he has integrated into his own approach, beginning with Heidegger and Adorno and

later the evolutionary theories of Jean Piaget and Michael Tomasello. Habermas has engaged with theories from the sociology of work, psychoanalysis, hermeneutics, political economy, linguistics, pragmatism, systems theory and, more recently, jurisprudence. His most recent work, on human cloning and on the relevance of religious arguments for a democratic debate, has been widely discussed (Habermas, 2002, 2012). This range of analysis distinguishes Habermas from his predecessors in critical theory, who were sometimes negligent of, or at least single-minded towards, other theories and scholars (Dahms, 1994). Yet this openness can also make it a challenge to locate, precisely, the critical edge in Habermas's theories. While his books often focus on the reconstructions of theories of other thinkers (Karl Marx and Max Weber, Niklas Luhmann, G.H. Mead and Talcott Parsons, John Austin, Ronald Dworkin and many others), in this chapter, I will focus on those contributions that established Habermas's critical acumen.<sup>1</sup>

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Habermas's intellectual development was influenced by Erich Rothacker, a cultural anthropologist with whom he studied philosophy in Bonn, and by Arnold Gehlen and Martin Heidegger (all of whom were involved in National Socialism; for more biographical information see Müller-Doohm, 2008, 2016). After a short period as a journalist, he became an assistant to Theodor W. Adorno. Habermas had already written a dissertation on Schelling and published some papers (which he described as being 'with Heidegger against Heidegger' (Habermas, 1953)) when he entered a professional relationship with Adorno, in 1956. The cornerstone of Habermas's engagement with critical theory was its apparent political hopelessness, which Habermas perceived as leading to an intellectual dead end. Later on in his career, Habermas became a severe critic of what he called the Frankfurt School's 'foundational deficit' (1981: I, 366 ff.; 1985a: 106 ff.). The problem with critical theory was that it often formulated value judgements but was seldom able to provide criteria by which to assess its verdicts (Dahms, 1994: 138 ff., 318, 392). According to Habermas, this position was aporetic due to the fact that it involved, at one and the same time, a radical critique of reason and the invocation of reason in support of this critique. Also, the Frankfurt School consistently called for consideration of the totality (the 'view of the whole') even as they described such consideration as impossible ('The whole is untrue', according to Adorno). These positions were contradictory, and Habermas would struggle with this for decades to come.

In spite of Adorno's close relationship with Habermas, Horkheimer had some reservations about the young Habermas – he considered him to be too politically active in the peace movement of the time. For this reason, Habermas finished his *Habilitation* thesis in Marburg, in 1961, with Wolfgang Abendroth, a Marxist scholar of law, and from 1961 to

1964, he was an associate professor of philosophy in Heidelberg (with the help of Hans-Georg Gadamer, a scholar of Heidegger). In 1964, he returned to Frankfurt to take over Horkheimer's chair in philosophy and sociology. Here, Habermas came to Adorno's defense in the so-called 'positivism' of the 1960s, where Adorno tried to defend his own dialectical thinking against an empirical approach in social theory that Adorno perceived as reductionist. Habermas soon developed his own approach in this debate, attacking not empirical research per se (in fact, the Institute for Social Research aimed to do empirical research itself, but there was always a disjuncture between this research and its theory) but rather the naturalist theory of science that was erected around it by scholars like Karl Popper and Hans Albert (referred to as critical rationalism). The dispute can be condensed down to the question of whether social theory should follow empirical research (a bottom-up approach), or whether empirical research should be guided by theory (as in the program Horkheimer defined as 'critical theory' in the 1930s). The problem for critical theory was how to remain critical, especially in regard to the facts that empirical research uncovers, without becoming dogmatic.

During these debates, Habermas developed a conceptual hierarchy: he elevated 'interaction' above the 'reduction of the self-generative act of the human species to labor' (Habermas, 1968a: 42) that he associated with Marxism as well as with positivism (1963: 142 ff.; 1968b: 91 f.). Thus, a reductionist conception of a purely technical 'labor' is superimposed by higher human forms of behavior. Both levels have their corresponding activities, social spheres, perspectives and sciences. This dualistic and hierarchical constellation can still be found in the controversy with Niklas Luhmann: Luhmann's arguments are not criticized by Habermas on their own ground but rather supplemented by a higher-level theory of 'communicative action' (Habermas, 1968a:

53; Habermas, 1971). This unmediated juxtaposition of various forms of action consolidates the problematic features of each of them. The content of 'labor' remains undetermined since it is taken to be a closed technical system in the manner of Friedrich Pollock or Arnold Gehlen. Moreover, the hermetic interpretation is perpetuated by closing it off to criticism: in a Diltheyan dualism, where mind is addressed only by mind, labor is left to the 'specialised sciences',<sup>2</sup> leaving philosophy free to engage with loftier intellectual matters.

This dualism was widely criticized. The East German sociologist Erich Hahn (1970) faulted Habermas for abstracting from the 'social character of production'. According to Hahn, this move forced Habermas to develop an anthropologized 'historical dualism' within which domination and ideology are explained 'only' (Habermas, 1968a: 42; 1981: II, 333) on the basis of 'interaction' – that is, idealistically (Willms, 1973: 33 ff., 70 ff., 138 ff., 162, 178; Rüdtenklau, 1982). A little later, Habermas transformed his anthropological model into a terminologically modernized 'rationality theory'. This transformation of anthropological dualism into an epistemological trinity took place in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Habermas, 1968a). The distinction between the interests guiding cognition is not derived from personality types, as in Dilthey, nor is it based on the assumption of self-contained cultures, as in Rothacker; it rests on an 'attempt to reconstruct' various sciences (Habermas, 1968a: vii), following a Neo-Kantian thread. With this formulation, Habermas sought to lay the groundwork for a 'theory of society', insisting at the time that such a theory did not yet exist.

In the view that Habermas developed, truth claims can be upheld not only in the natural (nomothetic) and empirical (fact-stating) sciences but also in practical disciplines like ethics and hermeneutics, or in critical theory. In order to defend this view, Habermas developed, in addition to his epistemological

(Habermas, 1967, 1968a) and social-evolutionary work (Habermas, 1973, 1976), a Kantian (quasi-transcendental) 'ethics of discourse' (beginning in the 1970s and published as a book in 1991) and a corresponding social theory about types of action that, similar to Talcott Parsons's approach of 1937, claims to be a theory of society at the same time. In the book that developed this approach, the *Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas, 1981), he reflected on critical theory in the narrow sense of Horkheimer or Georg Lukács. Here, he presented his own ideas as *the* contemporary approach in critical theory. Hence, the two dualisms of communicative vs. instrumental or strategic action and 'systems' vs. 'lifeworld' take the place of other distinctions such as freedom vs. domination, equality vs. inequality, fulfillment vs. alienation and capital vs. labor.

The personal context for this renewed interest in critical theory was that Habermas, who had been away from Frankfurt from 1971 to 1981 co-directing an institute in Bavaria for research on the conditions of life in a technical world (Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung der Lebensbedingungen der wissenschaftlich-technischen Welt, Starnberg), was returning to Frankfurt, where he was a professor of philosophy from 1983 to 1994. During this time, he defended modernity from a philosophical position against authors like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, whom he read as irrationalistic (Habermas, 1985a, 1990), as well as against historians like Ernst Nolte who had attempted to relativize Germany's fascist past as a more or less justifiable evil against the greater evil of Stalin's brutal state communism. Habermas defied this latter claim immediately and harshly in the press (Habermas, 1986), engaging in exactly that type of public debate on which his theory placed such great importance.

It also illustrates the way in which Habermas engages in more than strictly scholarly work. He has been a participant in public debate ever since his criticism of Martin Heidegger's refusal to deal with his

fascist phase (Habermas, 1953),<sup>3</sup> and he continues to write in international newspapers (his political essays since 2005 can be found at [www.habermasforum.dk](http://www.habermasforum.dk); also see Habermas, 2014). Even though he would like to differentiate between his roles as a public intellectual (in fact, he might be one of the last of this genre) and as a scholar and teacher, in his case the line is particularly hard to draw. As much as his public comments draw from his theories, the latter are often inspired by, and responses to, contemporary political events. Maybe the most important of these topics for Habermas was the failure to come to terms with the catastrophic political past that was burdening (West) Germany after 1945 (see his preface to Habermas, 2009: V, 9 ff.). Additional issues included Germany's nuclear armament in the 1950s, the student revolts of the 1960s, the ecological and financial crises as well as leftist terrorism in the 1970s, the historians' dispute and, later, Germany's reunification in the 1980s, the Gulf wars in the 1990s and 2000s and the religious renaissance of recent years (for an illuminating discussion of the conjunction of Habermas's works and political debates, see Müller-Doohm, 2016).

In addition to this dual course of theoretical work and involvement in public debate, one central, recurring theme of his theoretical work is public debate itself. What he calls 'communicative action' or 'deliberative democracy' in his theory generally refers to the activity he is engaged in himself: the free and public discussion of issues that are relevant to 'the public' and to civil society (which is similar to Hegel's understanding of society, only without the economy: Habermas, 1992: 100). Habermas's theory is, therefore, somewhat self-implicating. As we will see, on the upside this can lead to a high level of reflexivity; on the downside it can lead to certain blind spots in that the theory itself is primarily *about* public debate and not about the arguments that *animate* such debate. Hence, the recurring criticism of Habermas's work is that it is too formal, or (which amounts to the

same thing) too 'Kantian'. In what follows, the guiding theme of public debate will be traced through different stages of his theories.

## EARLY WORKS AND KEY IDEAS

When an author writes for seven decades, rereading his early works can illuminate some core ideas. In Habermas's large body of work, some topics emerge and then disappear (e.g., ideology, research-guiding interests and developmental moral psychology), while others remain more or less stable throughout his development, some of them appearing quite early in his work. One such topic is the opposition between technology (including *social* technology, such as bureaucracy and public administration) and 'real' politics (defined as speech acts advancing the common good, as opposed to egoistic, 'instrumental' or strategic uses of language: Habermas, 1968a: 76; 1981: II, 445 ff.; 1991). This can be seen in Habermas's early distinction between work and interaction (Habermas, 1968b: 9 ff.), running through the dualism of 'system' and lifeworld (1981), and remains visible in Habermas's campaigning for a EU-wide public sphere against a mere economic-administrative or 'technocratic' Europeanization (1998, 2014).

Unlikely as it is for a critical theorist, the young Habermas's view on technology was less influenced by Karl Marx or John Dewey than by Martin Heidegger. Marx interpreted technology as a tool used to increase productivity and output, tighten control over workers, lower costs and thus maximize profits. For Heideggerians, however, this interpretation appeared too superficial (Habermas, 1954: 8). For them, technology is more than a mere means of production within capitalism; rather, it defines our culture as a whole. In this formulation, we live in a 'machine-culture' (Habermas, 1954: 9). So, rather than subsuming technology under the capitalist economy, as did Marx and Lukács, the young Habermas

subsumes economy under the more abstract 'logic' of technology. This move had a huge impact on Habermas's later work. Early on, authors that were cited in support of this technocentric worldview, in addition to Heidegger, were Hans Freyer, Ernst Forsthoff, Friedrich Georg Jünger, Max Weber and, most importantly, Arnold Gehlen. Later, Luhmann and Foucault were perceived in a similar way.

As we often find in Habermas's work, this reversal of economy and technology takes place on different levels. One argument works on a *conceptual* level: it understands basic economic categories like work or consumption as parts of a 'technology' (Habermas, 1968a: 46) or 'machinery' (1954: 23; note the similarity to Deleuze and Erich Fromm). As a consequence, it interprets the 'technocratic' tendencies of explanatory, so-called 'positivistic' sciences such as economics and the great bulk of empirical social research (financed, in part, by big business) as driven by imperatives of technical disposal, or 'work' (Habermas, 1976: 184; Müller-Doohm, 2008: 70). Comparatively, the world of interaction seems free from economics, technology and power. A second, *socio-historical* line of argument reads the history of capitalist societies, along the lines of Pollock (1941) and Horkheimer (1942), as one of growing bureaucratization, mechanization and concentration, echoing the Leninist idea of state monopoly capitalism. This view implies that the driving capitalistic mechanisms (free exchange, the law of value, exploitation of labor power and, ultimately, class struggle) no longer function and have been superseded by political control and administrative planning.<sup>4</sup> For decades, Habermas was convinced that the welfare state was indeed successful in *overcoming* class divisions and inequality:

The welfare states of Europe and other OECD countries have in fact largely compensated for the socially undesired effects of a highly productive economic system. Capitalism has, for the first time, not obstructed but made possible the fulfilment of the republican promise of the equitable inclusion of all citizens. (Habermas, 2014: 425; written in 1999)<sup>5</sup>

This double perspective – conceptual as well as historical – indicates that Habermasian dualisms have no explanatory center but are rather free-floating: the subsumption of the economy under technology appears in the theory of science as well as in the theory of action and the theory of society. It is not quite clear whether the *explanans* for these simultaneous shifts is historical, theoretical or conceptual. Since they occur all at once, the non-falsifiability that was alleged during the positivism dispute is not completely mistaken. Because Habermas is embedded in public discourse, he sometimes takes the assumptions of this discourse (such as the 'end of class') at face value and treats them as theoretical arguments, which in some cases they are clearly not.

The work in which Habermas first developed these technocentric dualisms is surprisingly relevant for the twenty-first century, as several of Habermas's early arguments continue to be discussed – less by Habermas himself and more by other scholars. For example, in an article from 1954, Habermas (echoing Adorno and Erich Fromm) discusses a 'complete' and 'universal alienation' (1954: 26 ff.) that results from the mechanization of both production and consumption. This phenomenon, which also includes social services ('kollektive Daseinsvorsorge': Habermas et al., 1961: 262), he later called depoliticization or 'colonisation' of the lifeworld (1981: II, 522). People's decisions in different spheres, in their work life as well as their private life, are more or less prefigured by institutions. An effect of this total outreach of the system is the reshaping of post-political citizens ('Es werden unpolitische Bürger in an sich politischer Gesellschaft hervorgebracht': Habermas et al., 1961: 270). This perspective connects to Habermas's narrative of the 'end of the philosophy of the subject' and his own intersubjective turn (see 1985a and 1991; for the classic theme of the 'disappearing of the individual' as formulated by both Horkheimer and Adorno as well as by conservatives like Gehlen and Schelsky, see Habermas, 1973: 162 ff.).

Theoretically this biopolitical hypothesis is consistent: inspired by the young Marx and Helmuth Plessner, Habermas's anthropology had stressed the plasticity of human nature. Human lifestyles and interests are 'mediated through labour, as Hegel and Marx already knew' (Habermas, 1958: 28), and 'embedded in a certain "system" of social labour, in relations of production' (1958: 31). In short, "'the' human being as such does not exist, just like "the" language does not' (1958: 31). Hence, it would seem impossible to resist capitalism with forces that are modified by capitalism itself. (This already introduces another of Habermas's running themes, the dialectic of immanence and transcendence.) However, unlike Arnold Gehlen or Adorno, Habermas is not a fatalist when it comes to human nature. During 1968, for example, he followed Marcuse in stressing the new moral 'sensitivity' that had evolved among students (Habermas, 1969: 146, 182, 193; Marcuse 1969). Likewise, in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, he does not shy away from postulating a particular 'human' interest in emancipation (Habermas, 1968a, 244), which he distinguishes from both technical-instrumental and practical-communicative interests (1968a: 222), indicating that communicative action and critical activity are not the same. (Comments on the book are gathered in Dallmayr, 1974 and Müller-Dooch, 2000.)

Habermas's anthropological considerations duplicate Adorno's hermeticism in their own way, but they also provide options for escaping this hermeticism. Not unlike Erich Fromm, whose anthropological optimism led to his conflict with Horkheimer, Habermas could resort to *anthropological* counter-hypotheses. This strong anthropological undercurrent in Habermas's thought resurfaced three decades later, when he discussed and rejected genetic programming with anthropological arguments (Habermas, 2002). These later papers are continuous with Habermas's very early ideas; they continue to criticize the practice and attitude of 'control' ([*Verfügung*]: Keulartz, 1995: 35

ff.; Habermas, 1968a: 47, 61; 1992: 393), which drives instrumental action and rationality. Human nature as such never was – and, hence, should not be – at our disposal. In a dialectical move, Habermas interprets this very unavailability of our own nature as a natural foundation of our ideas of freedom and equality (Habermas, 2002: 101 ff., 110 ff.; this idea resonates with Schelling but also with French postfoundationalist political theory). If we instrumentalize 'the species', genetically modified persons could no longer be free and equal authors of their own life (2002: 115) since others have manipulated their DNA. This runs against the 'species-ethics' (2002: 121; the term 'species' carries a lot of weight in 1968a: 77, 341 but was hardly visible after Habermas's linguistic turn in the 1970s).

The running theme of a 'universal alienation' due to a dominance of technology connects Habermas not only to Foucauldian readings of biopolitics and posthumanism but also to claims of a 'post-democracy' as put forward by Jacques Rancière, Colin Crouch or Chantal Mouffe. Crouch's (2015) claims that big profit-maximizing corporations have privatized large parts of public life is exactly what Habermas had already claimed in the early 1960s (in his *Habilitation* thesis from 1962: 217 ff.; he also cites Altmann's term 'communification' for commodified communication: Habermas et al., 1961: 278; Habermas, 1962: 239; Altmann, 1954: 72). Even the Schmittian influence that drives Chantal Mouffe's version of post-democracy is already visible in Habermas's earlier version (Altmann, for example, an assistant of Wolfgang Abendroth, had studied with Carl Schmitt). Part of the problem for Habermas is that politics is no longer pure; it is 'infected' (Habermas, 1954: 25) by social and economic reasoning and, hence, 'decisions' (Habermas et al., 1961: 279; Habermas, 1962: 250) are rare. The welfare state leads to an expansion of state and administrative activities that were not foreseen in the classical political approach. On the one hand,

the state itself has become an economic actor, regulating the market and providing for citizens' welfare. *Daseinsvorsorge* is a term Habermas (Habermas et al., 1961: 267; Habermas, 1962: 179) took from Ernst Forsthoff, a Schmittian state lawyer (for self-criticism, see Habermas, 1992: 521 n.). On the other hand, subsidiary powers (unions, parties, administrative law courts) take over state functions (Habermas et al., 1961: 267 ff.), though they are not legitimized by parliament or through public debate. Again, this is a criticism Habermas repeats later against the EU – he criticizes it not for being 'post-national' but rather for not being fully legitimized by common debate (Habermas, 2014).

The commercialization, or economic privatization, of the public is only part of the problem, then; the other serious issue for Habermas is the expansion of the political sphere per se. The culmination of Habermas's argument only becomes visible if both arguments are taken together (the reification from Lukács and the political neutralization from Schmitt). It is not uncommon for actors in the public sphere (publishers, editors, newspapers) to be private businesses; in fact, their private status can guarantee a free (not state-dominated) press. Paradoxical as it may seem, the public is something private (Habermas, 1962: 42 ff.). However, once the state transgresses its core competencies, or large corporations and sub-state actors take over state functions, they gain a political power that is not democratically legitimized. They use political power in order to protect their private interests. Therefore, the real problem arises once concentrated media corporations (Habermas, 1962: 223) or political institutions try to *legitimize* the non-democratic decisions of non-state actors by using their influence on public opinion to *simulate* a public. The tools they use (e.g., advertisement and PR technologies) may be private, even if they are applied on a large scale; yet now they are used to 'manufacture' a public consent *ex post* rather than stir debate *ex ante* (Habermas et al., 1961: 298; Habermas,

1992: 250 ff.; Chomsky and Herman, 1988). Habermas's term for this is the 'depoliticization of the masses' (Habermas et al., 1961: 280; Habermas, 1968b: 71; 1969: 189), or of 'the public'; he also refers to it as neutralization and reification (these are, of course, Marxian terms used in a modified way; see Habermas, 1981: II, 514 ff.). This substitution of public debate by non-political means is the main target of his theories. One may wonder to what extent his experiences of National Socialism were a key motivation here.

The ideal behind this criticism is communicative action, later referred to as public deliberation. As powerful as it is as a political slogan (see the section below), it is questionable whether it is a good foundation for a *theory of society*. Yet for Habermas, this ideal serves both functions. Communicative action, as a specific subset of the action of individuals, relates to the actions of other individuals, and it is thereby guided by certain moral ideas that are 'generated' intersubjectively. These norms are of interest only insofar as they provide the 'frame' for an action that is conceptualized from the point of view of individual actors. Thus, norms make 'social sense' only on the premise that society is conceptualized as the aggregate of individual, norm-guided actions. Consequently, Habermas declares real structures to be the epiphenomena of more basic, normative structures based on the intentions of speaking subjects; norms and organizations 'issue from' law (Habermas, 1992: 153; cf. 25), much as 'institutions' were conceived as the product of communication (Habermas, 1968a: 283). It is hard to comprehend how this is not idealistic.

## POLITICAL AMBIVALENCES

Once we take these recurring themes as Habermas's main 'problématique', one quickly detects certain ambivalences. Early on, Habermas talks about an 'obscurity': 'Everything becomes blurred into an authoritarian and abstract "political apparatus"'



(Habermas et al., 1961: 295; cf. Habermas, 1985b). If we ask about the political model that motivates this criticism, there are at least two possibilities, just as the diagnosed problem itself has two poles. The term he uses in 1981, 'colonisation' of the lifeworld, includes *both* economic and political encroachments (with 'power' and 'money' as the two leading 'media' of control: Habermas, 1981: II, 273, 581) on a better world of mutual understanding and good intentions. One side of the problem is the commercialization of more and more fields of society, including the media. But we have seen that Habermas no longer assumes the capitalism of the nineteenth century as analyzed by Marx. Free exchange, the law of value and class struggle are no longer relevant in Habermas's writings, at least from the 1950s to the early 1990s, because for him the state and the bureaucracy have taken control of many economic functions ('the state apparatus executes many imperatives of the economic system': 1973: 52; for a change of mind on this, see the first essay in Habermas, 2014).

Politically this means that *more state* can hardly be the answer because we already have too much of it. This leads to the other side of the problem: the expansion of the political apparatus by the welfare state and the growing political influence of large non-state actors (a problem he later calls 'juridification': Habermas, 1981: II, 522 ff.).<sup>6</sup> This poses another problem: the compromising of democratic procedures and the depoliticizing of citizens. How should critical theory tackle this bivalent situation? Simple solutions (like the liberal credo 'less state and more market', or the social-democratic credo 'more state and less market') are no longer possible here, for whichever side of the problem is addressed, the other side will grow. Is the solution merely the right balance, or is there something more to it? As we will see, balancing between positions (between liberalism and republicanism: Habermas, 1992: 359; between human rights and popular sovereignty: Habermas, 1992: 131; between Kant

and Hegel, etc.) soon became Habermas's favorite position. This is no surprise, once we consider that the function of communicative action is to find a consensus.

The ambivalence of Habermas's political stance was visible in his role in the students' unrest of 1967–8. Like Habermas (1969: 83 ff.), the students were quite willing to discuss issues that had until then been concealed. This is the inevitable way to proceed in practice if 'public debate' is at the core of one's theory. But deliberation can also mean that some people discuss, while others *decide* (Habermas, 1992: 437; see the watered-down republicanism in Kant by 1795). To what extent decisions are driven by discussion cannot be determined by discussion alone. The students of 1967 were no longer willing to adhere to mere discussion as they witnessed the scant effects this had on the political situation. At this point, Habermas parted ways with the more radical students, claiming that any political act beyond debating would not only provoke massive counter-violence from the state: it would also turn the student movement into an irrational and voluntarist form of activism – a 'fascism from the left', as he warned Rudi Dutschke, the students' intellectual leader until his assassination in 1968 (Habermas, 1969: 148). Left fascism here did not mean a left wing of the fascist movement, as in Agnoli (1973), but rather the use of fascist methods by the left.

The dividing line between Habermas and the activists was not only the question of violence, however: it was one of political goals. Habermas understood the students' interests to be his own, namely the interest in communication for its own sake ('Der Kampf richtet sich gegen die entpolitisierte Öffentlichkeit': Habermas, 1969: 190). He assumed, and also expected others to believe, that under given circumstances more cannot be asked. Habermas held this position in the 1950s, continued to defend it in the 1980s and continues to believe it to this day. It appears to be Habermas's *idée fixe*. He once called those who asked for more political engagement

‘infantile’ and ‘deluded’ (1969: 197). Public debate, therefore, appears as something self-referential: in the debate, the debate itself (and its conditions) remains the only topic. It thus appears as the heir to the absolute subject: it posits itself and recreates itself permanently. The major step beyond Fichte is that now the subject is conceived as a *col-lective*. Habermas’s main topic, however, is not society; it is rather, as it was in Hegel, reason. Public debate and discourse are the form in which Habermas believes that reason realizes itself or, rather, into which it retreats (Habermas, 1992: 228, 360). This neo-Hegelianism is subsequently taken up and modified by Axel Honneth (1992).

More radical students, scholars and politicians, however, soon responded that more can and *should* be asked of political intervention (Abendroth et al., 1968; Willms, 1973; Bolte, 1989), and that alternative political goals that went beyond the conditions for debate should also be discussed. Students, especially, tried to politicize workers and larger parts of the public. Astonishingly, this led Habermas to doubt the very possibility of a politics that could seriously change civil society into something more socialist or emancipatory. Among other things, he based this political appeasement on a defensive rereading of Karl Marx (Henning, 2015: 406 ff.). That he transformed the debate with radical students about the limits and goals of politics into a discussion and reconstruction of ‘historical materialism’ (Habermas, 1976; cf. Rapic, 2014) indicates, again, the collapsing of his political and intellectual roles.

Surprisingly, even in his most original period – the middle years of the 1970s and 1980s – the political implications of Habermas’s theories are difficult to track. The ‘lifeworld’, the normatively laden remainder after deducting the political and economic ‘systems’ from social life, is quite meager in content if we observe the actors and structures within that sphere. The unequal bargaining power of actors in the field is not clearly addressed: ‘Habermas screens power

out of the lifeworld’ (Allen, 2008: 121). For Habermas, the lifeworld is composed of *knowledge* (1981: II, 189 ff., 521; 1992: 429), thus it is defined not in social but in *epistemic* terms; it is the cognitive, yet non-thematic background of people’s experiences (for a later elaboration Habermas, 2009: V, 203 ff.). This ‘supply’ of knowledge is differentiated between knowledge referring to ‘culture’, ‘society’, and to the ‘personality’ (1981, II, 209f.). Defending the lifeworld against ‘the system’ primarily means to fight a *cognitive* fight (as it was initially intended by Edmund Husserl) – against abstraction, neutralization, formalization and differentiation, in order to return the ‘freed territories’ to the other, communicative rationality (Habermas, 1981: II, 582). Communicative *actions* – acts of coordination – are only possible if the world is accessible by a communicative *rationality* in the first place (for the logical succession of rationality, action and society see Iser and Strecker, 2010: chapter 2). Habermas’s difficulty is in demonstrating the ways in which this abstract activity of reinterpreting the world, in order to deformalize the knowledge about it, is *not* backwards-looking. Most social movements he observed in 1981 were defensive; only feminism seemed to conquer new ground instead of defending older territories (Habermas, 1981: II, 578). So the question is, what is Habermas’s own political objective?

The ideal Habermas holds up against the diagnosed economic-political double-invasion (‘like colonialists invade a tribal society’: Habermas, 1981: II, 522) is ‘democracy’ – in early writings with the prefix ‘social’, in later writings with the prefix ‘radical’ (Habermas, 1992: 13). But what does that mean in practical terms? On the one hand, Habermas could be taken to endorse traditional social democracy, which implies extending the power of political institutions to redistribute income and life changes (an ‘economic democracy’ as advocated by Wolfgang Abendroth, for example). At least that is how some passages – never the central ones – in his work may be

read (Habermas et al., 1961: 290 ff.; Iser and Strecker, 2010: 144 ff.). This, however, is at odds with the Schmittian and Arendtian purism that also runs through Habermas's writings, which asks us not to 'mix' political and economic issues (because the resulting welfare-mentality transforms citizens into consumers or clients and thus compromises democracy: Habermas et al., 1961: 295f.; Habermas, 1992: 490 ff., 520). On the other hand, he could also be taken to endorse the neoliberal counterrevolution that calls for more 'freedom' and less regulation (for this unintended effect of leftist-liberal demands, see Fraser, 2013).

In fact, the neoliberal counterrevolution was pushed through by *social democrats* like Tony Blair (so-called 'New Labour') and Gerhard Schroeder in the 1990s. Like their intellectual godfathers, Anthony Giddens in the UK and Habermas in Germany, they talked about 'reflexive' politics – especially in relation to welfare (Habermas, 1985b: 141 ff.; 1992: 494; Iser and Strecker, 2010: 164). In practice, 'reflexive welfare' often means that citizens no longer receive benefits and instead have to endure a civic 'activation' towards an economically functionalized virtue ethics. When Habermas begins to talk about the welfare state, he often ends up with the idea of participation (Habermas et al., 1961: 297; Habermas, 1985b: 161; 1992: 495 ff.). So, even for him, political participation appears to be the alternative to crisis-ridden social democracy. In what way a repoliticized public could redesign a welfare state (and the character of that state) remains open in Habermas's writings.

Both politically and theoretically Habermas's focus on extending public debate is sandwiched between two camps. One camp denies the very possibility of communicative action (conservatives and technocrats, represented in theory by Gehlen and Schelsky or, later, by Luhmann or the bureaucracy of the European Union). It relies on systemic functionality, for which public debates are not only useless but an impediment. A similar avoidance of discussion could be found in

real socialism, which is why there emerged an alliance with socialist dissidents that resulted in a cooperation in Korcula known as the Yugoslav summer school. The second camp is very much in favor of communicative action, not for its own sake but in order to use it for other, more substantial goals (the student movement and socialists, for example). It is difficult to locate Habermas's position between these two camps because he is constantly arguing against *both* of them. On the one hand, he wants to enhance public debates. This is a running topic in most of his writings. On the other hand, he struggles with more radical politics that go beyond this position. When, early on, students' socialist ideas were attacked for overstressing their 'operational framework', Habermas echoed John Rawls's political liberalism that material 'conceptions of the good' should be avoided in political debate. The only topics that can be raised in public are those that could be held by everybody. This principle of universality sounds radically democratic, but, in fact, it leads to a formalism that restricts topics to procedural ones: it is only procedures that everybody can agree on, since everybody has different opinions on material topics. So Habermas's political program seems to be to always find a middle ground – a position neither very critical, nor particularly 'radical'.<sup>7</sup>

The change in critical theory's political orientation is also visible in Claus Offe's statement: 'There is no practical alternative to the constitutional program of liberal and welfare state democracy' (Offe, 1972: 53). When Habermas, building upon Offe, addressed late capitalism's legitimation issues (Habermas, 1973), he changed his position vis-à-vis his earlier position as a cultural critic. He no longer acted as an advocate *against* the state and its bureaucracies, conceived of as excessively powerful and as depriving people of their liberties; he was now concerned with the legitimacy of the state (governed by the Social Democratic Party at the time); he consolidated this apologetic position in *Between Facts and Norms*.

## ANOTHER TURN: LEGAL NORMATIVISM

The ideal of communicative action, of finding a consensus for contested issues in an ideal discourse, free of domination and restraints, has always been a counterfactual model. Neo-Aristotelians and Marxists alike criticized it by pointing out that nothing of the kind has existed in reality. The focus on law that Habermas developed in *Between Facts and Norms* (1992) responds to this critique. On the one hand, the provision of freedom of speech, association, assembly and the press *by means of* law is the institutional precondition for the occurrence of unfettered discussion. On the other hand, legal arguments presuppose the freedom and equality of legal subjects. Habermas now argues that this is no vicious circle but rather cuts the Gordian knot. The focus on law is thus a lifeline that ties the theory of communicative action to social reality, even though the 'reality' of law is itself partly normative (that is the 'norm' dimension of law, while the 'fact' dimension refers to its political existence). Thus, law is not so much examined for its own sake as used in an attempt to close the gap, deeply rooted in Habermas's approach, between sense-free technology and immaterial interaction, system and lifeworld.

Critical theory, which, according to Habermas had been aporetic for decades, now achieves a 'systemic closure', but it is a closure that once again replicates the dualism between technology and moral practice inherent in Habermas's basic approach. Habermas effects a rapprochement between discourse theory and law, integrating law between system and lifeworld as a 'transmission belt' (Habermas, 1992: 76, 81, 448). He examines law both from a normative perspective (which Habermas believes to be a participant's view) and from a systems-theoretically reductive observer's perspective. From this 'double perspective' of his own theory (Habermas, 1992: 66), he draws conclusions about the

nature of the object of inquiry. Within law, he claims, the two worlds, *facts and norms*, achieve the sought-after synthesis. In this way, law can be a 'plausible solution to the puzzle' since it thrives on communication even if it is coercive in nature:

A morality that depends on the accommodating substrate of propitious personality structures would have a limited effectiveness if it could not engage the actor's motives in *another* way besides internalization, that is, precisely by way of an institutionalized legal system that *supplements* post-conventional morality in a manner effective for action. (Habermas, 1992, 114)

In *Between Facts and Norms*, law serves as a 'safety net' providing the social integration other 'systems' fail to bring about: '*unfettered* communicative action can neither unload nor seriously bear the burden of social integration falling to it' (Habermas, 1992: 73). Yet even though law may be *one* medium of 'social integration' among others, this does not make it a sufficient mechanism of social integration. This assumption would overestimate the power of law.

Habermas alleges that normative implications are evident throughout law (and faults Luhmann for not seeing this: Habermas, 1992: 50) and assumes that law, driven by normativity, has detached itself from the economy and politics (1992: 75). For this reason, he is not interested in 'negative liberties and social entitlements' (1992: 78) but in the de-economized and depoliticized liberties of 'civil society', the 'rights enjoyed by citizens' (1992: 83, 75 ff., 79), i.e., the ones that rest on communicative action (this corresponds to Hannah Arendt's 'pure politics'). Thus, Habermas does not so much address the actual development of a specific legal system via social struggles but rather contents himself with discussion of an abstract 'generation' of 'validity' – a transcendental history ('logical genesis': 1992: 121).

Consequently, terms such as 'radical democracy' or 'political culture' have no definite referent. The question of what exactly

these terms refer to remains unanswered. Habermas analyzes the implications of normative concepts derived from the *self-understanding* of the democratic constitutional state in what amounts to a hermeneutics of democracy. Habermas's result looks like a transcendental deduction of the German Federal Republic. Consequently, what begins as a pamphlet on radical democracy in the end boils down to a politics of imagination: citizens are autonomous not because they themselves author the law, but because they 'may ... understand themselves' as authoring it (Habermas, 1992: 33). A law is just when all those affected by it can be thought of as approving it. They need do no more than imagine that they might be in a position to do so. Ultimately, it is enough for the 'authors' of such theories to imagine that the subjects can imagine this too: 'Just those action norms are valid to which all possibly affected persons could agree as participants in rational discourses' (Habermas, 1992: 107).

Habermas defends himself against the accusation of idealism (1996: 335 ff.), but the 'substantive reasons' (1996: 342) he invokes years later somewhat contradict his earlier assumptions ('There is still much work to be done in this area' (1996: 354)). In retrospect, the 'ideal communicative community' and 'discourse without domination' reveal themselves to be the somewhat exalted precursors of the later 'democratic procedure' (Habermas, 1992: 301 ff.), except that the latter does not leave much to be realized. As accurate as some of the descriptions provided in this model are, it is debatable whether it constitutes a critical theory of society (Shabani, 2003; maybe it never was; see Müller-Doohm, 2015) or, rather, a defense of liberal democracies in times of political crisis. Maybe this is the secret of Habermas's tremendous success (he has earned numerous prizes and distinctions): he is always well informed and vigilant about potential problems, but he does not ask the reader to expect more than there essentially already is.

## Notes

- 1 In this chapter, I expound on arguments from Henning, 2015. I want to thank Max Henninger for his translation and also Bev Best for her help.
- 2 While Arendt's (1958) assumption that capitalism is capable of 'smooth functioning' was neoclassical, Habermas (1963: 195 ff.) accepted hypotheses on 'organized capitalism', the supplanting of exploitation by 'alienation' and the disappearance of the proletariat.
- 3 The break with Heidegger was prompted by the renewed publication of texts written during the Nazi period: 'Until the publication of Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics* in 1953, my political and my philosophical allegiances were... two utterly different things – two universes that hardly touched' (Habermas, 1979: 515).
- 4 Instead of private capitalism, 'today' we have the primacy of politics (Habermas, 1973: 5), a new complex of the economy and the state that 'no longer' involves problems such as the systematic discrimination of entire sections of the population (statements like these can be found in Habermas et al., 1961: 295; Habermas, 1968a: 74 ff.; 1968b: 100 ff.; 1973: 33 ff., 49 ff.; 1976: 182; 1981: II, 273, 343 ff., 505 ff.; 1992: 520).
- 5 'Only in an egalitarian public of citizens that has emerged from the confines of class... can the potential of an unleashed cultural pluralism fully develop' (Habermas, 1992: 308). Class barriers seem to be abolished by 'equal rights of citizenship' (1992: 308). This misreads a juridical expression as a description of reality.
- 6 Following Gehlen, Habermas originally calls for 'asceticism' (1954; see Keulartz, 1995: 60). In 1992, he still refers to the 'undesirable effects of welfare-state provisions' (Habermas, 1992: 391; cf. 1981: II, 361 ff.). The 'paternalistically bestowed' 'social entitlements' promote a 'privatistic retreat from the citizen's role' (1992: 78). Habermas even uses the Schelskyan term 'leveling' (1992: 79). Opposition to the welfare state is seldom motivated by a democratic ethos (authors such as Forsthooff, Huber, Gehlen and Schmitt enjoyed successful careers under National Socialism); more frequently, such opposition is motivated by a fear of losing one's social status or of more far-reaching political demands.
- 7 Later on, he had second thoughts, claiming that in a postsecular age it would be too harsh to exclude believers from public debate (Habermas, 2005: 119 ff.; 2012: 127 ff.). But even if religiously motivated arguments may be articulated in a public debate, they have to be sorted out from decision-making and its legitimation – they need filters and floodgates (Habermas, 1992: 387, 398, 431 ff., 449).

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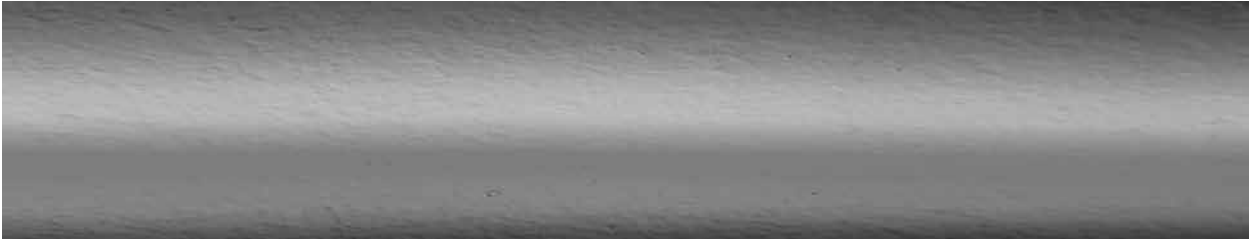
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PART III

# Critical Reception and Further Developments



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# Gillian Rose: The Melancholy Science

Andrew Brower Latz

## INTRODUCTION

Gillian Rose was born Gillian Rosemary Stone in London on 20 September 1947 to a secular Jewish family originally from Poland. She studied philosophy, politics and economics at Oxford, then continental social philosophy, sociology and the Frankfurt School at New York's Columbia University and the Freie Universität of Berlin. She also attended the New School for Social Research whilst in America. Her introduction to German philosophy began at Oxford, in a seminar set up by Hermínio Martins; continued in America and Germany (she studied Hegel with Dieter Henrich in Germany); and resumed in Oxford when she returned to complete a PhD on Adorno under the supervision of Leszek Kołakowski and Steven Lukes (Bernstein, 1995: 12; Caygill, 1996: 56; Martins, 1996: 112–14; Milbank, 1995; Rose, 1995a).

She was Reader in Sociology at Sussex University from the mid seventies to 1989 and Professor of Social and Political Thought

at Warwick University from 1989 to 1995, a chair created especially for her. All ten of her PhD students moved with her from Sussex to Warwick. Rose published eight books, two articles and four book reviews (for a full bibliography see Brower Latz, 2016b). She wrote on German Idealism, the Frankfurt School, Marxism, postmodernism and poststructuralism, sociology, Christian theology, Jewish theology and philosophy, Holocaust studies, architecture and jurisprudence, and offered original readings of many figures including Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Arendt, Luxemburg, Varnhagen, Girard, Thomas Mann and Kafka. She read German, French, Latin, Hebrew and Danish. Rose was 'one of a number of Jewish "intellectuals" chosen to advise the Polish Commission on the Future of Auschwitz' (Rose, 1995a: 12).

In Coventry on 9 December 1995, Rose died at the age of forty-eight, after a two-year struggle with ovarian cancer. She was baptized into the Anglican Church moments before her death by the Bishop of Coventry, Simon

Barrington-Ward. This surprised and troubled some of her acquaintances and readers, fueling a debate about how or whether Rose's conversion to Christianity related to her work (Ellis, 2000; Jay, 1997; Kavka, 2001; Rose, 1998; Wolf, 1997). 'Conversion', however, may be the wrong term, since she wrote in her final weeks in hospital, 'I shall not lose my Judaism, but gain that more deeply, too ... I am both Jewish and Christian' (Rose, 1998: 7). Some of her close friends were important religious figures and theologians (Julius Carlebach, John Milbank, Simon Barrington-Ward) (Rose, 1995a, 1996, 1998, 1999) and Rose has had an important influence on some Christian and Jewish theologians, including Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury.

The theological element of her thought should not be overstated, however, as it sometimes has been. Rose began her work as an atheist Marxist and only gradually began to consider political theology and liberation theology as worthy topics of research. Her own social philosophy, although evolving up until at least the early nineties, found its core coherence around Hegel (more on this later). That is, she had developed much, though admittedly not all, of the major planks of her social theory before she took up theological themes. When she did consider the theological, it was in response to reading Kierkegaard, to the theological turn in continental philosophy, an intellectual friendship with John Milbank (one of the major English language theologians of his generation), and, only later, her own burgeoning religious experiences (Rose, 1995a, 1996, 1999).

Rose located herself within the Frankfurt School tradition: 'there are now generations of Frankfurt School students who occupy posts as sociologists and philosophers throughout the world. I really consider myself to be one of them' (Rose, 1986). She was, more specifically, part of the second generation of the Frankfurt School, and took her bearings primarily from Hegel and Adorno. Rose's doctoral dissertation, submitted at

Oxford in 1976, was called *Reification as a Sociological Category: Theodor W. Adorno's Concept of Reification and the Possibility of a Critical Theory of Society*. A revised version was published as *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (Rose, 1978). It was the first book to provide an overall introduction to Adorno's thought in English and made a major contribution to introducing the Frankfurt School to English language scholarship. Her second book, 1981's *Hegel Contra Sociology* (republished with a new Preface as Rose, 1995b), criticized the neo-Kantian basis of classical and Frankfurt School social theory, and argued for grounding social theory instead on a full-blooded Hegelian philosophy. Let us take each in turn.

## ROSE'S HEGELIANISM

Hegel first. Rose's version of Hegel was unusual. She disagreed with most Frankfurt School theorists because she opposed their rejection of central aspects of Hegel's philosophy. As Garbis Kortian explained, in a book cited by Rose, 'The more precise coordinates which define the Frankfurt School thesis are, on the one hand, the two fundamental concepts of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, speculative experience and the speculative proposition, and, on the other, the fact that the dissolution of German Idealism threw these concepts into question' (Kortian, 1980: 26). Rose took exactly the opposite view to the Frankfurt School's rejection of speculative experience and speculative propositions. *Hegel Contra Sociology* begins: 'This essay is an attempt to retrieve Hegelian speculative experience for social theory' (Rose, 1995b: 1) and goes on to explain speculative propositions as fundamental to the whole enterprise. Again, in Kortian's view, philosophy must understand the implications of the dissolution of Hegel's idea of absolute knowledge, and must 'denounce

one of the constitutive moments of Hegelian speculative experience: the moment of recognition and appropriation (*Anerkennung und Aneignung*) of the phenomenised totality of the absolute concept in its otherness' (Kortian, 1980: 41). This is precisely contrary to Rose's view in which the Marxist distinction between 'radical method' and 'conservative system' has obscured

the centrality of those ideas which Hegel developed in order to unify the theoretical and practical philosophy of Kant and Fichte ... These ideas, recognition and appropriation (*anerkennen* and *aneignen*), are fundamental to Hegel's notion of a system, and their importance cannot be appreciated apart from Hegel's critique of the methodologism and moralism of Kant and Fichte. (Rose, 1995b: 45)

Hegel's system and method cannot be separated because Hegel 'demonstrated the connection between the limitations of the idea of method in Kant and Fichte and the limitations of the kind of social and political theory which they produced' (Rose, 1995b: 45). The two most serious limits in said social and political theory were, in Rose's view, their formality and lack of critical edge. Hence: 'the "absolute" is not an optional extra, as it were ... Hegel's philosophy has *no* social import if the absolute is banished or suppressed, if the absolute cannot be thought' (Rose, 1995b: 45).

Rose's Hegelianism is considered unusual outside the bounds of Frankfurt thinking too. Robert Bernasconi noted how in Rose's presentation, 'the completion of philosophies and religions takes place as the revealing of their social and political foundations ... It is hard to recognise this as a description of Hegel's discussions of the history of philosophy and when Hegel accounts for the possibility of the science it is not in these terms' (Bernasconi, 1981: 42). Or, for H. S. Harris 'her interpretive gambits are certainly very one-sided' (Harris, 1984: 426), which he put down to her focus on sociological implications, as when she read the *Logic of Being* as a critique of Kant and the *Logic of Essence* as a critique of Fichte. By the standards of contemporary

Hegelian scholarship she played rather fast and loose with the detail of Hegel's work. Above all, she tended to conflate Hegel's speculative logic with his phenomenology, she never really addressed how the *Science of Logic* is to be understood, and she never set out her vision of Hegel's system even though she repeatedly insisted the system was necessary and inseparable from Hegel's method.

Despite these flaws, at the time of its publication in 1981, *Hegel Contra Sociology* played a role in advancing Hegel scholarship, being used by Robert Pippin (1989: 272 n.49) and Slavoj Žižek (2008: 99) for instance, and it enabled Rose to create some very illuminating and suggestive works in social theory. For example, in 1984 Rose made the following observation about commodity fetishism in *Dialectic of Nihilism*:

In the *Grundrisse* Marx examines how Capital posits individuals as 'persons', the bearers of rights, and as 'things', the commodity 'labour-power'. The theory of commodity fetishism subsequently developed in the first volume of *Capital* is not simply an account of how material relations between 'persons' are transformed into social relations between 'things'. It is an account of the 'personification' and 'reification' intrinsic to the juridical categories of 'commodity', 'capital', and 'money'. Emphasis on the differences between Marx's and Hegel's thinking has obscured the continuity of their preoccupation with the antinomy of law. The juridical opposition of free subjects and subjected things, which characterizes not only relations between different classes but the relation of the individual to itself in modern states, forms the speculative core of Hegel's and of Marx's thinking. (Rose, 1984: 3)

This passage highlights Rose's emphasis on speculative thinking (which underlay her belief that Hegel and Marx are more similar than was generally recognized at the time). Each point is linked through the 'antinomy of law': law's tendency within capitalism to treat both persons and things as both persons and things in a way that is not and cannot be neatly resolved. It is precisely the bifurcated nature of law – which filters through politics, ethics and economics – that both Hegel and

Marx understood as requiring speculative, dialectical handling. The main source of Rose's dissatisfaction with classical and Frankfurt School theory was her belief that both were unable to handle antinomies as well as they should, which she traced back to their neo-Kantianism. Her own social philosophy, which operated under the figure of the 'broken middle', was an attempt to move beyond these dissatisfactions.

## ROSE CONTRA NEO-KANTIANISM

From 1981 onwards, Rose opposed a Hegelian speculative form of social theory to a neo-Kantian one. She developed and explored various ways in which the two differed and she never retreated from her reading of Hegel that originally led her to the distinction. In Rose's second book, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, her 'reading of Hegel functions as a reformulation of the foundations of Critical Theory' (Osborne, 1982: 8). In her view – not always clearly expressed – good sociology works on a Hegelian speculative basis but often mistakes its own procedures because it understands itself on a neo-Kantian basis. The nub of the issue is that neo-Kantian sociology both separates and yet conflates the conditioned and its condition of possibility (or, put otherwise, the social and the transcendental), whereas speculative thought is better able to relate the two (see further Brower Latz, 2015, 2018 and in press). Let us unpack this thought.

In *Hegel Contra Sociology*, Rose traced the neo-Kantian training and intellectual background of Durkheim and Weber, which she saw as both a strength and liability. As she says on the first page: 'The neo-Kantian paradigm is the source of both the strengths and weaknesses of Durkheim's and Weber's sociology' (Rose, 1995b: 1, cf. 31). Neo-Kantian sociology does provide information about and insight into society but is incomplete. Its transcendental circularity posits a

condition of possibility (e.g., the economy) and a conditioned (e.g., moral philosophy), but does not sufficiently allow the conditioned to redound onto the condition: 'a transcendental account necessarily presupposes the actuality or existence of its object and seeks to discover the conditions of its possibility' (Rose, 1995b: 1, cf. 129–30). Again:

empirical reality or experience of it cannot be specified apart from concepts. Experience of social reality is mediated by concepts, thus there is no independently definable reality to pit against concepts in order to 'test' them ... to stipulate *a priori*, that is apart from experience, what is to count as empirical evidence for a concept, is merely to register what the methodology is equipped to register.... A circle is unavoidable. (Rose, 1978: 101)

As Adorno had it, 'an object gets investigated by a research tool which, through its own formulation, decides what the object is: a simple circle' (in *Soziologie* cited in 'Introduction' to 'A Critique of Methodology' by Eike Gebhardt in Arato and Gebhardt, 1978: 376). Hence Rose:

With instruments in general we can demonstrate their use without setting about using them ... But designing, building and examining sociological tools can only be done by the same rationality that is sociology's object. Rationality means rules, and sociology is the study of the rules and conventions of social life. So we are in a vicious circle. We are assuming the validity of the operation whose validity is to be questioned. This [neo-Kantian] approach is claiming that it is neutral and makes no assumptions but it has overlooked a major assumption: that logic, here socio-logic, is distinct from the rest of reality and that it can be used to grasp that reality, or at least part of it. The very metaphor of tool in sociology is suspect. The power of sociology, especially Marxist, is that scientific rationality and subjective consciousness are themselves part of the whole to be apprehended. Instrumental method, however, seeks to know before it starts knowing. This is absurd – this is what Hegel said about Kant .... (Rose, 1987)

Rose looked to Hegel to provide a better awareness of the interaction between reason and reality, or between the society being investigated and the reason doing the investigating, essentially transposing Hegel's

critique of Kantian epistemology into the realm of sociology, but with the crucial proviso that, just as Hegel's critique of Kant was appreciative and aimed at furthering and improving the Kantian project, so Rose's critique of sociology was aimed at assisting her own discipline of social theory and sociology (though the title and tone of *Hegel Contra Sociology* led some to regard it as a rejection of sociology).

Systematizing and reconstructing Rose's views from across her corpus we can discern other ways in which she thinks neo-Kantianism causes further problems for social theory. First, in a transcendental account, that which explains other terms does not explain itself, such that one term tends to become unknowable. Durkheim, for instance, 'transforms society into the precondition of facts and, therefore, into a primary and ultimately unanalyzable concept' (Crane, 1982: 638; cf. Rose, 1978: 82–6). Transcendental thinking within sociology

involves the postulation of various mechanisms, powers, structures, etc. at a level which is logically unexperienceable because it supposedly constitutes the very conditions of possibility of experience. These transcendental entities are then taken to be, in a sense, more 'real' than the reality which can be and is known; the former is understood to generate the latter. In critical social theory this form of reasoning issues in a conjunction of theoretical assertions which purport to explain how people do what they do, how social order is sustained, and how social change is possible. Critical social theory is respectably fallibilist about *particular* kinds of knowledge-claim, but assumes infallible authority over *generalised* transcendental knowledge-claims. (Pleasants, 1999: 178)

Second, the neo-Kantian 'transformation of Kantian transcendental epistemology into a series of *methodologies* concerned with ascertaining the basis of validity implied that epistemological problems could be transformed into problems of the sociology of knowledge' (Israel, 1990: 116). As a result, the force of practical reasons is much reduced and Rose thus doubts the quasi-transcendental form of social theory can fully account for

ethics, especially if it is used as the basis of philosophy as a whole and as the way to hold together practical and theoretical reason. And, indeed, the neo-Kantians conceded they could not explain the unity of fact and value; these had to be taken on faith (Beiser, 2009; Adorno, 1977). 'Behind [Weber's] demand for value free science lies an epistemological conception derived from the neo-Kantians, namely, that value judgements are not the result of cognitive acts. In fact Weber later saw the justification of practical judgments as meaningless' (Frisby, 1976: xxiv). Weber and Durkheim accept the fact-value distinction in a way that assumes mind and world are separate, and so fail properly to understand their mutual mediation. Weber, following Heinrich Rickert, saw the world itself as irrational, and the values and categories used to understand it imposed on it by human minds (Habermas, 1988: 4–5, 13–16). Rose's Hegelian social philosophy does not take the fact-value distinction so rigidly, and sets it within a different mind–world relationship in which the aim is to see all the multiple mediations through which subject and object, individual and society, create one another (Rose, 1995b: 194).

Third, a corollary of Rose's critique of neo-Kantianism in sociology is that one of the sources of the repeated recurrences of positivism within sociology may be the lack of appreciation by sociologists about the transcendental form of their thinking (cf. Steinmetz, 2005; Habermas, 1988: 109). Neo-Kantian sociology is problematic when the 'notion of the limitations of knowledge simply turns into positivism of a generally scientific or, more specifically, psychological or sociological kind' (Pippin, 1989: 58, discussing Rose). The epistemological roots are evident in passages from Rickert such as: '*Nur aus dem Sollen also und nicht aus dem Sein kann ich die Wahrheit des Urteils ableiten*' [Only from the ought therefore and not from being can I derive the truth of the judgement]; '*der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis ... kann nur das Sollen [sein], das im Urtheile*

*anerkannt wird* [the object of knowledge can only be the ought that is recognized in the judgement] (Rickert, 1892: 66–7).

Fourth, the neo-Kantians shared the problem of ‘the transformation of Kant’s critical method into a logic of validity (*Geltungslogik*), a general method, [which] *excluded any enquiry into empirical reality*’ (Rose, 1995b: 10, emphasis added). How can this be, when the whole purpose of sociology is to enquire into the empirical reality of society? Rose’s protest is more subtle than a simplistic reading of this sentence indicates. The problem with a ‘method’ in the human realm is its external relation to what it analyses. Hence her doctoral supervisor Kołakowski: ‘What we properly call a method should be a sequence of operations which, when applied to the same subject, will give the same or approximately the same results. In the humanities, the identification and collation of sources apart, this is far from being the case’ (Kołakowski, 1990: 244). The so-called methods in the humanities are really only general guidelines such as ‘the way people think is usually influenced by their social relations, the values accepted within their community’; thus ‘no explanatory method exists in the study of cultural history’ (Kołakowski, 1990: 245). ‘A method is simply a question ... and surely no method will yield information which it does not ask for (through its very formulation) ... Methods/questions are thus as dependent on the cultural paradigm as are “satisfactory” explanations’ (Gebhardt, 1978: 379). On these grounds Rose opposed Marxism’s claim to be ‘scientific’ (Rose, 1995b: 2).

Finally, over the course of the neo-Kantian period, methodology became detached from and began artificially to dominate substantive study (Frisby, 1976: xxviii). Validity, values and cognition of the world were separated from one another. Validity became an *a priori* matter, separable from conditions of experience; values were based only on conviction. Weber’s value neutrality, for example, whilst legitimate if methodologically constrained,

‘makes independent scientific access to empirical reality a logical impossibility and ultimately reduces science to just one more value’ (Crane, 1982: 638).

Rose’s criticism of the neo-Kantianism of classical and Frankfurt sociology is not always fair, and she did enthusiastically use and value the work produced by Weber, Durkheim and the Frankfurt School. Nevertheless, she thought their misunderstanding about the methodological basis of social theory could and did lead to substantive problems. Not the least of these was the connection between theory and practice, an issue at the heart of critical theory and one she found especially wanting in the work of Jürgen Habermas:

This jettisoning of speculative thinking by recent ‘critical theory’ of modernity has also meant the abandonment of that methodological reflexivity, which is equally substantive, and which learns by coming to know its own formation in the culture it explores. Habermas and Giddens write in the severe style, having disqualified not only Marx and Hegel, but also Weber, Horkheimer and Adorno, who are read without any attention to their difficult and facetious presentation. This lack of attention to form and style leads to the functionalism of the subject: to the critical theorist who becomes a sociologist, his own authoritative voice a neutral, unimplicated discourse of its object. (Rose, 1992: 245)

As with Rose’s critique of Kant and Fichte, her criticism of Habermas focuses on his formality and attempt to produce ethics from theory rather than from ethical life (for a detailed critique and positive alternative along Rosean lines see Bernstein, 1995, 2001, 2015).

## THE SPECULATIVE SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY OF THE BROKEN MIDDLE

In contrast to such neo-Kantianism, Rose proposed a Hegelianism that embraced Hegel’s speculative logic, recognition, appropriation and the absolute:



Hegel put a trinity of ideas in place of Kant's idea of transcendental method: the idea of phenomenology, the idea of absolute ethical life (*absolute Sittlichkeit*), and the idea of a logic. The idea of phenomenology can be seen as an alternative to Kant's theoretical *quaestio quid juris*, while the idea of absolute ethical life can be seen as an alternative to Kant's justification of moral judgements. This, however, would be to concede the Kantian dichotomy between theoretical and practical reason. The idea of all Hegel's thought is to unify theoretical and practical reason. In his *Logic*, as in all his works, the unification is achieved by a phenomenology and the idea of absolute ethical life. (Rose, 1995b: 48)

The broken middle as an 'idea' is Rose's critical theory of modernity, which she glossed as 'the political diremption of the modern state', (Rose, 1992: 199) namely, the necessary tensions between self, society and state. Modernity 'is discovered to be diremptive and is not defined, quasi-a priori, as a "project"' (Rose, 1992: 240), and this discovery occurs by investigating modernity's political history and sociology. For Rose, philosophy and politics 'arise out of ... diremption and its provisional overcoming in the culture of an era' (Rose, 1992: 286). Diremption does not mean the absence of relation, but the relation of mutual dependence and tension. Law and ethics, and state and civil society, both require one another but pull apart. Rose's 'aporetic universalism' is a form of rationality that explicitly works through these tensions. 'While arcadian and utopian universalism would reconcile and posit the unity of particular and universal, aporetic universalism explores and experiments with the disunity of singular and universal' (Rose, 1992: 164).

The historical nature of speculative thinking was important to Rose and the source of her tendency to bind closely together (read: conflate) Hegel's speculative logic with his phenomenology. She discussed Hegelian phenomenology as an 'existential drama' (Rose, 1995b: Preface) and a 'comedy' (Rose, 1996: 63–76). By this she meant philosophy involved learning from mistakes, and

that it should be not merely an intellectual exercise but fully self-involving. In phenomenology, the dialectic between experience and thought, and between natural consciousness and philosophical consciousness, is just as much an existential formation and re-formation (a culturing) of the self as it is an epistemological exercise. 'Culture here has a specific educational meaning and import within speculative philosophy. It refers to the way in which an idea or an experience, in being known, re-forms itself in this being known. Ideas without such a notion of culture or re-formation tend towards dogma because they are asserted without philosophical or educative significance' (Tubbs, 2005: 39). Coming to awareness of the social determinations of both natural and philosophical consciousnesses through the phenomenological journey, does not allow a complete escape from social determinations, but a different relation to them and thereby some measure of freedom. 'We observe that justifications are circular and self-defeating. Why should this observation, the common-sense experience of contradiction, be ruled out as a valid observation?' (Tubbs, 2005: 23). In this way the 'speculative can retrieve the non-foundational experience of thought at the same time as the authority and integrity of reason' (Tubbs, 2005: 15). That makes it neither positivist nor relativist, avoiding the pitfalls of non-critical sociology and Nietzschean-postmodern social philosophy (Rose, 1995b: Preface).

Rose's speculative thinking had an advantage over the dichotomous nature of sociological thinking, still prominent in the seventies and early eighties. In Robert Pippin's words:

the foundational issue [in *Hegel Contra Sociology* is] ... the way in which a subject can be said to determine itself (to be a subject) ... and yet how a subject can be said also to be a real, concrete, and so, in some sense, determined subject ... To think both aspects together, indeed even to be able to recognize that they must be thought together, requires, as Rose points out with great thoroughness and insight, the move to Hegel's 'speculative' position. (Pippin, 1989: 272 n.49)

A common response to the central antinomy of sociology – whether society makes people or people make society – is, ‘both’. This employs the category Hegel terms ‘reciprocity’. It prevents the chicken-and-egg situation between the two terms. ‘Reciprocity is, to be sure, the proximate truth about the relationship of cause and effect and it stands, so to speak, on the threshold of the concept’ (Hegel, 2010: 229). The problem is it leaves each side ‘as something immediately given’ rather than ‘coming to know them as moments of a third, higher [dimension], which is precisely the concept’ (Hegel, 2010: 229 [translators’ insertion]). He continues:

If we consider, for example, the customs of the Spartan people as the effect of its constitution and then, vice versa, this as the effect of its customs, this consideration may for all that be correct; but this construal, for this reason, does not provide any ultimate satisfaction, since by this means neither the constitution nor the customs of this people are in fact comprehended. That happens only by virtue of the fact that those two sides, and equally all the remaining particular sides revealed by the life and history of the Spartan people, are known to be grounded [*begründet*] in this concept. (Hegel, 2010: 229)

Sparta’s customs and constitution can in this light be seen as the unfolding of a self-moving whole, not simply the back-and-forth between two pre-defined terms. In the whole, understood conceptually, the parts are essential to the whole, not accidental properties. The picture is not of an enduring substrate with subtractable predicates; rather a conceptual whole is ‘organic’: each part is necessary to the whole and is itself only within the whole; in this sense, each part is or expresses the whole. The concept also names what it is that makes the thing the thing that it is. The concept is similar to Aristotelian form: it is what makes, say, an eye an eye; what it is we understand by ‘eye’ that is not the same as listing all its properties. If the eye is removed from the body (the whole) it dies, and is no longer properly an eye, but a piece of flesh. The difference between reciprocal and conceptual (speculative, in

Rose’s terms) thinking is the difference between understanding the relation between things in terms of ‘efficient causes all the way down’ versus their relation in terms of ‘what they are’ (Schick, 2014: 96). Hegel suggests we need to posit (retrospectively, phenomenologically) something like ‘the concept (or spirit) of Sparta’ as what develops and expresses itself in the reciprocal interaction between customs and constitution: ‘it is a specific spirit which makes itself into an actual world which now exists objectively in its religion, its ritual, its customs, constitution and political laws, and in the whole range of its institutions, events and deeds. That is its creation – that is this people’ (Houlgate, 2005: 21). Rose was willing to follow Hegel this far, though with a heavy emphasis on the imperfections and fractures in the ‘whole’ that society is. (Organic was not a term Rose used). In Frankfurt School terms, society is ‘a sort of linking structure between human beings in which everything and everyone depend on everyone and everything; the whole is only sustained by the unity of the functions fulfilled by all its members’ (Frankfurt Institute, 1972: 16). For Rose, the society must be viewed as a whole – because it was one – but never could be entirely grasped as such.

In Rose’s view, speculative philosophy is required for understanding the human social world because it dialectically and progressively relates finite and infinite; it knows what *Geist*/spirit is in and for itself, a matter of ‘practical self-consciousness’ (Pippin, 2008: 227). History, reason and *Geist* cannot properly be understood merely in finite or quantitative terms, which is why positivism does not suffice. Speculative social theory therefore takes less for granted than its transcendental or quasi-transcendental cousins, just as it does in logic. This is the basis of its powerful ability to handle contradiction and antimony. Sociology has in fact moved in this direction since Rose first made her argument, though not by relying on Hegel. As an example, consider a very different kind of sociology from Rose’s own writing,

in order to see how Rose's speculative social philosophy provides a logical grounding for empirical sociology. In 2012, Rebecca Catto and Linda Woodhead published the results of a large-scale, multi-disciplinary, team research project into secularism and religion in modern Britain (Woodhead and Catto, 2012). Their approach can be read as exemplifying various aspects of Rose's philosophy. (For the background to Rose's views on empirical sociology see Rose, 1978: esp. 77–148). They used a combination of methods, including qualitative and quantitative (cf. Rose, 1978: 95–108). They bore in mind the position of researcher and theory with respect to society, and approached theories as both *explicans* and *explicandum*: 'far from being neutral voices speaking on the post-war religious condition, these [secularization] theories are integral to it. And, as such, they offer an important route into some of its deepest presuppositions' (Woodhead and Catto, 2012: 3). They emphasize an historical perspective on the multiple levels of mediation of religion and secularism, both of one another and by other social forms such as policy, media and law. They propose a dialectical relation between 'religion' and 'secular' as mutually determining, since "secular" gains substance in relation to the kind of "religion" it rejects' (Woodhead and Catto, 2012: 4). And they offer a speculative conclusion: 'post-war Britain emerges as both religious *and* secular ... Neither makes sense without the other, and their shifting meanings must be analysed in relation to their changing linkages, configurations, commitments and mutual hostilities' (Woodhead and Catto, 2012: 3–4). Here we have an example of some of the best contemporary sociology, combining various forms of empirical data collection and analysis, affirming that sociology needs to think in terms of contradictions and determinate negation, must use increasingly comprehensive levels of explanation and historically informed analyses, and be aware of its own role within its object of study. Although the empirical and descriptive

work in this volume fits the criteria of Rose's social theory, it still leaves open the normative questions that need to be tackled. Rose's work thus offers significant advantages to social theorizing by providing a sophisticated framework for relating its methodological, logical, descriptive, metaphysical and normative moments.

Rose concentrated her social philosophy on two main areas, the relation between state and civil society and the connection between law and ethics. She regarded both as dirempted, that is, split in two in a way that cannot be resolved even though it seems very strongly as though there should be a way to unite each half. Much of jurisprudence, for example, has concerned itself with bringing law and ethics into line with one another – think of Thomistic natural law – whilst other approaches have largely bracketed out the question of ethics from the study of law – such as Hartian legal positivism. Rose's harshest criticisms are directed at attempts to theorize away these diremptions, whether by proposing a clean separation of the two terms or by positing a premature reconciliation between them. She regarded post-structuralist views of law, for instance, to be reductive in the first sense, and much political theology to be reductive in the second sense. She called the latter approach an attempt to provide 'mended middles', which not only failed to recognize the reality of the diremptions in the 'broken middle' but also exacerbated them by obscuring from view the real problems on which intellectual and political work was needed (Rose, 1992). The 'broken middle' was Rose's name for her view of society as well as for her own social philosophy. In this way she avoided any utopian, facile or nostalgic connotations that often accrue to talk of society as a 'whole'. The diremptions of the broken middle pointed towards 'absolute ethical life', a society in which law and ethics would be united by belonging wholly to a people without alienation, but this was clearly unattainable and ought to be no more than a regulative ideal.

Rose did not offer stipulative definitions, preferring to allow connotations to accrue to her main terms of interest, because a 'grand theoretical explanation ... would hypostatize the distinction ... It would probably result in glib philosophical generalizations, oversimplified sociological observations and misguided or dogmatic political recommendations' (Keane, 1988: 14 [a volume cited by Rose, 1992]). Instead the distinction should serve as an '*interpretive standpoint* which can be of utility in historical investigations, sociological inquiry, normative discussions and political action' (Keane, 1988: 14). Rose indeed views the diremption as an interpretive standpoint, and offers Marx, Arendt and Luxemburg as examples of their exploration. The broken middle is thus 'a condition and a means of investigating that condition' (Gorman, 2000: 55); it is, as any reflexive sociological concept should be, *explicandum* and *explicans*.

Rose's account takes off primarily from Marx's 'On the Jewish Question', particularly Marx's observation that state and civil society both presuppose and contradict one another, and that the shift from feudal to modern societies involved depoliticized work and property and a bifurcation within the individual. A 'permanent "mismatch" between the economic and political spheres is a defining characteristic of modern capitalist systems of production' (Keane, 1988: 7). As a result, people lead a double life: in political life they regard one another as communal beings, but in civil society they act as private individuals, treating others as means rather than ends and being so treated, and thus are not entirely free. Indeed, 'political life declares itself to be only a *means*, whose end is the life of civil society' (Marx, 1978: 44).

Insight into these inversions cannot solve them by imposition of a philosophical ought [*Sollen*]. The dynamic movement of *Geist* in Rose's Hegelianism reveals how the social undermines and inverts political meanings, yet 'without trying to overcome [by means of theory] these meanings and their inversions

... as long as they continue to be generated by their legal and political and productive preconditions' (Rose, 1993: 68). Yet people do succumb to the temptation to mend the diremptions by theory alone, whether by appeal to community, the unmediated encounter with the face of the other, and so on. Rose was particularly scornful of such attempts at solution by theory. The centrality of misrecognition in Rose's account of *Geist* avoids such premature and dangerous pseudo-reconciliation of diremptions.

Rose's broken middle does not, then, expect too much from ethical life or its carriers in contemporary society, but she is more sanguine about its achievements than Adorno was. One of the reasons civil society works is because individuals are distanced from their economic, social and political roles, and as such can move around, be substituted one for another, join and leave associations at will without undue penalty. Recognition of the brokenness of the middle prevents an unrealistic investment in the social and political order. Indeed, although civil society has now become routinized it still needs, and has, values. On the one hand, routinization and the ability to move are essential to the success of civil society and the values and freedoms it rightly contains. On the other, much of the sociological and philosophical critique of modernity from the Frankfurt School objects to that routinization and movement as constantly carried too far and producing pathologies. The broken middle names this inescapable predicament, the necessary imperfection of current social forms and any provisionally achieved equipoise.

The broken middle is phenomenologically 'locatable – in history, in polity, in institutions, in *dominium*' (Rose, 1992: 288). Rose notes that one of the meanings of *aufheben* (Hegel's key term, usually translated 'to sublate') is 'to carry an opposition back to its source' (Rose, 1984: 50 n.2). Much of the social theory put forward within continental philosophy and political theology was in Rose's view insufficiently sociological.

She wished to show that its failure properly to grapple with its own sociological preconditions (especially the two fundamental diremptions) causes theoretical problems, which in turn reinforces those diremptions.

It has become easy to describe trade unions, local government, civil service, the learned professions: the arts, law, education, the universities, architecture and medicine as 'powers'. And then renouncing knowledge as power, too, to demand total expiation for domination, without investigation into the dynamics of configuration ... Because the middle is broken – because these institutions are systematically flawed – does not mean they should be eliminated or mended. (Rose, 1992: 285)

Social theory must be able to 'acknowledge that it does not know in advance whether such institutions are violent or peaceful' but 'is able to find out – by reconstructing the changing relation between universal, particular and singular' (Rose, 1992: 264). Rose argues modern society cannot properly be understood without reference to the institutions of civil society mediating between state and individual, hence her criticism of the tendency in politics to reduce their power and in (some) theory to denigrate their legitimacy. Equally, social theory cannot understand its own preconditions, or itself, if it ignores the state–civil society diremption.

Rose called the law–ethics diremption 'modernity's ancient predicament' (Rose, 1992: xii). This facetious phrase refers to the fact that debates around law and ethics stretch back to Socrates and the Sophists yet have a specific modern form, inflected through the Kantian revision of Roman law in combination with capitalist private property (Rose, 1993: 250–1): 'With the institutionalization of private property and contractual law, a market economy comes into being whose primary organizational unit, the business firm, disposes over purposive-rational methods of accounting, management, and production in the calculated pursuit of profit' (Ingram, 1987: 46). Thus the importance of the modern form of the law–ethics diremption: the

'single most decisive event paving the way for modern society was undoubtedly the separation of ethics and law from one another and from religious custom (*Sittlichkeit*)' (Ingram, 1987: 45). Where Rose's first fundamental diremption followed Marx, the second accepts Weber's pioneering analysis. Modern subjects, unlike their ancient counterparts, now experience the:

paradox of life lived in the two apparently different realms of the social and political when both realms are juridical, equally constituted by the civil law. Unaddressable oppositions between morality and legality, autonomy and heteronomy, the good will and natural desire and inclination, force and generality, can be traced to an historically specific legal structure which establishes and protects absolute property by means of the juridical fictions of persons, things, and obligations (Rose, 1984: 2–3).

The law–ethics diremption also refers to the Weberian problem of rationalization. Rationalization is the thread uniting Rose's ideas on the law–ethics diremption, violence, and ethical politics. Society, law and economy all now reflect the loss of meaning flowing from rationalization. Ethical values and ideals seemed increasingly less rational as scientific truth and rationality replaced other forms of reason. 'Modern, secular reason is self-undermining' (Bernstein, 2001: 5). With rationalization, society began to doubt ethical values and ideals (including even reason and truth), which in turn lost their motivating force. Agents' ability to understand and guide their lives with practical reason is then undermined. This begins to threaten 'the *ethical meaningfulness* of human existence' and 'in so doing, undermine the conditions of *rational agency, of goal-directed meaningful action* as such' (Bernstein, 2001: 6, emphasis in original). In terms of law: 'Modern legal practice – thinking, writing, deciding – is presented as a sort of hermetically sealed operation, formal logic without regard to "substance", a world of its own entire of itself. And it is the elimination of all concrete determinations from this process

which is said to be central – the transformation of a dispute into simply or essentially one between abstract (disembodied, anonymous) bearers of rights, legal subjects’ (Murphy, 1997: 56). And within the economy: ‘From an ethical viewpoint, this “masterless slavery” to which capitalism subjects the worker or the mortgagee is questionable only as an institution. However, in principle, the behavior of any individual cannot be so questioned, since it is prescribed in all relevant respects by objective situations’ (Weber, 1968: 1186). The result is the legal subject and ‘the misrecognitions attendant on abstract legal personality, private property and the decay of public and political life’ (Rose, 1993: 67).

Rose thus regarded law as necessary to gain a view of the social totality, and jurisprudence as an expansive enterprise, examining the links between the metaphysical, ethical and legal (Brower Latz, 2016a). From the diremptions evident in such jurisprudence, and existing law in contemporary society, if they are exposed in a Hegelian speculative manner, a view of the social whole is negatively implied. Rose calls this ‘absolute ethical life’, the implied unity of law and ethics and of state and society. Such seamless unity will never exist but it does offer an angle for critique of contemporary society and a normative goal to weigh against the bleak picture of Weberian rationalization. Absolute ethical life includes mutual recognition as the actuality, or immanent normative *telos*, of modern society, implied by the speculative unity of its two main diremptions, state–civil society and the law–ethics. It thus acts equally as a critique of society and sociology, including the role of bourgeois property law and social contract theories reflective of it, the hollowing out of middle institutions, and rationalized forms of law and ethics that undermine mutual recognition. The normative core of mutual recognition runs through all Rose’s work and refutes any ascription to it of relativism, nihilism, or lack of substantive normativity. It is the main way she saw herself

departing from Adorno, whom she viewed as ethically paralysed.

Rose’s influence runs along two axes, historical and theoretical. In the history of the reception of the Frankfurt School in the UK and English language scholarship, she had an important place, with her first two books, her teaching and doctoral supervision, and her intellectual friendships. In terms of theory, her influence is patchier. J. M. Bernstein credits Rose as a hugely important inspiration in his books (and, in the realm of theology, John Milbank and Rowan Williams were deeply effected). Yet difficult writing, a huge range of thinkers and themes, and no attempt to guide readers with a glimpse at the coherent position underlying her various essays, all combined to limit the reception and use of her own social philosophy, though it has found enthusiasts in a range of fields.

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# Bolívar Echeverría: Critical Discourse and Capitalist Modernity

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Born in Ecuador, formed intellectually and politically in West Germany, resident of Mexico until his death, Bolívar Echeverría (1941–2010) is a singular figure within the landscape of twentieth-century critical theory. Following his early engagement with leftist politics and the existential philosophies of Unamuno, Heidegger and Sartre in his home country, Echeverría moved to Germany in 1961, initially with the intention of studying under Heidegger in Freiburg. Later that year Echeverría relocated to Berlin, where he would eventually become involved both politically in the German student movement that saw the SDS (Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund) rise to prominence, and theoretically with the associated revival of critical Marxist thought. In the midst of intense cultural and social upheaval, Echeverría established himself as a revolutionary intellectual and expert in Latin American politics, forming friendships with Rudi Dutschke and Bernd Rabehl (Gandler, 2015: 61ff.). In 1968 Echeverría returned to

Latin America, settling in Mexico, where he began university teaching alongside Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez and concentrated his research on Marx and Marxism, specifically focusing on the critique of political economy. He began to publish the results of this work from the 1970s onwards, initially in a series of journal and magazine articles and eventually in a number of book-length essay collections. Echeverría's essayistic predilection (only three full-length monographs appeared under his name during his lifetime) was heavily indebted to Walter Benjamin, in style as well as form. He continued to teach at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in Mexico City up until his death in 2010.

Three key problematics constitute the fundamental co-ordinates of Echeverría's project: (1) the 'critical' status of theoretical discourse; (2) the dialectical relation of nature and society in the process of social reproduction; and (3) the historical, political and cultural condition of capitalist modernity.

Each of these problematics establishes a key point of affinity with concerns central to the Frankfurt School, although in Echeverría's work they are developed and reworked significantly in relation to the very different historical, geopolitical and cultural conditions under which his intellectual production took place. Broadly, Echeverría's project departs from a detailed, systematic and non-Eurocentric reading of Marx's writings, especially *Capital*, that emphasizes the centrality of their critical character as well as the concepts of 'use-value', 'natural form', 'social reproduction', 'fetishism' and 'subsumption'. At the forefront of this analysis, and taken to be the foundational aspect of Marx's entire critical project, is the contradiction between value and use-value, and more specifically the subsumption of the latter under the former that characterizes the capitalist mode of social reproduction. Based on this initial orientation, Echeverría engaged with the debates around 'culture', 'cultural form' and 'modernity' (both as a general process and in its Latin American variant) in order to propose a distinctive theorization of the 'crisis' that 'defines our epoch'. In this respect, his critical purview far exceeds typical Marxist accounts of society, and – here the influence of Braudel, Mumford and Benjamin, as well as Marx, is clear – could be called properly 'civilizational', engaging with the problem of freedom across the *longue durée*, as well as in its specific conjunctural instantiations. In his own words, his writings combine an insistence on remaining faithful to 'certain basic approaches of Marx's critical discourse with a willingness to radically recompose them in light of the practical and discursive experience of the twentieth century' (Echeverría, 1998a: foreword).

This spirit of radical recomposition, perhaps a fitting characterization of the Frankfurt School's own relation to Marxism, describes Echeverría's attitude toward Frankfurt School associated authors – primarily Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin and Marcuse – whose influence informs his thought as one part of

an eclectic constellation of figures: Lukács, Korsch, Sartre, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Hegel, Braudel, Mumford, Jakobson and Hjelmslev being key amongst them. Frankfurt School authors were a central reference point throughout the period Echeverría spent in Berlin. Subsequently, Echeverría went on to teach key works from the Frankfurt oeuvre as part of his seminar on 'German texts' at the UNAM in Mexico City. Whilst Echeverría's work was not produced primarily, or even expressly, in the direct lineage of Frankfurt School thought, he nonetheless maintains a generous dialogue with Frankfurt thinkers throughout his writings. In a pair of introductory lectures on the Frankfurt School delivered in Mexico City in the mid 1990s, Echeverría summarized the distinctiveness and originality of its contribution, focusing primarily on the work of Adorno and Horkheimer (Echeverría, September 2010–February 2011). But if critical theory is, and indeed must be, a response to the circumstances and struggles of its time, then it is essential to appreciate that the conditions under which Echeverría was working were very different to those which shaped the ideas of the first generation of Frankfurt thinkers. Echeverría's intellectual maturity coincided with the failure and retreat of the revolutionary cycle which reached its climax globally in 1968, and in Latin America throughout the 1970s. So whereas the discourse of the Frankfurt School arose, for Echeverría, within what Lukács in the 1920s termed the epoch of 'the actuality of revolution', lacking by the 1960s only the subject who could realize it, by the 1980s the very actuality of revolution was in question on both a practical and theoretical level (Echeverría, September 2010–February 2011: 22). Struggles had not only undergone a qualitative transformation, but the capacity to produce 'revolutionary significations on the discursive terrain' had become increasingly attenuated. Echeverría thus understood his own time to have inherited an intensified version of the problematic that Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse

understood as the benign totalitarianism of everyday life in the west, only without its dialectical other, the authoritarian regime of the Soviet Union. The blockage of critical possibilities implied in this context was reflected in the ascent of postmodernism and the rejection of Marxism within Latin American intellectual life after the 1970s, giving rise to a different configuration of interests and oppositions on the level of theoretical discourse. This in part explains Echeverría's transition to a focus on questions of semiotics, culture and the global during this period, although this was best understood as a polemical shift of register, given that its analyses remain grounded in a theory of social reproduction departing from terms set out by Marx. It is this highly original account of social reproduction that remains Echeverría's key contribution to a critical theory of society.

## CRITICAL THEORY AS CRITICAL DISCOURSE

The first point of convergence connecting Echeverría's thought to the Frankfurt School can be found in his emphatic assertion of the necessarily 'critical' character of revolutionary theory, and in a careful and comprehensive attempt to elaborate precisely what such criticality consists in. For Echeverría, this necessity can be traced intellectually back to a distinction between what he terms the 'romantic' and 'classical' modes of reflexive discourse. Whereas the latter, primarily francophone/anglophone in origin, purported to know its object by confronting it dispassionately, 'with distance', simply observing it 'as it is' independent of the observer, the romantic attitude, of central European provenance, is grounded upon the idea of a relation of *interiority* between the thinking subject and the thought object. Such interiority acts as the basic postulate of the romantic disposition, for which the thing is transformed in being thought, to the degree that thought

constitutes 'a moment of the existence of the thing'. The objectivity of reality (in this case *social* reality) does not therefore, following the romantic contention, subsist in an uncontested and neutral manner, as 'a sum-total of facts', in Horkheimer's words, that 'is there and must be accepted' (1972: 199) but is rather grasped via categories that are 'always already charged with signification and interpretation' (Echeverría, September 2010–February 2011). The 'critical' dimension of critical theory involves uncovering the charge of meaning undergirding all apparently immediate social phenomena, and in doing so, designating their relation to the broader social order and historical dynamic within which they are inscribed. It is on the basis of this postulate of interiority that epistemological adequacy and objective context become inextricably bound together, grounding the unity of critical theory – despite the diversity of concerns encompassed within it – in the refusal to separate theoretical and metacritical problems from historical judgement and social critique:

Social discourse is a historical discourse, and there is no possibility of realising it in any other manner, since all sociological, or anthropological approximations have sense only to the extent that they describe, establish, problematize the substance of the present, which is to say historical tension. In the consistency itself of the objectivity of things is marked, impregnated, a historical tension that gives significance to things and permits their sense to be fathomed and described. (Echeverría, September 2010–February 2011: 31)

Theorizing social reality in this manner does not aim to establish a static connection between objective entities and some set of constitutive relations that would form a closed totality, but orients every fixed social form toward a 'horizon of intelligibility' opened by a process of historical transformation bearing emancipatory possibilities. Echeverría thus affirms Horkheimer's notion of a 'dynamic unity' between critical theorist and oppressed class, which obliges the former to present social contradictions as not

merely the 'expression of the concrete historical situation but also a force within it to stimulate change' (1972: 215). This synthesis, binding the inner connection of knowledge and object to the project of realizing human emancipation, pits critical theory against a conciliatory bourgeois discourse that confounds freedom with unfreedom and happiness with suffering: 'critical discourse alone is capable of detecting the points of rupture or zones at which this conformism breaks down, appearing in the insignificant fissures or dysfunctional peripheries of the great apparatus, of rescuing the survival of feeling directed toward freedom' (Echeverría, 2006a: 7–8).

For Echeverría, such criticality also accounts for the 'programmatically difficult' mode of exposition characteristic of critical theory (especially pronounced in the case of the Frankfurt School), as a necessary reflection of the difficulty of comprehending this socio-historical tension itself, as well as the difficulty of the practical and political conditions in which such thinking occurs. Echeverría's conception of 'critical discourse' is determined in large part by the idea that such difficulty places demands on the very *mode* of theorization that can adequately respond to the historical reality of capitalism:

the originality, the specificity, or peculiarity of Marx's critical discourse is revealed even in its purely formal dimension. Marx's discourse is not only critical through its content, but also, and especially, by virtue of its form; what is more, if it were not critical in its form it would not be in its content. (Echeverría, 1998a: 62)

It is this formal dimension that endows Marx's thought with its 'properly "critical" or deconstructive scientificity' for Echeverría. Understood in this sense, critical discourse neither contributes to, corrects or appropriates the products of bourgeois ideological discourse, nor attempts to destroy them 'by means of another, more powerful, discourse' (as the official 'proletarian science' of 'real socialism' sought to) but rather works upon

them 'deconstructively', treats them as historical ciphers or symptoms from which tensions can be identified and rendered operable within a cycle of struggle. Here Echeverría works with a specific and precise focus on Marx's critique of political economy, taking *Capital* to be the *exemplary instance* of critical social theory (as it also is for Horkheimer, 1972).<sup>1</sup>

This focus on the critique of political economy is what delimits and gives content to Echeverría's critical theory. As simultaneously a revolution *in* theory (effecting a radical transformation of what is possible on the discursive level) and theory *of* the revolution (as a component of transformative struggle at the level of social practice), this critique does not simply designate an abstract method, applicable to whatever content, but derives its determinate characteristics and orientation in relation to its historical situation. It is, as a result, obliged to impugn *political economy* (primarily, although not exclusively) as the principle positive expression of social reality in the capitalist era, that around which 'the entirety of theoretical discourse revolves – openly or covertly' (Echeverría, 1976). For Echeverría, the discursive primacy of bourgeois economics is derived not simply from the greater material force through which it can saturate the channels of social communication but also, and especially, because of the manner in which it immediately reflects the necessary forms of appearance taken by capitalist social relations (Echeverría, 1976). It is this structural isomorphism, between ideal categories and social practice, that gives political economy its 'spontaneous' validity and ideological traction. Rather than denying this isomorphism as false and opposing to political economy an alternative, positive socio-economic theory ('marxist economics'), Echeverría points out that Marx's discourse works upon political economy 'parasitically'. Critical discourse dissolves the putative harmony and immediacy of economic discourse from within, in order to penetrate through the deceptive surface layer of 'freedom, equality, property and Bentham' and uncover capital

in its processual entirety as a mode of social organization that contradicts and disfigures its real foundations: nature and labour. Critique thus becomes the only adequate mode by which the relationship between dominant bourgeois discourse and revolutionary counter-theory can be resolved; it is only as critique that the latter can resist subjection to 'rules of the game' that would 'make of it, in the last instance – and unwillingly – a discourse apologetic of the capitalist order' (Echeverría, 1976). Understood in these terms, Marxist theory departs from 'the impossibility of constructing a positive discourse parallel to the established discourse of modernity, the impossibility of creating a *corpus* of knowledge alternative to the scientific knowledge elaborated by capitalist modernity' (Echeverría, 2011). Marx's work thus marks, for Echeverría, the instauration of an entirely new paradigm of theoretical practice for which, 'to realise itself as *revolutionary theory* means to realise the revolution also as a *revolution on the specific terrain of theoretical discourse*' (Echeverría, 1976).

The name given to this theoretical revolution is, quite simply, 'materialism', a position which Echeverría understands – *contra* the Althusserian notion of an 'epistemological break' – to be developed and refined coherently throughout Marx's entire oeuvre. In his 1974 essay, 'Marx's Materialism', a close textual analysis and commentary on the theses 'On Feuerbach', Echeverría attempts to establish 'from which basic affirmation of objectivity and which type of theoretical activity adequate to that objectivity communist theoretical discourse departs' (Echeverría, 1986: 20). Echeverría insists that the theses reorient the axes upon which theoretical engagement had hitherto proceeded at the most fundamental level, by dissolving the false antithesis of idealism and 'traditional' materialism which mutually constitute the horizons of bourgeois discourse:

are referred to? It is not, without doubt, the content of the definitory philosophemes of two doctrines present in the panorama of the history of thought: it is not a case of choosing between two philosophical positions or opinions, nor of synthesizing or surpassing them in another conception of the world. Marx speaks clearly of (traditional) 'materialism' and idealism as horizons or ambits of cognitive apprehension, as fields of possibility of theoretical action, in which an object may be 'captured' ('gefasst') or not. His critique is aimed not so much toward the knowledge produced explicitly in the modern scientific-philosophical discourse, but precisely toward the horizon of cognitive possibilities set out as a condition of that discourse [...] toward the specific configuration of its fundamental structure. [...] A central signification that, by its maximum simplicity and radicality, is inscribed at the level of the linguistic code and penetrates it decisively, thus outlining a totalising subcodification, capable of overwhelming every possible explicit message. (Echeverría, 1986: 24)

Emerging from the critique of this fundamental structure, Marx's new theoretical discourse transcends the limits of a unilaterally subjectivist (idealism) or objectivist (materialism) perspective. In order to do so, this 'new' materialism must simultaneously grasp the subjective dimension of praxis 'that founds the entire subject-object relation and therefore the entire presence of sense in the real' alongside the objective dimension of 'this founding process as a basically material process, as a process of practical "metabolism" between man and nature' (Echeverría, 1986: 27–8). The unity of these two aspects is given in an idea of praxis that integrates both of these subjective and objective dimensions. For Echeverría, the most developed conception of such praxis – of the metabolic realization of active, subjective being – is found in the idea of social reproduction. The critique of political economy is thus read by Echeverría as a critique of capitalist social reproduction, possible only with recourse to a conception of social reproduction as such, in its 'general form'. Critical theory therefore implies critique of economic discourse, only possible via Marx's 'new' materialism, which in the final instance must be elaborated as a critical theory of social reproduction.

What exactly is it that enters into Marx's critical view, when (traditional) 'materialism' and 'idealism'

## SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND PRACTICAL SEMIOSIS

For Echeverría, the capacity of a critical discourse to constitute itself as revolutionary discourse is grounded in a radical rethinking of the relation between human society and its natural basis, beginning with concept of praxis and finding its most conceptually refined expression in the theory of social reproduction. It is perhaps in this latter notion above all else that Echeverría's work is most invested and attempts to work through at the deepest level, generating a unique framework through which to pursue a critical theorization of society. There is a recognizable affinity here with Adorno's work on the concept of natural-history (2006; 1973: 354–8) that would be developed significantly in his student Alfred Schmidt's *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (1971). Drawing on a similar conception of the dialectical relation between society and nature (albeit via a different constellation of theoretical resources, specifically the addition of Heidegger and Sartre's ideas), Echeverría places at the centre of Marx's critical discourse the much neglected concept of 'natural form', or what Echeverría more precisely designates 'socio-natural form'. It is, Echeverría argues, only by virtue of the complex force through which the concept of 'natural form' or 'use-value' (its synonym) designates the objective concretion of social life that Marx is able to 'shatter the horizon of intelligibility' within which bourgeois thought moves (Echeverría, 2014). 'Natural form' is a concept, however, that in *Capital* 'remains only an outline and an indication' and therefore solely 'makes itself evident in its peculiar theoretical effects' (Echeverría, 2014: 26). Echeverría therefore undertakes the task of recovering and consolidating this concept, which he considers essential to combat the complicity of Marxist discourse with the myth of revolution, especially in light of the fate of 'actually existing socialism':

Only the reconstruction of the radical critical concept of use-value can demonstrate the fundamental

defect of the identification of Marxism with western productivism, the economic progressivism of capitalism and the bourgeois political statism which K. Korsch took in 1950 [...] to raise again for the second half of this century the theme, vulgarized in the seventies, of the inadequacies of the Marxist discourse to the demands of the new historical figure of revolution. (Echeverría, 1984)

This reconstruction of use-value and social reproduction departs from a radical re-reading of the concept of praxis in Marx's early thought, in a manner that establishes a deep coherence and continuity with his mature critique of political economy. In this conception of praxis, object and subject attain a new articulation in which neither is given a privileged role as the 'organising principle' of the actual, and such that neither corresponds simply to one pole of the opposition between idealism and ('traditional') materialism. Instead, both subjectivity and objectivity are grounded in the unity of a 'practico-critical' process of active world-constitution, conceived as 'a process in motion, and as a process that affects essentially and equally both the subject and the object that appear in it' (Echeverría, 1986: 25–6). The 'natural form' appears within this practical process as its objective side, yet without it being reducible to a passive, independently existing object (as in the object of intuition), given that it is exterior to the subject (so 'natural') but endowed with 'sense' or a specific determination of being according to its functions (symbolic and 'real') within the practical totality encompassing them both. The object of practice (rather than intuition) therefore always, necessarily, has a socio-practical objectivity that transcends, and is irreducible to, its purely 'natural' – which is to say, empirically intuited – qualities. This objectivity [*gegenständlichkeit*] is the 'general form' or global context within which anything can exist in opposition to the subject as the possible object of its activity:

Whichever element of nature, be it physical, chemical, vital, psychic; whichever fact, be it material or spiritual, etc., whichever parcel of exterior or

interior reality, whichever section of material, of whichever materiality it may be, when it is integrated into a social process of production and consumption, of the reproduction of a social subject, constitutes that which we could call a practical object, or an object that has a socio-natural form. (Echeverría, 1998b: 13)

The only possible mode of being in which nature can confront the social subject is therefore as already mediated by it, so that, as Lukács puts it in *History and Class Consciousness*, ‘nature’s form, its content, its range and its objectivity are all socially conditioned’ (Lukács, 1971: 234). This conditioning and mediation is at the core of the concept of the natural or socio-natural form, as determined by the metabolic process of production and consumption in which subject and object encounter one another. Hence for Echeverría, the ‘logic’ of the ‘natural form’ is social reproduction (1998b).

The *differentia specifica* of the human reproduction process, then, is its constitutive under-determinacy in purely ‘natural’ or ‘animal’ terms and the corresponding genesis of a social subjectivity that prosthetically undertakes to determine the form of its reproduction in a multiplicity of historically and ethnically variable configurations. This idea of ‘transnaturalized’ reproduction, elaborated by Marx and presented schematically by Echeverría in his 1984 essay ‘La “Forma Natural” de la Reproducción Social’ (‘The “Natural Form” of Social Reproduction’) is the most developed ‘general’ account of the practical and social structure of the reproduction process, conceived of as a totalizing but mobile relationship between subject and object. For Echeverría, it forms the basic theoretical framework from which a materialist theorization of society departs and can then be developed via an engagement with its variable concrete forms:

The concept of ‘production in general’ that Marx employs in his critique of political economy, taken in the widest possible sense, which is to say considered as a complete process of social reproduction implies the existence of an essential structure,

transhistorical and supra-ethnic, whose presence only acquires actuality or reality to the extent in which it is actualized or given form within innumerable particular situations or specific conjunctions of historical and ethnic conditions. Each one of the forms in which this structure is actualized constitutes the concrete figure or identity of a society. (Echeverría, 2014: 25)

In his reconstructive exposition of this ‘general form’, Echeverría transposes Marx’s conception of the specificity of human labour into an account of the specificity of human reproduction, arguing that because human praxis is not bound to any pre-established instinctual image – and, indeed, is distinguished by this lack of ‘natural support’ – its concrete content must always be given form according to the particular ‘political’ organization of practical life that governs it. This is what Echeverría terms the ‘basic politicity’ inherent to the socio-natural form of reproduction, whereby the social subject must consciously subsume its natural (‘animal’) life process under a particular form of political community in order to realize it. Such a form is always inscribed within a cyclical temporality of reproduction (production/consumption) that must continually and metabolically re-establish its own validity – that is, the functional correlation of the ‘system of productive capacities’ and the ‘system of needs for consumption’. The social process of establishing and modifying the form of human existence is thus always ‘in play’ and subject to change through the practical, collective action of its individual members in these two basic phases: the first moment of the realization of the subject through production of the object, the second of the realization of the object in consumption that (re)produces the subject. Reproduction is therefore governed by a *dynamic* politicity with a disjunctive structure, distributed across the *two modalities* of the metabolic relation to nature as it is conceived in process. This contestability and dynamism is what distinguishes the ‘socio-natural’ mode of reproduction from purely natural being,

which, as Hegel notes, knows only repetition, establishing 'a difference that could be an insignificant unhinging of the universal order, but that is sufficient to unfold within it an autonomous dimension of being: that of human existence' (Echeverría, 1995: 76). The realization of the human's biological reproduction is thus necessarily and exclusively tied to the reproduction of a socio-political order and, *vice versa*, so too is that socio-political order bound to the fulfilment of the basic physiological reproduction of the social subject. Not only, consequently, are the natural and social aspects of human existence mediated through one another – in spite of their non-identity – but, as Echeverría points out, humanity, precisely in its capacity 'to take the sociality of human life as a substance to which it can give form', to 'trans-naturalize' its 'animal' existence, and thus act as a 'subject', re-establishes the general lawfulness of nature, at the same time as it transcends it (Echeverría, 1998c: 77–8).

At the centre of Echeverría's critical theory of society is this 'dialectical violence' of subjectivation, whereby the social subject's realization is dependent upon its self-restriction to a determinate (if ambiguous) political configuration. The 'subjectness' [*sujetidad*] of the human resides in its active perpetuation or modification of the relational structure through which it is constituted, 'the capacity to constitute the concretion of sociality' or 'to give form, figure, identity to the sociality of its life, that is, the ensemble of social relations of co-existence that constitute it as a communitarian subject' (Echeverría, 2014; 2006b: 39). Yet this occurs not only in the directly 'political' activity that takes this form of sociality as its object, but also in the 'basic politics' characterizing every act of material production and consumption, because:

the form that a good that has been produced has is never neutral or innocent; it always has a concrete use-value that determines, in turn, the form that the subject that will consume it should have. Labour has a *poiétic* dimension; its giving form is a

*realization*, Marx says. It is an invention and the carrying out of a project; a project that is only immediately the construction of a thing, which indirectly but ultimately is the construction of the subject itself. (Echeverría, 2014: 29)

The practical intentionality and social project objectified in any use-value is not only inherent in every act of labour, but also comes to be totalized and impressed into the objective structure of means of production through which the social subject produces, and thereby reproduces itself, stamping those means with a distinctive qualitative character – a practical 'form':

The *effectiveness* of the instrumental field is not reducible to its productivity; this is only its quantitative determination – the degree to which the global instrument enables the subject to dominate or transform nature. Effectiveness is the qualitative content of productivity; it establishes an entire defined horizon of *possibilities of form* for the global object of production and consumption. In this sense, in presenting certain possibilities of form and leaving aside others, in being 'specialized' in a determinate axiological direction, the global effectiveness itself possesses a particular form, which rests upon the technological structure of the instrumental field. (*ibid.*: 31)

When the social process is grasped as a totality, as a process of socio-natural reproduction, praxis is seen to give form not only to the objects and in turn the subjects, of practical life, but also to the very form of the process itself, revealing reproduction to be a mediating mode of 'self-activity' [*Selbstbetätigung*]. The activity of the social subject, then, is consummated in the reproductive cycle of production/consumption, as that through which it gives form to its own sociality, to its 'socio-natural form' of existence. The specificity of this process, as a special version of the reproduction of animal life, is that for Echeverría it has freedom as its foundation, a freedom that emerges from the transgression of natural lawfulness. This conception of freedom is metaphysical (in that it establishes the possibility of practically transcending that which is objectively



given to the social subject) but not transcendent (in that this practice is delimited by and responds to those given conditions).

Departing from this 'ontological' schema, Echeverría draws critically upon concepts from semiotic theory and structural linguistics in order to argue for the identity of the production/consumption of practical objects and the production/consumption of significations. For him, every practical object is at the same time a significative object, precisely because of its 'transnaturalization' – its situation within a politically and culturally determined, rather than merely 'animal', process of reproduction – a situation devoid of any guaranteed correspondence between the moment of the object's production and that of its consumption. This constitutive ambiguity equally marks the acts of production and consumption that enact this semiosis, emitting/receiving the intentional 'messages' of practical life with a necessary degree of openness, uncertainty and selectivity. Taking this practical process of symbolization in its most characteristically human – and therefore political – mode, as *language*, Echeverría finally develops the idea of its capacity to act uniquely upon the basic practicality of the production/consumption of use-values, in so far as it 'not only passively condenses and refines the semiotic realizations of practice' but rather 'penetrates and interferes in each and every one of them with its own perspective'. He thus produces a critique of the discourses of linguistics and semiotics from a Marxist perspective by grounding them in a theory of social reproduction, whilst also deepening a Marxist conception of the latter by highlighting its peculiar communicative dimensions.

This confrontation between the Marxist, ontological and semiotic discourses should not be seen simply as a synthesis of heterogeneous concepts, or a mapping of terms between distinct disciplinary fields. Echeverría does not 'apply' a Marxist analysis to linguistics, or vice versa. Instead, he offers a conceptual elaboration of their

necessary inner connection and essential identity. He both grounds the conceptual innovations of contemporary linguistics within a critical understanding of reproduction, as the general structure of social materiality, and demonstrates the necessarily communicative character of all acts of production and consumption. Communication is therefore not simply a side-effect of production/consumption, nor is production/consumption a side-effect of communication. Social reproduction, the 'natural form' of human praxis, *must* be a semiosis, and semiosis *must* in turn be grounded in the basic structure of social reproduction. The necessity of the identity between these two processes derives from the dual and reciprocal character of human reproduction, as at once 'animal' (a metabolic process of the appropriation of nature for the reproduction of the organism's living consistency) and at the same time 'political', which is to say, a social process of establishing and contesting the concrete figure within which this first process is realized. Because this 'transnaturalization' (of the purely natural by the political) occurs in the movement between production and consumption, as the two phases of the reproductive process, and this movement has an uncertain or 'open' character, human activity always involves a constant ciphering/deciphering of form-intentional 'messages' inscribed within practical objects. Every social act of production transmits such a message, whilst each act of consumption interprets one.

On the basis of this identification, Echeverría is able to specify the distinct quality of language as a 'particular class of practical object' that combines 'a minimum degree of practicality with the maximum degree of semioticity', a quality that underpins both its emancipatory (or utopian) and ideological functions. This was an idea first developed in relation to capitalist ideology and its critique in his seminal 1976 essay, 'Discourse of the Revolution, Critical Discourse', where he argues that the 'technical composition' of the practical sphere is precisely what determines,

or ‘sub-codifies’, the boundaries of the general communicative code, positing the conditions for the intelligibility and efficacy of certain practical-discursive objects (‘messages’) over others:

The possibilities of truth that exist for knowing are defined within a socio-natural horizon of objectivity or meaning, constituted practically as a negation or re-ordering of the purely natural. It is the basic tendency of historical modifications of praxis (revolutions), or the social process of reproduction (labour), that demarcates the space inside of which an intended knowing can be true or scientific. (Echeverría, 1976: ??)

And yet this demarcated space is threatened with rupture, because the reproduction process binding its horizon of objectivity together is fundamentally disjunctive in structure, so that ‘without ceasing to be the same, [it] must be always other in being altered by its inevitable subjection to the change of situations carried with it by temporal flux’ (Echeverría, 1998d: 133). It is this constitutive non-identity and structural inconsistency of the social process that grounds the ‘the perennial open-endedness characterizing the significance of historical entities’ and from which a critical discourse can be articulated (Echeverría, 2005). Echeverría thus proposes a materialist understanding of the relation between semiosis and practical life that refutes the thesis of a parallel or homologous relation between the two spheres and is instead grounded in the wider project of attempting to ‘break with the dichotomy that postulates a substantial heterogeneity between material practice and spiritual guidance in human life’ (Echeverría, 2010: 46).

## THE CHALLENGE OF MODERNITY

If critique and a materialism of social reproduction are the resources with which Echeverría’s critical theoretical engagements are sustained, every one of these engagements

(taken both discretely and in their unity as a ‘project’) can be understood to be circumscribed by the historical, cultural and political condition of modernity. ‘Modernity’ is the name given by Echeverría to that ensemble of objective conditions and behavioural dispositions [*comportamientos*] which have come to characterize civilized life and its struggles over the course of the last millennium, in opposition to and as the negation of ancestral logics of social organization. In Echeverría’s account of these conditions and the process of their instauration certain motifs resonate strongly with the historical problematics that characterize Frankfurt School critical theory, and important convergences between Echeverría’s concept of modernity and Adorno and Horkheimer’s concept of Enlightenment have been highlighted, notably by Stefan Gandler (2015: 227 n.109). However, whereas the latter is identified with the long history of ‘western society’ and instrumental reason as such (of which capitalism is but an expression), Echeverría rejects this ethnocentric definition of modernity in favour of an account grounded in the development of the technical relation governing the metabolic interaction of human society and nature.

For Echeverría, following Lewis Mumford, the origin and foundation of modernity can be located in the ‘eotechnic phase’ of civilization that began around the tenth century AD, forming the initial instance of a process grasped in its entire unfolding as the ‘neotechnical epoch’. The significance of the eotechnic moment is its initiation of a complete transformation of the logic of the instrumental apparatus through which social production was previously realized, such that:

the secret of the productivity of human labour would cease to reside, as it had done throughout the entire Neolithic era, in the fortuitous and spontaneous discovery of new instruments copied from nature, along with their usage, and would begin to reside in the capacity to deliberately undertake the invention of new instruments and corresponding new techniques of production. (Echeverría, 2010: 22)

The effect of this 'eotechnic revolution' was to inaugurate an immense, if in its incipience gradual, intensification of the productive technical powers of labour, in a manner that decisively altered the relation between civilized humanity and nature. The new material basis of this relation effected a negation of the 'absolute scarcity' of natural wealth to which archaic societies were condemned, in favour of a merely 'relative scarcity' of that wealth, enabling the historically unprecedented possibility that the humanity–nature interaction 'not be directed toward the elimination of one of the two but rather toward collaboration between both in order to invent or create precisely within the other forms until now inexistent within it' (2010: 23). What is thus carried within modernity, understood in this specifically 'technical' sense, is the promise of abolishing those traditional forms of life which have their origins in a situation of naturally imposed scarcity – the originary impetus driving the impulse to conquer and dominate both inner and outer nature, as self-repression and instrumentalization respectively – once the material constraints of that situation have been superseded:

In both the means of production and the labour force, the scale of instrumental operability has taken a 'qualitative leap'; expansion has been such that it has moved to a higher order and, thus, to a horizon of possibilities for giving and receiving forms, unknown during thousands of years of history. The productive forces are no longer beleaguered by and subjected to the universe beyond the world conquered by them (a universe called 'Nature'), but have become if not more puissant than it then more powerful in so far as their specific objectives are concerned; they appear to have eventually appointed man to the promised hierarchy of 'lord and master' of the Earth. [...] This raised the age-old suspicion again, now on the strength of much more trustworthy data: if scarcity was not, in fact, the 'curse sine qua non' of human reality. The Pólemos model, which has inspired every project of the historical existence of Man, by making it a war strategy that conditions survival in terms of the annihilation or exploitation of the Other (of the human other, of Nature), is not the only possibility; one might, without it being an illusion, imagine a different one, in which the Other is called following the model of Eros. (Echeverría, 2005)

Modernity thus constitutes a novel logic of 'civilizational totalization' whose possibilities present a 'challenge' to civilized life, a challenge to which different configurations of that life have responded in diverse manners. Treated in abstraction from those configurations modernity would be but an ideal totalization, 'artificially isolated by theoretical discourse from the configurations that have given it an empirical existence' (Echeverría, 2005). In its concrete historical figure however, the specifically 'western' response to this challenge was established in the 'zone of encounter' of modernity with commercial capitalism, as the pragmatic dynamic of neo-technical invention interlocked symbiotically with the circulatory logics of commodity exchange, mercantile accumulation and accompanying 'antediluvian forms' of capital. It is, ultimately for Echeverría, the *subsumption* of the technical revolution grounding modernity under the economic compulsion to valorize and accumulate abstract wealth that endowed European capital with 'a progress of totalitarian reach, both extensive and intensive, (as planetarization and technification respectively)' (Echeverría, 2005). Beginning in the 1980s, Echeverría attempted to disinter a comprehensive theory of capitalist subsumption from Marx's writings, emphasizing its centrality to the critique of political economy in its entirety by declaring it be 'the most advanced attempt made by Marx to show in general theoretical terms how the two contradictory processes' of capitalist accumulation and the production and consumption of material wealth 'are articulated'. (Echeverría, 1983). It is through this theoretical framework primarily that Marx is able, on Echeverría's reading, to comprehend the manner in which the 'the apparently natural development of modern technology' (and the utopian promise borne within it) is 'set loose by a *regressive social necessity*, that of perfecting the exploitation of the labour force' (ibid., emphasis in original). As capitalist social relations extend themselves virulently they establish the

injunction, ever more forcefully, that ‘nothing is produced, nothing is consumed, no use-value can be realized in the practical life of capitalist society, if it is not also found in the function of vehicle or support of the valorization of value, the accumulation of capital’ (Echeverría, 2010: 113).

In this way, the essence of modernity became actualized as a specifically *capitalist* modernity only able to integrate neotechnical innovations in a ‘unilateral and impoverished manner’, treating them as if they were products of ‘the same old neolithic technique, only quantitatively potentiated’ whilst simultaneously repressing the possibility of a new compact between humanity and nature (Echeverría, 2010: 30). This abortive metamorphosis expresses itself, at the most fundamental level, in the essential vacuity of the social forms generated under capitalist conditions. Production within capitalist modernity – that is, production first and foremost of abstract wealth – truncates the creative elicitation of new forms based on material abundance, because ‘indispensable as it is to the concrete existence of modern social wealth, capitalist mediation cannot assert itself as an essential condition for its existence, nor can it synthesize a genuinely new figure for it’ (Echeverría, 2005). Instead, capital regressively reconstitutes and selectively promotes archaic modes of concretion, those social forms that are ‘nothing other than organs or means of sublimation of a self-sacrifice, a productivist repression that in principle has lost its reason for being’ (given the potential abundance borne by new material conditions) (Echeverría, 2010: 25). This time however, these archaic modes, whose ‘physiognomy is completely changed’ (as Marx noted in another context), present themselves only as ‘simulacra’ destined to ‘artificially reproduce absolute scarcity’ of social wealth, despite the potential profusion of satisfactions unlocked by the neotechnical revolution. Capital must repress or displace this profusion, and does so, as the material basis for it is rendered increasingly self-evident,

in an ever more violent and extreme manner. The contradiction between such monumental material capacities and their deformed actualization expresses the ambiguity of modernity in its existing (capitalist) form, as well as the ambivalence it displays with respect to the search for greater satisfaction of needs and freedom of action, despite its self-proclaimed superiority to traditional modes of life. Echeverría concludes thus that ‘modernity would not be “an unfinished project”, as Jürgen Habermas sees it; instead, it would be a set of possibilities, which are explored and actualized from only one side and in only one sense, and which might be approached from another perspective and have another light cast upon it’ (Echeverría, 2005).

The possibility of realizing the essence of modernity on a non-capitalist basis depends, however, on the excision of a certain abstraction – both theoretical and practical – relating to concrete forms of life, which has occupied a central place not only within bourgeois discourse but also within Marxism. One of the most valuable contributions made, for Echeverría, by the Frankfurt School was to identify this deficiency in Marx’s thought insofar as it remains a critique of traditional social forms and use-values without at the same time criticizing that critique (Echeverría, 1998a). Capital, for Marx, carries a progressive impulse within it, in its tendency to dissolve ‘all traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted satisfactions of present needs, and reproduction of old ways of life’ (Marx, 1993: 410). In affirming this restless drive to reinvent the forms of social life as an aspect of the communist supersession of capital, Marx’s thought is contaminated by what Echeverría calls the modern or bourgeois ‘myth of revolution’. Underlying this myth is the crypto-theological principle of an omnipotent subject of creation acting unilaterally upon the world’s ‘passivity as mere useful material’. Persisting in secularized form, this notion converts itself into the metaphysical *hybris*, proper to the ‘entire dominant political culture’ of modernity,

which anthropocentrically appropriates those powers normally attributed to a 'supreme fictitious being', in assuming:

that the human being has the capacity to create and re-create ex nihilo not only forms of sociality but sociality itself, without the need of abiding by any pre-existing natural or historical determination; in accordance with this myth, 'second nature', the ensemble of norms of communitarian co-existence, is a neutral and passive material, at the disposition of the activity of the human as a subject of 'politics'. (Echeverría, 1998a: 68)

Within traditional Marxist discourse, this myth has been inscribed in the idea of revolution as

an action capable of re-founding sociality after annihilating the forms of sociality cultivated and transformed by the human being over millennia, of erasing past history and recommending to write it upon a blank page [...] a moment of absolute creation or re-creation, in which human beings cast down everything and rebuild it all; in which all forms of sociality are destroyed and new ones created from nothing. (ibid.: 68)

Here, however, the discourse which claims for itself a 'critical' status demonstrates its complicity with precisely that which it ostensibly opposes, because 'only for [capitalist] modernity is use-value, the natural form of the world, nothing and, inversely, economic value, the crystallisation of energy, of activity, of human subjectness, that which is everything' (ibid.: 69). Capitalism, as the epoch of total and unending revolution, 'an era of destruction and radical restructuring', already spontaneously assumes an antipathy toward the traditional forms that it must constitutively render obsolete (even as it seeks to exploit them and even intensify their reactionary opposition to progress where it can gain from doing so). In the face of this tendency it is insufficient and naïve for critical discourse to simply advocate the acceleration or appropriation of this creatively destructive drive, purified of its exploitative class dimension. Without positing its own conception of the axiological specificity of practical life and an accompanying consciousness of qualitative

distinctions within that life, Marxism is bound to the figure of the abstract bourgeois subject submerged in civil society, for whom 'forms of sociality are presented as mere folkloric coatings or masks of the elemental functions of human sociality', forms which this subject 'in its narcissistic self-idolatry, can remove and place at its discretion' (ibid.: 70). For Echeverría, the only manner by which Marxist discourse can transcend this abstraction is by rescuing and elaborating the concept of use-value, enabling the comprehension of those concrete forms of social life that are the substance of any revolutionary process.

Modernity thus 'throws its challenge to civilized life', presenting itself, in the torsion of its utopian essence and its catastrophic actuality, as a 'situation on the edge'. Its interpenetration with capitalism is akin to the relation 'between a whole and independent totalization and one of its dependent parts, which has thus far imposed itself on the totalizing action of the whole' (Echeverría, 2005). This establishes the stakes of the communist project: to disarticulate the possibilities of technical socialization at the core of modernity ('an "indecisive" yet polymorphous exigency, a pure potency' [Echeverría, 2005]) from their repressive subjection to the demands of accumulation, in order that a history of social being based on generalized abundance, or merely 'relative' scarcities, can commence.

## CONCLUSION

The richness of Echeverría's systematic theorization of social reproduction in both its ontological and semiotic dimensions, alongside his unique conception of the condition and challenge of modernity and his precise definition of what constitutes critical discourse, presents a significant and original contribution to critical theory. By redressing the theoretical priority given to the economic dimension of social life in much Marxist thought with his account of the 'natural-form'

of reproduction, Echeverría is able to simultaneously analyse both capital's abstract mediation of the social process and the concrete diversity of effects and struggles it gives rise to. Locating the contradiction of capitalist society at the point of form-determination (of what is produced, reproduced and ultimately of the process as a whole), as an opposition between two competing logics of reproduction (of abstract or of concrete wealth, and the life-processes which give content to each), Echeverría presents a unifying framework for social research that supersedes the opposition of 'history' and 'system'. At its most basic level this framework grounds the normative distinction between the dialectical violence of transnaturalization through which 'subjectness' emerges and realizes itself, and social domination as the *negation* of that 'subjectness'. With the historical advent of capital that negation becomes depersonalized and autonomous, concentrating the antithesis of dialectical and dominating violence into that between the 'socio-natural' and 'socio-capitalist' logics of reproduction. For Echeverría, the problem of 'natural form' only becomes legible within the 'crisis of modernity' in its widest sense, which is to say, the fundamental conflict between two contradictory tendencies or 'dispositions' giving form to social life: between the social subject proper (freedom in its enactment, humanity living 'its own drama') and its alienated, spectral inversion (freedom subordinated to the end of capitalist valorization). From this perspective, what historically distinguishes capitalist modernity from other civilizational configurations is that within it the concrete form of society is generated in a conflicted 'dual manner', such that the 'proper' social subject is sublimated and displaced by capital's abstract dynamic of accumulation, what Marx famously refers to as an 'automatic subject'. The problem of politics in modernity is therefore first and foremost a problem of (alienated) form-determination, 'the permanent "effort" of the "spectre" to maintain and affirm its domination over real being'

(Echeverría, 2010: 113). This is the point of departure for an analysis of domination based on the capitalist ethos of self-repression:

If human beings exist in the absurd manner that we can observe empirically – in the midst of oppressions, repressions, exploitations, all of which are in principle avoidable –, it is because their natural process of reproduction does not obey a *telos* capable of synthesizing itself but rather an alien – alienated – one that is the 'reified' *telos* [...] of the accumulation of capital. (Echeverría, 1998b: 10)

At the same time there is fundamental negativity to Echeverría's 'ontology' of social reproduction, in that whilst it provides the conceptual resources to distinguish *between* social forms, it lacks any qualitative content or determinacy (it stipulates no specific configuration) and thus requires an attentiveness to the concrete forms – of both objectivity and subjectivity – assumed by social life within and against its capitalist organization; the theory must be operated in relation to the historical co-ordinates against which it is elaborated. The idea of the 'natural form' that Echeverría opposes to the value-form is not, therefore, a romantic or utopian concept, and far from conceiving of the supersession of the capitalist mode of reproduction as a final act of emancipation or advocating a restoration of the 'purely' natural as an idyllic state of harmony, Echeverría emphasizes only that the 'natural form of social reproduction' is only the site in which freedom and proper human history *can be* established, not its guarantee or original image. The necessity of selecting a form for social life can only occur by way of a politically uncertain process, and in light of this ambivalence Echeverría endeavours to chart a path between the 'utopian' and 'realist' impulses that have characterized the revolutionary movements of the modern era (Echeverría, 1976). Echoing Marx, Echeverría sees this project not as a retreat from the possibilities and dangers that modernity presents, a regression to pre-capitalist forms of life, but rather as a new way of responding to them.

## Note

- 1 The consonance of this deconstructive conception with the stance concentrated in Adorno's idea of negative dialectic is evident. But if, in the principal works of the Frankfurt School, tarrying with historical tension takes the form of critique of culture, philosophy, sociology, politics, psychoanalysis, etc., there is a marked ambivalence with regard to the economic dimension of first generation critical theory (Friedrich Pollock's contributions notwithstanding). In foregrounding this economic-critical dimension Echeverría reveals an affinity with later members of the Frankfurt School such as Backhaus and Reichelt, who in a similar period endeavoured to articulate elements of classical critical theory with Marx's mature critique of political economy under the banner of a 'new Marx reading' (see Chapters 22 and 23 in this volume).

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# Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez: Philosophy of Praxis as Critical Theory

Stefan Gandler

One of the outstanding, most studied, yet hard to grasp, works of Karl Marx are his *Theses on Feuerbach*. Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez's philosophy presents one of the most insightful and critical approaches to them. He not only manages to reboot the theoretical interest in the *Theses* through a critical interpretation of the concepts of *praxis* and *everydayness*, but also overcomes some of the original limitations of the text; shaping his own interpretation by drawing on his non-eurocentric political experience. Along with Alfred Schmidt, Sánchez Vázquez stands as a mandatory reference for understanding the true extent of the philosophy of praxis and its role inside critical Marxist theory.

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Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez was born on 17 September 1915 in Algeciras, in the Andalusian (southern Spain) province of Cádiz. After some time in the province of Madrid, in 1925 his family moved to the southern city of Málaga:<sup>1</sup> 'This "fierce city", which had given

the Republican Courts their first communist deputy, was at the time called "Malaga: the Red"'.<sup>2</sup> In 1933, he published a first poetic text in the journal *Octubre*,<sup>3</sup> and joined the Revolutionary Student Bloc within the Spanish University Federation (FUE) and the Communist Youth. In 1935, he entered the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts of the Universidad Central and studied with José Ortega y Gasset.<sup>4</sup> At the outset of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, the Executive Committee of the Unified Socialist Youth (JSU), with more than 200,000 members, put him in charge of editing *Ahora*, its central publication.<sup>5</sup>

In early July of 1937, he was invited in this capacity to the Second International Congress of Antifascist Writers in Madrid. At the International Congress for the Defense of Culture, he met, among others, Juan Marinello,<sup>6</sup> Louis Aragon, Anna Seghers, André Malraux, Ilya Ehrenberg, and Octavio Paz.<sup>7</sup> Then he renounced his position as editor and requested that the Executive Committee of the JSU transfer him to the front.<sup>8</sup>



Sánchez Vázquez participated in the Civil War and in September 1937 he joined the 11th Division under the orders of commander Líster.<sup>9</sup> He assumed responsibility for the press and propaganda commissariat,<sup>10</sup> and published the newspaper of that unit: *¡Pasaremos!*<sup>11</sup>, and in 1939 he became a member of the 5th Army Corps, where he became a battalion political commissar.<sup>12</sup> After losing the war, the democratic forces had to leave Spain toward France, and in late May 1939, Sánchez Vázquez left the Mediterranean port of Sète with the first ship sent by the Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas, the *Sinaia*, to travel to Mexico: 'On 13 June 1939 the *Sinaia*, an old ship previously used to transport pilgrims to Mecca, entered the port of Veracruz. With it, the first few hundred Spanish refugees arrived in Mexico from the southeastern coast of France. Many thousand would arrive later'.<sup>13</sup>

In 1941, he moved to Morelia, capital of the state of Michoacán de Ocampo, situated to the west of Mexico City, 'a city of scarcely 60,000 inhabitants but with an intense university and cultural life',<sup>14</sup> to teach undergraduate philosophy. There he married Aurora Rebollo, who he had already known during his youth in Spain.<sup>16</sup> In 1955 he obtained his Master's Degree<sup>17</sup> in Philosophy with a thesis entitled *Consciousness and Reality in Artwork*.

The 1959 Cuban Revolution, and the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia were two historical events that changed Sánchez Vázquez's theoretical perspective.<sup>18</sup> After these moments, what most mattered to him was jettisoning his previous theoretical framework: 'After that point, I was at pains to abandon the materialist metaphysics of *Diamat*, to return to the original Marx, and to take the pulse of reality in order to thereby gain access to a Marxism which was understood above all as a philosophy of praxis'.<sup>19</sup> In 1959, he obtained the position of full-time professor at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), and in 1961 published

his first academic text: 'Aesthetic ideas in Marx's "Economic-philosophical manuscripts"'.<sup>20</sup> In 1965, his first book appeared in Mexico City: *Art and Society. Essays in Marxist Aesthetics*,<sup>21</sup> which was inspired by the experiences on the terrain of art and cultural policy release in Cuba.

In 1966, he presented his doctoral thesis in philosophy under the title *On Praxis*, from which his main book *The Philosophy of Praxis* (1967) emerged.<sup>22</sup> Sánchez Vázquez joined the student movement along with other UNAM professors. His assistant, Roberto Escudero, was imprisoned; his former colleague and friend Eli de Gortari was unjustly detained; and his son Juan Enrique experienced the 'Night of Tlatelolco':<sup>23</sup>

Although it was crushed, the movement of '68 changed the political physiognomy of the country, and from that point onward the Universidad Nacional was never the same again. Marxism with a critical and anti-dogmatic edge became one of the most vigorous currents of thought in the institutions of the UNAM and especially in the humanities.... [M]y *Ética* [Ethics] ... was inspired in its elaboration by the objectives, achievements, and sacrifices of that student movement which taught not only political but also moral lessons.<sup>24</sup>

The Nicaraguan Revolution represented an important historical event for Sánchez Vázquez. He engaged in a lively theoretical-political exchange with prominent Sandinista leaders and, in 1983, gave speeches in Managua, at the Ministry of Culture and the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua, on the topic of Marxist aesthetics (for example, on Brecht and Lukács)<sup>25</sup>; as well as 'Democracy, revolution, and socialism' in 1989.<sup>26</sup>

Sánchez Vázquez was invited as an advisor to the Special Forum for State Reform, called for in July 1996 by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN). He participated by sending a contribution to the discussion of the question of human rights in Mexico, on the basis of the Zapatista rebellion and its causes. He died on 8 July 2011 in Mexico City, after having published more than 30 books and hundreds of

academic articles, translated into more than 15 languages.

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As has been shown so far, Sánchez Vázquez's work focused on a non-orthodox reading of Marx's work, this way, he aimed to state the critical extent of concepts as *everydayness* and *praxis*; thus his main work is the *The Philosophy of Praxis*. He develops its central idea further in the article, 'La filosofía de la praxis como nueva práctica de la filosofía [The philosophy of praxis as a new philosophical practice]'.<sup>27</sup> Core to his argument is Karl Marx's first *Thesis on Feuerbach*, which criticises Feuerbach's anthropological materialism in the following terms: 'he does not conceive human activity itself as objective [*gegenständliche*] activity ... he does not grasp the significance of "revolutionary", of "practical-critical", activity'.<sup>28</sup> Sánchez Vázquez cites this affirmatively as a definition of 'praxis' and speaks of 'human activity as objective activity' and 'critical practical ... revolutionary activity'.<sup>29</sup>

Sánchez Vázquez – in his first interpretation of Marx's concept of praxis in the *Theses on Feuerbach* – grants the two moments of praxis a special value: on the one hand, on its objective side, praxis consists of the true transformation of the world as it exists in the here and now (and which often presents itself to us as overwhelming); in this sense praxis refers just as much to palpable things, to nature, as to the relations which exist between humans and nature and also between humans; the totality of these relations constitute society. On the other hand, the subjective side of praxis constitutes the active moment, the initiative aspect of the human being as an actor in history, who focuses consciously on objectives and attempts to realise them. In this sense, Sánchez Vázquez understands praxis as 'activity ... oriented toward the end of transforming an object (nature or society), devised by the conscious and active subjectivity of men'.<sup>30</sup> The activity that he understands as praxis is, 'consequently, activity –

in indissoluble unity – objective and subjective at the same time'.<sup>31</sup> He understands the particularity of Marx's concept of praxis as that of the *unity* of those two moments. 'What is determinant in this practical process is neither objective transformation (separated from subjectivity) nor subjective activity (separated from objectivity), but rather the unity of both moments'.<sup>32</sup>

Marx formulates this unity through his double critique of two different unilateral philosophies: 'hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included' which only grasped the objective side in the form of contemplation, and idealism, which of course reflects the side of human activity neglected by 'hitherto existing materialism', but which could only arrive at a concept of praxis as ideal, intellectual, and not 'real, sensuous'.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, in Marx's concept of praxis the immense achievements on the theoretical terrain of both previous materialism and idealism find their place; following Sánchez Vázquez, we could boldly ask if this concept does not simultaneously transcend, maintain, and suspend (in the Hegelian sense of '*aufheben*') the entire dichotomy between materialism and idealism. Understood in this way, the seriousness of the second part of the eleventh *Thesis on Feuerbach* begins to take shape: 'the point is to change it [the world]', which, pronounced too quickly on more than one occasion, only serves to 'justify' our own distress in observing the philosophical giants upon whose shoulders we all stand.

Sánchez Vázquez's critical concept of praxis is based on a critique of the everyday consciousness<sup>34</sup> of praxis. He introduces his critique of the everyday consciousness of praxis through reference to the latter's philosophical conception: the philosophy that has praxis as its central concept, as its cornerstone, is Marxism. Now, the philosophical concept of praxis does not develop on its own, but rather draws support from a long history of humanity and its intellectual doctrines (theories), and so we cannot conclude that it reaches its conclusion with the philosophy of Marx.

In terms of overcoming the 'level reached by German idealism',<sup>35</sup> Marxism entails both a more developed consciousness of praxis as well as a more powerful theoretical connection to it. So we must overcome idealism, but this does not mean a return to the immediate and naïve perspective of everyday consciousness. This is not a question of returning to a pre-philosophical state or to a 'vulgar or metaphysical materialist philosophy' – to some degree stuck to run-of-the-mill conceptions of the human being – and which 'preceded the more developed expositions of Idealist philosophy (in Kant, Fichte, and Hegel)'.<sup>36</sup> A developed concept of praxis from a historical-philosophical perspective, is obligated to pass through and transcend its idealistic formulation.<sup>37</sup> In order to overcome philosophical idealism, we thus need a more broadly developed 'philosophical theory' and not 'a dose of "common sense"'.<sup>38</sup> On the contrary, such a theory would distinguish itself even more from everyday consciousness than does idealism. This is not just any philosophy, however, but precisely that which – based on its theoretical analysis of what praxis is – demonstrates the conditions that make possible the transition from theory to praxis.<sup>39</sup> The importance of idealism in world history has been underestimated, as the theoretical foundation for a Marxism which has broken radically with it, but which has been heavily enriched by this same idealism. This underestimation is one of the reasons that, in various sectors, Marxism has found itself reduced to 'the old materialism fertilised by dialectics on the one hand, or a materialist metaphysics which is little more than an inverted Idealism'.<sup>40</sup>

In internal Marxist debates, what interests Sánchez Vázquez is rescuing 'a true conception of praxis'. But this cannot occur through reference to everyday consciousness of praxis, but by destroying even the attitude that the latter determines<sup>41</sup>; this is necessary not only to achieve a developed theoretical-philosophical conceptualisation of praxis, but also to propel everyday political praxis and

elevate it to a higher level, which means, for Sánchez Vázquez: to make it creative.<sup>42</sup>

A fully *atheoretical* world does not exist, however, Sánchez Vázquez bases this point on two elements, without referring – as does Schmidt – to the history of philosophy. Against the belief that everyday consciousness is not tainted by any theoretical reflection, he criticises not only the fact that this neglects the 'prejudices, mental habits and commonplaces' that influence it, but moreover that – whether we like it or not – theories sediment within such consciousness.<sup>43</sup> Equally, the real human being, who possesses this consciousness, which is purportedly not influenced by the history of ideas, is a social being, incapable of subtracting himself from the historical framework in which he finds himself. 'The day to day character of his life, as well as the vision that he has of his own practical activity, are historically and socially determined'.<sup>44</sup>

At this point of the discussion of everyday consciousness, Sánchez Vázquez does not explain how we should understand in detail the end of the quoted phrase, for example, how the current 'historical situation' engenders a specific 'ideologically determined perspective'. Setting out from Marx, we could explain these formulations in the sense that, under given social relations, a specific ideological consciousness can be facilitated in humans insofar as, in all their contradictions, such relations slow or impede their own knowledge. Marx explains this in *Capital*, and especially in the subchapter 'The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret'.<sup>45</sup> He shows the effects provoked by the double character of human labour, which simultaneously generates *use-value* (concrete and useful, created by 'private individuals')<sup>46</sup> and *value* (abstract and socially mediated). This double character of human labour prevents or makes it difficult for humans to see its second side, as a result of which *value* does not appear as a social relationship, but, instead, as something almost inherent in the commodity as a seemingly natural thing.

The false consciousness that the human being develops, here, does not result simply from a misleading theoretical development, but from the objective appearance of the commodity, which 'automatically conceals' its social character.<sup>47</sup>

On the question of everyday knowledge – which concerns us, here, principally in relation to theoretical conceptions and its dependence on them – Sánchez Vázquez concludes that everyday consciousness is influenced by ideas that 'are present in the very air [the human being] breathes'.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, everyday consciousness is not completely free of a certain 'theoretical basis' in which it carries theories, albeit in a simplified and degraded way.<sup>49</sup>

Sánchez Vázquez develops the character of the double dependency that everyday consciousness has on both social theories and material social relations, on the basis of his understanding of two specific forms of creative praxis: revolutionary and artistic. The individual activity of a revolutionary cannot be understood in general by the everyday human being in his social or class dimension, who thus considers it to be something 'fruitless, foolish or irresponsible [... that will] never lead to the transformation of the world in its present state'.<sup>50</sup> But this disdain toward practical transformative activity on the terrain of social relations fits seamlessly within a generalised pessimistic atmosphere which is characterised by the underestimation of the active, social, and transformative elements<sup>51</sup> of humans. Here, the critique of everyday consciousness begins to emerge. For Sánchez Vázquez, it is not a question of privileging philosophical consciousness as better developed and truer than everyday consciousness *per se*, but of demonstrating the intersections and connections between a widely disseminated orientation of the latter and influential tendencies among the former. Everyday consciousness should, therefore, not be transferred to a philosophical and therefore rational plane through a theoretical-pedagogical mechanism, but instead critical analysis must uncover the contradictions of

all predominant types of thinking (both everyday and theoretical). But to do so, a particular foundation is essential, another theoretical basis which understands the human being as social, historical, and active.<sup>52</sup>

This is one of the questions to which the critical Marxist theory of knowledge owes its relevance. But here we would like to return to a more precise investigation of everyday consciousness. The fact that the latter is infiltrated with theoretical ideas, which it collects unconsciously, does not in any way entail that everyday understanding assumes a theoretical attitude toward praxis. What is lacking for it to do so is the conscious relationship of consciousness to its object.<sup>53</sup> The everyday human being, who perceives himself to be a 'practical man, ... living and acting in a practical way',<sup>54</sup> has, of course, a conscious relationship with his actions – he cannot carry them out without reflecting – but at the same time 'he does not separate or stress practice as his proper object in such a way that that separation occurs first of all in consciousness as a theoretical attitude'.<sup>55</sup> It is as a result of this that, as Sánchez Vázquez explains, everyday consciousness does not develop a theory of praxis (and nor could it do so, as will need to be shown).<sup>56</sup>

Sánchez Vázquez's critique of everyday consciousness of praxis has, therefore, raised, through a contrast with revolutionary praxis, two problems: in the first place, its concrete determination, namely, its immanent *pessimism*, which fails to grasp the human being in all its importance as a subject of history, and in the second place, its general conception, which he has determined to be *atheoretical* and which, in the absence of the reflexive moment, 'can never nurture a true revolutionary praxis'.<sup>57</sup> He continues his critique on the basis of three other concrete determinations of the everyday consciousness of praxis: its inherently 'ingenuous realism', its 'objectivism', and its 'utilitarianism'.<sup>58</sup>

*Ingenuous realism*, insofar as everyday consciousness assumes that things 'are ... known in themselves, irrespective of their

relation to human activity', whereby when speaking of human intervention, Sánchez Vázquez evidently refers to the act of knowing.<sup>59</sup>

The *objectivism* characterises the everyday consciousness insofar as, through the assumption that things are known in themselves, it additionally implies that their importance, their meaning, and their significance are given to the human being almost as if by nature. That is to say, the ordinary man ignores 'the fact that because they have a practical significance practical acts and objects exist only *for* and *through* men. The characteristic of ordinary consciousness is that it regards the practical world as a world of things and meanings *in themselves*'.<sup>60</sup>

Sánchez Vázquez speaks here, above all, of that aspect of the cognisant subject, which is underestimated by everyday consciousness: the *active* subject who recognises things and gives them meaning. But it seems that, at the same time, this – the capacity of recognising things and giving them a meaning – is present in a hidden way in the other side of the subject, which also produces those things, which are already implicitly present in the 'critique of pessimism'. A formulation in the final line of the 'critique of objectivism' in the introduction to *The Philosophy of Praxis* would seem to speak to this broader interpretation: 'this objectivism which disregards the human, subjective aspect, and maintains the separation between the practical object and the subject'.<sup>61</sup>

Aside from this objectivism, which, as we have seen, constitutes part of ingenuous realism, Sánchez Vázquez also critiques the everyday consciousness of praxis for its *utilitarianism*, which it is similarly not conscious of and which implies that it 'reduces the practical to a single utilitarian dimension, whereby a practical action or object is one which has material utility or which produces profit or advantage; that which lacks that direct or immediate utility, is impractical'.<sup>62</sup>

Here, his philosophy takes an interesting turn when it relates this aspect of everyday

human consciousness to the economic reality in which it is located as well as respective economic theories. While he does not suggest that the latter represent the immediate material foundation of this consciousness, as was the case with earlier economists and their theories, such as classical political economy, for example,<sup>63</sup> he does indicate that 'ordinary consciousness and the standpoint of capitalist theories of economics and production coincide', the utilitarian understanding of the concept of praxis in everyday consciousness maintains a discrete but definite relationship with the capitalist mode of production in which the law of value dominates. What other authors would understand as a clear *dependency*, Sánchez Vázquez describes as *simultaneity*, a concept that he makes broad argumentative use of in various texts (it is true that the grammatical construction of simultaneity is, as far as we know, used more in Spanish than in German and English, languages in which the *causal* construction insatiably and jealously demands its rightful place): 'For ordinary consciousness what is productive is by definition practical; from the point of view of capitalist production the practical is defined as whatever produces new value or surplus value'.<sup>64</sup>

In sum, Sánchez Vázquez's critique of the everyday consciousness of praxis centres on a general understanding of everyday consciousness and its concrete determination: its *atheoretical* conception, as well as its concrete determination as pessimistic, ingenuous realistic, objectivist, and utilitarian.

Sánchez Vázquez analyses the relationship between praxis and knowledge in Marx primarily on the basis of the *Theses on Feuerbach*. In this text, which was written immediately after the *Paris Manuscripts* and at almost the same time as *The German Ideology*, the essential elements of a 'true "philosophy of praxis"' already appear clearly.<sup>65</sup>

But he does not consider this early text to be separate from Marx's complete works, referring at various points to *The German*

*Ideology* in order to help interpret it. Moreover, for understanding the relationship between praxis and knowledge, he refers to *Capital*, for example, the subchapter on 'The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret', which is of such great significance to Western Marxism.<sup>66</sup> This manner of approaching Marx's work already allows us to glimpse the fact that Sánchez Vázquez considers it to be an indivisible whole. Now, I will move to discussing with greater precision the position that the *Theses on Feuerbach* hold in Sánchez Vázquez's general interpretation of Marx, and, in connection with this, in the structure of his chapter on *Marx's conception of praxis*,<sup>67</sup> as well as the position he takes regarding the debate about continuity and rupture in Marx's work.

Emerging from his anti-Francoist praxis, Sánchez Vázquez summarises in an introductory manner what is decisive about the *Theses on Feuerbach*: 'In the *Theses*, Marx formulated a conception of objectivity founded on praxis, and defined his philosophy as the philosophy of the transformation of the world'.<sup>68</sup>

These two aspects are inseparable. The material world can only be recognised along with the concept of its transformation. When Marx locates the practical and transformative activity of human beings at the centre of all human relations, this cannot but have serious consequences on the terrain of knowledge. The praxis/knowledge relation is represented in three ways in the *Theses*:

- Praxis as basis of knowledge (Thesis 1);
- Praxis as criterion of truth (Thesis 2); and
- Praxis as the end of knowledge.<sup>69</sup>

As has already been asserted, 'the intervention of praxis in the process of knowledge leads to the overcoming of the antithesis between idealism and materialism', which is to say, the antithesis 'between the understanding of knowledge as knowledge of objects produced or created by consciousness and the conception that sees that knowledge as the mere ideal reproduction of objects

in themselves'.<sup>70</sup> It is necessary to overcome both positions: we cannot persist in either an idealist theory of knowledge or in 'a realist theory like that of traditional materialism, which had done little more than elaborate upon the standpoint of ingenuous realism'.<sup>71</sup>

Sánchez Vázquez indicates, here, that different interpreters of Marx derive different conclusions from the introduction of the concept of praxis to the problem of knowledge, mentioning three positions in this regard:

- 1 'the fact that praxis is a factor in our knowledge does not mean that we cannot know things in themselves';
- 2 'the admission of the decisive role of praxis as an indication that we can never know things in themselves, outside their relation to man, but only things humanised through praxis and integrated thus into a human world' (Gramsci's view);
- 3 'maintain[ing] that without praxis, or the creation of socio-human reality, knowledge of reality is itself impossible'<sup>72</sup> (Kosík's position<sup>73</sup>).

The difference between the second and third positions is not immediately obvious. On the basis of the entirety of *The Philosophy of Praxis*, it is possible to sketch in broad strokes the differences between the three, as well as Sánchez Vázquez's own evaluation of them. While the first position recognises, albeit underestimating it, the epistemological relevance of human praxis, the second position moves in the opposite direction and grants human praxis such importance that, beyond its influence, no reality exists.<sup>74</sup> The third position, like the second, appreciates the irreplaceable epistemological relevance of praxis, but, diametrically opposed to the second position, criticises the idea of bearing praxis as an ontological claim, and, as a result, shares with the first position the recognition of the primacy of the object.

In what follows, I set out Sánchez Vázquez's argument in favour of the third position. He returns to Marx's original text to investigate its 'actual meaning', which, at first, becomes problematic for him since

the text lends itself to opposing or even contradictory interpretations.<sup>75</sup> But, in order to understand how Sánchez Vázquez goes into more depth regarding the three aspects of praxis in the process of knowledge – praxis as basis for knowledge, as criterion of truth, and as the end of knowledge – we will unpack his interpretation of the *Theses on Feuerbach*.

To illustrate Marx's critique of 'hitherto existing materialism', he continues with his interpretation of the German term '*Objekt*', used by Marx in the first thesis: 'This latter is opposed to the subject, for it is a given, existing *in* and *for* itself, and not a human product; thus the form of relation between subject and object in this case is one in which the subject is passive and contemplative'.<sup>76</sup>

Sánchez Vázquez's interest in aesthetics, and above all his dispute with 'socialist realism',<sup>77</sup> is visible, here, as in so many other parts of the book when he continues with his interpretation of the Marxian critique of traditional materialism: 'the subject ... restrict[s] itself [in traditional materialism] to receiving or reflecting reality. Here knowledge is simply the result of the actions of the objects in the external world and their effects upon the sense organs'.<sup>78</sup> And he takes up again the distinction between the concepts '*Gegenstand*' and '*Objekt*': 'The object is *objectively* grasped [i.e. *Objekt*, S.G.], rather than *subjectively* as the product of practical activity' [i.e. *Gegenstand*, S.G.].<sup>79</sup>

Human knowledge is not directed at things that are totally foreign to it. The world as presented to us today is produced by previous generations; it is, therefore, the product of human praxis.<sup>80</sup> When a human being looks upon the world, he does not see just any accumulation of matter, which in turn puts off just any electromagnetic waves – which is to say, light – entering his retinas through his open eyes, but, instead, confronts the product of his own activity and that of his contemporaries, as well as his forbears. The rays of light that stimulate his optical cells – continuing with this idea – are not in any way a merely natural phenomenon, but are, instead, socially and

historically conditioned. Even the light of distant stars that we see today, even though they could have been extinguished before there were even humans on this Earth, do not reach our eyes in a 'pure' or untouched fashion (and this is not to even speak of the telescope, through which such light is channelled, and which also does not come out of nowhere). The air over Frankfurt, like that of many of the world's cities, is becoming increasingly cloudy, according to the complaints of the scientists at the old Observatory at the Senckenberg Museum, and this again is a result of the overwhelming nature of human praxis.

This is what pre-Marxist materialism fails to see or 'forgets' when it does not include in its reflections praxis as the basis for knowledge. Marx does not examine in greater detail the problematic of human praxis as the basis for knowledge in this text of 'noteworthy brevity' (Bloch). In contrast to traditional materialism, idealism has focused subjective activity on the process of knowledge (the active side). 'The subject [in idealism...] did not grasp objects in themselves, but as products of his activity'.<sup>81</sup> In this sense, therefore, it is superior to 'hitherto existing materialism'. Sánchez Vázquez mentions, on this point, that Marx is thinking of Kant's idealist conception of knowledge, and that 'it was to Idealism's credit, in Marx's view, that it had underlined the active role of the subject within the subject-object relation'.<sup>82</sup>

But idealist philosophy has another weakness in its understanding of knowledge: it knows the active and creative subject only as something conscious, thinking, but in which its practical, sensuous, and real activity is excluded.<sup>83</sup> Thus, Marx sees the need for a double overcoming: of traditional materialism and of idealism, the overcoming of the theoretical negation of human praxis – with which natural forces become eternal and absolute – and the overcoming of the neglect of the material force inherent in praxis and the latter's reduction to thought.

Human praxis is the foundation, the basis for knowledge, since it has first created the objects that will be recognised (against traditional materialism), but it is not an isolated question of spirit, but tangible, since with material interventions it creates an objective, real, sensuous reality (against idealism). Regarding the first aspect of the critique of the ingenuous understanding of nature as already given, prior to human history, the author adds that with this Marx does not deny the existence of a nature beyond human praxis, but merely insists that what confronts our knowledge today is hardly this '*virgin nature*'.<sup>84</sup> 'Thus Marx accepts the ontological priority of a nature outside praxis whose ambit is progressively reduced as it becomes humanised nature'.<sup>85</sup>

Sánchez Vázquez argues that Marx takes up again here his understanding of the human–nature relationship developed in the *Paris Manuscripts*.<sup>86</sup> In his interpretation of the first *Thesis on Feuerbach*, it has become evident that Sánchez Vázquez, as previously indicated, leans toward the last of the three possible exegeses of this brief text: Marx does not here deny the existence of a reality of things which is fully independent of human beings; however, he does reject the idea that 'knowledge could be mere contemplation unrelated to practice. Knowledge exists only in practice as knowledge of objects integrated into practice and of a reality that has already lost or is in process of losing its immediate existence to become a reality mediated by man'.<sup>87</sup>

With the help of the second *Thesis on Feuerbach*, Sánchez Vázquez explains to what degree human praxis is not only, as we have said, the basis for knowledge (insofar as it creates its object), but, moreover, the criterion for the truth of knowledge. Recall Marx's thesis: 'The question 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, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the

reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question'.<sup>88</sup>

Sánchez Vázquez insists that, according to this thesis, 'truth does not exist in itself'.<sup>89</sup> A thought, a theory, cannot be certain in and of itself; its truth cannot be verified within the theoretical terrain. Here, as a result, the truth of a thought, a theory, is understood as its 'this-sidedness [*terrenalidad*]'. It is only when the idea applied in praxis is crowned with success that we have a basis for the verification of this idea with regard to pre-existing reality.<sup>90</sup>

This understanding of truth, we could add, reminds us of the modern natural sciences, which are oriented toward application: a law of the natural sciences is recognised as such at the moment in which it produces the desired results in experiments and in technical application.<sup>91</sup> An emphatic notion of truth – like that which Sánchez Vázquez also claims – as the coincidence of the idea with the reality existing outside of that idea,<sup>92</sup> is not (or almost never) found in the natural sciences. Nor is this logic uncomfortable with the recognition of reciprocally contradictory theories as valid – at least at a specific level of scientific development – as is the case with the undulatory and corpuscular theories of light. In each case, the theory which promises the best path to success is simply applied.

With reference to social theory – which is what most interests us here – it is thus worth asking whether Marx formulates an empiricist or a pragmatic concept of truth. Is the social or political theory which gives rise to the greatest political success therefore the most correct one? Is the one which we manage to impose more easily the right one? In the final instance, it would be possible to ask the following with regard to human praxis: is imposed praxis correct praxis? Which would imply: are stable systems of domination, by principle and thanks to the force of their imposition, the truest ones, which would therefore need to be placed outside any radical and systematic critique? Adolfo Sánchez



Vázquez rejects such a pragmatist interpretation of the *Theses on Feuerbach*: 'At the same time we must be wary of interpreting this relation between truth and success, or falsehood and disaster, in a pragmatist way, as if truth or falseness were determined by success or failure'.<sup>93</sup>

In praxis, the human being *is obliged to demonstrate* the truth of his reasoning, as Marx says in the thesis in question. He needs to demonstrate it there, but this does not mean that success constitutes truth or that praxis automatically confirms, so to say, the truth of a theory applied successfully. Sánchez Vázquez formulates this relationship between praxis and truth as follows: 'If a theory can be successfully applied, it is because it is true; the reverse, however, is not necessarily also true'.<sup>94</sup>

The success of a praxis, then, should not be compared to the truth of the theories upon which it is based. The power of this-sidedness of reasoning is not the essence of its truth, but rather merely an indication thereof. To express our understanding of Sánchez Vázquez's interpretation of Marx in the language of formal logic: the this-sidedness of thought is the necessary but not sufficient condition for its truth; since this condition must not be understood in the sense of formal logic as an *attribute*, but rather in the chemical sense as an *indicator*. Or, as Sánchez Vázquez puts it: 'Success does not constitute truth; it simply reveals the fact that thought can adequately reproduce reality'.<sup>95</sup>

This 'reveals' or 'makes visible' should be understood in relation to what has been said and quoted before, in the sense that success makes visible the truth of the theory that serves as its basis because it is also true independently of it. Success, then, is an indication of truth, but is not sufficient for its knowledge, while the absence thereof denotes that there is something that requires revising in the thought in question. After this critique of a possible erroneous interpretation of the concept of truth in the second *Thesis on Feuerbach* – an interpretation which Sánchez

Vázquez calls 'pragmatist' – our author indicates another interpretive problem which points implicitly toward an empiricist focus. This second aspect is both complementary to the first as well as offering the possibility of understanding what is necessary, alongside the 'success' of a given praxis, in order to follow the trail of the truth of the corresponding thought.

The 'making visible' of a theory's truth through praxis should not be understood to mean that it suffices to merely open one's eyes and simply read truth in praxis. If praxis is the criterion for a theory's truth, this does not mean, according to our author, that the search for truth is exempt from all theoretical feedback: 'Practice does not speak for itself; practical facts must be analyzed and interpreted, since they do not reveal their meaning to direct and immediate observation nor to intuitive apprehension'.<sup>96</sup>

In order to make praxis effective as a criterion for truth, a theoretical relationship to it is necessary. The dependent relationship between theoretical knowledge and praxis, as we again see demonstrated here, is bilateral, extremely close, and intertwined.<sup>97</sup> In order to document this understanding of the concept of praxis contained in the second *Thesis on Feuerbach* as a criterion of truth, Sánchez Vázquez refers, for assistance, to the eighth thesis, from which he cites the following: 'All mysteries which mislead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and *in the comprehension of this practice*'.<sup>98</sup>

For Sánchez Vázquez, this is how we establish the unity of theory and praxis in the second and the eighth *Theses on Feuerbach*, namely: in a 'double movement; from theory to practice (*Thesis II*) and from practice to theory (in *Thesis VIII*)'.<sup>99</sup> In so doing, Marx – in the concept of the unity of theory and praxis – turns against two conceptions of knowledge which are incapable of understanding this double movement as a result of their unilateralising optic: on the one hand, against an idealist understanding of the truth of knowledge 'whereby theory contains within itself

the criterion of its own truth', and, on the other hand, an empiricist approach 'according to which practice provides the criterion for judging the truth of theory in a direct and immediate way'.<sup>100</sup>

Sánchez Vázquez would like to make known the role of praxis as the criterion of truth of significant generality, without being restricted to the sphere of the sciences, which he discusses in greater detail, making note of the fact that this criterion for truth can assume different forms in the different sciences. But, at the same time, he indicates that this criterion for truth finds limitations in its application 'which prevent it [praxis] from becoming an absolute criterion of truth'.<sup>101</sup>

Sánchez Vázquez says that in the third thesis, unlike the first and second, praxis does not appear as a 'cognitive category', but instead here 'becomes a sociological category';<sup>102</sup> however, in discussing it he comes to speak various times about the relationship between praxis and knowledge. From the aforementioned double movement in the unity of theory and praxis, after studying up to this point principally the movement from theory toward praxis (what does praxis mean for theory as its basis and criterion of truth?), we now turn to the other movement, namely that from praxis toward theory (what does theory mean for praxis?). The problem of the role of the process of knowledge with regard to a world-changing transformative praxis is dealt with in this third *Thesis on Feuerbach*, through a discussion of the meaning of the power and limitation of knowledge or understanding acquired through education. In this thesis, Marx is thinking about Enlightenment philosophers and thinkers and about eighteenth-century materialists, whose thought Feuerbach and the nineteenth-century utopian socialists 'carried on'.<sup>103</sup> According to this understanding, the human being is essentially marked by two influences: circumstances and education. Voltaire places more emphasis on the first aspect, philosophers of the German Enlightenment the second; they understand the transformation of

humanity as a 'vast educative enterprise'.<sup>104</sup> The foundation of this view of education is the idea of the human as a rational being. According to this view, human progress can be driven by the destruction of prejudices and the dominion of reason. 'In order for man to progress, enter the age of reason and live in a world constructed according to rational principles, all that is required is that consciousness be illuminated by the light of reason'.<sup>105</sup>

This process of enlightenment occurs through the labour of the educator, who frees human beings from superstition and brings them from obscurantism to the realm of reason. And who are these noble educators? They are the Enlightenment philosophers and the 'enlightened despots' who follow their advice. But this understanding contains precisely the division of humanity that Marx mentions, into an active part and a passive part. Nothing remains for the rest of society (the non-educators) but to allow their consciousness to be shaped from without.<sup>106</sup> The human being, then, is considered 'passive matter which can be molded by the environment and by other men'.<sup>107</sup> Sánchez Vázquez reconstructs in three steps Marx's critique of this idea of the human being and its possible transformation by the 'simply pedagogical', and not the practical revolutionary, route.<sup>108</sup>

- The circumstances, which undeniably influence the human being, are treated as external and immutable instances, and the fact that they are produced by human praxis is ignored.<sup>109</sup>

Following Sánchez Vázquez, we could say that this step belongs to a critique of reified consciousness, which does not understand the degree to which the things we confront are in themselves the expression and result of a historical social situation and of relations of production which are in turn created by human hands. The circumstances studied thereby acquire the character of a thing, they appear as 'objective' [*objektiv*], which is to say, untransformable, as a thing-in-itself, which rises intact amid the swell of history.

Or as Marx puts it in *Capital*: in the world of commodities, products of human hands – like the products of the mind in the ‘misty realm of religion’ – appear as ‘autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with human beings’.<sup>110</sup>

- The educators must also be educated. Marx here criticises the presumption typical of the revolutionary bourgeoisie of the eighteenth century, which considers itself the single driving force of the historical process and, at the same time, deems it unnecessary for this process to continue developing. To the dualism of educators and those who are to be educated, Marx counterposes the ‘idea of a continuous praxis in which both subject and object are transformed’.<sup>111</sup>

To explain the third *Thesis on Feuerbach*, Sánchez Vázquez cites the following passage from Marx’s main work (*Capital*) on the effects of human labour: ‘Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature’.<sup>112</sup> He discusses a process of ‘self-transformation’ which ‘is never completed’, thereby excluding the existence of educators who, in turn, would not need to be educated.<sup>113</sup>

- The aspects mentioned in the two previous points, the circumstances which transform humans and are in turn transformed by humans, and the educator who educates other humans and must in turn be educated, can be combined in thought with the idea that only the human being is capable of transforming both his circumstances and himself. Those transformations can only be understood as a joint and simultaneous task, as revolutionary praxis.<sup>114</sup> This unity of the transformation of the human being through understanding, education, and the transformation of circumstances, as well as the manner that the author has of interpreting these, can be understood as an emphatic formulation of what is meant by the inalienable meaning and importance of the unity of theory and praxis more generally.

Sánchez Vázquez interprets that unity to which the third *Thesis on Feuerbach* refers as a double negation. Here, he again takes up

the model of the critique of two forms of unilateralising a process which is only conceivable in the unity of two moments: on the one hand, he rejects the ‘Utopian conceptions’ that consider the self-transformation of human beings through education to be sufficient, ‘irrespective of the circumstances of his life’, to accomplishing a radical transformation. At the same time, and on the other hand, he rejects a ‘rigorous determination’ which considers it sufficient to transform the conditions of life ‘without reference to the changes in his consciousness resulting from the labour of education’, in order to transform the human being.<sup>115</sup> But what both conceptions have in common is that they underestimate the importance of a unity between the subjective transformation of consciousness and the transformation of objective social relations; in other words, the relevance of revolutionary praxis.

After interpreting the first three *Theses on Feuerbach*, during the course of which he also introduced the eighth, Sánchez Vázquez moves directly to discussing the final thesis, which is by far the most famous, and not only for being the shortest. The eleventh *Thesis on Feuerbach*, one of the best-known phrases of Marx’s entire body of work, can be understood as an extremely concise summary of what Marxists like Sánchez Vázquez understand to be the German exile’s great theoretical revolution: the entrance of praxis as a fundamental category of theory, which had previously opposed it with a greater or lesser degree of scepticism. Let us once again examine the original version of the phrase that, chiselled in large letters – and in the version Engels published it for the first time – today adorns the gravestone of its author: ‘The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways, the point is to *change* it’.<sup>116</sup>

Sánchez Vázquez understands the eleventh *Thesis on Feuerbach* as a radical critique of previous philosophy, above all German idealism, which ‘culminat[ing] in Hegel and Feuerbach, was just such a philosophy of interpretation’.<sup>117</sup>

As we have just seen, we are dealing with a profound rupture with *this* philosophy, but at the same time and through this same rupture, there is an effort to save philosophy – in a new sense – as a highly developed theory of the revolutionary transformation of existing social relation. When Marx, in this famous *Thesis on Feuerbach*, criticises earlier philosophers for limiting themselves to *interpreting* the world, this is also synonymous with the affirmation that ‘they have accepted and sought to justify it, but have not contributed to its transformation’.<sup>118</sup>

The transition from interpretation to transformation implies a ‘theoretical revolution’ that Marxism must carry out and which is inseparable from the ‘revolutionary praxis of the proletariat’.<sup>119</sup> Sánchez Vázquez turns his interpretation of the final *Thesis on Feuerbach* in the direction of a manifesto for the unity of revolutionary theory and praxis, against the two attitudes which see only one side of the coin, and which bypass this unity entirely: unreflexive spontaneism and academic Marxism. Regarding the first of these attitudes (Sánchez Vázquez does not use either of the two terms mentioned), he emphasises that it is ‘an interpretation of the world that makes transformation possible’.<sup>120</sup> On the second, he insists that to reduce Marxism to mere interpretation means no less than to do exactly what Marx denounces in the eleventh *Thesis on Feuerbach*: to persist in remaining enclosed within the limits of theory.<sup>121</sup>

To conclude the interpretation of the *Theses on Feuerbach* by Sánchez Vázquez, we will permit ourselves a small political-theoretical observation. The contradiction between traditional materialism and idealism that Marx attempted to overcome, which was mentioned in the first thesis and which reappears here, seems to continue to be present in debates about leftist politics. Quite often there occurs a conflict that is occasionally quite vehemently fought out, between two distinct currents, which follow the respective steps of argumentation.

On the one hand, a naively sensuous current attempts to determine political action by

setting out directly from lived experience, individual involvement, and in part from felt desires. In so doing, this current loses its connection to the social and historical determination of that reality, which is understood as immediately given and directly graspable.

On the other hand, another current with a serenely distanced attitude which, from a more or less neutral and certain vantage-point, knows the dynamic of the process in which we are all immersed and, therefore, does not think simply that the ‘untouched sensuousness’ is a path which gives direct access to the correct analysis of the situation. But, at the same time, it hides behind this judgement; as a critical commentator its only enemy is the false concept, and it gradually loses the possibility for the materially transformative and objective conscious intervention into this reality, which is at least verbally recognised as historically and socially conditioned (and, therefore, as transformable in its very foundations).

Without a doubt, it is not possible to equate these two currents with ‘traditional materialism’ or ‘idealism’, respectively, but there seems to exist a certain parallel in their problematic and their errors, such that we can ask ourselves if present debates and actions (the emancipatory praxis) have fallen far behind Marx, or if while he recognised the problem – and despite the immense effort that he no doubt carried out – he was still not in a position to resolve it.

Finally, attending to re-establish the importance of the study of Sánchez Vázquez and remembering his contributions to the Leftist political thinking in general and, more particularly, to the critical – non-dogmatic – interpretation of Marx, the work of Sánchez Vázquez amounts to a serious attempt at overcoming some of the deficiencies that the orthodox Marxist tradition established for Marxist thought in general, causing its stagnation. For example, the commonplace idea that it is an impossibility for Marxism to theorise everyday life, or the critique that the Left depletes itself in material demands provoke a strong response in the Spanish-Mexican

thinker Philosophy of Praxis, claiming the true importance of Marxian concepts.

## Notes

- 1 See Ana Lucas, 'Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez: vida y obra', in Sánchez Vázquez, *Escritos de política y filosofía*, Madrid: Ayuso, 1987, p. 219.
- 2 Sánchez Vázquez, 'Vida y filosofía', in: *Anthropos*, no. 52, Barcelona, 1985, pp. 10–16, here: p. 11. The central theme of this edition of *Anthropos* (no. 52) is the life and work of Sánchez Vázquez and it contains, among other things, three autobiographical texts.
- 3 Sánchez Vázquez, 'Romance de la ley de fugas', in: *Octubre. Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios*, no. 3, August–September 1933 [published under the pseudonym 'Darís'].
- 4 Sánchez Vázquez, 'Vida y filosofía', p. 11.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 12. Following Ramón Casterás, the youth movement played a significant role in the political development of the Second Spanish Republic. Indeed it was one of the principal actors (Casterás, 'Las JSUC: ante la guerra y la revolución (1936–1939)', Barcelona: Nova Terra, 1977, p. 15). Understood in his way, the great responsibility that Sánchez Vázquez had to assume at the age of 21 was not an isolated experience, but rather part of a general development. In reality, he himself already expressed this when he suggests in the cited text that the JSU, among other things, achieved great importance through the considerable military role it assumed during the Spanish Civil War.  
Sánchez Vázquez's brother, Gonzalo, was a coeditor of *Ahora's* twin publication, *La Hora*, which appeared in Valencia from the beginning in the summer of 1937 (See 'Gonzalo Sánchez Vázquez, our beloved director', photo caption accompanying the article: '20 months of a youth daily', in *La Hora, Diario Juvenil*, year 3, no. 526, Valencia, 19 February 1939, p. 1).
- 6 See Sánchez Vázquez, 'Marinello en tres tiempos', Casa de las Américas, La Habana, 1978, no. 19, pp. 109: 113–16, here: p. 113.
- 7 Sánchez Vázquez, 'Vida y filosofía', p. 12. Moreover, Sánchez Vázquez mentions the following literati who he met there: Tristan Tzara, Stephen Spender, César Vallejo, Alejo Carpentier, Félix Pita Rodríguez, Rafael Alberti, José Bergamín, Ramón José Sender, Corpus Barga, Arturo Serrano Plaja, as well as Nicolás Guillén (Sánchez Vázquez, 'Marinello en tres tiempos', p. 113).  
Moreover, the following people also participated in this Congress: Pablo Neruda (Chile), Egon Erwin Kisch (Czechoslovakia), Córdoba Iturburo, Sara Tornú, Pablo Rojas Paz (Argentina), J. Braus (Netherlands), Vicente Huidobro, and José Bergamín (Spain) (See Enrique Lister, *Nuestra Guerra*, Paris: Ebro, 1966, pp. 139–140).  
Santiago Álvarez mentions another hundred participants, including Alexei Tolstoi (USSR), Ernest Hemingway (United States), and Wencislao Roces (Spain) (Santiago Álvarez, *Los comisarios políticos en el Ejército Popular de la República*, La Coruña: Edicions do Castro, 1989, pp. 367–8).
- 8 Sánchez Vázquez, 'Vida y filosofía'.
- 9 On the history of the 11th Division, see Lister, *Nuestra Guerra*, pp. 79ff., and Santiago Álvarez, *Memorias II. La Guerra civil de 1936–1939*, La Coruña: Edicions do Castro, 1986, pp. 121ff.
- 10 Sánchez Vázquez, letter to the author, Mexico City, 22 February 1991, p. 2.
- 11 See Sánchez Vázquez, 'Vida y filosofía', p. 12. This newspaper, which almost always consisted of eight pages, generally appeared weekly or biweekly (see *¡Pasaremos!*, March 1937 to September 1937).
- 12 Sánchez Vázquez, letter to the author, Mexico City, 22 February 1991, p. 1. On Sánchez Vázquez's role in the Civil War, see Álvarez, *Los comisarios políticos en el Ejército Popular de la República*, for example, pp. 133–5. See also in this regard Sánchez Vázquez (ed.), *Estética y marxismo*, Vol. II: *Estética comunista*, Mexico City: Era, 1970, p. 490.
- 13 Antonio Sánchez Barbudo, 'Introducción', in *Romance*, reprint, Glashütten im Taunus: Detlev Auvermann, 1975, p. 1, column 1.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 S. Álvarez, conversation with the author. Madrid, 22 March 1991.
- 17 According to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), the *Maestría* Degree in Mexico is similar to the Magister Artium in Germany and to the Master's degree in both England and the United States. All of them belong to the seventh level in the ISCED.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Sánchez Vázquez, 'Vida y filosofía', p. 16.
- 20 Sánchez Vázquez, 'Ideas estéticas en los Manuscritos económico-filosóficos de Marx', in *Diánoia. Anuario de Filosofía*. México: UNAM, Centro de Estudios Filosóficos, 1961.
- 21 Sánchez Vázquez, *Las ideas estéticas de Marx. Ensayos de estética marxista*, Mexico City: Era, 1965.
- 22 See Sánchez Vázquez, *Filosofía de la praxis*, Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1967 (the book version of the doctoral thesis entitled *On Praxis*, presented

- in 1966 to the UNAM), and the second edition, Sánchez Vázquez, *Filosofía de la praxis*, Second corrected and expanded edition, Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1980. Several important differences exist between the first and second edition of *The Philosophy of Praxis*. See: Sánchez Vázquez, *The Philosophy of Praxis*, trans. M. Gonzalez, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1977.
- 23 Sánchez Vázquez, 'Vida y filosofía'.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Anonymous 1985, p. 22. Thus, for example, his speech 'Brecht and Lukács' conceptions of realism', given at the Ministry of Culture, Managua (29 April 1983).
- 26 Sánchez Vázquez 1989.
- 27 Sánchez Vázquez 1983b.
- 28 Marx 1978b, p. 143.
- 29 Sánchez Vázquez 1983b, p. 36. Sánchez Vázquez does not note the precise citation, here, but we could assume that he is referring to the same Spanish translation of the *Theses on Feuerbach* that he cites in *Philosophy of Praxis* (namely, that of Wenceslao Roces). See Sánchez Vázquez 1980, p. 22. Omissions belong to Sánchez Vázquez. The quotation marks in the Marx's original text do not appear in Sánchez Vázquez).
- 30 Sánchez Vázquez 1983b, p. 36.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Marx 1978b, p. 143.
- 34 The concept of '*conciencia ordinaria*' that Sánchez Vázquez employs can be translated not only as '*gemeines Bewusstsein*' [ordinary consciousness] but also as '*Alltagsbewusstsein*' [everyday consciousness]. As a general rule, we use the second variant, which is slightly freer but also more common in German, and in favour of which Sánchez Vázquez also speaks with regard to the meaning of the concept of the everyday. For a similar reason, his expression 'ordinary man' [literally, '*der gemeine und gängige Mensch*'] can be translated as '*Alltagsmensch*' [everyday man].
- 35 Sánchez Vázquez 1980, p. 21. [In the English version of *The Philosophy of Praxis*, these words are simply translated as: 'Having gone beyond German Idealism' (Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 2.)]
- 36 Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 2.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid., pp. 2f.
- 39 Ibid., p. 2.
- 40 Ibid., p. 3.
- 41 Ibid., pp. 2ff. The 'abolition' discussed here refers above all to the *attitude* of everyday man. His consciousness, as Sánchez Vázquez says later, must be 'overcome' (ibid. In this regard, see the following extensive quotation in Sánchez Vázquez).
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Ibid., pp. 4ff.
- 44 Ibid., p. 5.
- 45 *Capital* Volume I, Chapter One, Section Four: 'The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret': Marx 1976a, pp. 163–77.
- 46 Marx 1976a, p. 165.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 5.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 '... [M]an as a social, active, and transformative being ...' (Sánchez Vázquez 1980, p. 25). This is different in the English-language edition: 'the active role of men in transforming society' (Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 5). Sánchez Vázquez does not let slip such anthropological determinations.
- 52 But why is everyday consciousness not oriented, as a result, according to *this* philosophical consciousness? Why is it that it does not allow itself to be infiltrated by it, rather than this being merely occasional, as stated above? Is Schopenhauer simply more astute than Marx, does he have better 'public relations'? Or is it because the man from Trier, since his burial at Highgate Cemetery on 17 March 1883, has died over and over again in recent years with increasing frequency and greater commotion? (And what, then, would Lazurus – one of the few figures who, according to tradition, died *twice* – say of this immoderate competitor?)
- 53 Sánchez Vázquez 1977.
- 54 Ibid., p. 6.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Ibid. With regard to the concept of ingenuous realism, as well as later on, when Sánchez Vázquez sharpens and explains over and over again his analysis through the example of art as human praxis, we should recall his close relationship with aesthetic debates.
- 60 Ibid., p. 6.
- 61 Ibid., p. 7.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 Ibid., Part I: 'Philosophical sources of the study of praxis', Chapter III: 'The conception of praxis in Marx', subchapter: 'Praxis and knowledge: the "Theses on Feuerbach"', pp. 115–17, here: pp. 115. See, moreover, Part II: 'Some philosophical problems of praxis', Chapter V: 'The unity of theory and practice', pp. 169–98.
- 66 See, for example, Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 189.

- 67 Ibid., Part One: 'Philosophical sources of the study of praxis', Chapter III: 'The conception of praxis in Marx', pp. 92–147.
- 68 Ibid., p. 116.
- 69 Ibid.
- 70 Ibid.
- 71 Ibid.
- 72 Ibid., pp. 116f.
- 73 Karel Kosík (1923–2003) was a Czech philosopher whose most important contributions are in the field of Neomarxist critical epistemology. His best work is *Dialectics of the Concrete* (1963). It focuses on the problem of knowledge. Furthermore, the importance of this thinker when studying Sánchez Vázquez is increased by the fact that Sánchez Vázquez was directly involved in the translation of *Dialectics of the Concrete* to Spanish.
- 74 Elsewhere, Sánchez Vázquez characterises Gramsci's position with the latter's own words, as 'absolute immanentism', 'absolute historicism' and 'humanism' (Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 33. This quote was changed using the second edition of the Spanish original: Sánchez Vázquez 1980, p. 56).
- 75 Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 117.
- 76 Ibid., pp. 117–18.
- 77 On Sánchez Vázquez's abandonment and critique of socialist realism, see our biographical introduction.
- 78 Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 118.
- 79 Ibid.
- 80 Ibid., p. 119.
- 81 Ibid., p. 118.
- 82 Ibid.
- 83 Ibid.
- 84 'Marx does not deny the existence of a nature outside praxis or prior to history; the nature that actually exists for him [man], however, is given *in and through* practice' (ibid.).
- 85 Ibid.
- 86 Ibid., p. 119.
- 87 Ibid., p. 120.
- 88 Marx 1978b, p. 144. Marx's cited formulation, 'the truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking', shows that he is not interested in an abstract concept of truth that floats in the air, as is generally associated with the German term '*Wahrheit*'. The Spanish term '*verdad*' [truth] does not generally carry that heavy significance, but can also be understood by the terms '*Richtigkeit*' [being correct] or '*Wirklichkeit*' [reality]. This question – which we here describe as specific to the Spanish language and of its German translation, as well as one pertaining to Sánchez Vázquez's texts – is also present in Marx's original text. Studies on the topic note that 'two concepts of truth coexist in the second Thesis on Feuerbach'. Alfred Schmidt distinguishes between truth as "'objective truth": pertinent knowledge' and truth as the "'reality", "power", and "this-sidedness" of human thought' (Schmidt 1973, p. 1129).
- 89 Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 120.
- 90 Ibid., p. 121.
- 91 See, in this respect, Sánchez Vázquez's following formulation in his interpretation of the second thesis on Feuerbach: 'If the ends pursued are achieved through action, this means that the knowledge out of which those ends can be elaborated is true knowledge.... if we base our hope for the achievement of certain ends on a given judgment about reality, and those ends are not achieved, it follows that our judgment was false' (ibid.).
- 92 Ibid.
- 93 Ibid.
- 94 Ibid.
- 95 Ibid.
- 96 Ibid.
- 97 'The criterion of truth may be found in practice, but it is only discovered within a properly theoretical relation with practice itself' (ibid.).
- 98 Marx 1978b, p. 145. Italics according to Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 121.
- 99 Ibid., pp. 121–2. Another note, perhaps a *pedantic* one: we are not citing here from the second edition, which we have used in other cases, but from the first edition (Sánchez Vázquez 1967, p. 130). This is due to an error in the second edition: in the phrase cited above, 'thesis II' suddenly becomes 'thesis I'. We have allowed ourselves to correct this error, one that is obvious in context. With regard to the unity of theory and praxis, Sánchez Vázquez always speaks only of theses II and VIII, but not thesis I. [The English translation also includes a mistake, corrected above, when mentioning the numbers of the theses here referred to: instead of 'thesis VIII', the translator of *The Philosophy of Praxis* put 'thesis III' (ibid.).]
- 100 Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 122.
- 101 Ibid. The reader who was hoping for a clear and final answer to the possibility of establishing a definitive truth will respond with disgust. Where, in the end, does this leave the advanced position of knowledge as compared with idealism and empiricism? Here, once more, we see the results of a non-dogmatic interpretation of Marx: great disgust and insecurity, but little knowledge that can be applied. For the orthodoxy this is a most disappointing outcome. How to build a state on such an uncertain basis?
- 102 Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 125.

- 103 Ibid., p. 122.
- 104 Ibid.
- 105 Ibid., p. 123.
- 106 Ibid.
- 107 Ibid. On this topic, what interests Sánchez Vázquez is, among other things, the various forms of violence applied in politics and art. In the latter case, this violence falls on passive material, for example, the stone to be carved, but in the first the action is exercised upon active beings, toward whose creation of consciousness it is directed and which in a given case can generate a counter-violence. Here we will quote a central passage from this chapter to allude to the force field in which Sánchez Vázquez is roaming: 'Indeed violence has been so clearly linked to all historical production or creation, that many commentators have seen violence as the very motor force of historical development – for example those who, like Dühring and Gumplowicz, have tried to find a theoretical justification for racism or fascism'. Sánchez Vázquez 1977, Part II: 'Some philosophical problems of praxis', Chapter VII: 'Praxis and violence', pp. 305–36, here: p. 308.
- 108 Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 123, italics by S.G.
- 109 Ibid.
- 110 Marx 1976a, p. 165.
- 111 Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 124.
- 112 Marx 1976a, p. 283.
- 113 Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 124.
- 114 '... [C]hanges in circumstances cannot be separated from changes in man, just as the changes that occur in him as circumstances and human activity, or rather of the transformation of circumstances and the self-transformation of man, can only be achieved *in and through* revolutionary practice' (ibid.).
- 115 Ibid.
- 116 Marx 1978b, p. 145. [Translation corrected, based on the German *original* text of the *Theses*, written by Marx. It seems that the translator of the English-language edition of the *Theses* used here was taking its cue from the problematic German version published by Engels. It mistakenly separates the two parts of the sentence by a semicolon and confronts them with the added word 'however', both non-existent in Marx's handwritten original. In consequence, the translator writes erroneously: 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point however is to *change* it'. (Ibid.)]
- 117 Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 126.
- 118 Ibid.
- 119 Ibid., p. 127. For his interpretation of the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, Sánchez Vázquez refers here to the last line of Engels' text, 'Socialism, Utopian and Scientific': 'To thoroughly comprehend the historical conditions and thus the very nature of this act, to impart to the now oppressed proletarian class a full knowledge of the conditions and of the meaning of the momentous act it is called upon to accomplish, this is the task of the theoretical expression of the proletarian movement, scientific Socialism': Engels 1907, p. 87.
- 120 Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 126.
- 121 Ibid.



# Roberto Schwarz: Mimesis Beyond Realism

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the course of a career that has so far spanned more than a half-century, Roberto Schwarz has made several indelible contributions to critical theory. While Schwarz has written commandingly on diverse topics, his towering achievement is his work on the late nineteenth-century Brazilian literary figure Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, particularly his last great novels. Born in 1938 in Vienna, Roberto Schwarz moved with his family to Brazil in 1939 after the annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany. Schwarz studied social sciences at the University of São Paulo (USP) before taking a Master's degree in Comparative Literature at Yale University under René Wellek. Returning to Brazil in 1963, Schwarz taught under the great Brazilian critic Antonio Candido in the Literary Theory Department at USP. With the hardening in 1964 of the dictatorship that had begun in 1964, Schwarz was forced into a decade-long exile in Paris. During that time

he completed his doctorate in Latin American Studies at the Sorbonne (University of Paris III) with a thesis that would become his first book-length study of Machado de Assis, *Ao vencedor as batatas* (*To the Victor Go the Potatoes*).<sup>1</sup> From his return to Brazil in 1978 to his retirement from teaching in 1992, Schwarz taught literature and literary theory at the University Estadual de Campinas (Unicamp).

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Schwarz's contributions to critical theory develop along two major axes: the elaboration of a theory of literary realism that goes far beyond the Lukácsian limit of the historical novel (while maintaining and developing many of Lukács's insights and commitments), and the development of a framework for understanding the relationship between culture on the periphery and in the dominant countries. The problem of literary mimesis is surprisingly poorly developed among Schwarz's Frankfurt School forbears;

Schwarz's jumping-off point is not even Lukács but the work of the great (and in English woefully under-translated) Brazilian critic Antonio Candido de Mello e Souza, universally known as Antonio Candido. Among Schwarz's Marxist contemporaries, only Fredric Jameson has offered a theory of interpretation of comparable ambition. In the classic Frankfurt School texts, the theorization of cultural production outside Europe and North America is so conspicuously lacking as to amount to a blind spot; Schwarz's work stands, with that of his followers and students, as the great dialectical alternative to post-colonial and Latin American studies criticism indebted to the moment of subaltern studies. Making difficult work for the commentator is the fact that neither of these projects is conceived or pursued as a separate development; indeed, for the most part they are undertaken in the course of close engagements with particular texts. The necessary attempt to disentangle them will involve a certain amount of violence to the texture of Schwarz's thought.

## INTERPRETIVE METHOD

The most explicit statement on method that Schwarz has made takes the form, characteristically, of a textual commentary. In 'Objective Form: Reflections on the Dialectic of Roguery' (1979), Schwarz pinpoints Antonio Candido's 'Dialectic of Roguery' (1970) as the breakthrough of dialectical criticism into Brazil as a project rather than as a mere slogan.<sup>2</sup> Candido's contribution – 'without predecessors' in Brazil and rare enough outside it – is to produce an account of self-legislating ('emancipated' [20]) form as itself revelatory of 'the movement of society as a whole' (24). By 'emancipated' form, Schwarz means that in a successful work the link between literary and social form is not itself a directly social process. It neither takes place through the development of

preexisting generic forms (which, in relation to self-legislating form, are merely raw material), nor through a 'political unconscious' that insists behind the back of the novelist. (Whether that Jamesonian category works the way it is commonly understood to work is another matter). As he says in an early study of Henry James, 'in a literary text ... everything is construction, intentional gesture'.<sup>3</sup> The creation of literary form is a cognitive act, even though, as we shall see, it is a cognitive act of a peculiar sort. 'Before it was intuited and made objective by the novelist, the form that the critic studies was produced by the social process, even if nobody was aware of it' (22). We will return to this dense formulation, but it is enough to note at present that social form is not an object to be reported on by the novelist, but is rather something that is made objective by the novelist – at the same time, however, as it is the effect of a real social process quite apart from the intuition or will of the novelist.

Form – 'any and every nexus that subordinates others in the text' (20) – mediates our understanding of all the particular elements in the text, all the way from inherited literary forms to narrative sequences to sociological or historical data, whether these be suspect or apparently trustworthy. Apparently paradoxically, then, the link between aesthetic and social form can only be achieved by first rigorously delinking them: since mimesis inheres in the form, no single element is to be taken as immediately mimetic. 'The unification of the novelistic sphere with that of reality takes place through their near-total separation, and the dialectic of the two passes through their precise articulation and not, as usually happens, through their confusion' (23–4). Everything depends on this articulation which, as will not have escaped notice, is nothing other than literary form itself: 'As to method, it should be noted that in the back-and-forth between fiction and reality the priority of literary form is absolute. It is form that poses the problem that

the knowledge and study of the critic help to formulate' (21–2).

Antonio Candido's breakthrough essay concerns Manuel Antônio de Almeida's 1854 novel *Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant*. We begin (rearranging Antonio Candido's argument for our own purposes) with the extraordinary observation that *Memoirs* achieves the standpoint of totality by means of a radical constriction of viewpoint. The book presents an 'impression of reality' (89) that strikes us with the 'force of conviction' (88) despite the near absence of both slaves and landholders, which is to say the near absence of both the labor force and the ruling class (87). 'In suppressing the slave, [Almeida] suppressed labor almost totally; in suppressing the ruling classes, he suppressed the controls of power' (95). Despite ignoring both labor and power – the two major candidates for forces actually shaping society – the novel 'suggests the lively presence of a society that seems to us quite coherent and existent' (86). Somehow Almeida's novel allows us 'to intuit, beyond the fragments described, certain principles constitutive of society – a hidden element that acts as a totalizer of all these partial aspects' (89). How?

The greater part of Antonio Candido's essay is devoted to drawing out formal peculiarities of Almeida's novel, whose distinctive texture derives from the figure of the *malandro* or rogue. In the novel the *malandro* is not precisely a type, though he is that too and will certainly become one over the subsequent course of Brazilian literary history. Rather he is a principle of composition, a figure that passes easily between two poles that Antonio Candido labels 'order' and 'disorder' respectively: something recognizable as bourgeois society on the one hand, with its laws, marriages, professions, and all the rest, and on the other a larger zone, difficult to qualify, that presents 'twenty situations of concubinage for every marriage and a thousand chance unions to every situation of concubinage' (95). This movement, once we are attuned to it, turns out to govern the novel as a whole, such that

even omnipresent Major Vidigal, the fearsome representative of order throughout the novel, turns out to obey the same logic. In a climactic scene the major, approached at home in *deshabille* by three women who seek to intervene on the hero's behalf, rushes inside and reemerges wearing his uniform dress coat – but not his pants. The major, complacently responsive to the blandishments of the ladies, appears 'in regimentals from the belt up, homespun from the belt down – armoring reason in the norms of the law and easing the solar plexus in amiable indiscipline' (95).

It is this organizing principle that gives the novel its coherence and, as it plays out across social strata and situations, its 'feeling of reality' (96). But so far this is a purely subjective – though, as we will explore more thoroughly below, modally universal – judgment. What is the 'reality' whose presence we feel? We recall that the action of the novel is 'circumscribed socially to the kind of free people of modest means who we would today call the *petit bourgeois*' (86). Almeida will restrict his action to this world – a marginal one, but one whose consistency is only intelligible with reference to the other two classes. Landowners are landowners, slaves are slaves, but the petty bourgeoisie is not a petty bourgeoisie but rather a superfluous but relatively privileged population; while the economy is capitalist, it does not produce a classically bourgeois society but rather one 'in which only a few free people worked and the rest whistled whichever way the wind blew, gleaning the leftovers through parasitism, venal contrivance, the kindness of patrons, good luck, or petty theft' (95). This, then, is the objective correlative of the dialectic of roguery:

What remained was the gamelike air of this unsteady organization fissured by anomie, translated into the dance of characters between licit and illicit, without our being able to say in the end which was one and which the other, because everyone ends up circulating between the two with a naturalness that recalls the mode of formation of families, power, fortunes, and reputations in urban Brazil in the first half of the nineteenth century. (95)

Two observations remain to be made. First, while social form here pertains to the real, it is not a fact. Form is rather imposed upon facts of two different orders: both the facts of lived experience and the historical record, and the fictional facts that belong only to the novel. This is what Schwarz means by the ‘near-total’ separation of the real and fictional orders: fact does not relate to fact, but both sets of facts are subjected to the same logic, ‘thanks to which the two series, real and fictitious, are rendered coherent’ (96). Second, while this is clearly a cognitive process, it is a cognitive process of a special kind. The pertinent criterion of judgment is not truth, in the sense of something that can be verified by means of other kinds of documents, but plausibility: as we have seen, Antonio Candido’s categories of judgment are always subjective: the ‘sense’ [*senso*] or ‘feeling’ [*sentimento*] or ‘impression’ of reality, which carries a greater or lesser ‘force of conviction’. Plausibility is a subjective determination, but one whose mode is nonetheless universal: if two people disagree about the ‘feeling of reality’ produced by a work of fiction, they do not simply have different opinions: each party is saying that the other is wrong, which means that each party is saying that her own impressions are not simply her own impressions, but are correct. We should not be shocked or disappointed that this modality of judgment ultimately rests on nothing more solid than argument and consensus. (So does politics.) With art, plausibility is a higher criterion than verifiable truth, which after all is not rare. Every photograph on Facebook bears an indexical relationship to the real world, some element of verifiable truth – which does not mean that what it says is plausible. A Jeff Wall photograph, on the other hand, may be so highly manipulated that no particular element can be said with certainty to bear an indexical relationship to an actual state of affairs. A successful Jeff Wall picture is successful, then, not because the state of affairs it represents is true, but because its fictional presentation is plausible.

Since Kant, aesthetic judgment has been understood as, only apparently paradoxically, both subjective and universal. Indeed, the philosophy between Kant and Hegel – Jacobi and Reinhold through Fichte – finds the justification for this mode of judgment in an inchoate set of implicit, and possibly inexpressible, convictions, without which experience would not be intelligible in the first place. Recall that for Schwarz, as we saw above, a social form can, apparently paradoxically, be recognized without having been previously known. For these reasons, as we shall see below, realism inheres in works that, like *Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant*, appear very far from the realist tradition.

## THE SPECIFICITY OF THE LITERARY

Schwarz tests these propositions in his underappreciated *Two Girls* (1997).<sup>4</sup> The book would be said to concern two characters in Brazilian literature that share similar formal features, except that one is not a character, but rather a young girl (‘Helena Morley’, nom de plume of Alice Dayrell Caldeira Brant) from the mining town of Diamantina who kept a diary between 1893 and 1895 and who published them in 1942 – with what degree of subsequent polish and rearrangement is not clear. The other character is Capitolina, or Capitu, the heroine of one Machado de Assis’s late masterpieces, *Dom Casmurro* (1899). Both Capitu and Helena are inquisitive, self-enlightening female figures inserted into a conservative, patriarchal culture that is, on one hand, not ignorant of metropolitan developments whose hegemony is acknowledged but not felt, and, on the other, tacitly complicit with other local, less formalized modes of existence. Helena’s book, while hardly innocent of literary form, nonetheless cannot be said to deploy it in the way that Machado de Assis or Manuel Antônio de Almeida does. Life in a declining mining town in late-nineteenth-century

Brazil has a texture and a form, and Helena, with astonishing perspicacity, records events that exhibit that form.

Like the girl, her little brothers sometimes do work normally done by blacks, or become poor cousins, exploited for domestic work by wealthy relatives, or take their place as members of an important family. This alternation between more or less incompatible roles, far distant from one another in the social spectrum, is lived as an everyday experience, so that the system of social differences is transformed into an interior reality marked by a surprising objectivity and irony of manner. (119)

The point of interest and difficulty is that Helena's registration of social form seems only quantitatively, not qualitatively, different from that of Machado or (here) Almeida. Helena Morley's speech is, as non-literary speech, not different qualitatively from any other speech. It may be cleverer, more insightful, more lively than others, but it requires no special status simply because it lies between two covers. The particularity of literary form, which Antonio Candido and Schwarz had been so careful to specify, threatens to evaporate before our eyes, and literary study begins to look like an elite variant of qualitative sociology, cultural anthropology, or history.

Schwarz solves the problem by performing a thought experiment. What if the book's form turned out to be literary in the strict sense? What, in other words, if the book turned out to be a hoax, written, rather than merely edited, by a cosmopolitan woman in her 60s? In that case,

the nature of our reading changes. Much of what would appear as curious, lively detail in a day-to-day registration of events becomes, in a strictly composed work, crude, pseudo-ingenuous, and artistically inadequate. In other words, we already didn't believe that we were confronted with a work of the imagination in the strict sense. Indeed, the interest and beauty of the work are tied to the feeling that it was composed according to the drift of days, 'without artistic intentions'. (96)

The problem had in fact already been solved, though we didn't realize it, because not only had we already posited the book as

non-literary, but the very felicitousness of the book's contents depended on being posited a priori as non-literary. As a register of events, the diary as a form bears with it an indexical relation to reality. The work of producing a 'feeling of reality' has been accomplished before the first word has been read. The moment we are asked to sever the indexical link, the book fails to strike us with the 'force of conviction': it becomes a novel, but a bad one.

This thought experiment has interpretive implications as well. Helena's story ends well. One can hardly take issue with this, as the story of the girl who wrote the diary indeed ends well. Capitu's story ends unhappily. This is not just a felicitous choice, but from the standpoint of the logic Machado is developing, a necessary one. 'The obstacles that are overcome [by Helena] do not go away; they remain, awaiting their next victim. From the collective standpoint, there is more reality in them than in the triumph of the occasional lucky individual' (151). Again, the point is not to criticize Helena Morley for having overcome obstacles: to do so would be, absurdly, to criticize Alice Brant for having overcome those same obstacles. The point is rather that, as something that happened, Helena's triumph is simply beyond criticism on literary grounds. If, on the other hand, Capitu had enduringly rather than provisionally overcome the obstacles that confronted her, the 'feeling of reality' – the opposite of the Barthesian 'reality effect', which is a mere literary technique rather than a principle of composition in the sense that Antonio Candido and Schwarz have elaborated it – would have been sacrificed for a singular romantic adventure.<sup>5</sup>

## CASE STUDIES

Two relatively minor essays illustrate Schwarz's productive and unconventional approach to the question of literary realism.

The first is Schwarz's brief but decisive reading of Kafka's *Worries of a Family Man*.<sup>6</sup> The story sticks with us less for the family man, who turns out to be the unnamed narrator of the piece, than it does for the figure of Odradek, a strange object that looks like a spool but isn't, since its spool-like form, covered in random pieces of string, is supplemented by two crossed bars that enable it to 'stand upright as though on two legs'.<sup>7</sup> As we soon find out, Odradek not only stands upright, but speaks. This would seem to be an odd place to look for realism. But the story's secret is hiding in plain sight: its title has nothing to do with Odradek, but rather the somewhat mysterious anxiety of the narrator, whose patriarchal status would seem to have little enough to do with the figure at the story's center.

Looking for a unifying compositional principle, Schwarz discovers that the piece is organized around a series of shifts in tonal register that reveal the family man's attitude toward Odradek: initially amused, then condescending, dismissive, anxious, and ultimately (though this is expressed indirectly) murderous. Why should little Odradek provoke any reaction at all, much less this peculiar sequence? The only thing we know about the narrator other than what he tells us is his status as paterfamilias, and the prose confirms that he sees himself as the bearer of bourgeois responsibility and propriety. Looking carefully at what the family man tells us about Odradek, Schwarz explains that Odradek is 'the precise and logical construction of the negation of bourgeois life' (23). We are told twice that Odradek has no purpose. On the other hand, he does have purposive form, so emphatically so that the family man can, to his frustration, withhold it from him for only a sentence before it reasserts itself. To say that Odradek is useless but in his own way complete is to say that Odradek's form is immanently determined. In a society like ours, no entity is permitted an exemption from the obligation to serve a heteronomous purpose. Since Odradek's being cannot

be connected to any heteronomous activity, rather appearing complete in himself, 'he is the extreme image of liberty amidst the effort required by propriety; a perfection neglected but perfectly safe, since it is made up of parts that nobody wants'; climactically, Odradek is 'a lumpenproletariat without hunger and without fear of the police' (24). But the point is not that Odradek allegorically represents the lumpenproletariat without hunger and without fear of the police: since the lumpenproletariat is hungry and does fear the police, the formulation is just as much an impossible schematic construction as Odradek himself. Since realism in fiction is not a matter of relating fictional facts to real ones, there is nothing anti-realist in Kafka's prose and Odradek doesn't 'stand for' anything at all; rather, the realism of Kafka's story inheres in the form given to the family man's prose, which schematizes the condescension, fear, and hostility exhibited by bourgeois life when confronted with what escapes its logic.

Schwarz's reading, brief though it is, goes theoretically far beyond Benjamin's and Adorno's more comprehensive approaches to Kafka, which always in the end lunge for Kafka's thematic bait. Something similar could be said for the debate between Brecht and Adorno over the question of literary 'commitment' – a question Schwarz resolves by sidelining the immediate question of commitment to ask the question of how Brecht means what he means.<sup>8</sup> As is well known, Brecht sought to turn the ancient defense of poetry – 'delight and teach' – more fundamentally into a choice of priorities: theater for pleasure or theater for learning?<sup>9</sup> Adorno raises an objection to this orientation that is in its essence very basic. If a work of art is to be judged not according to immanent criteria but according to its ends – revolutionary precepts or lessons on the functioning of capitalism – then what is in fact to be judged is those ends themselves, and the aptness of the work as a means to them.<sup>10</sup> In the early 1950s Adorno is, to say the least, suspicious of the ends to which Brecht is committed.

More devastatingly, however, Adorno points to the implausibility of the work of art as a means. In order to do what it claims to do – namely, to ‘strike in images the being of capitalism’ (Adorno: 416) – Brechtian theater has recourse to the technical means available to drama as a medium. But from the perspective of propositional truth, of the revolutionary doctrine the work of art is supposed to contain, these technical means are distortions. The very requirement that Brecht’s *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* be a play falsifies the treatise it also claims to be. The ostensible thesis of *Saint Joan*, that individual do-gooding is a compensatory substitute for collective action, is subverted by the fact that everything hinges – necessarily, since this is a play – on the success or failure of Joan’s individual do-gooding.

The brilliance of Schwarz’s intervention is to see that Adorno’s critique is devastating to Brecht’s claim to didactic effectiveness, but not to the play for which this claim is made. The loss is not as great as it might seem: after all, Schwarz reminds us, the Brechtian ‘lessons’ are ‘of modest scope’ and it is not obvious that they remain today ahead of historical developments (43). ‘Thus, against claims to the contrary, the truth of the plays would not lie in the lessons passed on, in the theorems concerning class conflict, but rather in the objective dynamic of the whole’ (44). This is not to say that Brecht’s plays have no cognitive content or that they have no political potency, but rather that their content and their politics are mediated by ‘emancipated form’, the self-legislating nature of the work. On Schwarz’s reading, the central figure is not so much Joan as the industrialist Mauler, whose need to outdo his competitors leads him to take risks that provoke successive crises. We remember, of course, that for Marx, ‘the characters who appear on the economic stage are merely personifications of economic relations’: competition is not a drive, but an effect of relationships among firms. In *Saint Joan*, subjectivity takes its revenge. If universal competitiveness is indeed a product

of capitalist economic relations, it is nonetheless, in Mauler, hypostasized into something very like a drive, which is to say something that overrides self-interest. ‘The capitalists’ extraordinary cleverness changes meaning, in turn becoming obsolete and pernicious’ (54). What appears on the stage is the ‘transformation of the cunning of capital into reflexes that are counterproductive, one would almost say antideluvian. The contrast ... recalls in fact a loss of judgment on a species-wide scale’. The plausibility of this formalization, and its relevance to contemporary history, could not be clearer, or more lamentable.

## MISPLACED IDEAS

So far we have taken Schwarz’s work in its dimension as a continuation, methodological refinement, and theoretical justification of a familiar problematic, namely the problem of literary realism in its non-literary-historical sense, the interpretation of literary form as disclosing social form. But Schwarz’s major contribution has been to produce a powerful and productive version of what Fredric Jameson has called in another context a ‘spatial dialectic’. That is, the social form disclosed by literary formalization is, particularly in Schwarz’s work on Machado de Assis, not just national in scope, but reaches out to the dynamic of what an older vocabulary called ‘combined and uneven development’, the differential development of capitalism across geographic and political space.

The major text here is *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism*, a book-length study of Machado’s masterpiece, *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*.<sup>11</sup> But a chapter of an earlier study, published separately in English as ‘Misplaced Ideas’, concisely lays out the theoretical coordinates.<sup>12</sup> Schwarz begins by diving into the historical record, showing that in the debates around the abolition of slavery, the latter is argued to be not just good or bad, justifiable or unjustifiable, but is seen

against the background, implicit or explicit, of the European ideology of free labor. The economist F.H. Cardoso, who studied Marx with Schwarz and later became President of the Republic, noted that the structural effects of this mismatch are thoroughgoing (21). In Europe, the profit motive directly produces the need for efficiency, for shedding labor costs. In Brazil, the same motive required the slaveowner to 'fill and discipline the day of the slave' (21), who could be sold but not laid off. The critical point, however, is that these totally divergent forms of labor organization are not separate phenomena: they are linked by the same world economy that requires ever new efficiencies and innovations in the industrial center, but also requires stability in the production of raw materials on the periphery.

The ideological consequences of this phenomenon are complex and wide-ranging. If we conceive ideology in a broadly Althusserian vein, as an imaginary relationship to real conditions of existence, then we notice that the dominant discourses – from political economy all the way down to everyday bourgeois morality – do not, in fact, relate to Brazilian conditions of existence. As Schwarz pithily phrases it, in this situation 'ideologies do not describe reality, not even falsely' (23). Art historical developments, for example, which are intuitively understood in Europe, at least by their partisans, to be vital responses to rapidly changing social and sensory conditions, can only appear from the periphery, even to their partisans, to be a parade of fashions – a perspective that is not false. A phenomenon that relegates Brazil to a kind of cultural backwardness is not, then, without a certain lofty ambivalence: failing to (falsely) account for local conditions, liberal ideology became preposterous, but 'inasmuch as they became preposterous, these ideas ceased to mislead' (24). Adding to the ambivalence is the fact that also in Europe liberal ideas had been given the lie by the apologetic turn they had taken since 1848. Since Brazil's 'improper discourse was hollow even when used properly' (25),

there is a certain congruence between apologetic speech in Brazil and critical speech in Europe, such that a defender of slavery can call the European laborer 'a slave without a master to pity him' (19).

Complicating all this is the fact that the central class articulation worked out in the actual functioning of everyday ideology is not that between masters and slaves but between the former and the anomalous class already familiar to us from the discussion of Almeida above: free whites without property. 'Favor', the system of unequal reciprocities that maintained the privileged but dependent class, 'formed and flavored the whole of national life, excepting always the basic productive relationship which was secured by force' (22). But if slavery renders liberal ideas irrelevant, 'favor, more insidiously, uses them, for its own purposes, originating a new ideological pattern':

The element of arbitrariness, the fluid play of preferences to which favor subjects whatever it touches, cannot be fully rationalized. In Europe, when attacking such irrationalities, universalism had its aim on feudal privilege. In opposing this, bourgeois civilization had postulated the autonomy of the individual, universality of law, cultivation for its own sake, a day's pay for a day's work, the dignity of labor, etc., against the prerogatives of the Ancien Regime. Favor in turn implies the dependency of the individual, the exception to the rule, ornamental culture, arbitrary pay and the servility of labor. (22–3)

Liberal ideas, which do, after all, legitimize the organization of the independent Brazilian state and its articulation with the world system, continue to circulate, but without a connection to a social reality that they do not (falsely) describe. But since the whole point of liberalism is to account for a social reality, this displacement cannot be acknowledged even though it is generally understood: an openly ornamental liberalism no longer looks like liberalism. 'Real as it was, the antagonism vanished into thin air, and the opposing positions walked hand in hand' (23). This same structure, most easily visible in



relationships of direct patronage, can be seen to operate at manifold levels: 'The same is true of institutions, bureaucracy and justice, for example, which though ruled by patronage, proclaimed the forms and theories of modern bourgeois state' (23). In a final twist, however, we have to be reminded that while the structure underlying Brazilian culture was retrograde from the standpoint of liberalism, it was not archaic, but rather rigorously contemporaneous with and linked to developments in the central economies:

However, Brazil was not to Europe as feudalism was to capitalism. On the contrary, we were a function of European capitalism, and moreover, had never been feudal, for our colonization was the deed of commercial capital. ... In this confrontation, the two principles were not of equal strength: in the sphere of reasoning, principles the European bourgeoisie had developed against arbitrariness and slavery were eagerly adopted; while in practice, sustained by the realities of social life, favor continually reasserted itself, with all the feelings and notions that went with it. (23)

This is essentially the structure that Machado de Assis will bring to consciousness in his late masterpieces. We will return to this shortly. Meanwhile, it is important to note exactly what has taken place here. The ideological structure of slaveholding Brazil – and Schwarz makes it clear that the argument holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for other periods, as long as Brazil is in the position of periphery to a European and American center – is drawn with extraordinary sensitivity and complexity. But at the same time it is drawn into a binary structure. The texture of Brazilian life is not simply produced from the *sui generis* interaction of its various constitutive elements; rather, it is much more profoundly produced by its relation to the world economic system. However, this culture, subordinate though it is, is not merely to be condemned nor criticized for its backwardness since it is not literally backward – feudal, let's say – but rather in every way contemporary with, indeed, produced by, the same process as its

industrializing counterpart. 'In such wise, our national oddities became world-historical'. Indeed,

The tenacity of the basic social relationships and the ideological volatility of the 'elite' were both a part of the dynamics of Capitalism as an international system, the part that it was ours to live out. The latifundia [landholding elite], little changed, saw the baroque, neoclassic, romantic, naturalist, and modernist cultures pass by, cultures which in Europe reflected immense transformations in its social order. We could well suppose that here they would lose their point, which in part did occur. But this loss to which we were condemned by the working of the international system of capitalism condemned the working of that very system itself. We say this to indicate its more-than-national significance. (27–8)

Neither, then, is peripheral culture to be celebrated under the banner of difference. For while the difference has an ambivalently positive aspect – a critique of the world system is implicit in it – its source is at basis deeply negative: the profound structural inequalities built into capitalism's reproductive process. Third world or subaltern culture is of world-historical significance not for its alterity in relation to the culture of the dominant countries, but through its differential insertion into the world system. What Schwarz produces in these relatively few pages is nothing less than what Fredric Jameson has called a 'spatial dialectic', one in which the great Hegelian schema of the 'identity of identity and difference' plays out not only in time but across apparently disparate social formations. (Indeed, at a moment when capitalism's ability to absorb labor displaced by technological advances is doubted even by mainstream economists, even the core economies may be entering a Machadian universe where liberal ideas no longer describe reality, not even falsely.) It is not only an external framework for understanding peripheral culture in general but, when works of extraordinary power draw this structure into their own literary form – as for example, in the late novels of Machado de Assis – a kind of key.

## MACHADO DE ASSIS: PERIPHERAL IDEOLOGY AND LITERARY FORM

*A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism*, Schwarz's book-length study of Machado de Assis's *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, is a critical masterpiece whose intricacy and rigor cannot be adequately conveyed in summary. However, much of the critical apparatus we need to understand it has been sketched above. Schwarz begins with a series of textual observations that are schematized into a description of the generative structures that underlie the novel. The novel is written, appropriately for a memoir, in a strong first person; indeed, the narrator has such firm control over the flow of language that the implied addressee – and very likely the actual reader, at least on a first reading – is left at sea, at the mercy of the mercurial Brás. The effect is initially charming, if bewildering:

I hesitated for some time as to whether I should open these memoirs at the beginning or the end, that is, whether I should put my birth or my death in first place. Granted, the common usage is to start with one's birth, but two considerations led me to adopt a different method: the first is that I am not exactly a writer who has died, but a dead man who has become a writer, and for whom the grave was a second cradle; the second is that my writing would thus be more elegant and novel. Moses, who recounted his death, didn't put it in the introduction, but at the conclusion: a radical difference between this book and the Pentateuch.<sup>13</sup>

The debt to Sterne is obvious; and yet with these first lines we realize we are in the presence of something new. Summarizing Schwarz's initial approach: Brás exhibits a conscious desire to provoke. Already in the first paragraph he compares his book to the Hebrew bible – to the detriment to the latter, since the difference is that his own book is 'more elegant and novel'. On the other hand elegance and novelty are hardly Mosaic virtues, so the whole provocation is made in such a way that the narrator, at least, does not take his impertinence seriously – or at least,

he does not expect anyone else to take overt offence. Similarly with the claim to be not a writer who has died, but a dead man who writes. The proposition seems to make a fine distinction but is in fact an absurdity: in the light of what follows, the line drips with a contempt that is casual but serious. He speaks as one who does not expect to be believed, but also does not expect to be contradicted.

The key to Brás's language is his 'volubility', a period term that refers to speech but means not so much talkative as variable, mercurial, capricious.

At every turn Brás puts on the airs of a modern gentleman, only to disparage them in the next moment, then take them up again, setting up a system of inconsequentiality that in the course of the novel will become the norm. It is as if enlightened conduct were equally deserving of respectful consideration and mockery, functioning at one moment as an indispensable norm, at another as an obstacle. (9)

Once one becomes sensitive to them, the class overtones of this speech are unmistakable and give the prose its peculiar edge, even if one has no particular understanding of Brazilian social structure then or now. It is a structure that can, returning to Schwarz's earlier formulation, be recognized without being known. However, in light of what we already know from 'Misplaced Ideas', we can begin to see in Brás's speech a formalization of the peculiar ideological formation that prevailed in Brazil in Machado's time. Brás's insouciance is 'an acritical or nonspecific irreverence' (19) constantly taking contrary positions without taking any of them seriously, appropriate in a world where the ideas that circulate don't describe reality, not even falsely. His volubility 'is unimaginable without the ... groundwork of secularization and unification of human experience that the Enlightenment carried through, a struggle whose spirit Brás does not share, even though he makes use of its results, always stamping it with a note of derision' (19). Brás's volubility 'gives the objectivity of form to an

ideological ambivalence inherent to the Brazil of its time' (27).

As Merleau-Ponty says of painting, Machado's production of Brás's language as a thoroughgoing principle is almost mad – precisely because it is complete while being deliberately partial: a social totality, presented in nothing more than the way one man talks. (Schwarz goes on to show that the formal principle of volubility is also active at the level of the plot, where different figures effortlessly assume mutually incompatible social significations.) The force and ambiguity of this form is then familiar to us from 'Misplaced Ideas'; the comic effect of the novel is aimed at the mincemeat Brás is making of the various positions he adopts. We never lose sight of the fact that he is doing so as a wealthy provincial, but at the same time 'we are laughing here at nothing less than the achievements of the modern Western world' (35). However, there is in the end nothing attractive about Brás's volubility. In what is surely one of the most convincing close readings in the history of criticism, Schwarz demonstrates the class violence at work in Brás's volubility in a chapter that reveals its almost unbearable verbal and narrative cruelty when confronted with the poor girl Eugênia, who because she has nothing to stand on but her own dignity has, unlike Brás, something solid for her character to stand on – but nothing solid to live off.

With this one reaches the turn within a turn or negation of the negation in Schwarz's reading. Brás treats prestigious, liberal ideas with a contempt that is casual yet tacit. As we have seen, the peculiar ideological structure that gives Brás's speech its plausibility is a symptom of nineteenth-century Brazil's social and political formation. A side-effect of that formation is a certain critical distance from the liberal ideas it makes use of, which is nonetheless an 'acritical or nonspecific' criticism. But Brás is not a symptom but a formalization, and his final ugliness is not an external commentary on Brás but rather part and parcel of the figure's plausibility. In other words, *Brás Cubas* is, like 'Worries of

a Family Man', a profoundly realist text that uses apparently anti-realist means. But more than this, Machado is then closer to Flaubert than to Sterne in his historical significance. For while in Brás himself the critique of liberal ideas is tactical and nonspecific, this is not the case for Machado, whose earlier novels had attempted – at the cost of plausibility – to narrate the influence of those very liberal ideas on the ruling classes. But the cynical adaptability of liberal ideas to illiberal circumstances is not unique to Brazil: as we have seen, it is an open secret in Europe after 1848. Indeed, it is such a feature of daily life that it takes a truly self-parodic figure – like the tech billionaire who sleeps in his office on his own largely automated factory floor to show that he believes in a day's work for a day's pay – to remind us of it. 'Unerringly, by concentrating on the internal and external thresholds of the bourgeois order, the advanced literature of the second half of the nineteenth century dedicated itself to showing this same relativity and usurpation. This vanguard still has validity today' – one might even say that it has validity especially today – 'and Machado de Assis is part of it' (146).

### **CULTURAL CRITIQUE: POST-COUP BRAZILIAN CULTURE AND POSTMODERNISM**

Even the most accomplished works of art have blind spots, limitations imposed by the work's formal procedures, that cannot be overcome by means of those procedures themselves. Almeida's *Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant* succeeds despite its weak initial plan, which seems to have been overcome in the course of composition. Machado's earlier novels, which aimed to have 'a civilizing effect without being disrespectful' (152) fail, even when their content is a critique of the 'liberal-clientelist system' (151), to reconcile their romantic and realist aims in a satisfying way. *Memoirs* itself is powerfully mimetic

but, as a direct consequence of its formal procedures, limited in its ability to present historical movement. It is a limitation we may well see as symptomatic, as a 'sacrifice made' (128) in the name of Machadian mimesis that points to a blind spot, however historically unavoidable, that may have made the Machadian inventions necessary in the first place.

In other words there is, in Schwarz's work, room for a more traditional, Adornian culture critique, where the failures and limitations of works of art are symptomatic of historical impasses. Schwarz's relatively recent essays on Caetano Veloso and Augusto de Campos would fall into this category. But the most celebrated essay in this vein was written near the beginning of his career, when Brazil was undergoing a profound and prolonged political crisis. Despite its modest and workman-like title, 'Culture and Politics in Brazil, 1964–1969', written 1969–1970, is one of the great works of cultural criticism.<sup>14</sup> So profound is the cultural matrix it produces that work written on the period in real or apparent ignorance of it – as, for example, a great deal of North American writing on Brazilian concretism and on the musical movement known as *Tropicália* – renders itself pointless, already undermined by Schwarz's critique. Not necessarily of greater importance, but of greater interest to non-Brazilianists, is the fact that it concerns the coup of 1964, 'one of the crucial moments in the Cold War' (139), a turning point that marked as an event what was elsewhere felt as a more gradual process of the elimination of socialist alternatives – a process whose cultural equivalent is eventually known as postmodernism.

Schwarz's sweeping critique of Brazilian culture during the first years of the dictatorship reveals how profoundly the coup affected the arts. The situation of architecture is emblematic: Brazilian architects, whose formation had been centered around a collectivist, Utopian modernism that developed out of Brazil's popular-developmental period and into the developmental-socialist moment

cut short by the coup, suddenly had nothing better to do than build single-family houses. The ends being completely out of proportion to the means, the result was architecture ill-suited for living: formerly 'rational' design principles were turned either into a mere sign of good taste or a moralistic symbol of abstract revolution. This evacuation of content – the Jamesonian 'withdrawal of the signified' – is the very prototype of the transition from an avant-garde aesthetic economy to postmodern transavantgardism.

Schwarz reserves his most detailed analysis for the theater. Simplifying Schwarz's discussion, we might say that there are essentially two possibilities. The first is represented by the Augusto Boal's Teatro de Arena, whose dominant influence is Brechtian. As with the architectural instance, Brechtian techniques, developed in the context of a potential revolution, undergo a certain deformation in the context of the immediate aftermath of a failed one. Indeed, to put it in overly brutal terms, the Brazilian cultural elite, though sincere in its Left politics and opposition to the coup, was 'objectively' on the side of the coup, since it failed to take account of the way in which its own class interests coincided with the populist elision of class conflict: 'The defeated Left triumphed, without critique, in front of a full house, as though its defeat had not been a defect' (148). Revolutionary artistic technique becomes, at best, a reproduction of the problems inherent in Left populism, and at worst a consumable sign of the audience's innocence. The pleasure of this experience gives the lie to the innocence.

On the other hand we have José Celso Martinez Corrêa's Teatro Oficina. The Oficina represents an entirely different kind of theater experiment based on assault. Grounded in a more critical understanding of the role of the middle classes in the coup, Celso argued that 'any understanding between the stage and the house is an ideological and aesthetic mistake' (151). The audience, therefore, is to be insulted by the stage, its habits and choices ridiculed, its very person grabbed by the

collar, yelled at, spattered with blood, jostled by actresses fighting in the aisles over a raw ox liver (representing the heart of a TV celebrity), jeered out of the theater if they show any resistance. The surprising thing, and also the problem, is that the audience enjoys the image of its own humiliation: the show is a tremendous commercial success. But we are not dealing here with simple masochism. In fact, something rather more sinister appears to be taking place: the audience

identifies with the aggressor, at the expense of the victim. If someone, after being grabbed, leaves the theater, the satisfaction of those who stay is enormous. The disintegration of solidarity in the face of the massacre and the disloyalty created in the midst of the audience are absolute, and repeat the movement initiated on the stage. (153)

Does it need to be said that that movement initiated on the stage, in turn, repeats the movement of society at large?

Two ways of evaluating these thoroughly ambiguous experiments present themselves. The criterion of the first would be overcoming the contemplative attitude inherent in the aesthetic principle in favor of the value of political solidarity. From this standpoint, the minimal political cohesion maintained by the Arena productions is preferable to the thoroughgoing 'disintegration of solidarity' in the Oficina. The criterion of the second, which also seeks to exceed the aesthetic principle, is on the contrary finally cognitive: 'By its content, this movement is demoralizing in the extreme; but since we are, after all, in the theater, it is also an image, hence its critical force' (153). The Oficina productions, in all their brutality, in fact forecast the actual brutality of the dictatorship (the worst of which was yet to come) and general complacency in the face of it.

Any choice between the two modes – which remain 'options facing culture'<sup>15</sup> – would have to depend on how we understand our shared post-1968 political-cultural scene. However, it well may be that this era is everywhere drawing to a close, and what the

unsettling new conjunction calls for is new and unconventional realisms, 'emancipated forms' like those Roberto Schwarz draws our attention to in Machado de Assis.

## Notes

- 1 Roberto Schwarz, *Ao vencedor as batatas* (São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1977).
- 2 Page numbers for Schwarz refer to 'Objective Form: Reflections on the Dialectic of Roguery', in *Two Girls and Other Essays* (London: Verso, 2012: 10–32); the Portuguese version is 'Pressupostos, salvo engano, de "Dialética da malandragem"', in Roberto Schwarz, *Que horas são?* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1987: 129–55). The translation may be silently amended to match the original more closely.  
Similarly for Antonio Candido's essay 'Dialectic of Malandroism', in Antonio Candido, *On Literature and Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995: 79–103). The Portuguese version is 'Dialética da malandragem', *Revista do Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros* 8 (June 1970) 67–89.
- 3 'Retrato de uma senhora: O método de Henry James', in Roberto Schwarz, *A sereia e o desconfiado* (São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1981, here 153).
- 4 Page numbers refer to Roberto Schwarz, *Two Girls and Other Essays*; cited text refers also to *Duas Meninas* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997).
- 5 Inexplicably, the section of *Duas Meninas* drawing out the implications of the local problem for the 'nature of literary realism' (103–4) has been omitted from the English translation.
- 6 Roberto Schwarz, 'Tribulação de um pai de família', in *O pai de família e outros estudos* (São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1978: 21–6). References are to 'Worries of a Family Man', trans. Nicholas Brown, in *Mediations* 23.1 (Fall 2007) 21–5, available at [mediationsjournal.org/worries-of-a-family-man](http://mediationsjournal.org/worries-of-a-family-man)
- 7 Franz Kafka, 'Die Sorge des Hausvaters', in *Erzählungen* (Berlin: S. Fischer, 1965, here 171).
- 8 Roberto Schwarz, 'Altos e baixos da atualidade de Brecht', in *Seqüências brasileiras: ensaios* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1999: 113–48). References are to 'The Relevance of Brecht: High Points and Low', trans. Emílio Sauri, in *Mediations* 23.1 (Fall 2007) 27–61.
- 9 Bertolt Brecht, *Schriften zum Theater* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1957: 60–73).
- 10 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Engagement', in *Noten zur Literatur* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003: 409–30).

As the essay title makes clear, the terminology is Sartre's, not Adorno's.

- 11 Roberto Schwarz, *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); as above, cited text takes into account *Um mestre na periferia do capitalismo* (São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1990).
- 12 Roberto Schwarz, 'Misplaced Ideas', in *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture* (London: Verso, 1992: 19–32); 'As idéias fora do lugar', in Roberto Schwarz, *Ao vencedor as batatas* (São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1977: 9–31).
- 13 Machado de Assis, *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* (São Paulo: Penguin and Companhia das Letras, 2014, here 33). The translation is John Gledson's, from *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism*, here 8.
- 14 Roberto Schwarz, 'Cultura e Política, 1964–1969', in *O pai da família e outros estudos* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1978). Page numbers refer to 'Culture and Politics in Brazil, 1964–1969', in *Misplaced Ideas*: 126–59.
- 15 In a very different context: 'Worries of a Family Man', here 24.

# Aborted and/or Completed Modernization: Introducing Paulo Arantes

Pedro Rocha de Oliveira

Brazilian philosopher Paulo Arantes was born in 1942. He belongs to a generation of Brazilians who became intellectualized and politicized in the vibrant, turbulent years preceding the 1964 military coup. Despite sometimes defining himself as a ‘vulgar materialist’, his work was mainly influenced by Roberto Schwarz. György Lukács, Theodor Adorno, Jean-Paul Sartre, Herbert Marcuse and Hannah Arendt – but also Francis Fukuyama, Jürgen Habermas, Fernand Braudel and Carl Schmitt – are all names appearing regularly in Arantes’ writings which often take the form of critical analyses of varied but simultaneously contrasting authors and works. Yet, Arantes is only superficially concerned with defending his own take on celebrated authors and works. The epigraph of his 1996 book *O Fio da Meada* (‘The Skein in the Tangle’) could be used for the whole of his work: ‘he thought inside other heads’ (Brecht, 1988: 420).

At first glance, the themes occupying his thought have varied greatly. In the

1970s and 80s, Arantes studied the transition from classical bourgeois thought to the Critique of Political Economy. In the 1990s, he reflected on the connection between the previous decades’ projects of socioeconomic modernization and socialist ideology. In the early 2000s, he wrote about the processes of economic and political polarization underlying ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘globalization’. Since then, Arantes has discussed the consequences of militarized territorial administration on a national and international level.

However, his work as a whole displays formal unity. His books are collections of often jocosely titled essays (‘Single-minded thought and the distracted Marxist’ (Arantes, 2004) enigmatically grouped in untitled, numbered parts. With few exceptions his texts are organized in puzzling arguments with doubled negatives, parentheses inside parentheses, and closing with deliberately inconclusive twists. This consistent choice of form is, however, no mere stylistic caprice

but an expression of the difficulties and aporias implied by the subterranean problem occupying Arantes: the ways in which the complex relationship between the ideology of socioeconomic development and the historical intensification of capitalist social relations, inspired a tradition of radical social transformation and yet, collapsed into a brutal reaffirmation of capitalist accumulation – or, in his characteristically aphoristic terms, how modernity came to be aborted and/or completed (Arantes, 2004: 66).

Arantes' work is also trespassed by a certain unity of approach. In his assessment of capitalist modernization, Arantes adopts a perspective with two fronts. On one, bourgeois socialization appears as an open, potentially emancipating project or process; on the other, it is taken as a short-lived deception whose clear signs of failure are displayed all over the history of mass movements and in the peripheries of capitalism. This approach, clearly inherited from Roberto Schwarz, entails that global capitalism is better understood from the cognitively *privileged* position of its downside – 'reading North by South', in Neil Larsen's expression (1995).

The chapter reconstructs Arantes' arguments in what I consider his most representative works. The aim is not to exhaust the texts I will be dealing with, but to explore their points of contact in order to give the reader a bird's-eye view of Arantes' thought. That exploration will be undertaken in the following ways. I begin with an analysis of Arantes' essays on the genesis of the thought of Hegel and Marx, attending to the sociological foundations of the dialectical consciousness of bourgeois modernity. I then proceed to address Arantes' appraisal of the relation between that dialectical consciousness and the political possibilities of modern society. From there, I go on to discuss Arantes' interpretation of Brazilian modernization, especially in light of its authoritarian modulation, determined by and/or determining the 1964 military coup and of certain paths

taken by the theoretical consciousness that developed around it. I then engage the way in which Arantes follows the implications those developments have for a diagnosis of contemporary global capitalism, particularly as pertains to the dissociation between economic development and social progress: a dissociation that connects to an increasingly violent social administration and the material transformation of the classical role of temporality in bourgeois ideology and political practice.

## **SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND MODERNIZATION**

### ***Theory, Nation Building and Political Modernity***

One of the recurring ideas in *Ressentimento da Dialética* ('The resentment of dialectic'; Arantes, 1996a) is that one of Marx's and Engels' fundamental discoveries – in *The Holy Family* and *The German Ideology* – was the connection between the genesis of bourgeois social theory and the class character of the capitalist relations. According to Arantes' account, due to the complexity of civil society – the volume and diversity of the propertied classes – national consolidation under capitalism demands a discursive effort capable of displaying, in terms of state formation, the material interests particular to each social sector. To that effect, the workings of capitalism must be represented in terms compatible with common interest, common advantage and general viability. State formation must therefore appear as a more or less conscious project, oriented by the universal language of science – sociology, economy, philosophy, etc. In the mid to late 1700s, Germany had a philosophical discourse, but a national bourgeois society was yet unformed. In that, according to Arantes, lies the root of dialectic.



### ***Intellectual Resentment in the Periphery of Classical Bourgeois Society***

The basic idea, here, is that Idealism sprang from the frustration felt by intellectuals whose work failed to penetrate a politically closed society. In the resentful tones that give Arantes' work its title, German intellectuals began to picture themselves as those not heard or read because German society was not ready to appreciate their sophistication.

Their resentment had a material basis. On the one hand, the middle class was bound to become intellectualized because of its specific socioeconomic functions. From the standpoint of public administration, however, the mixture of political fragmentation and concentration of authority that characterized Germany made middle-class ideology dispensable. The common people, in their turn, had no reason to care about the political consequences of ideas in an environment completely closed to their political participation. The intelligentsia, therefore, found itself dependent on an aristocracy whose uncontested power limited their intellectual endeavours to the purely professional or private spheres, making political ideas irrelevant.

French philosophy, with its cosmopolitan, universalized content and outlook, expressed a fundamental moment of European reality: social modernization as the rational exercise of administrative power by the modern state. Scottish and English thinkers, in turn, were deciphering the hidden laws of economic activity. The German intelligentsia, no matter how sympathetic to such projects, were socially excluded from the possibility of promoting a problematic clash between thought and reality: an interested social class was lacking, as well as the political structures capable of advancing their ideas. Thus, German philosophic discourse was forced to assume a self-centred disposition for which the practical criterion of truth was restricted to the paradoxical space between political

conservatism and intellectual modernity, carefully avoiding the 'excesses' of French Enlightenment – both the enthusiasm of its form and the radicality of its content.

### ***Idealism and Reality as a Problem***

According to Arantes, the interiorization of the objective impotence of thought, combined with its subjective empowerment, had paved the way for a German reception of scepticism. In Immanuel Kant's Philosophy, David Hume's radical empiricism was distilled as a taboo against the 'thing-in-itself' due to its incognizability. Such a taboo was also extended to the essence of the human being, which could be known as a 'transcendental subject' deprived of historical and sociological context. Kant further dissociated philosophy in its technical specificity from a philosophy sufficiently sure of its own powers and limitations as to be able to safely discuss matters of general interest. The latter was indefinitely postponed until the theory of knowledge was completed, a day Kant himself did not live to see. Therefore, philosophy had nothing to say about the social, historical world, except whatever could be deduced from the metaphysics of the transcendental subject. And all this went hand in hand with Kant's distinction between the 'public' and 'private' uses of reason, which fitted well into the politically imposed limitations on thought in Germany – even as it tried to translate those limitations in terms not of social theory, but of epistemology.

Jacobi's reading of Kant's Criticism was to the point. If existing things were forbidden to thought, and intelligence was thus limited to the world of mere appearance, then, the only object of thought was nothingness, and reason thus was left in a useless state. However, Fichte would see in the transcendental nullification of things the opposite of an impoverishment of thought. Reality was nothing, but *should* become something,

as inscribed in the teleological character of ideas which were not *yet* socially relevant.

### ***Fichte and the Neutralized Masses***

Fichte, Arantes argues, went on to root his philosophy in the social context of Europe. Specifically, the nihilism at the core of Idealism – nullified reality – corresponded to the socio-political inertia of the masses. However, in his system, that inertia was represented as an empty space for the didactic political activity of intellectuals. German backwardness, and even the dissociation between thought and political action, existed only so that the intellectual could fulfil his civilizing destiny – a project inscribed in the title of Fichte’s magnum opus, the *Doctrine of Science* [*Wissenschaftslehre*].

Characteristically, Fichte ignored the sociological basis of the dissociation between the politically neutralized masses and the highly cultured intellectual sectors. Instead, Fichte made a place for a didactic reforming ideal. The plebs, as ignorant and impoverished as they were alienated from politics, oscillated between revolt and passivity. A slow process of reformation, rooted in education, was needed to change that.

### ***Hegel, Social Theory and Class Alliances***

Fichte was not alone in that regard, Arantes argues. German Idealism was constantly concerned with the possibility of a popular uprising, giving a patronizingly reformist response to that imagined threat. But Arantes points out Hegel’s contribution to that consensus was slightly dissonant. In 1798, Hegel saw German society as riven by a loss of ‘power and dignity’ of ‘existing life’, in which ‘no satisfaction can be found’ (cited in Arantes, 1996a: 324). However, the young Hegel did not prescribe an immediate restoration of dignity through culture, but instead

lingered on that negative moment, and described it as a social experience shared by both the learned classes and the masses. He thus moved on to say that the people and the intelligentsia suffered from the same problems and *wanted the same change*. In Hegel’s words, quoted by Arantes:

The growing contradiction between the unknown that men unconsciously aspire to, and the life that is given and consented, and which is in fact their own life, and the nostalgia for the life of those who have in themselves elevated nature to the condition of the Idea, carries in itself an impulse of reciprocal attraction. The need of the former to accede to the consciousness of what imprisons them, and the unknown to which they aspire, meets the need of the latter, of introducing in life the Idea they have formulated. (1996a: 324)

Over the years, though, Hegel would express a diminishing sympathy for popular political action. In his mature writings, the only remaining aspect of his youthful tirades will be the image of coerced, powerless masses and a rigid state bureaucracy stopping the enlightened sectors from dedicating their capacities to the modernization of German society. The generalization of suffrage was not recommended; the prevailing feudal structures could be overcome only through a restricted democracy in which the enlightened few would represent the common interest in modernity.

### ***The Proletariat as the True Heir of Bourgeois Resentment***

In Arantes’ account, Hegel was thus responsible for bringing into the idealist tradition the representation of politically efficient universality as class alliance. After Hegel, theoretical truthfulness could be posed in terms of the ability of ideas to respond to and express social needs. In his most recent essays collected in *Ressentimento*, Arantes (1996a) further suggests that Marx’s work was shaped around that same demand. However, the critique of bourgeois ideology,

based on an awareness of the class character of universalism, would allow Marx to question the idea of class alliance.

Arantes interprets the sociological grounds of Hegel's contribution in the following terms. Due to the operational complexity of the state and the market, capitalist public administration needs to incorporate a technical-scientific content, which is also the basis for the growth of a social sector exclusively dedicated to thought. The intellectual productions of this sector are, therefore, impregnated with habits of thought linked to the preservation of the status quo, and manifested in the reformist impulses of the German intelligentsia. Yet the fact that social administration is, by definition, restrictive and hierarchical, imposes a frustrating limitation to the degree to which intellectuals can identify themselves with political conservatism. The emphatic moment of bourgeois universalism springs from that frustration: it expresses an alienation that the intelligentsia shares with the masses, and projects a reality entirely permeable to rationality and human agency in general.

Marx's critique of ideology stressed that this universality represented a politically valid ideal. It was society itself which, when measured against that ideal, appeared as false. In historical terms, universalism was rooted in class alliances forged in the struggle against Absolutism; but bourgeois society had appropriated the machinery of the modern state, and employed it for the expansion of capitalism. The violence required for the conservation of property reaffirmed social alienation, imposing it on the dispossessed. The proletariat was thus the heir of bourgeois resentment, but in a historical moment in which rationality could no longer be represented as a merely subjective attribute: after all, the bourgeoisie had already unleashed social modernization. The *Communist Manifesto* will thus reinterpret the alienation that Idealism saw as a gap between reality and the rational faculty in terms of the contradiction between, the modern state and

its political-juridical-administrative apparatus centred on the preservation of private property – the relations of production, and the technology, machinery and administrative knowledge inherent in them – the productive forces. The revolt of the masses was thus thought of as the negativity of bourgeois rationality – inasmuch as it resented alienation, and of its positivity – since overcoming alienation was possible through the potential expansion of the technical-scientific moment: modernization.

## LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES OF BOURGEOIS MODERNIZATION

### *The 1848 Paradigm*

In *O Fio da Meada*, Arantes (1996b) adds a further layer to his account of the genesis of Marxian thought: his analysis of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. For Arantes, 'the 1848 upheaval represents the true dawn and still birth of bourgeois politics' (1996b: 31). The demand for the democratic reorganization of the French political system imploded when the propertied classes turned against universal suffrage, fearing the consequences of the growing radicalism of popular political consciousness, thus laying bare the class content of the universalism of the 1789 Revolution.

Insofar as this defeated mass movement involved not only the organized proletariat but also the intellectualized petite-bourgeoisie, it was also the expression of a turning point in capitalist accumulation. The period of free enterprise was over: the victors of 1848 were the monopolistic bourgeoisie of high industry and finance. Thus, Arantes suggests, socially relevant philosophy seems to have been a fading dream tied to a phase historically doomed by the logic of capitalist modernization.

In Arantes' appropriation of Marx's argument, the historical repeal of universalism transforms the positive moment of bourgeois

thought. The modernization impulse was critically connected to the idea of an ample civil society, due to its rootedness in the critique of alienation. Expressed in universal terms, that connection imbued bourgeois ideology with a democratic moment, which was suppressed by 1848. If we read that suppression in terms of the *Communist Manifesto*'s formula, it can be said that 1848 repositioned modernization in a manner that would tend to the concentration of both economic power and political power. The sterilization of bourgeois universalism thus seems to imply the sterilization of politics in capitalist society.

### ***Philosophy without an Object and the Critique of Political Economy***

The outcome of 1848 thus caused philosophy 'to lose its object once and for all' (Arantes, 1996b: 31): its function of articulating class alliances for the transformation of social reality was historically revoked. However, it retained a sort of empty functionality despite its loss of object. After the mid 1800s it increasingly turned itself into a highly specialized academic subject.

Yet the fact that philosophy was now barred from having direct political implications did not mean that all critical thought was paralysed. The Critique of Political Economy emerged precisely in this context, shedding 'a retrospective light over the previous philosophical illusion' (1996b: 40). Philosophy is overcome by the discovery of a sort of rationality alienated from itself – Capital as a seemingly automatic subject – and by the exposure of its violent core of social domination, which expressed itself in the political limitations of class alliance in bourgeois society. This, argues Arantes, is reflected in the path taken by Marx's work after 1852 and, ultimately, in *Capital*.

At the same time, that dissociation between philosophy and social transformation was not permanent. Georg Lukács and a whole lot of Marxist philosophers will seek to re-establish

the problem of universality within the discourse of the Critique of Political Economy. Arantes finds the historical context of development of 'Western Marxism' noteworthy. In his view, *History and Class Consciousness* was an 'unrepeatable model' written in a 'moment of historical grace' (1996b: 45). The Bolshevik Revolution had reopened sudden possibilities for popular organization worldwide, so that the political perspective of the working class could be formulated in terms of a general critique of capitalist society based on the problem of commodity fetishism – thus, alienation – and expressed through a Weberian sociology of modernization. A socially relevant critical philosophy thus emerged in connection with a real political process in a brief historical opening soon closed by the catastrophic rise of National Socialism.

## **INTELLECTUALS AND MODERNIZATION IN THE PERIPHERY OF CAPITALISM**

### ***The Problem of the Brazilian Socialist Intelligentsia***

The intellectual reception of socialist ideas in Brazil began on the eve of that European collapse. The absence of an endogenous theoretical tradition critical of modernization was a constitutive problem for the Brazilian intelligentsia. Its left-leaning elements turned to socialism, and were thus faced with the task of translating into local terms a set of theories originally formulated to cope with a very different reality.

I sought to show, above, how Arantes read the genesis of Marxian thought as stemming from a philosophical discourse sensitive to the peripheral character of German society, concluding with questions regarding the relationship between the historical relevance of that thought and the political limits of capitalist socialization. Arantes will take that

peripheral character and these limits further, as the keys to reflect on the intellectual reception of socialist ideas in Brazil.

### ***Modernization and Progressivism***

Fundamental to Arantes' reading of that reception is the consideration of the context in which it takes place: the industrializing effort undertaken by president Getúlio Vargas' 1930–1945 administration. His corporatist, nationalistic, authoritarian developmentalism had some ideological affinity with the European extreme right, but it dispensed with its sort of popular mobilization, which at any rate, was then impossible in Brazil. The population was largely occupied in rural activities involving extreme economic vulnerability, on which Vargas' fundamental economic strategy relied. Heavily subsidized coffee exports combined with rigid state control of the resulting influx of foreign currency, allowing the concentration of wealth required for the intense imports of production goods and the consequent state-driven development of the steel and energy industries. A change in the Brazilian economy was thus implied, as well as a reorganization of the relationship between the productive sectors, financial capital, and a new industrial working class subjected to trade unions controlled by the Ministry of Labour.

In spite of its authoritarian overtones, Vargas' modernizing initiatives imbued the Brazilian political imagination with the enduring legacy of 'progress' as a guiding principle for public administration. This progressivism portrays 'social-economic development' as the result of overcoming the country's comparative backwardness in the face of the Northern economic powers. It first found adherents among the intellectuals of the propertied classes of the state of São Paulo, the seat of the coffee-producing elite.

Those sectors related ambiguously to Vargas' government, though. Economic modernization would eventually consolidate

a *paulista* middle class, and the University of São Paulo – where Arantes was to be a student and a teacher – was founded in response to its demand for higher education. At the same time, the authoritarian government could do without an intellectualized sector: Vargas surrounded himself with a small council of appointed technical advisors, and the propertied classes who benefited from his policies, and were to some extent partial to the discourse of economic progress, were at the same time not politically integrated into his administration. Besides, their privileged social position depended fundamentally on the agrarian export economy, and thus on the social inequality that made the export system lucrative enough to sustain state-driven industrialization, so that their commitment to modernization had to be somewhat limited.

At any rate, in the 1930s and 40s, socialist intellectuals – mostly, members of those same propertied social sectors – predominantly adopted the progress-centred discourse. The formation of a proper proletariat, the development of the productive forces – and thus of a national bourgeoisie – and the 'political front' strategy prescribed by the Third International, lay the schematic foundations for the hope that Vargas' authoritarian modernization would help to place Brazil on the path of socialist revolution.

### ***Populism and Its Dialectic***

Immediately following Vargas' initial modernization, industrialization brought an increased formalization of labour which conflicted with the political limitations of state-controlled unionism, and enduring agrarian poverty. Towards the late 1940s, as a result of this contradiction, social movements developed a semi-independent streak that combined adherence to the institutional structures of progressivism and growing popular mobilization at a local level. Usually referred to as the 'populist' period, the often-convoluted relationship between industrial and agrarian

labour organizations and traditional political institutions were characteristic of the years between the end of Vargas' first administration and the military coup of 1964.

Populist ideology represented social reform as a consequence of the mutual trust between a somewhat politically organized population and a national government committed to employing economic development to generally improve the quality of life. Agrarian reform, price control, workers' rights and minimum wage policies were constantly on (and off) the political agenda. Populism thus implied some level of collaboration between the social sectors produced by Vargas' authoritarian modernization: organized labour, the historically new national industrial bourgeoisie, and the progressivist, learned middle class that had developed around the universities and technical councils.

All this imbued populism with an inner dialectic. Popular capacity for political organization and demand-making collided with the limitations imposed on the official trade unions by their institutional subjection to the Ministry of Labour. Increasingly formalized labour also meant increased job security and thus, potentially, a disposition for more radical demands and strategies. A coherent struggle for greater economic advantages as well as political freedom – including the freedom to form independent trade unions – began to develop both in urban and rural areas.

Inside the universities, the social sciences, had already accumulated a certain level of endogenous reflection on Brazilian economic development, partly seen as problematic due to its enduring compatibility with sustained poverty in the outskirts of industrial development. A progressivist youth increasingly engaged in educational campaigns that were concerned with the development of popular political consciousness and literacy.

Leftist organizations articulated these different dimensions of political activity. The largely socialist intelligentsia that circulated in them projected a connection between economic modernization and social revolution.

When the resulting political effervescence began to clash with the politico-economic order, it had to be suffocated by a military coup, engineered with the active support of significant portions of the industrialist sector. The populist political machinery was destroyed, leftist organizations were outlawed, political leaders and intellectuals murdered or sent into exile. While some embarked on armed struggle, no such initiative outlived the first ten years of the military regime.

### ***Dictatorship and Authoritarian Modernization (again)***

In Arantes' account (1996b, 2014), the Brazilian military regime (1964–1985) is portrayed as the rupture of the system of potentially conflictive social alliances that were the basis for populist politics, and thus the obstruction of the political processes leading to radical social change, but *not an interruption in Brazilian modernization*. On the contrary, industrialization never was so intense before, or since. Brazilian history thus offers a bizarrely privileged opportunity for witnessing how the development of the productive forces can take place independently of social and political development. In the schematic terms employed above, Brazil's modernizing dictatorship illustrates the sterilization of the dialectic of capitalist socialization. A Brazilian progressive left-wing imagination, based as it was on the tensions of populism, was rendered objectless.

## **THE DIALECTIC OF MODERNIZATION IN BRAZILIAN THEORETICAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

### ***Dualism***

Arantes studies the expressions of that political-conceptual perplexity in *Sentimento da Dialética* ('The feeling for dialectic')

(1992). The book presents a critical history of a Brazilian theoretical consciousness of modernization, beginning with assessments of the country's 'backwardness' as conditioned by its colonial disadvantages, and ending with reflections on the place of underdevelopment within the global system of capitalism. The concept of 'dualism', very popular among progressivists in the 1940s and 1950s, is central to Arantes' exposition. Dualists represented the problems of Brazilian society as a civilizational deficit in the face of Northern economic powers whose path to greatness had to be emulated.

In Arantes' account, one of the fore-fathers of dualism is the famous abolitionist Joaquim Nabuco (1849–1910), who spoke of nineteenth-century Brazil as being stalled in its ascent to modernity by slave-owning elites stupidly attached to primitive labour relations and thus blind to the economic advantages of capitalist modernization. According to Nabuco, what was lacking, then, was the enlightenment of the propertied classes, which would result from the contact with modern foreign ideas. Therefore, Brazil found itself on the unfavourable side of the world market for cultural reasons.

In the early 1900s, intellectuals connected to the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), then a member of the Third International, also reasoned in dualist terms. The export agriculture which would still dominate Brazilian economy in the 1920s and 30s was the heir of pre-modern – 'feudal'(!) – colonial archaism. The problem of socialist revolution in Brazil was thus complicated by the fact that capitalism – the modern state and civil society – had not fully developed *yet*. The PCB thus read Brazilian reality in terms of altercations between backwardness – the archaic slave-owning elites whose socioeconomic action revolved around export and subsistence agriculture – and progress – unleashed by the industrial bourgeoisie. The latter was to be found acting whenever Brazilian history gave signs of modernization: the abolition of slavery (1888), the proclamation of

the republic (1889), the republican militaristic nationalism of the early twentieth century and even in the aesthetic modernism that culminated in the Week of Modern Art in 1922. This missionary view of the national bourgeoisie would later clash bitterly with the events of 1964.

Dualist ideology also penetrated the populist environment – specifically, intellectuals connected to the Institute for Higher Brazilian Studies (ISEB), created in 1955 by president Juscelino Kubitschek. One such intellectual, Ignácio Rangel (1957) saw dualism in historic-geographical terms. Coastal cities, traditionally connected to international capital, were modern spaces, while the hinterland remained archaic. American sociological functionalism inspired variations of this version of dualism, construing what would become the persistent view of Brazil as the 'divided country' where different historical times coexisted, among which, however, a political choice had to be (urgently) made.

The 'divided country' or 'two-countries' discourse was extremely long-lived. It integrated the ideology of fiscal and monetary rearrangement undertaken in the 1990s by Fernando Henrique Cardoso's administration. Arantes finds Cardoso's intellectual trajectory particularly noteworthy. In the 1960s, Cardoso argued that, having supposedly experienced the structural incompatibility between a slave economy and late 1800s capitalism, the Brazilian elites had chosen to abolish slavery (Cardoso, 1977). However, in a full-fledged capitalist economy such as that of the mid 1900s, those same elites were to become content with their subordinate, essentially dependant role in the international division of labour (Cardoso, 1972). As president of Brazil, however, Cardoso accommodated his earlier views to the allegedly urgent need of synching the Brazilian economy with the new financialized realities of international capitalism: given the uncontested power of transnational financial capital, the local elites had to be free to use this power to their best possible advantage, even if that meant, to

some extent, turning the government's back on the needs of the common people.

### ***The Critique of Dualism***

Dualist ideology underwent an interesting transformation in the hands of the proponents of so-called Dependency Theory, a group of authors connected to the United Nations Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL), whose creation coincides with the apex of Brazilian progressivism. What interested these authors was not so much the opposition, but the combination between development and economic archaism. Celso Furtado (1964) formulated a concept of underdevelopment that incorporated the Trotskyite discussion of 'uneven and combined development' clarifying the socioeconomic necessity that bound together archaic and modern economic processes – specifically, formal wage labour and informal, subsistence-oriented labour; industrial technology and primitive cultivation techniques; rationalized industrial production; and the concentration of land and political power in the hinterland.

In the 1970s, dualism began to give way to a new theoretical awareness of the consequences of authoritarian modernization under military rule – as exemplified in the works of Florestan Fernandes (1976) and Francisco de Oliveira (1972). Industrialization continued, but economic inequality and other important social characteristics up to then predominantly associated with pre-modern society not only persisted, but intensified. Shanty towns spread in the urban spaces, revealing the reality of Brazilian wage labour. A brutal concentration of land continued to endow the landowning elite with power over an economically destitute and politically powerless population which remained, moreover, largely illiterate. These were not signs of archaism – some sort of historical accident peculiar to a maladjusted national economy – but

constitutive elements of capitalist modernity on the periphery. Part of the Brazilian left-leaning intelligentsia could thus distance itself from the PCB's developmentalist ideology by incorporating a more supple Marxist grasp of the seeming paradox of capitalist economic development fully linked to specificities of Brazilian reality once thought to retard that development.

In Arantes' reading, historian Fernando Novais (1986) took a particularly important step in this direction. Novais traced the paradox of Brazil's pattern of development back to Brazil's colonial past as a movement towards integration within the totality of world capitalism. In his formulations, the Brazilian slave economy had a central role to play in the development of European mercantile capitalism, thus revealing the violent core of capitalist modernization.

Here, according to Arantes, Roberto Schwarz's contribution was crucial. Schwarz (1997, 2000) demonstrated that, long before attaining a full *theoretical* formulation, the true peculiarity of Brazil's dialectic of modernization was given expression as the organizing formal principle of the fictions of Machado de Assis.

At first, schematically speaking, Machado's novels were aligned with the progressive mentality of the late 1800s. Typically, his female characters would be placed in the problematic social position of being free, but not propertied, individuals living in a slave society. This showed how women's ambitions and prospects were curtailed by the archaic economic and political structures of nineteenth-century Brazilian imperial society, while their talents went to waste in a, for them, non-existent labour market. At the same time, their social and financial dependence invariably clashed with inner moral principles forbidding any benefit from the patriarchal, hierarchical culture of 'favour' (patronage) presiding over pre-modern socioeconomic relations. Their worthy obstinacy and valiant resignation ended up forcing the propertied



men in whose sphere of power they existed to see the intrinsic indecency of their own privilege. The ensuing moral reflection and reform of the lords of slave society ultimately opened a little space for a properly civilized engagement with life on the part of the formerly subjugated women. At this stage, that is, Machado's literary output took part in a programmatic belief in the possibility of a cultural and moral transformation – the enlightenment – of the national elite. This was a mentality very similar to that guiding enlightened abolitionism.

In his second phase, inaugurated by his *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1881), Machado abandoned the intellectual and moral reformation of the elite. The subjective passage from hierarchical archaism to modern civilization, reappears, but here as a prerogative of the powerful: the very fact that the elite can actually choose between acting according to civilized norms or not is a sign of their socioeconomic privilege. Cultural inner growth is, for them, a sort of luxury item. An external, arbitrary contact with modern standards of socialization rules the relationship between the elite and high culture – which it consumes and parades, as seen in the abundance of excerpts from classical, international literature, cited, both accurately yet at the same time disparagingly, by title character and narrator of the 1881 work. Paralleling this, capitalist activity in the periphery enjoys the same sort of flirtatious privilege as regards the archaic and modern elements of capital accumulation. That is why, for instance, a slave owner can call upon Adam Smith's liberalism to attack the abolitionist movement. But rather than signs of intellectual inconsistency, these bizarre contradictions surface from roots that lie in the particular ideological elasticity of modern rationality when transplanted to the periphery of the capitalist metropolis. The vague universality of such, points to its fundamental class bias, further exposed by its shameless, convenient appropriation by the elite.

What looked like an anomalous, specifically Brazilian, combination between modernity and archaism thus becomes the open expression of the hidden constitutive fracture of metropolitan normality. In Arantes' synthesis: 'inasmuch as the present world exposed its secrets in the periphery of capitalism, which was not a residue, but an integral part of a complex, concomitant evolution, [Brazil] was therefore a living figure of the Dialectic of Enlightenment' (1992: 96–7).

An analysis of the theoretical consciousness of capitalist modernization in the periphery is thus transformed into an analysis of the *unity* of the socioeconomic processes taking place in *both* the centre and in the periphery. In face of the latter, Arantes argues, modernization can no longer be seen as an alternative to archaic social relations: after all, it feeds on, and reproduces them. Besides, if the two moments are connected in the totality of world capitalism, then modernization in the periphery is at once precarious and full-fledged modernization. As indicated above, this aborted/completed modernization (Arantes, 2004: 66) – a formula also expressive of what transpired in Brazil after the 1964 coup – is a recurring theme in Arantes' work.

## THE BRAZILIANIZATION OF THE WORLD

It can be seen that one of Arantes' main concerns is the historical dissociation between the programme of bourgeois modernization and the dialectic that would ground *either* class alliances supposedly conducive to economic development and an eventual abolition of the social alienation bequeathed by dependency *or*, alternatively, the revolutionary interruption of capitalist socialization. Both dealt with the overcoming of an assumed contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production. In Arantes' reading, the overcoming backfired. His discussions of the phenomenon of

neoliberal globalization explore some aspects of that resulting shape (Arantes, 2004).

### ***Brazilian Neoliberalism***

In the early 2000s, Arantes used neoliberalism and globalization to describe the expansion of financial markets in the 1990s, and the consequent political economic adjustment of national economies to the flow of speculative capitals.

In Brazil, elites, largely within the state apparatus, became local administrators of transnational investments and exerted political pressure conforming public administration to financialization. The result was an eloquent image of contemporary modernization, undertaken in spite of the class alliance with the masses. At its core was the privatization of key public companies. The discourse of the 'reduction of state machinery' – which to this day leaves untouched the surveillance and armed repressive apparatuses, as well as those of financial control – also had practical effects on public services such as health and education, whose importance for a largely underemployed, impoverished population has ever been historically immense. Generally speaking, therefore, it was a project of increasing social inequality.

### ***The North-American Discourse of Brazilianization***

At the same time, Arantes highlighted the emergence of a theoretical discourse of 'third-worldization' or 'Brazilianization' of the world (Luttwak, 1993; Lind, 1995; Gray, 1998). It sought to describe a reversion of the rise in the life standards of the working class in Europe and the United States linked to de-industrialization and financialization. The resulting socioeconomic immobility and stratification, combined with mass incarceration, expressed growing national fragmentation (Rorty, 1998) and, at the least, an

interruption of the parallel between capitalist accumulation and social development.

What Arantes sees in the Brazilianization discourse is an oblique consciousness of aborted modernity that echoes the anti-dualism of the 1970s. Besides, the identification of national fragmentation in 'central' countries had an impact on the progressivist thought of the periphery, whose main idea was, in populist terms, the 'national coalition for development' that would place Brazil on the path of European and North-American progress – ultimately, a dream of successful Keynesian regulation of national economic systems, which now appeared as flawed.

### ***The Collapse of the Bourgeois Civilizational Horizon***

Arantes further sees a long-reaching effect of the category of the nation to describe the economic and sociological problems at stake. The nation is, after all, one of the touchstones of classical bourgeois thought. The class alliance of universality of which modern philosophy spoke had its origin in the political unity of the lower and middle social strata's struggle against Absolutism, for the control of the national state. The anonymity of universality on which modern rationality is founded – Arantes argues – is dependant on an underlying belief in the common destiny implied in the idea of the nation. If the phenomena predicated on globalization and neoliberalism conspire to fragment national unity, they also erode the material basis of modern rationality, so that universalism suffers a second death.

Arantes further focuses on the historical decline of the critical relevance of the categories of classical bourgeois thought in his (sometimes satirical) essays on the Brazilian intelligentsia that, in the mid to late 1990s, chose to advocate Cardoso's administration by evoking its supposedly redemptive modernizing features. Intellectuals such as José Arthur Giannotti are portrayed as eloquent

pedestrians whose only real concern is defending 'governability' at all costs.

Having been objectively deprived of any emphatic ideology by the obsolescence of the classical promises of economic development, those thinkers were reduced to hailing economic modernization and discursively converting the social catastrophe unleashed by privatizations, financial flexibilization and the erosion of social rights into their own allegedly sober realism. Cardoso himself adopted similar tones when he shamefacedly admitted that his own programme was bound to result in increased social exclusion.<sup>1</sup> This cynical realism, which Arantes terms 'single-minded thought' (Arantes, 2004: 115), is invulnerable to traditional ideological critique: it openly admits that national economies are in the hands of transnational investors, and that public administration can do nothing better than locally create 'competitive' conditions for their operation, no matter the cost – 'there is no alternative', to quote Margaret Thatcher's famous dictum.

### ***Consequences for the Socialist Imagination***

Neoliberal technicism is thus symptomatic of bourgeois rationality's dead end. The transformations that placed it in such a position, though, are ample enough to have affected socialist thought as well. After all, the latter sought to oppose the former by relying on its inner contradictions, but was deprived of its dialectic.

To further understand what is at stake here, it is important to recall that neoliberal politics was in part devised as a tool for the destruction of the labour movement that had been in quick and powerful ascension especially after 1968. That social movement had been gaining momentum from the economic contraction caused by the end of the post-war reconstruction cycle, as well as from the political frustration with the conciliatory politics adopted by leftist parties who, in addition, remained ambiguously uncritical of the

many signs of authoritarianism in the USSR. But in the wake of numerous credit crises and the economic turmoil caused by the oil and dollar shocks, neoliberalism won a series of victories against the Left, culminating in Latin American military coups.

For Arantes, understanding those defeats requires reconstructing the inner theoretical limitations of socialist politics. Relying on Singer and Machado (1996) he defines socialist politics as advocating the overcoming of the alienation of bourgeois society by expanding production. The socialist imagination relies on the development of the forces of production. This is further connected to the two-step strategy (Wallerstein, 2004) in which socialism depended on the capture of the state – and was thus tied to the sort of economic control and social administration embedded in its structures. Arantes' argument is that, inasmuch as it was premised on classical bourgeois forms, the socialist imagination is affected by their decay.

Therefore, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Arantes spoke of how modernization had become a purely technical matter, bereft of any potentially transcendent possibility. In the administrative spheres where the ideal of national economic development used to function as a powerful political inspiration, neoliberal ideology, now preaches the functionalization of national economies by transnational financial valorization, at the same time advertising the threatening, destructive character of capitalism. The provocative Marxian idea that capital is accumulation as an end-in-itself, no longer privy to the Critique of Political Economy, becomes one of the mottoes of official economists.

### **MILITARIZED SOCIAL ADMINISTRATION**

In order to describe the specificities of collapsed but ongoing modernization, Arantes (2007) turns to certain contemporary

alterations in warfare, exemplified by the 'preventive wars' waged by the United States and its allies since the 1990s.

While war has traditionally played an essential role in the understanding of capitalism, Arantes notes that military destruction and occupation, classically a means for the control of national economies, have now been converted; destroying entire countries and subjecting survivors to a tendentially permanent martial regime in which the combined military occupation and infrastructural reconstruction provide a few monopoly holders the opportunity of tapping into titanic volumes of public resources.

### ***Smart Bombs, Stupid Intellectuals***

Meanwhile, a self-entitled 'cosmopolitan' intelligentsia, objectively sterilized by the self-centred character of modernity, decides to demonstrate bizarre enthusiasm for the debatable fact that 'preventive wars' function as wilful acts on the part of those unleashing them. According to Arantes, the identification of this volitive sense results from a contrast with the previous period: during the Cold War, nuclear arsenals were fundamentally unusable: the first act of war would also be the last. But the high-tech equipment developed since then is highly deployable: its 'surgical' nature tends to considerably diminish proportional losses on the side of the operators of war. Therefore, the decision to make war becomes possible, and the very idea of a preventive war is imbued with that decisional character.

However, given the political economic conditions of the contemporary world discussed above, such a decision has no basis, except for pure accountancy. Nevertheless, so as to carefully keep themselves oblivious to their own obsolescence, the aforementioned intelligentsia spin a political discourse veiling self-centred economic activity by eloquently hailing the decision to go to war as the resurrection of the national sovereignty.

That is how Habermas (1999) and Honneth (1997), among others, quoted by Arantes, welcomed the cosmopolitan rationality, the nobility, the justice and the morality of the First Gulf War.

### ***Just Wars and Military Asymmetry***

By focusing on the doctrine of 'just wars', Arantes also remarks on its obliquely adequate description of contemporary reality. In Augustine's original formulation in the *City of God*, the possibly just character of wars between sovereigns derived from the moral arbitration of the Holy Church. Inasmuch as it transcended the political borders of humanity, and was thus allegedly distant from its material concerns, the Church had the necessary neutrality and moral superiority to dispense mundane justice. In Arantes' appropriation of Augustine's stance, moral superiority finds a macabre secular parallel in the asymmetric economic and military superiority of the United States in today's world. In practice, that asymmetry exempts the US-led military coalitions from all moral or political judgement: the largest military apparatus in the world cannot be forced to give satisfaction for its decisions, inasmuch as it cannot be coerced into obedience by any existing authority.

### ***Territorial Administration and Permanent Exception***

Arantes notes that 'just wars' also cause an alteration in the international division of labour. They target comparatively underdeveloped peripheries that, instead of being incorporated into the world market through economic dependence, as was formerly the case, now have their social and productive structure destroyed (Altvater, 1997) and supply sufficiently low-priced resources.

Notably, in Libya's and Iraq's case, before foreign intervention, a productive structure

was maintained only in an environment of fragmented national unity, kept together by strongly militarized states. In cases such as these, the imperative of reducing costs in an oil-based system seems to demand the removal of state mediation. In other scenarios, however, incorporation in the international circuit of financial valorization does depend on such mediation, albeit also in the form corresponding to a collapsed social pact: the continual deployment of systemic violence. That is the case in financialized peripheries such as Brazil, where neoliberal modernization combines the destruction of the social service system with the restructuring of national institutions of financial supervision required by transnational capital and incremental militarization of the police.

The classical bourgeois category of the nation state is thus reconfigured. Since class-alliance modernization cannot take place, and since the way to a rupture with capitalist accumulation is barred, then the nation can no longer support a political imagination concerned with social progress, and is reduced to a concept of territorial administration concerned only with the production of the conditions for local economic exploitation through state control, military action and surveillance. The state is gradually given the shape of the main coordinator of that administration, while its role as provider of social assistance is eroded. Besides, this domestic, strategic administration of the national territory is expressed transnationally in the 'cosmopolitan wars' (Zolo, 1997) discussed above.

Therefore, from such a viewpoint, the state's maintenance of economic exploitability is a result of a sort of permanent war waged against the peripheries: spaces occupied by a population that exceeds the needs of economic activity and, therefore, is composed of individually disposable persons. Internationally speaking, the US army, inasmuch as it functions as a sort of 'global cavalry' – to borrow an expression employed by a neo-conservative think tank (AEI,

2003) – projects a global space pinpointed by failed states – the 'interstices of globalization' (Smith, 2003: xv) – for which redeeming modernization is no longer an option, and in which systemic violence is the virtual key for mineral exploration and financial valorization.

## CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM: BOURGEOIS TEMPORALITY AT A STANDSTILL

In *O Novo Tempo do Mundo* ('The new time of the world'), his most recent book, Arantes (2014) condenses some of the arguments deployed in his two previous works, focusing on their consequences for some basic categories of classical bourgeois society – specifically, time and labour.

### *Modernity and the Temporality of the Elite*

One of the foundations of bourgeois ideology was the awareness of the potentially ample reach of social activity, first self-consciously articulated during the defeat of Absolutism. Soon after it was further distilled in the concept of 'modernity' – the time of historical novelty (Koselleck, 2004). The term expressed the inauguration of a connection between finite human agency and very long periods of time, and had a libertarian expression in the universalist image of humanity taking control of its own destiny. However, being concretely rooted in the administrative power of the modern state, that image was strongly connected to the experience of a tiny elite for whom the stages of operation were comparatively gigantic territories and, virtually, the world as a whole.

The main vehicle of that operation was, from the start, capitalist accumulation: in the forms of industrialization, colonization, and the military imposition of a commercial logic

on distant populations, their extermination, enslavement, and the economic functionalization of their territory.

### ***Universalism, Progress and the Normalization of Social Change***

The modern 'discovery' of temporality as world history thus involved a conflict: on the one side the temporality of the elite, employing the modern state, consolidated and expanded capitalism; on the other, a tedious and rigidly controlled temporality, the subsumption of labour. Bourgeois universalism's image of a cohesive society represented the possibility of unifying the two temporalities in the collective experience of social progress. Since the first political institutions of the bourgeoisie theoretically allowed for the participation of the common people in the political process, and that participation soon clashed with fundamental geographical and class boundaries, progress represented historical action in the moralizing terms of labour, construing the possibility of a normalization of social change that would take the place of troublesome revolutionary ruptures.

### ***Civil War Regimes***

However, in Arantes' description, this regime of normalized social change is the obverse of the dissolved class alliance, as expressed in the gap between the two diverging temporalities. Therefore, its historical complement is a succession of regimes of popular oppression, or civil war waged by the state against the people, paradigmatically conceptualized in terms of colonial genocide, the formalization of exception as the constitutional instrument of the politico-economic elites, the new imperialist social administration of the late 1900s (Agamben, 2005; Arendt, 1968), the regime of exception under the Third Reich (Neumann, 2009; Dejours, 1998; Torrente,

2002) and the contemporary penal state (Wacquant, 2009).

Revolving around those paradigms, Arantes' argument articulates the decay of the nation as the space of class alliance in the struggle of the elites against organized labour throughout the 1900s, as well as the development of belligerent nationalism and the 'total war' of 1914, with the ensuing amplification of European governments' power. In the United Kingdom, for instance, governmental emergency powers were prolonged through the 1920s, legalizing the state's violent response to increasingly organized unions. In the wake of the First World War, the Russian Revolution and its German and Spanish reverberations prolonged and intensified the civil aspect of the armed conflict, until National Socialism gave it a stable form. In *O Novo Tempo do Mundo* (Arantes, 2014), therefore, the discussion undertaken in *Extinção* (Arantes, 2007) is inserted in a broader historical perspective.

### ***The Subjective Labour of Exception***

In the Third Reich, Arantes looks for a paradigm of the social experience of labour in the rational submission of those who, confronted with the threat of genocide, became collaborators with the Nazi regime. Arantes highlights the voluntary and involuntary logic of this act wherein the exercise of the will is checked by the palpable possibility of annihilation. He then goes on to compare it to the historical imposition of the selling of labour power through so-called primitive accumulation.

Immersion in the temporality of labour is thus shown to be a reaction to a threat. Under National Socialism, the grinding tediousness of that temporality is unthinkable increased due to the repulsive nature of the labour of genocide. That nature demands of the labourer subjective engagement with, and through the development of personal

approaches to, the work at hand, enabling the labourer to spend shorter time on each individual repulsive task. Of course, that also amounts to subjective investment in increasing labour efficiency.

This has implications for the problem of exception as the fundamental operational mode of the contemporary state. Bureaucracy is the expression of modernization's technical development and rational social administration, and, from the standpoint of the historical temporality of the elite, that is the dimension that matters. But bureaucracy as the repetitiveness of protocols is also the epitome of the confined temporality of the private, individual subject: in this sense, the labour of bureaucracy is the quintessence of labour. In public administration, however, the improvisation resulting from the subjective investment aimed at contracting the grinding temporality of labour entails a breach of protocol. In ample territorial scales, in which administrative decisions of enormous impact are concentrated in the hands of a few bureaucrats, the breach of protocol is converted into improvised arbitrariness: in other words, exception.

It is important to note that such arbitrariness is the consequence of modern bureaucracy, and not some archaic symptom of pre-modernity. It is, at once, the essential characteristic of the overdeveloped state apparatus of National Socialism (Neumann, 2009) and that of the developed state apparatus *tout court*. Increased rationalization entails increasingly powerful, and at the same time increasingly arbitrary, bureaucrats giving the Weberian 'iron cage' a sinister twist. In this sense, in addition to formally incorporating exception into the state, modernization also normalizes the social experience of informal exception.

### ***The Penal State***

The next aspect of Arantes' analysis to consider is how post-war state investment in the reconstruction of Europe and in the Cold War

apparatus sustained, for a short period, the Keynesian class alliance. Total mobilization and government spending combined permanent military readiness with a functioning welfare system (Marcuse, 1966), but the scheme was short-lived, as suggested by the discussion of neoliberalism above. To understand the disintegration of the post-war system, Arantes appropriates Wacquant's (2009) account of the transformation of welfare in 'prisonfare'.

In the Keynesian period, impoverished populations in the centre used to be the target of social assistance programmes aimed at sustaining their capacity for work. Parts of that population were episodically subjected to a system of incarceration that had historically imbued them with the discipline of obedience required by efficient wage labour. Political economic transformations in Europe and the United States, beginning in the 1970s and culminating in the 1990s, introduced the withdrawal of social rights, the precarization of labour and the depression of the labour market. Impoverished populations were now administered as numerically redundant groups. On the one hand, social assistance began to accept degrading labour conditions. On the other hand, those groups became permanently exposed to a destructive punitive system which lost all concern with their reintroduction in the labour market.

Wacquant (2009) demonstrates that the principles internally organizing this punitive system aim at the production of suffering, and the destruction of the subjective capacity for wage labour. Moreover, the expansion of the mechanisms of control and surveillance turn increasing portions of those populations into virtually unemployable groups. As Arantes points out, this all resonates with the militarized social administration employed in peripheral countries, where overcrowded prisons and high levels of police lethality express the limitations of the economic integration of the population by contemporary capitalism, as well as the class content of governmental action.

## ***The Temporality of Permanent Decomposition***

Arantes concludes his analysis with the consideration of the openly illegitimate character of the governing elites in contemporary capitalism. Outside strict academic circles, sheer violence has become, Arantes argues, the most dominating feature of today's socio-political experience in Western societies. That violence has economic and military components; public statistics continually disclose increasing economic polarization worldwide. The response to that inequality is a routinization of protest; reflecting the collapse of progress and of the class alliance that sustained social cohesion. At the same time, the obverse of that collapse is a self-centred capitalist accumulation taking place in complete dissociation with the civilizational prospects which had seemed to be embedded in the technical development of the means of production and administration.

The wilful experience of the historical dimension of capitalism thus becomes a privilege of the elites. Detached from the life of common people, historical action cannot, and need not, aim at a conscious, radical transformation of social reality: only its exponential intensification. In this world, the rational projection of long-term agency, with worldwide reach, impacts most people as the product of someone else's decisions – and, further, as a threat. Imposing-looking fellows in suits continually reproduce highly specialized discourses, while political lobbies involving the weapons, energy, construction and logics sectors and mathematical models on the fluctuation of the markets direct speculative attacks, and armed coalitions permanently transform entire countries in fields for the deployment of state-funded projects of destruction and reconstruction.

For ordinary people, historical temporality refuses to be expressed as what already exists. The narrow terms imposed by infinite cyclical debt on each and every public administration on Earth transform all problems of

state action into meagre accountancy matters. Realist political discourse is exempt from any transcendence by the monstrous predicament imposed by an obviously destructive production apparatus on which the lives of almost every human being ultimately depends. That dependence mockingly portrays every political idealization incapable of finding in the reproduction of capitalism an escape route leading to its abolition.

In this context – our socio-historical context – Arantes' work contributes to the cognitive liberation of the consciousness of the fact that our present lack of prospects is not the result of some historical accident, but of the specific consistency of modernization.

## **Note**

- 1 An interview published in a Brazilian newspaper in which Cardoso's aforementioned shamefaced admission is made (Freire, 1996).

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# Fredric Jameson

Carolyn Lesjak

Fredric Jameson's work might best be characterized as a series of political and methodological commitments: to Marxism, dialectics, historical materialism, narrative, the aesthetic, and the utopian. An unrepentant dialectician who continues to insist on the particular efficacy of dialectical criticism in the current moment, Jameson espouses an assertion he made in one of his earliest books, *Marxism and Form* (1971), namely, that 'the great themes of Hegel's philosophy – the relationship of part to whole, the opposition between concrete and abstract, the concept of totality, the dialectic of appearance and essence, the interaction between subject and object – are once again the order of the day' (xix). Although this pronouncement came in 1971 at a time when 'the order of the day' was being defined in terms of a newly postindustrial capitalism, or 'monopoly capitalism in the West', Jameson subsequently modified these terms in his most famous and wide-reaching book *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (the titular

essay of which was published in *New Left Review* in 1984), where Ernest Mandel's concept of late capitalism names the nature of postindustrial society, and postmodernism names the cultural logic of the current mode of production. Indeed, the need to continue to hone new concepts to understand our contemporary moment, itself a function of the dialectic, defines Jameson's career as a whole.

Since the publication of the *Postmodernism* book in 1991, a prodigious output of new books has followed, including books on modernism (*A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* and its companion piece, *The Modernist Papers*), science fiction (*Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*), Bertolt Brecht (*Brecht and Method*), Hegel (*The Hegel Variations*) and Marx (*Representing 'Capital'*), the dialectic (*Valences of the Dialectic*), realism (*The Antinomies of Realism*), and literary form (*The Ancients and the Postmoderns: On the*

*Historicity of Forms*). In this same 25 years, Jameson has also written articles on current political and media events and issues, from an essay on the HBO series *The Wire* to *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*, in which he boldly offers up as a 'candidate' for a model of Utopia the universal army and proposes a plan for the full militarization of American society, with militarization meaning 'neither war nor the bearing of weapons, nor even military drills, but rather the discipline involved in ensuring that the functions required for society's existence be secured by something like conscription' (2016: 28). This most recent foray into contemporary politics, more so than any of his other writing, has provoked the Left; as the publisher's blurb for the book incites, 'Many will be appalled at what they will encounter in these pages – there will be blood! But perhaps one has to spill such (ideological) blood to give the Left a chance'. Despite the potential bloodshed, a veritable Jameson industry has developed in the same period, with many monographs dedicated to his work, as well as the publication of *The Jameson Reader* (2007), and numerous interviews with Jameson.

The colloquial interview format, in particular, has offered a more accessible path into Jameson's work, known for its difficulty, at both the level of the sentence and at the broader level of its conceptual ordering. At the same time, the interviews showcase the dialectical complexities always present in Jameson's work. In an essay 'On Not Giving Interviews' that introduces a book of interviews entitled *Jameson on Jameson: Conversations on Cultural Marxism* (2007), for example, Jameson reflects on the structure of the interview itself and what it can and cannot offer as a space for thought. In the process, the very movement of Jameson's own thought is clearly on display. On the one hand, the interview can shed light on the interrelationships among one's work – with the following caveat: 'To discover the kinship between earlier positions or interests and

much later ones is, to be sure, not quite so satisfying: as though you never really moved from the spot after all, or kept returning to it' (2007: 1). But then, he reflects, there is a better way to come at this issue and that is 'to grasp one's relationship to such a system as one of learning a code or a language' (1), which does not so much influence us in any conventional sense as take hold of us. 'A philosophy grips us', he suggests,

because it suddenly has answers for our questions and solutions to our problems: but that is the least of it, and the answers and solutions are what become most quickly dated. What electrifies us is not so much those, but rather the new language in which the need – the questions and problems – suddenly become visible in the first place. (1–2)

This exciting new 'conceptual language' is not really ever replaced; newly acquired languages instead are spoken with its accent. From here, Jameson's thinking moves to his belief that 'all conceptuality is figurative' (2), and that his 'list of language conversions ... would be fairly long' and include 'structuralism, Greimasian semiotics, Frankfurt School dialectics and sentences (but also Proustian sentences), Heideggerianism, Deleuzianism, Lacanianism (cum Mallarmé)' (3).

To do justice to the concept and practice of the interview, its form too must be taken into account, and here, in the structure of the interview, thought is shown to be inevitably transformed: concepts are turned into opinions, 'epistemes are processed into doxa', and 'intellectual commitments are transformed into so many optional thoughts or "ideas" that can be compared or contrasted with others of the same type, which one can swap like stamps or baseball cards, or ferociously defend like your favorite clothing or haircut' (4). This flattening of interests necessarily entails a loss of precision: ideas are reified into slogans and 'the opinion-commodity' is crystallized 'into a catchphrase that can be appealed to in any context, and reused over and over again without any wear and tear' (5). This crystallization, all too familiar within

our contemporary public sphere, with its 24-hour news and opinion cycle, returns us to the question of method and a self-reflexivity about the freezing of thought, of the movement between thinking and the ‘thematized opinions and stereotypes’, the ‘named idea’. Again, as with the dialectic, the choice is not either one or the other, but a recognition of an irresolvable tension between the two:

If this is understood as a tension that can never be resolved, however – as an interminable alternation between the wandering mind and the stylistic or linguistic freeze frame – then the customary search for a resolution might be converted into a method for perpetuating the alternation itself and keeping the whole process going, as something we have to use cleverly since we cannot do away with it, at least in this society. (6)

With echoes of Sartre’s *Search for a Method*, the problem of method forms no less a crux of the matter than the concept or object of study. Form and content are shown to be indissociable, and, in turn, subject to their historical moment, thereby necessitating a method that perpetrates nothing short of the movement of thought at the very moment when such movement, historically, seems impossible. The persistent give and take in this small occasional piece, the ways in which the essay is about thinking – about what thinking looks like, about how thought works – defines Jameson’s corpus as a whole. In short, to understand Jameson is to understand not only his thought but also the shape of his thought, which, as he himself notes, is at once deeply indebted to the Frankfurt School – and Adorno specifically – and replete with multiple other accents.

The acquisition of languages can be seen as so many learning processes (to borrow a notion from another of Jameson’s influences, Alexander Kluge) shaping Jameson’s intellectual development and worldview. After graduating from Haverford College in 1954, Jameson traveled in Europe where he became interested in continental philosophy and structuralism. As a doctoral student at Yale in the 1950s, Jameson then studied under Erich Auerbach

and wrote his dissertation, which would become his first book, on *Sartre: The Origins of a Style* (1961). In the 1960s, amid the anti-war movement, the rise of the New Left, and the Cuban Revolution, he increasingly focused on Marxist literary theory and critical theory, and published his seminal *Marxism and Form* in 1971. Central to his ongoing interest in and development of the Frankfurt School tradition is its emphasis on cultural criticism as integral to Marxism; its articulation of the dialectic; the emphasis on form; and the concept of reification. In the Introduction to *The Ideologies of Theory, Volume 1*, a collection of essays that spans the 1970s–80s, Jameson reflects on his own intellectual path and describes the aim of his essays to

stage the attractiveness of a worldview – the only one, I think – for which those multiple dimensions and temporalities we sometimes crudely call the political, the history of forms, the dynamics of desire, the class texture of the social, the originality of the act, and geological rhythms of human history, all unimaginably coexist. (1988b: xxix)

While he goes on to note a shift in his thinking ‘from the vertical to the horizontal’, or from the ‘multiple dimensions of a text’ to the ‘multiple interweavings’ of texts within history, the dimensions and temporalities he lists here – so many of which equally define the Frankfurt School – continue to capture the essential and interconnected strands of Jameson’s intellectual world.

Holding together what can seem like an inexhaustible range of interests and commitments is the surprise of the dialectic, the unexpected reversal, the persistent self-reflexivity, what Jameson calls its ‘un-naturality ... its provocative and perverse challenge to common-sense’ (2009: 4). Surprise and provocation, the unsettling of the given and critical doxa: these processes mark Jameson’s forays into everything from realism, modernism and postmodernism, and their attendant economic and political histories, to TV and science fiction, architecture and film, theory and Marxism.

## MARXISM AND POSTMODERNITY

If a Marxist literary critic in twenty-first-century America can be said to have a claim to fame, Jameson's undoubtedly would be the publication of his book on postmodernism. While prior books, most prominently *Marxism and Form* and *The Political Unconscious* garnered critical praise, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* marked Jameson's entrance into the larger public sphere and the debates taking place both inside and outside the academy about contemporary aesthetics and consumer society. *Postmodernism* opens with a signature dialectical move on Jameson's part: 'It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern', he begins, 'as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place' (1991: ix). Unlike those who had preceded him in the postmodernism debate, Jameson's key contribution, as Sara Danus (2008) has put it, was to bring postmodernism into the analysis of postmodernism. This analysis carries through on the oft-quoted opening to *The Political Unconscious* (1981), 'Always historicize!'. For what postmodernism brings to postmodernism is the means of understanding the multiplicitous cultural signs of postmodern life historically – from the new architecture and contemporary film to Theory with a capital 'T' and new forms of subjectivity. Rather than a proliferation of disparate or varied styles, postmodernism, in Jameson's account, is a 'cultural logic', unified by the economic structure of late capitalism. Against a variety of other assessments of postmodernism, beginning as early as Charles Olson's account in 1948 and extending to Lyotard's and Habermas's respective theorizations in 1979/80, Jameson, as Perry Anderson frames it, 'won [the discursive victory ... over the term postmodernism] ... because the cognitive mapping of the contemporary world it offered caught so unforgettably – at once lyrically and caustically – the imaginative structures and

lived experience of the time, and their boundary conditions' (1998: 66).

More so than any other account of these imaginative structures and lived experiences of postmodernism, Jameson's reading of the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles captured the new reality of postmodernism. In a virtual tour of the hotel, taking us famously up its series of elevators, and into the glassed, reflective spaces now synonymous with major metropolitan hotels, Jameson argues that the dizzying effects of the Bonaventure's interior duplicate our experience of postmodern space and our inability to map that space, or, in Lukácsian terms, to map the global totality. This sense of disorientation, as Jameson underscores, has dire political consequences. The disjuncture between our own bodies and the built environment of the Bonaventure 'can itself stand as the symbol and analogon of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects' (1991: 44). Jameson goes so far as to suggest that these new built spaces require us to grow new organs to catch up with these new cognitive and perceptual challenges. His emphasis, moreover, on 'cognitive mapping' underscores his commitment to the pedagogical function of art, an aspect of Aristotle's aesthetics that has gone out of favor to our collective detriment. The importance of aesthetics as pedagogy or of didactic art is developed later explicitly in Jameson's work on geopolitical aesthetics and especially in his discussion of the Filipino filmmaker Kidlat Tahimik, as well as in his book-length study of Brecht (of which more below).

The concept of 'cognitive mapping' derives from an earlier essay of Jameson's, simply titled 'Cognitive Mapping' (1988a). This first formulation of the concept is useful for highlighting a number of key aspects of Jameson's thinking about space. Crucially, Jameson proposes here a more general spatial analysis of culture, identifying the aesthetics

of realism, modernism, and postmodernism respectively in terms of the historical stages of capitalism out of which each arose and the type of space each of these historical stages produced. Realism is shown to coincide with classical or market capitalism and a spatial grid, modernism with market capital or Lenin's 'stage of imperialism', and the increasing contradiction between lived experience and structure, and postmodernism, as we have seen, with a fully global late capitalism and a seemingly unmappable space. Central to this schema is Jameson's commitment to periodization, and the idea that new modes of production create new aesthetic possibilities and challenges. (In *A Singular Modernity*, he directly states that 'We cannot not periodize' (2002: 29).) From the moment of modernism to the present, specifically, problems of figuration become acute as

the phenomenological experience of the individual subject – traditionally, the supreme raw materials of the work of art – becomes limited to a tiny corner of the social world, a fixed-camera view of a certain section of London or the countryside or whatever. But the truth of that experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place. (1988a: 349)

Modernist aesthetics grapple with this impasse, searching for new forms to express this new reality, this new social space and the experience of it. Hegel's distinction between essence and appearance is transcoded here into the distinction between lived experience and structure, as the 'limited daily experience of London ... is bound up with the whole colonial system of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual's subjective life', even as 'those structural coordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience' (349). With the move to multinational or 'late capitalism', the gap between lived experience and structure widens and is modified.

As Jameson's analysis of the Bonaventure dramatizes, postmodernity ushers in an increasingly spatial politics of globalization,

with its own problems of figuration. In *Valences of the Dialectic*, Jameson gestures toward a spatial dialectic in response to postmodernity, arguing that

[g]lobalization has above all meant the association of space and spatial distance in production itself, whether in terms of outsourcing, of the uneven development of producing and consuming nations, or the migration of labor, as well as the black holes of unemployment, famine, and unspeakable violence into which whole surfaces of the current globe suddenly fall. (2009: 66)

Certainly, as he clarifies, time has not disappeared as a result of space becoming dominant; rather the ratio between them has changed. But, significantly, the political challenges of globalization when seen in spatial terms are considerable.

Not least, they require new kinds of thinking within Marxism. *Marxism and Form*, as we have seen, begins with the assertion that a revitalized dialectical criticism is in order to respond to the changed conditions of postindustrial society: if in the 1930s, Marxist criticism had a 'simpler Europe and America' to deal with in which 'social conflict was sharpened and more clearly visible' (1971: xvii), by the time of the 1970s, the new realities of a (first) world in which 'as a service economy we are henceforth so far removed from the realities of production and work on the world that we inhabit a dream world of artificial stimuli and televised experience' (xviii) necessarily requires new approaches and methods within Marxism. It should be noted, as well, that Jameson really made known for the first time the tradition of Western Marxism and the Frankfurt School, in particular, in the United States – in his attention, in *Marxism and Form*, to Adorno, Benjamin, and Sartre, as well as Marcuse, Bloch, and Lukács, all of whom have continued to influence his thinking.

Key to the changed condition of the 1970s and 80s is the dominance of culture and hence of aesthetics. In a revelatory exchange between Nancy Fraser and Jameson after he delivered his talk on 'Cognitive Mapping', she presses him on

his insistence that cognitive mapping is an aesthetic rather than a social scientific project, to which he responds: 'Now I think that you can teach people how this or that view of the world is to be thought or conceptualized, but the real problem is that it is increasingly hard for people to put that together with their own experience as individual psychological subjects, in daily life' (1988a: 358). Unlike social scientific approaches, then, which 'model the real independent of its relations to individual subjects ... [a]esthetics is something that addresses individual experience rather than something that conceptualizes the real in a more abstract way' (358). The relationship between lived experience and structure is necessarily mediated and requires new ways of thinking, as both lived experience and structure are radically transformed under late capitalism. In other words, unless Marxism wishes to risk obsolescence, it too must change.

At the same time, Marxism is not simply one of many equally viable methods of criticism. For Jameson this means, as he provocatively claims in *The Political Unconscious*, that Marxism – or 'the political perspective' – is not an 'optional auxiliary to other interpretive methods ... but rather ... the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation' (1981: 17). A claim that galvanized Marxist literary criticism, and criticism of Marxism, especially more recently, it was equally inciting for its use of 'absolute', and its embrace, more generally, of interpretation. In fact, the long opening chapter of *The Political Unconscious*, titled 'On Interpretation', is a ground-clearing tour de force, which not only subsumes all other interpretive methods, but also 'transcodes' the body of major contemporary theoretical work, from poststructuralism and semiotics to psychoanalysis and Althusserian Marxism. Althusser's notion of structural causality, in particular, grounds Jameson's conception of the three 'semantic horizons' of texts, or levels of interpretation, and their semi-autonomous relationship to each other: (1) historical events, (2) society, or

the 'constitutive tension or struggle between social classes', and (3) history in the 'vastest sense of the sequence of modes of production'. Each of these horizons registers a 'widening out of the sense of the social ground of a text' and represents 'distinct moments of the process of interpretation' (1981: 75). They also mark how history enters a text, and against the current of the day – characterized by Nietzschean anti-interpretive stances such as those of Deleuze and Guattari and Foucault – insist on the necessity of a hermeneutical approach to texts precisely because of their multiply mediated horizons. This too is where overly deterministic models of causality, such as those of vulgar Marxism (and its base/superstructure architecture) and Hegelian expressive causality are shown to be inadequate to the task of modeling the overdetermined nature of social phenomena. Against older Marxist approaches to literature, Jameson constructs what Douglas Kellner calls a 'double hermeneutic' (1989:13): interpretation entails equally a 'negative' ideology critique and the 'positive' recognition of a Utopian impulse within texts, regardless of their overt political commitments.

In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson frames the question of how a conservative ideology and a Utopian impulse can co-exist in a text in the following way: 'how is it possible for such a text to embody a properly Utopian impulse, or to resonate a universal value inconsistent with the narrower limits of class privilege which inform its more immediate ideological vocation?' (1981: 288). His 'solution' is to suggest that 'all class consciousness – or in other words, all ideology in the strongest sense, including the most exclusive forms of ruling-class consciousness just as much as that of oppositional or oppressed classes – is in its very nature Utopian' (289, emphasis in original). This is so because class consciousness is fundamentally an expression of class solidarity. But Jameson adds one crucial caveat: such a proposition is allegorical insofar as ruling-class collectivities, along with

other collectivities, are ‘*figures* for the ultimate concrete collective life of an achieved Utopian or classless society’ (291, emphasis in original). This sense of a Utopian impulse leads to the kinds of dialectical reversals or surprises that allow us to see contemporary and/or popular culture differently. Jameson’s attentiveness to Utopian desire or a Utopian impulse in high and low culture alike significantly challenges Adorno and Horkheimer’s famous account of ‘The Culture Industry’ in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In contrast to the monolithic image of the ‘deceived masses’ who ‘immovably ... insist on the very ideology which enslaves them’ (2002: 133–4) in Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis, Jameson proposes a more complex relationship to mass culture in which both repression and wish-fulfillment are present, in which, in other words, mass culture contains both negative and positive functions, at once tapping into Utopian desires even as it manipulates those desires. Moreover, Jameson works to undo the divide between high and low culture that grounds ‘The Culture Industry’ chapter. As he comments in ‘Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture’, ‘what is unsatisfactory about the Frankfurt School’s position is not its negative and critical apparatus, but rather the positive value on which the latter depends, namely the valorization of traditional modernist high art as the locus of some genuinely critical and subversive, “autonomous” aesthetic production’ (1990: 14). Instead, the opposition between mass culture and high culture needs to be understood dialectically; both, in Jameson’s account, must be seen as ‘twin and inseparable forms of the fission of aesthetic production under capitalism’ (14). In this view, and again in contrast to the Frankfurt School’s reading, modernism is no less ‘reactive’ than mass culture to the social crises of its day; what differs is their respective responses to the increasing commodification of everyday life and, by extension, art and culture. In the provocative readings of *Jaws* and *The Godfather* that follow this proposal for a new model of manipulation,

Jameson shows how these mass cultural Hollywood blockbusters engage Utopian desires for the collective, be it in the form of the partnership between Hooper and Brody in *Jaws* or the family in *The Godfather*. These films, like works of mass culture more generally, ‘cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated’ (1990: 29) – a claim that extends even to phenomena as repellent as National Socialism, with its vision of the collective, or, in our contemporary moment, one might add, to the populism of the Tea Party, Trump, and Brexit. As Jameson underscores, such an approach to mass culture establishes a new and necessary realm of study for Marxist critics. He ends ‘Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture’ by emphasizing just how critical this change in orientation is:

To reawaken, in the midst of a privatized and psychologizing society, obsessed with commodities and bombarded by the ideological slogans of big business, some sense of the ineradicable drive towards collectivity that can be detected, no matter how faintly or feebly, in the most degraded works of mass culture just as surely as in the classics of modernism – is surely an indispensable precondition for any meaningful Marxist intervention in contemporary culture. (1990: 34)

Written in 1979, this claim serves much like a mission statement for Jameson’s work to date.

Recently, Jameson has further developed his notion of the Utopian impulse in the context of divergent texts and cultural forms ranging from Marx’s *Capital* to *The Wire*. In an essay that would become part of *Representing ‘Capital’*, Jameson distinguishes between Utopian texts that are ‘political’ insofar as they map or plan Utopias imaginable or achievable within our present system, and the Utopian impulse, which is ‘profoundly economic, everything in it, from the transformation of personal relations to that of production, of possession, of life itself, constitutes the attempt to imagine the life of a different mode of production



... of a different economic system' ('A New Reading of *Capital*', 2010: 8–9). Likewise, in *The Wire*, the HBO series that ran from 2002–2008, Jameson (2012) finds, amid the grim portrayal of postindustrial Baltimore, a Utopianism that co-exists with the series' realism. Residing in different collective visions in the multiple seasons of the series, including the labor leader, Frank Sobotka's plans to rebuild the Baltimore port (season 2), and Major Colvin's drug-free zone (season 3), this Utopianism is notable for its ability to break through in the realistic present in the plot rather than as fantasy or wish-fulfillment. The power of these plots rests in the fact that, in order to succeed, they would each require 'the Utopian (or revolutionary) transformation and reconstruction of all of society itself' (371). The series, in other words, not only reworks realism by creating a 'slight crack or rift' in the 'seamless necessity' that characterizes realist projects, but also provides a vision of a Utopian future that 'here and there breaks through, before reality and the present again close it down' (372). That this future is unrealizable within the limits of the present powerfully expresses the limits of the present.

In all of these readings, the imperative to historicize and to read dialectically shifts attention away from evaluative judgments toward an attempt to understand cultural forms and aesthetic movements, and their social, political, and economic coordinates, without taking a moralizing approach. The problem with such moralizing, as Jameson sees it, is two-fold: on the one hand, it prompts ahistorical thinking; on the other hand, it leads to sterile oppositions. The dialectic, he reminds us, 'is "beyond good and evil", in the sense of some easy taking of sides, whence the glacial and inhuman spirit of its historical vision' (1991: 62). In the context of postmodernism, specifically, repudiating or celebrating it are equally facile given that we are already fully within the thick of it. As a result, 'ideological judgment on postmodernism today necessarily implies,

one would think, a judgment on ourselves as well as on the artifacts in question: nor can an entire historical period, such as our own, be grasped in any adequate way by means of global moral judgments or their somewhat degraded equivalent, pop psychological diagnoses' (62). In short, there is no resting place in moral judgments; we must get on with the work of assessing our own cultural forms and ways of life in their dialectical relationship to the totality of relations structuring late capitalism. And while there have been changes even in the time since Jameson first wrote about postmodernism, we are still, in his estimate, within postmodernity: 'you can say that postmodernism is over, if you understand postmodernism in a narrow way, because art has certainly changed in many respects since the '80s. But I don't think that you can say that the whole historical period – the third stage of capitalism, I would like to call it – has come to an end, unless you are able to specify what has followed it' (Baumbach et al., 2016: 144).

## REPRESENTATION, ALLEGORY, AND POLITICS

The project of *Postmodernism* can be seen to inform Jameson's work, more broadly, given its commitment to (or its aim) of unearthing the historical content of aesthetic forms. Indeed, Jameson is currently in the process of completing a multi-volume series entitled *The Poetics of Social Forms* that includes the *Postmodernism* book, as well as *A Singular Modernity*, *Archaeologies of the Future*, and *The Antinomies of Realism*. It is notable that the series will include a book on allegory, which has been a central trope in Jameson's oeuvre, precisely because of its exceptional capacity to mediate between the individual and the social, a capacity shared by the aesthetic more generally. In one of his more controversial uses of the concept of allegory, Jameson argued in 'Third-World Literature

in the Era of Multinational Capitalism' that 'all third-world texts are necessarily ... allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I call *national allegories*' (1986: 69, emphasis in original). This assertion sparked controversy, especially among postcolonial scholars, who objected to what they saw to be the reductiveness of his claim that '*the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*' (69, emphasis in original). They also saw his use of the category 'Third World' as homogenizing and Eurocentric. Jameson, however, understood this essay to be a 'pendant' to the postmodernism essay; the validity of its claims, for him, lay in articulating the fundamentally different relations informing First- and Third-World cognitive aesthetics, given the differential space of the world system, and the possibility still of a collective politics beyond the West. In short, Third-World aesthetics necessarily differ by dint of their relationship to the global order; hence, the possibilities of mapping the totality, with 'national allegory' being one form of that mapping, are different – a position that extends Georg Lukács's notion of the standpoint of the proletariat to First World–Third World relations and, as with Lukács's analysis, opens up space for a collective politics of dereification. It is worth noting, as well, that Jameson introduced the concept of 'national allegory' initially in his book on Wyndham Lewis, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (1979). National allegory, he argues there, 'should be understood as a formal attempt to bridge the increasing gap between the existential data of everyday life within a given nation-state and the structural tendency of monopoly capital to develop on a worldwide, essentially transnational scale' (94).

Despite older criticisms of his use of allegory and more recent turns against it as outmoded (to which I will return), Jameson stands by the notion and necessity of allegory as the means through which to represent

the unrepresentable. In a recent interview, Jameson clarifies what he means by allegory:

Saying that the world has a narrative structure does not mean that you can tell a simple story about it, or that there are representational techniques for translating realities into stories. Insisting on contradiction does not mean that anybody ever saw one, or that it would be easy to make a picture of whatever it is. So the insistence on allegory is an insistence on the difficulty, or even impossibility, of the representation of these deeper and essentially relational realities ... Allegory happens when you know you cannot represent something but you also cannot not do it. (2007: 195–6)

Capital, contradiction, globalization: these are all realities, but not realities that are 'out there' to be transparently represented; as 'relational realities' they pose distinct challenges to representation, with allegory being one mode of representation that addresses this challenge. Allegory and representation thus go hand in hand and offer one way of understanding the primacy of narrative for Jameson and his belief, as noted above, that 'all conceptuality is figurative'. This emphasis on the figurative equally applies to literature and philosophy, political theory and politics. As he comments about contemporary invocations of the multitude, 'Surely all of those collective words – *the people, the multitude, the nation, the masses*, and so forth – these are all representations – so is general will – and I think all of them are attempts to model something that's not representable' (2007: 230, emphasis in original). On the one hand, this insistence on the allegorical or the figurative puts the question of mediation at the heart of Jameson's Marxism. On the other hand, it firmly places aesthetics at the center rather than the periphery of a Marxist politics.

It is no accident then that Jameson's book on Marx's *Capital* is entitled *Representing 'Capital': A Reading of Volume One*. Both the 'representing' and the 'reading' in its title are integral to Jameson's understanding of *Capital* and capital. And with respect to both, there are new and surprising things to

be found in this urtext of Marxism. At the broadest level, there is a lesson to be learned about reading and interpretation more generally, and more specifically about reading the forms in which ideology appears: as Jameson characterizes Part One of *Capital*, it is a 'polemic waged against conventional forms of thought and language – the equation – which presupposes the possibility, indeed, the natural and inevitable existence, of this form, and thereby the plausibility of all the ideologies that issue from it' (2011: 22) – e.g. the notion of a just price or a just wage, as well as, in philosophy, epistemological or aesthetic conceptions of reflection. Again, the idea of any kind of empirical immediacy is shown to be deeply ideological, drawn to mere or false equivalences.

When we do read figurally, what we discover for our own time is the 'scandalous' claim that *Capital* is a book about unemployment – a category generally not understood in structural terms, i.e. as a primary rather than secondary feature of global capitalism. Seeing *Capital* in this way underscores the dialectical nature of capitalism – its unity of opposites, encapsulated in the at once immense productivity and immiseration that capital generates – and the fact that it needs to be seen as a total system, at a time when systemic, totalizing analyses, not to mention dialectical ones, are very much out of favor. More pointedly, *Capital, Volume One* has something 'unexpected' to offer regarding our understanding of the present system of globalization, for what we can see that Marx could not is a further intensification of this 'absolute general law' of capital: the unity of capitalist production and unemployment. Supplanting or intensifying Marx's 'reserve army of labor', the category of the structurally unemployed registers this marked change, and the need for a concomitant 'change in theory and in practice' able to rethink 'all such lost populations of the world in terms of exploitation rather than domination' (2011: 150). Here too the question of representation is key: it is the 'recoding' of

'multiple situations of misery and enforced idleness, of populations in prey to the incursions of warlords and charitable agencies alike' in terms of 'global unemployment' that offers the potential for inventing 'a new kind of transformatory politics on a global scale' (151). If the slogan uniting the proletariat in Marx's time was addressed to the workers of the world, the vantage point our present circumstances affords to the reserve army of labor demands new conceptual and political tools with which to unite a largely surplus population defined by its lack of work.

In *Valences of the Dialectic*, Jameson writes about the world market today, 'the closure of the world market is ... not to be understood as the filling up of an empty container but rather as the progress of an epidemic' (2009: 582). With this formulation, Jameson aims at once to (1) draw attention to the category of the 'formerly employed' and the ways in which capital now leaves whole swathes of the world behind when it moves to new spaces – entire areas, he suggests, essentially have "'dropped" or "fallen out" of history'; and (2) underscore the importance of the figural itself in describing capital. In short, it matters whether we think of the world market filling up empty spaces or functioning like an epidemic that spends itself and moves on because each figuration not only produces different visions of capital, but makes visible different potential 'actants' or agents of history. The figuring of capital as an epidemic is precisely what brings into view the category of the 'formerly employed'.

In *Representing 'Capital'*, Jameson uses the language of figuration specifically to signal the precarity of theory and the material conditions out of which it arises. In fact, given the claim that *Capital* is not a political book but rather an economic one – by which Jameson means that it is not explicitly about revolution, or proletarian politics, or the living labour on which the 'infernal machine' called capitalism feeds – reading figurally is what we must do, on one level, in order to read *Capital* for its political consequences

(2011: 38). On another level, Jameson's insistence on the disjunction between politics and economics is meant also as a provocation to contemporary post-Marxist theorists who, in his view, neglect the economic in the name of a politics centered around the language of domination. The same provocation holds for non-Marxist critics, who employ the language of domination at the expense of the realities of exploitation. Both in *Valences of the Dialectic* and in *Representing 'Capital'*, Jameson underscores that 'an emphasis on exploitation is a socialist program, while that of an emphasis on domination is a democratic one, a program and a language only too easily and often coopted by the capitalist state' (2011: 150).

Jameson's claim about *Capital* is hardly the only scandalous assertion to be found in his later work. For instance, his collection of essays on dialectical thinking, *Valences*, contains both original and reprinted articles with similarly scandalous propositions. An essay entitled 'Utopia as Replication' famously proposes a reading of Wal-Mart as the 'new institutional candidate for the function of Utopian allegory' (2009: 420) and prompts us to think 'quantity positively', despite our tendency to see 'an impending future of size, quantity, overpopulation, and the like' only in 'dystopian terms' (419). The final essay on 'The Valences of History', likewise, makes us feel palpably the contours of our 'secular totality', originally theorized by Marx, and dramatized by Jameson via the metaphor of the spider, an analogy worth quoting at length for its exemplary style and *cri de coeur*:

We have indeed secreted a human age out of ourselves as spiders secrete their webs: an immense, all-encompassing ceiling of secularity which shuts down visibility on all sides even as it absorbs all the formerly natural elements in its habitat, transmuting them into its own man-made [*sic*] substance. Yet within this horizon of immanence we wander as alien as tribal people, or as visitors from outer space, admiring its unimaginably complex and fragile filigree and recoiling from its bottomless potholes, lounging against a rain-wall of exotic and artificial plants or else agonizing

among poisonous colors and lethal stems we were not taught to avoid ... in its cosmos ... we continue murmuring Kant's old questions – what can I know? What should I do? What may I hope? – under a starry heaven no more responsive than a mirror or a space ship, not understanding that they require the adjunct of an ugly and bureaucratic representational qualification: what can I know *in this system*? What should I do in this new world *completely invented by me*? What can I hope for *alone in an altogether human age*? And failing to replace them by the only meaningful one, namely how can I recognize this forbiddingly foreign totality as my own doing, how may I appropriate it and make it my own handiwork and acknowledge its laws as my own projection and my own praxis? (608, emphasis in original)

How we see this reality – 'our ultimate Being as History' (608) – and our emancipation from it may no longer be in temporal but rather spatial terms, as Jameson bookends *Valences* with his gesture toward a spatial dialectic, a 'thought mode that does not yet exist' (67): in the final sentence of the book, an alternate world (rather than a Utopian future) is now characterized as a world

contiguous with ours, but without any connection or access to it. Then, from time to time, like a diseased eyeball in which disturbing flashes of light are perceived or like those baroque sunbursts in which rays from another world suddenly break into this one, we are reminded that Utopia exists and that other systems, other spaces are still possible. (612)

As with Jameson's thought more generally, his willingness to continually test and reconsider his own formulations illuminates the necessity of theory to be informed by practice and vice versa, even, or especially, when these assessments require the acknowledgment of failure – of theory or practice, or both. Steven Helmling identifies what he calls a 'failure imperative' in Jameson's work and argues that 'in the context of the historical intransigences of "late capitalism", no critical gesture could be more unseemly than seeming to succeed: a critique too readily satisfied with merely critical success might seem ... deluded by its own false consolations for the revolutionary movement's realworld failures' (2001: 4). In this

final passage from *Valences*, the possibility of 'other spaces' is recognized as increasingly fleeting and captures how much has changed just in the time between the 1980s and the first decade of the twenty-first century. Reflecting back on these changes, Jameson notes the presence of the socialist bloc in the 1980s (regardless of its lack of success) and forms of art that preserved some sense of an 'outside' to commodification, whereas now 'everything seems subsumed, in that sense; people seem resigned to the idea that everything is commodified' (Baumbach et al., 2016: 144).

The sense of alternate spaces being increasingly hard to find or imagine save in 'disturbing flashes of light' or sunbursts is perhaps best felt when viewed in light of Jameson's earlier enthusiasm for particular writers, artists, and filmmakers, many of whom are discussed in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (1992), and whose art resists commodification. In the final chapter, for example, Jameson turns to Kidlat Tahimik and finds in him a Brechtian aesthetic that not only counters the division between aesthetics and production but also offers an alternative vision of progress and 'development'. In Tahimik's *Perfumed Nightmare* (1977) jeepnies, old American Army jeeps transformed into colorful taxi cabs or omnibuses, represent a radically different relationship to production as recycled, repurposed, and aesthetically pleasing 'painted traditional artifacts' (1992: 209). These jeepnies, for Jameson,

mark the place of a properly Third-World way with production which is neither the ceaseless destruction and replacement of new and larger industrial units ... nor a doomed and nostalgic retrenchment in traditional agriculture, but a kind of Brechtian delight with the bad new things that anybody can hammer together for their pleasure and utility if they have a mind to. (211)

By extension, the jeepnies are allegorical figures for Tahimik's aesthetic, which itself is an act of recycling and utopian production: he uses expired film stock, recycled imagery

and found objects, and non-professional actors, for example. For Jameson, the film's utopian production is supplemented by its function as an 'omnibus and omnipurpose object that ferries its way back and forth between First and Third Worlds with dignified hilarity' (211), driven by the humorous antics of Kidlat himself, who, as *Perfumed Nightmare*'s jeepney driver, comes to terms with his own fascination with American culture and American commodities. In his reading, Jameson positions Tahimik's film and the Third World generally as 'the last surviving social space from which alternatives to corporate capitalist daily life and social relations are to be sought' (188). Not insignificantly, Jameson also argues that Tahimik 'eschews the political for the economic, and the thematics of power for that of reification' (191), in the process offering a critique of capitalism as a universalized, global system in which, as Marx famously said, 'all that is solid melts into air'. What is most startling for Jameson, and what lends the film its didactic force, is that Tahimik demonstrates this destabilizing force of capitalism not only within the Third World, but also within the heart of the First World, in Paris, where the nefarious effects of the constant overturn of the forces and relations of production are shown to eradicate the very last vestiges of noncommodified space in the metropolis.

Eschewing the political for the economic: this is the Brechtian *plumpes Denken* or crude thinking of Jameson's Marxism, and that which militates against all forms of identity politics, and pertains equally to the First and Third World (to stay with Jameson's terms). If Jameson's use of national allegory in his reading of Third-World literature became a focal point for criticism of him as Eurocentric early on, his assertion that there are not multiple modernities but rather a singular modernity has similarly provoked the charge of Eurocentricism now, both within Modernist Studies and among his international readers, the latter of whom were early celebrants of Jameson's work and the *Postmodernism*

book, in particular. At issue is the claim that cultural differences do not make for multiple modernisms, a claim deemed Eurocentric for its positing of European modernity as *the* model for a modernity to which the rest of the world then must catch up. Recently, in response to the negative reactions he has received to *A Singular Modernity* from his readers in China and Brazil, Jameson has reiterated his argument against the idea of multiple modernisms and his belief that ‘the only possible “alternate modernity” open to us today is called socialism, and that merely cultural versions of these forms of difference are not helpful’. As he attempts to explain the disaffection of his readers, he speculates: ‘But perhaps what pained my critics more was less the attempt to impose my Western thinking on them than my expectation that they would develop alternatives that might reenergize us in the West or the First World: an expectation perhaps too hard to live up to’ (2007: 7).

Despite his claim that the Third World offers the last refuge of alternate spaces to the homogenized commodified universe of capital, there is an inherent, immanent, and dialectical logic to his own thinking that permits it to regenerate and self-differentiate from within. *A Singular Modernity*, for example, develops his analysis of modernism and modernity in the now changed context of postmodernity; in one of his four theses of modernity he proposes that ‘No “theory” of modernity makes sense today unless it comes to terms with the hypothesis of a postmodern break with the modern’ (2002: 94). *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013) sees Jameson returning to realism, the third aesthetic form in the trio of realism–modernism–postmodernism outlined in ‘Cognitive Mapping’ (1988a) and developed in multiple ways over the course of his career to date. In an older essay on ‘The Brecht-Lukács Debate’ (1977), for example, Jameson stages a dialectical reversal in which Lukács’s allegiance to realism, in the changed context of the postmodern, takes on a different valence. Whereas the new aesthetic forms

of modernism – and especially the privileging of the fragment in Jameson’s analysis – championed by Brecht were part of a resistant, noncommodified practice of art, with the advent of postmodernism those same forms are shown to be complicit with rather than resistant to market ideology. In this same essay, which prepares some of the ground for his later coining of the term ‘cognitive mapping’, Jameson too identifies what he sees as the unique status of realism, namely its joining of the cognitive and the aesthetic.

In his new work, however, a different problematic surfaces, due in part to the current popularity of affect theory. On the one hand, contemporary work on affect has led Jameson to amend one of the central features he identified with postmodernism, namely the ‘waning of affect’, which he now wishes to specify as the waning of ‘emotion’ or ‘named emotion’. On the other hand, in *The Antinomies of Realism*, he proposes a new model of realism centered on a set of antinomies that includes the irresolvable tension between affect, which for Jameson signifies the ineluctable present of the body and its resistance to language, and named emotion, which designates the consequence of the body’s inevitable entrance into language or the symbolic more generally. For Jameson, this antinomy is crucial to realism, and any attempt to resolve it in favor of one term or the other will end up not only destroying the opposite term, but the problematic upon which the realist project is grounded. The tension between named emotion and affect arises, in Jameson’s account, in the mid nineteenth century in response to the emergence of the ‘bourgeois body’: ‘alongside a crisis of language, in which the old systems of emotions come to be felt as a traditional rhetoric ... there is also a new history to be written, the “bourgeois body” as we may now call it, as it emerges from the outmoded classifications of the feudal era’ (2013: 32). The kind of linguistic innovation we associate with modernism has its roots here as realists grapple with this new body and its ‘nameless bodily states’ (32). Over the course of

Part One of *Antinomies*, Jameson moves from Zola and ‘the codification of affect’ to Pérez Galdós and the ‘waning of protagonicity’ to George Eliot and Alexander Kluge. In Part Two, Jameson then moves to contemporary works of realism, and the issue specifically of the historical novel today, ending with yet another scandalous claim: ‘that the historical novel of the future (which is to say our own present) will necessarily be Science-Fictional inasmuch as it will have to include questions about the fate of our social system, which has become a second nature’ (298). Although his use of the term ‘affect’ does not line up with contemporary invocations of the term by critics such as Brian Massumi or Sianne Ngai (a lack of connection that Jameson acknowledges in a footnote), the story of realism that Jameson tells not only puts the nail in the coffin of simplistic views of realism’s naive sense of the real and of the transparency of language, but also dovetails with and expands indirectly on recent attempts to reinvigorate the project of realism and its ongoing pull for us today, whether in the resurgence of reality TV and the serial realism of shows like *The Wire* and *Mad Men*, or the renewed interest in memoir as the new realism. What Jameson brings to this discussion is an attempt, as he puts it,

to try to isolate and experimentally to observe [the bourgeois body/s] emergence in language: here it is the language which is the sign and symptom of historical change and transformation, it is the process of grappling with new language-problems that we can catch sight of this phenomenon.... (Blix et al., 2014: nonsite.org, n.p.)

In the process he enriches our sense of a range of writers and, ironically, given its identification with modernism, makes realism new. He not only suggestively offers an explanation for when and why it came into being but also provides a compelling account of its end in the dissolution of the tension or antinomies that kept it alive. As with Jameson’s other work, the test of its power is in its ability, time and time again, to speak to aesthetic phenomena and everyday life in

ways that continue to resonate and generate yet more examples of the very dynamic he has identified and articulated, whether it be the ‘waning of protagonicity’ in Galdós and the trajectory of realism generally, or the broad claim for the primacy of narrative in all attempts to come to terms with history and ‘our ultimate being as History’.

## THEORY AND POLITICS TODAY

History has proven hostile to the project of critique, which Jameson has attempted to sustain against overwhelming odds. At a time when the end of critique is being declared, Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* has been back in the theory spotlight, gaining notoriety as the prime target for attack. In various new formalisms, from the call for ‘surface reading’, to a return to questions of beauty, to Bruno Latour’s influence on diverse strands of social and cultural analysis, symptomatic or hermeneutical models of reading and interpretation are being dismissed as obsolete. While Jameson certainly recognizes that we must respond to the changes – in representation, the status of art, the ‘intransigences’, as Helmling (2001) calls them, of our present and its political cynicism – that have taken place since the 80s, he is not so quick to throw out the baby with the bathwater, as it were, and maintains that interpretation and dialectical thinking are still necessary and indispensable if we are to think beyond the limits of the present.

This commitment to a dialectical criticism marks one of the key ways in which Jameson’s work continues the legacy of the Frankfurt School. Just as with Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, the very possibility for critical thinking is at the center of Jameson’s work, with the forces of domination, the processes of reification and commodification now more subsuming even than Adorno in his bleakest moments could have predicted. And yet, despite the loss of ‘Adorno’s notion of the

negative' or of 'Left ideas of subversion' (Baumbach et al., 2016: 144) as a force of resistance to a commodified world, Jameson's project carries on the work of critical theory in these new dark times in its most basic sense. As Horkheimer described this project in 'Traditional and Critical Theory', 'Critical theory maintains: it need not be so; man can change reality, and the necessary conditions for such change already exist' (1972: 227). In short, the Frankfurt School tradition lives on in Jameson's work in a new way now, in its broadest aims as a voice – in the wilderness, increasingly – of critique *and* hope.

Keeping this voice of critique alive, throughout his oeuvre, is Jameson's commitment to Utopia, the aspect of his thought most often neglected in accounts of the outmoded nature of his interpretive model. 'If then Utopia is what allows us to become aware of the absolute limits of our current thinking', Jameson surmises, 'then such are the limits and such is the contradiction we have become able to confront. I have described it as a contradiction between Utopia and Cynical Reason. If so, then it virtually produces its own slogan: Cynicism of the Intellect, Utopianism of the Will!' (2010: 13). The contours of this 'Desire Called Utopia' are treated in depth in Jameson's book about science fiction, *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), where, in a reference to Sartre's famous proposition of a politics of 'anti-anti-Communism', he offers a more grounded or practical version of his utopian appeal: 'the slogan of anti-anti-Utopianism ... might well offer the best working strategy' (xvi) today.

But in his most recent book, *An American Utopia*, he takes a step further, moving from what he calls in *Archaeologies* and elsewhere the 'utopian impulse' to the generation of an actual 'utopian program'. This program is hallmark Jameson in its promise to surprise and provoke. The opening gambit is that the waning of historicity 'confronts those of us still committed to radical system change with some very real political problems and in particular with the obligation to think revolution

in a new way' (2016: 13). That way turns out to be a new version of the old idea of 'dual power', or, the search for an institutional structure or event along the lines of the soviets that co-existed with Kerensky's Provisional Government. For Jameson, that institution is the army, which, through universal conscription, will become a universal army with the capacity to become not another government (the old government will 'wither away') 'but rather a new social structure, or better still, a new socio-economic structure' (20). This universal army, in its collective structure and its ability to provide everything from food and shelter to health care and a sense of a unified collectivity – will radically transform the army of today insofar as what was a professional, voluntary army becomes a wholly socialized institution. A manifesto replete with specific details about how the universal army will be constituted, the services it will provide, and the ways it will answer the socio-economic problems of late capitalism, *An American Utopia*, like Jameson's thought *in toto*, takes to heart the need to be aware of and push against the 'absolute limits of our current thinking' and to practice 'Cynicism of the Intellect, Utopianism of the Will'. Jameson leaves us at the end of his manifesto anticipating the instinctive distaste for a Left politics that conscripts the army:

This is the moment in which, as Sartre put it, existentialism supersedes Marxism as a philosophic horizon, and we can detect the nature of our own ideological reflexes by way of our reactions to it. However those may be, it is at the very least at least one way in which an alternate future can be imagined as opening once again, a future sealed and effaced by the absolute limits currently imposed by late capitalism as such. So this may not be the place to stop; but also to begin. (96)

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# Moishe Postone: Marx's Critique of Political Economy as Immanent Social Critique

Elena Louisa Lange

## INTRODUCTION: REINTERPRETING MARX

This essay will provide an overview of Moishe Postone's key work *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (1993) that according to its own claim presents a 'fundamental reinterpretation' of Marx's mature economy-critical work, especially the central categories of *Capital*. In doing so, Postone's critical reinterpretation relates to the theoretical interests and draws on the conceptual framework of critical theory. Postone's work must therefore be situated within the tradition of critical theory itself, even if it is precisely Postone's *critical* evaluation of some of its positions, developed from his reinterpretation of Marx, that qualifies him as a critical theorist in his own right.

In *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, Postone rethinks the method as well as the object of Marx's Critique against the background of so-called 'traditional Marxism' that has hitherto interpreted the fundamental

Marxian categories either insufficiently or spuriously, leading to a truncated understanding not only of capitalism as a general social relation based on a historically specific mode of production, but also to a questionable interpretation of possibilities for its overcoming. Essentially, the book aligns positions of 'traditional Marxism' with critical theory by arguing that especially Friedrich Pollock and Max Horkheimer gave way to 'pessimism' due to their reliance on the framework of traditional Marxism's interpretation of Marx's central concepts.

After giving a brief outline of the formation of Postone's thought in a short introductory biographical note, the essay will primarily discuss Postone's major contribution to international Marxian research in value theory, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*. Following the biographical note, the chapter is divided into three parts: the first part presents Postone's *method* as that of 'immanent social critique', elucidating Postone's intellectual heritage in the twentieth-century Hegelian Marxism

of critical theory in Germany, and clarifying its usefulness for understanding Marx's own intervention. The second part discusses Postone's *object* of critique, namely the theoretical assumptions of traditional Marxism. Here the emphasis lies on: (1) the positive and 'transhistorical' role it ascribes to the notion of labour as the underlying general hypothesis; (2) its discussion of the object of Marx's critique, capitalism, as a form of *class* society, rather than a form of *society*; (3) its emphasis on the notion of the market, private property and modes of distribution, as presented in Ricardian Marxism (Paul M. Sweezy, Maurice Dobb); and (4), in building on these assumptions, early critical theory's understanding of capitalism's basic contradiction in the 'forces' against the 'relations' of production, as presented in the works of Friedrich Pollock and Max Horkheimer. The third and final part shall present Postone's own reconstruction of Marx's central categories with special emphasis on the notions of abstract labour, the fetish-character of the commodity, and the difference between abstract and historical time and its 'social-epistemological implications'.

For reasons of circumventing redundancies, Postone's critique of Habermas and the chapter on 'The Trajectory of Production' will not be discussed separately, but rather mentioned within the context of the analyses directed at the critique of traditional Marxism and Postone's reconstructive framework, respectively.

## **THE FORMATION OF AN INTELLECTUAL: MOISHE POSTONE AS A STUDENT OF MARX AND CRITICAL THEORY**

Moishe Postone studied at the University of Chicago in the 1960s where he became involved with the political left. Though he never aligned with self-avowed Marxist movements, such as the Maoists and the Trotskyites, the (often) emigré faculty members of the

University of Chicago helped to shape his interest in modes of thought that attempted to grapple with the social and cultural dimensions in addition to the 'purely economic'. Postone's first encounter with Marx, in the 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844', left him with a sense of sensation while at the same time he discovered the works of the Frankfurt School. The greatest impact Postone received at that point was reading the *Grundrisse* (in translation). It also formed the basis for his dissertation proposal that was accepted by the University of Frankfurt in Germany where he enrolled as a doctoral student in the autumn semester of 1972. In Frankfurt, Postone worked closely with Adorno's former associates and assistants, such as Oskar Negt and Alfred Schmidt, but also Jürgen Ritsert, Gerhard Brandt and Iring Fetscher, although his intellectual formation was distinctive: while Postone's reading of the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* was strongly informed by his reading of texts from the critical theory tradition, he in turn re-read Adorno and Horkheimer through the lens of his new reading of Marx. In this sense, Postone's theoretical incentive was indebted to a kind of 'cross-fertilization' of both readings. This allowed Postone, in the seminal *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, to point towards a path for overcoming the antinomies of classical critical theory in a fundamentally different way than, for example, the attempt by Habermas.

Moishe Postone was Thomas E. Donnelley Professor of Modern History, co-director of the Chicago Center for Contemporary Theory and member of the Committee on Jewish Studies at the University of Chicago. He died aged 75 on the 19th of March, 2018.

## **IMMANENT SOCIAL CRITIQUE AS METHOD**

Going back to Hegel's claim that the 'most difficult' task is to unite judgement and comprehension in the matter's 'presentation'

(Hegel, 1986: 11), this essay will first try to elucidate the method of 'immanent critique' influenced by critical theory, especially Adorno's approach, that structures Postone's presentation in his reconstruction of Marx's mature theory.

Against interpretations that limit Marx's analysis and critique to a theory of material production, class structure or simply a 'different' kind of economics ('critical' economics included), Postone stresses that Marx's theory understands not only the object of its critique – the historically specific form of production called 'capitalist', but also its own *standard* of critique – mediated by particular categories and concepts, as historically determinate. This enables this kind of critique to account for its conditions of possibility within its own social and historical context. Postone calls this kind of critical method 'immanent social critique' (1993: 87) and adopts this view of Marx's method for his own criticism of what he terms 'traditional Marxism'. It is crucial for Postone that 'Marx's theory is thought to grasp the relationship of theory to society self-reflexively, by seeking to analyse its context – capitalist society – in a way that locates itself historically and accounts for the possibility of its own standpoint' (1993: 16). Only this approach can be called an 'immanent' critique in which the social dimension relates not only to the criticized object, (capitalist) society, but also to its subject as being socially and historically mediated by the fabric of the very society it criticizes. This standpoint reflects the theorem of the dialectical unity of method and object, or the judgement immanent to its object, as often invoked by Adorno (1976: 109, 117–18; 1993: 7–9).

The acknowledgement or demand of the criticizing subject's own immanent standpoint opens a perspective to an evaluation of Marx's Critique of Political Economy that emphasizes the relation of subject and object, positivity and negativity (affirmation and negation), universality and particularity, essence and appearance, content and form, substance and function, the dynamic and the

static, as being an integral part of Marx's categorial critique of political economy. The re-evaluation of these classical metaphysical topoi within the context of Marx's categorial critique also provides a more fundamental approach to not only the critique, but also to how capitalist society can be efficiently overcome. Here, Postone's understanding of the underlying structure of capitalist society as owing to the deeply inverted and reified structure of the capitalist mode of production, and yet presenting itself as rigid social objectivity, is eminent. It is only with this set of critical categories that as historically specific also address the historically specific *Problemstellung* of capital that theories of reification and fetishism of social relations can be adequately addressed. In other words, it is only within the self-reflexive standard of immanent social critique that the problem of the fetish-character of value, of social objectivity and subjectivity, and that of social mediation are expressed as the structural fundamentals of capitalist society in their own right, so that their overcoming becomes a real possibility. Because the emphasis of the problem of social objectivity and subjectivity informs Postone's basic assumptions, he hereby declares the first conceptual determinations of *Capital* – value, abstract labour, the commodity, and capital, in which the problem of subjective and objective social constitution is already expressed – as 'fundamental categories' of Marx's analysis, and likewise of his own reinterpretation.

The emphasis of the historical specificity of Marx's categories of value, (abstract) labour, capital, etc. not only provides a critique of the 'naturalism' inherent in both classical political economy and what Postone terms 'traditional Marxism' – it also provides the criticism of the idea that production in capitalism in some way or the other represents the interaction of humans and nature that constitutes a realm outside of capitalism itself and therefore also the standpoint of its critique. It also moves beyond a mere critique of exploitation: 'the basic categories

of Marx's critique not only delineate a mode of exploitation. They also are temporally dynamic categories that seek to grasp modern capitalist society as a mode of social life characterised by quasi-objective forms of domination (commodity, capital) that underlie an intrinsic historical dynamic' (Postone, 2004: 53–4). The emphasis on the historically specific in the immanent critical approach also formulates the conditions of how a socially valid and holistic critique can be conceptualized. Postone calls this approach a 'negative critique'. A 'negative critique', resonating Adorno's concept of 'negative dialectics', and in accordance with the presuppositions of immanent social critique as a *holistic* critical theory, 'criticizes what is on the basis of what could be' (1993: 64) while a 'positive critique' 'criticizes what exists on the basis of what also exists' (ibid.), a position that holds for the traditional Marxist view of labour as the standpoint of critique. The representatives of the traditional Marxist viewpoint, by de-emphasizing the historically specific role of labour as value-producing, abstract labour in the particular socio-historical constellation called 'capitalism' – hereby fatally underestimating Marx's essential theoretical intervention of the dual character of labour in the capitalist mode of production – fail adequately to grasp the object of Marx's critique, the form of value and its production in this kind of society, and the call for its abolishment. By making the value-based capitalist mode of production and the historically specific form of labour that creates value the object of his critique, Marx, in Postone's view, 'transformed the nature of the social critique based upon the labor theory of value from a positive to a negative critique' (1993: 63). In contrast, traditional Marxism does not see abstract labour as the *substance* (or 'content') of value as the object of critique, but merely addresses a particular *function* (or 'form') of labour in capitalist society and therefore remains trapped in the positive critique *from the standpoint of labour*, instead of a negative critique *of labour* in capitalism.

Traditional Marxism therefore has the character of 'redemptive criticism' [*rettende Kritik*] (although Postone never uses this term to characterize traditional Marxism). In the 'positive/redemptive critique' of traditional Marxism, therefore, the 'essence' of Marx's analysis becomes an entity like a '(truly) human society' that should be *realized*, instead of capitalism that should be *abolished*. What is therefore underlying the methodological standard of immanent social critique is a particular dialectic: precisely because the traditional critique points to an *external* essence ('human self-fulfilment', the 'truly human society'), it remains positive. In contradistinction, Postone's position of immanent social critique is a negative one: it calls for the overcoming of the very social and historical configuration within which it is set. In it, the 'realizable "ought" that is immanent to the "is" and serves as the standpoint of critique' (1993: 88). It must be conceptualized as the *negation* of the existing conditions.

At this point, the notion of immanent social critique must be reviewed against its theoretical background in Hegel's metaphysics or logic that Postone identifies as one essential cornerstone of Marx's (and consequently, his own) position. As indicated above, the emphatic use of Hegelian terminology and the themes of classic German idealism provide Postone with a solid basis to investigate the epistemological implications of his reinterpretation of Marx's fundamental categories, like the commodity and capital, and the forms of obfuscation that accompany them. Hegel's concepts like the idea, the self-moving subject, and also the concept [*der Begriff*] itself, here also deliver a rich source for reconceptualizations of *a theory of subjectivity as a theory of capital* that arguably represents the main interest of Postone's intervention at the level of method.

The basic assumption of Postone's adaption of Hegel's theory is that Hegel's notion of *Geist* (or Subject/Substance, or Idea, or *Begriff*) finds its adequate expression in

Marx's notion of capital in his *Critique of Political Economy*. Like Hegel's *Geist*, value becomes the 'self-moving subject' that subsumes the forms of appearance of social structures under its own logic, a logic for its own sake. It is 'constituted by forms of objectifying practice' (1993: 75), a practice that finds its expression in a determinate social reality it moulds according to its own inner structure (e.g. commodity exchange). '[Marx] investigates the nature of that social reality in *Capital* by unfolding logically the commodity and money forms from his categories of use value, value, and its "substance"' (1993: 75), the particular form of labour in capitalism that produces (surplus) value, abstract labour. For this hypothesis, Postone finds textual proof in a crucial passage of the first volume of *Capital* in which Marx presents the transformation of money to capital, especially in Marx's well-known conceptualization of value (not, as is often thought, capital) as 'automatic subject' (see Marx, 1976: 255–6). Yet, how can the adaptation of Hegel's theory of subjectivity deliver a ground to a social critique that emphasizes the mutual mediation of the objective and subjective dimension of practice expressed in the notion of capital? Postone's answer is that Marx's move to conceptualizing Hegel's *Geist* as the self-moving subject of value, entails a shift from the subject-object paradigm of classic epistemology to a social theory of consciousness (1993: 77). With the help of Hegel's methodological-theoretical overarching architecture of the self-mediation of the identical subject-object – a Subject in the true meaning of the word, divested of and incorporated in its 'own' objectivity – Postone can reconceptualize the forms of really existing capitalist social relations as forms of both subjectivity and objectivity, implying and excluding one another. In this sense, the commodity form is not simply a social reality, expressed in a more or less arbitrary thing-like form, but as a social reality it already *encompasses* the fundamental social relations of production, namely in the

notions of use value and value, of concrete and abstract labour, and both its fundamentally contradictory, yet mutually conditioning objective and subjective dimensions (which will be discussed in part three in more detail). However, Postone defies what could seem as a reformulation of the classic analysis of Georg Lukács' essay 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' in his path-breaking *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). In fact, both regarding its method and its impetus, Postone's understanding of Marx's appropriation of Hegel's method is quite different from its appropriation in Lukács. In his essay, Lukács has tried to demonstrate the insufficiency of the epistemological paradigm of the subject-object dualism associated with 'bourgeois' science. Hegel, in Lukács' view, provides the antidote to this kind of thinking 'in terms of finitude' by not only overcoming the opposition of epistemological subject and object in the infinite 'identical subject-object' of the *Geist*, but, by delivering the conceptual means to 'materialistically' appropriate this identical subject-object to the object of history and historical emancipation, identifying it with the proletariat. The proletariat accordingly becomes the 'identical subject-object' of historical progress, and its emancipation by way of self-realization or *Selbstbewusstwerdung* is equal to that of mankind as such. Postone argues that Marx's understanding of Hegel differs from Lukács' interpretation in three essential aspects: first, as indicated above, Lukács' argument relies heavily on a critique of capitalist society from the standpoint of labour, and with it, the glorification of the 'labouring proletariat' as the emancipatory force of history, instead of positing it precisely as the *object* of Marx's critique. In consequence, Lukács' interpretation remains confined to a 'positive' and redemptive critique. Second, Marx 'suggests that a historical Subject in the Hegelian sense does indeed exist in capitalism, yet he does not identify it with any social grouping, such as the proletariat, or with humanity' (1993: 75). Were this the case,

the concept of the identical subject-object of history would not supersede the collective version of the bourgeois (economic) subject, 'constituting itself and the world through "labor"' (1993: 78). Rather, as preliminarily indicated before, this historical Subject is a strictly *impersonal* entity, namely value or capital itself as the fundamental social nexus [*Zusammenhang*] of capitalist society. Lukács therefore disregards the particular historically dynamic character of domination in capitalist society in which even class domination is encompassed within the logic of the capital relation necessarily obeying the law of valorization, and hence, of value (for a critique of Postone's interpretation, see Feenberg, 1996). Third, in contrast to Lukács, Marx perceives of capitalist relations as the *necessary constitutive* of the modern subject, not as *extrinsic* to it. They 'veil' neither the 'real' social relations of capitalism (class relations) nor a 'human essence' attributed to the exploited class. To the contrary, there 'is' no real kernel to the existing mechanisms of social constitution other than those performed in capitalist practice. This critique indirectly also demonstrates Lukács' misrepresentation of Marx's theoretical intervention as belonging to the paradigm and discourse of 'enlightenment' critique. Here, mankind exists in the mode of 'estrangement' (rather than alienation as a specific form of estrangement) from its essence, the emancipative universal structure of rationality. The self-empowerment of the intellect, as expressed in Kant's 'Sapere aude' – in Lukács' terms, the *Selbstbewusstwerdung des Proletariats* – would serve as the death blow to authority, personified in the King or the capitalist class. Contrary to its anti-Kantian impetus, Lukács' conceptualization is still embedded in the mode of enlightenment critique. To be sure, contrary to Kant, Lukács' remedy would not be the well-formed and sound argument alone, but human practice aimed at self-emancipation.

What is furthermore essentially 'Hegelian' and to some extent 'un-Lukácsian' in this

adaptation is Postone's stress on *contradiction* that forms the underlying hypothesis for the possibility of immanent social critique. For Marx, as for Postone, the fabric of capitalist society is constituted on a fundamental social contradiction. For now, it should suffice to say that this social contradiction is already incorporated in the form of the commodity or the value form, the 'economic cell form' of bourgeois society (Marx, 1976: 90) and its aspect of use value and value that 'characterizes its social universe' (1993: 88). As such, it is not only historically specific to capitalist society, but the specific social dimension of the commodity, its value, refers to the totality of social relations that manifests itself in objective structures while being subjectively mediated. They find their realization in the inverted structures of fetishism that are both objectively valid and socially constructed in practice. The nature of the contradiction of the commodity form therefore points to the subjective and objective dimension of social mediation that can only be grasped from the standpoint of totality. This methodological approach allows Marx to conceptualize a theory 'of the ways in which humans constitute structures of social mediation which, in turn, constitute forms of social practice' (1993: 218). In this sense, Hegel's 'speculative identity' of subject and object serves as the buttress for Postone's interpretation of Marx's notion of value and its necessary realization in modes of practice. Needless to say, Marx's theory forecloses Hegel's idealist standpoint. Postone, though aware of their essential difference, has probably not made clear enough *how* Marx's difference from Hegel must also be understood in relation to the notion of 'truth'. For Hegel, the concept *reveals* itself. At first, at the level of appearance, it is superficially true, while with the further distinctions it becomes false, before it becomes finally true 'again', but now as the concrete totality of all the previous determinations which are sublated in it, in the triple meaning of the word. For Marx however, understanding the operations of the capitalist system is

not a question of the self-presentation of the concept at all. Quite to the contrary: what the concept and the concepts present [*darstellen*], has to be read *against themselves*, as the abyss between their appearance and their uncomprehended presuppositions, or their essence. Here is why his Critique of Political Economy presents itself as the critique of the mechanism taking place in the economic categories that in and out of themselves *increasingly obscure* the origin of (surplus) value in the exploitation of living human labour. The fetish-character that value takes on as a form in this dynamic points to a greater *mystification* instead of a greater approximation towards the Idea or truth, as in Hegel. Hence, for Marx, in a concept such as interest-bearing capital ‘the fetish character of capital and the representation of this capital fetish is ... completed’ (Marx, 1981: 516). For Marx, the truth of what *is* will not come to appear – and precisely because of that, the presentation of the categories not only proceeds from the simple to the complex as in Hegel, but *at the same time from the level of essence to that of appearance*. This is also why Marx introduces his labour theory of value together with the presentation of the twofold character of labour right at the beginning of his Critique. That being said, while Marx and Hegel are fundamentally opposed in this regard, Postone is correct to highlight Marx’s indebtedness to Hegel’s methodological approach of critical immanence.

## FALLACIES OF TRADITIONAL MARXISM

### *The Transhistorical View of Labour*

At the most general level, the basic objection against what Postone terms the traditional Marxist interpretation is that its critique of capitalism is one *from the standpoint of labour* instead of being a *critique of labour* in capitalism (see 1993: 5). The latter, as

indicated above, entails a critique of the capitalist mode of production in its totality, whereas the former implies a transhistorical notion of labour as underlying Marx’s analysis in *Capital*. In this view, labour is endowed to provide the metabolism between humans and nature throughout human history, so that labour is seen to be in itself a worthy social practice and generally attributed with positive features. Postone rejects this ‘productivist paradigm’ on the grounds that Marx’s critique points to the historical specificity of the particular role of labour in capitalist society, namely, to be the substance of value whose (value’s) production and re-production is capitalist society’s only rationale. Postone’s emphasis on the historical and systematic specificity of value-producing labour in capitalism enables him to reinforce Marx’s crucial distinction of concrete, use-value-producing labour and abstract, value-producing labour to show that only the latter form of labour constitutes the kind of social nexus mediated by the value form that is characteristic for capitalism. Value, accordingly, as a historical determination specific to capitalist society expresses ‘both the determinate form of social relations and the particular form of wealth that characterize capitalism’ (1993: 44). This particular form of social wealth expressed in value, Postone argues, is contradictorily opposed to wealth expressed in use value, as in the ‘immense collection of commodities’ people may or may not use to satisfy their needs. In contrast, the form of production aimed at value, specific to capitalism, has substituted the meaningful coherence of social life directed at the satisfaction of needs (concrete wealth) with the production of abstract wealth directed at abstract wealth itself.

According to Postone, traditional Marxism not only conflates what Marx calls ‘crucial to an understanding of political economy’ (Marx, 1976: 132), namely the character of social production aimed at use value with that of value, but underestimates the significance of his critique. In this sense, influential



Marxist economist Paul Sweezy's intervention is centred around the notion of the *distribution* of value, instead of delivering a critique of its *production*. It therefore remains on the traditionalist standpoint of a positive notion of labour that identifies the market as the 'self-regulatory' instance that demonstrates the efficacy of the law of value. He thus maintains that isolated workers 'are, in fact, working for each other' (Sweezy, 1969: 27) which not only assumes that the goal of this kind of production is use value, but that the market distributes the goods so that a 'general equilibrium' (Sweezy, 1969: 53) can be maintained. In his critique, Postone claims that 'The law of value, according to Sweezy, then, is an attempt to explain the workings of the self-regulating market, which implies that value is a category of distribution alone, an expression of the non-conscious, "automatic", market-mediated mode of distribution in capitalism' (Postone, 1993: 45). The tenet of Sweezy's critique remains at the level of the non-overt vs the overt relations of production whereas value and the labour it creates remain historically unspecific and are exempt from Sweezy's critique. If, however, value were only a category of the mode of distribution, 'the labor that creates that wealth would not differ intrinsically from labor in noncapitalist formations' (Postone, 1993: 45), even if the relations of production were mediated in an 'overt' way.

Another way to inaccurately perceive of Marx's theory of value from the standpoint of labour is the discussion of its social and/or private character. Apart from Sweezy, Postone specifically refers to Vitali Vygodski and Ernest Mandel who both – notwithstanding their difference over the centrality of private property to capitalism – suppose that the social character of labour in capitalism is 'indirect' and, as such, only validated through the market (Vygodski, 1973: 54; Mandel, 1971: 98). The goal of Marx's value theory would be to show that in a non-capitalist society, like socialism, private and individual labour would be 'directly' social

and need not rely on an ex-post validation through market mechanisms that obscure labour's directly value-producing properties (Mandel, 1971: 97). Postone argues that this view of the 'indirectly' social labour in capitalism, misrepresents Marx's understanding of the character of private and social labour that, contrary to these views, does not 'specify an extrinsic difference' (1993: 46), but is conceptually derived from the crucial difference between abstract and concrete labour. With the terminological convention of his early *Critique of Political Economy* where 'exchange-value' and 'value' are still synonymously used, Marx contends in the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) that '[t]he labour which expresses itself in exchange-value is presupposed as the labour of the isolated individual. It becomes social by assuming the form of its immediate opposite, the form of abstract generality' (Marx, 1970: 34, quoted in Postone, 1993: 47). According to Postone, the relation between private and social labour cannot be adequately grasped in the critique of mediation (viz. the market) from the standpoint of immediacy ('direct social labour'), the latter of which a socialist society would purportedly realize. The point of Marx's understanding of the character of labour in capitalism is the mutual conditionality and simultaneity of its private and social character. Labour in capitalism, directed at the production of (surplus) value, is privately expended labour [*privat verausgabte Arbeit*], conditioned by the particular social nexus expressed in value, which itself is conditioned by the existence of the expenditure of private labour. As such, this kind of labour is directly social. Even more, because of its double character, for Marx, 'it is *only* in capitalism that labor also has a directly social dimension' (1993: 48). The truncated understanding of the meaning of 'social' in the traditional views leads to an interpretation from the standpoint of labour: '[Marx's characterization of labour] refers not to the difference between the "true", trans-historical "essence" of labor and its form of

appearance in capitalism, but, rather, to two moments in capitalism itself' (1993: 47). Because value constitutes the social nexus in capitalism, labour in the mode of its production is *directly social*.

In the following, the general critical interventions against critiques from the standpoint of labour will be addressed in some of its specific forms.

### ***Capitalism as a Form of Class Society***

In Postone's analysis, traditional Marxism has often emphasized the meaning of capitalism as a class society in which the dominant, capitalist class, lives off the wealth produced by the exploitation of the labouring or working class. While this is not in itself wrong, Postone laments that this view departs from the standpoint of totality that an imminent social critique can provide. By understanding capitalism not as a form of society, but a form of class domination, traditional Marxism also brackets what is *specific* to capitalism and fundamentally distinguishes it from all previous forms of social formation: its form of abstract and impersonal social domination by value and capital itself, the 'abstract form of wealth'. The bourgeois class, too, is not exempt from this form of domination (while, being caught in the fetishism of its self-understanding, it must protect its implementation). This has also problematic consequences for the projections of a future, noncapitalist society ('socialism') in which domination and exploitation shall be overcome. In the traditional view, it is not labour itself – as wage labour – that must be abolished, but its unfree, 'fettered' condition of existence. Consequently, for Postone, the interpretation of capitalism as class society sees the 'possibility of theoretical and practical critique ... in the gap between the ideals and the reality of modern capitalist society, [not] in the contradictory nature of the form of social mediation that constitutes that

society' (1993: 67), and thus remains positive and external. The traditional critique takes off 'from an already existing structure of labor and the class that performs it. Emancipation is realized when a structure of labor already in existence no longer is held back by capitalist relations and used to satisfy particularistic interests but is subject to conscious control in the interests of all' (1993: 66). The working class or proletariat, thus glorified, should not be abolished, but merely emancipated from its particular social rank as the oppressed class. The 'dignity of production' is therefore hypostasized onto future (and past) societies. Along these lines, traditional Marxism also positively refers to industrial production as the site in which 'the worker' can instantiate his/her labour to 'come to its own' and unfold its potential. Labour is proclaimed as the locus of self-realization of not only the working class, but mankind as such. This progressivism of traditional Marxism also uncritically adopts the view that a social reproduction process, the capitalist one included, must be based on use value. Hence, this position often views demands for a top-down re-distribution of wealth, understood as the expression of use value, as an adequate critique of capitalism. At the same time, the intrinsically *structural* relation between the abstract form of wealth in value, exploitation, and their historical specificity remains unthematized. The positive, redemptive critique of capitalism is also reflected in traditional Marxism's false attribution of a 'right' consciousness to the proletariat, as opposed to the ideology or 'false consciousness' of the bourgeois class. Immanent social critique in contrast perceives of the 'inverted' structure of capital, as a social relation, as a *totality* from which the labouring class cannot be exempted: the fetish-character of value is not one exclusively reserved for the bourgeois class or political economists. This is why the standpoint of labour is not antagonist to capitalist relations, but one of its inherent components. Indeed, 'the standpoint of capital and wage labour is the same' (Bonefeld, 2004: 113. For a critical

discussion of Postone's view, see also Bonefeld, 2004).

In this regard, Postone discusses a more pertinent question: why is it that labour in capitalism is perceived as a transhistorical force of the self-realization of mankind? His answer is that the particular form of labour in capitalism, abstract labour, delivers in and out of itself its appearance as transhistorical, and hence, use value-producing. This point shall be elaborated in the overview of Postone's own reconstruction of Marx's categories in part three.

### ***The Market, Private Property, and Modes Of Distribution as Defining Moments: Ricardian Marxism***

Another critique of capitalism from the standpoint of labour is that of a specific form of traditional Marxism, namely the Ricardian Marxism notably represented in Paul Sweezy and Maurice Dobb that Postone locates in their emphasis on the market, the significance of the notion of private property, and the modes of distribution. The crucial objection to this reading of Marx is that in its basic assumptions, it hypostatizes convergences between Marx and classical political economy, especially David Ricardo, instead of seeing Marx as a predominant *critic* of Ricardo, his labour theory of value, and the emphasis on distribution (for the detailed critique of Ricardo, see Marx, 1973: 557–64 and Marx, 1989: 9–208). According to Postone, the alleged common features of Marx's and Ricardo's theory include (a) the normative critique of nonproductive social groupings (land owners in Ricardo, capitalists in traditional Marxism), (b) the identification of labour or the 'labourer' with the general interests of society, as expressed in Ricardo's transhistorical labour theory of value (see Ricardo, 1911: 5), (c) the critique from the standpoint of labour as a quasi-natural point of view and its evocation of social ontology, and (d) the moralistic critique in the name of justice, reason, universality, and

nature. Also the positive evaluation of industrial production is a convergence between the traditional view of Marx and Ricardo, exemplified in Ricardian Marxism.

Like Sweezy, Dobb views value as a 'market category'. It indicates that 'a system of commodity production and exchange can operate of itself without collective regulation or single design' (Dobb, 1940: 37, quoted in 1993: 49–50) and positively refers to Adam Smith's classic idea of the 'unseen' or 'invisible hand'. For Dobb, Marx's law of value and the idea of classical economists are however not to be conflated: the classics 'had not provided a historical critique of capitalism itself' (Dobb, 1940: 55, quoted in 1993: 50). This became Marx's task. However, what the classical political economists, notably Smith and Ricardo, purportedly provided for Marx's analysis, was a positive theory of production that implied a normative critique of the nonproductive, consuming class – the owners of landed property. Dobb's understanding of social critique, according to Postone, is therefore 'a critique of non-productive social groupings from the standpoint of production' (1993: 50). For Dobb, consequently, both Smith's and Ricardo's classical labour theory of value (see Smith, 1846: 13 and Ricardo, 1911: 5) served as the vantage point for Marx's own labour theory of value that he refined in terms of a critical weapon against both of the 'unproductive classes', the owners of landed property and the bourgeoisie. As for differences between Smith and Ricardo, it should be briefly mentioned that while Smith attacked the 'unproductive' land owners, he still believed that rent constitutes one of the three 'sources of revenue', next to labour and capital. Ricardo departed from this view to question that 'the appropriation of land, and the consequent creation of rent, will occasion any variation in the relative value of commodities independently of the quantity of labour necessary to production' (Ricardo, 1911: 33ff.) This 'refinement' of Smith's and Ricardo's value theory was purportedly expressed in the category

of surplus value. Here, Dobb argues, Marx goes beyond Smith and Ricardo to show that profit is not a function of capital, but of labour alone, to include the bourgeois class in his criticism. This allegedly enabled Marx to predominantly criticize how the products of labour, based on the private ownership of the means of production, are *distributed*. 'Social domination is treated as a function of class domination which, in turn, is rooted in "private property in land and capital"[Dobb: 78]. Within this general framework, the categories of value and surplus value express how labor and its products are distributed in a market-based class society' (1993: 53). Dobb's misrepresentation of Marx's intervention then, in Postone's view, is a double one: neither does Marx attack the 'unproductive classes' from the standpoint of the 'productive' ones, nor does he attack the 'non-overt' operations of the mode of distribution, i.e. the market and the existence of private property, from the perspective of an ontological and quasi-natural notion of 'labour' that embodies the general interests of society. The crucial difference between classical political economy and Marx's critique is, rather, the *critique of labour* specific to the capitalist mode of production. In the latter, labour is neither the positive standpoint from which to attack class domination, nor can be endowed with the dignified status of a 'social ontology'. At this point, Postone's critique of Ricardian Marxism could be extended to more recent Proudhonist reinterpretations of Marx's work, notably those of Karatani Kōjin, that also stress the distributive or 'consumption' side of reproduction with its strong emphasis on the allegedly 'emancipatory' potential of use value against value (see Karatani, 2014. For a critique of this view, see Lange, 2015).

The consequences of the theoretical proximity between traditional (Ricardian) Marxism and classical political economy also fall back onto traditional Marxism's projections of a future society. If the critique of domination in capitalism relies predominantly on a positive, transhistorical notion

of labour, then its moralistic dimension is equally evoked. Hence, the traditional critique is directed against 'unjust' modes of distribution in the name of the 'particular' interest of the bourgeois class. In a quasi-natural understanding of labour, then, all the 'artificial fetters' of capitalism (the market, private property) should be abolished. A society that most adequately grasped human essence would then be one in which labour can develop its natural forces unobstructedly. In short, it would be 'socialist'. The dialectic of this moralistic dimension of the critique consists in the hypostatization of ideals that themselves are products of the social configuration that shall be overcome. Especially the opposition between abstract universality and concrete particularity as that of nature and artificiality, critically evaluated by Postone, 'is not one between ideals that point beyond capitalism and the reality of that society; rather, as an opposition, it is a feature of that society and is rooted in its labor-mediated mode of social constitution itself' (1993: 67). This, however, is a problem of the epistemological dimension of the critique in its social constitution. The positive, external critique of traditional Marxism neglects to undertake its self-reflection on the specific historical conditionality of its 'ideals' projected onto a future, noncapitalist society.

In the next and final part, on the 'fallacies of Traditional Marxism', the epistemological self-reflection becomes a prevalent condition to examine critical theory's regress towards pessimism. It is expressed in Max Horkheimer's politico-theoretical assumptions sharing parallels with Ricardian Marxism's reductionist interpretation.

### ***The Forces and The Relations of Production as the Basic Contradiction: The Case of Horkheimer***

Beyond the more obvious targets of what Postone terms 'traditional' Marxism, he also,

probably more counter-intuitively, critically evaluates the political theory of critical theory, especially that of Friedrich Pollock and Max Horkheimer. For reasons of space, the critique of Pollock will only be briefly taken up, to pay more attention to Horkheimer whose later position was largely influenced by that of Pollock.

At the core of two articles Pollock published in 1932 and 1933 (Pollock, 1932, 1933) stood the theory of state capitalism: the reassessment of the political in Marxist terms in which, with the rise of the interventionist state in the wake of the Great Depression in the early 1930s, 'the political sphere has superseded the economic sphere as the locus of both economic regulation and the articulation of economic problems' (Postone, 1993: 90). The theoretical framework behind this assessment is informed by understanding the basic contradiction of capitalism – *nota bene*: one that leads to its demise – as one of the forces of production (*Produktivkräfte*, i.e. industrial production) and the relations of production (*Produktionsverhältnisse*, i.e. private ownership of the means of production, class relation, the market, etc.). Providing a prognostic viewpoint, Pollock assumes that this basic and *growing* contradiction would lead to the abolishment of the present economic form while being able to give room for state capitalism, expressed in planned economy. Political power would gradually determine and reconfigure the economic sphere, and a conscious, yet possibly authoritarian control of society would become a reality. Postone's main criticism is that the economic categories, i.e. profit, become subspecies of political concepts, i.e. power, and that the concept of capital remains unconsidered as a category of social critique. Furthermore, if the market and private property characterize the relations of production of capitalism, and these are abolished with state capitalism, then this form cannot be characterized as capitalist. While Pollock's understanding of the basic contradiction of capitalism, formulated along the lines of the forces and the relations

of production, was rendered inadequate by the development of twentieth-century capitalism, Postone argues that Pollock has himself failed to reconceptualize it (1993: 104) and remained in its discursive framework.

Directly influenced by Pollock's views on the basic contradiction between the forces and the relations of production to form capitalism's basic contradiction, Horkheimer takes a 'pessimistic turn' (Postone, 1993: 104). In its adequate contemporary form, according to Horkheimer, the Critique of Political Economy has been superseded by the critique of politics, the critique of ideology, and the critique of instrumental reason. These vantage points form the cornerstones of critical theory. The first, not yet pessimistic expression of this refiguration of social critique as defining critical theory, was Horkheimer's programmatic essay 'Traditional and Critical Theory' (1937). While, in Postone's view, Horkheimer's position is an 'epistemologically sophisticated version of traditional Marxism' (1993: 108), the standpoint of critique, however, still remained within the framework of viewing capitalism's basic contradiction in the one between the forces and relations of production. However, in contrast to traditional vulgarizations of identifying labour *sans phrase* with a state of human nature 'come onto its self', Horkheimer critically indicates its *opposition* to 'nature' and labour's propensity for nature's domination. But according to Postone, Horkheimer failed to criticize the particular *form* of labour in capitalist societies, only questioning the mode of its organization and application (1993: 108). This blind spot paradigmatically led to Horkheimer's opposition between human activity and the 'waste' of labour power and human life (Horkheimer, 1972/2002: 204, quoted in 1993: 106), or his insistence that human development is arrested, fragmented, and alienated by the market and private property. Like the traditionalist view, Horkheimer's early analysis suggests an emancipation *of*, but not *from*, labour (in support of this view, see also Horkheimer,

1972/2002: 213, 218). Notwithstanding these underlying assumptions, Horkheimer's early understanding of social critique is largely in compliance with Postone's own method of immanent critique. In 'Traditional and Critical Theory', Horkheimer, in accordance with Postone's characterization of immanent social critique, 'uncovers the growing discrepancy between what is and what could be' on the basis of the intrinsic contradictions of a society grasped as a totality (1993: 107). In that sense, Horkheimer's programmatic proposal for critical theory is still embedded in an optimistic vision of possibilities for critiques of the dominant form of society as well as overcoming it.

According to Postone, however, this early view gave way to an increasing pessimism, reflected in 'The Authoritarian State' (1940). Note that Postone's diagnosis is founded on the unreflected traditionalist Marxist assumptions in Horkheimer, namely that the contradiction between the forces and the relations of production is one between a general positive evaluation of the development of human labour in its typically industrialist phase and the 'fetters' or 'limits' imposed on it by the market and private property (as for Postone's different view of the basic contradiction in capitalism, see the final part of the essay). What is new in 'The Authoritarian State' however is a deeply ambiguous attitude towards the emancipatory potential of the forces of production. Adhering to Pollock's state theory of conscious planning that may take authoritarian forms, Horkheimer realized that with the rise of national socialism and fascism, the inherent contradictions of capitalism did not only lead to a state capitalist form of planned economy, but came to be realized in the repressive state. With the development of the forces of production, 'the state has become potentially anachronistic' and 'must become more authoritarian, that is, it must rely to a greater degree on force and the permanent threat of war in order to maintain itself' (Horkheimer, 1978: 109–11; Postone, 1993: 110–11). Horkheimer

maintains that the basic contradiction of capitalism is superseded in the repressive state, but in such a way that its outcome is an even more disastrous one: no longer are the relations of production putting 'fetters' on the emancipatory potential of labour the greatest obstacle to human emancipation, but the political *itself* has turned against human life in its immediacy. It is, indeed, a more vital and fundamental contradiction than the capitalist one. The forces of production, freed from market and private property, now turn against emancipation itself to consolidate the authoritarian system. In its pessimistic conclusion: the repressive state system and emancipatory socialism share the same material basis (1993: 111, see also Horkheimer, 1978: 114). With this 'turn to a pessimistic theory of history' (1993: 112), Horkheimer now reconceptualizes his views of the revolution, of human emancipation, and of a future society – instead of reconsidering his own conceptual presuppositions, as Postone suggests (for a critique of Postone's view, see Abromeit, 2011: 420ff.). In Horkheimer's new view of revolution, two moments complement each other: that of historical necessity and the 'voluntaristic' spontaneity of freedom (Horkheimer, 1978: 107). Labour is no longer viewed as the source of emancipation, nor is it a 'bearer' of human emancipation at all: the necessity of historical progress has no longer chosen a formidable role for labour in its course. At the same time, he has nothing to put in its place, except for the 'act of will against history' (Postone, 1993: 112). Moreover, Horkheimer now grasps the totality of capitalist society not as an internally contradictory and specific system of production, but affirmatively, identifying it with 'the absolute'. 'Horkheimer reverses his earlier position: "labor" and the totality, which earlier had been the standpoint of the critique, now become the grounds of oppression and unfreedom' (1993: 114). In this sense, also the *character* of the critique changes from the emphasis on human emancipation to a 'disjunction' of the concept (i.e. the Absolute,

as grasped in Hegel and appropriated by Horkheimer for his view of society) and actuality. In sum, by not reconsidering the basic traditional Marxist views even after the ‘basic contradiction’ explained in that way had been superseded in the authoritarian state, Horkheimer embarks on historical pessimism in which only the relation between the concept and reality becomes thematic and the potential of immanent social critique of his early critique is left unrealized.

A similar diagnosis, Postone argues, can be made for Habermas who shares the premise of a traditional understanding of labour, and yet ‘attempts to limit the scope of its social significance’ (1993: 120). Habermas, leaving the crucial difference between abstract and concrete labour unthematized, understands the category of value as a quasi-natural, trans-historical, and technical category of wealth. His interpretation therefore reduces Marx’s critique of the social relations of production in capitalism to a critique of its *particular aspects* that are not only wrongly attributed, but also failing to grasp it as a self-reflexive and historically specific critique of capitalist society in its *totality* (Postone, 1993: 230–4). (For a critical discussion of Postone’s critique of Habermas, see Kim, 2014. For an elaboration of Postone’s critique of Habermas, see Elbe, 2017.)

### **ABSTRACT LABOUR, THE FETISH-CHARACTER, AND ABSTRACT AND HISTORICAL TIME**

The final section takes a brief overview of Postone’s own reconstruction of Marx’s central categories that form the latter part of *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, insofar as they have not already been made clear in the critical discussion of the traditional Marxist standpoint.

For Postone, the crucial conceptual and real distinction of value and use value in the commodity form, functions as the interpretative

template to analyse the character of abstract labour, social domination, and time in capitalist society. Abstract labour has been a widely contested concept in the history of the scholarly reception of Marx’s *Capital*. Not least, because in its first definition, provided at the outset, Marx had given an explanation inviting misunderstanding, namely that abstract labour was the ‘expenditure of human labour power, in the physiological sense’ (Marx, 1976: 137). This naturalist view, even if Marx never uses it again throughout the three volumes, would, however, contradict what we have seen so far, namely that abstract labour is a purely social category, and specific only for the capitalist production mode. Postone here adheres to I.I. Rubin’s interpretation that both value and abstract labour are ‘determined social forms of production’ and that Marx had no physiological concept of abstract labour at all (Rubin, 1972: 135, quoted in 1993: 145). Why, then, does Marx invite the reader to believe it is? Postone’s argues that this first conceptualization was no ‘mistake’ of Marx’s, but a deliberate methodological move that delivers its own informative content. This argument requires a closer look.

As we have previously seen, Marx’s critique of political economy as a categorical critique of bourgeois economy targets the increasing mystification or the fetish-characteristic forms of value manifesting themselves in the categories of the commodity, money, capital, wage, price and profit, interest-bearing capital, rent, the sources of revenue, and so on. For Postone, this categorical critique not only serves to ‘reveal’ the essence of abstract labour in its inverted forms of appearance in these categories, as e.g. Lucio Colletti maintains (1972, 89–91, quoted in 1993: 147) with the objective to ‘defetishize’ the world of commodities (1993: 147), but to show that abstract labour itself constitutes a total ‘social mediation’ that simultaneously provides its own forms of appearance as transhistorical, ontological, and hence, physiological. After all, it *appears* as though

capitalist production is organized in a way to satisfy needs on the level of consumption. It *appears* as though the goal were material, concrete wealth that is only faultily distributed. The social mediation however that is presupposed for capitalist production to appear that way is bracketed from this view. For Postone, therefore, the relation between the essence of value in abstract labour and its appearance in its fetish-characteristic forms is a necessary one: 'the essence must be of such a quality that it necessarily appears in the form that it does. Marx's analysis of the relation of value to price, for example, is one of how the former is expressed and veiled by the latter' (1993: 166). The categories of essence and appearance, in accordance with Postone's theory, are not to be understood as ontological, but as historical categories directly related to the 'specific social function of labor' (1993: 167). Postone's critique therefore is not so much directed at Colletti's objective of 'defetishization', but, rather that 'defetishization' alone does not deliver the means to understand the 'mediating function' of abstract labour and value (1993: 167). In order to present abstract labour's mediating function, then, Marx chose to present and critically examine the fetishized forms such as its physiological function, in order to deliver an *immanent critique* of it in his succeeding analysis. (For a critique of Postone's undeclared usage of this original interpretation by Helmut Brentel, see Elbe, 2008: 243–4.) The mediating function of abstract labour therefore lies with its social and objective forms of expression that hitherto constitute the object of Marx's critique in the three volumes of *Capital*. It does *not* lie in its metabolic function to mediate human activity and nature, understood as a transhistorical and ontological process, as initially understood. Yet, '[the] appearance of labor's mediational character in capitalism as physiological labor is the fundamental core of the fetish of capitalism' (1993: 170).

Postone's conceptualization of abstract time demands a preliminary closer look at

some fundamentals of Marx's value theory. As is well known, Marx determines the substance of value as 'abstract human labour' and the measurement of value that determines its magnitude in 'the quantity of the "value-forming substance"', measured by its duration 'on the particular scale of hours, days, etc.' (Marx, 1976: 129). However, since the value of a product may then rise with greater unskillfulness and laziness of an individual producer, Marx introduces the notion of socially necessary labour time to give a more exact definition of the measure of value:

Socially necessary labour-time is the labour-time required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society ... What exclusively determines the magnitude of the value of any article is therefore the amount of labour socially necessary, or the labour-time socially necessary for its production. (Marx, 1976: 129)

For Postone, the 'quantitative' side of value – its expression in labour time and consequently in money and exchange ratios – has dominated the traditional discourse over the qualitative one, introduced by Rubin and others in the 1920s, to designate the specific social *form* or coherence that value creates. Postone however claims that even the determination of the magnitude of value entails a *qualitative* determination of the relation of labour, time, and social necessity. Value, understood in terms of its measure in time, becomes the defining moment of capitalist totality that impresses its 'norm' on the social relations. As a non-consciously operating social objectivity, it 'expresses a quasi-objective social necessity with which the producers are confronted' (1993: 191). Hence, Marx's famous sarcastic statement that 'in the midst of the accidental and ever-fluctuating exchange relations between products, the labour time socially necessary to produce them asserts itself as a regulative law of nature. In the same way, the Law of Gravity asserts itself when a person's house collapses on top of him' (Marx, 1976: 168).



Postone's intervention consists in demonstrating how, with the historical emergence of the capitalist mode of production, 'time' becomes a *social* category. It loses its previous contingent, natural and concrete dimension and becomes a socially determinate and abstract-general category that structures the social nexus in the form of abstract domination. Note that this understanding refines the one previously stated, namely that the capitalist mode of production is solely oriented towards abstract wealth in value. It shows how both social objectivity and subjectivity mutually constitute the conditions on which the adherence to abstract time emerged, expressed in the objective forms of value. As a part of this process, abstract time changed the social function of human labour, while the latter increasingly oriented towards the demands of the new form of time. In other words, capitalist society organized itself in such a way that it is no longer the concrete and particular labour time required to produce an individual commodity that determines its value – in other things, there is no such thing as 'individual value' – but always a 'general social mediation', expressed in socially necessary labour time. Strictly speaking, this 'socializing' [*vergesellschaftende*] function of time became one of the constitutive elements of value itself. Socially necessary labour time then functions as the mediator of moment and totality, of the particular and the abstract-general, to relate the productive activity of concrete labour and the socially mediating activity of abstract labour. The opposition of the use value and the value dimension of the commodity is consequently mediated through abstract time (or socially necessary labour time) as the one condition to generate a social coherence in capitalism. It is through the quasi-objective abstract temporal measure of social wealth that abstract time becomes a 'new time-form' – new as against pre-capitalist social formations. While this essay cannot go into Postone's historical analysis of the shift from concrete to abstract time, it should suffice to

say that this new, adequately capitalist time form, oriented towards value production, has stripped off the cyclical perception of time in pre-capitalist, use-value-oriented social formations. Here, as often presumed, time was distinguished by seasonal cycles, or day and night, accommodated to the natural rhythms of life and (mostly) agrarian reproduction. When productivity changed its paradigm from quality to quantity with the rise of modern production techniques, etc., and it was practically possible to produce everything at any given time in any given space, the natural conditions of reproduction were dispensed with. The new paradigm of production required an independent framework of time that was 'uniform, continuous, homogenous, "empty"' (1993: 202) and in that sense quite close to Newton's theory of absolute time that 'flows equably without relation to anything external'. A theory that tellingly has been developed in the wake of the capitalist relations of production in the late seventeenth century (Newton quoted in Heath, 1936: 88, quoted in Postone, 1993: 202). The new time paradigm also included acceleration. Since, as Postone argues, 'each new level of productivity, once it has become socially general, not only redetermines the social labor hour but, in turn, is redetermined by that hour as the "base level" of productivity' (1993: 289), humans and their labour become part of a *treadmill effect* of production.

With the 'tyranny' of abstract time, Postone's understanding of the basic contradiction in the capitalist mode of production can now be revealed. As shown in the previous discussion, it does not consist in the contradiction of the forces with the relations of production, but more fundamentally in the concept of value itself: while abstract time is the standard of measurement in value, increased productivity resulting from the application of new techniques and innovation, *lowers* the time – and hence, the value – necessary to produce commodities in the average. The paradigm of abstract wealth in value and the paradigm of ever-increasing

productivity, both vital for capitalist production, cancel each other out – and yet, capitalism cannot exist without both. In Marx's own words: 'Capital itself is the moving contradiction, in that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as the sole measure and source of wealth' (Marx, 1973: 706). The concept of production of relative surplus value in which we can see 'not only how capital produces, but how capital itself is produced' (Marx, 1976: 280), developed in Volume I, captures this predicament from which he also develops one aspect of *crisis* in capitalism. (Discussed as the 'Law of the Tendency for the Rate of Profit to Fall' in part three of Volume III of *Capital*, Marx, 1981: 316–78.)

Towards the end of *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, Postone presents the concepts of 'historical time' and 'abstract time' as the fundamental categories of the dialectic of capitalist production. The 'treadmill effect' or pattern is entailed by both categories insofar as the dialectic of value and use value here unfolds its grip on the production process. Rather than viewing the dialectic of value and use value simply as a problem of the commodity in atemporal, logical terms, Postone attempts to reconfigure it towards its temporal dimension. With this conception, Postone can effectively argue against conceptions of the 'materiality' of use value being distorted by value that remain on a purely logical hypothesis. He can also substantiate his previous contention that overcoming capitalism would involve overcoming both the form of growth and of production (labour) in capitalism, and not only the market and private property. Both abstract and historical time interact in a specific historical dialectic that, itself, generates a form of domination.

Here, Postone's analysis diverges in part from the clear conceptualizations of 'immanent social critique', applied to his understanding of the value form. In somewhat unmediated fashion, the category of 'space' is suddenly introduced – while its contribution to the explanatory power of the concept of

historical time somehow remains in the dark: 'Although the measure of value is time, the totalizing mediation expressed by "socially necessary labor time" is not a movement *of time* but a metamorphosis of substantial time into abstract time *in space*, as it were, from the particular to the general and back' (1993: 293). The only pertinent distinction between abstract and historical time, then, is that the former is a movement *in* time, while the latter is a movement *of* time. The explanatory objective of this distinction, however, remains obscure, or does, in any case, not move beyond the conceptual distinctions of his previous analysis. This becomes problematic especially against the background that both concepts designate *capitalist* time forms. As for the probable motive to introduce this concept, in this latter part of his analysis, Postone seems to incorporate philosophical classic dualisms (abstract–concrete, time–space) to give further proof of the holistic nature of his own interpretation, while it seems that the theoretizations of concepts such as space and historical time have not received the analytical treatment needed for such an attempt. (For a critical discussion, see Osborne, 2008: 19.)

All in all it must be stated, however, that since its first publication in 1993, Moishe Postone's reinterpretation of Marx's Critique of Political Economy has set new standards in the discourse of the critique of capitalism in aligning itself with the methodological approach of immanent social critique of critical theory. In addition to being a philosophically and historically well-informed and seminal theoretical intervention in the study of Marx's work, it has set the standard for a critical theory of society adequate for the twentieth century.

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# John Holloway: The Theory of Interstitial Revolution

Ana Cecilia Dinerstein

## INTRODUCTION

John Holloway's work spans over four decades of intellectual development and commitment to radical change. Holloway develops his ideas through ongoing dialogues, conversations, debates and discussions with both Marxists and radical scholars and students, and social movements and activists, worldwide. His work developed within the context of the Conference of Socialist Economists (CSE) and was foundational for the establishment of Open Marxism. The chapter focuses on Holloway's theory of interstitial revolution which, paraphrasing Holloway, has produced a 'crack' in Marxist praxis. I start with an account of Holloway's life and intellectual trajectory. Then, I discuss his theory of interstitial revolution, presented in his two single authored books, *Change the World without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today* (CTWWTP) (2002) and *Crack Capitalism* (2010). I conclude that for critical theory as a critique of capital, Holloway's work is groundbreaking.

## LIFE AND INTELLECTUAL TRAJECTORY

John Holloway was born on the 26th of July 1947 in Dublin, Ireland. He studied law, did a degree in Higher European Studies at the College of Europe, and received a PhD in Political Science from the University of Edinburgh. He taught Politics at the University of Edinburgh until his move to Mexico in 1991. He settled in the Spanish colonial city of Puebla, where he established himself as a Professor at the Institute for Social Sciences and Humanities 'Alfonso Vélaz Pliego', at the Benemérita Autonomous University of Puebla, where he currently (March 2018) teaches post-graduate courses. He is also a member of the Editorial Board of *Bajo el Volcán*, the journal of the Sociology Graduate School of the University.

Holloway began his intellectual relationship with the Frankfurt School when he read Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, in 1967. But it was not until he read the work of Ernst Bloch that he entered the realm of Critical Theory and Marxism. He came across his

philosophy around 1968, when a friend who was a student at the University of Tübingen, where Bloch worked from 1961 until his death in 1977, recommended Bloch's work to him; he read Bloch's work before Karl Marx's *Capital*. He studied Adorno's theory in the 1970s and continued working with it, encouraged by Richard Gunn and Werner Bonefeld, in the late 1980s and early 1990, then through joint work with his colleagues at the Benemérita Autonomous University of Puebla in the 1990s and 2000s.

In 1974, Holloway joined the CSE, which was created as a non-sectarian and internationalist forum for theoretical Marxist political debate in the United Kingdom as a response to the need to develop a socialist critique of Marxist orthodoxy. The Thatcher years brought about intense debates on globalization and the internationalization of the nation state among the various groupings of the British Left. The CSE aimed to understand the relation between domestic policy and international developments and the character of the capitalist state within the context of a globalizing world economy, and empower the Marxist critique of capital.<sup>1</sup>

Within the context of the CSE state debate, Holloway developed the category of state as a political form of definite social relations, in distinction to those approaches that tended to regard it as a political *institution* and argued that 'the internationalization of capital had undermined the ability for the state to serve the interests of "national" capital' (Clarke, 1991b: 22). Holloway agreed with other CSE members (Hugo Radice, Sol Picciotto and Simon Clarke) about the importance of raising 'the question of the relation between class struggle and the restructuring of capital' (Clarke, 1991b: 23) and the need to reintroduce class struggle as intrinsic – rather than external – to the analysis of the state. The CSE State Study Group was influenced by the German State Derivation (GD) debate, whose members, i.e. Joachim Hirsch and Heide Gerstenberger, conceived of the state as the political *form* of the capitalist social

relations, and sought to develop a materialist critique of the state. The GD debate applied the concept of 'form' to their exploration of the state, conceiving of the latter as logically and historically derived from capital. The GD debate interpreted Marx's *Capital* as a *materialist critique of the capitalist economy*, wherein the political and the economic were not separated spheres but rather distinct moments of capital as a social totality. While this development was vital for the CSE State Debate, they rejected the GD's problematic assertion of a 'logical derivation' of the state from capital. As Holloway highlights:

there is a tendency to see logic as establishing the general framework of development, with the actual details being filled in by the history of class struggle, so that in the end class struggle is seen as being subordinated to the structural logic of capitalism (Holloway, 1993a: 78).<sup>2</sup>

By rejecting the idea of 'logical' derivation and arguing for the existence of the state as a historical necessity of class struggle (Clarke, 1991a), the CSE State Study Group succeeded in the task of re-integrating class struggle into the analysis of the political and the economic forms of the capitalist social relations.<sup>3</sup> In 1977, John Holloway co-authored an article with Sol Picciotto where they contested Ralph Miliband's and Nicos Poulantzas' analysis of the state, arguing that their

approach rests ... on a misunderstanding of Marx's great work, which is not an analysis of the 'economic level' but a materialist critique of political economy, i.e. precisely a materialist critique of bourgeois attempts to analyse the economy in isolation from the class relations of exploitation on which it is based. (Holloway and Picciotto, 1977: 82)

According to Holloway and Picciotto, in order to understand the crisis of capitalism and the role of the state within it, it was essential to abandon the idea of crisis as 'economic crisis' and to interpret crisis as the crisis of the capital relation. The materialist theory of the state does not start from the analysis of the state, but from the analysis of

capital as a definite form of social relations. A 'political' theory of the state (such as Miliband's or Poulantzas'), autonomizes the state as an object of study, which leads to the *methodological* detachment of the study of the state form from the capitalist social relations. As suggested by Hirsch, the separation between the political and the economic prevents understanding of the state as the political form of capitalist society.

The theoretical developments of the CSE State Study Group constituted a turning point in the Marxist state debate.<sup>4</sup> To Holloway, 'to understand the political and the economic as two forms, as two moments, of the relation between capital and labour implies to understand the state as a process that fetishizes social relations' (Holloway in Thwaites Rey and Dinerstein, 1994: 14, author's interview).<sup>5</sup> The question was not what is the state, but what is capital and why the state appears as autonomized from capitalist society. Holloway and Picciotto discussed the specific form of domination in capitalist society by using Pashukanis' question:

Why does the dominance of a class not continue to be that which it is – that is to say, the subordination in fact of one part of the population to another part? Why does it take on the form of official state domination? ... Why is it disassociated from the dominant class – taking the form of an impersonal mechanism of public authority isolated from society' (Pashukanis, cited in Holloway and Picciotto, 1977: 79; see also Holloway and Picciotto, 1977)

Their analysis pointed to the distinctive character of the state in capitalist society: while it *appears* above society as a *deus ex machina*, i.e. as an autonomous institution above society, it is but the political form of capital. For Holloway and Picciotto (1977: 79) 'the important distinguishing feature of class domination in capitalist society is that it is mediated through commodity exchange'. In practical terms this means that 'the state has to be derived from the analysis of class struggles surrounding the reproduction of capital instead of being derived in some way from the surface forms of appearance of capital' (Clarke, 1991c: 185).

Yet, it was still not clear how the state was experienced in everyday life. In 1979, Holloway was a member of the CSE London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group (LEWRG), and they published a pamphlet entitled *In and against the state*.<sup>6</sup> It criticized 'the dominant, "Fabian" ideology of the Labour Party' in which

the expansion of the welfare state is identified with the onward march towards socialism. Often people make a distinction between two different sides of the state. They think of the state as having a 'good' (i.e. socialist) side, which would include social services, health, education and nationalised industries; and a 'bad' (i.e. capitalist) side, involving such functions as defence, law and order, and aid to private industry. In this view the struggle for socialism involves trying to expand the good side and restrict the bad side. (LEWRG, 1980: 56)

In their argument, the problem with reformism was its lack of recognition of the capitalist character of the state. The state is not a state *in* a capitalist society but a *capitalist state*: 'How is the state a capitalist state?'. The LEWRG maintained that 'what makes the state a capitalist state is the way in which it is built into the whole structure of capitalist social relations' (LEWRG, 1980: 56). They offered the notion of 'in and against the state' to express the contradictory form of both the state and the experience of the state, as both a form of social relations and an institution: 'The two senses are closely intertwined, but the distinction is important. The problem of working in and against the state is precisely the problem of turning our routine contact with the state apparatus against the form of social relations which the apparatus is trying to impose upon our actions' (59).

But if the state was conceived of as the political form of capital, what was the relation between the nation state and global capital and how did the state form change as a result of major transformations in the form of capital accumulation? According to Holloway the state is not the starting point for the analysis of the state. If we do so, the world 'appears as the sum of nation-states' (Holloway, 1996b: 117).

He argued that ‘to reach a satisfactory understanding of the changes taking place [...] we need to go beyond the category of “the state”, or rather we need to go beyond the assumption of the separateness of the different states to find a way of discussing their unity’ (118).

Holloway makes an important distinction between ‘the political’ and ‘the state’. The political is a ‘moment of the totality of capitalist social relations’ (Holloway, 1996b: 123) which exists not as a global state, but as a ‘multiplicity of apparently autonomous territorially distinct national states’ (124). National states are political ‘forms of the global totality of social relations’ (122). The relation between both – the political and the nation states – is such that the political is

fractured into territorially defined units: this fracturing is fundamental to an understanding of the political ... The world is not an aggregation of national states, national capitalisms or national societies: rather the fractured existence of the political as national states decomposes the world into so many apparently autonomous units. (Holloway, 1996b: 124)

The CSE State Study Group members had already reached the conclusion that the problem was not that the nation state was being weakened by global capital, illustrated by the impossibility of maintaining the Keynesian state due to increasing pressures from global capital but that the state was the political form of the social relations of capital as fundamentally a world market relationship. With the transformation of capital into money (financialization), national states were now competing for a portion of global capital to sustain domestic social reproduction. The neoliberal form of the state was not ‘economic’ or ‘political’ but induced material changes produced by the global transformation of capital that were brought about by the class struggle. The crisis of Keynesianism and the emergence of monetarism could thus not be explained by recourse to either political or economic rationality. Rather, they manifested a crisis-ridden process of restructuring of the capitalist social relations at the

level of the world market level (Clarke, 1988: 11).

Holloway’s contribution to this specific debate focused on ‘labour’ as the central category of the capitalist crisis. In this argument, the crisis of Keynesianism amounted to a crisis of the specifically Keynesian form of the *recognition of the power of labour*. Keynesianism expressed the power of labour as ‘mode of domination’ (Holloway, 1996a: 8). That is, the Keynesian state contained the power of labour via the ‘monetization’ of class conflict: ‘In the face of rigidity and revolt, money was the great lubricant. Wage-bargaining became the focus of both managerial change and worker discontent’ (23). He thus analysed the crisis of Keynesianism as a crisis of the containment of labour (27).

In Holloway’s approach, the notion of *form* developed from an earlier account of the state as the political form of capitalist society into an argument about fetishism as an open process of fetishization (Holloway, 1992). This change marks a second moment in Holloway’s trajectory as a key contributor to Open Marxism. The term was employed by Werner Bonefeld, Richard Gunn and the late Kosmas Psychopedis in the early 1990s to challenge the ‘closed’, ‘scientistic and positivistic’ Marxist tradition. Open Marxism was inspired by the tradition of unorthodox Marxists and critical radical thinkers such as Adorno, Agnoli, Bloch, Lukács, Luxemburg, Rubin, Pashukanis and Marx (Holloway, 1993a: 77). The term Open Marxism goes back to the title of a book in which Ernst Mandel and Johannes Agnoli (1980) ‘debated the meaning of Marx’s critique’ and, connected with it, whether Marxist economics is a contradiction in terms. While Mandel argued that it is not, the open Marxist followed Agnoli who contended that it was because ‘Marx primarily negated the world of capital by revealing its human social content’ (Bonefeld, in Bieler et al., 2006: 178). Open Marxism rejects the dogmatic closure of the categories of thought: ‘open Marxism offers to conceptualize the contradictions



internal to domination itself ... critique is open inasmuch as it involves a reciprocal interrelation between the categories of theory (which interrogates practice) and of practice (which constitutes the framework for critique)' (Bonefeld et al., 1992a: xi; see also 1992b; 1995). Holloway described Open Marxism as 'freeing Marx' from traditional theory (Holloway, 1993b). In his account, it entailed a theory of struggle: 'to speak of struggle is to speak of the openness of social development; to think of Marxism as a theory of struggle is to think of Marxist categories as open categories, categories which conceptualise the openness of society' (Holloway, 1993a: 76).

One of the issues at stake in the above-mentioned debate between Mandel and Agnoli was that '[t]he critique of social forms ... amounts to a critique of economic categories on a human basis and it does so by returning the constituted forms of the economic categories to "relations between humans" (Marx, 1972: 147)' (Bonefeld in Bieler et al., 2006: 178). For Holloway's theoretical development this critique of social form is crucial. He developed it by dissecting the category labour, and its 'relation with capital', which led him to the argument that capital and labour form an *inner connection*.<sup>7</sup> In Holloway's contribution the argument about inner connection established Marx's *critique of political economy* as a critical theory of labour as constitutive power. As he put it, 'it is labour alone which constitutes social reality ... *our own power is confronted by nothing but our own power, albeit in alienated form*' (Holloway, 1993b: 19, emphasis in original). As a consequence, the resolution to Marx's theory of struggle cannot lie in the 'reversal of the polarity between capital and labour, but in its dissolution' (Holloway, 1995: 164). That is, labour appears in capital as its alienated form of existence (Dinerstein and Neary, 2002b). As Gunn (1987) highlights, '[s]ocial roles are mediations of class struggle, i.e. they are *modes of existence* of class struggle ... : as mediated in terms of roles, class struggle exists

*in the mode of being denied*' (20, emphasis in original).<sup>8</sup>

The notion of 'form' points to the historical condition of *transitoriness* of the ways in which labour exists in and against capital. The forms of existence of labour are not 'constituted' (emph. in orig.) by some abstract social forces (Bonefeld, 1995: 183). Rather, they are *being* constituted through class struggle. Hence, 'to introduce the concept of form is to move from the photographic print to its negative ... [the] various implications of forms (historicity, negativity, internality) are well captured by the term "mode of existence"' (Holloway, 1995: 165). Form is 'central to Marx's discussion in *Capital*' (164) and facilitates the understanding of the inner connections (and mediations) of class struggle. Form implies a concept of totality (see Jay, 1984). But a totality that is not as impenetrable as Marxist traditional theory suggests:

the fetishised forms in which capitalist relations appear are not a totally opaque cover completely concealing class exploitation from those who are subjected to it ... Money, capital, interest, rent, profit, state – all are commonly experienced as aspects of a general system of oppression, even though their precise interconnections may not be understood (Holloway, 1992: 157).

The problem at stake was how to theorize labour resistance and labour subjectivity against this totality. Holloway offered a critique of the concept of work understood as resistance, as practical subjectivity and negativity, and replaced the notion of fetishism with fetishization. Both will be central to his theory of revolution. Work 'is subjectivity – practical subjectivity, since there is no other; and work is negativity, since it involves the practical negation of that which exists. Work is all-constitutive. "Objectivity" is nothing but objectified subjectivity' (1995: 172). Subjectivity exists then in a contradictory form based on the existence of work 'in the form of the two-fold nature of labour' (1995: 172): as concrete labour and as abstract labour. As we will see below, this distinction is key to Holloway's re-conceptualization of

class struggle. Although Marxists acknowledge the two-fold character of labour, they have neglected the fact that the 'subordination of concrete to abstract labour (the production of value)' and the resistance to it, are central to class struggle. Work, he contends, 'exists in a form which negates that "free conscious activity" which is the "species characteristic of man"'. Marx's central criticism of capitalism is that it dehumanises people by depriving them of that which makes them human' (1995: 172).

The focus on the dehumanizing effect of work in capitalism marks a third 'moment' in Holloway's intellectual trajectory, which coincided with the Zapatistas' uprising in 1994. The uprising inspired a worldwide discussion of class struggle as a struggle for dignity, which cannot be attained in capitalist society. Holloway found in Zapatismo, the inspiration to produce a theoretical revolution. The indigenous revolt challenged existing revolutionary traditions, as the movement put 'human dignity' instead of class at the centre of their revolution. Following indigenous traditions of self-determination and self-government, they were not interested in taking power. The Zapatistas rebelled against traditional ways of conceiving of radical change and problematized the traditional concept of class. Holloway became interested in the way the Zapatistas challenge the binary thinking of class analysis with their notion of 'we' or 'revolutionary we' [*nosotros revolucionario*] and anti-power. The Zapatistas' discourse mediated by Subcommander Insurgent Marcos' speeches, poems and prose, and the movement's Declarations of the Lacandon Jungle resonated with Holloway's critique of Leninism, 'Real Socialism' and Scientific Marxism. More importantly Holloway connected with the movement's rejection of the state as the main locus for revolutionary change. Holloway became one of the intellectual reference points for the Zapatistas' message and resistance beyond Chiapas. During this time, and in addition to his short articles about Zapatismo in *Common Sense*,

he co-edited a book (with Eloína Peláez) featuring several dimensions of the Zapatistas' uprising and movement, including his own reflections on the movement's notion of power, the meaning of revolution and their concept of dignity (Holloway and Peláez, 1998; Holloway, 1997).

Holloway's book *CTWWTP*, published in 2002, can be regarded as the culmination of his theoretical efforts to gain understanding of a world in flux. According to Holloway, 'the aim of the book is to promote discussion, a discussion that moves forward, that recognises that we all desperately want to change the world but that none of us know how to do it' (Holloway, 2005b: 284). Holloway characterized his book as Janus-faced: 'an attempt to say to activists that, in order to take their activism seriously, they must read Marx and theorise austere; and to say to austere Marxist theorists that they must break through their austerity and think politically, and thereby transform their own theory' (283–4).

The years that followed the Zapatistas' revolt were politically stimulating. In 1999, a two-day street protest outside the State Convention and Trade Center in Seattle, that prevented the World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Conference from taking place, appeared as a turning point in social activism.<sup>9</sup> Both the 'Battle of Seattle' and the Zapatistas' revolt led to the birth of the Global Justice Movement (GJM), an umbrella movement that comprised new forms of social activism and citizen mobilization that were not led by the labour movement, did not aim at taking part in or take the power of the state, and left behind the traditional leftist discourse based on class to advocate dignity instead.

The emergence of transnational activism as well as the intensification of local resistance to neoliberal globalization put Holloway in the spotlight of passionate debates and discussions among academics as well as activists about the meaning of collective actions, social movements, of politics and anti-politics and the relationship

of anti-capitalism to the state and money. While the book's argument resonated among those who celebrated autonomy as a tool for radical change, Holloway's proposition produced intellectual adversaries too, i.e. those who hold onto traditional readings of Marx and Marxist politics and will not forgive his irreverence towards the working class as the subject of revolution and, above all, his contempt for the state (see Callinicos, 2005: Bensaïd, 2005). His experience of the two years after the publication of *CTWWTP* was like 'playing at the edge of the sea and being hit by big waves of enthusiasm and criticism which roll me over and over: an exhilarating and sometimes confusing experience in which I occasionally lose the thread of the argument' (Holloway, 2005a: 39).

Holloway continued working in the Institute for Social Sciences at the Autonomous University of Puebla. He co-edited a book, *Negativity and Revolution*, on the significance of Adorno's negative dialectics for understanding resistance and political activism today, with Sergio Tischler and Fernando Matamoros (Holloway et al., 2009). The publication was an outcome of the ongoing seminar in 'Subjectivity and Critical Theory' delivered for the Sociology Postgraduate Programme by the three book editors.

Despite the subtitle, *The meaning of revolution today*, *CTWWTP* does not offer a theory of revolution. It took six more years for such theory to emerge amid the context marked by the capitalist financial crisis of 2008 and the expansion of the politics of austerity in the global North. *Crack Capitalism* (2010a) offers a more sophisticated discussion of crisis, labour, resistance and revolution and it is here where Holloway offers the idea of 'crack' as a way of thinking about revolutionary struggles. He asserts that *revolution cannot be other than interstitial* (Holloway, 2010a). Since then, John Holloway has continued tirelessly to give keynotes and lectures, participate in workshops, events and conferences worldwide, and to write short

interventions and articles on the crisis of abstract labour, the reading of Marx's capital, communization, hope and the Greek crisis, in English and in translation.

## THE THEORY OF INTERSTITIAL REVOLUTION

### *Marxism as a Theory of Struggle*

Holloway's proposal that Marxism is a *theory of struggle* originated in a short 'Note on Fordism and Neo-Fordism' where he claimed 'If Marxism is not about the "beat of the heart", it is nothing. If it is not "pushing against the wall", it has no meaning' (Holloway, 1987: 52.<sup>10</sup> In *CTWWTP*, Holloway dedicates an entire chapter to critiquing the tradition of Scientific Marxism, a Marxism that sees itself as a 'theory of' for example, capitalist oppression, but not of the contradictions of that oppression (see Gunn, 1994; Holloway, 1994: 40). Echoing Horkheimer's critique of traditional theory as opposed to critical social theory, Holloway argues that Marxism cannot be 'Scientific Marxism', i.e. the positivization of theory or a paradigm:

In so far as Marxism emphasises the regularities of social development, and the interconnections between phenomena as part of a social totality, it lends itself very easily to a view of capitalism as a relatively smoothly self-reproducing society ... Marxism, from being a theory of the destruction of capitalist society, becomes a theory of its reproduction. (Holloway, 2002a: 136)<sup>11</sup>

Holloway's Marxism as a theory of struggle is decisively Blochian. Ernst Bloch argued that 'Marxism in general is absolutely nothing but the struggle against the dehumanization which culminates in capitalism until it is completely cancelled' (Bloch, 1959/1986: 1358). To Bloch, Marx's humanitarianism is not as an abstract concept. Rather, it invokes struggle to create another form of human society. Holloway's Marxism is similar to Bloch's

Marxism also in another way. Like Bloch, Holloway sees Marxism as a theorization that opens a space to the not yet. Bloch's philosophy appeals to those who aim to escape the caricatures of a ready-made Marxist utopia and wish – like Holloway – to rephrase resistance, antagonism and revolution today.

### ***Fetishization, Form and Totality***

As a theory of struggle, Marxism rejects the traditional Marxist's understanding of 'totality'. To Holloway, the distinction between fetishism and fetishization and the replacement of the former with the latter 'is crucial for a discussion of Marxist theory' (Holloway, 2002c: 27). To re-incorporate class struggle into the discussion of commodity fetishism, 'fetishism' must be seen 'as a process of defetishisation/re-fetishiation' so that we can emphasize the 'inherent fragility of capitalist social relations' (Holloway, 1992: 157). The main difference, maintains Holloway, is that, while fetishism sees the world as domination, fetishization sees it in terms of struggle. This distinction between fetishism and fetishization is a 'central thread' of *CTWWTP*: 'that the struggle against capital is a struggle against fetishism and that fetishism must be understood as a process of fetishisation' (Holloway, 2005a: 38). The notion of fetishization is rooted in the above mentioned work of the CSE State Study Group and their capital relation theory of the state, which conceives of the state 'as a form of the capital relation, an aspect of the fetishisation of social relations under capitalism' (Holloway, 2005a: 39): 'For me, the most important turning point in this discussion was the argument that fetishism has to be understood not as *fait accompli* but as process, as form-process or process of formation, as struggle' (Holloway, 2005a: 39).<sup>12</sup>

Fetishization entails a totality that is open. For Holloway, totality refers to inner connections among fragmented forms of social relations rather than to an entirety. The notion of *form* is most crucial in this regard. To Holloway, 'the concept of "form" ... implies

a concept of "totality"' (Holloway, 1995: 166). To use the notion of form means to look at society 'from the point of view of its overcoming' (Holloway, 1992: 154). Holloway sees in the concept of fetishism the possibility to 'emphasise the inherent fragility of capitalist social relations. Defetishisation/refetishisation is a constant struggle' (157). In *CTWWTP*, Holloway engages critically with Lukács' notion of reification developed in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). To Lukács, reification affects the totality of social relations and not only the labour process; or in other words, as Holloway cites: 'The fate of the worker becomes the fate of society as a whole' (Lukács, 1971: 91, cited in Holloway, 2002a: 56). In the perverted world we live in, 'relations between people exist in the form of relations between things. Social relations are "thingified" or "reified"' (Holloway, 2002a: 56). Lukács's argument, argues Holloway, 'points to the incomplete or, better, self-contradictory nature of fetishism. The process of objectification induces a split between the subjectivity and the objectivity of the worker, between the worker's humanity and his dehumanisation. The experience of the worker is at once fetishising and de-fetishising. At this point, Lukács seems to be laying the basis for a theory of revolution as the self-emancipation of the workers' (Holloway, 2002a: 35).

However, although this seems to point in the direction of a theory of revolution, writes Holloway, Lukács final move is towards external intervention. The tensions are not resolved with and by the proletariat but by the party: 'Despite the radical character of his essays, Lukács is operating in a theoretical and political context which is already pre-constituted. His approach is far from the crude "scientific Marxism" of the Engelsian-Leninist tradition, yet his theoretical-political world is the same' (84).

Holloway also problematizes Adorno's (and the Frankfurt School's) idea of totality. According to him, it is disengaged from the idea of revolution and could not associate reification or fetishism with anti-fetishism

(Holloway, 2002a: 87). Despite differences, Holloway suggests that all Frankfurt School scholars emphasize ‘the all-pervasive character of fetishism in modern capitalism [which] leads to the conclusion that the only possible source of anti-fetishism lies outside the ordinary – whether it be the Party (Lukács), the privileged intellectuals (Horkheimer and Adorno) or the “substratum of the outcasts and the outsiders” (Marcuse)’ (Holloway, 2002a: 88). Holloway rejects this elitist understanding of theory and points out its profound political implications:

the view either that revolution is impossible, or that it must be led by an emancipated vanguard acting *on behalf of* the working class: this leads to a focus on the state, which is precisely a form of organization *on behalf of*, that is, a form of exclusion and repression (Holloway, 2005a: 39, emphasis in original).

Instead, fetishization starts ‘from a self-divided subject ... against its/our own alienation or fetishisation, driving towards social self-determination ... there is no possible saviour, no possible emancipated vanguard’ (39). *Totality* is an open process full of tensions as the struggle of what exists in the mode of being denied moves in and against the reified forms of capitalist social relations: ‘the struggle for the dissolution of power is the struggle for the emancipation of power-to (*potentia*) from power-over (*potestas*)’ (Holloway, 2002d).

### ***Classification, Class Struggle and the Revolutionary Subject***

Holloway’s theory of revolution deconstructs the categories of class and class struggle and rethinks the revolutionary subject. As Richard Gunn argues ‘it is not that classes, as socially (or structurally) pre-given entities, enter into struggle. Rather – holding fast to the conception of class relations as relations of struggle – we should think of *class struggle* as the fundamental premise of *class*’ (Gunn, 1987: 16, emphasis in original).<sup>13</sup> Holloway rejects *class* as a sociological descriptor or as a

pre-constituted entity. Instead of class he talks about ‘classification’ (2002c). That is, a process through which we are transformed into something else, that is *classified* as the working class.<sup>14</sup> If class is understood as a fixed entity, it inevitably leads to identitarian thinking. But to Holloway, identitarian thinking does not comprehend society, nor class. Instead, it classifies what it perceives and, in so doing, fragments human activity as a whole in thought. Revolutionary praxis is necessarily anti-identitarian. Rather than denying the importance of workers’ struggles (as many critics have charged him with), Holloway rejects the ‘working class’ as the subject of revolution. For him, the radical subject is ‘we’. We are the working class; and yet we *are not* the working class. We live in contradiction: ‘We struggle as the working class *and* against being the working class:

We are/ are not working class ... We classify ourselves in so far as we produce capital, in so far as we respect money, in so far as we participate, through our practice, our theory, our language (our defining the working class), in the separation of subject and object (2002a: 36–7).

The main issue with a theory of revolution based on the power of the working class is that the working class is a subjectivity that is ‘defined on the basis of its subordination to capital: it is because it is subordinated to capital (as wage workers...) that it is defined as working class ... by being *defined*, the working class is *identified* as a particular group of people’ (Holloway, 2002a: 140–1, italics in the original). The definition and classification of the working class ‘on the basis of its subordination to capital’ (140) poses the wrong question of belonging, i.e. who belongs and who does not belong to the working class. This question obscures the complex problem of social antagonism for it limits the struggle to a specific identity. The struggles of today cannot typify the struggle of the ‘working class’ or any other ‘subject’ for the reason that ‘the subject of anti-capitalist struggle is ... an anti-identitarian subject’ (Holloway, 2009b: 98).

Holloway points to the two-fold character of labour in capitalism as concrete and abstract, and argues that traditional readings of Marx have historically neglected the antagonism between useful 'doing' and abstract labour. He moves the axis of class antagonism from labour against capital to doing against labour. He argues that the key to understanding struggles is to see them not as the struggle between labour and capital (the orthodox Marxist view), but as 'the struggle of *doing against labour (and therefore against capital)*' (Holloway, 2010a: 157, emphasis in original). By exposing the two-fold character of labour, Holloway points to the fetishization of human activity (named 'doing') as abstract labour. This process of fetishization produces a constant 'rupture of the social flow of doing' (115). Abstract labour, he argues, amounts to the 'weaving of capitalism' (87), i.e. the abstraction of human activity constitutes the form through which capitalism weaves its web of social cohesion. He translates his reading of the critique of political economy into a new language where labour becomes 'doing' against abstract labour, i.e. where class antagonism asserts itself in the form of a struggle against classification, that is, he conceives of doing as refusal of abstract labour. The labour movement, a movement that represents and defends wage labour, can therefore not be revolutionary (Holloway, 2010a). He thus conceives of doing as a crisis of abstract labour, which, Holloway (2010b: 917) claims, is evident in the decline of the trade union movement, the crisis of social democracy, and the collapse of real Socialism, etc.

### ***Doing, Practical Negativity and Anti-Power***

The historical difficulty for the struggles of the other labour movement is how to construct a critique beyond the idea of work, when capitalist work is still the defining principle of the organization of social life

(Dinerstein and Neary, 2002b: 15). Holloway writes that '[a]n important question that arises is whether the most important anti-capitalist theory, Marxism, is relevant for understanding these movements' (Holloway, 2010b: 912).

Holloway replaces the term work with the above-mentioned notion of 'doing':

There are two different sorts of activity: one that is externally imposed and experienced as either directly unpleasant or part of a system that we reject, and another that pushes towards self-determination. We really need two different words for these two different types of activity. We shall follow the suggestion of Engels in a footnote in *Capital* (Marx 1965 [1867]: 47) by referring to the former activity as *labour* and the latter simply as *doing*. (Holloway, 2010b: 910–11, emphasis in original)

'Doing' is not just work. 'Doing' is the movement of 'practical negativity': 'Doing changes, negates an existing state of affairs. Doing goes beyond, transcends' (Holloway, 2002a: 23). Doing exists in a 'mode of being denied' (Gunn, 1987: 20) because it is constantly transformed into abstract labour (value, money).<sup>15</sup> Thus, the doers are *denied their doing* (Dinerstein, 2012: 525). 'The doing of the doers is deprived of social validation: they and their doing become invisible' (Holloway, 2002a: 29–30).

The argument that class struggle is a struggle of *doing against abstract labour* points to the existence of two types of antagonisms which, according to Holloway, emanate from the dual character of labour in capitalism: the antagonism of exploitation and the antagonism of abstraction. While the antagonism of exploitation is the struggle *of* labour in the work place, the antagonism of abstraction is a struggle *against* labour, that is

the struggle against the constitution of labour as an activity distinct from the general flow of doing ... [this is] the struggle of what is sometimes referred to as the other labour movement, but it is in no sense limited to the workplace ... [these are at a] deeper level of anti-capitalist struggle, the struggle *against* the labour that produces capital. (Holloway, 2010b: 915, emphasis in original)

The idea of class struggle as a struggle of doing against abstract labour is consistent with Holloway's rejection of two antagonistic subjects of struggle, for ultimately it is labour alone which confronts its own existence as capital (Dinerstein and Neary, 2002b); and follows on from the CSE's conclusion reached in 1980 that emphasizes the subordination of human practice to the power of money:

[F]or Marx value did not correspond to Ricardo's embodied labour, but to abstract labour that appeared in the form of money ... the distinctiveness of Marx's theory lay not so much in the idea of labour as the source of value and surplus value as in the idea of money as the most abstract form of capitalist property and so as the supreme social power through which social reproduction is subordinated to the power of capital (Clarke, 1988: 13–14).

For Holloway, doing is the struggle *against* the transformation of all human practice into an abstract measure of labour time. In this manner, he emphasizes subjectivity as negativity. This conception of doing is a fundamental tenet of his theory of interstitial revolution. For Adorno, dialectic means impossibility of closure. The negation of the negation cannot be resolved positively. If this would be the case, 'the negation of the negation would be another identity, a new delusion, a projection of consequential logic – and ultimately of the principle of subjectivity – upon the absolute' (Adorno, 1995: 160). Holloway holds on to this conception of the negative and develops it to its most radical conclusion.

In distinction to Adorno, and paraphrasing Lukács, Holloway is an uncomfortable guest at the Grand Hotel Abyss. His appreciation of Adorno's negative dialectics is combined with Bloch's argument about the necessity of concrete utopia and the utopian function of hope. The 'fusion between negativity and hope' offered by Holloway is founded on the *not yet* in Bloch (Dinerstein, 2015; 2012). Still, Adorno's rejection of activism does not exclude hope as a category of negative

critique. As Amsler reminds us, Adorno defends 'hope as a critical practice' (Amsler, 2016: 20):

In the end hope, wrested from reality by negating it, is the only form in which truth appears. Without hope, the idea of truth would be scarcely even thinkable, and it is the cardinal untruth, having recognized existence to be bad, to present it as truth simply because it has been recognized. (Adorno, 2005[1974]: 98)

Utopia is 'the ray of light that reveals the whole to be untrue in all its moments ... the utopia of the whole truth, which is still to be realized' (Adorno cited by Boldyrev, 2015: 173). Thus, negativity contains the *possibility of affirmation* of another praxis, a praxis that was denied and which, by being enacted, denies the impossibility of the existence of an alternative (Dinerstein, 2016). In this manner Holloway writes:

The struggle of that which exists in the form of being denied is inevitably both negative and positive, both scream and doing: negative because its affirmation can take place only against its own denial, and positive because it is the assertion of that which exists, albeit in the form of being denied. (Holloway, 2002a: 213)

Hope constitutes a call for negativity to understand reality as full of improbable possibilities: 'humans are subjects while animals are not. Subjectivity refers to the conscious projection beyond that which exists, the ability to negate that which exists and create something that does not yet exist' (Holloway, 2002a: 25–6). Therefore, '[r]evolutionary politics (or better anti-politics) is the explicit affirmation in all its infinite richness of that which is denied. "Dignity" is the word that the Zapatistas use to talk of this affirmation' (212).

### **Power, Anti-Power and the State**

One of the most striking theses in Holloway's theory of revolution is that the revolution is about destroying relations of power. The goal

is 'to create a society based on the mutual recognition of people's dignity' (Holloway, 2002a: 20). As we have seen in this section, Holloway conceived of the state as a political form of capitalist social relations, arguing that the state is not a thing but a process of class struggle. For this reason, 'it is crucial to understand the class character of the state as a form of social relations and to develop our own distinctive, a-symmetrical forms, forms which move against-and-beyond the fetishisation characteristic of capitalist forms' (Holloway, 2005a: 40).

The problem is not the state but how we understand power in relation to the state. Power is 'usually associated with the control of money or the state'. The Left, mainstream, Leninist, or social democratic, have all focused on the state as the main locus of social change (Holloway, 1996c: 21). But this strategy has failed. It not only failed in achieving its goals but also 'has tended to destroy the movements pushing for radical change' (22). Holloway thus suggests that the revolutionary experiments of the twentieth century did not 'aim too high, but aimed too low' (Holloway, 2002a: 20). That is, they did not aim to dissolve relations of power. What is therefore necessary is a 'revolutionary challenge' that changes 'the world without taking power' (20).

With the Zapatistas, Holloway dared to address explicitly the insignificant role of the state for revolutionary change: instead of endorsing 'the paradigm that has dominated left-wing thought for at least a century', i.e. 'the state illusion [which] puts the state at the centre of the concept of radical change' (Holloway, 2002b), the Zapatistas' rejection of the state power must be viewed as a principle of struggle for self-determination. To the Zapatistas, people have dignity already, such dignity exists as the negation of power, the negation of degradation (25). The Zapatistas' notion of civil society is not the dominant notion of civil society, defined as a sphere established apart from, regulated via or complementary to the state. Through the struggle

for self-determination, the Zapatistas' notion of civil society must not be interpreted as an 'actualization of the classic term', because, following Esteva, it 'alludes to a mutation in the political body' in which civil society would not counterweight [or substitute] the power of the state but 'makes it superfluous'. The Zapatistas activated the power they already have (Esteva, 1999: 159). Esteva's point is central to Holloway's conclusion of negativity: 'We struggle in and against and beyond ... [fetishized] forms' (Holloway, 2005a: 40).

## CRACK CAPITALISM: REVOLUTION AS AN INTERSTITIAL PROCESS

In *Crack Capitalism*, Holloway rephrases the traditional revolutionary question to how 'to stop making capitalism' (Holloway, 2010a: 255). Revolution, argues Holloway, starts with the 'scream'<sup>16</sup> here and now, and constitutes an ongoing (present) process of refusal to power and construction of anti-power through 'practical negativity'. Practical negativity means a multiplicity of acts of rejection of the capitalist world and the struggle against the transformation of human capacity into abstract labour, i.e. money. To stop making capitalism is to crack it, which, rather than attempting to achieve the total transformation of society by means of taking the power of the state, aims at an ongoing opening of the world.

Conceived as cracks, resistance breaks the 'social synthesis of capitalist society':

Any society is based on some sort of social cohesion, some form of relation between the activities of the many different people. In capitalist society, this cohesion has a particular logic often described in terms of the laws of capitalist development. There is a systemic closure that gives the social cohesion a particular force and makes it very difficult to break. To underline the close-knit character of social cohesion in capitalist society, I refer to it as a *social synthesis*. (Holloway, 2010a: 52, emphasis in original)



Cracks are 'fissures' that offer '[a] thousand answers to the question of revolution' (Holloway, 2003: 4). Thus, '[t]he only way to think of changing the world radically is as a multiplicity of interstitial movements running from the particular' (2010a: 11). The cracks clash with the logic of the state, they disrupt the homogenization of time, they confront the fetishism of commodities and money. The impact of the crack must not be measured in terms of a future gain but in the 'here and now' (11). Cracks always interrupt the process of abstraction, of doing into labour, that forms the capitalist 'social synthesis' (52).

The subject of the interstitial revolution is not 'the working class'. Rather, it is an undefined subject comprised by doers, i.e. 'we'. There is no particular organization to lead the process.<sup>17</sup> Our doings are united by the common experience of a variety of forms of oppression that force our 'doing' to exist as abstract labour (money). Cracks are inevitably 'vulnerable to the gelatinous suction of the capitalist synthesis' (51). They are always at risk of helping the capitalist state to reframe its policies along the lines of market-oriented liberalism. Thus, cracks exist 'on the edge of impossibility' (71). But this is not a zero sum. Total subordination is impossible: 'concrete doing is not, and cannot be, totally subordinated to abstract labour. There is a non-identity between them', an asymmetry: 'doing does not fit in to abstract labour without a remainder'. Cracks point to the emergence of another type activity: *doing*. Hence, '[t]here is always a surplus, an overflowing. There is always a pushing in different directions' (173). Asymmetry is the hidden premise of the capitalist social relations.

## CONCLUSION: THERE IS A BEFORE AND AFTER

John Holloway has turned the page to both a new Marxism and a new thinking about revolution. Both have their roots in a long-term

process of theoretical development where Holloway found his own voice by collaborating with fellow critical theorists within the CSE, Open Marxism and the University of Puebla. He contributed to the process of demystifying the state, the freeing of Marx and the revitalization of Marxism as a theory of struggle. Holloway committed himself to the task of communicating and interpreting Marxism in a way that becomes closer to everyday struggles. Like the first generation of Frankfurt scholars, Holloway criticizes the separation between theory and practice and calls for the creation of a 'we' that unifies both. By so doing, he has achieved something that Richard Gunn suggested some time ago: 'what is needful to show is that Marxism requires an appeal to common sense; that it can make this appeal; and that it can achieve its synthesis of theory and practice once this appeal is made' (Gunn, 1991: 88; 1987). Holloway's rejection of capital as a form of society is uncompromising. Yet, he points to the openness of reality. Capital is not a thing but a social relation. It is porous and can crack. Holloway has given the word 'revolution' a new meaning: interstitial, and rephrased class struggle as a struggle in, against and beyond the reified forms through which both capital and *us* exist.

## Notes

- 1 At their London Conference in 1976, CSE members launched the journal *Capital & Class* (C&C) (which evolved from the CSE Bulletin). Both C&C and the Edinburgh Journal of the CSE, *Common Sense: A Journal of a wholly new type*, created by Richard Gunn and Werner Bonefeld in 1987 in Scotland, would become outlets for Holloway's publications (on the CSE, see Picciotto, 1986; Radice, 1980).
- 2 For a critique of the GD and Hirsch's reformulation of state theory and the Fordist state, see Bonefeld and Holloway, 1991.
- 3 For an account of the CSE State Debate see Clarke, 1991b.
- 4 They reached the conclusion that 'we have to look behind the institutional separation of economy, law and politics, to see money, law and

- the state as complementary economic, legal and political forms of the power of capital' (Clarke, 1988: 15).
- 5 Picciotto highlights that the implication of this is that the real question is what are the *forms adopted by* social relations, what is the relationship between the institutional forms – through which economic activity takes place, and political forms, the public sphere – through which political activity takes place, and how they are synthesized in the reproduction of society as a whole' (Dinerstein and Picciotto, 1998, author's interview).
  - 6 The authors of *In and Against the State* (LEWRG, 1979/1980) were Cynthia Cockburn, John Holloway, Donald Mackenzie, John McDonald, Neil McInnes, Jeanette Mitchell, Nicola Murray and Kathy Polanshek.
  - 7 In a pivotal article, Bonefeld assesses both the autonomist and structuralist approaches to class struggle. Both fail to grasp the inner connection between capital and labour: 'the inversion of the class perspective is dependent upon two "subjects"' (Bonefeld, 1994: 44). The *inner connection* between capital and labour must be re-established: 'the problem of autonomism and/or structuralism arises from a conceptualization that sees labour as existing either merely *against* capital (autonomism) or merely *in* capital (structuralism). Structuralist and autonomist approaches are complementary because both depend on the notion of "capital" as a logical entity. While structuralist approaches emphasize capital as an autonomous subject, autonomist approaches emphasise capital as a machine-like thing. Both approaches depend on a determinist view of capital in as much as capital is perceived fetishistically as an extra-human thing. The notion of labour as existing in and against capital ... stresses the internal relation between substance and social form' (49–50).
  - 8 Coined by Richard Gunn (1987), the term 'mediation' explains the 'possibility of A existing as not A, i.e. as existing *in the mode of being denied*' (1994: 54, emphasis in original). To Gunn, Marx's early concept of 'alienation' (54) means that to be alienated is 'to exist as *other* than oneself' (54, emphasis in original).
  - 9 The 'Battle of Seattle' successfully prevented the launching of the millennial negotiations from taking place after enduring crude police repression. The protests were repeated in several of the locations where WTO members met and led to the creation of the World Social Forum (WSF) in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and the Argentine rebellion of 19–20 December, 2001.
  - 10 Holloway was referring to a poem 'Bass Culture' by Linton Kwesi Johnson, published in *Dread Beat*
  - an' Blood*, Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, London, 1975.
  - 11 An example of this is Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2000) where the authors argue for a transition from Imperialism to Empire, thus falling into the 'paradigmatic tradition' that seeks identification and regularity (Holloway, 2005c) and leads to the positivization of theory and the subject or radical change. As Holloway sees it, their idea of 'Saint Francis of Assisi as the example of communist militancy is the repugnant culmination of positive thought' (Holloway, 2005c).
  - 12 See debate Holloway-Clarke on 'Fetishism' in Dinerstein and Neary 2002a, Chapter 1.
  - 13 To Gunn, 'something quite like class in its sociological meaning does *indeed exist* in capitalist society, but only as "appearance" or in other words as an aspect of the fetishism to which Marxism stands opposed. Like vulgar political economy, sociological Marxism takes appearances at their face value and casts itself upon the mercy of the existing order of things' (Gunn, 1987: 20, emphasis in original). To Gunn, 'we can say that class is *the relation itself* (for example, the capital-labour relation) and, more specifically, a *relation of struggle*. The terms "class" and "class-relation" are interchangeable, and "a" class is a class-relation of some historically particular kind' (15, emphasis in original).
  - 14 In February 1999, Holloway presented a paper titled 'Class and Classification' at the International Conference 'The Labour Debate: The Theory and Reality of Labour in a World of Increasing Unemployment and Poverty' convened by Ana C. Dinerstein and Mike Neary at the University of Warwick, Centre for Labour Studies. Holloway's contribution focuses on what he saw as the failure of the concept of the working class and the labour movement for an understanding of activism and subjectivity today. He approached the problem of the subject of labour not by affirming the working class, but by arguing for its abolition. Key to his account is Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, which Holloway transformed into an ongoing process of *fetishization*. To him, commodity fetishism was an open process by which the subject is separated from the object of its productive capacity, and human activity is classified as labour or the working class. His major opponent in the debate over fetishism was his CSE fellow and friend Simon Clarke (see Dinerstein and Neary, 2002a).
  - 15 For a critique of the concept of 'doing', see Stoetzer (2005). He argues that Holloway conflates three forms of resistance in the concept of doing, i.e. 'human doing', 'screaming' and 'effective

resistance', which has important theoretical and political implications.

16 Holloway used this term for the first time in the title of an article where he discussed the importance of Marxism as a theory of struggle and the inner connection between capital and labour (Holloway, 1991).

17 On this, see also Hardt and Holloway (2012).

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# Radical Political or Neo-Liberal Imaginary? Nancy Fraser Revisited

Claudia Leeb

## INTRODUCTION: DRAMA IN THREE ACTS

Nancy Fraser, born in 1947, is an American critical feminist theorist, and Professor of Political and Social Science and of Philosophy at The New School for Social Research in New York City. She is known for developing a critical theory of justice through her engagement with Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth's work. She earned her Bachelor's degree in Philosophy at Bryn Mawr in 1969 and received her PhD in Philosophy from the CUNY Graduate Center in 1980. She taught in the Department of Philosophy at Northwestern University before moving to The New School for Social Research.

Fraser charts her work of the past twenty-five years in relation to the history of second wave feminism as a 'drama in three acts', each of which utilized a specific imaginary.<sup>1</sup> In Act I, argues Fraser, emerging with the radical movements of the 1960s, second wave feminists utilized a 'radical imaginary'

that exposed the androcentrism of capitalism, challenged the gender exclusions of social democracy, and sought to transform society. As a result, argues Fraser, feminists expanded the boundaries of contestation beyond socio-economic distribution to the realm of culture and thereby deepened the socialist imaginary.<sup>2</sup> One of Fraser's own feminist socialist interventions in Act I was to expose the gendered public/private opposition in Habermas's work on the public sphere which eradicates the ways in which women are subordinated in both their households and in the workforce.

In Act II (around the 1980s) we find, according to Fraser, a new imaginary of cultural politics, encapsulated in identity politics that shifted from the idea of redistribution to recognition. Instead of remaking political economy, which was the focus of the previous generation, here feminists sought to remake culture. As a result, socio-economic struggles were downplayed and a one-sided culturalism prevailed. Here the figure of the struggle

for recognition had 'so thoroughly captured the feminist imagination', that instead of deepening the socialist imaginary it served to replace it.<sup>3</sup> Engaging with the model of recognition of Honneth, Fraser's core intervention in this Act was to reconnect concerns of 'recognition' with the concerns of 'redistribution' in her dual model of justice.<sup>4</sup>

In the current Act III, according to Fraser, with the recent crisis of neo-liberal capitalism, feminists must resurrect the radical potential of second wave feminism by deepening the economic concerns of Act I without neglecting the cultural concerns of Act II, and without forgetting the political concerns made salient by globalization. She aims to capture the political concerns of globalization with her concept of representation – her core intervention in Act III.<sup>5</sup> She suggests that her expanded model of justice, which struggles on the three fronts of redistribution, recognition and representation, delivers the new 'radical' political imaginary to deal with the current escalating crisis of neo-liberal capitalism.<sup>6</sup>

The core question that concerns me in this chapter is the following: Can Fraser's model of justice actually deliver that radical political imaginary that we need today to transform neo-liberal capitalism into a better society where the suffering capitalism has brought onto the world stage ceases to exist? This essay aims to find an answer to this question in the following three sections.

In section two, 'The Drama Continues: Neo-liberalism Reinforced', I first provide an overview of Fraser's redistribution-recognition model of justice as she introduced it in Act II. I then discuss some of its inherent problems which implicate Fraser's project in neo-liberal capitalism – namely her holding on to the language of recognition, and her establishment of an opposition between culture and the economy which contributed to the decoupling of culture from the economy. Whereas feminist thinkers in Act II challenged such decoupling in Fraser's characterization of sexual oppression as 'purely

cultural', what has been less critiqued is her characterization of class oppression as 'purely economic', which is what I will challenge in this section.

In section three, 'Capitalism Transformed: The Proletariat-in-Outline', I further explain why Fraser's model of justice does not allow us to transform neo-liberal capitalism. First, the overarching principle of 'parity of participation' aims at including oppressed social groups into the capitalist enterprise rather than transforming such an enterprise. Second, her 'transformative' remedy to cultural devaluation – the 'constantly shifting identity' – is implicated in the spirit of neo-liberal capitalism rather than allowing us to transform capitalism. Third, her attempt to do away with the proletariat as a political subject does not allow us to theorize an agent of transformative change. I argue that feminists today need a clear break with the idea of the 'constantly shifting identity', and instead I offer my idea of the proletariat as a subject-in-outline as the agent who incites a revolution.

In section four, 'Proletarian Revolution Instead of Reform', I argue that Fraser's transformative account of class injustice, socialism, implies a reformative socialist imaginary that merely attenuates the ills of neo-liberal capitalism but does not allow us to transform capitalism. Moreover, her attack on the welfare state as implied in her affirmative remedy for class injustice contributed to the dismantling of the welfare state advanced by neo-liberal capitalism. I argue that we must bring back the radical imaginary of those early Marxist and socialist thinkers, such as Rosa Luxemburg, who opted for a proletarian revolution instead of reforms within capitalism, to do away with the suffering caused by capitalism.

I agree with Fraser that feminist thinkers must resurrect the critical potential of feminist critique in Act I to deal with the current crises of capitalism. Fraser's own work from Act I provides such critical potential, which I will also bring back in this chapter.

## THE DRAMA CONTINUES: NEO-LIBERALISM REINFORCED

Based on the quasi-Weberian dualism of status and class, Fraser introduces her dual model of justice in Act II. This model implies the 'redistribution perspective', which has affinities with class and is rooted in the economic structure of society. The harm is here 'mal-distribution' and the remedy 'redistribution' of goods and resources. It also implies the 'recognition perspective', which is akin to status, and rooted in the status order of society. The harm is here 'misrecognition' and the remedy 'recognition'.<sup>7</sup>

Fraser provides a continuum for classifying the forms of injustice groups suffer. On one end of the continuum groups suffer a 'pure' form of economic injustice (class oppression), and on the other end they suffer a 'pure' cultural injustice (sexual oppression). In the middle of this continuum we find women and racial minorities, because such groups face both economic and cultural injustice. Since working-class people suffer from economic injustice alone, the remedy for class injustice is 'redistribution', and gay men and lesbians suffer from 'misrecognition', the remedy is here 'recognition'. For class injustice, according to her, we need 'redistribution', for sexual injustice we need 'recognition', and for gender and racial injustice we need both 'recognition' and 'redistribution'.<sup>8</sup>

Fraser argues that she introduced her 'two-dimensional theory of justice' to counter the 'cultural turn' in gender theory with its one-sided focus on recognition at the expense of redistribution, with the aim to reconnect struggles for 'recognition' with struggles for 'redistribution'.<sup>9</sup> However, few, if any, feminist theorists and social movements in Act II have actually couched their claims for justice in such language.<sup>10</sup> Rather, Fraser herself was the main feminist theorist in the Anglo-American context who applied the recognition paradigm, developed by Axel Honneth and Charles Taylor, to feminist theory. It is,

then, not second wave feminists in general, but the philosophic discourse of recognition in academia, in which Fraser was and continues to be a central figure, which contributed to capture the imagination of a younger generation of feminist theorists of the Frankfurt School critical theory kind, and established the dominance of the recognition paradigm in feminist theory.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, there have been and continue to be central challenges to the recognition paradigm, which Fraser seems not to engage with.<sup>12</sup> The problem with Fraser's dual model of redistribution-recognition is that it accepts the ideal of 'mutual recognition', which covers over, rather than exposes, class antagonisms at the heart of capitalist societies. Also, her model hangs on to the notion of Hegelian desire, according to which human desire is essentially a desire for recognition. Insofar as oppressed social groups need to be recognized from an alienating Other (their oppressors) to secure their existence, the desire for recognition becomes an *exploitable* desire, where becoming recognized implies at the same time subordination to an oppressive power. In such a scenario it is difficult, if not impossible, to theorize transformative agency of oppressed social groups.

Moreover, Fraser's own model of justice contributes to what she charges feminists in Act II with, namely that 'the cultural strand became decoupled not only from the economic strand, but also from the critique on capitalism that had previously integrated them'.<sup>13</sup> As such, it is her own work, and not that of feminists in Act II, as she argues, that 'dovetailed' with the rise of neo-liberal politics.<sup>14</sup> This can be seen in assertions throughout her works, such as her claim that we must maintain a 'first-order distinction' between culture and the economy, which implies oppositional thinking, in which we find culture in opposition to and decoupled from the economy.<sup>15</sup> It is also evident in her repeated assertions that 'by distinguishing redistribution and recognition analytically, and by exposing their *distinctive* logics, I aim



to clarify – and begin to resolve – some of the central political dilemmas of our age'.<sup>16</sup> Rather than clarifying or even resolving the political dilemmas of capitalism, her proposal of a 'distinctive logics' between culture and the economy has contributed to the political dilemmas of neo-liberal capitalism in which we find culture as decoupled from the economy.

Already feminist thinkers in Act II have pointed at the ways in which her dual model of justice contributes to such decoupling. As an example, Iris Marion Young points out that Fraser's theory of justice constructs an absolute opposition between culture and economy, which retreats from New Left theorizing that has insisted that culture and economy are intertwined. Furthermore, she points out that Fraser's continuum framework makes working-class and queer politics appear as more one-dimensional than they are, and that her portrayal of sexual oppression as purely cultural evades the material, economic and political consequences of such oppression.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, Judith Butler pointed out that Fraser constructs a problematic opposition between culture and the economy, and that her portrayal of sexual oppression as 'purely' cultural is problematic, given the ways in which, as an example, the operations of homophobia contribute to the poverty rate of lesbians.<sup>18</sup> In her response to such critiques, Fraser repeatedly reasserts that we must make an analytic distinction between recognition and redistribution, as such distinction can be fruitfully applied to capitalist societies, because here the economic and the cultural 'are relatively decoupled'.<sup>19</sup> However, it is her own repeated reassertions of a separate logic between culture and the economy that contributed to make culture appear as decoupled from the economy.

Although Butler and Young challenged Fraser's positioning of sexuality as being 'purely cultural', feminists have remained largely silent about her positioning of class injustice as 'purely economic' in her dual

model of justice, which I would like to further address here. For Fraser, class is a collectivity *wholly* rooted in the political-economic structure of society; the issues here are thus *unclouded* by issues of cultural-valuational structure; and the remedies required are those of redistribution, not recognition'.<sup>20</sup> However, class injustice is not as unclouded by culture as Fraser assumes.

Marx showed us that the cultural construction of the working-classes via the mind/body opposition is connected to capitalist economy. As he puts it in *Die Heilige Familie*, 'The critique [The Young Hegelians] transforms "the spirit" ... on the one side and "the mass" on the other side into fixed entities, into concepts, and then relates them to one another as such *fixed extremes*'.<sup>21</sup> The bourgeoisie establishes an absolute opposition between the 'pure mind', and the 'impure body', and links itself to the mind and the masses to the body, which it then uses to justify and cover over the division of labor and the exploitation of the working-classes in capitalist societies.

As Adorno further explains, orchestrating an absolute opposition between the 'pure mind' and the 'despised body' became the purpose of those who benefited from the division between mental and material production. 'The more dependent the ruling classes become on the work of others, the more they despise that work', he points out, 'the exploited body should be considered by those on the bottom as the worst and the mind, into which the others were free to indulge, as the supreme good'.<sup>22</sup> Marx and Adorno point here at two central elements which underline the ways in which the economic and the cultural are interconnected.<sup>23</sup>

First, the absolute opposition between mind and body is the result of an orderly activity of the ruling classes that discursively constructed the 'pure mind' in opposition to the 'despised body' and then linked itself to the primary and the working-classes to the secondary pole. Second, such activity is not innocent, but is connected to the capitalist enterprise, because the mind/body opposition

is implied in the intellectual/material labor opposition, which allows the ruling classes to justify the division of labor and the exploitation of those associated with the despised body. Fraser's argument that class injustice is 'unclouded' by cultural patterns of valuation is not only mistaken, but further decouples culture from the economy.

Although Marx and Adorno exposed the ways in which the cultural construction of the working-classes as the 'despised body' advances capitalist exploitation of workers, they did not grasp the ways in which hierarchical oppositions (such as the mind/body and intellectual/material labor oppositions) are unconsciously not only classed but also gendered, raced and sexed. Although Fraser understands that hierarchical oppositions are gendered and raced, she misses that they are also classed. Moreover, because she rejects psychoanalysis and with that the idea of the unconscious,<sup>24</sup> she misses that the signifiers 'working-classes' and 'woman' as well as racial and sexual minorities are *unconsciously* linked to what constitutes the negative side of hierarchical oppositions (the despised body and material labor), which is used to justify and cover over the division of labor and exploitation along class, gender, race and sexual lines.<sup>25</sup>

Fraser herself aimed to challenge the duality of her redistribution-recognition model of justice in Act III.<sup>26</sup> Here she points out that her model of justice in Act II had been assuming the 'Keynesian-Westphalian frame', where claims of justice were applied mainly to the modern territorial state and the dimension of the political was neglected. Here the 'what' of justice was central, and nobody needed to dispute the 'who' of justice, because it was assumed that the 'who' is the national citizenry. However, in a time of globalization, we must focus on who should count as a member of a political community entitled to claims of justice. In such times the theory of justice must become 'post-Westphalian', which means that it 'must become

three-dimensional, incorporating the political dimension of representation, alongside the economic dimension of distribution and the cultural dimension of recognition'.<sup>27</sup>

I appreciate Fraser's moment of historical self-critique in her essay and her attempt to theorize her model beyond national boundaries. However, the problem is here that Fraser merely adds a new dimension, the political, without addressing the inherent problems in the idea of 'reciprocal recognition' and 'redistribution', which she continues to defend. Moreover, and most importantly, although she argues that these three domains are interconnected with each other, her analytical distinction in her 'three-dimensional' model contributes to a problematic separation of these domains.

Fraser herself, in her early essay 'Struggle over Needs', explains that the separation between the 'political', 'economic' and the 'domestic' are the result of dominant groups in male-dominated, capitalist societies that define what is political in opposition to and separate from the economic and domestic as a means to depoliticize needs. As an example the needs of battered women (such as temporary housing, jobs paying the family wage, daycare, permanent housing etc.) were declared as a domestic issue in opposition to the political, and thus depoliticized.

However, since there are what she calls 'leaky or runaway needs', dominant groups failed to fully depoliticize certain needs. In this moment of 'leaky needs' oppositional discourses from subordinated groups (women, workers, minorities) could enter the terrain and contest the naturalized boundaries between the political, domestic, and economic. Here the women's movement could politicize the needs of battered wives, which challenged the opposition between the domestic and the political.<sup>28</sup>

Also in her early essay from Act I 'What's Critical about Critical Theory', Fraser challenges Habermas's construction of an opposition between the state-regulated official capitalist economy (system), where actions

are coordinated through money and power and the modern, male-headed nuclear family (lifeworld), where actions are coordinated by consensus. She points out that such opposition mirrors the opposition between household and paid workplace, in male-dominated, capitalist societies, that eradicates the ways in which the household is a site of unremunerated labor, and decision-making is permeated by money and power, and that women are subordinated in both spheres.

As she puts it, his 'uncoupling of system and lifeworld institutions tends to legitimate the modern institutional separation of family and official economy, childrearing and paid work', which reinforces the opposition between the public and the private.<sup>29</sup> In this essay, Fraser makes a classic, socialist-feminist intervention that challenges the decoupling of the economic and cultural sphere and shows how they are interconnected with each other. It is of no coincidence that the language of '(mis) recognition' and '(mal-)distribution' is in her earlier work not yet salient.

## **CAPITALISM TRANSFORMED: THE PROLETARIAT-IN-OUTLINE**

Fraser's attempts at including women, racial and sexual minorities into capitalist structures instead of transforming such structures becomes especially apparent with her overarching principle of justice as she introduces it in Act II – 'parity of participation', which implies that material resources must be distributed and cultural patterns of valuation must be in place that allow all adults to participate on par with their peers in social life.<sup>30</sup> Although this model seems to apply to all areas of life, when taking a closer look at the way it is played out in her concrete examples, it becomes apparent that Fraser aims with her parity principle at the inclusion of oppressed groups into the capitalist economy rather than transforming capitalism itself.

As an example, in her response to Judith Butler's critique on her position that sexual oppression is not 'purely cultural', Fraser maintains that 'the economic disabilities of homosexuals are better understood as effects of heterosexism in the relations of recognition than as hard-wired in the structure of capitalism. The good news is that we do not need to overthrow capitalism in order to remedy those disabilities'.<sup>31</sup> The good news is here certainly only for capitalists. Since all we need to do is to change the patterns of valuation that denigrate homosexuals to include them into the capitalist system, the system itself remains intact.<sup>32</sup>

The bad news is that such an understanding of injustice leaves the 'hard-wired' relations of capitalist production intact. One of the central insights of Marx's thought is that to overthrow capitalism we must transform the relations of production, which is also what Butler suggests in her critique on Fraser.<sup>33</sup> However, as we see in the citation above, overthrowing capitalism is not what she aims at. As she further puts it 'capitalist society now permits significant numbers of individuals to live through wage labor outside of heterosexual families. It could permit many more to do so – provided the relations of recognition were changed'.<sup>34</sup> Her message is here that once the patterns of cultural valuations are changed, then women, racial and sexual minorities will all be integrated into the capitalist system of production. Once culture is decoupled from the economy and the relations of production are replaced with the 'relations of recognition', capitalism merely needs to recognize oppressed social groups. Capitalism, as Fraser herself points out in Act III, is only too happy to address issues of 'recognition', 'as it builds a new regime of accumulation on the cornerstone of women's waged labor and seeks to dissemble markets from political regulation in order to operate all the more freely on a global scale'.<sup>35</sup>

In terms of the feminist movement, the problem with inclusion into capitalist structures is that it merely allows some individual (mostly professional) women to advance themselves, but it leaves the suffering caused by capitalist exploitation intact. It seems that Fraser's parity model is embracing a model of feminism that comes close to what Ruth Milkman labels 'corporate feminism' that has become dominant in US American feminism, which excludes the concerns of working-class women.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, it does not challenge, but rather valorizes, waged work for all, in opposition to the feminized unwaged work (such as care work), which, as Fraser herself rightly points out in Act III, has been taken up by the spirit of neo-liberal capitalism in the modern norm of the two-earner family.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, her account falls short of a critique of wage labor itself, which is based upon relations of exploitation. Since all we need to do is to alter those patterns of cultural valuation that impede 'women, racialized peoples, and/or gays and lesbians from parity of participation', any critique on the exploitation of wage labor, upon which such parity is based, is foreclosed, and such relations of exploitation can remain intact.<sup>38</sup> It is of no coincidence that Fraser does not mention working-class people in this 'laundry list' of parity of participation, since the parity of participation of women, sexual and racial minorities is based upon the exploitation of the working-classes. It seems that Fraser's model aims at what Marx termed political instead of universal emancipation. In political emancipation only a part of society (in Fraser's model those women, sexual and racial minorities who are participating in capitalist structures) undertakes the emancipation of society from its particular situation, 'which leaves the pillars of the building standing'.<sup>39</sup>

Fraser furthermore proposes 'affirmative' and 'transformative' remedies for injustices in capitalist societies. She finds an affirmative remedy for 'misrecognition' in multiculturalism's focus on affirming group identities, in contrast to the transformative one, which is implied in deconstruction's focus on the

'constantly shifting identity' and a politics of constant flux and instability. The affirmative remedy for 'mal-distribution' is the liberal welfare state as we find it in the United States, which entrenches the disrespect for those on welfare, and the transformative one is implied in her account of 'socialism'. In her model, mainstream multiculturalism is the cultural analogue of the liberal welfare state, and deconstruction the cultural analogue of socialism.<sup>40</sup> I suggest that what she calls 'transformative' remedies are in fact not transforming capitalism, but firmly entrenching its ills. Let us start with taking a closer look at her remedies for 'misrecognition'.

Since affirmative remedies, according to Fraser, merely affirm group identities, she opts for 'deconstruction'<sup>41</sup> as the transformative remedy for 'misrecognition' because 'it tends to *destabilize* group differentiations'.<sup>42</sup> This means that we must replace gender dichotomies 'by networks of multiple intersecting differences that are *demassified* and *shifting*.... Its utopian image of a culture in which *ever new constructions of identity and difference* are *freely elaborated* and then *swiftly deconstructed* is only possible, after all, on the basis of *rough* social equality'.<sup>43</sup> Also, racial dichotomies must be replaced with '*demassified* and *shifting* networks of multiple intersecting differences',<sup>44</sup> and the 'homo-hetero dichotomy', must be replaced with 'a sexual field of multiple, *destabilized, fluid, ever-shifting* differences'.<sup>45</sup>

I agree that gender and racial, as well as sexual and I would add class dichotomies which she does not mention, must be challenged, because such dichotomies are interconnected with capitalist exploitation, as I have shown in the previous section. However, I disagree with her turn away from the subject to 'demassified and shifting networks and identities', because such a turn, rather than being consistent with transformative socialism, as Fraser suggests, is firmly entrenched within neo-liberal capitalism.

Marx helps us understand that Fraser's turn to 'demassified and shifting networks and

identities', does not lead to any transformation of the project of capitalism. In *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx points out that one of the central features of capitalist societies is that the 'everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all other earlier ones'.<sup>46</sup> In such an epoch, we encounter subjects that are characterized by a fundamental instability, or in today's jargon an identity that constantly shifts.

Moreover, Fraser's own characterization of the 'spirit of neoliberal capitalism', with its 'flexible networks' and the 'masculinist romance of the free, unencumbered, self-fashioning individual', which she describes in Act III, bears striking resemblances to her characterization of the 'demassified and shifting networks' and the 'freely elaborated and swiftly deconstructed' identities she proposes as a transformative remedy for 'misrecognition' in Act II. It seems that neo-liberal capitalism has seized upon the idea of the 'constantly shifting identity' which many feminist theorists, including Fraser, have defended in Act II and continue to defend in Act III.<sup>47</sup> The problem with such 'constantly shifting identities' is that they are not in a position to transform neo-liberal capitalism.

As Jodi Dean points out the focus on the constantly refashioned subject in Left politics has resulted in the loss of a 'we' and with that to in-agency.<sup>48</sup> Market capitalism, she argues, allows and needs identities that can be constantly refashioned, because such fragile identities are incapable of challenging the status quo.<sup>49</sup> Already Young was wondering in Act II, how Fraser's deconstructive account of culture could become effective as a political practice.<sup>50</sup> To transform capitalism, feminists need a *clear break* with the idea of the constantly shifting identity, because such an idea is firmly entrenched in the spirit of neo-liberal capitalism, and does not allow us to theorize an agent in a position to effect change. Instead they must turn their attention to what I call in my work the idea of the political subject-in-outline to transform capitalist structures.<sup>51</sup>

The political subject-in-outline, the proletariat, moves within the tension of a certain (albeit not total) coherence (the subject), necessary to effect change, and permanent openness (the outline), necessary to counter its exclusionary character. The proletariat-in-outline has the necessary coherence of a political collectivity in a position to transform capitalism. Yet, because such a political subject remains an outline, excluded subjects can enter (or exit) the political collectivity and redefine its boundaries, strategies and aims.

Again, if we turn to Fraser's earlier work we find a more nuanced view on the subject. As an example, in 'What's Critical about Critical Theory', she counters Habermas's charge that women essentialize their new social identities. She argues that new social identities cannot be dismissed if they lapse from universalism, because they 'are no more particular than the sexist and androcentric meanings and norms they are meant to replace'. However, these new social identities will focus on difference.<sup>52</sup> The defense of identity politics in this early essay stands in stark contrast to her work in Acts II and III, where she argues that identity politics reifies femininity and is responsible for the one-sided turn to 'recognition' that contributed to the rise of neo-liberal capitalism.<sup>53</sup>

In *Feminist Contestations*, as another example, she argues that the proliferation of 'identity-dereifying, fungible, commodified images and significations constitutes as great a threat to women's liberation as do fixed, fundamentalist identities ... Feminists need both deconstruction and reconstruction, destabilizing of meaning and projection of utopian hope'.<sup>54</sup> It seems that it is precisely the 'reconstruction' aspect of her argument that has become occluded in her one-sided turn to 'deconstruction' in her 'transformative' account of how women, and racial and sexual minorities can challenge their 'misrecognition'.

Moreover, Fraser seems to reject the notion of the proletariat as the political subject. Since

for Fraser class injustice is ‘purely economic’, we do not need the transformative remedy of ‘misrecognition’ – the constantly shifting identity. Rather, all we need to do is change the basic economic structure, which thereby eliminates the proletariat. As she puts it,

overcoming class exploitation requires restructuring the political economy so as to alter the class distribution of social burdens and social benefits. In the Marxian conception, such restructuring takes the radical form of abolishing the class structure as such. The task of the proletariat, therefore, is not simply to cut itself a better deal, but ‘to abolish itself as a class’. The last thing it needs is recognition of its difference. On the contrary, the only way to remedy the injustice is to put the proletariat out of business as a group.<sup>55</sup>

It is not clear why she thinks the proletariat ‘would cut itself a better deal’, given the ways the bourgeoisie always has a better deal, because it exploits the proletariat. Moreover, Marx certainly did not think that all we need to do is to ‘redistribute’ burdens and social benefits to restructure the political economy, to get rid of exploitation, as such a move leaves the structures of exploitation intact. And although Fraser is correct that Marx suggests that the proletariat must abolish class society and with that itself, her account of Marx is problematic, because it leaves out a huge part of the picture – how the proletariat manages to transform capitalism into a classless society.

Marx does not argue that we need to put the ‘proletariat out of business as a group’, as Fraser suggests. Rather, Marx makes clear that to achieve universal emancipation, ‘*a class must be formed* which has radical chains ... and which does not claim a particular redress because the wrong which was done to it is not a particular wrong but wrong in general’.<sup>56</sup> For Marx, this sphere of society, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating all other spheres of society is the proletariat. To transform capitalism into a better society the working-class must exactly do what Fraser attacks as the ‘affirmative’ account of redressing gender, racial

and sexual injustices of ‘mis-recognition’ – the affirmation of group solidarity *beyond* national boundaries via the concept of the proletariat.

However, any conception of the world proletariat today needs to bring forward the deeply raced and gendered aspects of the labor force in urban centers, which is increasingly performed by insecure, part-time, low-paid immigrant women that are excluded in the traditional Marxian conception of the proletariat, and which I aim to bring back with the notion of the proletariat-in-outline.

## PROLETARIAN REVOLUTION INSTEAD OF REFORM

Proposing to change the sea of capitalist bitterness into a sea of socialist sweetness, by pouring into it bottles of social reformist lemonade presents an idea that is merely more insipid but no less fantastic.<sup>57</sup>

Fraser’s affirmative remedy for ‘mal-distribution’ is redistribution as we find it in the liberal welfare state, which leaves, according to her, the basic economic structure intact, and her transformative remedy is redistribution as we find it in ‘socialism’, which transforms the underlying political-economic structure. Fraser’s account of socialism implies a reformative socialist imaginary that merely poured ‘bottles of social reformist lemonade’ into the ‘bitterness’ of capitalism, which does not take away the bitterness of capitalism itself. Moreover, her attack on the welfare state as implied in her critique on ‘affirmative remedies’ as being reformist further assisted to heighten such bitterness.

Fraser argues in Act II against the welfare state as a remedy for ‘mal-distribution’, because it leaves intact the deep structures that generate class disadvantage, which ‘must make surface reallocations time and again. The result is to mark the most disadvantaged class as inherently deficient and insatiable, as always needing more and more’.<sup>58</sup> Moreover,

affirmative remedies when applied to women and racial minorities fuel resentment against affirmative action and are thus to be avoided.<sup>59</sup> It seems that Fraser's attack on the welfare state as implied in her 'affirmative' remedy for 'mal-distribution' itself played into neo-liberal capitalism, which, as Fraser herself points out in Act III, swiftly took up the nuanced feminist critique on the stigmatizing and androcentric elements of the welfare state in Act I into Bill Clinton's plan 'to end welfare as we know it'.<sup>60</sup>

Fraser had a more nuanced view on the liberal welfare state in Act I. As an example, in the last part of 'What's Critical About Critical Theory', where she examines Habermas's account of welfare-state capitalism, she points out that he misses the gendered subtext of the dual system of welfare states: one geared towards the male breadwinner, and one to families without a male breadwinner that become clients of feminine programs for 'defective households'. The welfare state also implies an empowerment for women – by reducing their dependence on individual male breadwinners. However, women become dependent on patriarchal and androcentric state bureaucracies, which contribute to their subordination.<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, in an excellent early essay 'A Genealogy of "Dependency"' co-authored with Linda Gordon, the authors explain a shift from a patriarchal pre-industrial usage where women shared dependency with many men, which was considered as a normal state of affairs, to a modern, industrial male-supremacist usage, where dependence became stigmatized and gendered and racialized notions of dependence emerged with the valorization of independence, to a post-industrial usage where some women claim the same kind of independence to men but it remains a feminized term attached to racialized groups considered deviant and superfluous. Here all forms of dependency became blameworthy and declared as a moral/psychological defect, which remains effective in US welfare debates to delegitimize welfare

today.<sup>62</sup> It is to such insights from Act I that we must return to deal with the current crisis of neo-liberal capitalism.

Now let us take a closer look at Fraser's 'transformative' remedy for 'mal-distribution', 'socialism'. In contrast to affirmative remedies, transformative remedies are, according to her, in a position to transform the underlying political-economic structure, because 'by restructuring the relations of production, these remedies would not only alter the end-state distribution of consumption shares; they would also change the social division of labor and thus the conditions of existence for everyone'.<sup>63</sup>

Although Fraser mentions here 'restructuring the relations of production',<sup>64</sup> this idea remains unelaborated in her work and remains subsumed under the concept of 'redistribution'. Moreover, Fraser proposes a notion of social democracy that occupies a 'middle position', which involves, 'a moderate extent of economic restructuring, more than in the liberal welfare state as we find it in the United States, but less than in socialism'.<sup>65</sup> The problem with such a middle position is that the overarching principle for economic restructuring remains 'redistribution', which aims to arrive at economic restructuring through reforms and never invokes the concept of revolution, and as such implies a reformist socialist imaginary.

The core problem with the turn to distribution is that capitalist exploitation rests on unequal relations of production and *not* unequal relations of distribution. The turn to (re-)distribution erases that the bourgeoisie owns the material conditions of production (land, capital) and the workers own merely the personal conditions of production (their labor power, which they are forced to sell on the 'free market' to survive). Since the redistribution of material (or non-material) goods does not alter the relations of production, those who own the means of production can continue exploiting those who have nothing but their labor power.

Already Marx attacked the Social Democratic Party program's idea of 'fair

distribution of the proceeds of labor with equal right' as implicated in the capitalist enterprise, because the proceeds of labor, material or immaterial goods are also distributed to those who do *not* work – the owners of the means of production. He also points out that raising taxes, which is also implied in Fraser's transformative account, is necessary to alleviate the ills of capitalism, but does not transform it.<sup>66</sup> As Marx puts it, 'income tax presupposes various sources of income of the various social classes, and hence capitalist society'.<sup>67</sup>

Moreover, Fraser, throughout her work, defends rights instead of a revolution as the proper means of addressing injustices in capitalist societies. As an example, in 'Struggle over Needs' she points out that 'needs talk' needs to be translated into rights, as 'I do not believe that rights talk is inherently individualistic, bourgeois-liberal, and androcentric; it only becomes so where societies establish the wrong rights, as, for example, when the (putative) right to private property is permitted to trump other rights, including social rights'.<sup>68</sup>

However, already Marx showed us that the state is a *class* state and attempts to transform society merely via legal reforms serve only to buttress the interests of the bourgeois class. He made clear that in order to transform capitalism, reforms are not enough – we need a proletarian revolutionary struggle.<sup>69</sup> Also Wendy Brown, following Marx, argues that feminism's turn to the state and rights does not lead to any socio-political transformation. Rather, it leads to an *illusory* politics of equality, liberty and community, which is contradicted by an unequal, un-free and individualistic domain of bourgeois society.<sup>70</sup>

Also, Luxemburg points out that because the state is a class state, any reform, including legislative reform, is enacted in the interests of the dominant class.<sup>71</sup> She further explains that legal reforms do *not* lead to social transformation, because wage labor is *not* a juridical relation, but an *economic* relation. The exploitation of wage labor is not based on

laws and the level of wages is not fixed by legislation, but by economic factors. 'The phenomena of capitalist exploitation does not rest on a legal disposition'; Luxemburg points out, 'but on the purely economic fact that labor power plays in this exploitation the role of merchandise possessing, among other characteristics, the agreeable quality of producing value – more than the value it consumes in the form of the laborers means of subsistence'.<sup>72</sup>

Moreover, Fraser seems to rely on trade union struggles to transform capitalist society. In Act III, she explains that in times of globalization, where the national economy is faced with trans-nationalized production and the outsourcing of jobs, the 'nationally focused labor unions look increasingly for allies abroad' to achieve redistribution.<sup>73</sup> However, capitalism is not a recent global phenomenon, as Fraser seems to suggest. Already Marx explained that capitalism goes beyond national boundaries, which is why the proletarian struggle is a trans-national one and because of that workers of the world must unite. The aim of such struggle, moreover, is not to achieve redistribution, as we find it in Fraser's reformist socialist account, but revolution to transform capitalism.

As Luxemburg makes clear, social reforms are only relevant insofar as they help to *prepare* the social revolution, but they are in itself *not sufficient* to transform capitalism. And although trade union struggle is for Luxemburg important to forge class solidarity, and with that prepare the proletarian revolution, it is in itself not a practice sufficient to *transform* capitalism. Moreover, trade unions can only limit the excesses of exploitation, but they *cannot* do away with exploitation itself. In times of rising unemployment rates, trade union action is reduced to the simple defense of already realized gains.<sup>74</sup>

The daily struggles of achieving reforms offer social democracy the means of engaging in the class struggle and working in the direction of the final goal – the conquest of political power by the proletariat and the



suppression of capitalism's growing anarchy. Whereas the reformists do away with social revolution, and instead make reforms the aim of social democracy, for Luxemburg 'the struggle for reforms is its means; the social revolution, its aim'.<sup>75</sup> I agree with Luxemburg that to transform capitalist society into a socialist one, the reformist account as we find it in Fraser's imaginary of socialism is not enough, because it leaves the pillars of capital domination intact.

## CONCLUSION

We must bring back the concepts of a proletarian 'revolution' and the idea of the proletariat-in-outline into political and feminist theorizing, where such concepts have been largely banished. While reforms are necessary to prepare the proletarian revolution, they cannot replace a revolution. Unfortunately, the reformist account of socialism, which both Marx and Luxemburg attack, has become the dominant form of social democracy in Western capitalist society, which largely did not incorporate such critique in its policies. The current crisis of neo-liberal capitalism reminds us that reforms alone did not work and did not change anything.

I suggest that we need to bring back into feminist thought what Marx termed the significance of revolutionary activity, which is for him 'practical-critical activity'.<sup>76</sup> Revolutionary activity implies that both practice and critique (theory) are mediated with each other and both important tools for how we can transform capitalism. We must, as the young Marx points out, both engage in a transformative practice and a ruthless critique of everything existing to transform capitalism. Such a critique is 'ruthless in that it will shrink neither from its own discoveries, nor from conflict with the powers that be'.<sup>77</sup>

Mediation between theory and practice also means to rethink the theory and practice relation in the context of the idea of the political subject-in-outline, which does not

aim at wholeness and accepts contradictions. Luxemburg's argument of accepting errors in revolutionary practice is central, because such errors lead to a better understanding of what needs to be done differently to change the world. Her stress on errors in practice illuminates that practice must remain an outline – an ongoing and never static effort to change the world. Moreover revolutionary activity also implies that theory or critical thinking itself must remain an outline and thus an unfinished process. I thus hope that my critique in this essay will be seen in that light, and will be taken up and further developed by critical feminist theorists.

## Notes

- 1 Nancy Fraser, 'Prologue to a Drama in Three Acts', in Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (New York and London: Verso, 2013), 1–16, here 1; and Nancy Fraser, 'Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History', in Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, 209–26.
- 2 Fraser, 'Prologue', 3. However, the language of 'redistribution' and 'recognition' was not yet used in this phase.
- 3 Fraser, 'Prologue', 4.
- 4 See for example her debate on the concept of recognition with Honneth, in Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution Or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (Verso, 2004). In general, Fraser also accuses Honneth and Taylor of a one-sided focus on recognition, whose validity (or not) merits a paper on its own and is not the focus of this chapter.
- 5 Fraser, 'Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History', 210.
- 6 Fraser's discussion of second wave feminism ignores that feminist theorists in the US American context largely discuss three or even four 'feminist waves'. She also reduces the rich and diverse theoretical feminist accounts to her own theoretical framework of recognition, redistribution and more recently, representation.
- 7 Nancy Fraser, 'Feminist Politics in the Age of Recognition: A Two-Dimensional Approach to Gender Justice', in Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, 159–73, here 162.
- 8 Nancy Fraser, 'From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a "Post-Socialist" Age', *New Left Review* 1/212, 68–93.

- 9 Fraser, 'Feminist Politics in the Age of Recognition', 160.
- 10 Rather Fraser herself, and without much justification, argues in Act II that feminist thinkers, such as Patricia Williams Collins and Iris Marion Young, who do not use the language of recognition in their feminist theories, nevertheless implicitly refer to the concept of 'recognition'. Fraser, 'From Redistribution to Recognition?', 71.
- 11 We find her appropriation in both political science and philosophy. See for example the recent work of Amber Knight, Malloy Tamer, Jacinda Swanson and Patricia Matos.
- 12 See for example Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); and Claudia Leeb, 'The Politics of Misrecognition: A Feminist Critique', *The Good Society*, vol. 18, no. 1, September 2009, 70–5.
- 13 Fraser, 'Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History', 219.
- 14 Fraser, 'Prologue', 5.
- 15 Fraser, 'From Redistribution to Recognition?', 74.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 72, my emphasis.
- 17 Iris Marion Young, 'Unruly Categories: A Critique of Nancy Fraser's Dual Systems Theory', *New Left Review* 1/222, March–April 1997, 147–60.
- 18 Judith Butler, 'Merely Cultural', *New Left Review* 1/227, January–February 1998.
- 19 Nancy Fraser, 'Heterosexism, Misrecognition, and Capitalism: A Response to Judith Butler', *New Left Review* 1/228, March–April 1998, 175–86, here 184; see also Fraser's response to Young, Nancy Fraser, 'A Rejoinder to Iris Young', *New Left Review* 1/223, May–June 1997.
- 20 Fraser, 'From Redistribution to Recognition?', 84, n.34, my emphasis.
- 21 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Die Heilige Familie oder Kritik der Kritischen Kritik: Gegen Bruno Bauer und Konsorten*, in *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Werke, Band 2*, Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1962), 1–221, here 88.
- 22 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998), 246–7.
- 23 In fact Adorno's entire critical theory might be construed as exposing the relation between the economy and culture. I would like to thank the reviewer for this insight.
- 24 Nancy Fraser, 'Against Symbolicism: The Uses and Abuses of Lacanianism for Feminist Politics', in Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, 139–58, here 149.
- 25 Claudia Leeb, 'Marx and the Gendered Structure of Capitalism', *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 33, no. 7, November 2007, 833–59.
- 26 Nancy Fraser, 'Reframing Justice in a Globalizing World', in Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, 189–208.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 192–3.
- 28 Nancy Fraser, 'Struggle over Needs: Outline of a Socialist-Feminist Critical Theory of Late-Capitalist Political Culture', in Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, 53–82, here 63–4.
- 29 Nancy Fraser, 'What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender', in Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, 19–51.
- 30 Fraser, 'Feminist Politics in the Age of Recognition', 164.
- 31 Fraser, 'Heterosexism, Misrecognition, and Capitalism', 183.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 180.
- 33 Butler, 'Merely Cultural'.
- 34 Fraser, 'Heterosexism, Misrecognition, and Capitalism', 183.
- 35 Fraser, 'Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History', 223.
- 36 Ruth Milkman, 'Women Workers, Feminism and the Labor Movement since the 1960s', in Ruth Milkman (ed.), *Women, Work, and Protest: A Century of US Women's Labor History* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 300–22, here 308.
- 37 Fraser, 'Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History', 220.
- 38 Fraser, 'Heterosexism, Misrecognition, and Capitalism', 179.
- 39 Karl Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction', in Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1972, 1978), 53–65, 62.
- 40 Fraser, 'From Redistribution to Recognition?', 82.
- 41 I am putting deconstruction in quotes, because the father of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, did not defend a notion of the subject as defended by Fraser.
- 42 Fraser, 'From Redistribution to Recognition?', 87, my emphasis.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 89–90, my emphasis.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 91, my emphasis.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 83, my emphasis.
- 46 Karl Marx, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 469–500, here 476.
- 47 See also Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).
- 48 Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 34 and 60.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 71–2.

- 50 Young, 'Unruly Categories', 160.
- 51 See Claudia Leeb, *Power and Feminist Agency in Capitalism: Toward a New Theory of the Political Subject* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- 52 Fraser, 'What's Critical about Critical Theory', 49.
- 53 Fraser, 'Feminist Politics in the Age of Recognition', 168.
- 54 Nancy Fraser, 'False Antitheses', in Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell and Nancy Fraser (eds), *Feminist Contestations: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 59–74, here 71.
- 55 Fraser, 'From Redistribution to Recognition?', 76.
- 56 Karl Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction' in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 53–65, here 64.
- 57 Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 29.
- 58 Fraser, 'From Redistribution to Recognition?', 85.
- 59 Ibid., 89.
- 60 Fraser, 'Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History', 221.
- 61 Fraser, 'What's Critical About Critical Theory', 44.
- 62 Nancy Fraser, 'A Genealogy of "Dependency": Tracing a Keyword of the US Welfare State' (co-authored with Linda Gordon), in Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, 83–110.
- 63 Fraser, 'From Redistribution to Recognition?', 84.
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 Ibid.
- 66 Ibid., 85–6.
- 67 Marx, 'Critique of the Gotha Program', 539 n.
- 68 Nancy Fraser, 'Struggle over Needs: Outline of a Socialist-Feminist Critical Theory of Late-Capitalist Political Culture', 82.
- 69 Marx, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', 475.
- 70 Brown, *States of Injury*, 114.
- 71 Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution*, 29.
- 72 Ibid., 51.
- 73 Fraser, 'Reframing Justice in a Globalizing World', 191.
- 74 Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution*, 22.
- 75 Ibid., 8.
- 76 Karl Marx, 'Thesen über Feuerbach', in *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Werke, Band 3*, Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1958), 5–7, here 5. 'Theses on Feuerbach', in *MECW*, vol. 5, 1845–47 (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 1–8, here 6.
- 77 Karl Marx, 'For a Ruthless Critique of Everything Existing', in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 12–15, here 13.

# Axel Honneth and Critical Theory

Michael J. Thompson

## INTRODUCTION

The work of Axel Honneth has been seen by many as effecting a major shift in the tradition of critical theory. With its emphasis on recognition, a reflexive theory of democracy, and its defense of modernity as a mode of self-realization and social freedom, his ideas have become highly influential for those sympathetic to a post-Habermasian critical theory which has sought for an alternative foundation for normative philosophical questions. If Habermas and the Kantian-pragmatist program for critical theory that he initiated struck many critical theorists during the 1980s and 1990s as too epistemic and ideal-typical with respect to human rationality and social action, Honneth offers a more humane, more comprehensive view of the human subject, a thicker conception of intersubjectivity, and has made a major effort to turn critical theory toward concerns over identity and non-economic dimensions of power. But the extent to which Honneth's

ideas really constitute a critical theory of society is an open question. I will be concerned in this chapter with laying out what I see to be Honneth's most salient ideas and to question their bona fides for qualifying as a critical theory of society. Honneth fails to keep in view the centrality of the ways that the logics of social structures under capitalism shape the cognitive and intersubjective patterns of self and society. Essentially, what I will argue here is that Honneth's ideas and his theoretical reconstruction of critical theory have taken the project of critical social theory away from its radical impulses and morphed it into an essentially neo-Idealist enterprise. I will defend this thesis through an examination of his theory of recognition, his reworking of the research program of critical theory as well as his theory of democracy.

Born in Essen, West Germany in 1949, Honneth studied there and in Munich under Jürgen Habermas. Since 2001, he has been the director of the *Institut für Sozialforschung*

in Frankfurt as well as Professor of Philosophy at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University of Frankfurt and, since 2011, the Jack C. Weinstein Professor of the Humanities at the Department of Philosophy at Columbia University. Honneth's early work combined French and German social philosophy, but was deeply marked by his defense of Habermas' intersubjective turn, having been, from 1983 to 1989, Habermas' *Hochschulassistent*. His dissertation, published in English as *The Critique of Power* (1991), was a study of how Habermas' theory of the social as a communicative system of understanding solved the problems of the social in early critical theory as well as the paradoxes of Foucault's theory of society as power. This paved the way for his own distinctive development toward a theory of the social not as a system of power, but rather of understanding and intersubjective relations – as a system of recognition. His *Habilitation*, written in 1990 and published in English in 1995, was *The Struggle for Recognition*, which essentially marked his theoretical contribution to shape and ground the tradition of critical theory in his theory of recognition.

Honneth's relation to Habermas is an important one. He follows the paradigm shift laid out by Habermas' turn toward a post-metaphysical and intersubjectivist model for philosophy and social theory. For Habermas, this meant a shift toward a model of reason that was intersubjective and discursive. The structure of language was the context within which the validity of norms were raised, questioned, and ultimately agreed upon. This meant that the core of critical theory was not simply concerned with diagnosing social institutions and the pathological structures of modernity, as it was for early critical theorists, but was also constructivist as well. Social actors engaged in discursive practices were able to articulate new claims to normative validity, to challenge the encrusted and hegemonic norms and institutions that prevailed within their community, and were liberated from any essentialist conceptions of

the person and society. The postmetaphysical turn meant that reflexive forms of intersubjective relations were now the context which would articulate norms without any kind of grounding or foundations (Habermas, 1998).

Honneth accepts the postmetaphysical and intersubjective pillars on which Habermas scaffolds his theory of discourse ethics (Honneth, 1995a, 2007), specifically the move to embrace an intramundane theory for critical theory and the postmetaphysical paradigm of emancipating social action from structural and functional constraints. However, he reacts to what he sees as its limitation through its emphasis on the purely cognitive aspects of discourse ethics and widens the scope of intersubjective relations to include the cathectic and emotional aspects of the psyche. But even here, Honneth draws a line between his own ideas and the early critical theory tradition. Whereas for early critical theorists, the psyche and cathexis bound subjects to the reality principle of consumption, domination, and exploitation via the culture industry, repressive desublimation, or other such mechanisms of conformity, for Honneth it is the cathectic bonding between mother and child and, in time, between ego and alters, that forms the basis for a recognitive approach to moral philosophy rooted in the structures of modern everyday life.

But in addition to this, Honneth's ideas begin as a kind of disagreement with the focus of Habermas' paradigm as well as its assumptions. For Honneth, the problem lies in the way that subjects experience domination: 'They experience an impairment of what we can call their moral experiences, i.e., their "moral point of view", not as a restriction of intuitively mastered rules of language, but as a violation of identity claims acquired in socialization' (Honneth, 2007: 70). With this move, Honneth now claims that critical theory should focus on the ways that social relations of recognition can provide us with a normative and descriptive means to measure the extent of social pathologies. More importantly, he maintains that critical theory

must restrict itself to this nexus of social relations and abandon critical inquiry into the structural-functional logics of modern society: 'Critical social theory must shift its attention from the self-generated independence of systems to the damage and distortion of social relations of recognition' (Honneth, 2007: 72).

One of the core ideas that motivates and underwrites Honneth's work as a whole is not only his embrace of the postmetaphysical and intersubjectivist paradigm, but also an insistence that this intersubjective lifeworld is shaped by the moral experiences of agents. In the early 1990s, Honneth responded to the question of the salience of critical theory in the following way: 'All the reflections I have so far presented converge in the thesis that the multifarious efforts of a struggle for recognition are what will enable Critical Theory to justify its normative claims' (Honneth, 2007: 77). The normative turn is now, for Honneth at least, the proper path for any useful form of critical theory. Indeed, according to him, the work of early critical theorists was too deeply shaped by Marxism, which he claims constrained its capacity to reveal the broader moral struggles that give shape to modernity. Since earlier critical theorists were concerned with the problems of instrumental reason – promulgated by the spread of capital and technical rationality – they were unable to see 'that dimension of everyday practice in which socialized subjects generate and creatively develop common action-orientations in a communicative manner' (Honneth, 1995a: 72). The extent to which Honneth's work constitutes a valid critical theory of society ultimately must rest on the extent to which this basic proposition can shoulder the weight of a critical grasp of power, domination, social pathology, and the concrete form of life characteristic of modernity.

Honneth's work therefore emerges out of the Habermasian break with early critical theorists and it embraces what I term a 'neo-Idealist' reworking of critical theory. By this I mean a type of theory that isolates

intersubjectivist processes of social action that are nevertheless devoid of the material and structural-functional sources of social power that shape and orient them. The neo-Idealist therefore invests critical potency in these abstract forms of social action – say, communication, discourse, recognition – and believes them to possess a critical power against social pathologies and to promote a more humane and rational community. By viewing Honneth's theory of recognition in this light, we can see how this strand of critical theory has recalibrated its concerns away from the structural and systemic nature of social power and domination and toward the phenomenological and micro-relational levels of sociation. I will tease out the implications of this theoretical move after rehearsing Honneth's theoretical ideas and models.

## THE THEORY OF RECOGNITION

If Honneth's concern with early critical theory is its under-investment in the concept of 'morally-motivated struggle' (Honneth, 1995b: 1), it is because he sees its alliance to a structural and functional understanding of modernity as problematic. Since he is concerned with essentially constructing what we can call a non-Marxian, non-Freudian, and non-Weberian brand of critical theory, his move toward a theory of recognition is the descriptive and normative vehicle for this new approach. Honneth's paradigm rests on a reconstruction of Hegel's concept of recognition fused to pragmatist theories of social action, along with the psychoanalytic theories of thinkers such as Donald Winnicott that bolster the model. It is essentially constructed via two different but parallel paths. First, Hegel's theory of recognition is seen to constitute a theory of the development of consciousness that occurs through stages of struggle which give rise to 'a moral potential that is structurally inherent in communicative relations

between subjects' (Honneth, 1995b: 67). This occurs because, for Hegel, 'conflict represents a sort of mechanism of social integration into community which forces subjects to cognize each other mutually in such a way that their individual consciousness of totality has ultimately become interwoven, together with that of everyone else, into a "universal" consciousness' (Honneth, 1995b: 28).

The limit of this approach, however, is that it remains trapped in a speculative framework that fails to grasp the action-theoretic side of modern social theory. This, he argues, can be fulfilled by the second path of constructing the model by grafting George Herbert Mead's thesis of subject-formation onto Hegel's theory of recognition. Here, Honneth offers a core argument about the nature of self-formation. The thesis is that recognition carries with it a symbolic-interactionist dimension that provides the subject with the second-order capacity to see himself as a subject through interaction with an other: 'a subject can only acquire a consciousness of itself to the extent to which it learns to perceive its own action from the symbolically represented second-person perspective' (Honneth, 1995b: 75). Recognition now can be seen as a process of identity- and self-formation that develops a practical identity for the subject over time. It is this core process of identity-formation that bears much of the weight of the theory, since it is Honneth's claim that recognition is both a formative and evaluative theory. On the one hand, it is the means by which we form our sense of self through others and our self-conception of our identities. This then leads us to have a kind of base line for how we are respected by others. We seek to have our identities recognized not only by discrete others, but through the legal and political system itself. The 'struggle for recognition' is therefore the means by which modern subjects seek to change and assert their desire for respect and for their identities to be accepted by the society to which they belong.

Honneth maintains that individuals articulate an identity and a sense of self-worth from the very processes of social relations that constitute them. But these relations are recognitive relations in that we receive approval and recognition for our actions and for who we are from others. This creates within us a sense of integral identity that constitutes our self-identity as an individual: 'human individuation is a process in which the individual can unfold a practical identity to the extent that he is capable of reassuring himself of recognition by a growing circle of communicative partners' (Honneth, 1995a: 249). This intersubjective pattern of communication allows for the transfer of emotional ties between subjects such that a practical identity is able to emerge. This begins in childhood, with relations to parental and specifically 'maternal' relations that develop into a desire for respect and dignity in the world as adults:

Just as, in the case of love, children acquire, via the continuous experience of 'maternal' care, the basic self-confidence to assert their needs in an unforced manner, adult subjects acquire, via the experience of legal recognition, the possibility of seeing their own actions as the universally respected expression of their own autonomy. (Honneth, 1995b: 118)

To the extent that this happens, we can speak of the existence of an integral sense of self that is formed through recognition that comes into tension with the existing social relations that frustrate or deny this recognition in later stages of social development. Hence, the concept of 'disrespect' [*Mißachtung*] comes to the fore which constitutes what he calls a 'moral injustice' which, he claims, 'is at hand whenever, contrary to their expectations, human subjects are denied the recognition they feel they deserve. I would like to refer to such moral experiences as feelings of social disrespect' (Honneth, 2007: 71).

The ideas of 'respect' [*Achtung*] and 'disrespect' [*Mißachtung*] rest on a prior model of self-development that is produced by a

struggle for identity and recognition. This moves through the initial stage of childhood and then into the secondary stage of an assertion of one's right to be recognized as who one is. But the model then culminates with a form of society that has been shaped by these struggles for recognition that in turn grants social integrity and respect to individuals. A new conception of Hegelian 'ethical life' [*Sittlichkeit*] now opens up, one which is 'now meant to include the entirety of intersubjective conditions that can be shown to serve as necessary preconditions for individual self-realization' (Honneth, 1995b: 173). Since personal identity is seen to be intersubjectively structured and constituted, the model of recognition provides, according to Honneth, a convincing paradigm for a critical theory of society. It meets, in his view, the theoretical conditions of post-metaphysics, of an intramundane, practical, and intersubjective account of social action. But all along, the model that he espouses, and which plays an almost axiomatic role in his entire social philosophy, is that the process of recognition is endogenous to human sociation and secure from the infiltration of exogenous social forces. It is this basic idea that gives Honneth's work its cohesiveness, systematicity, and, ultimately, I believe, is also its greatest weakness. For how can the theory of recognition, even if we accept its basic premises as valid (which, I believe, we cannot), help us in the face of those who explicitly reject the recognition of others? How can it make a political contribution to the problems of nationalism, xenophobia, religious privatism, or ethnic particularism? Indeed, to what extent can we say that the internal or 'intramundane' concept of critique that Honneth elaborates can have any capacity to make those who refuse to recognize the other, do so? (cf. Kauppinen, 2002). It is unclear that it can, and one reason is not so much its moral humanism, but its weak theoretical-explanatory accuracy in understanding the contours of modern power and society.

## TOWARD A NEW RESEARCH PROGRAM FOR CRITICAL THEORY

With his basic model in place, Honneth now begins to see recognition as a kind of lens through which the various categories of critical theory are to be reinterpreted. So, in his attempt to reconstruct the theory of reification, he claims that what Lukács misses in his elaboration of the concept is that it 'can be conceived neither as a kind of moral misconduct, nor as a violation of moral principles, for it lacks the element of subjective intent necessary to bring moral terminology into play' (Honneth, 2008: 25–6). Of course, Lukács' intent was to problematize the capacity of members of the working class to be able to conceive of their own objective interests within capitalist society. This meant that reification was not simply a freezing of the cognitive capacity of these subjects, it also entailed a normative normalization of the social facts that constituted the given reality around them (cf. Thompson, 2017). Lukács effectively sees that the powers of the systemic level of society – such as capital's social rationality – colonize and defectively shape the cognitive and epistemic powers of subjects thereby having effects on their evaluative and critical powers.

In place of this view, which in many ways was foundational for much of early critical theory, Honneth maintains that we must see reification as a 'forgetfulness of recognition', or, in a more complex way, a 'process by which we lose the consciousness of the degree to which we owe our knowledge and cognition of other persons to an antecedent stance of empathic engagement and recognition' (Honneth, 2008: 56). This is a more sophisticated claim about the process of recognition. Honneth's basic idea is that recognitive relations precede cognitive and epistemic capacities, what he terms the 'ontogenetic priority of recognition over cognition' (Honneth, 2008: 42). This thesis deserves considerable attention since it essentially serves as the root argument for the theory of recognition, and



the justification for it serving as a comprehensive paradigm for Honneth's reworking of critical theory. Indeed, it can be said that Honneth's claim rests on the plausibility of this thesis. The reason for this is that, as in his earlier *Struggle for Recognition*, recognition is posited as an unsullied process of self-formation. This then serves, according to the model, as the basis for further instantiations of the thesis. As such, Honneth believes we must shut down the structural-functional and systemic aspects of modern society and move forward with an action-theoretic argument for moral development. But if we can show that this is not the case, that recognitive relations are embedded in and shaped by already existing social and cultural forces rooted in social totality, then the structural integrity of his model weakens significantly.

Essentially, what Honneth claims is that research into developmental psychology as well as the intuitions of certain philosophical arguments (e.g., those of Mead, Dewey, Sartre, and Cavell) demonstrate that the emergence of the capacity for cognition is dependent on the ability of the child to develop an emotional attachment to a parent thereby creating the preconditions for the second-person perspective. What this means is that the child is unable to develop his cognitive capacities without communicative interaction with someone to whom he has forged an emotional attachment. The reason for this is that the child 'learns step by step and through the perspective of a second person to perceive objects as entities in an objective world that exists independently of our thoughts and feelings about it' (Honneth, 2008: 43). The child's development of cognitive capacities is dependent on an emotional recognition of an other because it fosters the development of an objective (i.e., cognitive) perspective that decenters the egoist relation to self and world. It is only through my ability to put myself in the place of the other that I can really form a developed sense of self-relation and cognitive capacities. But even more, Honneth maintains that emotional forms of

recognition are prior to and preconditions for cognition itself.

Honneth's claim that empathic relations precede and make possible cognitive capacities and a neutral relation to the world is not problematic on its face. But he does make a crucial and, I think, fateful error by seeing this process as somehow relevant for later stages of moral cognition and social life. Recall that his reconstruction of reification, for instance, is one that claims that it is a 'forgetting' of this necessary relation between recognitive empathy with an other and reason itself. But this is problematic on several levels. First is the crucial problem of the way that this cathectic relation between the developing ego and the psychological parent is portrayed as a disembedded process. Indeed, the socialization process has been consistently seen as a kind of recognitive relation between ego and alter, but this cathectic relation between the two also shapes value-relations that are embedded in the specific historical and sociological context of those agents. Indeed, the fact that the child develops a cathectic or empathic relation to an alter may in fact open the ego up to the development of the second-person perspective and to cognition, but this process is also inseparable from the installation of value-orientations that can shape and orient moral-cognitive capacities. Indeed, there is little question that the mere fact that empathic relation between child and psychological parent exists means that there is something normatively progressive or rational about the recognitive relation. One can develop racist or exclusionary beliefs about the world through the empathic connection with the parent just as one can develop more egalitarian values. This can lead to the regression of the subject and the failure to develop and articulate a fuller sense of autonomy.

The thrust of my argument is that the social-relational structures that shape the values communicated in the early socialization process (and beyond) are embedded not simply in the family, but that the *family* is

embedded in a social context of norms, values, and logics that shape it and thereby the socialization of the child. There is no protected sphere of parent–child relations that is not permeated by norms of consumption, of attitudes toward race and gender, and so on. Indeed, this has been a core finding since Adorno et al.’s *Authoritarian Personality* (1950) as well as Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom* (1941): It is in the power of alters to shape the cathectic, evaluative, and cognitive layers of the personality, and these relations are not without content, they possess world-views and value-orientations about a basic, axiomatic moral structure which comes to shape different relations to others and the world (cf. Rokeach, 1960). What this implies is that the power of recognition to bind the emerging ego to authoritarian, reactionary, liberal, or any other kind of value system is not anathema to Honneth’s thesis. Why then should we be persuaded that recognition has the power to confront and overcome the powers of socialization, social power, domination, and alienation? What Honneth fails to see is the way that the ‘ontogenetic priority of recognition over cognition’ fails to remove us from the distorting effects of pathological social relations and structures and yet still preserve the process itself. Indeed, it is sullied by the pathologies of the socio-cultural context within which they occur (cf. Thompson, 2013).

Further, as socialization proceeds, the reinforcement between recognition and value-systems only continues to grow. As the ego develops institutional mechanisms reinforce certain value-orientations and undermine others; they select and emphasize certain goals and aims and weaken or delegitimize others. But these values themselves are rooted in the domain of social facts and institutions that operate according to logics of power and interests that are expressions of the social-relational structures of power that pervade any community. Indeed, recognition now becomes entangled in a series of overlapping processes, institutional norms,

social facts, and structural-functional processes from which it can only extricate itself *philosophically* – in other words, in the mind *reflectively*, not from within the practices and actually-existing social forms of capitalistic society. The point of early critical theory now comes more into focus: it correctly diagnosed the powers of instrumental reason, the culture industry, mass society, and exchange value to be able to infiltrate and increasingly to saturate the culture and the social relations that produce and shape the self. Indeed, Fromm held that relations of care and love express healthy, creative expressions of self- and other-relations, but Fromm sees all too clearly that it is the abolition of modern capitalist society that will be able to allow for the more genuine unfolding of such relations. This is because Marx plays a significant role in relation to (Freudian) psychology: insofar as the social structure shapes the formation of the personality structure, it is the organization of society that precedes and shapes the social-relational forms of life in which intersubjectivity is embedded. The key point here is that Honneth has ripped the intersubjective and recognitive relations out of this richer and more critical theoretical architecture. To be sure, Fromm’s ideas on this matter point to the fact that critical theory already held that recognitive relations would be distorted by structural and functional forces. To point theoretically to recognitive relations as a humane alternative to social pathologies is simply not enough to combat the systemic and functional pressures of social power and domination. To suggest that these relations are immanent to and potentially critical of those pathologies may indeed also be simply a misguided view of social reality.

Now a clearer picture of the weaknesses of Honneth’s critical theory can be glimpsed. In order for us to enter into his system, we must be persuaded that recognitive relations are *constitutive of the totality* of society instead of being *constituted by the totality*. If the former is the case, then we can accept

his ideas about recognition leading to a more democratic, humane form of modernity. But if the latter is the case, then it cannot. Honneth believes an emphasis on the social relations of recognition are somehow separate from the pathological forces of modernity that early critical theorists pointed to as destructive and dehumanizing. They would not have been hostile to the goal of creating humane forms of social existence, but they would have taken it for granted that the structures of rationality, of the patterns of consciousness generated by mass society, of the institutional imperatives of capitalist society as well as the irrational psychological forces unleashed by the repressive and authoritarian reactions to modernity, were more than significant blockages for the supposed power of recognition to overcome. As Lois McNay insightfully points out, ‘the spontaneous and innate nature of the desire for recognition is an example of how, in late modernity, disciplinary structures have been so thoroughly internalized by individuals that they become self-policing subjects’ (McNay, 2008: 133).

Honneth, however, does not seem to take these insights into account in any meaningful sense. Instead, he persists along the path of a moral philosophy that relies on a social theory bled of systemic and functional content. He sees, in short, the power of recognition as resistant to the reifying, alienating, and instrumentalizing powers of institutionalized instrumental rationality that pervades modern culture. Indeed, Honneth maintains that: ‘the basic concepts of an analysis of society have to be constructed in such a way as to be able to grasp the disorders or deficits in the social framework of recognition, while the process of societal rationalization loses its central position’ (Honneth, 2007: 74). But as I have been showing, it seems like an increasingly brittle thesis in the face of the reality of modernity. I think this becomes more obvious in Honneth’s turn to constructing a democratic theory based on the idea of social freedom that he sees as the result of the theory of recognition and the kind of social

forms to which the practice of recognition gives rise.

## TOWARD A CRITICAL THEORY OF DEMOCRACY

The theory of recognition becomes a kind of nucleus for a normative theory of modernity that Honneth will seek to defend as a theory of justice and a theory of democracy. He comes to rely more on Hegel, fused with pragmatism, but it is an anti-metaphysical reconstruction of Hegel that prioritizes social relations of recognition as the unifying idea. The basic germ of this development in his thought is summarized when he argues that

Hegel seems convinced that we can talk about ethical structures or ethical living conditions only where at least the following conditions are met: there must be patterns of intersubjective practice that subjects can follow in order to realize themselves by relating to each other in such a way as to express recognition through the way in which they take account of each other morally. (Honneth, 2010b: 54)

Hegel’s theory of ‘ethical life’ [*Sittlichkeit*] is now seen to be a complex of communicative social relations where recognitive relations come to constitute a modern theory of a just society where individual self-development can unfold. Freedom is now circumscribed by this reconstructed Hegelian view where “ethical life” frees us from social pathology by creating for all members of society equal conditions for the realization of freedom’ (Honneth, 2010b: 49).

Key to this concept of democracy is not only the Hegelian view of modernity as an ethical life defined by intersubjective–recognitive relations, but also a Deweyian theme. Dewey’s understanding of democracy is one based on collective problem-solving and the capacity for individuals to find an identity within a cooperative framework toward common ends and purposes. For Honneth, this is an important aspect of a ‘reflexive’

understanding of democratic community. Dewey therefore adds something to the discursive insights of contemporary political theory: 'Although Dewey shares with Arendt and Habermas the intention of criticizing the individualist understanding of freedom, he sees the incarnation of all communicative freedom not as intersubjective speech but as the communal (*gemeinschaftlich*) employment of individual forces to cope with given problems' (Honneth, 2007: 222). In his more comprehensive discussion in *Freedom's Right*, Honneth goes on to advance the idea that the family, friendship, and market society enhance and promote social freedom by allowing individuals to connect and complete their needs for recognition through relations with concrete others (Honneth, 2011: 232ff.). All the while, however, these social relations of love and friendship and mutual needs satisfied by market relations weave a deeply uncritical account of the class-based structure of modern society (cf. Jütten, 2015; Foster, 2017).

And now we can see Honneth reconstruct the wheel of intellectual history, for we are brought back to a kind of Idealism in the sense that non-structural forms of sociation are privileged at the expense of institutional forms of power and the pressures of domination and power on social relations and self-development. The problem essentially comes into focus once we see that Honneth's is essentially *a theory of sociation without society* – at least without a conception of society that has any systemic or structural features with causal powers. As a result, social action is seen to be constitutive of society as a whole. Relations of reflexive, recognitive, and communicative forms of action are taken, on this view, to be the generative source for critical consciousness. This leads to institutions and norms that congeal the normative content of recognition itself. The institutions of a modern, democratic 'ethical life' [*Sittlichkeit*] are those that objectify the ethics of recognition into its institutional and normative life (Honneth, 2011: 119ff.). It

should be noted that this was precisely where Marx came into critical conflict with Hegel's philosophical ideas. But even prior to that, Hegel himself saw that the state had to be the crowning achievement of modern ethical life because it was only through the objectification of the principles of freedom and right that there could exist a stop gap to the pathologies generated by civil society modern market relations, something that also runs against Honneth's ideas. Hegel was moved here by an appreciation of Machiavelli's realism and the kinds of conflicts that would occur due to the realities of interests (cf. Pöggeler, 1979) and Marx was clearly moved by the overemphasis on Idealism to secure the common good of a society increasingly dominated by systems of power (namely capital) that outstripped the capacity of agents to control its dynamics.

Another issue is the reliance on pragmatism and the symbolic-interactionist ideas of Mead in particular. The central concern here is the way that Mead – and Honneth as well – deal with the problem of power and domination. Mead's views on social power and domination specifically are often overlooked in favor of his social-psychological thesis about the development of the social self and the second-person perspective. But Mead actually saw domination as a problem not of modern societies, but rather of pre-modern societies (cf. Athens, 2012). For Mead, in the modern world, we are dealing with processes not of dominance and subordination but of *sociation*; the concern moves away from hierarchies and the static formations of social structure to processes and systems based on social equality. This assumption is made for the purpose, it would seem, to isolate and bring out the bare bones of sociation for his own purposes. But we choose to see what we want to see, in this regard. Mead, like Honneth, cleanses sociation of all forms of power, dominance, subordination, and dependence. One of the core findings of early critical theory, however, was that this is precisely *not the case*. Instead, the problems of power and dominance are able to distort and

deform the self and social relations, thereby blunting the critical powers of reason.

The point of this project of uniting Hegel and Mead is to found a theory of social life, one based on recognitive relations, that can serve as a postmetaphysical theory of democratic ethical life. This leads to another decisive problem that goes unconsidered by Honneth: namely, by shearing Hegel's ideas of their metaphysical power, we are left with no metric for critique, no ground to be able to possess any genuine, rational critical judgment. Recall that Honneth wants to persuade us that processes of recognition lead to struggles for social respect and dignity. But it was Hegel's view that this was not possible because the concept of right is not something that we agree upon, its origins lie in its capacity to achieve universality. Honneth's response to this is clear: he argues that, in fact, recognitive relations shape our understanding of what we accept as universal, i.e., norms of respect and mutuality that should undergird modern, free institutional structures and norms.

But there is more to this argument, as Hegel sees it. His idea is more demanding in that modernity be based not on particularity, but on an individuality mediated by universality. The problem here is to discover what is particular and what is universal. Respecting and recognizing a woman's choice to wear a hijab does not, at least on its face, satisfy the Hegelian idea of modernity since the demands of reason require some critical interrogation of such a choice (which is itself a product of particularist and pre-modern norms), and this requires supplying reasons that are universalizable and which promote the freedom of self and community. In other words, for Hegel, the act of recognition cannot simply be an Arendtian acceptance of the other's or my own practices, beliefs, and norms, nor can it simply be the expression of a Habermasian consensus. Modernity, rationality, requires that there be reasons for one to accept those norms, beliefs, and practices and that these reasons resonate with some kind of

universal categories. For Hegel, we recognize one another as reason-givers, and a modern form of ethical life is held together not simply by the practice of recognition, but also by the reasons we give to one another. But these reasons themselves must have criteria for counting as reasons, and this is why Hegel links his *Philosophy of Right* with his *Science of Logic*. The basic idea is that individuals in modern societies are able to articulate reasons for their practices and beliefs that take the common interest into account, and this requires that we see that the purpose and end of our association with one another is rooted in the development of the self as well as the totality.

This means that for Hegel recognition was not the object, but the *mechanism* allowing rational agents to comprehend the essential properties of social life: specifically that each was not a self-formed, independent subject but rather ensconced in webs of interdependencies that could be brought to rational reflection and consciousness only under the conditions of modernity. And once this was grasped by rational agents, it would shape and guide their rational wills. Recognition was an entry point, not an axiomatic thesis that underwrites all of Hegel's political ideas. Honneth's reading of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* seems to be at odds with Hegel's actual intentions, since Hegel is not interested in the phenomenon of recognition per se, but in the institutional, objective socio-political forms that a modern society engenders and which can instantiate freedom (cf. de Boer, 2013). He thereby distorts Hegel's project and reads the totality of its argument through one narrow feature of his philosophical system.

Now, Honneth would no doubt respond that he is keeping to this insight, that he is exploding the subjective bias and moving us into the intersubjective, recognitive paradigm where actions and ideas become sublated. His basic insight is that the Hegelian Idea (*Idee*) is to be recast as the objectification of those institutions that can better instantiate and reflect the recognitive and intersubjective

properties of a reflexive form of freedom (Honneth, 2011: 123 and *passim*). Now the claim achieves a political form. But this is not the point: the principle behind Hegel's claim is metaphysical, not based on the recognition process of intersubjective agents alone. And there is a reason for this. Reason cannot be seen as inherent to the social processes and relations found in everyday life. Rather, reason is the product of reflection and of negation, in particular, the negation of the reality principle that props up everyday life. Early critical theory was based on this assumption and the various problems associated with the frustration of this capacity among modern subjects. But the post-Habermasian turn toward intersubjectivity has rooted critical consciousness in the contours of everyday speech-acts and, for Honneth, recognitive acts. The problem that reasserts itself is that Honneth does not allow for the ways in which recognition can – and more often than not, is – a mechanism for securing power and hierarchy than eroding it. Simply recognizing others can have the effect of fostering affirmative attitudes and ideas about the status quo rather than a critical, negative attitude toward it.

But to return to my main point, if we allow for a non-metaphysical path for moral theory, then we must simply accept what gets refracted back to us through our existing structures and practices. We have no way to judge whether the identities that are seeking recognition promote freedom since the identities of the prostitute, the fisherman, or the philosopher have no meaningful differences. Indeed, all can be equally 'recognized' by a community dishing out attention (or 'respect' [*Achtung*]) to others' identities, but not *critical evaluation of those identities*. And there are reasons for being critical of different identities to the extent that they may develop as reactions to defective relations; or they may be expressions of forms of subjectivity that falsely seek to reject or escape the implications of alienating and reifying social structures. Recognition then, for Hegel, must play a different role than it does

for Honneth. For the former, it is the phenomenological process that leads to a transformed cognition of the agent by revealing the ontological structure of social relations that make up the essential structure of human life; but for Honneth, in its postmetaphysical form, it becomes embedded in intersubjective practices that have no criteria for validity *other than those practices themselves*. In this instance, the norms brought to bear by the processes of recognition form the criteria for judgment.

But should we see this as a valid argument? The main problem with this philosophical path, as I am trying to show, is that it rips the process of recognition too far out of its embeddedness within the actual, objective processes of society itself and that the purpose of critical reason must be to allow thought to counterpose something better to what is existent and pathological. Hegel's later work is focused not on the intersubjective mechanisms of mutual recognition, but on the objective social forms – institutions, laws, norms, and so on – that shape objective spirit. This is important because, as I will show below, this opens up the possibility that these objective social forms, as later critical theorists were able to show, have causal and formative powers on individuals and their development. Now, Honneth's claim is that this is precisely what he is doing. He is arguing that we can judge and critique any social form by assessing the extent to which it can secure 'the intersubjective conditions of individual self-realization to all' (Honneth, 2010b: 7). But what it lacks is a realist confrontation of the ways that power operates and shapes the institutions and norms of the community. The essential problem is that intersubjectivity can be a tool for recreating domination and power just as it can be one for shaping humane relations.

But now the concept of a social pathology is shifted from being generated by structures within modern society – economic, cultural, whatever – to a failure on the part of agents to absorb the norms of modernity itself

(cf. Freyenhagen, 2015), i.e., the norms of recognition itself. But not everyone struggles for the kind of recognition that Honneth has in mind. There is no criteria given by Honneth to know when identities that seek recognition are valid or not valid; no way to tell whether or not the kind of weakened egos produced by late capitalism are evincing identities produced by the alienation they experience. The theory of recognition does nothing to help us discern these levels of self-understanding because the self has been too eroded by its embeddedness in intersubjectivity to be able to assert itself.

### HONNETH'S NEO-IDEALISM AND THE RETURN TO TRADITIONAL THEORY

One of the results of this series of problems with Honneth's theories is that we see critical theory entering into a phase where critique is to be detached from a confrontation with the economic and structural organization of society. This should be seen as problematic for any project of critical theory since its distinctiveness was to highlight the ways that social structure shapes and affects the subjective and agentic structures within persons. The social is not, on this view, constituted by intersubjective social practices. Rather, it is an ontological domain that is distinct from that intersubjectivity and possesses causal powers separate from it as well. In this sense, one of the central charges that can be brought against Honneth's attempt to reorient critical theory is that it fails to take into account an insight that has galvanized all critical social science. This can be described as what Karl Popper once termed the 'unintended social repercussions of intentional human actions' (Popper, 1969: 342). What this means is that human sociality and social actions produce congealed social formations of social facts that come to possess their own logics and causal powers. These logics are not totally autonomous from agents – indeed, agents

themselves are the ultimate purveyors of those social facts – but they accrue a kind of power to socialize and to have an ontology all their own. They become systematic, acting behind the conscious volition of individual actors, forming the context within which social relations unfold and operate (cf. Garrett, 2009).

Capital is therefore not simply a social fact, it is an accumulation of social facts, with logics, institutional instantiations, and constitutive power over and through subjects. It is therefore also a set of institutions and norms that shape social structures and functions and also were created prior to the socialization and development of individuals socialized into it. It acts, therefore, as a force on their development and a force shaping the social relations and, therefore, the relations of recognition that shape us. Our sociality is not simply reducible to recognitive relations as Honneth would have it. Indeed, sociality possess a second-order reality (indeed, a *metaphysical* reality) that exists even more powerfully than those first-order, recognitive, relations. Indeed, one can plausibly assert that Honneth wants to rewind social theory and simplify human sociality to this first-order level. The second-order level of sociality consists of the accumulation of congealed practices, norms, and concepts that any society possesses into systems that shape the life-world of subjects. These congealed practices, norms, etc., achieve objectivity and formative effects on subjects because they have causal powers; and they obtain these causal powers once they are able to embed themselves sufficiently in the consciousness of subjects through socialization processes that embed norms (cf. Elder-Vass, 2015). Indeed, this is what thinkers such as Marx, Weber, and Simmel saw as particularly unique to modernity: the capacity of these institutions and logics of practice to divest themselves from the conscious control of agency. Alienation, fetishism, the 'tragedy of culture' thesis, and so on, are exemplars of these kinds of problems. Honneth ignores does this to such an

extent that it is difficult to find the practical relevance of his ideas for explaining real social problems as well as the continued pathologies that infect modern societies.

One reason for this is that the central insight of early critical theorists was that the rationalization of social institutions and their increasingly hegemonic logic was imbuing social relations with the very values and personality systems that would continue to reproduce and instantiate those logics of power that maintain the prevailing reality. In this sense, Honneth's sidestepping of Marx is deeply inadequate as well as problematic. He claims, following Habermas' critique of the 'production paradigm' (Habermas, 1976), that Marx's ideas have little relevance for critical theory today because they are based on an outdated model of human action, namely that of *homo laborans* and the notion that all social action can be reduced to social labor (Honneth, 1995a: 3–91). But Marx's more important contribution is not to the theory of human action per se, but rather to the logics of modern social institutions and those very logics being shaped by the processes of capital; and this further entails that these processes are not only economic, but increasingly absorb more aspects of social reality (cf. Thompson, 2016). When we understand this, we see that Marx's thesis – one that critical theorists accepted as basic, it seems to me – is that there exists a logic of social power and social life that capital creates and which in turn shapes the kind of ontogenetic processes that Honneth claims are the root of recognition and the font for a normative validity for critical theory.

Marx's deeper, more radical claim is that we cannot view society as being simply accumulations of any simple practice, but that there exist systems which shape and orient the life-world of its participants. Capital, for instance, is not simply 'congealed labor', it is a complex of norms, institutions, practices, etc. that shape the social relations and self-understanding of subjects, coordinate their activities, shape the structural forms within which they interact,

shape their ideational and normative consciousness, and so on. And it is the objectivity of this ensemble of social facts that is capital and its capacity to have power over the community as a whole that Marx sees as important because it affects the ways that social life reproduces itself through individuals. For one thing, it is able to shape the very striations of sociality itself which means that, for Marx, mutual recognition would be an abstraction in the sense that it is not constitutive in its own right but is rather constituted by the prevailing social facts and relations that are governed by the objective ensemble of social facts. From a Marxian point of view, recognition is inherently abstract because it is embedded in the phenomenological and micro-relational levels of society rather than the *systemic and functional structures* that shape those levels of interaction. Hence, recognitive relations fail to achieve truly critical content and they lack a capacity to serve as a means to grant critical insight into the structures of modern forms of power. Marx and other critical theorists, Habermas included, accepted a distinction between systematic levels of social life and the phenomenological lifeworld that constitutes the micro-relations of everyday life. Honneth rejects this distinction and, as a result, is able to overstate the case for recognition as a mechanism of social integration and one that can also pick up on mis-recognition as a signal to normative struggles (cf. Borman, 2009: 946ff.).

This problem highlights the ways that the social acts on subjects and subject-formation. This is related, of course, to the problem of unintended social repercussions and the ontology of social facts I discussed above. However, it entails a specific problem, one that can be described as what Harry Dahms has usefully called 'the constitutive logic of the social' (Dahms, 2018). What this means is that the domain of social facts has deep constitutive implications on self-formation which entails the persistence of domination as an internalized and routinized phenomenon. The key issue here, one of which early



critical theorists were keenly aware, was that the social arrangements of capitalist society – imbued with bureaucratic, instrumental rationality and reification, as well as reification and commodity fetishism – overwhelmed the subject and disabled capacities for critical reason. We cannot, in this sense, achieve the overcoming of these forces through the social relations that are embedded within them. Once we see that this is the case, we find that Honneth's normative theory is without any valid social-theoretical ballast. The key issue for critical theorists has been that the basic relations between people (e.g., recognitive relations) are generally unable to withstand the infiltration and socialization pressures of these complexes of social facts and the constitutive logics that they bring to bear on the subject. This does not mean that recognitive relations do not exist or have any ability to shape consciousness, it simply means that it is open to the same infiltration of attitudinal and cathectic problems that the personality suffers under conditions of inequality, domination, and dehumanized relations under modern social formations.

Recall that one of the salient limitations of traditional theory, especially as pointed out by Horkheimer (1972), was its inability to grasp the ways that self-reflection and the subject's cognitive capacities to grasp the object were distorted by the pressures of social and institutional forms that made ambient certain logics and ways of thinking that socialized knowledge in particular ways. With the move toward the pragmatist and phenomenological, Honneth brings us back full circle to this pre-critical situation while promoting it as an advance for critical theory. For he maintains that the experience of disrespect provides agents with the needed normative motivation for critical reflection rather than a lapse into a subjective or ideological form of consciousness that has been created to protect the ego from the dehumanizing processes and reality of an instrumentalized, alienated, and exploitive existence. The practical identities that unfold within the alienated and reified forms

of life that prevail under modern capitalist societies, are more refuges from modernity than intrinsically meaningful expressions of individuality.

Herein lies a central weakness of the pragmatist enterprise, one that Honneth inherits: namely that by dissolving critique into the intersubjective practices of social agents, we have no way to formulate a concrete, objective standpoint for judgment. As Max Horkheimer, in his critical reflections on pragmatism made clear, a central problem is that 'it may be taken to refer to the desires of people as they really are, conditioned by the whole social system under which they live – a system that makes it more than doubtful whether their desires are actually theirs' (Horkheimer, 1947: 53–4). What Horkheimer's critique conveys is the idea that pragmatism essentially conceives of the subject as oversocialized: the self essentially dissolves in intersubjectivity. Honneth seems to embrace this unproblematically. Part of the problem with this move is that critical consciousness has to also achieve a standpoint that lies external to what exists. As Joel Whitebook usefully puts the matter, to think of a critical self is to 'picture a self that can stand outside the world – outside of any given traditional world – and evaluate it. And this capacity, in turn, has generally been viewed as a necessary anchoring point for critique' (Whitebook, 2001: 272). But the pragmatist theory of the self and society that Honneth utilizes is one that relies on the lifeworld at the expense of system; that over-invests recognitive relations with the capacity to generate an ontological viewpoint for critique. The question that pragmatists are unable to tackle is the extent to which ideas generated by reflexive reason-giving can actually achieve critical status. How can we secure the lifeworld, within which this reflexive reason-giving and reason-responding occurs, from the distorting pressures of the social system? Honneth simply sidesteps the issue. It seems to me that no critical theory can adopt such a stance.

Indeed, the use of pragmatism is itself a move into a non-critical framework insofar as its model of social action is cleansed of the realities of social systems of power and domination. Indeed, whereas critical theorists look to the power relations that shape social interaction and socialization processes, Mead's and Dewey's theories about social interaction assume not power relations, but a more idealistic model of 'sociation' as the essence of social action (Athens, 2012). Sociation and social action is thereby confused with society as a totality itself. As a result, Honneth's theory of recognition and his approach to modernity shows no way to immunize themselves from the ways that power relations, the structural-functional logics of institutions, and so on, are able to infiltrate the symbolic and phenomenological domain.

Hence, social power as a concrete form of domination where the structures and processes of the community are shaped is passed over in favor of micro-interactional forms of social action. We are asked instead to accept the view that a critical theory of society should be about the practical identities of individuals concerned with the normative goals of identity, dignity, and respect. But this simply reproduces the kinds of questions that early critical theorists saw as emerging from a society and culture marked by exploitation, alienation, and reification. They knew all too well that the growing conformity of individuals toward the efficient imperatives of the technical and economic goals of modernity were such that the symbolic domain of culture as well as the psychological realm of the individual would come to passively accept these concrete power structures; that the development of the ego and the self would be predicates of those power structures. The key question therefore is the extent to which *social structures precede the affective bonds between people*, the social relations of recognition of respect and dignity that he sees as normatively valid. The weakness of the approach

is therefore that it lapses into 'neo-Idealism' (Thompson, 2016), by which I mean the dis-embedding of ideational and noumenal structures of consciousness from the objective, structural, and functional processes that have constitutive power in shaping the self and social relations. Neo-Idealism brings us away from a critical model of social relations shaped and oriented by power structures and logics and toward one where critique is generated from the phenomenological, micro-relational activities of everyday life. But critique needs more than this since it requires us to adopt an ontological vantage point from which we can call into question the structures and systems of power.

## FINDING THE WAY BACK

None of these critical remarks are intended to detract from Honneth's impressive attempt to construct a normative theory of modernity and social interaction that has genuinely humane implications and intentions. It would be absurd to maintain that Honneth's contributions to moral philosophy do not have an impact on the way that we can think about critical theory, especially the need to keep in view the distortion of recognitive relations as a valid category of social pathology. He offers a highly sophisticated and deeply profound way to think about human sociality and the ways that recognition can foster a richer context for the formation of self-actualization and agency (Honneth, 2015). But it ignores far too much of what early critical theorists saw at the heart of the critical enterprise. And this is where Honneth's project of reworking a critical theory of society falls mortally short. Ultimately, the great limitation of Honneth's ideas lay not in their intellectual originality, but in their inability to provide us with a critical vantage point outside of the phenomenological lifeworld of social agents. A return to a critical theory with radical

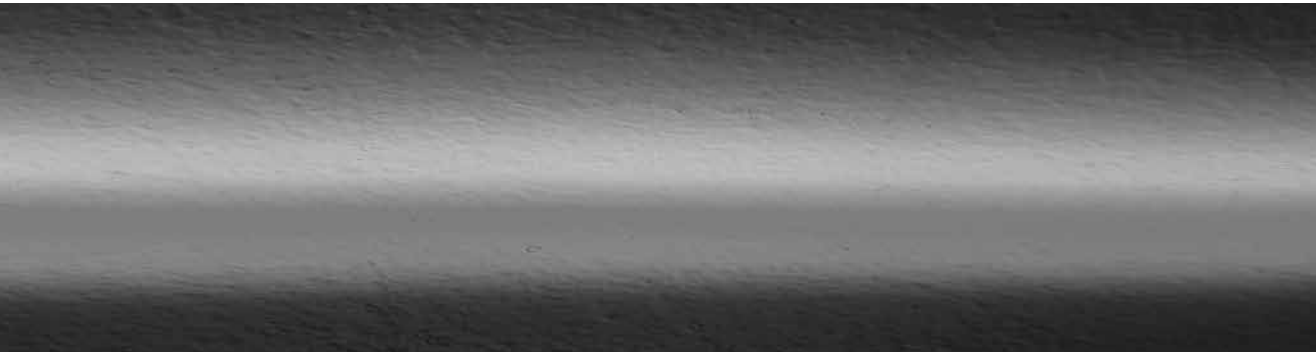
political intent would be one that teases out the mechanisms of systemic power and relates them to the degraded forms of agency and subjectivity that derive from it. It would also seek, in addition to this diagnostic program, to provide normative ideas of what a more humane, more just, and more rational society should consist. Honneth can help us with the latter, but not the former, and there should be little doubt that both are required to maintain critical theory's salience in a new century.

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*In memoriam*

Moishe Postone

Moishe Postone died on 19 March 2018. Words fail to express the sadness felt and the loss encountered. Amidst the misery of a time made abstract, a time of value for valorisation's sake, Moishe showed us what it means to think against the grain. He was *ein guter Mensch*.

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# Introduction: Key Themes in the Context of the Twentieth Century

Beverley Best, Werner Bonefeld, and Chris O’Kane

## INTRODUCTION

This Volume brings together contributions that explore the key themes of critical theory by means of conceptual argument. Volume 2 serves as a bridge between the chapters on *Key Texts and Contributions* in Volume 1 and the chapters on *Contexts* in Volume 3. Volume 2 develops the thematic concerns and analytical insights of the critical theorists and Volume 3 expounds the theoretical context in which critical theory first developed and explores its further development in a contemporary context.

The title of this Volume was chosen because critical theory emerged and developed as a wide-ranging critique of the historical developments of the twentieth century in Europe in particular. As laid out in the general Introduction to the *Handbook* in Volume 1, Frankfurt School critical theory articulates particular political experiences in theoretical terms. It is an attempt at conceptualizing what is active in society at large.

This Volume explores critical theory as a critique of the social object and the social subject, of society and culture. It focuses on a select number of key themes, and addresses different perspectives within critical theory. The Volume contains two parts. The first part is entitled ‘State, Economy, Society’. It contains chapters on the conception of society, its political form and its social constitution, its economic form and the rationality of social action, on violence and force, class, technology, and the foreshortening of protest. The second part, ‘Culture and Aesthetics’, contains chapters on critical theory and the critique of culture and the production of ideology. It covers topics ranging between education, cinema, music, theatre, literature, and dissonance.

The focus of the first part is on social forms. It provides arguments about society as object, its economic form and political form, and about society as subject, its authoritarian personality, illusory community, and regression. In the first chapter Lars Heitmann explores

society as objective totality, as ontology, and assesses the concept of totality as an innately capitalist category, focusing on the contributions of Hegel, Marx, Lukács, Horkheimer, and especially Adorno. Sami Khatib writes about the relationship between society and violence, focusing in particular on the work of Benjamin. He holds that for critical theory, violence is not an objective transhistorical category. Rather, it is innate to capitalist social relations. It comprises a specific logic, temporality, and modality. It also has a history that is incompatible with traditional conceptions of history as objectively unfolding. José Zamora examines the connection between society and history. He argues that the present contains its historical formation within its concept. The objective appearance of society as a force of nature is therefore not untrue – as a historically specific social nature. Samir Gandesha examines the technological form of capitalist society, that is, the manner in which the productive forces establish a certain abstract instrumentality and perceptive structure that identifies the productive forces as the driver of historical development. In distinction, for Critical Theory, the productive forces are form-determined. They are the forces of definite social relations. Sebastian Truskolaski explores how critical theory's particular approach to materialism is notable for seeking to challenge the orthodoxies of dialectical materialism by casting into relief a Marxism that would liberate humankind 'from the primacy of material needs in their state of fulfilment'. On this basis, he examines how Adorno devised a broadly Marxian form of materialist social criticism that aimed to offset the perceived failings of Engels' and Lenin's dogmatic metaphysics of matter; foregrounding certain epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic impulses, which follow from a focus on individual experiences of visceral, somatic suffering in capitalist modernity. He then shows how the resurgence of certain precepts of materialist metaphysics in speculative realism gives a renewed

actuality to the Frankfurt School's position. Julia Jopp and Ansgar Martins take this argument a step further. They explore materialism as an immanent critique of society that seeks reconciliation in an emancipated society that does not exist and has no material basis in existing society. Jopp and Martins explore the theological dimension of the idea of a reconciled humanity in the materialist critique of existing social relations. Tom Houseman writes about the critical theory conception of the class character of capitalist society. His chapter establishes that traditional conceptions of social class, both Marxist and Weberian ones, derive from classical political economy, especially Smith's contribution. For critical theory, class is a negative category and as such a category of social critique. It is critique of the social relations of production as a definite mode of social reproduction. The final chapter in this group of chapters is Alexander Neupert-Doppler's 'Critical Theory and Utopian Thought'. It explores the relationship between critical theory and utopia in Adorno, Benjamin, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Bloch. The conclusion assesses Habermas's contention that utopian energies have been exhausted. For the critical theory of Horkheimer, the alternatives to the existing relations of freedom as depersonalized compulsion 'depend on the will of men', that is, what Bloch called 'willing the other'. Neupert-Doppler makes clear that in distinction to the dominant interpretation of Marxism, for the early critical theory, Utopia is a positive term, a glimpse of a longed-for condition beyond contemporary suffering.

The next five chapters explore critical theory as a critique of economic objectivity. Stefan Gandler contributes with a chapter on human praxis that focuses on the work of specifically Alfred Schmidt. The concept of praxis entails nature and labor as the two sources of human social reproduction. Society comprises a socially specific mode of human metabolism with nature. For a critical theory of society, praxis is a historically



mediated category of social reproduction. Frank Engster returns to the critique of society as subject and society as object in his examination of critical theory's double-faceted critique of epistemology and society. In contrast to traditional Marxism, Engster demonstrates how critical theorists', particularly Adorno's, notion of social mediation grounds the German idealist notions of subject and object on a social foundation by drawing on Marx's critique of political economy.

Patrick Murray explores the critique of political economy as a critical social theory, focusing on exchange equivalence as real abstraction and on surplus value as the fundamental category of an equivalent exchange between unequal values. Josh Robinson introduces the contribution of the *Wertkritik* approach to the critique of economic reproduction. *Wertkritik* developed alongside the German-based *Neue Marx-Lektüre* as an Adorno-inspired critique of capitalist wealth, of value as more value, money as more money, and developed its argument about money as the category of the false society into a critique of finance capitalism. In these arguments the critique of capital amounts to a critique of the social relations of production, in which the only productive labor is that which produces wealth in the form of profit.

The following six chapters develop the state as the political form of bourgeois society. Lars Fischer's chapter focuses on fascism. It argues that the concerns of the exiled Frankfurt School with fascism and National Socialism was above all else pragmatic and practical in nature, and no one 'official' conceptualization of fascism ever emerged. In particular, Horkheimer and Adorno by no means subscribed as neatly to Pollock's concept of state capitalism. Fischer argues that Horkheimer and Adorno concluded the dynamics of (state) capitalism alone could not possibly account for the Shoah, which led them to the more broadly conceived critique presented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Conceptually, they viewed fascism as both

the extreme case of the 'administered world' and its dysfunctional other. The legacy of the Frankfurt School's grappling with fascism and National Socialism ultimately lies in the need to deal with this paradox. Alexander Neupert-Doppler's chapter takes Pollock's and Horkheimer's arguments about the authoritarian state as the starting point for his exploration of political form. He explores these arguments further in the context of the debates about the state from the early 1970s onwards until the 1990s on globalization and the state. The political form argument holds with Marx that society doubles itself up into society and state. Political form entails administration of bourgeois society by rules and regulations, and legitimation by procedure, as argued by Weber. It entails instrumental rationality as social mentality. Hans-Ernst Schiller's chapter on the 'administered world' charts the critical theory of bureaucratized society. The implications for law of the arguments of Neupert-Doppler and Schiller are the subject of Andreas Harms's chapter on legal form. The argument here is that capitalist social relations assume legal form in the liberal rule of law. As a consequence, the critique of capitalism entails the critique of law as the legal form of definite social relations of exploitation and domination. However, against the background of the suspension of the liberal rule of law in fascism, the negative critique of the liberal rule of law recognizes its – indispensable – civilizing and protective value, enshrining human rights as inviolable, when compared with political conditions beyond law. In critical theory the critique of the rule of law as the legal form of capitalist society thus goes hand in hand with its endorsement as a means of personal protection, human rights, and individual freedom in capitalist society. Amy Swiffen's chapter focuses on Benjamin's concept of law for contemporary socio-legal theory, focusing on his 'Critique of Violence'. Benjamin wrote this text against the backdrop of political turbulence in

post-WWI Germany. The theme of violence upon which it dwells speaks to the context of parliamentary breakdown and political violence that plagued the country in the lead up to the rise of fascism and the third Reich. The influence of the text in Anglo-American legal and political theory began after WWII when it was translated by Hannah Arendt (1969). Since then it has played an important role in debates on the limits of democracy and the ethics of political violence. The chapter by Mark Neocleous, 'Security and Police', expands on the critique of the rule of law in the context of capitalist world market relations and the politics of security and policing of conditions. He argues that the concepts of security and police have been central to the constitution of bourgeois modernity and that for this reason these concepts should be at the heart of critical theory. Security and police are the processes through which commodification and obedience go hand in hand, and are thereby crucial to the ways in which security becomes inscribed in commodity relations.

The final four contributions to this part elaborate the critique of capitalism through a discussion of authoritarian personality, antisemitism, race and the recognition paradigm, and psychoanalysis. James Murphy explores the research projects on antisemitism and authoritarian personality that the Institute undertook during its exile in the United States. Referring to the socially conditioned character structure of individuals living under late capitalism, Murphy argues that the concept of the authoritarian personality intervened in explanations of the failure of the German Revolution and the development of fascism primarily because it introduced a libidinal dimension to the traditional Marxist conception of the contradiction between the forces and relations of production. Lars Fischer's chapter is on antisemitism. It establishes the significance of Pollock's concept of state capitalism for the Frankfurt School's grappling with the nexus between antisemitism and capitalism. Fischer focuses specifically on Horkheimer's and

Adorno's accounts, including their 'Elements of Antisemitism', and discusses contemporary conceptualizations, including that of Moishe Postone. He asks where the conceptualization of antisemitism in the tradition of the Frankfurt School ought to go next given the contemporary context of anti-semitic projection. Christopher Chen's chapter explores key debates surrounding what has been called the 'politics of recognition' in the context of questions of racial justice and indigenous sovereignty. Recent scholarship on antiblack racism, settler colonialism, and so-called 'neoliberal multiculturalism' has mounted powerful challenges to the recognition paradigm's initial framing of racial injustice in terms of cultural misrecognition. Attempts to move beyond recognitive politics reveal an underlying conceptual tension between antiracist political strategies premised upon the affirmation of racial identity on the one hand, and the abolition of the racial order on the other. As Chen argues, 'This affirmation/abolition bind is subsequently narrated through a Fanonian deformed dialectic of racial nonrecognition, indigenous refusals of settler state authority, or the racially differentiating effects of [economic] maldistribution and state-sanctioned expropriation [of land and labor]'. The concluding chapter is by Benjamin Fong and Scott Jenkins. They explore the social psychology of the Frankfurt School and the development of Freudian Marxism. Sickness in the false society is not an individual pathology. It expresses its mentality. In the false society the sane are numbered. Following the argument of Fong and Jenkins, psychoanalysis explores the unconscious drives shaped in relation to the social environment. It offers the rudiments of a conceptual schema for interpreting and thereby disenchanting the regressive satisfactions that stabilize a society given over to destructive forces. Their chapter reviews and assesses the attempts of researchers associated with the Frankfurt School to mediate these rudiments with a Marxian theory of society. The various 'analytical social psychologies' of Frankfurt School critical theory are passed

down to the present as fragments, i.e. expressions of an historical-philosophical limit and its possible surpassing.

Part V is entitled 'Culture and Aesthetics'. It comprises ten chapters that focus on the critique of cultural forms *as* a contribution to a critical theory of society. Christian Lotz presents a re-reading of 'The Culture Industry' chapter in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as well as a reflection on the topics of culture and industry in general, through the lens of a critical theory of society. Against the reductions of the 'culturalist' understandings of the culture industry, Lotz reconnects the concept of culture to the concept of society, to the concept of political economy, and to the concept of capital. He demonstrates how Horkheimer and Adorno frame the culture industry not only as a social-material concept, but as the principle for establishing the negative unity of society. As a mechanism of social unity, and potentially of dissonance, Matthew Charles turns his attention to the question of education. According to Charles, founding Frankfurt School thinkers such as Horkheimer, Adorno, Fromm, Pollock, and Neumann, while saying little explicitly about the formal activities of teaching and learning in their work, expressed ideas about the activity of scholarship and research that tacitly preserved in its concept bourgeois forms of 'rational' education. Their texts have a tendency to oppose in an undialectical way the mimetic and rational elements of education, an opposition which is manifested in the self-avowed conservatism of their educational attitudes. However, Charles argues, one can distill an alternative critical theory of counter-education from the writings of Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Angela Davis, Alexander Kluge, and Oskar Negt.

The following three chapters of this part focus on the question of aesthetics and politics. As the authors of these chapters illustrate, the wide-ranging interventions into the analysis of the modality of aesthetic formation in capitalist society staged generative debates among the founding Frankfurt

School thinkers that, in turn, informed the development of critical theory itself in its ongoing iterations. Engaging directly with this development, Johan Hartle emphasizes the importance of aesthetics for the original program of critical theory and its relevance for contemporary artistic practices. Taking Lukács's program of a politics of form as a point of departure, his chapter focuses on the writings of Benjamin, Marcuse, and Adorno to identify the ideology critical strategies of early Frankfurt School aesthetics. Whereas Benjamin historicized aesthetic perception and formulated a program of proletarian aesthetics, Marcuse presented an immanent critique of classical bourgeois aesthetics to discuss the possibility of collective happiness. Adorno, meanwhile, unfolds the antinomies of modern aesthetics in the image of the commodity and thereby derives both the idea of aesthetic autonomy and its inner conflicts. Isabelle Klasen's contribution looks at Adorno's critique of the theatrical interventions of Samuel Beckett and Bertolt Brecht in light of ensuing debate over engaged versus autonomous art. While Adorno judges Beckett's works, because of their autonomous configuration, to be paradigmatic for an advanced art, he criticizes Brecht's works for their immediate engagement in a false social practice. Klasen argues that, as a result of Adorno's aversion to political art, he over-emphasizes the element of political engagement in Brecht's work and thereby neglects the breaches and contradictions in Brecht's oeuvre. Matthias Rothe's chapter extends the reflection on the intellectual relationship between Adorno and Brecht, but from a very different point of view. While Brecht is commonly seen as Adorno's antagonist, Rothe challenges readers to move beyond their conventionally perceived rivalry and consider Adorno's frequent and extensive writings on Brecht. Rothe argues that Adorno's relationship to Brecht must be seen in its own right and not exclusively through the lens of their friendship with Benjamin. Rothe contends that, approached in this way, one is able to

see how Brecht's work and politics influenced Adorno's thinking decisively.

The remaining five chapters focus on cultural production – specifically, on the analysis of cultural forms such as literature, music, visual art, as well as the ‘technological mass media’ forms such as cinema, radio, and television. For the development of a critical theory of cultural forms, the question of method is a central concern. Mathias Nilges's chapter surveys some of the foundations of the particular theory of literature and method for literary criticism formulated by Adorno, Benjamin, and Löwenthal. The core of this method is to treat art and literature on their own terms – in other words, to engage a form of immanent critique – focusing centrally on matters of form, medium, interpretation, and history. Johannes von Moltke's chapter traces the development of the analysis of cinema and media in critical theory. For von Moltke, milestones of this development are Benjamin's understanding of modern media in relationship to the history of the senses; Kracauer's prolific film criticism and theory from the Weimar era through the Cold War; and Adorno's scattered reflections on technological media such as radio, television, and film. What unites these positions, according to the author, is a consistent concern with the relationship between technological media and experience in modernity. The chapter concludes that critical theory contains untapped resources for a contemporary theory of the media after the century of cinema. Murray Dineen approaches the question of method by staging the confrontation of diverse cultural forms in analysis. Dineen argues that Adorno adopted a style of prose expression called *Scharnier* [Dineen uses *hinge*] where an idea and its negation are brought together succinctly in a form resembling music. Using the concept of ‘hinge’ as a theoretical framework to describe Adorno's prose, Schoenberg's music, and Beethoven's late style, Dineen arrives at a revision of the concept of authenticity as applied to music. Focusing on the interventions of Adorno,

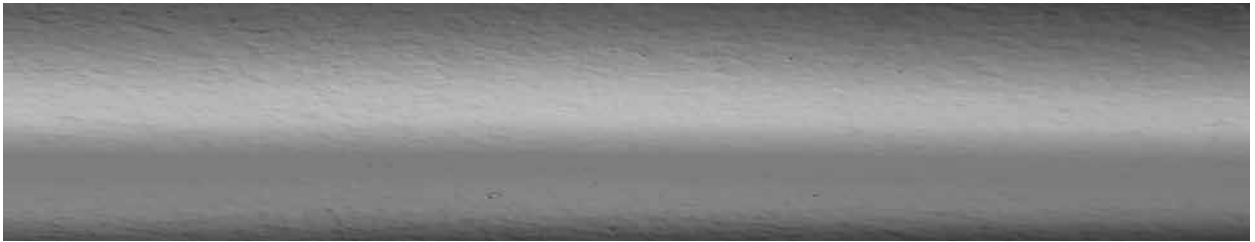
Horkheimer, and Benjamin, Marina Vishmidt looks at the Frankfurt School's sustained contribution to the inquiry into the position of art in capitalist society, more specifically, into the historical dynamic between ‘aesthetic forces’ and ‘aesthetic relations of production’. Vishmidt investigates what she calls the ‘conceptual constellations’ that form in this work around the question of art and technology, around art *as a type of* technology itself, and around the concept of repetition as the logic of the production of art – and as a cultural logic more generally – in capitalist social relations. Finally, Owen Hulatt considers the view, debated by first generation critical theorists, that art can enunciate a critique of society and of the ideologies and distorted forms of rationality that underlie and shore up society. He focuses on the work of Adorno in particular, and argues that the structural preconditions for Adorno's account are no longer realized and that we are now required to reconsider what critical power artworks may have.

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PART IV

# State, Economy, Society



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# Society as 'Totality': On the Negative-Dialectical Presentation of Capitalist Socialization

Lars Heitmann

Translated by Jacob Blumenfeld

The primacy of totality should also not be hypostatized. The totality reproduces itself again and again out of the details of social life, ultimately from individuals. If we attach such value to the totality of society, Mr. Dahrendorf, this is not because we are intoxicated with grand concepts, with the power and glory of the totality, but on the contrary, because in it we see the doom that, if I may cite myself, 'the whole is the false'.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of society as a 'totality' is of the utmost importance in critical theory. This is particularly true for Theodor W. Adorno, who places this concept at the centre of social critique. Adorno formulated many different versions of this concept, such as 'total socialization',<sup>2</sup> 'total system',<sup>3</sup> he speaks of the 'total structure',<sup>4</sup> the 'power of totality',<sup>5</sup> 'supremacy of totality',<sup>6</sup> 'history as a self-realizing totality'.<sup>7</sup> In the same sense, he speaks vividly of society as a 'universal block',<sup>8</sup> 'network',<sup>9</sup> 'business',<sup>10</sup> 'gigantic apparatus',<sup>11</sup> 'machinery',<sup>12</sup> 'system',<sup>13</sup> 'monstrous totality',<sup>14</sup> of an 'integrated society'<sup>15</sup> and of the emergence of a 'radically

societalized society'.<sup>16</sup> And this 'totality' of the social is characterized as constitutively 'contradictory', 'antagonistic'.<sup>17</sup>

The concept of 'totality' is not only central for Adorno, but in 'dialectical social philosophy' in general.<sup>18</sup> Adorno picks it up from the tradition of Hegel through Marx and Lukács to Horkheimer and gives it his *own* meaning. It can therefore be asked: what *exactly* does Adorno's concept contain for social analysis? And furthermore, what are its implications?

In terms of *content*, the meaning of the concept of 'totality' from Adorno's writings appears quite simple. The concept of society as an 'antagonistic totality' refers to his notion that subjectivity, social relations, and the natural conditions of human beings in modern society are increasingly shaped by an all-encompassing, heteronomous, irrationally dynamic context of capitalist commodity production.<sup>19</sup> Thus, society – brought together by and oscillating around the capitalist exchange of goods – develops into a 'functional nexus' of 'total' subsumption

of human beings and human relationships under the capital relation.<sup>20</sup> Adorno emphasizes that this all-encompassing ‘functional nexus’ – this ‘totality’ – does not exist apart from ‘individual phenomena’, but rather only subsists *in* them: in the thoughts, actions and feelings of ‘individual human beings’ in ‘individual situations’ and ‘individual institutions’, as Adorno says.<sup>21</sup>

For the historical level of social development that Adorno has in mind, this means: held together and driven by the irrationality of the capitalist valorisation process, society develops into a (‘totally’) ‘administered world’ to which people adapt their attitudes and actions.<sup>22</sup>

Adorno *normatively* concludes from his analysis of society that this ‘totality’ should be abolished. For it is a completely ‘inverted’ world, produced by human beings as a ‘false’ unity of the universal and concrete – an ‘administered world’. Human beings can stop making this ‘inverted world’. In view of the development of the division of labour and technology, its abolition [*Aufhebung*] is the condition for a life without coercion, destruction and poverty for every (!) human being. The abolition of the inverted world would mean ‘progress’ in a comprehensive sense for Adorno, not just technically, but also socially.<sup>23</sup>

The *content* of the concept of totality as well as its *normative* consequences are relatively easy to grasp. What is more difficult to grasp are the *systematic* implications of this societal concept. Comprehension entails methodological arguments about Adorno’s approach to the analysis of definite social *contents*. Among other things, the focus here will be on the systematic concepts of ‘unregimented experience’, ‘interpretation’ and ‘thinking in constellations’. I will discuss these systematic implications below. However, this is not so easy, since Adorno’s systematic reflections are scattered all over the place. It is therefore necessary to reconstruct Adorno’s intellectual approach from his own writings, including the sociological ones.

In light of this, I will proceed in the following manner. In the first section, the intellectual-historical background of Adorno’s dialectics is explained. The second section provides a more detailed reconstruction of the systematic character of Adorno’s thinking in dialectical categories; that is, it clarifies how the concepts of ‘totality’, ‘interpretation’, ‘experience’ and ‘thinking in constellations’ are related. In this context, Adorno’s understanding of central sociological categories such as ‘individual’, ‘society’ and ‘capitalism’ is revealed.<sup>24</sup> In this section, I proceed exegetically and let Adorno speak more fully. Finally, I draw a short conclusion.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: ‘TOTALITY’ AND ‘DIALECTIC’ FROM HEGEL TO ADORNO

To understand the concept of ‘totality’ in Adorno, it is worthwhile to see, in broad outline, how the meaning of the concept developed from Hegel through Marx to Lukács, Horkheimer, and Horkheimer and Adorno. The relationship between ‘totality’ and ‘dialectics’ will also be briefly discussed.

### *Hegel*

‘Totality’ is a frequently used concept of Hegel’s philosophy.<sup>25</sup> It can be found in various contexts, such as logic, philosophy of religion, anthropology, epistemology and social philosophy. It always refers to a whole that is more than the sum of its individual parts that stand *external to each other*; this whole, therefore, does not exist on its own *as such*, but rather subsists *in the parts*.<sup>26</sup> Each moment can thus only be thought in its ‘mediation’ with all other moments of the ‘totality’. At the same time, each individual moment is always already determined as self-contradictory: it is always itself and not itself, both immediate and mediated at the same time.



For Hegel, the concept of 'totality' belongs to a comprehensive 'dialectical system of science'. This 'system' is conceived as the conceptual reconstruction of the self-actualization of 'absolute spirit' through various forms (the 'idea', 'nature', the different forms of 'spirit') progressing from being-in-itself through being-for-another towards being-in-and-for-itself.<sup>27</sup> In so doing, Hegel unfolds the objects from each other (or 'derives' them) by always showing how simple forms have contradictions that lead to higher forms.

He thus conceives of actuality as the becoming of a structured whole comprising interrelated forms. For Hegel, this 'whole' is the 'true', namely, the expression of the 'essence consummating itself'. He writes: 'The True is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development' (Hegel, 1807: 11).

Regarding the reconstruction of Adorno's concept of 'totality', Hegel's conceptions of 'totality' and 'dialectic' should be noted. In *substance*, the concept of 'totality' in Hegel designates the unity of interrelated moments. On the one hand, it is not reserved for *any specific subject area*. And, on the other hand, it shows that Hegel does not consider 'totality' as *problematic* in any way. From a more *systematic* point of view: the 'dialectical method of development', or the dialectical 'derivation' of concepts, is for Hegel the appropriate analytical means to grasp the inner structure of the world, and thus the 'totality' of being in a comprehensive sense.

## Marx

The concept of 'totality' is also important for Marx. In contrast to Hegel, however, Marx applies the concept essentially to a specific subject area: the *capitalist* economy, and therewith to the division of labour,<sup>28</sup> exchange,<sup>29</sup> money<sup>30</sup> and the 'system of capital'.<sup>31</sup> Marx also conceives the relationship between 'production, distribution, exchange,

[and] consumption' as a 'totality'. Marx writes: 'The result at which we arrive is, not that production, distribution, exchange and consumption are identical, but that they are all elements of a totality, differences within a unity' (MECW 28: 36).

Marx is concerned here with the capitalist economy as an *objective* 'system', which means that all individual economic phenomena are connected with one another in *this* mode of economy. Not only that: at the same time, *this* economy is literally 'perverted' [*verrückt*], because the social relations of production appear as seemingly natural relations between the things themselves, and the product of their social labour assumes the form of value as a socially valid object force. In *Capital*, Marx analyses the central form of the commodity in the 'capitalist mode of production':

A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. (MECW 35: 82 et sq.)

Marx provides proof of this 'systematic' context of inversion by means of a 'dialectical presentation of the economic categories' akin to Hegel's methodology in the *Science of Logic*.<sup>32</sup> That is, Marx develops the (general) concept of 'value' from the 'analysis of the commodity', and then develops all further 'economic categories' as forms of appearance of this 'essence'. In his analysis of capital, Marx shows how the 'economic categories' (value, price, money, capital, wages, profit, interest, etc.) establish a practice of economic activity that belongs to an inverted, seemingly self-moving 'whole'. For Marx, the 'capitalist mode of production' constitutes a crisis-ridden dynamic system of social production that is based on the private appropriation of unpaid surplus labour.

For Marx, the ‘presentation’ of the economic ‘categories’ as moments of an independent, objective-irrational ‘system’ is identical with the ‘critique’ of this ‘system’. On his critique of economics, Marx writes: ‘The work I am presently concerned with is a *Critique of Economic Categories* or, if you like, a critical exposé of the system of the bourgeois economy. It is at once an exposé and, by the same token, a critique of the system’ (MECW 40: 270).

With regard to Marx’s use of the concept of ‘totality’ and the relation of ‘totality’ and ‘dialectics’, we can say the following: the concept of ‘totality’ is used in Marx for the analysis of the *economic* ‘system’. The economic ‘totality’ is the expression of inverted social relations. Marx shows this by way of a ‘dialectical presentation of categories’ which is identical to the critique of the ‘totality’ of capitalist relations.

### Lukács

After Marx and in distinction from him, Lukács develops the categories of ‘totality’ and ‘dialectics’ further.<sup>33</sup> He transposed the category of ‘totality’ to a materialistic theory of society, combining Marx’s ‘critique of political economy’ with Weber’s analysis of modern rationalism. In the 1920s, Lukács analysed what Weber describes as ‘rationalisation’ in connection with Marx’s analysis of the ‘fetish character of the commodity’ as ‘reification’:

The separation of the producer from his means of production, the dissolution and destruction of *all* ‘natural’ production units, etc., and *all* the social and economic conditions necessary for the emergence of modern capitalism tend to replace ‘natural’ relations which exhibit human relations more plainly by rationally reified relations. (Lukács, 1923: 91)

Lukács’ main concern is that the constitution of the commodity form involves the development of a specific objectifying,

‘instrumentally rational’ attitude towards ‘the world’. Lukács conceives of the assumed universality, that is, the ‘totality’ of the principle of ‘reification’, as a form of appearance of the capitalist economy. In *capitalism*, people produce all their relationships, their forms of consciousness, natural conditions and their social relations as ‘reified’.<sup>34</sup> According to Lukács, human beings ‘produce’ the ‘reified’ social forms of instrumental rationality and social structure, which establish an inverted unity of human action and social structure. He considers reified reality as the (necessary) foundation for the revolutionary transformation of society.

For Lukács, the ‘dialectical method’ is a means to think about the historically concrete context; it is thus also the appropriate means to grasp the historical relativity of the object – capitalist society or the (instrumental) subjectivity of modern subjects. The *historical-concrete* forms of ‘reification’ are ‘derived’ from the capital relation; furthermore, they are interpreted as forms leading to the overcoming of capitalism. Lukács argues that the proletariat understands the character of ‘reification’ and therewith the ‘negative totality’ of capitalist modernity. The proletariat is thus able to create a ‘reasonable totality’. The privileged position of the proletariat is due to the fact that workers have ‘first hand’ experience of the process of rationalization in the production process.

Influenced by Weber, Lukács interprets Marx’s analysis of the commodity as a critique of rationality, and then transfers the analysis of the commodity to an analysis of society. Dialectics for Lukács is *the* means to demonstrate the historical relativity of the social object and the necessity of changing it. Lukács thinks of this change as a transition from a ‘negative’ to a ‘positive totality’.

In sum, although the concept of ‘totality’ is *significantly* different for Hegel, Marx and Lukács, they all share the idea that ‘totality’ must be grasped in the context of dialectical *theory*. This changes with Horkheimer.

## Horkheimer

In his writings from the 1930s, Horkheimer is sceptical about Lukács' position.<sup>35</sup> First of all, he conceives of 'totality' as a specific term for describing the negative context of *capitalist* society. But Horkheimer also distinguishes himself from Lukács in a more systematic regard. Horkheimer's programme is to examine the connection of economic, cultural and psychological phenomena within the framework of an 'interdisciplinary materialism' in order to penetrate the 'false totality' of *capitalist* society. The goal is to show how the capitalist 'totality' develops and reproduces itself through empirical forms of subjectivity and its various cultural forms.

The background of this programme is the historical experience that workers do not revolutionize the 'system', but rather practically and theoretically behave in a reactionary manner, tending towards authoritarianism. The absence of revolution gives the 'critical theory of society', as Horkheimer understands it, grounds to more precisely analyse how this 'system' functions: how and why the workers 'participate' in this manner.

For Horkheimer, the analysis of the social 'totality' must result from an analytical synthesis of scientific, theoretical and empirical research (from sociology, psychology, economics and political science) and historical-materialist theory. The 'materialist theory' should guide the 'research'. However, this theory should not be dogmatic at all, but rather correct itself when necessary according to the results of the individual sciences. The claim that materialist theory should lead 'research', however, is still part of a materialist philosophy of history. Horkheimer (still) understands his approach as a contribution to enlightening society about itself, and thus as laying the groundwork for a more reasonable subjectivity. In this respect, he contributes to revolutionizing social conditions.<sup>36</sup>

This ambitious programme of 'interdisciplinary materialism' seems to have been abandoned

in the 1940s against the backdrop of the experience of fascism, Stalin's terror in the USSR, and the Holocaust. The *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, co-authored with Adorno, developed his earlier conception of 'totality' in a new direction.

## Horkheimer/Adorno

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a 'negativist philosophy of history' (Axel Honneth) of human development and a radical critique of 'instrumental reason' (showing a direct line from the 'slingshot' to the 'atom bomb') supersedes the empirically and scientifically expanded materialist theory of capitalist society. Instead of revolutionary hope, there is a fundamental doubt about the possible emancipation of mankind. The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* understands itself as an enlightenment of the Enlightenment; no longer knowing a direct addressee, it becomes a 'message in a bottle'.<sup>37</sup>

The radical critique of 'instrumental reason' is also reflected in the methodology. This method is an expression of protest against the rationalism of the sciences. The sciences did not contribute to the liberation of mankind or to the establishment of a reasonable form of social life, but rather to man's oppression, that is, to a thoroughly 'irrational' structure of the world. Horkheimer follows the methodology that Adorno had been developing since the early 1930s, in line with Walter Benjamin, and about which Horkheimer had been previously extremely sceptical: the method of 'interpretation'. Because of this method of 'interpretation', the 'presentations' of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* combine with an experimental, rather tentative, unsystematic-meandering style of thinking and with linguistic exaggerations and literary phrases in the context of a more or less (deliberately) 'fragmentary' overall composition.

Adorno's thinking after 1945 was not oriented by the philosophy of history of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Essentially, it builds upon the perspective introduced by

Horkheimer's programme for 'interdisciplinary materialism' of an empirically substantiated, structural analysis of capitalist society that unfolds within categories of 'totality'. However, Adorno remains faithful to his own systematic approach: the analysis of the capitalist 'totality' is consistently carried out by way of materialist 'interpretation'.<sup>38</sup> Adorno finds a term equally dazzling and appropriate for this approach: 'Negative Dialectics'. The concept of society as an 'antagonistic totality' constitutes its conceptual centre.

## SOCIETY AS 'TOTALITY' FOR ADORNO

### *The Programme for a Social-Theoretical Retranslation of Hegel's Categories*

Adorno argues using the category of 'totality' mainly from the 1950s onwards. At the same time, he elaborates his own manner of using the concept of totality, especially in dialogue with Hegel. Adorno reads Hegel's philosophy in terms of its 'experiential content', differentiating the 'experiential content of the theory' from the 'experiential content in the theory'.<sup>39</sup> 'Experiential content in the theory' are concrete historical experiences that occur in the theory. Adorno is not concerned with this, but rather with the 'experiential content of the theory'. This means that Hegel articulates the 'systematic character' of modern, capitalist society in his idealist-dialectical philosophy, albeit *unconsciously*.

From there, Adorno formulates the programme of 'retranslating' Hegel's categories into social analysis. In addition to the category of 'totality', this includes the 'retranslation' of broader dialectical categories, such as 'individuality', 'universality', 'particularity', 'essence', 'appearance', 'contradiction', 'mediation' and so on. Adorno formulated this programme continuously from the 1950s on. Discussing Hegel, Adorno writes: 'I will try to translate into something as close to

contemporary experience as possible what Hegel essentially understood, what he saw about the world' (Adorno, 1959a: 54). In *Negative Dialectics* of 1966, Adorno writes,

that the object of a mental experience is a *very real antagonistic system in itself*, not just in its mediation with the knowing subject that rediscovers itself therein. The *coercive state of reality*, which idealism had *projected* into the region of the subject and the mind, must be *retranslated* from that region. (Adorno, 1966: 10 trans. mod)

And in the 'Introduction' to *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* from 1969, he says:

In terms of society, the idea of an objective *system-in-itself* is not as illusory as it seemed to be after the collapse of idealism, and as positivism asserts. The notion of the great tradition of philosophy, which positivism considers to be outdated, is not indebted to the allegedly aesthetic qualities of intellectual achievements but rather to a *content of experience* which, because of its *transcendence into individual consciousness*, would tempt me to hypostatize it as being absolute. Dialectics is able to *legitimize* itself by *translating* this content *back* into the experience from which it arose. But this is the experience of the *mediation of all that is individual through the objective societal totality*. In traditional dialectics, it was turned on its head with the thesis that antecedent objectivity – the object itself, understood as totality – was the subject. (Adorno, 1969c: 9 et sq.)

These programmatic expressions make clear that the task of 'retranslation' formulated again and again by Adorno should lead to analyses of *sociological* problems. In essence, this involves the *material* question of the relationship between the individual and society or the economy and society. It also includes *systematic* and *methodological* questions about the relationship between method and object as well as the formation of theory and empirical research.

In his confrontation with Hegel in the 1950s, Adorno made a more precise and substantial statement of his programme:

We know that in its emphatic Hegelian version, the concept of system is to be understood organically;

the partial moments are to grow into and be interpenetrated by one another by virtue of a whole that is already inherent in every one of them. This concept of system implies the identity of subject and object, which has developed into the sole and conclusive absolute, and the truth of the system collapses when that identity collapses. But that identity, full reconciliation through spirit in a world which is in reality antagonistic, is a mere assertion. The philosophical anticipation of reconciliation is a trespass against real reconciliation; it ascribes anything that contradicts it to 'foul' existence as unworthy of philosophy. But a seamless system and an achieved reconciliation are not one and the same; rather, they are contradictory: the unity of the system derives from unreconcilable violence. Satanically, the world as grasped by the Hegelian system has only now, a hundred and fifty years later, proved itself to be a system in the literal sense, namely that of a radically societalized society. One of the most remarkable aspects of Hegel's accomplishment is that he inferred that systematic character of society from the concept long before it could gain ascendancy in the sphere of Hegel's own experience, that of a Germany far behind in its bourgeois development. A world integrated through 'production', through the exchange relationship, depends in all its moments on the social conditions of its production, and in that sense actually realizes the primacy of the whole over its parts; in this regard the desperate impotence of every single individual now verifies Hegel's extravagant conception of the system. (Adorno, 1957: 27. trans. mod)

Thus, the 'system' reconciled in philosophical categories is, in truth, an 'unreconciled' one, contradictory *in itself*, fundamentally based on the *violence* of a self-perpetuating capitalist economy. Hegel did not grasp this, but he captured something else: he anticipated the 'systematic character' of the world, which was concretely coming into view before him in the shape of an emerging capitalist economy. With the development of capitalist mass society, the social context finally becomes a 'seamless system'. According to Adorno, this 'seamless', 'systematic' context, based on capitalist exchange, 'realizes the primacy of the whole over its parts', which means that individual persons as well as individual situations and individual institutions become completely transformed into impotent executors of the 'system'.<sup>40</sup>

From a *systematic* point of view, it should be emphasized that this 'retranslated' concept of 'totality' first of all concerns a theoretical 'anticipation' [*Vorgriff*] based on specific experiences: namely, that phenomena which initially appear to us in their singularity are, in fact, not immediately given. Rather, 'something' is reflected in them, they are 'parts' of a larger context. 'Societal knowledge', Adorno emphasizes, 'requires [...] theoretical anticipation, an organ for what determines phenomena and at the same time is denied by them' (Adorno/Jaerisch, 1968: 195).

The *concept* of 'totality' is not yet identical with the *proof* of the specific 'mediation' of the 'immediate'. Habermas also stresses this moment of 'anticipation' in the 'positivist dispute'. He points out that the concept of 'totality' guides the formation of theory as well as 'experience', and that it must prove adequate in the course of (empirical) 'explication': 'This prior experience of society as totality shapes the outline of the theory in which it articulates itself and through whose constructions it is checked anew against experiences' (Habermas, 1969: 135). And further: 'The hermeneutic anticipation of totality must prove itself in more than a merely instrumental manner. In the course of the explication, it must establish itself as correct precisely as a concept appropriate to the object itself (...)' (ibid.: 136).

For Adorno, this 'explication' of the 'concept of totality' is nothing other than sociological 'interpretation'.

### ***The Programme of 'Interpretation'***

Adorno's programme of sociological 'interpretation' runs as follows: the interpreter should perceive the totality in the 'features of social givenness', as they appear in *concrete* individual phenomena:

In sociology, interpretation acquires its force both from the fact that without *reference to totality* – to the real total system, untranslatable into any solid immediacy – nothing societal can be conceptualized,

and from the fact that it can, however, only be *recognized* in the extent to which it is apprehended in the *factual and the individual*. It is the *societal physiognomy of appearance*. The primary meaning of 'interpret' is to *perceive something in the features of totality's social givenness*. (Adorno, 1969c: 32)

Adorno repeatedly formulated this claim. For example, he says: 'I try to think my way deeply into specific phenomena in order that light will fall from them onto the whole' (Adorno, 1964/65: 184 trans. mod). Or, metaphorically put: '(...) to interpret social phenomena as an expression of society, much as one may interpret a face as an expression of the psychological processes reflected in it' (Adorno, 1968a: 146).

With regard to the concept of 'totality', this means that one cannot *immediately* prove its existence, but only make it 'plausible' out of acts of interpretation. In essence, 'interpretation' means the precise analysis of a concrete individual phenomenon that demonstrates its 'mediation' with the 'system of capital' as well as its cultural, political, social and psychological 'manifestations'. These 'interpretations' are not conceived and carried out as strongly systematized, comprehensive 'investigations' but are presented in the form of 'models' or 'analyses of models'. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno writes: 'A model covers the specific, and more than the specific, without letting it evaporate in its more general super-concept. Philosophical thinking is the same as thinking in models; negative dialectics is an ensemble of analyses of models' (Adorno, 1966: 29).

This systematic self-understanding is also reflected in the titles of Adorno's publications, for instance, *Interventions: Nine Critical Models*. In this publication, Adorno deals with various topics like 'Television', 'Culture', 'Sexual Taboos' and 'Working Through the Past'. This self-understanding is also expressed in the title and execution of Adorno's last publication, *Catchwords: Critical Models 2*, in which Adorno deals with objects such as 'Free Time', 'Progress',

'Personality', and 'Education after Auschwitz'.<sup>41</sup> In their entirety, the 'models' – as a kind of 'ensemble' – accumulate to far-reaching insights into the social context.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, model interpretations of individual phenomena based on the specific concept of society as 'totality' take the place of the formation of a general theory of society, as formulated by Durkheim, Parsons, Luhmann and Habermas, as well as the early Horkheimer.

Adorno justifies this exemplary and fragmentary approach with the 'complexity' and 'irrationality' of society as such. On the one hand, 'society' in general does not immediately present itself to the researcher; rather, one finds isolated phenomena appearing alone, which, on closer inspection, point beyond themselves. On the other hand, 'society' proves to be 'contradictory' and 'irrational' in so many ways that it would be wrong, from Adorno's perspective, to formulate a self-contained theory.<sup>43</sup>

The overall character of social analysis for *concrete* objects proves to be anti-definitional and 'fragmentary'. In the same way, the conceptual method in the framework of 'interpretation' also proves to be an attempt to explain by means of non-definitional and historical-concrete terms the specific kind of sociality of objects. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno describes this approach as 'thinking in constellations'.

### **'Thinking in Constellations'**

'Thinking in constellations' forms the systematic centre of Adorno's societal analysis. In this way, Adorno concerns himself with formulating and solving the fundamental problem of conceptual thinking.<sup>44</sup> This is the core idea: objects, which must always be conceptually designated but are never identical with these concepts, should not be grasped by means of definite and classifying concepts, but through the development of theoretical-conceptual 'constellations'. In a

‘constellative’ way, according to Adorno, meaningful content can be created that ‘overcomes’ [*aufheben*] the limitations of individual concepts:

By themselves, *constellations* represent from without what the concept has cut away within: the ‘more’ which the concept is equally desirous and incapable of being. *By gathering around the object of cognition, the concepts potentially determine the object’s interior. They attain, in thinking, what was necessarily excised from thinking.* (Adorno, 1966: 162)

‘Constellative’ thinking thus explicates the ‘mediation’ of the ‘immediately’ appearing, which turns out to be nothing other than the specific historicity of the thing:

The object opens itself to a monadological insistence, to a sense of the constellation in which it stands; the possibility of internal immersion requires that externality. But such an immanent generality of something individual is objective as sedimented history. This history is in the individual thing and outside it; it is something encompassing in which the individual has its place. Becoming aware of the constellation in which a thing stands is tantamount to deciphering the constellation which, having come to be, it bears within it. The *chorismos* of without and within is historically qualified in turn. The history locked in the object can only be delivered by a knowledge mindful of the historic positional value of the object in its relation to other objects – by the actualization and concentration of something which is already known and is transformed by that knowledge. Cognition of the object in its constellation is cognition of the process stored in the object. (Ibid.: 163)

Adorno also elucidates the method of ‘constellation’ with a metaphor:

As a constellation, theoretical thought circles the concept it would like to unseal, hoping that it may fly open like the lock of a well-guarded safe-deposit box: in response, not to a single key or a single number, but to a *combination of numbers*. (Ibid.)

So, not by turning a *single* ‘key’, but by finding a ‘combination of numbers’, namely, a *specific* arrangement of different individual keys (‘concepts’, theories), the object *reveals* itself.<sup>45</sup> This method of a ‘constellation’ of

concepts is not formal, but experimental, playful, almost ‘artistic-creative’.<sup>46</sup>

If one looks at the different ‘models’ developed by Adorno against this background, then it becomes clear that in carrying out the ‘constellative-conceptual’ ‘interpretation’ of a historical-concrete object, he resorts to different *conceptual* modes of access and thus interrelated ‘individual concepts’. These include:

- the reflection of general political-economic structures and issues that can be shown in the object, such as the differences between ‘free time’ and ‘work’, ‘public’ and ‘private’, as well as other issues like ‘domination of nature’, ‘reification’, ‘rationality’, ‘rationalization’, ‘productive forces’ and ‘relations of production’.
- the reflection of concrete political-economic dynamics, power relations and strategies of capital such as ‘monopoly’, ‘culture industry’, ‘crisis’ and ‘administration’.
- the social-psychological dimension (which reflects the history of domination): ‘ego-weakness’, ‘unconsciousness’, ‘neurosis’, ‘repression’ and ‘identification with the aggressor’.
- the properly sociological dimension: ‘domination’, ‘institutions’, ‘organization’, ‘bureaucratization’, ‘adjustment’, ‘integration’, ‘disintegration’, ‘social control’, ‘socialization’, ‘character masks’, ‘pseudo-individualization’, ‘fetishism’ and ‘ideology’.

Through ‘constellations’ and in ‘models’, these categories are critically examined and, if necessary, reinterpreted. As such, Adorno is able to grasp how different moments are ‘mediated’ with each other: for example, how economic phenomena contain psychological moments and *vice versa*, or how the economic structure influences the psyche.

This can therefore be stated of ‘thinking in constellations’: by emphasizing the tentative, experimental and ‘model’ character of his conceptual-analytical methodology in the framework of a sociological ‘interpretation’ of concrete objects, Adorno maximally distinguishes himself from the formalizing, classifying, and other such methods of sociology. This applies even more so to the

typical rhetorical form of Adorno's 'interpretations', which often trigger defensiveness; they are not just different, but have their own method as well.

### ***Rhetorical Moments in the Process of Interpretation: Exaggeration, Individual Expression and Metaphors***

In his 'models', Adorno systematically uses different rhetorical forms of presentation: exaggeration, genuine literary stylistics and the formulation of metaphors.

Again and again, Adorno uses radical formulations and statements that many consider to be untenable or even absurd.<sup>47</sup> The most incisive examples from the period after 1945 are the well-known phrases from *Minima Moralia*: 'The whole is the false' (Adorno, 1951: 50), 'Wrong life cannot be lived rightly' (ibid.: 39), 'In many people it is already an impertinence to say "I"' (ibid.: 50). These exaggerations have always been systematic in their self-understanding. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno write: 'But only exaggeration is true' (Horkheimer/Adorno, 1944: 92), and in 'The Meaning of Working Through the Past', Adorno says:

I have exaggerated the somber side, following the maxim that only exaggeration per se today can be the medium of truth. Do not mistake my fragmentary and often rhapsodic remarks for Spenglerism; Spenglerism itself makes common cause with the catastrophe. My intention was to delineate a tendency concealed behind the smooth façade of everyday life before it overflows the institutional dams that, for the time being, are erected against it. (Adorno, 1959b: 99)

Using exaggeration as a 'medium of truth' means that the exaggerated phrase can help illuminate what is *really* at stake, what is *actually* behind the thing at hand and where it 'tends'. Exaggeration never stands alone, but is a rhetorical moment in an overall

argumentative context. Exaggeration hopes to create a shattering effect, ultimately in order to help avoid what it says.

But it is not only Adorno's exaggerated formulations that polarize; his analyses are always carried out in a unique style that rubs many the wrong way.<sup>48</sup> Adorno, however, does not speak in this very specific way out of vanity or arrogance, but on principle: through his style, he highlights individuality in a society which, in his opinion, is characterized by conformity, pseudo-individualization, pseudo-objective (definition-based and quantitative) science and a frequently accompanying anti-intellectuality.

These specific rhetorical forms of 'presentation', in my view, obtain their meaning against the background of Horkheimer and Adorno's assumption that 'no terms are available which do not tend toward complicity with the prevailing intellectual trends (...)' (Horkheimer/Adorno, 1944: xv). Horkheimer and Adorno refuse to speak the sober language of supposedly objective science, because this language has not become the 'medium' of liberation, but a means of oppression.

Beyond these means of exaggeration and individual stylistics, sociological 'interpretation' ultimately integrates a figurative mode of knowledge. As already mentioned, Adorno repeatedly describes 'society' with technical metaphors such as 'system', 'business', 'apparatus' and 'machinery'. In particular, these metaphorical elements of Adorno's social analysis have important systematic significance.

With reference to Benjamin, Adorno's textually interwoven metaphors are by no means arbitrary.<sup>49</sup> Already in the early 1930s, Adorno writes:

Benjamin shows that *allegory* is no composite of merely adventitious elements; the allegorical is not an accidental sign for an underlying content. Rather *there is a specific relation between allegory and the allegorically meant*, 'allegory is expression'. Allegory is usually taken to mean the *presentation of a concept as an image* and therefore it is labelled abstract and accidental. The relationship of allegory to its meaning is not accidental



signification, but the playing out of a particularity; it is expression. *What is expressed in the allegorical sphere is nothing but an historical relationship.* (Adorno, 1931b: 119)

In the course of ‘interpretation’, ‘allegory’ should reveal concrete history, as a ‘historical relationship’ ‘expresses’ itself in the phenomena. The ‘images’ drawn in this context are above all the articulations of suffering in reality:

Everything about history that, from the beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather in a death’s head. And although such a thing lacks all ‘symbolic’ freedom of expression, all classical proportion, all that is human, nevertheless not only the nature of human existence in general but the biographical historicity of an individual is enunciated in this figure of the most extreme subjugation to nature, in the form of a riddle. This is the *heart of the allegorical vision, of the Baroque, secular exposition of history as the passion of the world*; it is only meaningful in the stations of its prostration. (Ibid.: 120)

Adorno and Horkheimer repeatedly make recourse to allegorical forms of expressions in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. For example, they speak of the ‘sun of calculating reason’, which ‘illuminates myth’ but ‘beneath whose icy rays the seeds of the new barbarism are germinating’ (Horkheimer/Adorno, 1944: 25). The image of the *Odyssey* is also used to express the suffering of becoming a subject. Referring to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Baars writes:

Introducing the *imagination* into the theory of society allows us to experience what the regressed enlightenment can only conceive as a material of domination, and shows that it is something special and individual that *suffers* under domination. (Baars, 1989: 223 trans. mine)

In his characterization of the overall context of presentation, Baars particularly highlights the theological as well as psychoanalytic meanings of the presentation, indicating a liberating moment that transcends the expression of suffering:

Joining the figurative form borrowed from aesthetic modernism is anamnesis, borrowed from modern psychoanalysis (...). Moments of this anamnesis are, for example, an *expressiveness of suffering*; a *remembrance of prehistory*, which is structured by a *traumatically fixed present*; an *interpretation of prehistory as a history of illness*, and, finally, the *possibility of liberation from compulsive repetition through insight into genesis.* (Ibid.: 210)

It is thus possible to retain the role of the image in the process of ‘interpretation’. The linguistic image – ‘metaphor’, ‘allegory’ – can reveal meaningful content that goes beyond the concept and enriches it. The image, as well as the exaggeration, never replaces the concept, but *supplements* it. Figurative expression is the moment of conceptual reflection of the specific-historical world of experience; as such, it’s a moment of condensing the content of the statement, and so holds the possibility of thinking – and feeling – beyond the concepts expressed in the ‘constellation’. The negation of the reified, hardened and coagulated world appearing in the image makes it possible to imagine *that* and *how* it can be quite different, and foremost what a liberated society does *not* look like: uniform, orderly, hierarchical, technological.

### ***The Significance of ‘Experience’ in the Process of Interpretation***

Up to this point, the essential programmatic and methodological assumptions as well as the most important conceptual elements of Adorno’s ‘sociology’ have been reconstructed. The reconstruction of the most important systematic elements of Adorno’s approach is, however, still incomplete. There is another essential concept that has so far only been discussed in the margins: experience.<sup>50</sup>

Both the formulation of the social-theoretical concept of ‘totality’ and its execution in sociological ‘interpretation’ are closely linked to the concept of ‘experience’.

Thus, in the context of the ‘positivist dispute’. Adorno insists that ‘the supremacy of totality, which is indeed abstract, but also escapes the general concept in a certain sense, can only be encountered in the experience of the individual and in the interpretation of this experience of the individual’ (Adorno, 1968b: 587). Adorno even postulates a primacy of experience before ‘form’. Provocatively, he writes: ‘The key position of the subject in cognition is experience, not form’ (Adorno, 1969b: 254). And: ‘It beckons us to defend experience against empiricism, to bring a less restricted, less narrow, and less reified concept of experience to science’ (Adorno, 1969d: 545). Adorno even calls for a ‘rebellion of experience against empiricism’ (Adorno, 1968a: 51).

It is important for Adorno that one can make experience and that dogmatic theoretical and/or methodological assumptions about the subject area do not prevent this. Thus, Adorno criticizes the fact that ‘the positivists’ know much more about society and its ‘objectivity’ in the context of non-scientific discussions than they acknowledge as *scientists*. In the *Introduction to Sociology* from 1968, Adorno says:

I want only to warn you against adopting a certain type of scientific posture which is not unknown to me and can manifest itself somewhat as follows: you are able to sit down at a *Caféhaus* table – I’m thinking of Vienna now – with someone with whom you can talk about every possible intellectual, social and political issue and who has thoroughly free, reasonable and critical views. But the moment he metaphorically puts on his academic gown – I don’t think too many people are inclined to put it on literally nowadays – he immediately succumbs to what Habermas has called *restringierte Erfahrung* (*restricted experience*). He will now only entertain views so limited and narrow that they bear no comparison with his so-called *prescientific* views – what he knows when you talk to him normally – and are entirely lacking in weight. (1968a: 126)

Adorno is concerned with laying the foundations for ‘primary experiences’ in sociology.<sup>51</sup> In his sociological seminars on ‘social

conflict’ and ‘laughter’, Adorno encourages his students to ‘go out on the streets’ and, in general, to look closely.<sup>52</sup> Adorno repeatedly said that it is necessary for the sociologist to develop an ‘evil eye’, and these seminars are conceived as ‘exercise for the development of that evil eye, without which hardly a sufficient consciousness can be gained of the *contrainte sociale*’ (Adorno/Jaerisch, 1968: 177).

At the same time, this programme states what the ability to make experiences actually means: namely, to develop a feel for the specifically *social* in directly experienced phenomena. On the one hand, Adorno describes such ‘primary experiences’ on the economic level, in the *Introduction to Sociology*:

For example, one might find oneself in certain social situations, like that of someone who is looking for a job and ‘runs into a brick wall’ has the feeling that all doors are shutting automatically in his face; or someone who has to borrow money in a situation in which he cannot produce guarantees that he can return it within a certain period, who meets with a ‘No’ ten or twenty times in a definite, automated manner, and is told he is just an example of a widespread general law, and so on – all these, I would say, are *direct indices of the phenomenon of society*. (Adorno, 1968a: 36)

In another lecture Adorno states ‘that our most immediate experience is that we are all harnessed to an objective trend, and it is hard to disabuse us of this’ (Adorno, 1964/5: 17).

On the other hand, according to Adorno, the social can also be ‘felt’ in concrete situations that initially appear to have no economic or structural character. In the seminars on laughter, for example, more can be found in the many concrete humorous presentations or situations of communal laughter: a collective aggressiveness that indicates the identification of people with the prevailing conditions, against which they are ultimately powerless.<sup>53</sup>

Finally, Adorno combines the development of this ability to make experience, that is, to look closely, with the hope of finding starting points of social change:

Should *experience regain* what she could possibly once do, and what was dispossessed of her by the administered world: to penetrate *theoretically* into the *unknown*, she would have to *decipher slang, attitudes, gestures, and physiognomies, even infinitesimal slights*, to make the *petrified and speechless* speak, whose nuances are as much *traces of violence* as they are secret messages of possible liberation. (Adorno/Jaerisch, 1968: 193)

As a result, Adorno gives experience a central position in his social analysis. As a critic of empiricism, Adorno also knows that experience is never made directly, but that experience and concepts are mediated through one another. In the context of methodological reflections for the seminar on laughter, Adorno states that the relationship between experience and theory is fundamentally ‘circular’:

The task would be to visualise the interaction of theory and experience. Inevitably, therefore, a *circle*: no experience that is not mediated by – often inarticulate – theoretical conception, and no conception that is not based on experience and always measures up to it, whatever it’s worth. The *circle* should not be concealed; by no means, however, should it be accused of lacking reflection or unclear thinking. It is conditioned by the fact *that even in the separation of experience and concept, there is arbitrariness*. (Ibid.: 186)

This can only mean that the interpreter ultimately brings both experience and theory into ‘balance’. This implies that the interpreter does not proceed uncritically from theoretical and/or methodological premises, but remains open to experience (may this be ever so painful!) and also bases this experience in the sciences, in theoretical and conceptual formation. Furthermore, Adorno notes that in addition to ‘lived experience’, theoretical formation can also be oriented by the analyses preceding it. This means orienting oneself to what can be discerned from the available theories and analyses of ‘objectivity’.<sup>54</sup> The concept developed in this way should be applied consistently to the material along with the willingness to stay open to other experiences of the object and, if necessary, to draw consequences for the concept:

The construction of totality has for its first condition a concept of the thing in which the disparate data organizes itself. The construction must bring this concept to the material not according to the socially installed mechanisms of control but from lived experience, from the memory of former thoughts, from the unswerving consistency of one’s own reflection, and, in contact with it, change it. (Ibid.: 197)

What’s crucial is that even the fundamental concepts of (dialectical) social theory, in essence the concept of ‘totality’, can still be legitimized *from experience*. As early as the 1930s, Adorno vehemently criticized Karl Mannheim for developing abstract sociological categories and bringing them *externally* to the object, thus blocking in advance the experience of social contexts:

This methodological requirement [according to which phenomena are to be placed in external contexts, L.H.] is questionable. For it is valid only on the presupposition that social reality is *dominated* by as many *divergent and distinct ‘forces’* as present themselves in the manifold of appearances; it is not valid, however, on the assumption that before all abstraction and generalization by the sociologist, *this society is a highly ‘articulated’ fundamental unity which determines precisely this manifold in each individual feature, namely, the unity of the capitalist system*. (Adorno, 1937: 16 et sq.)

## CONCLUSION

The *critical* kernel of Adorno’s theory, in my view, lies ultimately in the reconstructed conception of the ‘interpretation’ of ‘society’ as ‘totality’. In the *History and Freedom* lectures from 1964/65, which emerged within the context of the development of *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno says:

Interpretation (...) is criticism of phenomena that have been brought to a standstill; it consists in revealing the dynamism stored up in them, so that what appears as second nature can be seen to be history. On the other hand, criticism ensures that what has evolved loses its appearance as mere existence and stands revealed as the product of history. This is essentially the procedure of Marxist

critique (...) Marxist critique consists in showing that every conceivable social and economic factor that appears to be part of nature is in fact something that has evolved historically. (Adorno, 1964/5: 135 et sq.)

Adorno thus explicitly moves his concept of critique closer to Marx's idea of 'critique through presentation', as used in the *Critique of Political Economy*. Critique here means in essence to reveal the 'mediation' of the apparently 'immediate' – that is, the 'fetishized' 'economic categories' – by the irrational overall context – that is, the crisis-ridden process of social production and private appropriation of surplus value.

This critique, based on Marx, means the 'determinate negation' of subjective, cultural, and social reality, its comprehension as 'appearance', that is, as a 'cipher' of the totally inverted social relations. It is only on the basis of *this* critique, and not from some *moral-theoretical* reflections, that the principles underlying an emancipated society can be obtained. Even in the face of total horror, Adorno makes this clear: 'mimesis', 'remembrance of nature within the subject', 'the ability to be different without fear'.

## Notes

- 1 Adorno, 1968b: 586. [Translator's Note: Throughout the text all translations from German original texts are mine].
- 2 Adorno, 1966: 346.
- 3 Adorno, 1965: 149; Institut für Sozialforschung, 1956: 35.
- 4 Institut für Sozialforschung, 1956: 22.
- 5 Adorno, 1964/65: 29.
- 6 Adorno, 1968b: 587.
- 7 Adorno, 1964/65: 47.
- 8 Adorno, 1965: 153.
- 9 Institut für Sozialforschung, 1956: 140.
- 10 Adorno, 1965: 149.
- 11 Horkheimer/Adorno, 1944: 194.
- 12 Adorno, 1951: 15.
- 13 Adorno, 1969c: 112.
- 14 Adorno, 1965: 153.
- 15 Institut für Sozialforschung, 1956: 34.
- 16 Adorno, 1957: 27.
- 17 See also Ritsert, 1998.
- 18 See also Breuer, 1985a: 7.
- 19 Adorno, 1965: 148 et sq.
- 20 For the central importance of the exchange-abstraction in Adorno's critical theory, see Ritsert, 1998.
- 21 Adorno, 1965: 146 (trans. mod).
- 22 In the present phase of capitalist development, this 'total context' presents itself quite differently: as 'domination through autonomy'. See also Meyer, 2005: 19 et sqq.
- 23 Adorno discusses this more extensively in his article on 'Progress' (Adorno, 1969a).
- 24 Adorno has always emphasized that his method cannot be separated from its object. See Adorno, 1966: xix.
- 25 For the concept of totality in Hegel, see Pisarek, 1996.
- 26 See Schnädelbach, 1999: 14 et sqq.
- 27 Arndt (2008: 11 et sq.) has concisely summarized the core of Hegel's ambitious dialectical conception: 'One can perhaps summarize what dialectics means in the Hegelian sense in the following points: (1) Hegel's conception links the thinking of totality and contradiction insofar as (...) he thinks of (...) determination as negation (...). To think of something in its determinateness, I must think of it in its negative relation to something else – an other that in turn negates this determinateness; this relation and with it the negation not only of the other but also of itself through the other is an essential component of determinateness itself. This concept compels us to interpret every determination supposedly identical with itself as an existing contradiction, and at the same time forces the transition to the totality of determinations. (2) Contradiction, not identity, forms the foundation of all determinacy; at the same time, the concept of a self-identical entity, a subject as the bearer of determinations, is deprived of its basis. In truth, what exists are not things, but relationships: totality as a network of relations. (3) For Hegel, this network has a conceptual nature, that is, it develops dialectically from the self-mediation of the determinations of thought to the totality, which at the same time is the self-comprehension of the concept. This culminates in the self-consciousness of the completed concept, which ultimately determines itself as dialectical method. (4) The dialectical method mediates the presuppositions, moments, and results of becoming a totality. It is, therefore, the logic of the becoming of this totality in the sense of (historical) genesis as well as its internal reproduction'.
- 28 MECW 28: 40 et sq.

- 29 MECW 28: 123, 131 et sq.
- 30 MECW 28: 153 et sq.
- 31 MECW 28: 1"94 et sq., 205 et sq., 208.
- 32 For Marx's 'dialectical method', see Reichelt, 2013, chapters 8 and 9.
- 33 This section relies on Dannemann, 2005.
- 34 'Lukács' specific version of the concept of totality consists in the fact that he comprehends the social *totality as an organization of heterogeneous forms of practice according to a homogenizing pattern (the commodity form)*. Lukács finds the abstract, quantifying form of the commodity even outside the economy in the formally rational organization of modern bureaucracy, the bourgeois state, and above all in the life forms of capitalist everyday life. According to Lukács, the capitalist mode of production is the only social formation so far that forms such a *strict unity*, while pre-capitalist societies do not structure themselves into a complex unity (with an *overarching form-determination*'). (Dannemann/Erdbrügge, 1978: 146 et sq., emphases by author)
- 35 The following section is influenced by Wiggershauss, 1988; Dubiel, 1978 and Jay, 1973.
- 36 In contrast to Lukács, Horkheimer still has a positive concept of modern 'productive forces'. And, as mentioned, his relationship with the empirical sciences of his time is still positive.
- 37 Following Müller-Doochm, 2003: 278 et sqq.
- 38 On this note, Breuer (1985b) speaks of 'differences in the core paradigm'. Breuer refers here to Brunkhorst (1983), who had dealt with the 'core paradigm' of critical theory. See also Jay, 1981.
- 39 Adorno, 1959a: 54.
- 40 It should be pointed out that the conception of social 'totality' thus understood no longer has a systematic basis in the philosophy of history, but is rather directed at the analysis of modern, capitalist society – its structure and dynamics – as an 'irrational system'.
- 41 The essayist character of 'models' typical for Adorno results from this constitutive understanding of 'interpretation' as model-based concrete analysis.
- 42 See Adorno, 1964/65: 254 et sqq. See also Institut für Sozialforschung, 1956: 8; von Wussow, 2007: 186 et sqq; Müller-Doochm, 2002: 150 et sqq.
- 43 Adorno (1931a, 1931b) argues early on that the 'dispersed' and 'puzzling' character of individual phenomena make it impossible to form abstract-universal theories. For the consequences of 'irrationality', see Adorno, 1969c: 16. See also Müller-Doochm, 2003: 424.
- 44 See von Wussow, 2007: 186 et sqq.; Gripp-Hagelstange, 1984: 127 et sqq.; Müller, 2006: 83 et sqq. In addition, see the studies of Schweppenhäuser, 1991 and Tiedemann, 1993. The remarks in *Negative Dialectics*, in my opinion, should clearly not be read *philosophically*. Adorno says this himself (Adorno, 1964/65: 184 et sq.). As a reference for the concepts of 'models' and 'constellations', Adorno points to the sociological seminar on laughter he carried out. See Adorno/Jaerisch, 1968. Müller-Doochm (1996: 164) also points out that 'constellative thinking' is identical to 'sociological micrologic'. Negt (2001) emphasizes the unity of philosophy and sociology in Adorno.
- 45 Müller-Doochm (1996: 165) uses the example of a nutshell: the contents of the nut – the historicity of the phenomenon – should not be opened with a nutcracker, but rather falling nuts should be caught and smashed together until they burst open.
- 46 See Adorno's (1966: 164 et sq.) remarks in *Negative Dialectics* on the compositional character of the formation of ideal types in Max Weber.
- 47 See, for example, Schnädelbach's (1983) criticism of Adorno's notion that dialectics 'is the ontology of the wrong state of things' (1966: 11).
- 48 On the specifics of Adorno's style and its effect, see the informed article by Henning Ritter, 'When Adorno Speaks', in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)*, 11.10.2008. <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/bilder-und-zeiten-1/adornos-stil-wenn-adorno-spricht-1712550.html>
- 49 On the meaning of metaphors in Adorno, see Schweppenhäuser, 2009; Tiedemann, 1993.
- 50 In the following, I will only deal with the fundamental aspects of the significance of the concept of experience. I do not go into the more specific question of Adorno's conception of a *critical* empirical social research. See the more relevant presentations in Bonß, 1982; Müller-Doochm, 2002, 2003; Negt, 2001; Wiggershauss, 1988.
- 51 See, for example, Adorno, 1964/65: 29.
- 52 See Adorno and Jaerisch's 'Remarks on Social Conflict Today' (Adorno/Jaerisch, 1968: 177 et sqq.), based on the sociological seminar on laughter and social conflict held regularly by Adorno. On the Laughter seminars, see also Puder, 1976 as well as Schörle, 2007.
- 53 See Schörle, 2007.
- 54 Thus, for example, the action-theoretical sociology of Max Weber cannot help using objective metaphors such as 'structure' to characterize society. For Adorno's Weber interpretation, see Meyer, 2005: 165 et sqq.

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# Society and Violence

Sami Khatib

## **CAPITALIST SOCIETY AND VIOLENCE**

According to Marxist theory, violence is an inherent characteristic of capitalist class society. If the basic socio-economic relation is a violent relation, violence is not an exception but shapes, maintains and sustains capitalist reality in its 'normal' functioning. Violence as a relation is the most obvious expression of the asymmetry of class antagonism. Therefore, in capitalist societies the agents of violence are not merely of individual but also of structural and institutional nature. In the ongoing history of capitalist class struggle, the violence of the state (which acts on behalf of the class of capitalist and feudal landowners) is met by the counterviolence of workers or other excluded or oppressed groups. Since the modern state is founded on the dogma of the state monopoly on legitimate violence, there is a fundamental political asymmetry of state violence and non-state counterviolence. Whoever questions this monopoly challenges the sovereign

power of the state. Sovereignty, as Carl Schmitt (1922) famously declared, is not defined by the normal case but by the extreme limit case: 'Sovereign is he who decides on the exception', that is, the state of emergency (Schmitt, 2005: 5). From this perspective, the state and its 'ideological state apparatuses' (Althusser, 2014: 232–72) is constitutively founded on violence, defined through the sovereign use of 'exceptional' violence and relies on the 'normal' functioning of the systemic violence contained in the sphere of jurisdiction, politics and economy.

Whereas traditional Marxism theorized violence as the natural or naturalized status quo of class relations within class struggle, the later Marx of the 'Critique of Political Economy' and after him critical Marxism and critical theory complicated the picture by investigating the specific logic, temporality and modality of systemic violence. The latter comes only fully into view once the normal and normalized capitalist status quo is analyzed from the perspective of its repressed

origin: Every mundane act of commodity exchange is a congealed remainder of the original violence of the so-called ‘primitive’ or ‘*ursprüngliche*’ [‘original’] accumulation through which capitalism was historically implemented. The disruptive transformation from feudal to capitalist society was enforced through the violent separation of labor power from the means of production by way of expropriation, expulsion and brutal force (Marx, 1962: 741–91). The uneven process, which in the case of Western Europe took from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, is still present in and, at the same time, repressed from the seemingly peaceful surface of the market. The same applies to the violence of colonialism and imperialism: it is an integral part of capitalism’s history and present (Fanon, 2004: 1–62; Luxemburg, 1951: 446–67).

In *Capital* (1867), Marx shows how the manifest violence of the so-called ‘primitive accumulation’ remains present in the everyday of capitalist production. Commenting on the historical struggles for the normal working day, he notes:

Between equal rights, force [Gewalt] decides. Hence, in the history of capitalist production, the establishment of a norm for the working day presents itself as a struggle over the limits of that day, a struggle between collective capital, i.e. the class of capitalists, and collective labour, i.e. the working class. (Marx, 1976: 344; 1962: 249)

Marx’s employment of the German term ‘*Gewalt*’, here translated as ‘force’, alludes to three difficulties that any theory of violence has to address:

- 1 The *theoretical* challenge: Violence is a dialectical term that applies to both its latent, covert, systemic (‘objective’) and its openly physical, manifest, intentional (‘subjective’) dimension. This dialectics is not identical with, yet often parallel to, the dialectics of structural and individually embodied violence. Violence is thus not a substance or a well-defined content (bound to an action or site of social, political, economic life) but a relational concept that also materializes

itself in language. The latter symbolic dimension of violence is not derivative or idealistic but material in the sense that language produces its own materiality of symbolic economies.

- 2 The *conceptual* vagueness: In the absence of a clear definition, violence overlaps and competes with other semantic fields and concepts such as power, force, strength, coercion and authority. Depending on the degree of its specific determinacy, the concept of violence partakes in the definition of broader neighboring concepts such as terror, struggle, conflict and war.
- 3 The *philological* complication of translation, retranslation and etymology: In the case of critical theory, mostly German, French and English authors have theorized violence. The respective conceptualizations can be either traced to the Latin root of violence (*vis*, *violentus*) or the Germanic root of *Gewalt* (*waltan*).

In the case of Marx’s argument in *Capital*, all three problems coincide.

With the rise of capitalism the direct physical violence of ‘primitive accumulation’ is partly transformed into the less visible systemic violence of the capitalist working day. By the end of the nineteenth century, in Western Europe the daily class struggle of the workers against the capitalists becomes more and more regulated by defining the limits of what is considered as the normal working day. In twentieth-century Western post-war societies, eight hours became a political goal and normative standard, enforced by the wage system of labor and its disciplinary regulations. This standard, however, has been subject to violations and attempts to increase the amount of labor time and exceed the duration of the working day towards its absolute: ‘By the end of the twentieth century it had become possible to see a broader and much fuller integration of the human subject with the “constant continuity” of a 24/7 capitalism that had always been inherently global’ (Crary, 2013: 74). Besides its individual violations, the juridical and administrative regulations of the normal working day already contain violence in its systemic dimension: The increased exploitation of labor power,

that is the extraction of surplus value as surplus labor, is ensured, regulated and normalized by the legal framework of the capitalist wage system, entrepreneurship and competition. Strikes and other forms of sabotage can be regarded as subjective forms of resistance against this form of objective violence which the normal working day contains. The latter's limits are the unstable, always contested, results of class struggle.

In Marx's argument, however, another dimension comes to the fore. If the working day and its legalized results already contain systemic violence in its 'congealed' or 'frozen' form as law, regulation and norm, the objective dimension of violence is only guaranteed by a necessary exception: 'Between equal rights, force [*Gewalt*] decides' (Marx). Force as *Gewalt* is here introduced as a different kind of violence: a decisive and deciding violence that strikes in a different way than the congealed systemic violence contained in the competing equal rights. Exceptional violence decides the seemingly peaceful competition between different factions of commodity owners: those who have nothing else to sell than their labor power and those who own capital to buy labor power (see Tomba, 2009: 128f.). The distinction between the law of the working day and its exception is internal to the earlier differentiation between subjective and objective violence. As we will see later, the functioning of objective violence relies on the possibility of its own exception or 'sovereign' suspension. What Walter Benjamin calls 'mythic violence' – the mutual dependency of 'lawmaking' and 'law-preserving violence' (1996: 241–9) – is not only inherent to the objectively violent sphere of law and jurisdiction but befalls almost all fields of human action in modern capitalist societies, particularly the sphere of economic production and its contractual 'freedom' of the market.

The ideological and epistemological challenge of this dialectics of violence has been succinctly addressed by Slavoj Žižek:

The catch is that subjective and objective violence cannot be perceived from the same standpoint: subjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level. It is seen as a perturbation of the 'normal', peaceful state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this 'normal' state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent. (2008: 2)

The parallax shift from the perspective of the seemingly peaceful zero-level of violence and its subjective interruptions to the perspective of objective (systemic) violence is an epistemo-political move. This move also intervenes in the shifting conceptual ground through which the term violence acquires its meaning.

## VIOLENCE AND CLASS STRUGGLE

In the history of revolutionary Marxism it was Georges Sorel, a self-acclaimed Marxist and revolutionary syndicalist, who in 1906 introduced a theoretical distinction in the term violence, revealing the latter's asymmetric dialectics.

The study of the political strike leads us to a better understanding of a distinction we must always have in mind when we reflect on contemporary social questions. Sometimes the terms *force* and *violence* are used in speaking of acts of authority, sometimes in speaking of acts of revolt. It is obvious that the two cases give rise to very different consequences. I think it would be better to adopt a terminology which would give rise to no ambiguity, and that the term *violence* should be employed only for acts of revolt; we should say, therefore, that the object of force is to impose a certain social order in which the minority governs, while violence tends to the destruction of that order. The middle class have used force since the beginning of modern times, while the proletariat now reacts against. (Sorel, 1921: 195)

Sorel exploits the conceptual vagueness of the term violence vis-à-vis power, authority and force. In the above cited section, he

opposes two seemingly parallel French terms: 'violence' against 'force' (256). In short, for Sorel violence is on the side of the revolt against the force of authority and state power. Violence is an immediate expression of the proletarian masses against the intellectualized, technically and administratively mediated force exercised by the state and capital owners of. The social order of force and the violent resistance of the exploited masses, however, are not symmetrical.

While the ruling order of state and capital and its political representation rely on the mechanical rationality of their forces, violence is linked to the proletariat's direct political action. Relying on the concept of the myth of the proletarian strike, Sorel posits the proletariat in the position of waging a violent and moral class war against the corrupted forces of bourgeois rationality. His anti-bourgeois concept of the syndicalist-anarchist class war invokes Marx, yet his 'apology of violence' also relies on non-Marxian, that is vitalist, notions such as 'struggle for life' (Sorel, 1915: 197), 'instincts' (182), and spontaneity of the masses (44, 165), fusing motifs from Proudhon, Bergson, Le Bon and Spencer. The myth, Sorel's central term and theoretical innovation, functions as an anti-rational link to hold these otherwise contradictory influences and arguments together. His wager thus is: 'the syndicalist "general strike" and Marx's catastrophic revolution are such myths' (22). And myths, as Sorel adds, 'cannot be refuted', they are 'identical with the convictions of a group' and to this extent 'unanalysable' (33). Put differently, the myth is a political category that cannot be validated 'objectively' in terms of its content; it cannot be ascribed to a subject of cognition. Rather than having an epistemological, sociological or scientific function, the syndicalist or proletarian general strike is grounded in the political struggle of a collective: it has no further ideological meaning, it does not provide any Socialist *Weltanschauung*, world-view.

Sorel's distinction between force and violence allows him to give full theoretical

and political weight to the basic asymmetry of systemic violence in capitalist societies. Instead of playing violence and counterviolence against each other, Sorel aims at abolishing the state and its forces through a violent action against which the state cannot defend itself. The myth of the revolutionary syndicalist or proletarian general strike serves this role. Instead of appealing to the state, accepting its force and authority and demanding reforms, the proletarian general strike calls for more. As the forces of the state and violence of the revolution are fundamentally different, so the political and proletarian general strike 'are diametrically opposed to one another' (Sorel, 1915: 174).

It is not the state who could abolish capitalism (as hoped for by the political general strike and its representatives, the parliamentary Socialists) but the proletarian general strike that will abolish the state and with it 'destroy the existing state of things' (Sorel, 1915: 33). Those who 'desire the overthrow of the State' (125) are the only ones who do not believe in the 'superstitious cult of the State' (114) and, therefore, can break with 'the *magical forces of the State*' (138, italics in original). The parallelism of Sorel's asymmetric distinctions, the *forces* of the state vs. the *violence* of the working classes, *reform* of parliamentary socialism vs. *revolution* of the Syndicalist movement, *political* vs. *proletarian* general strike, set the stage for his concept of class war, which is ultimately to be fought between the state (including all political forces that support the state) and the revolutionary Syndicalists who aim at destroying the state in the course of the proletarian general strike. Sorel's image of class struggle as class war relies on this profoundly anti-rational, anti-utopian, anti-middle-class and anti-reformist polarization. In this vein he states: 'With the general strike [...] the revolution appears as a revolt, pure and simple, and no place is reserved for sociologists, for fashionable people who are in favour of social reforms, and for the Intellectuals who have embraced the profession of thinking for

the proletariat' (151). This radical simplification thrives on the sharp antagonism of force and violence; however, it remains blind to the inherent dialectics of violence.

Without going further into detail of Sorel's argument, his differentiation between force and violence sheds light on the asymmetry and ambiguity of violence that modern political theory, in one way or another, attempted to contain. Violence, however, is not one-sided or exclusive – it cannot be attributed to one institution, social group, political agent or historical epoch. Sorel's *Refléxions sur la violence* remain blind to the inherent dialectics of subjective (proletarian) violence and objective (state) force: how can violent revolts transform themselves into state forces and, in return, how can the state itself rely on the exceptional or 'subjective' violence inherent to the functioning of its 'objective' forces? Despite its radical rhetoric, Sorel's moral criticism of the state falls short in producing a materialist insight into the inner relationship, transition and reversal of the two notions that he attempted to separate: violence and force. In other words, the dialectics of violence does not simply refer to a conceptual ambiguity but also to a dialectical reversal of the extremes: the violent act bears 'the seed of its opposite', and vice versa. Any attempt to map violence horizontally fails to grasp this dialectics. Relations of violence thus are both asymmetric and dialectical.

## STATE VIOLENCE AND POLITICAL POWER

Thirteen years after Sorel, the German sociologist Max Weber made an opposite claim affirming the basic view of Marxism that the state and its forces are based on violence:

In the last analysis the modern state can only be defined sociologically in terms of a specific means (*Mittel*) which is peculiar to the state, as it is to all

other political associations, namely physical violence (*Gewaltsamkeit*). 'Every state is founded on force (*Gewalt*)', as Trotsky once said at Brest-Litovsk. That is indeed correct. [...] Violence (*Gewaltsamkeit*) is, of course, not the normal or sole means used by the state. There is no question of that. But it is the means *specific* to the state. (Weber, 1994: 310, italics in original)

In this vein, Weber defines the state as 'that human community which (successfully) lays claim to the *monopoly of legitimate physical violence* within a certain territory' (Weber, 1994: 310f., italics in original). Weber inscribes physical violence [*Gewaltsamkeit*] and force [*Gewalt*] in the instrumental web of means and ends through which modern states produce their claims to legality, legitimacy and morality. If politics within the framework of the modern state is a struggle for '*Macht*' ['power'], the instrumental use of *Gewalt* and *Gewaltsamkeit* as a means is at the bottom of all political struggles. Moreover, any positive law, imposed by the state and its executive forces, partakes in the instrumental chain of violence and its regulation. Weber's definition of politics intertwines the German notions of *Macht* and *Gewalt*, undermining Sorel's plain distinction between force and violence. Once power (*Macht*), violence (*Gewaltsamkeit*) and force (*Gewalt*) are woven into the texture of instrumental rationality, moral calculations and administrative procedures, violence cannot be defined according to a compartmentalized logic that aims at ascribing it to one particular group, agent or epoch. In this respect, Weber's notion of politics provides an insight into the dialectics of violence, which is compatible with the critical Marxian distinction between subjective (individual, direct, physical) violence and objective (structural, systemic, indirect) violence. The functioning of the state relies on the mutual interdependency and translatability of its objective *Gewalt* and subjective *Gewaltsamkeit*. This is the meaning of Weber's intriguing comment, according to which physical violence as *Gewaltsamkeit* is not the 'normal or sole

means used by the state' but the one '*specific to the state*' (1994: 310). Weber's concise analysis of politics, however, fails to grasp the functioning of violence in the sphere of capitalist economy.

If in modern times the economy is political and vice versa, the peaceful semblance of the market and its contractual relations cannot fully obscure the structural violence at the bottom of every economic transaction: 'Between equal rights, *Gewalt* decides' (Marx). Despite his careful analysis of politics and violence, Weber cannot grasp the intertwinement and mutual determinacy of the seemingly peaceful sphere of economic-contractual exchange of commodities and the sphere of politics and its violent foundation. In his influential study *Economy and Society* (posthumously published in 1921 and 1922), Weber follows the schism of his indicative title. His 'interpretive sociology' aims at understanding 'the extent to which the action of the group is oriented to violent conflict [*gewaltsamen Kampf*] or to peaceful exchange [*friedlichen Tausch*] as its end' (Weber, 1978: 47). Marx's point, however, is to show how this alternative is not exclusive but dialectical: what Weber refers to as group orientations of the class of capitalists and workers, whatever their *subjective* rationale may be, embody and impersonate the *objective* yet non-totalizable totality of capitalism and its structural violence.

Against this Weberian-Marxian train of thought, Hannah Arendt proposes a different reading. In *On Violence* (1970) Arendt attempts to disentangle the dialectics of violence by introducing an exclusive set of definitions. Consequently, she puts forth distinctions between 'such key words as "power", "strength", "force", "authority", and, finally, "violence" – all of which refer to distinct, different phenomena' (1970: 43). Her central argument focuses on the strict opposition of power (*Macht*) as 'human ability not just to act but to act in concert' (44) and violence (*Gewalt*, *Gewaltsamkeit*)

as an instrumental use of individual strength (43–7). In short, Arendt's intervention in the political-theoretical debate on violence tries to undo the latter's inherent dialectics by moving as many meanings as possible to other concepts and semantic fields in order to leave a narrow definition of violence as the instrumental remainder of what Weber calls *Gewaltsamkeit* [physical violence] once all systemic and social components of violence are reduced. Such violence is always individual, bound to an individual bearer of violence whose appearance is grounded in one's personal strength. In Arendt's liberal optics, violence is thus the ultimately individual use of physical or symbolic strength as a means in order to pursue legitimate or illegitimate goals. Her depoliticization of violence relies on a dual strategy neither fully naturalizing violence as personal strength and impersonal force nor formalizing it instrumentally with regard to politics and power. Although Arendt concedes that power and violence 'usually appear together', she insists that 'they are distinct phenomena' (1970: 72). Whereas violence can be used instrumentally by the state, violence cannot create any sort of political power. Rather, '[r]ule by sheer violence comes into play where power is being lost' (1970: 53). If, following Arendt, power is the only genuine political attribute, political power appears as a generic human capacity, sealed off from any trace of structural, systemic violence. For Arendt, thus violence is always reduced to its subjective dimension; its objective dimension is either essentialized as power, naturalized as force, individualized as strength, culturalized as authority or depoliticized as merely instrumental violence. Arendt's argument falls short in grasping the Marxian-Weberian insight according to which the subject of the instrumental use of violence is not merely bound to an individual or particular government but also an objective structural agent (the state, the law, the economy). The irreducible dialectics of impersonating violence and impersonal violence is thereby obscured.

## GEWALT: WALTER BENJAMIN'S 'CRITIQUE OF VIOLENCE'

In terms of the dialectics of violence, a philological detour through the German use of *Gewalt* proves instructive in order to grasp the different layers of meaning violence has acquired in modern political and sociological theory. As Étienne Balibar shows, there are different political-economic traditions and languages that theorized the term violence: 'In German [...], the word *Gewalt* has a more extensive meaning than its "equivalents" in other European languages: violence or *violenza* and *pouvoir*, *potere*, *power* (equally suitable to "translate" *Macht* or even *Herrschaft*, depending on the context)' (Balibar, 2009: 101). These different meanings are not only relevant from a philological but also conceptual point of view: 'the term *Gewalt* thus contains an intrinsic ambiguity: it refers, at the same time, to the negation of law or justice and to their realisation or the assumption of responsibility for them by an institution (generally the state)' (101).

In the history of critical theory, it was Walter Benjamin who first theorized the dialectics and asymmetry of violence that is present in the German term *Gewalt*. Benjamin's essay 'Zur Kritik der Gewalt' ('On the Critique of Violence'), published in 1921, examines the intrinsic ambiguity that violence acquires in the modern state and its policy, institutions and jurisdiction, exposing a 'latent dialectic or a "unity of opposites" that is a constituent element of politics' (Balibar, 2009: 101).

The German word *Gewalt* originates from the Old High German verb '*waltan*', which roughly translates into 'to be strong', 'to dominate' or 'to master'. In modern High German *Gewalt* covers a variety of meanings, among them violence, force, power and authority. Benjamin's intricate essay is very aware of these contradictory meanings when reflecting on a political situation shortly after the failed German revolution of 1918/19 and in the light of communist and anarcho-syndicalist uprisings in various regions in

Germany. This historical context is echoed in his critique of the liberal parliamentarism of early Weimar Republic:

When the consciousness of the latent presence of violence [*Gewalt*] in a legal institution disappears, the institution falls into decay. In our time, parliaments provide an example of this. They offer the familiar, woeful spectacle because they have not remained conscious of the revolutionary forces [*Kräfte*] to which they owe their existence. (Benjamin, 1996: 244; 1977: 191)

Taking its cue from this historical conjuncture, the essay formulates a far-reaching critique of all uses of legitimized and legalized *Gewalt*. Due to its 'intrinsic ambiguity' (Balibar), the problem of *Gewalt* is inherent to all legal and moral questions, as the opening passage suggests: 'The task of a critique of violence can be summarized as that of expounding its relation to law and justice. For a cause, however effective, becomes violent, in the precise sense of the word, only when it intervenes into moral relations' (Benjamin, 1996: 236). An action can only assume the status of violence in the strict sense once it stands in a relation – in a moral relation. Benjamin gives no further substantial definition of *Gewalt*; it remains a relational concept, which can only be presented, defined and criticized from within these relations and their respective polarizations.

This immanent critique does not assume a position outside of violent relations. However, Benjamin's critique aims at and points to the concept of nonviolence – not as a normative standpoint but as an extreme case, a transcendental limit so to speak. Benjamin's post-Kantian understanding of 'Kritik' is crucial to understand his intervention as an immanent critique without normative standpoints, external positions or prescribed political agenda. Critique is not simply negative; rather, following Kant, critique is the positive activity of measuring out, exploring the limits of a concept without relying on a safe standpoint beyond or outside the limits of the object of critique. Without the post-Kantian notions of relation

and critique, Benjamin's critique of violence would remain caught in the uneven continuum of violence and counterviolence.

Invoking a paradoxical kind of 'non-violent' violence, Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' aims at undoing the nexus of life, law and violence. Against the mainstream of political and legal theory, he explores 'the possibility of a violence (...*Gewalt*...) that lies absolutely "outside" (*außerhalb*) and "beyond" (*jenseits*) the law' (Agamben, 2005: 53). Grasping violence in its subjective and objective, physical and symbolic dimension, Benjamin does not fail to register the asymmetry of this dialectics. The violence inherent to the law – be it the law of monarchy, western democracy or autocratic regimes – contradicts itself and cannot be undone by resorting to counterviolence only. Echoing Weber's earlier definition in 'The Profession and Vocation of Politics', Benjamin understands *Gewalt* as integral to the legal rationality of the modern state. Within a legal system, the most essential relation is that between means and ends. If violence is not an ethical or legal goal, it is present only in the sphere of means – as an effective force, whatever its justification or legitimization might be. The basic dogma of any theory of violence is therefore: 'just ends can be attained by justified means, justified means used for just ends' (Benjamin, 1996: 237). Benjamin refers to two legal schools that diametrically legitimate violence: 'natural law' and 'positive law' (i.e. Kelsen, 1934). While the former 'perceives in the use of violent means to just ends no greater problem than a man sees in his "right" to move his body in the direction of a desired goal', the latter, the school of positive law, is more concerned with just means (Benjamin, 1996: 236). Exposing their complementary blind spots, Benjamin does not side with either school. However, he recognizes the effort of the school of positive law to focus on the justification of means as such, whereas the school of natural law conceives of violence as a quasi-organic 'product of nature, as it were a raw material' (236f.). Nevertheless,

both schools, natural and positive law, share a basic assumption: violence can be framed, controlled and compartmentalized by inscribing it into the instrumental nexus of ends and means. 'Natural law attempts, by the justness of the ends, to "justify" the means, positive law to "guarantee" the justness of the ends through the justification of the means' (237). In contrast, Benjamin refutes any concept of violence based upon a theory of just ends or of just means. In short, violence cannot be neutralized through its legitimization or legalization.

Benjamin's immanent critique of violence does not propose a different concept nor introduce a non-violent standpoint. The argument for non-violent means finds its ground in the limits of its object of critique itself: the notion of violence in natural and positive law. The theoretical and political scope of this dual critique is not to be underestimated. Whereas militant anti-hegemonic, anti-imperialist, anti-colonial struggles often legitimize the use of (counter)violence with reference to natural law, the state and its institutions rely on the perspective of positive law in order to justify state repression and institutionalized coercion. Although both standpoints are diametrically opposed in their emphasis on either just ends or justified means, they share the assumption that violence has always to be perceived within a causal chain of means and ends. Benjamin, however, insists on independent criteria for both just ends and justified means.

Following this line of argument, even the most basic theological principle from the Decalogue, 'Thou shalt not kill', cannot be perceived as a forbidden means with regard to certain just or unjust ends. On the contrary, the deed itself, the means of killing, has to be scrutinized as such without referring to a possible goal. Therefore, as Benjamin concludes, 'no judgment of the deed can be derived from the commandment'; it does not exist 'as a criterion of judgment, but as a guideline for the actions of persons or communities' (250). A guideline for actions, however, can never



be fully applied to a situation since it only offers a general orientation; it always needs a negotiation of whether and how a concrete situation can be guided by an ethical principle.

It is precisely this infinite and non-accomplishable work of negotiation and scrutiny that arises from the lack of absolute judgment that Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* wanted to contain. According to Kant's first formula of the 'Categorical Imperative', you are to '*act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law*' (Kant, 2011: 71, italics in original). Since this imperative is not a means to certain ends but a self-sufficient end-in-itself or pure end, it has to maintain a timeless and universal applicability to all possible historical situations including those in which violence is exercised. Yet Benjamin strongly opposes the flat temporality of the 'Categorical Imperative'. Since no historical situation is identical to another, nothing can be said categorically in advance. For Kant, it is only the universal applicability that renders a law and morality consistent with itself. Kant's 'Categorical Imperative' is based upon a timeless universalizability abstracting from concrete historical situations. Benjamin, in contrast, distinguishes between the universal value of an ethical guideline and its particular application. Thus the universalizability of judgments, principles or imperatives is never a given. Pacifism, therefore, is not a viable position for Benjamin if it calls for nonviolence and avoidance of armed struggle *before* a specific historical situation is scrutinized on its own terms with regard to possible means of a certain party of conflict.

### THE SPURIOUS DIALECTICS OF 'MYTHIC VIOLENCE'

If, following Benjamin, ahistorical principles of ethico-political acting are to be ruled out and replaced by historically situated

guidelines, the violence, *Gewalt*, of the state and its law can only be criticized historically and immanently. Such a critique exposes the inherent ambiguity of *Gewalt*. As Werner Hamacher argues in his reading of 'Critique of Violence', every '*Setzung*', positing, of law or ethical principle already implies its reversal, for every positing requires its enforcement against any other acts of positing, setting or constituting (1994: 110f.). Hence, the logic of positing is always threatened by other acts of positing. Within the paradigm of the state, Benjamin distinguishes between two forms of violence that mutually presuppose and deconstruct each other: 'All violence as a means is either lawmaking or law-preserving' (Benjamin, 1996: 243). While the former concerns the constitutive act of establishing power through violence, terror or 'primitive accumulation' (Marx), the latter is embedded in state-institutions. Benjamin calls these two forms of violence 'mythic violence'. Their mythic, inescapable or 'fateful' character is rooted in their intrinsic dialectic, which leads into a totalizing circular logic: any law-destroying act results in a new positing of law which again violently tries to preserve itself. For Benjamin, this fateful cycle of overcoming law by re-establishing it is a clear indicator that there is something fundamentally 'rotten in the law' (242).

This rottenness appears as ambiguity, for every action of law enforcement blurs the line between law-preserving and lawmaking violence. In the sphere of direct state repression, i.e. police force, law-preserving *force* and lawmaking *violence* are always spectrally conflated.

[The violence of the police] is lawmaking, because its characteristic function is not the promulgation of laws but the assertion of legal claims for any decree, and law-preserving, because it is at the disposal of these ends. The assertion that the ends of police violence are always identical or even connected to those of general law is entirely untrue. Rather, the 'law' of the police really marks the point at which the state, whether from impotence or because of the immanent connections within

any legal system, can no longer guarantee through the legal system the empirical ends that it desires at any price to attain. Therefore, the police intervene 'for security reasons' in countless cases where no clear legal situation exists, when they are not merely, without the slightest relation to legal ends, accompanying the citizen as a brutal encumbrance through a life regulated by ordinances, or simply supervising him. Unlike law, which acknowledges in the 'decision' determined by place and time a metaphysical category that gives it a claim to critical evaluation, a consideration of the police institution encounters nothing essential at all. Its power is formless, like its nowhere-tangible, all-pervasive, ghostly presence in the life of civilized states. (Benjamin, 1996: 243)

'*Polizeigewalt*' [police force and violence] is the paradigmatic case of violence in modern states since it demonstrates the uneven or spurious dialectics of mythic violence: law enforcement partakes in law destruction and, vice versa, the violent destruction of the law posits a new law. In democratic states, characterized by rationalized administration and institutionalized governance, these mutually codependent acts of violence are not traceable to the sovereign decision of a king or absolute authority but delocalized and amplified into a spectral web of often anonymous *Gewalten* [authorities], which act on both extremes of mythic violence: lawmaking and law-preserving *Gewalt*. In modern democratic states the sequence of politics, policy and policing is indicative not only for etymological reasons. If the *Polizeigewalt* in democracies 'bears witness to the greatest conceivable degeneration of violence' (Benjamin, 1996: 243), there is no way back to seemingly authentic sovereign violence as unalloyed lawmaking violence.

The symptomatic impurity of mythic violence affects the limits of critique. In certain spaces of the social order mythic violence has become almost invisible, an intangible juridical web of biopolitical practices, whereas in other spaces excessive lawmaking violence is exercised in the guise of law preservation, be it external as military intervention or internal as militarization of the police force. With regard to colonial and imperial violence, this

spectral conflation, which Benjamin detected in the case of the police, is projected on a global scale. While mythic violence is distributed *internally* between different spaces and regions of the social order within particular states, it is exchanged *externally* between capitalist states. Under the conditions of the capitalist world market, these asymmetric exchanges follow a colonialist or imperialist logic. Former colonial states outsource lawmaking violence into the post-colonial 'periphery' while, at the same time, formerly colonial lawmaking violence is integrated into the means of law-preservation of so-called western-style democracies. These exchanges of outsourcing and integration lead to a spectral omnipresence of violence attached yet not limited to institutions of state law enforcement, privatized security forces or armed mobs. The most graphic cases of the inflationary redistribution and transformation of mythic violence can be found in territories where 'exceptional' martial law is permanently imposed on civilians, particularly in territories where the roles of the military and police symptomatically overlap. Where the boundaries of lawmaking and law-preserving violence are blurred, the distinction of subjective and objective, individual and structural violence seems to lose its significance. In the uneven continuum of violence and counterviolence, strike and counterstrike, terror and counterterror, the basic asymmetry of violent relations is occluded. These extreme cases of violence demonstrate a general tendency inherent to all forms of mythic violence. Also in legal zones that appear less violent, where police and military forces are legally separated and their actions are rarely performed in public, the spurious dialectics of mythic violence affects all social relations inscribed in the law.

From the perspective of struggles for decolonization, it was Frantz Fanon who analyzed the colonial situation as a situation of continuous omnipresent violence, fully grasping the totalizing dynamic of mythic violence, which Benjamin had initially

perceived in the particular case of the police. Arguing against the colonial bourgeois strategy of nonviolence, Fanon's seemingly paradoxical conclusion from the omnipresence of the all-pervasive colonial violence insists on the asymmetry of colonial and decolonial violence: 'Decolonization is the encounter between two congenitally antagonistic forces that in fact owe their singularity to the kind of reification secreted and nurtured by the colonial situation' (Fanon, 2004: 2). This political insistence on irreconcilable difference, however, relies on the qualitative commensurability of violence and counterviolence the underlying (colonial) logic of which Fanon fiercely criticizes.

The violence which governed the ordering of the colonial which tirelessly punctuated the destruction of the indigenous social fabric, and demolished unchecked the systems of reference of the country's economy, lifestyles, and modes of dress, this same violence will be vindicated and appropriated when, taking history into their own hands, the colonized swarm into the forbidden cities. (Fanon, 2004: 5f.)

Acknowledging the spectral amplification of colonial violence in all domains of social life, Fanon insists on marking the political difference between violence and counterviolence without proposing a qualitatively different kind of violence. He even admits that the 'violence of the colonial regime and the counterviolence of the colonized balance each other and respond to each other in an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity' (46). At the same time, he clearly sees the difference in terms of the consequences of the violent struggle: 'Once the colonized have opted for counterviolence, police reprisals automatically call for reprisals by the nationalist forces. The outcome, however, is profoundly unequal, for machinegunning by planes or bombardments from naval vessels outweigh in horror and scope the response from the colonized' (47). Fanon's gloomy analysis of the reality of colonial violence articulates the stakes of decolonization: how to fight the mythic violence of the colonizer

without reproducing the mythical violent cycle of lawmaking and law-preserving violence? How to decolonize without simply changing the colonial master for the colonized middle class? How to reject the colonial perspective according to which counterviolence against state violence is categorically rendered as 'terrorism', particularly in spaces where the state acts as an occupying military force within or beyond its borders? How to fully acknowledge the spectral omnipresence of mythic violence as asymmetric and dialectical without resorting to the fantasy of nonviolence or equivalence of (colonial) violence and (decolonial) counterviolence?

Benjamin's dialectical concept of mythic violence proves instructive when read with and against Fanon. The spurious dialectics of mythic violence undermines any political attempt to attain a 'neutral' position vis-à-vis antagonistic forces. The antagonism between forces of repression and counterforces against repression is not symmetric and cannot be represented from a third position independent of the violent relations through which these forces are constituted. It is precisely the inherent ambiguity of *Gewalt* as law-preserving and lawmaking that renders any violent struggle as asymmetric. Asymmetry here is not to be misunderstood as conceptual lack or deficiency; rather, as Benjamin's analysis of legal violence as mythic violence demonstrates, violence is most effective when its asymmetric dialectics is occluded. Theory can only grasp this asymmetry when it gives up the fantasy of a 'neutral' totalizing viewpoint. The parallax shift of perspective, allowing for a critique of violence, is itself an intervention into the force-field of uneven *Gewalten* by taking a political position, that is, a partial, partisan perspective. However, in this context it is worth mentioning that even in the discourse on critical theory some commentators choose to side with the perspective of state violence and its 'self-defense'.

From a different historical perspective and in a different theoretical language, Michel

Foucault (1975) analyzed the modern link between knowledge (*savoir*) and power (*pouvoir*), allowing for a theory of mythic violence beyond the scope of Benjamin's and Fanon's theoretical horizon. Foucault's post-Nietzschean shift concerns the terminological preference for the French term *pouvoir* (power, *Macht*) instead of violence or force. The spectral omnipresence, the formless and intangible shape of mythic violence, which Benjamin detected in the case of the modern police force, is given full theoretical weight by Foucault's notion of the 'micro-physics of power': 'What the apparatuses and institutions operate is, in a sense, a micro-physics of power, whose field of validity is situated in a sense between these great functionings and the bodies themselves with their materiality and their forces' (Foucault, 1995: 26). Power is not simply repressive or symmetrically opposed to other powers but proliferating and productive: it is inscribed in life on a bodily micro-level, it produces the knowledge about life, it functions as a mobile, less tangible micro-physics, which makes it impossible to single out symmetrical acts and subjects of power bound to empirical individuals. 'In short this power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the "privilege," acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions' (Foucault, 1995: 26). With Foucault's theory of power one could argue that the implications of Benjamin's relational understanding of *Gewalt* is put to its next stage. Consequently, in a later lecture (1979), Foucault concludes that '[p]ower is not a substance. Neither is it a mysterious property whose origin must be delved in to. Power is only a certain type of relation between individuals' (Foucault, 2002: 324). These individuals, however, are themselves the effect of those techniques and strategies that Foucault analyzed under the heading of the 'micro-physics of power'. The political investment of body and life comes into view only if corporality and life are denaturalized, de-essentialized and grasped as the effects of the constitutive link of power and knowledge.

Before Foucault, Benjamin already theorized how the law of modern states is inscribed into life as naked, bare or 'mere life' (Benjamin, 1996: 250). This productive inscription, Foucault would have said investment, is one of the basic functions of mythic violence. In short, only the application of mythic violence to life produces the very peculiar mode of life that Benjamin calls 'mere life' or '*bloßes Leben*' (Benjamin, 1977: 201). Mere life is not only natural or biological life but the product, effect of legal violence: life as mere life is rendered as the natural bearer of '*Schuld*' [guilt] – '*bloßes Leben*' is a culpable life, which is, at the same time, the subject matter of the modern humanist 'doctrine of the sanctity of life, which [the humanists] either apply to all animal and even vegetable life, or limit to human life' (1996: 250). Benjamin, however, dares to ask what is sanctified in such doctrine – a doctrine which is also the moral foundation of the modern idea of inalienable human rights and humanism. For Benjamin, the abstract subject matter of human rights is mere life – a life deprived of its supra-biological properties (what he calls the '*Lebendige*' [the living], 1977: 200; 1996: 250). The humanist fetishizing of life as mere life leads to a life deprived of ethical categories: freedom, truth and justice. From this consideration Benjamin concludes that the 'idea of man's sacredness gives grounds for reflection that what is here pronounced sacred was, according to ancient mythic thought, the marked bearer of guilt: life itself' (1996: 251). The invention of life and its culpability share the same origin, which is also the mythic ground of modern state violence sanctioned and justified by the law, as argued, for example, by Agamben (2005: 87f.).

## BEYOND VIOLENCE

If the cycle of lawmaking and law-preserving violence cannot be opposed externally by resorting to instrumental violence, the

question remains whether there is a different kind of violence that could internally interrupt the spurious dialectics of mythic violence. Benjamin's term for the interruption of mythic violence is 'divine violence' (1996: 248–52) – a paradoxically pure or non-violent violence that coincides with its tautological opposite: a strikingly violent violence. As a 'pure means' (1996: 246), divine violence performs a pure interruption that sets human action free from all teleological calculations and instrumental prescriptions. A pure means de-posit (ent-setzt) positings (*Setzungen*) of violence without counterpositing another violent position (1977: 202). On a formal level, pure means do not serve external ends but stage an asymmetric negation to all forms of impure, that is, violent means. Pure means do not represent a certain cause, party, group, program or content but present their medium or mediacy as interruption of mediated (teleological or impure) relations of violence.

To clarify the relation of divine violence and pure means, Benjamin refers to the sphere of class struggle, drawing on Sorel and his anarcho-syndicalist distinction between the political and proletarian general strike. While the former fights for certain political-economic ends (political rights, higher wages, better working conditions etc.) the latter acts as a pure means that questions the '*Staatsgewalt*' (1977: 202), the state and its violence and authority. Owing to the German term *Gewalt*, Benjamin, who read Sorel in the French original, does not need to reproduce Sorel's terminological distinction between force and violence. The inherent ambiguity of *Gewalt* provides Benjamin with sufficient conceptual versatility to accommodate asymmetry and dialectical opposition in the interior of his object of critique: *Gewalt* is not a given self-identical term but, depending on perspective, an unstable split-term or a relational limit-concept. Therefore, Benjamin relocates Sorel's antithetical relation of the political and proletarian general strike to the level of their immanent relation

to violent social relations. Following the theoretical footprints left by Max Weber, these relations can be mapped as rationalized relations of means and ends. Concerning Sorel's absolute distinction between the political and proletarian general strike, Benjamin puts forth a clear, yet relational criterion: if the strike serves as a means to an end, its violence will be instrumental; but if a strike is a pure means without any concrete goal other than overthrowing the state, that is, destroying the ultimate horizon of all reformist means-and-ends calculations, it will reach beyond the vicious cycle of mythic violence (Benjamin, 1996: 239–47).

With this modification, Benjamin sides with Sorel that the 'idea of the [proletarian] general strike destroys all the theoretical consequences of every possible social policy' (Sorel, 1915: 147; Benjamin, 1996: 246). For Benjamin, this anti-utopian and anti-ideological concept of the proletarian general strike is not underpinned by a positive concept of Sorel's 'myth' but remains strictly negative. It abstains from all attempts to justify or legitimize the use of violence by employing violence in the causal chains of means and ends.

This ideological disengagement immunizes the proletarian general strike against the reformist threats of political blackmailing and compromising. In short, such a strike refrains from recognizing the institutions of the state as an equal partner in conflict resolution. Affirming the fundamental asymmetry of relations of violence, Benjamin follows Sorel's 'conception of the general strike' since it 'manifests in the clearest manner its indifference to the material profits of conquest by affirming that it proposes to suppress the State' (Sorel, 1915: 190; Benjamin, 1996: 246). The proletarian general strike is not a violent means to an end because there are no concessions to be made under which the workers will resume their work under improved or reformed conditions. The strike's 'striking' character stems from its unconditional character. It is a pure means and only

in this specific sense nonviolent. While the political general strike remains in the domain of mythic violence (for it aims at establishing a new law), the proletarian general strike is anarchistic insofar as it abandons the spurious dialectics of lawmaking and law-preserving violence. For Benjamin, it is only the distinction between violent teleology and non-violent pure means that can give full weight to Sorel's otherwise static opposition of the political and proletarian general strike.

As a pure means without taking into account its possible consequences, however destructive they may be, the proletarian general strike does not envision a stateless new society. Against socialist reformism and idealist utopianism, Benjamin joins Sorel's attempt to think politics beyond the paradigm of the state. Without this paradigm shift the striking workers would only witness 'how the State would lose nothing of its strength, how the transmission of power from one privileged class to another would take place, and how the mass of the producers would merely change masters' (Sorel, 1915: 202; Benjamin, 1996: 246).

As many readers of Benjamin's essay have noted (e.g. Derrida, 1991), his most controversial, if not obscure, concept remains 'divine violence'. Commenting on Benjamin's unconventional employment of theological categories and attributes such as 'guilt', 'fate', 'sacrifice', 'mythic' and 'divine', Herbert Marcuse conceded in 1964 that 'Benjamin has proposed formulations that we find difficult to accept any longer' (Marcuse, 2014: 126). However, structurally Marcuse supports the argument of 'Critique of Violence' and reads it in the context of Benjamin's elsewhere documented references to messianic thought: 'In Benjamin's critique of violence, it becomes clear that messianism is a trope that expresses the historical truth: liberated humanity is only conceivable now as the radical (and not merely the determinate) negation of the given circumstance' (124). It is the totalizing social-political reality of capitalism itself that is reflected in Benjamin's

theological references. Theology, here, has no positive meaning like in political theology but a 'corrective' function *ex negativo* (Benjamin, 1999: 471). A radical critique of state violence cannot count on any given roots of criticism; rather, it also needs to introduce categories that are uncountable and unaccounted for in a certain society at a certain time. With rise of the discourse on political theology after 1979 (Iranian Revolution) and the post-secular turns in political philosophy after 1989 and 2001, however, it is at least questionable whether Benjamin's terminology from 1921 has preserved its radical edge. Being aware of the text's historico-political indexicality, Marcuse concludes: 'Benjamin's messianism has nothing to do with customary religiosity: guilt and restitution are for him *sociological categories*. Society defines destiny, and is itself derelict: within it a person must become guilty' (124). As sociological categories, however, they are not reducible to any positively given realm of the social. On a formal level, they expose the ontological gaps within the fabric of modern relations of violence.

In the absence of a prescriptive definition, Benjamin abstains from identifying divine violence directly with political pure means like the proletarian general strike. Despite its theologically charged name, divine violence functions as a non-totalizable distinction in order to introduce an asymmetric negation into the infinite chain of mythic violence as a sequence of violent positioning and counter-positioning (Khatib, 2013: 392–6). Divine violence does not perform a double negation in the conventional Hegelian sense; its results do not become positive positings (*Setzungen*) of violence. As a de-positing (*ent-setzende*) violence it denotes neither a determinate quality nor a predictable event. For 'only mythic violence, not divine, will be recognizable as such with certainty, unless it be in incomparable effects, because the expiatory force of violence is not visible to humans' (Benjamin, 1996: 252). Thanks to its indeterminate, subtractive or privative efficacy, divine violence is not symmetrical to mythic violence but its

undeterminable zero-level. Therefore, divine violence is not a stable entity, a predetermined act, but an interruption of the spurious cycle of mythic violence – a rupture that can only be retroactively identified as such: '[i]t may manifest itself in a true war exactly as in the divine judgment of the multitude on a criminal' (252). This comment indicates that divine violence is not external, an intrusion from some divine power, but a violence that can be embodied, performed or presented by a profane agent or entity.

With the term divine violence as a 'critical' limit-concept, Benjamin is testing out the scope of the concept of violence and its inherent dialectics, entering a zone of indistinction where a subjective stance for or against violence loses its significance. For only the violence of the depositing of violence is 'pure' and insofar nonviolent:

on the depositing of law [*Entsetzung des Rechts*] with all the forces on which it depends as they depend on it, finally therefore on the abolition of state power [*Staatsgewalt*], a new historical epoch is founded. If the rule of myth is broken occasionally in the present age, the coming age is not so unimaginably remote that an attack on law is altogether futile. But if the existence of violence outside the law, as pure immediate violence, is assured, this furnishes proof that revolutionary violence, the highest manifestation of pure violence by man, is possible, and shows by what means. (Benjamin, 1996: 252; 1977: 202, trans. changed)

It is crucial not to identify divine violence directly with 'the highest manifestation of pure violence by man', that is, revolutionary violence as a pure means (e.g. in the proletarian general strike). Rather, 'between' divine violence and revolutionary violence as a non-violent pure means, there exists a relation of asymmetric correspondence. In this sense, divine violence, a paradoxical violent/non-violent *Gewalt*, is the theological name for an inaccessible site within society and profane life that escapes the logic of mythic violence. Benjamin operates here with two incommensurable perspectives on profane life: divine violence relates to profane life as 'the living'

(life including its supra-natural attributes) to 'mere life'. Only the latter is the subject matter and product of mythic violence – a life deprived of its ethico-political excess over biological life. It is in this sense that revolutionary violence as the profane embodiment of a site inaccessible to mythic violence and mere life may correspond to divine violence. Paradoxically, on the one hand, divine violence belongs to the order of the Event: it is not an integral part of everyday life but introduces a caesura into the mythic nexus of state violence, law and life; on the other hand, it can be performed, embodied or presented by humans in the form of revolutionary pure violence without being predictable or predicable beforehand.

### EXCEPTIONAL VIOLENCE: REVOLUTIONARY VERSUS FASCIST

Lacking definite predications in advance, divine violence in its problematic correspondence to revolutionary pure violence can be mistaken for its mythic doppelgänger, that is, the violence of the sovereign, which aims at grounding the law of state violence in the suspension of it. However, the state of emergency, '*Ausnahmezustand*' (literally: 'state of exception'), has to be strictly distinguished from divine (violent/non-violent) violence and the revolutionary depositing of law. In this context, it has to be noted that the sovereign 'suspension' of the law has also to be terminologically differentiated from the revolutionary 'depositing of law' (*Entsetzung*). Unfortunately, the common English translation of Benjamin's essay renders *Entsetzung* into English as 'suspension' (Benjamin, 1996: 251), which blurs this crucial line of difference. Benjamin comments on this difference in the famous eighth thesis 'On the Concept of History' (1940):

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of exception' [*Ausnahmezustand*] in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must

attain to a conception of history that accords with this insight. Then we will clearly see that it is our task to bring about a real state of exception, and this will improve our position in the struggle against fascism. One reason fascism has a chance is that, in the name of progress, its opponents treat it as a historical norm. (2003: 392; 1974: 697, trans. changed)

Putting '*Ausnahmezustand*' in quotation marks, Benjamin makes an unmistakable reference to the fascist state of exception, which was theoretically anticipated, rationalized and, ultimately, legitimized by Schmitt (2005 [1922]). In the same vein as the real exception of the rule relates to the fascist exception as the rule, so divine (violent/non-violent) violence as the deposing of law relates to the sovereign suspension of mythic violence. The entire argument of Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' hinges on this minimal but crucial distinction, on which also his later historical-materialist concept of history draws.

Discussing the seeming proximity of divine violence (Benjamin) and sovereign violence (Schmitt), Giorgio Agamben remarks in the first essay (1995) of his *Homo Sacer* series:

The violence that Benjamin defines as divine is [...] situated in a zone in which it is no longer possible to distinguish between exception and rule. It stands in the same relation to sovereign violence as the state of actual exception, in the eighth thesis, does to the state of virtual exception. (Agamben, 1998: 42)

Against the backdrop of this reading, one could argue that, precisely due to its indeterminate content and attributes, divine violence as the 'real state of exception' cannot symmetrically be opposed to the fascist 'state of exception'. Even in the absence of assignable determinations there is no symmetry *ex negativo* of divine (violent/non-violent) violence and sovereign violence *vis-à-vis* the spurious dialectics of mythic violence. In his later essay on the *State of Exception* (2003), Agamben elaborates further on this point, claiming that the lacuna, which separates the law from its application and enforcement, always remains blind from the perspective of

the apologetics of state violence and law. In other words, the Schmittian decisionist theory of the 'state of exception' misses the nature of the lacuna it is pretending to theorize by introducing a fictitious problem: '[f]ar from being a response to a normative lacuna, the state of exception appears as the opening of a fictitious lacuna in the order for the purpose of safeguarding the existence of the norm and its applicability to the normal situation' (Agamben, 2005: 31). Put differently, the theory of the state of exception can be read as an attempt to include that which is outside the law, yet always remains blind from the latter's perspective, into the law by inventing a fictitious zone of indistinction within a field that Benjamin defines as mythic violence. Unlike sovereign violence, divine violence is not introducing a zone of indistinction between law and nature, outside and inside, violence and law, but short-circuits the spurious dialectics that always inscribes life anew into mythic violence as mere life.

With notions such as divine violence, revolutionary pure violence as the depositing of law, state of exception and sovereign violence, the limits of theoretical presentation are reached. The paradoxical structure of Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' and the asymmetry of acts of positing and depositing prompted Hamacher to introduce a neologism, drawing on the terminology of speech-act theory and deconstruction:

If one [...] characterizes law imposition in the terminology of speech-act theory as a performative act – and specifically as an absolute, preconventional performative act, one which posits conventions and legal conditions in the first place – and if one further calls the dialectic of positing and decay a dialectic of performance, it seems reasonable to term the 'deposing' of acts of positing and their dialectic, at least provisionally, as an absolute *imperformative* or *afformative* political event, as *depositive*, as political *a-thesis*. Pure violence does not posit, it deposes; it is not performative, but afformative. (Hamacher, 1994: 115)

Hamacher's wager is that the peculiar structure of the 'afformative' – an ad-forming *and*



a-forming event, a formless form (Hamacher, 1994, 128–9) – can interrupt the self-propelling per-formance of law and its application to mere life. In this sense, the proletarian general strike can be read as the affirmative – the striking (‘forming’) undoing (‘de-forming’) of all political action (‘formation’) based on the state and its mythic violence. This undoing remains on a formal level; it accounts for the unaccountable pure mediacy of politics in its relation to *Gewalt*; it does not add any radical content or program but exploits the asymmetric dialectics of the *Staatsgewalt*, state power, from within its formal structure without taking the perspective of the state (as advocated by the apologists of the ‘sovereign violence’).

## CONCLUSION

The analytic task of discriminating between violence and power, force and authority provides the ground for a historical-materialist critique of violence. The history of pursuing this task conveys a political perspective, a parallaxic shift, without which the critique of violence relapses into a dehistoricized anthropological universalism (‘homo homini lupus est’) or succumbs to the individualistic casuistic of normative ethics. Unlike conventional practical philosophy or more recent applied ethics, the critical theory of violence exposes the dialectical instability of its object of inquiry by demonstrating the abstract socio-political categories that are already implicated in the false concreteness of liberal-individualist ethics of violence. Violence is not a given object but a problematic ‘critical’ relation: a relation prior to that which is related through it. If the atomizing perspective on an individual’s concrete acts can, at best, account for the ‘subjective’ dimension of violence, that is physical, manifest or intentional acts of violence bound to an empirical subject, the critical-theoretical view puts this dimension into perspective by

asking what is the nature of its very object of inquiry. Critical theory since Marx has analyzed the socio-political implications of violence in its latent, covert, systemic or ‘objective’ dimension, providing the materialist ground for any concrete analysis of relations of violence. The disavowal of the latter’s objective and, in this sense, productive dimension results in the flat positivism of individual ethics and its biopolitically applied derivatives in the discourses on ‘humanitarianism’ and ‘global security’. If social relations in modern capitalist societies are constitutively violent, even the perspective of anti-hegemonic counterviolence is threatened by reinscribing its critical violence into the asymmetric dialectics of state violence.

The shifting ground of constitutive (‘objective’) and constituted (‘subjective’) violence leaves no safe space for non-violent standpoints. Rather, non-violent politics as the political operation of deactivating the spurious dialectics of violence and counterviolence has to exploit the very porosity and corruptness of its object of critique without resorting to individualistic moralism and the false concreteness of normative orders. The political exploitation, refunctioning and radicalization of the gaps within the ontology of systemic violence has a history, yet no trans-historical subject. If history is the history of class struggles (Marx/Engels), the ‘critique of violence is the philosophy of its history’ (Benjamin, 1996: 251). Violence has a history and it is the uneven temporality of its ‘objective’ history that is incompatible with the linear temporality of constituted violence.

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# Society and History

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The connection between society and history<sup>1</sup>, or more strictly, between the theory of society and the theory of history, is an essential one when it comes to analysing and presenting the fundamental, defining features of modern social formations. In these formations dynamism, change and acceleration go hand-in-hand with the fact that the forms adopted by social structures and relations lose their naturalness. 'Society' itself turns into an object of reflection and enables social theory(ies) to emerge. At the same time, the acceleration of the changes and transformations involved is at the root of what could be called historical consciousness of temporal becoming and social evolution. Within this framework, the idea of a universal history is associated with the creation of an all-encompassing and expansive global market: the capitalist market.

Speaking of society seems to situate us on a plane of objectivity with which individuals are confronted, which is not diluted into a mere collection of individual actions. We find ourselves in the face of structural

crystallizations and objectifications that condition or determine the actions of subjects. Speaking of history, however, situates us on the plane of action that results from subjective intentionality and presupposes a certain degree of freedom, discretion and choice. Speaking of society and history means connecting action and structure, subjectivity and objectivity, singularity and universality. On this specific question, the critical theory of society has made a significant contribution that cannot be ignored. This contribution was in opposition to the idealist construction of a relation of correspondence between the theory of society and the theory of history, whose main proponent was undoubtedly Hegel.

The object of the critique was Hegelian idealism and what it reveals and hides about the reality it interprets. The foundation for this critique was Marx's theoretical contribution. The testing and updating of this contribution in a new historical context posed some extraordinary challenges, as we shall see.

This was the fundamental task of the group of intellectuals whose work fell under the heading of Critical Theory, with their differences and peculiarities.

### **'CAPITAL' AND HISTORY: KARL MARX**

Marx's theory of history is accused of being the last remnant of Hegelian metaphysics, from which he could not detach himself, however much he attempted to put the idealist dialectic 'on its feet' (or perhaps precisely because of this). The accusation of being caught in the traps of the philosophy of history is well known and widespread. The speculative viewpoint is reflected in a series of easily identifiable arguments: conceiving history as a totality that can be observed from a tipping point that opens up the perspective of an all-inclusive or absolute knowledge; conceiving history as a teleological process with an immanent orientation towards a pre-determined goal; integrating negativity into an unstoppable progress for the better and reducing it to the moment that it leads to a (happy) end; identifying a (privileged) subject of the historical process called to realize the (universal) idea (Reichelt, 1995; Heinrich, 1999). Since the dawn of the philosophy of history in the Enlightenment these are the main arguments, with variations, which have characterized hegemonic historical thinking in the modern period. According to these critics, Marx would be one further representative of that hegemonic thinking. One of the source texts for this conception of history, used as a basis for the formulation of Historical Materialism, is the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx, 1859: 8–9). Undoubtedly there are a number of similar passages throughout Marx's work that support a positivist interpretation of the logic of capital. This logic is merely a 'reflection' of the objective process of reality. Critics of Historical Materialism have decried that the

critique of political economy has been turned around into affirmative economy in vulgar Marxism (Backhaus, 2011).

Despite the numerous passages throughout Marx's work that point in this direction, there may still be some reasons for controversy over his theory of history. This is due to the fact that Marx's contribution is not exhausted by this representation of historical evolution that is clearly contaminated by the philosophy of history. In fact, the 'de facto' bourgeois economic system can only be analysed and understood through a critique of the economic categories of the bourgeois theories of capitalism. Far from ontologizing dialectics, Marx unravelled the contradictions of social reality by unveiling the contradictions between the premises of bourgeois economics and the reality that they intended to reflect in their theories. Marx also made significant criticisms of speculative thinking about history and the claim to provide a philosophy of universal history. What seems central to Marx's contribution is his conception of the formation of capitalist society as an historical – that is, an unnatural – mode of production. The critique of political economy analysed this social formation as a conscious-unconscious – and therefore pseudo-natural [*naturwüchsig*] – organization of social production. At the same time, this critique provided the key to understanding (contingent) historical processes that made it possible to create this specific mode of production (for example, so-called primitive accumulation) and those (necessary) processes under the law of accumulation that generated the conditions for overcoming it (tendency of the rate of profit to fall, periodic crises, pauperization, etc.). Ultimately this analysis highlights the historical character of the capitalist mode of production: 'Economists do not conceive of capital as a relationship. They cannot do so, without having at the same time to conceive it as a historically transient, relative and not absolute way of production' (Marx, 1862–3: 269).

However, Marx made an observation regarding the fundamental historical condition of possibility for the constitution of the

capitalist mode of production that will prove highly relevant to what will be discussed later about critical theory authors. This concerned the existence of 'free workers' who sell their labour power on the market: 'This singular historical condition encloses a universal history' (Marx, 1890: I, 184). In what way is 'universal history' present in that singular condition, behind which the violence of primitive accumulation hides? How should this universal history be interpreted in the critical disentanglement of the present? This is in fact a present, lest we forget, generated and reproduced with violence. Marx's study of the historiography of his time, the inclusion of historiographic passages in his systematic works, and even some writings that might be called historical, show links to the (critical) historiography of his time, and the meaning that Marx attributed to the concept of 'universal history' (Krätke, 2014/15). But here is also where its limit is found. And not because of a lack of awareness of the violence accumulated in that history. Bourgeois historiography, and even critical or scientific historiography – which rejects the philosophy of history as an unacceptable metaphysics, and seeks to work on data which are schematically represented and used to construct general categories – derives from a model that could be called progressive-sacrificial, to which Marx himself was not immune (Zamora, 2010: 115–19):

Thus capital creates the bourgeois society, and the universal appropriation of nature as the social bond itself by the members of the society. Hence the great civilizing influence of capital; [...] For the first time, nature becomes purely an object for humankind, purely a matter of utility; ceases to be recognised as a power for itself; and the theoretical discovery of its autonomous laws appears merely as a ruse so as to subjugate it under human needs, whether as an object of consumption or as a means of production. (Marx, 1857–8: 323).

His explanation about the British domination of India is another example of this progressive-sacrificial model:

England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindostan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England, she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution. (Marx, 1853: 133)

For Marx, civilizing progress and the domination of nature are not only conditions of possibility for establishing the 'automatic subject' of abstract value; also, the abstract socialization of a commodity-producing society constitutes progress with respect to all previous forms of sociality that were still trapped in the natural or mythical order. Commodity fetishism represents an advance over the magical or religious forms of the fetishization of social relations and relations with nature. Commodity fetishism harbours within it the possibility of final emancipation. But in this way of interpreting history, the destructive automatism of value threatens to be presented as an emancipating automatism.

## THEORY OF SOCIETY AND HISTORY AFTER THE THWARTED REVOLUTION

The challenges faced by those critical thinkers who sought to interpret the present in the first third of the twentieth century from the perspective of the critique of political economy are well known. The historiography of critical theory or, as others prefer to call it, the Frankfurt School, reconstructed and contextualized these theoretical and practical challenges in great detail (Jay, 1973; Dubiel, 1978; Wiggershaus, 1988; Asbach, 1997; Demirović, 1999). Perhaps the term that best defines the challenges of critical theory is that of 'crisis', but it would be better to speak of a constellation of several crises: first, the economic crisis of the late 1920s; second, the crisis of the labour movement and the failure of the world revolution in 1917–1918; and third, the crisis of Marxism, which was

unable to provide an adequate response to the two other crises, and became a science of legitimation for the Soviet system. This three-fold crisis would be aggravated further with the coming to power of Hitler and the National Socialist regime.

With regard to the crisis of Marxism and the need for critical self-reflection, the publication of Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* (1923) and Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) can be considered a turning point. Both works would serve as an essential point of reference for critical Marxism and assist Horkheimer in the construction of the methodological and programmatic basis for critical theory. However, the usual way of presenting the dependence of critical theory on Lukács normally disregards very significant differences (Brunkhorst, 1983, 1985; Habermas, 1988: 455–534). One of the fundamental elements of the theory of society and history that served as a reference for 'western Marxism' (Anderson, 1976) and was critiqued by Horkheimer and Adorno in the 1930s was the concept of 'totality'. Regardless of how this totality is conceived, the concept itself is considered to be idealistic (Horkheimer, 1936: 693). This category is burdened with the aporias of the Hegelian subject–object identity, and with an almost inevitable recovery of his metaphysics of history (Horkheimer, 1932a: 303). The Schopenhauerian pessimism of the young Horkheimer immunized him against the theodicy of history in all of its forms, even if it was concealed under the guise of materialism (Horkheimer, 1934: 326; Schmidt, 1974: 9–26). Lukács came under the same verdict as the bourgeois philosophy of history. The theory–praxis and the subject–object unit postulated under the concept of totality was a clear sign of idealism (Horkheimer, 1931b: 223).

But the critique of metaphysical materialism, of subject–object identity and of the Hegelian-Marxist philosophy of history was one of the two strands in the process of the development of critical theory. The other was the critique of specialization in the bourgeois

scientific apparatus and its reduction to finding and recording facts. In connection with this, critical theory exposed the failure of scientific research 'when faced with the problem of the social process as a whole' (Horkheimer, 1932b: 42). This dual strand defined the fields of influence in developing the programme of social research known by the term *interdisciplinary materialism*, which was first formulated at Horkheimer's inaugural lecture as director of the Institute in Frankfurt (1931a). The course of history and the crises mentioned above imposed the need to resort to psychoanalysis as an 'auxiliary science' of social theory and history (Horkheimer, 1932c: 57). Without its contribution it is impossible to answer the question of why individuals in a revolutionary context, instead of engaging in a liberating action, open their executioners' way to power. This is a key question for the theory of society and history from the Marxist perspective, and it cannot be answered without bringing together the critique of political economy with the theory of culture and psychoanalysis. This shift in the concept of society and history is one of the distinctive features of critical theory. The concept of ideology as the Marxian 'necessary false consciousness' was clearly insufficient and required the incorporation of the psycho-libidinal economy of individuals into analysis and critique.

The significance of Marxist materialism in the social research programme is not to be sought in the presupposition of a theoretical knowledge of the whole socio-historical process. Rather, it lies in knowing the dynamic and supra-individual 'structures and trends' and not offering a 'finished vision of the whole' (Horkheimer, 1932c: 53, 58). Nevertheless, since current misery is linked to the social structure, it is not possible to renounce theoretical knowledge and be satisfied with a mere description of the facts. Neither is critical theory a purely theoretical matter. Both the empirical material and the subject of knowledge are mediated by social praxis. The criteria that guide the knowledge

of critical theory are defined by the historical situation and the emancipatory praxis rooted in it, as no pre-established harmony exists between praxis and theory. It is concerned with showing the existing contradictions and the possibility of their practical overcoming. This is why it is not possible to dispense with the subjects of emancipatory praxis, as they introduce into the cognitive process their interest in a fully rational situation. This process is triggered by social negativity: by excluding a growing number of human beings 'from the happiness made possible by the widespread abundance of economic forces' (Horkheimer, 1933: 105).

The progressive historical problematization of these coordinates of critical theory in the 1930s led Horkheimer to ground them in his programmatic paper 'Traditional and Critical Theory' (1937) through a philosophy of the historical process, and in connection with supposedly objective emancipatory interests. Delving into these methodological questions of the original research programme thus loses its meaning. It is not difficult to recognize in this paper some of the arguments of the Historical Materialism approach: the global historical process, driven by its contradictions, enables a rational construction of society – if not through historical necessity, through a dynamic inherent to human labour. This process produces not only critical theory and emancipatory praxis, but also the subjects that lead society to a truly human state (Horkheimer, 1937: 203). Not that Horkheimer took a turn towards speculation. On the one hand, he continued to stress the non-identity between critical theory and the consciousness of the proletariat, and spoke of the 'mutual influence' and 'tension' between the two. On the other hand, he maintained the need for a link between theory and emancipatory praxis, in order for the contradictory totality to be understood as such, and for both its negativity and the possibility of radical transformation to be argumentatively presented.

The tragedy of this attempt at substantiation and resistance in view of the factual

course of events resonates with the text that Horkheimer published as an annex to the 'Traditional and Critical Theory' after an internal discussion at the Institute. In the absence of better arguments, he ended up settling for an anthropological concept:

As long as thought has not won a definitive victory, it cannot feel secure in the shadow of any power. It demands independence. But if its concepts, which sprang from social movements, today seem empty because no one stands behind them but its pursuing persecutors, yet the truth of them will out. For the thrust towards a rational society, which admittedly seems to exist only in the realms of fantasy, is really innate in every man. (Horkheimer, 1937: 224)

Although Adorno's contribution to the development of critical theory in the 1930s was not as important as that of Horkheimer, his reflections are still of interest, especially considering the developments that took place from the 1940s. Above and beyond the role allocated to Adorno in the field of culture within the 'interdisciplinary materialism' programme, his contributions to the central theme discussed here also deserve to be taken into account. His inaugural lecture on 'The Actuality of Philosophy' (1931) contained programmatic proposals somewhat different to those made by Horkheimer, who did not seem to particularly like them (Wiggershaus, 1988: 112). When looking at the differences, perhaps the most relevant is the one that affects the relationship between social materialistic philosophy and the results of the empirical research provided by the individual sciences. Adorno did not assign social philosophy the task of thinking about the 'global social process', into which the results of the particular sciences would be integrated. Thought is conceptually unable to cover the whole of reality, especially because that reality contradicts any demands of rationality. While the question about totality expresses the intention of the subject of knowledge to find meaning behind the phenomenal appearance of reality, the materialistic interpretation focuses on the fragments, the unintentional

elements, whose complete construction in constellations brings to light a reality that no longer needs any hidden meaning. That reality even makes such hidden meaning disappear in order for praxis to give meaning to events. His understanding of materialism is expressed in this renunciation of the search for meaning, present in major theoretical constructions.

Philosophy understood as interpretation cannot take social reality as it appears in its plural manifestations. This is what positivism does. It considers phenomena as 'facts' that have a kind of finality or indissolubility. If facts are indisputable, then all that remains is a classifying procedure in which the contradictions and tensions of capitalist society are particularized and masked. The key for unravelling social phenomena through interpretive construction is the category 'commodity'. The commodity form is the law to which everything tends to be subject in capitalist society. Adorno had no doubt that in bourgeois capitalist society the 'commodity' form produces an antagonistic totality and determines all of reality. He did not believe that reason is conceptually capable of encompassing this totality. To some extent this would involve taking a perspective that is external to it, a surplus or excess of spirit beyond reality (absolute knowledge, proletariat as subject-object, etc.). Rather, the interpretation should aim to appropriate that universal determination in the constellation of the elements of reality, through its construction. By means of these assembled elements, the antagonism of the social totality can be unveiled through the fragments analysed, without its interpretation needing to be presented as an autonomous magnitude capable of theoretically encompassing that totality. Thus, deciphering is at the service of a praxis whose task is to respond to the enigma posed by reality. A task that theory cannot fulfil.

The other programmatic aspect in which Adorno departed from the conventional view of the Marxist tradition is outlined in his lecture 'The Idea of Natural History' (1932).

This precisely specifies his understanding of the relationship between interpretative work and the philosophy of history. Despite the distance between Adorno's and Horkheimer's arguments, the former intended his lecture to be understood as a contribution to the 'immanent interpretation and deployment' of the materialist dialectics of Historical Materialism (365). The task of the philosophy of history is to disclose the dialectic interweaving of nature and history *through the fragments* mentioned in 'The Actuality of Philosophy'. This was now the way to realize the interpretation sought using that programme (360). For Adorno, the task of the philosophy of history is not to attain a unit that totalizes the discontinuous and disparate with the aid of a universal construction, nor is it to make the ruptures and breaks disappear into a global structure of any kind; rather, he focused on the ruins and fragments of the real and social world and inquired into the dialectic between nature and history contained within them.

It is well known that Adorno relied on Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* and Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, perhaps because he avoided the construction of philosophy typically found in universal history. The explanation of the dialectic of nature and history needs to demonstrate why history takes place as if it had a natural character, and how that second nature in which history has become frozen is in fact an appearance that can be removed by explaining its historical constitution. Historical reality is affected by the appearance of 'second nature' because, to a certain extent, it is imposed almost as a destiny and eludes our decision-making power. In this sense, it can be stated that *historical* phenomena manifest a *mythical* character. At the beginning of his lecture Adorno explained the meaning of the concept of 'nature' on which he relied. This can best be explained through 'the mythic conception', as he referred to 'what has always been, what as fatefully arranged predetermined being underlies history and appears in history; it is



substance in history' (345–6). From this perspective, the adjectives 'natural' and 'mythic' become synonymous with rigidity, inevitability, coercion and repetitiveness.

But in the dialectic of nature and history, Adorno wanted to show something else. The interpretation of allegory made by Benjamin offered him new categories with which to unravel the meaning of that dialectic. What is expressed in allegory, according to Benjamin, is the face of history as an enigmatic question. The fragments and ruins produced by history are like a scripture to be deciphered, a scripture which speaks of 'everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful' (Benjamin, 1925: 434). In the ruins and fragments of reality it is possible to recognize what has collapsed and decomposed; that which failed to complete the advance and vanished on the way; and that which was the victim of the historical process in its 'progress'.

This aspect of Benjamin's concept of allegory seems to have been of decisive significance for Adorno. From the allegorical interpretation of the world that has collapsed and decayed into ruins, something emerges that should be thought of as being complementary to the concept of 'second nature': 'Whenever something historical appears, it refers back to the natural element that passes away in it' (Adorno, 1932: 359). History cannot be interpreted as a triumphal march of the spirit that has subjugated nature. Precisely through that subjugation, history is primarily the history of suffering, the history of collapse and decay. Allegory therefore opens the way for the catastrophic dimension of history and individual life as they both go by. The crumbling stations that become visible in the ruins that progress leaves behind confirm the triumphal march of domination. But at the same time they belie it by exposing the discontinuity that cannot be subsumed under any structural totality: everything that is inherent to the civilizing process in terms of failure, regression and barbarism. In the sufferings of history, the mythical spell reigns. The ability to stop the

continuing catastrophe is far from being guaranteed, and it is inadmissible to raise it to the status of an ontological structure of history. This is why Adorno rejects both the ontologization of the catastrophic dimension of history and the postulation of a cunning of reason that leads everything to the ultimate good.

### **WALTER BENJAMIN: PROGRESSION AND CATASTROPHE, OR HOW TO SAVE HISTORICAL MATERIALISM FROM ITSELF**

The importance of Walter Benjamin's work for Adorno's idea of 'natural history' increased over time as critical theory developed. Following Horkheimer's initial incomprehension of his approach to history in the paper for the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* on Eduard Fuchs (Benjamin, 1937), its importance gradually increased, as was clearly shown in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It therefore seems relevant to briefly discuss some elements of his unique contribution here.

First, a radical critique of social democratic revisionism can be found in the theses entitled 'On the Concept of History' (1940). They also contained a critique of traditional Marxism that focused on some essential points, namely, the teleological nature of history, its evolutionary-progressive vision, and the determinism of the revolution: 'The experience of our generation: that capitalism will not die a natural death' (Benjamin, 1927–1940: 819). Benjamin's thesis was that faith in progress had become the most powerful ideology to leave the proletariat disarmed in the face of their tormentors. History is not a chain of events connected by a causal link. What is considered to be History (with a capital 'H') is in fact a historiographical construction that satisfies the needs of those who write it: it is the history of the victors. This view is not only recognizable in bourgeois historiography – against which Benjamin

formulated his critique of historicism – but has also taken over the conception of history within Historical Materialism. The idea of progress found not only in the bourgeois philosophy of history, but also in the social democratic and common Marxist conception of History, brings together the traits of infinity, continuity and irreversibility. And these are the traits that Benjamin revealed as being false. Under the idea of progress, the past appears as definitely closed, as a prelude to the present converted into a canon of a history represented as a sequence of events that form a continuum. Benjamin rejected this idea, among other things, because it was a history of victors, a stylized history in favour of those who dominate the present. And fundamentally, the key issue is the present; but not as a transition or as a small dot in an infinite series, but as a moment when time stops.

History as a continuum cannot be affirmed as a condition of possibility for a present characterized by domination and the threat of catastrophe for the oppressed, since what would be confirmed is the catastrophic present. This should be juxtaposed against a different construction of time. What did not fit the modern concept of progress was the idea of interruption. History takes place throughout an abstract time, and the present in each case is nothing more than a point on an infinite line. The procedure of universal history is 'additive: it musters a mass of data to fill the homogenous empty time' (Benjamin, 1940: 702). By a kind of sacrificial logic everything is functionalized to construct a supposedly better future that must be implemented more or less inevitably. However, what Benjamin perceived in the historic present that he lived in was that time has a catastrophic structure.

This is why he ventured to say that 'the concept of progress is to be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things just "go on" is the catastrophe. It is not that which is approaching but that which is' (Benjamin, 1939: 683). The interesting thing about this proposal to use the concept of catastrophe as a basis for the idea of progress is that such

catastrophe is not a future event; it is not so much an end or goal of progress, but its constitutive character. It consists in continually producing, through the force of its advancement, something that is dislodged, abandoned on the margins, something that cannot maintain the pace, which crumbles and becomes rubble because it fails to keep up with time. The modern idea of progress, both in its bourgeois and socialist variants, remains insensitive to this loss. It merely reproduces the dynamics of the merciless advancement of the logic of capital accumulation.

Memory at the time of danger, as a recollection of an already past future – the future that has not happened, which has been stolen from the oppressed – does not establish a historical continuum; rather, it enforces the open-ended character of past suffering and outstanding hopes of the victims of history. Only from that already past future is it possible to think that the current future has a chance to be more than the consummation of the catastrophe. Only from the memory of shattered hopes is it possible to recognize the true dimension of the threat, and curb the optimistic self-deception about the catastrophe that lurks at every moment. However, under the ruins of the past, under the ashes of the almost extinct memory, the time of waiting and desire has sought refuge from destiny: that is where the ember of a forgotten future is preserved. The sudden constellation of the archaic with the latest dialectical images unleashes the revolutionary force of what has been forgotten.

Only through memory does the present become truly actual, by actualizing a forgotten past by connecting it with the present. This requires political will to actively exercise freedom. In the constellations between the present and the past, in the qualitative simultaneity of the dischronic, materialist historians seek to unleash revolutionary energies nestled in the past, in their unfulfilled expectations, in their unfinished business, in their utopian hopes. Only what has escaped integration into the historical continuum of

the history of the victors, the moments of the past that were repressed and forgotten, can form constellations with the present that will interrupt the course of that history and open a gap for the truly new.

In addition to these critical reflections on the temporal pattern of Historical Materialism, Benjamin brought another fundamental concept to the creation of a materialist theory of knowledge from the point of view of the theory of history. This is the concept of 'proto-history' [*Urgeschichte*]. Bearing in mind that the set of writings that make up the *Arcades* project was conceived as a proto-history of the nineteenth century (Benjamin, 1927–1940: 579), it is clear that we are not talking about a remote source, a prehistory, the beginning of a chronological order. It is rather an interpretation of the *present* that is free from the prevailing teleological visions of history. Since this is a key concept in the interpretation of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it is surprising that the vast majority of interpretations of this work persistently read it as a negative *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as a kind of reconstruction of universal history understood as a negative metaphysics of history.

Proto-history aims to establish a new, non-linear and consecutive configuration between past, present and future. Proto-history is produced and reproduced in history as a place where what is silenced, hidden and forgotten becomes visible. That is, proto-history allows the illusions that every present weaves around itself to be broken; it shows the natural-historical dialectic that perpetuates the domination of internal and external nature and social domination, resulting in destruction and suffering. This is not a history of origins, which may form the germ of the current catastrophe by following a causal chain. The concept of proto-history precisely runs counter to this teleological scheme, whether based on an optimistic concept of progress or on a pessimistic concept of decadence (Forster, 2009).

In line with the Marxian critique of commodity fetishism, the explosive force of

proto-history consists in showing the lack of freedom that is hidden in bourgeois freedom (of hiring), the coercion reproduced in the freedom of exchange, or the barbarism that lies in every attempt to dominate nature. Proto-history is primarily a work of memory intended to counteract the oblivion involved in the reification of fetishism. As we have seen, in Benjamin this work of memory is attributed to an unintentional constellation between past and present under dialectical images. The materialist historian constructs them in order to provoke an awakening from the dream in which the capitalist system has engulfed us (Benjamin, 1927–1940: 494). It involves taking hold of a memory that dispels the illusions about history as progress, and not as natural history. Adorno's 'Reflections on Class Theory' expresses this in the following terms:

Knowing the new does not mean adapting oneself to it and to the movement of history; it means resisting its inflexibility and conceiving of the onward march of the battalions of world history as marking time. Theory knows of no 'constructive force' but only of one that lights up the contours of a burned-out prehistory with the glow of the latest disaster in order to perceive the parallel that exists between them. The latest thing is always the old terror, the myth... (Adorno, 1942: 375)

Clearly, the idea of proto-history is essential for a correct interpretation of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944), whose true character is to offer a proto-history of catastrophic modernity (Zamora, 2004: 125–85).

## AUSCHWITZ AND THE DIALECTIC OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Adorno and Horkheimer saw in Auschwitz a caesura which forced the conventional means of rational analysis to question themselves, and the historical advance in which such an unfathomable abyss of pain and injustice had opened. The historical effectiveness of a supra-historical divine subject, but also of the

bourgeois subject, and of the dialectical process of production forces and relations, were suspended in the death camps of the Third Reich. A catastrophe of this magnitude, which began to systematically eliminate one part of humanity and could turn such annihilation into a purely technical and organizational problem, highlighted the seriousness of the failure of the forces and powers which had, until then, supported the various immanent hopes. Auschwitz represents, therefore, a *break with the civilizing process* (Diner, 1988: 31) which requires a radical rethinking about the way of looking at this process. It also prohibits, from a moral point of view, the desire to extend all that preceded. As Krahel says, 'Auschwitz cannot be explained by capitalist accumulation' (2008: 296).

Moreover, in Adorno's view it was not acceptable to reduce death camps to simply being 'a technical mishap in civilization's triumphal procession' (Adorno, 1951: 265). Considering them to be unique would be tantamount to a temporal, social and cultural delimitation of fascism, which would turn it into a kind of circumstantial anomaly. This relativizing would minimize and significantly reduce the relevance of Auschwitz in understanding the history and the society in which such a catastrophe could take place (Claussen, 1987: 9f.; 1988). This paradoxical situation led Adorno to formulate a phrase that, at first glance, seems oddly contradictory:

The identity lies in the non-identity, in what, not having yet come to pass, denounces what has [...] He who relinquishes awareness of the growth of horror not merely succumbs to cold-hearted contemplation, but fails to perceive, together with the specific difference between the newest and that preceding it, the true identity of the whole, of terror without end. (Adorno, 1951: 266)

What must be avoided is, on the one hand, the spell of the philosophy of origin or *prima philosophia*, in which all of reality is more or less directly derived from a single principle. Within it, uniqueness is the expression or manifestation of the basic ontological structure of reality, regardless of whether the

structure is positively or negatively determined. On the other hand, it would be illicit to maintain a disconnection from phenomena, as this does not do the extent and persistence of historical negativity any justice (Adorno, 1956: 46). The identity of non-identity or *vice versa*, which the new horror allowed to be discovered, could be initially characterized as the stasis of social dynamics, following Marx. As society advances in an *antagonistic* and *pseudo-natural* way, the dynamics of its unbridled expansion remain a reproduction of the old antagonism, and are therefore static. The irrationality of cyclical crises, the impotence of socialized subjects against the advance of their own history, as well as the avoidable but persistent suffering, show that the 'historical dialectic leads, to a certain extent, to the confirmation of fatality' (Adorno, 1961: 234). The Marxian concept of 'prehistory', to which Adorno wanted to remain faithful with his idea of 'natural history', included the historical process under the umbrella of the persistent lack of freedom. So it is not positive continuity, but continuity of the history of suffering. When Marx qualified 'free' paid work as 'wage slavery', he aimed to prevent the appearance of blind progress against the continuity of coercion beyond its historical mutations that could not and should not be denied. The decision to eliminate the social coercion that causes suffering was still to be made. Therefore, for Adorno it was not enough just to expose human history as prehistory, as static in and through dynamics; instead, its hidden reverse needed to be revealed.

By assuming the Marxian concept of 'prehistory', Adorno did not intend a positive determination of domination as a negative and ontological foundation of history, but sought to prevent the relativization of suffering within it and in all historical periods. The unity of the discontinuous and chaotically scattered moments of history can be negatively seen as the continuity of destructive domination, since unjust suffering has not yet been eliminated from any of them. The latest

form of iniquity is an eye-opener to the current suffering at each moment, just as the persistence of unjust suffering is proof of the continued existence of destructive domination. Adorno did not intend to formulate a new – now negative – metaphysics of history with this construction of history as ‘natural history’, but sought to force a *change of perspective* in the way it was considered.

Walter Benjamin superbly formulated this in the theses: ‘The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule’ (Benjamin, 1940: 697). The ability to bring together ‘rule’ and ‘exception’ and – in line with Adorno – ‘continuity’ and ‘discontinuity’, ‘identity’ and ‘non-identity’, depends on this change of perspective. The intention is not to ontologize discontinuity, the state of emergency or suffering, as if it were an essential, inescapable determination of history. Rather, what is required here is to adopt the perspective of the oppressed. The difference in perspective certainly leads to a different perception of historical events. For the oppressed in history, with their individual and non-interchangeable suffering, all progress is non-existent: ‘the last sacrifice is always yesterday’s’ (Adorno, 1953: 269). Each victim is like the negative of persistent coercion, and therefore, the denial that progress really existed. The opposite would be tantamount to integrating the victims into the movement of the totality towards a happy ending, to rising above the victims – in Hegelian terms – and relegating them to mere stations in the unstoppable ascent of the spirit or the human race. And in doing so, their suffering would be converted into a ‘*quantité négligeable*’ that they must inevitably pay as the price of that ascent. ‘The essential character of pre-history is the appearance of utmost horror in the individual detail. A statistical compilation of those slaughtered in a pogrom, which also included mercy killings, conceals its essence, which emerges only in an exact description of the exception, the most hideous torture’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944: 139).

If every reconstruction of history is an anamnesis of the process that has taken place, it is not less true that, to date, the historical reconstructions guided by the idea of progress have shown a curious complicity with amnesia. Such amnesia is determined by how the historical process has effectively occurred. It is not possible to move away from these historic constructions as if they were old furniture once the dirty game has been exposed, as they actually make it possible to discover why memory has always been mutilated (Baars, 1989). So whatever is not expressed (but implicitly hidden) by these constructions needs to be elicited. Real crimes against victims and amnesia are closely connected.

The only way to prevent suffering – which in Auschwitz reached unimagined heights – from disappearing from an interpretation of universal history, and from being reduced to a mere contingency linked to plural, and therefore relative, contexts, is to contemplate the totality of history bearing in mind the break marked by Auschwitz. The most singular – Auschwitz – forced a change of perspective on the totality, so that the dark night of history could be contemplated from its standpoint (Claussen, 1995: 19f.): ‘Certainly, the unprecedented torture and humiliation of those abducted in cattle-trucks does shed a deathly-livid light on the most distant past’ (Adorno, 1951: 266). Thus, ‘manifest history is also revealing its connection to that dark side, which is passed over in the official legend of states, and no less in its progressive critique’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944: 265).

This perspective makes it possible to understand the contribution of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* without turning it into a mere expression of a state of mind and a wrong assessment of the evolution of the capitalist system, as expressed in the theory of Pollock’s State capitalism (Türcke and Bolte, 1994: 44f.). In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the thoughts are composed in fragments, and the authors did not hesitate to use ‘exaggeration’. They tried to capture in

'dialectical images' the spell of an inscrutable negativity. And they also used 'protohistoric constellations' to suspend the advance of a way of thinking and a history that prolonged the old injustice against which they rebelled. These dialectical images were not intended to bring to light the hidden meaning of history or to rebuild it by the use of a philosophy of history or an evolutionary theory of it, albeit a negative one. Rather, they attempted to make visible the meaninglessness *in* history, in order to issue a wake-up call to a way of thinking that was well practised in oblivion. The objective of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was to bring to light the dialectics between nature and history in the sense discussed here, that is, that of breaking the deceptive appearance of a process of civilization which, despite possible setbacks, advances so irresistibly towards individual and social emancipation. The terms 'myth' and 'Enlightenment' that this work connects represent for the dominant consciousness in modernity the two ends of the process: the reassuring opposition that legitimizes the present as a liberation from the enslaving ties of a mythical past. Horkheimer and Adorno tried to build a constellation between the two ideas that both energized and problematized the self-satisfied modern consciousness that was blinded to the catastrophic nature of the present – and of history (Tiedemann, 1998).

Those who claim that the critique of the instrumental domination of nature prevails over the critique of social domination and see here a break with the critique of political economy tend to use a teleological scheme and interpret the concept of 'proto-history' [*Urgeschichte*] to mean that which temporarily existed in the beginning. Even though some formulations of the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* give reasons for this, the scheme of the bourgeois philosophy of history as a process of teleological-evolutionary cause–effect should not be projected onto them. The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* discusses the historical and natural constitution of both modern society and instrumental

subjectivity, from the perspective of the social and cultural context which manifested itself in the culture industry, antisemitism and the Nazi genocide, and certainly as an ill-fated constitution. The purpose of this was to illuminate the reverse of the 'logic of things' deceptively transfigured by the ideology of progress. What the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* discusses, then, is the dialectic between the constitution of the self and its negation, between the domination of nature and its destruction, between progress and regression, between the universality of exchange and the liquidation of the individual. The diagnosis of a factual failure of the Enlightenment should not be confused, therefore, with its happy postmodern cancellation.

## NEGATIVE TOTALITY AND THE NEGATIVE DIALECTICS OF HISTORY

According to Adorno, what confers on society a character of (negative) totality is that the all-encompassing and all-embracing social organization is characterized by antagonism. The way society is organized – supposedly aimed at ensuring the self-preservation of its members – generates and reproduces relations of domination of some individuals over others. These relations cannot be simply attributed to the necessary division of labour.

The ultimate goal of social organization – that is, ensuring that the needs of its members are satisfied and avoidable suffering is eliminated (Adorno, 1966: 203) – is thwarted by the relations of domination that cause an inversion in the relationship between the self-preservation of all individuals and social organization. The latter is no longer a means to achieve self-preservation; instead self-preservation – mediated by social relations of mainly economic domination – becomes a means to obtain profits (Adorno, 1968: 361). The natural thing is to work to have one's needs met, but capitalism reverses that relationship. It demands postponing the

immediate satisfaction of needs in order to increase capital. Paradoxically, in this way individuals are reduced to a mere struggle for self-preservation, and the autonomy that would allow them to pursue goals beyond it is thwarted. Such goals are only possible when the purpose of social organization truly pursues the self-preservation of all of its members.

As Marx and Adorno noted, this inversion is expressed in the concept of 'capital', the automatic subject of the social process. A social process is run by a kind of mechanism, the expanded reproduction of capital, which carries individuals along with it and reduces them to mere producers or consumers. For Adorno, social objectivity as an antagonistic totality is undoubtedly a real, all-encompassing unit. The inversion that constitutes it is primarily hypostatization, autonomized reification with respect to individuals. The form of the reproduction of capital is truly an inverted world. Through and within the actions that ensure its reproduction, it becomes independent from the individuals who engage in those actions, and develops its own dynamics under laws that operate behind their backs, so to speak. Both Marx and Adorno stated this, not without irony, as their concept of society primarily aimed to be a critique of the autonomization of social synthesis, which is both an ideological construction and an expression of the specific form of capitalist economic development.

This two-fold character comes from the fact that individuals are both subjects and objects at the same time. The system is constituted thanks to their actions, it results from them; its 'naturalness' is 'pseudo naturalness' [*Naturwüchsigkeit*]. But as such, it appears in opposition to them, following a dynamic that overruns them and turns them into mere executors and appendices of the objectivity they have produced (Adorno, 1969: 294). If a short-sighted positivism absolutizes this reified objectivity and omits its genesis, the sociology of (inter)action absolutizes the appearance of atomized individuals, whose

constitution as true subjects is hampered by the existing social organization.

Autonomized social objectivity appears as something external and opposed, whose genesis has become opaque, almost impenetrable for individuals who are not able to unravel the process of their autonomization – even though the real abstraction is nothing other than reification that is independent from the sum total of their labour. While autonomized social objectivity remains in force with respect to individuals, their freedom will be reduced to conforming to market laws, lest they be penalized with economic ruin or social marginalization. This means reproducing in one's own action the inversion that capital consists in, that is, to not pursue the satisfaction of needs as the purpose of their economic action, but to convert that satisfaction into an instrument of an economic action aimed at maximizing profit.

This compels us to enquire into the principle that unifies the antagonistic society. What is the origin of the inversion that is responsible for the autonomized reification of social relations and the opacity that shrouds it? Adorno used two concepts to describe the unifying principle of the antagonistic totality, which were not mere equivalents: exchange and the law of value (Görg, 2004: 249). While the latter is less important in Adorno's theory of society, in his writings he repeatedly used the terms 'exchange' [*Tausch*], 'exchange principle' [*Tauschprinzip*], 'exchange society' [*Tauschgesellschaft*] and 'commodity society' [*Warengesellschaft*] to refer to the capitalist form of economy. In the law of exchange, Adorno recognized the same 'heteronomous objectivity' expressed in the concept of capital that is presented to individuals in the form of coercion (Adorno, 1966: 172). Thus, the inverted world of autonomized social objectivity is grounded in the abstraction operated by exchange: 'Here originates the disregard for the qualitative specificity of producers and consumers, for the mode of production, even for the needs which the social mechanism satisfies as it were in passing, as a secondary

consideration. The primary consideration is profit' (Adorno, 1965: 13).

The principle of exchange levels and eliminates spontaneity and the unique qualities of the individuals who make up society, reducing them to a common denominator. It also tends to demand an abstract and universal equivalence. Under the terms of exchange, abstract labour, that is, the historically specific way of producing commodities as a unit of use and exchange value, becomes the universal social form of useful concrete work. Concrete work, transformed into the average performance of the labour force, becomes a reifying abstraction of human relations, because the social relationships of things decide on the universal social nature of specific jobs. In addition, the quality of things becomes the fortuitous appearance of their exchange value. The products of human labour are identified by quantitative magnitudes and all the products of abstract labour are identical in terms of being the personification of exchange value. According to Adorno, this logic of exchange determines not only the economic processes, but the whole of social life; it penetrates social reality in its entirety and implies a domination of the universal (society) over the singular (its members), whereby the particular ends up prevailing in the antagonistic society (Adorno, 1969: 294).

This domination of the universal over the singular is expressed in the Hegelian concept of 'world spirit' [*Weltgeist*]. This concept, better than those constructions that nominally organize endless facts, expresses the experience that history escapes from the control of individuals. 'The objective and ultimately absolute Hegelian spirit; the Marxist law of value that comes into force without men being conscious of it; to an unleashed experience these are more evident than the prepared facts of a positivistic scientific bustle' (Adorno, 1966: 295). While Hegel transfigures it into a self-conscious subject, Adorno identifies it as 'the negative' (298). It is not what it claims to be, but it is not simply nothing. It has truth content.

The cunning of reason turns individuals into mere means for its own ends, and expresses the hubris of history over them. In line with Marx, Adorno did not retain this concept to give it a negative metaphysical twist, but to offer a materialist reinterpretation of the World Spirit. This simultaneously brings to light its true content, without dismissing it as if it were an empty concept: 'The mythical adoration of the spirit is not pure conceptual mythology' (310). The critique of personification and the ideological affirmation of the objective hubris of history over individuals in the concept of World Spirit cannot ignore the objective character of this hubris and the experience of it that this concept expresses.

The thesis that society is subject to natural laws is ideology if it is hypostatized as immutably given by nature. But this legality is real as a law of motion for the unconscious society, as *Das Kapital*, in a phenomenology of the anti-spirit, traces it from the analysis of the commodity form to the theory of collapse. (349)

Instead, Adorno intends to develop the negative character of that experience: 'to experience the world spirit as a whole means to experience its negativity' (300). This is how he incorporated reflections on the character of natural history dating back to the 1930s. Negativity is the suffering accumulated throughout history that the Hegelian concept reduced to a necessary price. The individual experience of suffering is subsumed under a sacrificial logic. Not that Hegel ignored that suffering, but he subordinated it to the goal of the World Spirit that was imposed over the heads and bodies of singular individuals. Suffering was always perceived from the perspective of a speculatively projected reconciliation. But the falsehood of the World Spirit was, at the same time, its truth: the truth of the coercion that the antagonistic totality exerted on the individuals who reproduced their existence through it. The shift from reason to unreason is the same experienced by self-preservation when mediated through the revaluation of capital.



However, it should not be forgotten that the spell of the concept of the World Spirit, as an ideology of history, is produced by commodity fetishism: 'In human experience, the spell is the equivalent of the fetish character of the commodity. The self-made things become a thing-in-itself, from which the self cannot escape anymore' (339). Commodity fetishism is objectivity that produces a form of consciousness. This explains the difficulty in escaping the spell. But the purpose of asserting objectivity is not to ontologize negativity, which would reduce the critique of the World Spirit to the absurd, but to not underestimate its power. If there is any chance of breaking the spell, it would be a product of false universality itself. The coercion of the universal, and the unity it imposes between individual interests and the logic of the reproduction of capital, produces non-identity between them through the coercion and suffering that it generates (314f.). The domination of nature and social domination produce the breaks and cracks which, belonging to history, do not disappear in the identity of the World Spirit. It is in these breaks and cracks that the failure of that identity is made apparent, and the possibility of its elimination opens up ever again.

## Note

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# Totality and Technological Form

Samir Gandesha

Critical theory emerges in the early 1920s in response not just to the so-called ‘objective crisis’ of capitalist society but also to its ‘subjective crisis’ (Gandesha, 2014). Running parallel to other influential intellectual currents in the early twentieth century, most notably phenomenology (Husserl, Heidegger, Arendt, Merleau-Ponty) and existentialism (Schmitt, Camus, Sartre, de Beauvoir), Critical Theory understands such a subjective crisis in capitalism as a crisis of reason and experience. Like the former, Critical Theory, at its inception, was particularly concerned with the increasing pervasiveness of scientism and technology; like the latter it was concerned with ascertaining the conditions for the possibility of genuine ‘action’ or praxis as distinguished from naturalistic, unreflexive conceptions of ‘behaviour’.

In this, Critical Theory sought to clearly differentiate itself from the dogmatic, economic and quietist ‘scientific socialism’ of fin de siècle social democracy and to those aspects of Marx’s own thought that it

considered to be characterized by a certain technological determinism. For example, in the *Poverty of Philosophy* (1976: 166) Marx argues infamously that ‘the hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the individual capitalist’. Critical Theory differentiated itself from this dogmatic tradition in at least two ways. The first was by reclaiming genuinely ‘dialectical thinking’, which is to say a form of thinking that centred on the reciprocal and mutually determining relations between subject and object rather than on an understanding of their supposed opposition and the positing of mechanistic, causal relations between them. Indeed, it emphasized the central role played by negativity, which is to say the non-coincidence between subjectivity and objectivity, identity and non-identity (see Adorno, 1981; Marcuse, 1986). The second, as alluded to above, was by entering into a productive dialogue with currents that were to some extent exterior to the Marxian tradition, for example the thought of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche,

as well as the schools of phenomenology and hermeneutics, ideas and approaches that presented significant challenges to certain guiding assumptions of historical materialism, at least in its more orthodox incarnations.

At its inception, Critical Theory understood itself in Kantian terms as engaging in a 'rational critique of reason' as well as of reductionist, economistic and dogmatic forms of Marxism (Horkheimer, 1975). It was a theory that was *critical*, but also a critique of existing *theory*. Both dimensions coalesce as in the form of criticism of what Horkheimer (1974) called 'instrumental' or 'subjective' reason or a form of reason confined to the determination or calculation of the most efficient means to the achievement of goods or ends that, themselves, could never appear before the bar of reason but, rather, were simply a matter of an irreducible subjective preference or decision. In the realm of moral theory this was referred to as emotivism. A major challenge of Critical Theory, especially in the work of Jürgen Habermas (1991), was to identify a form of communicative as opposed to strategic and instrumental rationality that would be able to serve to adjudicate between certain ends and outcomes in the form of an ethics of discourse (Habermas, 1992). The subjective form of reason becomes dominant with the eclipse of a form of 'objective reason' that embodies a claim to conceptualize the totality of mediations, historically understood – on the basis of a dynamic account of 'becoming' rather than a static naturalistic account of 'being'.

Crises of reason and experience were diagnosed in the early work of Erich Fromm (1994) and Max Horkheimer (1975, 47–128), through the lenses of psychoanalysis and sociology, respectively, and attributed to the profound transformations in existing forms of authority, familial structures and processes of socialization. Parallel to this was the critique of reason that had become reduced to pure means or the relation of technological form to the social totality. Walter Benjamin (2002b, 144) makes clear this connection

between technological form and the crisis of experience in an arresting passage from his essay on Nikolai Leskov: 'For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power'. It is this second stream – the crisis of experience – that will be the focus of this chapter.

The roots of such a critique of the crisis of experience, as previously alluded to, can be located in a wider critique of the positivistic and mechanistic reading of Marx in the Second Socialist International (1890–1914) that was geared to understanding with nothing short of scientific precision the so-called 'objective laws' of capitalist society (Joll, 2015). This reading of Marx – what Russell Jacoby (1971, 1975) called 'automatic Marxism' – held that the fundamental contradiction in capitalist society was that between the 'productive forces', on the one hand, which were relentlessly innovative, future-oriented and, ultimately, therefore promised human emancipation, and the relations of production based on private property which, after the transformation of the feudal order, were increasingly static, on the other. The *locus classicus* for this is the *Communist Manifesto*, in which Marx and Engels suggest that the contradiction comes about through the necessarily antagonistic relation between capital and concrete labour within the space of the industrial factory, where the productive forces bring workers together in ever larger numbers in increasing opposition to the bourgeoisie in the context of the increasing immiseration of the population and what Marx would later diagnose in *Capital* as the tendency of the rate of profit to fall.

Written on the eve of the cataclysmic, if ultimately unsuccessful, revolutions of 1848, Marx and Engels spend rather more time praising the historical accomplishments of the bourgeoisie than anticipating the transformative praxis of the proletariat. In particular, Marx and Engels emphasize

the great advances in transportation and communications technologies that would enable the proletariat to shed its allegiance to particular local or even national identities and that would be, instead, like the First Working Man's International – consisting mainly of German and Polish émigrés – for which they wrote the *Manifesto*, truly internationalist if not explicitly cosmopolitan in outlook. Indeed, at the end of the *Manifesto*, the authors, with some prescience, note the advent of 'world literature'. It came as little surprise, then, in the sesquicentennial of the publication of this epochal text in 1998, that the house organs of global capital such as *The Economist*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* praised the text as foreseeing the advent of neo-liberal globalization while, of course, ignoring Marx and Engel's prediction that the bourgeois order would be transitory, giving rise to its communist successor. Marx and Engels held that the dynamic, even explosive, nature of technological forces would create the conditions in which the proletariat – having become the majority of society – would be able to 'expropriate the expropriators'.

Revolutionary transformation in Europe, alas, did not come to pass. In fact, not only did the proletariat fail, during the supposedly 'objectively revolutionary conjuncture' of the 1930s after the Stock Market crash, to seriously vie for social power, it was, to the contrary, largely won over to the side of fascism only to see its autonomous institutions – for example political parties, trades unions and cultural institutions – decimated and incorporated by the party/state apparatus. An important prelude to the incorporation of the working class could already be seen, in retrospect, with the German Social Democratic Party's ignominious vote for 'war credits' in the Reichstag in 1914 and the subsequent implosion of the Second Socialist International due to a resurgence of nationalism that was only apparently superseded by proletarian internationalism. Indeed, fascism, in some analyses

(Postone, 1986, Bonefeld, 2016), was itself a corrupted and displaced form of anti-capitalism, a 'socialism of fools', in words often attributed to August Bebel but most likely to have issued from Ferdinand Kronawetter, insofar as it identified and separated the abstract form of capital, financial capitalism, for capitalism as a whole. In other words, the narrower dynamics of an abstract logic of finance capital were mistaken metonymically for the totality of capital as a whole for which the Jews were taken as personifying in concrete form.

In any case, the rise of fascism became cause for a fundamental rethinking of Marx and Engels' conception of the socially innovative nature of technological forms insofar as it draws attention to the way in which dominant strains of Marxism tended to emphasize concrete over the problem of abstract labour and articulate a critique of capitalism from the standpoint of the former. In other words, the rise of fascism occasioned a rethinking of Marxian categories which continues today in the so-called 'new reading' of Marx (see Heinrich, 2012). According to one such reading, based on a reconstruction of the argument of the *Grundrisse* (1993), Marx's Critical Theory must not be simply understood as a *critique from the standpoint of labour*, entailing a more equitable or just distribution of wealth in the form of value, but rather as the *critique of abstract labour* as the predominant form of social mediation (Postone, 1993). In the first, there is simply a more just distribution of wealth in the form of value, while in the second, the aim is the abolition of the law of value *tout court*. In other words, it wasn't simply the objective reality of capitalist society that constituted the conditions of unfreedom but the very reified categories that capitalism itself produced qua 'real abstractions'.

The historical rise of National Socialism that showed the extent to which what was regarded by the Marxist tradition as the emancipatory implications of technology – emancipatory insofar as it enabled humanity

to increasingly master and control a once overwhelming, threatening but now tamed and domesticated power of external nature – could be turned in the direction of deepening the hold of existing forms of social domination. In contrast to traditional, Romantic or Burkean forms of conservatism, which ultimately drew upon an Aristotelian understanding of a hierarchy of goods established within a traditional organic political community within which reason was to be understood, German National Socialism represented a form of ‘reactionary modernism’ (Herf, 1986) that sought expressly to employ the most *advanced technological forms* in economy and, most importantly, the state, to annul the universalistic ideals that had been actualized, from the standpoint of the Marxian tradition, in a one-sided and incomplete way, during the bourgeois revolutions of the late eighteenth century. Nazism wasn’t simply anti-Enlightenment but precisely embodied the *dialectic* or self-undermining of Enlightenment – the ‘self-devaluation’ of the Enlightenment’s highest, which is to say, universalist, values. While such an actualization was one-sided and incomplete insofar as it liberated, as Marx showed in his early writings, man only as *citoyen* but emphatically not as *homo economicus*, it nonetheless laid the groundwork for the basis of a determinate negation via the proletarian revolution that would represent the genuine ‘realization of philosophy’. And, indeed, as previously suggested, the productive forces would play a key role in such a determinate negation of the bourgeois order. In other words, the abstract, formal achievement of ‘free and equal exchange’, concealing a hidden form of domination of the owner of labour power by the owner of money, nevertheless made possible the concrete actualization of genuinely ‘free and equal’ relations (Adorno, 1981: 147) that it had promised. In contrast, using the most advanced technological means, the Nazis sought to obliterate the radical political legacy of the historical Enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> An important sphere of the deployment of

such technology was mass communications such as radio, on which the F  hrer’s masterfully manipulative oratory was broadcast to the masses, but also film, in particular that of Leni Riefenstahl, in the form of an ‘aestheticized politics’. The Communist left sought to confront such an aestheticized politics – the spectacle of war and violence – by politicizing art (Benjamin, 2002a) through a deployment of the anti-auratic media of cinema and photography in ways that pushed, through an alienation effect [*Verfremdungseffekt*] beyond passive spectatorship under conditions of aesthetic illusion, or ‘*Schein*’, directly into political action. We shall return to this problem of an aestheticized politics below.

The starting point of any account of the relation between totality and technological form is Marx’s (1992) seminal discussion of commodity fetishism in *Capital Volume I*. It will then turn to Max Weber’s influential account of rationalization and disenchantment, before showing how Georg Luk  cs’ systematic account of “reification” (1972a) in *History and Class Consciousness* represents a synthesis of both accounts.

Luk  cs’ account of reification helps us to understand the manner in which technological form fundamentally occludes the social totality of which it is a ‘moment’, or what has been understood as the problem of what Fredric Jameson (1988) calls ‘cognitive mapping’ – the difficulty, if not impossibility, of representing or imagining the totality of social relations and therefore the lines of social and political conflict in late capitalism whose relations of production are increasingly globally dispersed through many discrete yet closely inter-connected nodes and sites. Technological forms become ever more prominent with the deepening of generalized commodity production and the application of advanced scientific techniques to the labour process, which. This deepens reification insofar as the social field becomes increasingly understood not as comprised of social relationships but as anonymous ‘objective’ processes and is therefore converted into

merely technical problems to be mastered or solved. This opposition could be said to lie at the heart of the current discussion of global climate change and the prospective solutions to it. Are these solutions to be understood in terms of more advanced forms of, for example, carbon capture techniques that leave in place social relations geared to an infinite, unfettered accumulation, or do they entail a fundamental transformation of human social relations, the species' relation with external nature and to our relation to own libidinal impulses or desires? Would such transformed, that is to say democratized, relations, at the same time, lead to changes in the actual technical design of objects and their relation to the natural world? In other words, are purely technical solutions to ecological crises possible without directly addressing what Marx calls the 'metabolic rift' between humanity and nature? (Marx, 1981: 949; Bellamy-Foster et al., 2011)?

Critical Theory, broadly understood, can be said to manifest at least three distinct responses to Lukács' diagnosis of this contradictory relation of technological form, on the one side, and social totality, on the other: (1) Walter Benjamin's influential account, already alluded to above, of post-auditory art, which suggests the manner in which technology can successfully confront the crisis of experience by engendering new artistic forms that can articulate a critical perspective on social relations, revealing what he calls an 'optical unconscious'; (2) Theodor W. Adorno's antithetical defense of aesthetic autonomy, specifically in terms of the accelerated development of the 'aesthetic forces of production', for example in the work of figures such as Beckett and Schönberg, that enable them to register the 'truth content' of natural history and point beyond the pure immanence of late capitalism in which virtually all other forces of opposition have been transformed into the means by which the system, or what he calls the 'total context of delusion', is reproduced; finally, (3) the debate

between Herbert Marcuse's phenomenological account of technology as a form of 'world disclosure', subsequently elaborated by Andrew Feenberg into the theory of democratizing technical design (2002), and Habermas' critique of 'functionalist reason'. In what follows, we will focus on the third account of the relation between totality and technological form.

## MARX AND COMMODITY FETISHISM

Marx shows the manner in which generalized commodity production under capitalism (M-C-M,' as opposed to the C-M-C of pre-capitalist formations) already hints at a cognitive crisis. The starting point, namely, Marx's account of 'commodity fetishism', cannot be overestimated in terms of its importance for understanding the relation between technological form and social totality. The logic of the commodity, an object that is at one concrete and abstract, that embodies both use value and exchange value, functions in such a way that the commodity qua fetish becomes both separated from and also obscures the totality of mediations – social relations of production – that constitutes it. The phenomenon of commodity fetishism presents the social world in such a way that relations between human agents appear as the relations between things, and relations between things appear as the relation between agents. Marx's critique of commodity fetishism returns to and develops his early critique of alienation that takes the criticism of religion as its primary model. It should be said that, in Hegel, this critique of alienation anticipates, in its treatment of the Kantian Understanding or *Verstand* and the underlying culture of diremption that it expresses (see Hegel, 1978; Pinkard, 2011), the deep tension between technological reason and an account of reason [*Vernunft*] that is up to the task of grasping the whole.



The alienation of the human essence in religion, as per Feuerbach's 'transformative critique', has its origins, fundamentally, not simply in the human suffering which gives rise to it, as Marx suggests in his early critique of Hegel, but in the mystified realm of alienated production relations constitutive of capitalist society. Such alienation results from the fundamental separation of the worker from the productivity of his labour power. In the same way that the idea of God represents the alienated projection of fundamental human spiritual powers, so, too, do the products of human labour power take on a life of their own independent of it. The worker therefore creates a world that confronts her in the form of an 'alien power' and that possesses a lawfulness that is inherently heteronomous or determined outside of her and beyond her control. Such a heteronomous condition constitutes a particularly vicious circle: the more wealth the worker produces the poorer he becomes; the more *powerful* capital becomes, the more *powerless* the worker.

Capitalist society as a totality of social relations and productive forces is occluded by the commodity form, or what Sohn-Rethel (1977) describes as a 'real abstraction'. That is to say, it is not an abstraction qua 'idea' posited by a philosophical concept or a sociological theory but an actual *phenomenon* induced by social relations themselves. The commodity as the embodiment of abstract, measurable labour time, and is 'alienated' from the direct producers, that is, goes its own way independent of their will. So, it conceals from view the fact that it is itself a product of social relations and is, in effect, therefore a form of 'socially necessary illusion' under capitalist production relations. Such an illusion lies at the heart of the self-presentation of capitalist social relations as a 'natural' order. The commodity form precludes, therefore, an immediate grasp of capitalism as a set of determinate social relations but rather presents the latter in the form of the simple appearance of what Marx calls 'an immense collection of commodities'.

Exactly one hundred years after the publication of *Capital* in 1967, Guy Debord (1992) elaborated this into a theory of the 'society of the spectacle,' 'capital accumulated to the point where it becomes an image'. The spectacle transforms the active, laboring subject into a passive spectator who beholds the products of his own sensuous activity from a distance.

Commodity fetishism is the point of departure for Georg Lukács' (1972a) theory of reification. Marx held that the inverted relation of humans and things could be demystified, dialectically, within a larger account of the unfolding of the mediations or relations constitutive of the social whole, that is, the realms of production, consumption, distribution and exchange, which is precisely what he sought to provide in the three volumes of *Capital*. It is for this reason that, as Lenin argued (Lenin, 1976), it was first necessary to grasp the mediations of Hegel's *Logic* in order to properly understand Marx's argument in *Capital*. In his essay 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', Lukács takes up the problem of inversion of the relation between human beings and things that Marx understands as the immediate self-presentation of capitalist social relations and elaborates the theory of 'Reification' (literally 'thingification') with the help of Max Weber's account of disenchantment and rationalization.

## WEBER, RATIONALIZATION AND DISENCHANTMENT

Weber's account of rationalization shows the way in which the conception of nature undergoes a fundamental transformation through the process by which it is reduced to mechanical causal relations and could, therefore, no longer be understood as inherently meaningful. Modern thought can be understood in terms of a break with a teleological Aristotelian ontology that saw nature as

embodying purposes. A decisive step was of course the Copernican-Galilean revolution in the conception of the universe via the invention of the telescope, which also marked the emergence of the modern empirical-scientific world-view (Husserl, 1970). Rationalization can be understood as the reduction of the complex, manifold understanding of causality in ancient philosophy to a single form of causality – efficient causality – mechanically understood.

Disenchantment means that there are neither inherent meanings nor indeed any mysterious forces embodied in nature. Nature in its totality can, in principle, be explained by way of science and manipulated and controlled by purposive reason. In other words, we can no longer understand nature as embodying final causes or purposes. As Weber (1958: 155) puts it, the ‘disenchantment of the world’ entails that ‘[p]recisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations’. What results from this is a decentring of a single and hierarchical account of the good life and a re-emergence of conflicts between what Weber calls ‘warring gods and demons’ within increasingly differentiated, complex, pluralistic capitalist societies, which culminates in the Westphalian system of nation-states. In the ‘dark writers of the bourgeoisie’, such as Machiavelli, Hobbes, de Sade and Nietzsche (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 92), final causes or ends are shown to be no longer determinable by a reason reduced to pure instrumentality.

With the decentring of a totalizing account of the good, there is a corresponding transformation of authority. The charismatic authority upon which many religious world-views, particularly those of the Abrahamic religions, was based, as well as the traditional authority of agrarian societies, is increasingly replaced by what Weber calls ‘legal-rational authority’. While charismatic authority is grounded in insight into the divine, and the traditional

form is ‘the authority of the eternal yesterday’, legal-rational authority derives from the adequacy of the procedure by which a given social norm is generated or determined. In other words, the binding character of the norm has to do with the degree to which a legitimate procedure is followed. Crucially, here rationality [*Zweckrationalität*] is *by definition* restricted from judging the outcome of content of the procedure and concerns itself with only the adequacy of the *form* of the procedure itself.

The bureaucracy of the modern state is founded precisely on this form of rationality, centring exclusively on calculability and technical efficiency in attaining its ends, but this also makes it constitutively *unable to reflect* on the validity of those ends themselves. The apparent inability of rationality to attend to outcomes is what gives rise to the possibility of the genocidal events of the twentieth century, in particular the Nazi Holocaust, which constitutes the uniquely ‘banal’ form of modern evil (Arendt, 2006). This procedural conception of rationality, which also governs science, suggests the neutrality of technology insofar as it can serve either good or evil ends. As we shall see, however, in Marcuse’s phenomenologically inspired critique of technology, technology cannot be thought of exclusively as technological but is constitutive of practices of ‘world disclosure’.

It is important to bear in mind Weber’s account of purposive rationality as articulated in the context of his account of the role of religious ideas or spirit of capitalism in the emergence and consolidation of capitalist social relations in Western Europe. Challenging the orthodox Marxian view (Anderson, 2013) that the rise of capitalism could be understood to result from objective contradictions intrinsic to the previous, feudal order, for example, in the growing antagonism between the town-dwelling burghers (the incipient bourgeoisie), on the one hand, and the aristocracy and Absolutist state, on the other, Weber argued that the

subjective transformation of the world-view of the Puritan created a subjective disposition uniquely suited to capital accumulation. Following Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* (1989), Weber (2001) called this unique disposition 'inner-worldly asceticism'. By this, Weber meant that the bourgeois Puritan's asceticism entailed activity outside of the monastic order (in the world) but, like the monastic order, it entailed self-abnegation and the deferral of gratification in the service of what were initially higher, spiritual ends. Rather than immediately consuming the surplus that his enterprise had generated (by exploiting the labour of others), according to his methodical 'rational life practice', he reinvested it back into the enterprise itself. While, given the doctrine of predestination, no amount of worldly success could guarantee 'election', inner-worldly success could be, nevertheless, read or interpreted as a *sign* of divine grace.

As processes of rationalization and disenchantment deepened, however, and produced an increasingly secular world, religious world-views began to lose their hold. The accumulation of capital, which was initially a means, once detached from any reference to a higher purpose or end, becomes an end in itself. In other words, Weber puts his finger on the manner in which technical means becomes an end-in-itself. In a logic of what Nietzsche (1968: 9) called 'nihilism', that the 'highest values devalue themselves', Christian faith proves itself unable to withstand the very transformations inaugurated by the Reformation itself. Rationality, which had previously been understood in terms of the realization of purposes, including, of course, the highest good, understood in either Aristotelian or Christian terms, now becomes reduced to a pure means, instrument or tool (Taylor, 1992) stripped of any possible relation to transcendence. In other words, rationality becomes a mere technique by which capital accumulation is pursued or bureaucratic state power administered without being indexed to a conception of the 'good life'

lying beyond it. The processes of rationalization and disenchantment culminate, therefore, in a seemingly inescapable fate, an 'iron cage'.

## LUKÁCS AND THE PROBLEM OF REIFICATION

In the key chapter of *History and Class Consciousness*, 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' (Lukács, 1972), written in the wake of the failures of the central European Revolutions, Lukács presents a synthesis of Marx's account of commodity fetishism and Weber's theory of rationalization in his concept of 'reification', or the process by which what is living, vital and dynamic becomes hollowed out and static, seemingly governed by law-like regularities that mirror laws governing nature. In other words, reification is a form of 'second nature' that resembles first nature. Marx had sought to show the manner in which the commodity was a moment in the unfolding of the mediations of the capitalist mode of production as a whole. Indeed, as already suggested, the contradiction between the relations and forces of production would make possible the transformation of the class-in-itself to the class in-and-for-itself and enable the proletariat to challenge the power of the bourgeoisie.

In contrast, Lukács indicates the manner in which the increasing specialization within the division of labour and rationalization of the labour process through the integration of technical knowledge (for example Taylor's principles of 'scientific management' that came to play such a key role within the post-War Fordism) further alienated and isolated individual workers from one another, themselves and the labour process as a whole. In other words, the fact that abstract labour was the given form of social mediation constituted the social world as a kind of 'second nature' (Lukács, 1974) that

seemed, as a result, impervious to human will and action; quality was replaced by quantity. Reification gave rise to a pervasive passivity, or what he called a 'contemplative attitude' (1972b: 83–222), which was a regression insofar as it inverted the modern hierarchy in the relation between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* in which the former prevailed over the latter. Again, it was only a short step for Guy Debord (2002) to elaborate Lukács' insights into a theory of the spectacle in post-war Europe (Gandesha and Hartle, 2017). To emphasize the difference with Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto*, once more, it was precisely because of the pervasiveness of reification in all of its manifold forms that it became clear that it was now no longer possible for workers in the space of industrial production to directly grasp the totality of capital that confronted them collectively and to mount a challenge to this, what amounted to *their own 'alien powers'*.

The phenomenon of reification was not confined to the sphere of production relations but came to penetrate even the most intimate or refined cultural sphere, including the assumptions of philosophy itself. It culminates in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, in particular in his conception of the Understanding [*Verstand*], in which various oppositions are established, between ought and is, freedom and necessity, etc. within differentiated spheres of value: science, morality and art. Indeed, for Lukács, Kant's opposition of the world as appearance and as the 'thing-in-itself' crystallized the contemplative attitude and represented the very apotheosis, at the level of thought, of the process of reification that derived from and 'expressed' (Althusser, 2006) the fundamental contradiction at the heart of capitalist social relations. It is in the subsequent history of German idealism, in Hegel's Absolute Idealism in particular, that we find the best strictly philosophical solution to this problem.

## MARCUSE, TECHNICS AND TECHNOLOGY<sup>2</sup>

As previously suggested, Critical Theory strives to come to terms with the fact that, rather than playing an unequivocally emancipatory role, technology is at best ambivalent. Marcuse addresses such ambivalence through a critique of Max Weber, whose concept of rationalization, as we have seen, plays such a key role in Lukács' influential account of reification. Far from being value-neutral, as Weber maintained, Marcuse argues that the very abstractness of technology conceals a substantive complicity with domination, much in the same way the abstract 'equal' exchange between the 'owner of money' and the 'owner of labour power' conceals what is, at bottom, a structurally unequal, exploitative relationship. Such a critique of Weber is significant because it highlights Marcuse's own ambivalent relationship to technology, it contrasts with Habermas' own critique of the one-sided nature of Weber's account of rationalization, and it enables us to identify the stakes in the respective accounts of technology in Marcuse and Habermas.

Marcuse challenges Weber's claim to value-neutrality by situating him within the context of Wilhelmine Germany and suggests that, in its very insistence of value-neutrality, Weber's concept of rationality reveals its inherent political disposition. Genuine value-neutrality is premised upon self-reflection, on the 'power of resisting interference' (Marcuse, 1965). Marcuse's point here is that value-neutrality can only be thought of as a regulative ideal, a moment of which must be a reflection on the way in which technology embodies value. In the absence of such self-reflection, putatively value-neutral rationality becomes vulnerable to heteronomous determinations or determinations from the outside. Given the nature of formal rationality, such determinations cannot, by definition, be adjudicated in the court of reason. Moreover,

Marcuse identifies three salient elements of Weber's account of reason: the progressive mathematization of experience, here the natural sciences, in particular physics, become the model for the social sciences as in Hobbes' political theory (2008) as suggested above; the insistence on the necessity of rational experiment and proofs in the organization of both science and the conduct of life; and the genesis and solidification of a technocracy. It is indeed in the transition from theoretical to practical reason that the apparently neutral conception of formal rationality reveals itself to be circumscribed by the conditions of its own historical emergence. The parallels with classical political economy are clear. Weber's account of rationality, in Marcuse's view, is unequivocally marked by its own historicity, which is to say, the conception presupposes a form of abstract labour 'freed' from the means of production and its increased control by private firms. Weber's supposedly 'neutral' conception of rationality, in other words, presupposes liberal capitalism. With the eclipse of this social order, what becomes increasingly clear is the inescapably irrational nature of technical reason. The 'inner-worldly asceticism' which, as we have already seen, drove the rational life-conduct of the emergent bourgeoisie, now becomes objectively irrational in a transformed capitalism ever more dependent upon solving its inherent contradictions by the mass production and consumption of commodities.

Here Marcuse seeks to provide an answer to the question that we posed earlier: how do the productive forces, whose 'liberation' played such a decisive role in the undermining of the old order, now contribute to the freezing of social relations in an eternalized present? Marcuse argues that, in his understanding of industrialization as a logic of the 'iron cage', Weber inadvertently demonstrates the manner in which formal rationality is substantively determined. Weber, according to Marcuse, 'generalizes the blindness of society that reproduces itself behind the

back [sic] of the individuals, of a society in which the law of domination appears as an objective, technological law' (1965). Weber's concept of rationalization shows how, in contrast to previous modes of production in which political and economic domination were fused, the nature of domination under capitalism seems increasingly impersonal, abstract and necessary, taking on, therefore, a fateful character. Recognition, however, that this fate has in fact *become* a fate, that is to say, a historical rather than a natural phenomenon, implies the possibility of its transcendence or determinate negation. Any scientific analysis that fails to commit itself to such a negation places itself in service of 'actually existing' domination.

If Marcuse's two-fold critique of Weber is to hit home, if the identification of the limits of Weber's account of rationality is, as Hegel had shown in his critique of Kant, a transcendence of those limits, then it was incumbent on Marcuse to provide an alternative to the culmination of the unfolding of rationalization in a stultifying and nihilistic 'iron cage'. Only through such an alternative would the triumph and domination of formal rationality not appear as the singular fate of modern societies. Marcuse locates such a possibility, anticipating his later account of the possibility of a new reality principle in the idea of non-alienated labour. Lukács' response to Weber entails an understanding of the proletariat as the collective subject that grasps its own objective reality in the self-consciousness of the historical process, which nonetheless makes the error of conflating 'objectification' and 'alienation'. Marcuse, in contrast, with the benefit of having read Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, offers an existential and ontological interpretation of labour as the foundation of historical materialism.

We can now see the clear outlines of Marcuse's critique of the reified nature of technological reason. Marcuse provides an account of how the insights of Husserl's

diagnosis of the crisis of the European sciences can be fleshed out by historical materialism. What the *Epoché* reveals isn't the pure structure of intentionality – the consciousness always already directed towards an object – but rather the objectivity of the object is, in the final instance, the *objectification* of an embodied form of sensuous subjectivity. Through practical reason, the reified structures of the lifeworld are dynamized into actuality and cease standing over and against human beings as a heteronomous order.

What becomes clear in Marcuse's encounter with Weber is an apparent ambivalence in Marcuse's approach to technology that stems from the two sources of his critique: historical materialism and phenomenology. In other words, Marcuse wants both to appropriate the concept of the lifeworld understood as the symbolic or meaningful structures into which individuals are always already 'thrown' and offer the possibility of their fundamental transformation via 'historical and social labour'. Marcuse argues that the ideological nature of technology does not just come from the outside – that is, in the specific ends to which it is put – but rather constitutes its innermost essence. The ambivalence is thus one between technology as a *project*, on the one hand, that discloses human beings and things within the 'world' in such a way as to make them available for the apparatus of industrial capitalism and technology understood as *technics*, or neutral instrumentality fettered only by society's production relations, on the other. Such an ambivalence can be said to run throughout Marcuse's post-war writings, in particular *Eros and Civilization* (1974) and *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). It is evident also in his important essay from 1941 'Some Social Implications of Modern Technology' (1990).

Technology and technics converge in Marcuse's account of the way in which the automobile embodies the new 'matter-of-factness' of technological reason. While in the past such 'matter-of-factness' played a progressive role in countering metaphysical

world-views, as in the modern physics and the rationalism of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, today it contributes to reproducing the existing order (see also Horkheimer, 1975: 232). This gets to the heart of Marcuse's answer as to why, after a period of rationalization that contributes to the overthrow of the *ancien régime*, technological reason plays a crucial role not in pushing beyond the capitalist order – as some contemporary 'Accelerationists' (see Mackay and Avanessian, 2014) think it still possesses the capacity to do – but rather in buttressing and justifying this order. This is the dialectic, in other words, whereby the normative ideals of the bourgeois society, in particular the idea of reason as the actualization of human autonomy in opposition to external authorities, are reversed. Technological reason forms the basis of one-dimensional society insofar as it supplants critical, which is to say, negative reason, which seeks to liberate the untapped potential that lies dormant in human beings and in external nature alike.

In contrast to his later position, however, Marcuse retains the orthodox Marxian view of the productive forces as inherently dynamic and emancipatory. If the proletariat, and with it the possibility of an immanent critique of political economy, is at the point of being fully incorporated within the dominant form of technology of the late capitalist order, technics or the productive forces can still be understood as embodying contradictory tendencies that result from its inherently innovative logic. As such, technics retains the ability, for example, to 'democratize' functions and, in the process, reveal the existing production relations as arbitrary and obsolete. How this is actually to come about is not clearly specified. Nonetheless, what is crucial is Marcuse's attempt to keep open the relation between technology and technics. Let us now turn to Habermas, who makes such ambivalence central to his response to Marcuse, and his important alternative reading of Weber, which plays such a crucial role in his attempt to work out his account of communicative reason.

## HABERMAS' CRITIQUE OF MARCUSE

Taking as his point of departure Hannah Arendt's (1958) differentiation within the *vita activa* of labour, work and action, Habermas distinguishes in his reading of Marx between labour and interaction: action oriented towards mastery and control and action oriented to mutual understanding. Such a differentiation enables Habermas to provide, like Lukács and Marcuse before him, a critique of Weber's account of rationalization. While showing that the 'inner-worldly asceticism' of the Puritan was central to the spread of what he calls 'cognitive-instrumental' rationality ('formal' as opposed to 'substantive' rationality), Weber underplays the transposition of the rationalization of world-views into 'societal' rationalization. With the process of secularization that comes in the wake of the process of rationalization, Habermas comes to rethink this process in his notion of 'post-secularity' (2005), fundamental questions of the 'true', the 'beautiful' and the 'good' become differentiated and supplant, as distinct and irreconcilable spheres of value, the metaphysical systems in which they were bound together. While Weber, in his Nietzschean diagnosis of nihilism as the unending war between contending 'gods and demons', drew the pessimistic conclusion that reason had forever lost its unity, universality and capacity to grasp the whole, Habermas elaborates on the vague conception of formal rationality inherent in Weber. The fragmented dynamic of cultural rationalization, according to Habermas, is unified by a *communicative* form of rationality, guided by the regulative ideal of undistorted communication or mutual understanding. The latter takes the form of the argumentative redemption of claims to validity: 'The unity of rationality in the multiplicity of value spheres rationalized according to their inner logics is secured precisely at the formal level of the argumentative redemption of validity claims' (Habermas, 1991: 249). Habermas therefore

attempts to show that communicative reason mediates the universal structure of action oriented towards understanding and the particular claims made within each quasi-autonomous sphere of value.

In contrast with Marcuse's critique the shortcomings of Weber's account of modernity lie in the refusal to recognize that the process of rationalization is, itself, accompanied by a simultaneous differentiation of value spheres no longer rooted in either traditional or charismatic forms of authority, and the corresponding possibility of a 'rationalization' of the lifeworld grounded in the argumentative procedure of the giving and taking of reasons. Marcuse's and Habermas' critiques of Weber's account of rationalization are inverse images of each other. While Marcuse argues for an extension of the concept of labour as the cultural mediation of subject and object, Habermas argues for its foreshortening in an account of the rationalization of the symbolically mediated interaction of the lifeworld that is attendant upon the spread of formal rationality.

Habermas therefore argues that Marcuse's ambivalence towards technology, discussed above, results from the collapse of 'work and 'interaction'. Work is defined as 'purposive-rational action', which is, itself, further differentiated into instrumental action, rational choice (strategic action) or some combination thereof. Purposive action is action geared to realizing goals defined under given conditions guided by criteria for the effective control of reality (instrumental action) or the correct evaluation of possible alternative choices (strategic action). Interaction, as distinguished from work, is defined as communicative or symbolic action and 'is governed by binding *consensual norms*, which define reciprocal expectations about behavior and which must be understood and recognized by at least two acting subjects' (1970: 92).

According to Habermas, the central problem with Marcuse's critique of technology lies in its misguided attempt to cash out a philosophical critique of technological reason in

sociological terms. As we have already seen, Marcuse's critique of Weber lies in what he takes to be the latter's suspect conflation of reason and rationalization which, for the former, is inextricable from domination. It is necessary, in Habermas' view, to keep the philosophical and sociological dimensions of his critique separate and distinct. The former derives, as it does for the first generation of Critical Theorists as a whole, from what Habermas regards as the problematic horizon of what he calls the 'secret hope of the redemption of a fallen nature, of restoring 'nature's voice'. This would entail, then, 'a different scientific methodology in general ... The viewpoint of possible technical control would be replaced by one of preserving, fostering, and releasing the potentialities of nature' (1970: 86). Because Marcuse articulates his philosophical critique from within the antiquated confines of the metaphysics of the philosophy of consciousness, his critique of technology becomes obsolete. If technology could be viewed phenomenologically as a 'project' at all, it could only be as a 'generic' one, which has the human species as a whole as its subject, 'not one that could be historically surpassed' (1970: 87). Habermas accuses Marcuse of the category error of attempting to apply concepts that are applicable only to inter-subjective relations to relations between subject and object.

Habermas is, nonetheless, more sympathetic to Marcuse's sociological critique of technology as the dominant ideology within late capitalism. He agrees with Marcuse's view that rather than exploding capitalist social relations from within, technology legitimizes this order. Technological reason, in Habermas' view, becomes the means by which the 'productive forces ... continually threaten the institutional framework *and at the same time* set the standard of legitimation for the production relations that restrict the potential' (1970: 89, emphasis in original). This is an early version of Habermas' 'colonization' thesis articulated in the second volume of the *Theory of Communicative*

*Action*, according to which the fundamental pathology of late capitalist societies lies in the tendency of the steering mechanisms of the social subsystems of economy and state, namely money and power, to 'colonize' the symbolically mediated sphere of the life-world. So, rather than rejecting Marcuse's critique of technology *tout court*, Habermas seeks to set it on firmer, post-metaphysical footing. This is accomplished by arguing that the ideological nature of technology (and science) inheres not in its orientation towards controlling nature, but rather in the transgression of the boundary of its own sphere of value. Because its legitimate orientation consists of controlling nature, technological or cognitive-instrumental rationality becomes ideological when it overflows or exceeds the sphere of subject-object relations or the sphere of work and spills into that of inter-subjective relations or that of 'interaction'. This argument rests upon a theoretical edifice that becomes clearer in Habermas' subsequent work, central to which is an understanding of language that privileges validity over meaning.

Indeed, as alluded to above, Habermas' account of language enables him to reconstruct the relationship between technological form and totality. This account of language is based on an appropriation of speech act theory, and rationality itself is understood in terms of a formal conception of argumentation. By shifting the perspective from the relation between subject and object to that between subject and subject or inter-subjectivity, Habermas grounds rationality in the 'argumentative procedures for directly or indirectly redeeming claims to propositional truth, normative rightness, subjective truthfulness and aesthetic harmony' (1987: 314). The dirempted spheres of validity (science, morality, art) are unified not in an emphatic, metaphysical way as in Hegel's conception of Absolute Spirit, or in Lukács' conception of the identical subject-object of history, or in Marcuse's early ontological understanding of labour but, rather, in terms of communicative action.



Habermas' critique of Marcuse's understanding of technology and, indeed, his reconstruction of Critical Theory as a whole is based on the marginalization of a 'world disclosive' conception of language (Lafont, 2000; Kompridis, 2006). Such a marginalization becomes especially clear in Habermas' engagement with Derrida, in which he draws a strong line between pragmatic or 'problem-solving' and disclosive conceptions of language (Habermas, 1987; Gandesha, 2006). In other words, with his emphasis on the *argumentative* redemption of claims to validity within the 'objective', 'social' and 'subjective' worlds, Habermas could be said to suspend the question of the meaningfulness of these worlds themselves. But what precisely is meant by 'world disclosure'? The world disclosive conception of language (in a lineage stretching back to Wilhelm von Humboldt and Herder) emphasizes, as Gadamer puts it, that 'Language is not simply one human possession among others in the world, rather, on it depends the fact that human beings *have* a world at all' (cited in Bohman, 1996: 200). The concept of 'world refers to the always already articulated, shared orientations and interpretations, independent of individuals who are socialized in it' (Bohman, 1996: 200).

As Bernstein (1994: 210) has suggested, while Habermas claims that interpretation has a key role to play within his theory, he nonetheless privileges discourses of justification. Such a privileging has a tendency to rehabilitate the positivist position that tends to denigrate the rationality of logic of discovery by holding that only justificatory discourses are rational. Validity claims within the three spheres are modelled on that of scientific truth which itself, at least for Habermas, presupposes 'nature as it is'. The marginalization of the disclosive conception of language places the emancipatory aspiration of modernity – its unique consciousness of time, its relentless impulsion to generate its own normativity out of itself, its need for a new beginning unencumbered by the past, etc. – in jeopardy. In his assessment

of poststructural critiques of the discourse of modernity, Habermas juxtaposes in sharp outline his pragmatic conception of language with the disclosive conception that figures so prominently in the work of thinkers such as Jacques Derrida but whose provenance is clearly Heideggerian. Central to Habermas' critique of the poststructural appropriation of Heidegger is that it is based upon the idea of the 'ontological difference': the happening of truth that discloses the world is a mysterious extra-mundane dispensation of Being, rather than the result of intra-mundane action and learning processes.

## MARCUSE, TECHNOLOGY AND WORLD DISCLOSURE

As previously suggested, Marcuse's conception of technology (as opposed to technics), albeit without its fullest linguistic implications, is based on a notion of disclosure. If this aspect is emphasized, then it is possible to defend his account of technology from Habermas' critique. By so doing it may also be possible to expose some of the weaknesses of the communicative paradigm.

It might be argued that the very strength of Habermas' critique of the pre-eminence of the paradigm of production in Marcuse is at the same time its weakness. While Habermas might be correct to take issue with Marcuse's attempt to ground his critique of technological reason in the paradigm of production, such a critique can perhaps be undertaken without necessarily accepting the premises of the paradigm of communication. As suggested above, the elements of the production paradigm, namely its emphasis on the centrality of labour as an ontological category, sit rather uncomfortably with the phenomenological dimension of Marcuse's critique. The productivity of meaning and the productivity of labour power cannot be assimilated. Meanings accumulated and embedded in cultural traditions are not to be re-appropriated

in an analogous way to the appropriation of accumulated, 'dead labour' by 'living labour'. Habermas must privilege validity over meaning in order to complete the transition from the philosophy of consciousness to communicative reason.

In contrast, Marcuse can be defended if we read his critique of technology as anticipating the following insight: that in each of the three realms – science, morality and art – it is possible to discern the operations of a disclosive conception of language. This is what Adorno calls 'constellation' and what Wittgenstein calls 'aspect seeing'. Far from subverting rationality ('the acquisition and use of fallible language'), linguistic world disclosure, in fact, makes such rationality possible. Any theory that fails to elucidate the manner in which the world, itself, becomes possible ends up reifying the symbolic resources of the lifeworld and, therefore, short-circuits the possibility of its transformation. In contrast to Habermas, the merit of Marcuse's critique of technology is to show the way in which validity and meaning exist in a relation of genuine tension.

While Habermas is correct to note the ambivalence in Marcuse's approach to technology as both value-neutral and a specific historical 'project', such an approach isn't so contradictory as it may *prima facie* appear. The key concept that undergirds Marcuse's critique of technological reason is what he calls the 'technological *a priori* which organizes modern science and technology. It is the culmination of the processes of rationalization and disenchantment that Marcuse outlines in his critique of Weber and appropriation of Husserl. As rationality comes to be defined in terms of objective laws of motion, values become purely subjective as opposed to indexed to a conception of objective reason. The effect of this is that, theoretically, the transformation of humanity and external nature is free from all limitations except, of course, from the 'brute factuality of matter', and become a '(hypothetical) system of instrumentalities'. The elaboration of

such a system becomes more than simply the development of all forms of particular technical organization; rather, it is their precondition. 'Proved in its effectiveness', Marcuse (1965b: 152) argues, 'this conception works as *a priori* – it predetermines experience, it *projects* the direction of the transformation of nature, it organizes the whole'.

Marcuse's example is that of the automobile which, of course, gives its name to an entire 'regime of accumulation', namely: Fordism:

A man who travels by automobile to a distant place chooses his route from highway maps. Towns, lakes and mountains appear as obstacles to be bypassed. The countryside is shaped and organized by the highway. Numerous signs and posters tell the traveller what to do and think; they even request his attention to the beauties of nature and the hallmarks of history. Giant advertisements tell him to stop for the pause that refreshes. And all this is indeed for his benefit, safety and comfort; he receives what he wants. Business, technics, human needs and nature are welded together into one rational and expedient mechanism. He will fare best who follows its directions subordinating his spontaneity to the anonymous wisdom that ordered everything for him. (Marcuse, 1990: 143)

The automobile, the 'rational and expedient mechanism into which is synthesized 'business, technics, human needs and nature', functions as the 'technological *a priori*'. The very judgement that it is the most effective means of travelling from point A to point B structures in advance the visible and the invisible (what Rancière calls the 'distribution of the sensible'). The automobile as technology materialized participates therefore in disclosing the world. Albert Borgman views the modern highway system, as well as symbolic logic and modern architecture, as exemplifying the essential features of technology. Like the other two forms of technological practice, the highway system qua 'embodied calculus, is not just *instrumental* but *paradigmatic*' (Borgman, 1978: 20). As a paradigm it shapes our vision of objectivity. Thus, like the vicious circle that Marcuse discerns in Husserl,

in technological practice formal features are discovered in the concrete phenomena of our world. Such discoveries lead to the construction of formal models that cover a certain domain of the concrete world. These models form a hierarchy from concrete and limited realizations at the bottom to more abstract and encompassing models in the higher reaches of the hierarchy. (Borgman, 1978: 20)

In the process, technological practice 'delimit[s] in rigorous form the space of all possibilities of the domain that they cover', the result of which is that the 'world in its historical coherence and its actual and singular presence recedes' (20). Or, as Marcuse (1990: 143) puts it, 'The countryside is shaped and organized by the highway'.

Viewed now in light of the concept of 'technological a priori', the apparent contradiction between technics as neutral, and technology as value-laden, dissolves. The form functions at the level of what Marcuse calls technology, while technics constitute the productive forces that can promote either domination or liberation. Marcuse takes up the phenomenological understanding of technology as 'nothing technological' (Heidegger), that is, as a mode of 'revealing beings' without at the same time understanding world disclosure as existing beyond the pale of history. The technological disclosure of being happens through historically situated human decisions and practices. In fact, it is precisely the very productivity of technics that makes it possible to imagine the objective possibility of a radically different set of social arrangements. This does not mean that the appearance of such an imaginary is its realization. Rather, Marcuse provides us with the possibility of understanding the relation between technology and technics as the relationship between meaning and validity respectively. While technics can and must be understood in terms of the criterion of 'success' in achieving a given end, the sense or meaning of success itself would have to be understood in terms that lay beyond the narrow provenance of pure instrumental means

or efficiency. Such a criterion would have to make reference to a wider set of assumptions, orientations and commitments that cannot ultimately be understood independently of the languages within which they are expressed. Success can be defined in terms of the furtherance of domination of human beings and external nature alike or it could be understood in terms of the thriving and flourishing of human and non-human life within a 'pacified existence'.

## CONCLUSION

What we have tried to show is that, from its origins in the mid 1920s, Critical Theory applied itself to the question of why, in the midst of a profound crisis of capitalism in the inter-war period, the outcome was counter-revolution rather than proletarian revolution. Committed to the idea that any compelling grasp of the physiognomy of this crisis must be premised on totality, Critical Theory disavowed a purely philosophical conception of it. Rather, it constituted an interdisciplinary research project geared, in part, to empirical analysis of the social-psychological and institutional nature of the crisis that questioned some of the key assumptions of traditional or 'world-view' (Heinrich, 2012) Marxism. In particular, it challenged the role such a form of Marxism assigned to the productive forces. Drawing upon Marx's critique of the value form, Lukács' important elaboration of this critique in the concept of 'reification' and Weber's account of the rationalization of disenchantment, Critical Theorists, in particular Herbert Marcuse, sought to show the manner in which, far from constituting a neutral, abstract form of rationality that would burst asunder capitalist production relations from within, technology actually helped to consolidate rather than transform these relations. Technology, Marcuse argued, wasn't simply an abstract instrumentality but rather

constituted the principle perceptive structure – the ‘technological a priori’ – through which the world takes shape. It is for this reason that the aesthetic dimension comes to play a key role in the politics of Critical Theory.

## Notes

- 1 This was perhaps most dramatically represented by Thomas Mann in his novel *Dr. Faustus*, in which the troubled yet brilliant composer, and representative of the most advanced artistic form, Leverkühn, threatens to ‘revoke’ Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* with its *pièce de résistance* ‘Ode to Joy’, a beautiful paean to the solidarity of a universal humanity proclaimed in Schiller’s song.
- 2 Much of what follows draws upon Gandesha (2004).

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# Materialism

Sebastian Truskolaski

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to outline the significance of materialism for the formulation of the Frankfurt School's critical theory of society. Traditionally, materialism has been taken to mean that the world is composed of a single substance or matter, and that all worldly phenomena – including ostensibly intangible ones, such as thought – are modifications or attributes thereof. Accordingly, materialism has long been equated with the view that our experience of the world is rooted in (and conditioned by) tangible, material circumstances. It signals an effort to explain the world out of itself, on its own terms, i.e. without appealing to any higher principle, be it the primacy of the Idea or the supreme reign of God. The wider implication of this view – famously elaborated in the nineteenth century by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and their followers – is that these material circumstances are historically produced, rather than naturally given or divinely

sanctioned, and that, as such, they can be contested, challenged and, ultimately, changed. However, as we will find, many of the most prominent attempts to give concrete shape to these views have wound up inadvertently reproducing the very metaphysical assumptions that they set out to overturn. The materialism of the Frankfurt School stems squarely from within this contested space. Accordingly, the positions advanced by figures from its so-called 'first generation' (particularly Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, as well as Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse) mark a significant, if not uncritical, contribution to the history of this idea. Horkheimer, for instance, discusses the question of materialism in his early essays 'Materialism and Metaphysics' (2002a), 'Materialism and Morality' (1993) and his seminal 'Traditional and Critical Theory' (2002b). This theme is taken up again in his discussions with Adorno (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2011), who – in turn – treats it in his lectures on *Philosophical*

*Terminology* (1974) and his magnum opus *Negative Dialectics* (1973). Other notable examples include Bloch, who explores the issue in his book *Das Materialismus-Problem, seine Geschichte und Substanz* [*The Problem of Materialism, its History and Substance*] (1972), Benjamin, who debates the matter in the notes comprising his unfinished *Arcades Projects* (1999), and Marcuse, who examines the subject in his essay 'New Sources on the Foundation of Historical Materialism' (2005). What holds these texts together is that, in one way or another, they all interrogate the professed materialist disposition of Marxian social criticism, which, they suggest, had hardened into a dogmatic worldview by the 1930s – at least in its official iterations. Following figureheads of 'Western Marxism' (Elbe, 2013), such as Georg Lukács and Karl Korsch, the authors from the Institute for Social Research thus re-inscribe the diverse concerns collected under the heading of materialism into the history of philosophy, especially that of German Idealism – a tradition which, in their estimation, had been prematurely left for dead. In this regard, Horkheimer, Adorno et al. explore questions of experience and affectivity, cognition and morality, as well as the relation between nature and culture in the age of 'positivism' – a byword for the philosophically un-reflected empiricism of much scientific thought, including its Marxist variants. By re-engaging with the problems of materialism in this expanded sense, and by drawing on a range of disciplinary specialisms – from sociology to philosophy and economics – the authors from the orbit of the Institute for Social Research thus sought to recast the parameters of this concept with and beyond Marx. In this regard they position themselves against a tendency, prevalent amongst Soviet Marxists such as Lenin, who tended to neglect the wide-ranging philosophical implications of Marx's early writings, thus re-converting the emphasis on the material transformation of society into a metaphysical doctrine.

It is noteworthy, too, that many of the most pointedly Marxian aspects of the early Frankfurt School's materialism were taken up in the 1960s/1970s by students of Adorno and Horkheimer in Germany, and Herbert Marcuse and Leo Löwenthal in the United States. Significant examples include works by Alfred Schmidt (1971, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1977, 1981), Hans-Jürgen Krahl (1974), Hans-Georg Backhaus (1997), Helmut Reichelt (2001), Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt (2014), as well as Angela Davis (1998). Their positions markedly contrast with those of prominent figures from the so-called 'second-generation' of the Frankfurt School, including Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, whose work has tended to foreground questions of normativity over explicitly Marxist-materialist forms of social criticism.

Without presuming to account for the full breadth of the Frankfurt School's materialism – there are, of course, considerable differences between its individual players – the following pages will attempt to highlight some of its salient features, such as the prominent emphasis on the suffering body, on materialist epistemology, and on the negative image of utopia that the examination of these themes is supposed to throw into relief. To this end the chapter is organised into three parts: (1) An overview of the history of materialism, and an indication of the Frankfurt School's place therein; (2) An account of Adorno's 'imageless materialism' as a paradigmatic instance of the Frankfurt School's position; (3) An attempt to highlight the cotemporary resonance of the Frankfurt School's ideas in contrast with a recent form of philosophical materialism known as Speculative Realism. All the while the overarching conceit is the following: the Frankfurt School's re-formulation of materialism – the malleability of man's historical, material situation – intends to safeguard Critical Theory from the perceived pitfalls of both Soviet-style Marxism and liberal scientism by creating an interdisciplinary toolkit with which to change the world that philosophy has hitherto only interpreted.



## OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY OF MATERIALISM

Although it is arguable that the concern with matter and the way that it relates to consciousness is coeval with the emergence of (European) philosophy itself, *materialism* – in the sense of a distinctive intellectual formation – means an eminently modern phenomenon; one that rose to prominence in eighteenth-century France during the era of the so-called ‘High Enlightenment’ and is associated with the writings of the Baron d’Holbach, Julien Offray de la Mettrie, Denis Diderot, Claude Adrien Helvétius and others (Israel, 2001). In turn, the French materialists – whose fiercely atheistic views are frequently named in connection with the revolutionary ferment of the late 1780s – forged their positions in response to a wide range of older philosophies, which foregrounded the material stuff of life over the lofty realm of ideas: from the Pre-Socratic Atomism of Democritus and his follower Epicurus, to the pantheistic monism of Spinoza, and the scientific thought of Galileo, Bacon and Descartes. With a view to these sources, amongst others, the French materialists developed their characteristically polemical, politically explosive view that human beings are quasi machine-like, that they are independent of divine design, and that – as such – they are not answerable to clerical and (by extension) royal authority. A famous formulation of these views appears in d’Holbach’s *The System of Nature* (1770), which denies the existence of any final causes, arguing that there is no soul apart from the living body, and suggesting that faith in God is the result of an irrational fear before the ultimately mechanistic processes of nature.

Despite the widespread political reception of the French materialists’ ideas amongst German-speaking intellectuals, which was due – above all – to their association with revolutionary Republicanism, their philosophy as such tended to be met with some suspicion. Immanuel Kant, for instance, whose declared, if not unambiguous, sympathies for

the French revolution are well documented (Kant, 1996), rejected materialism – alongside Idealism – as insufficient for grounding a critically self-reflexive form of philosophy. As he writes:

Through criticism alone can we sever the very root of materialism, fatalism, atheism, of freethinking unbelief, of enthusiasm and superstition, which can become generally injurious, and finally also of idealism and skepticism, which are more dangerous to the schools and can hardly be transmitted to the public. (Kant, 1998: 119)

The German aversion to materialism, which was foreshadowed in the famous controversy between Leibniz and Newton (Bertoloni-Meli, 1993), remained in force throughout the first three decades of the nineteenth century – a period that was dominated by the Idealist systems of Fichte, Hegel and Schelling. The Idealist’s relation to materialism can be gleaned in Hegel’s lectures on the history of philosophy (1995), which praise the French materialists’ attempt to overcome the dualism of body and mind, whilst rejecting their view that it is possible to grasp totality in terms of mere matter. What is important here is that following Hegel’s death in 1831, Idealism – the philosophy of Spirit – increasingly came under fire. As a consequence, numerous attempts were made to circumnavigate its perceived failings. They are characterised by an extraordinary conceptual breadth, ranging from Søren Kierkegaard’s Existentialism to Hermann von Helmholtz’s Neo-Kantianism. Amongst these varied programmes there are four specifically materialist approaches that bear mentioning, insofar as they form the backdrop to the Frankfurt School’s subsequent work. They are, first, the physiological materialism of Jacob Moleschott, Carl Vogt and Ludwig Büchner; second, the anthropological materialism of Ludwig Feuerbach; third, the early dialectical/historical materialism of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels; and fourth, the late reformulation of dialectical/historical materialism by Engels, as well as its reception by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.

(It exceeds the limitations of the present chapter to outline a fifth important forebear of the Frankfurt School's position, namely: the messianic materialism of the Jena Romantics [Frank, 2004].)

First, then, Moleschott, Vogt and Büchner are notable principally because their positions demonstrate the extent to which German-speaking philosophers had abandoned the precepts of Idealism by the mid nineteenth century (Gregory, 1977). Over the course of the 1850s, Vogt, for instance, published a series of popular texts that echoed the fierce atheism of the French materialists by rejecting the biblical view of creation on biological grounds, arguing that the world, and our experience of it, is to be explained in purely physiological terms; a view that, in turn, led him to identify psychological processes with physical ones (e.g. thinking with brain activity). Vogt's ideas were vigorously contested by an array of Christian thinkers, most prominently Rudolf Wagner, culminating in a public disagreement at Göttingen in 1854 – the so-called *Materialismus-Streit* (Bayertz et al., 2012). Without touching on the finer points of these debates – in essence they amount to a series of broadly ideological declarations of the superiority of materialism over spiritualism and vice versa – the public interest in such issues, spurred on by major advancements in the life sciences, created a fertile climate for the proliferation of other materialist philosophies.

Second, Ludwig Feuerbach – a contemporary of the physiological materialists, who corresponded for a time with Moleschott and Vogt (Feuerbach, 1993) – is significant for introducing an anthropological dimension into the newly fangled German debates about the primacy of matter. Along with Bruno Bauer, Max Stirner and others, Feuerbach had been associated with the left-leaning Young Hegelians, who – in the period before 1848 – foregrounded aspects of Hegel's philosophy that had seemed to them to call for a ruthless criticism of the present (chiefly religion, but also the state) in the name of a fully

actualised form of reason, and an associated state of freedom, which, they claimed, followed from Hegel's thinking, but exceeded in its radicality his stated intentions. Although Feuerbach is best remembered for the criticisms levelled at him by Marx (2000) and Engels, his central work – *The Essence of Christianity* (1957) – is an important forerunner of dialectical/historical materialism, not least because it emphasises the importance of human sensuality. As Feuerbach writes, 'I negate God. For me this means that I negate the negation of the human. I put the sensual, real, and, consequently, necessarily political and social position of the human in place of its illusory, fantastic, heavenly position' (Feuerbach, 1990: 189). On this basis, Schmidt has done much to rehabilitate Feuerbach's philosophy by pointing out the importance of his atheistic humanism for the development of subsequent materialisms. As he argues:

If, in its most advanced form, Marx's theory discusses societal reality on two levels (which are related precisely by dint of their *mediation*); if it insists that, despite their objectivity, economic categories, such as the commodity, value, money, and capital are 'subjective', i.e. that they are concrete existential determinations of embodied human beings, then this insight points back to Feuerbachian impulses. (Schmidt, 1973: 19)

Third, then, Marx and Engels are crucial for carrying out a practical re-orientation of Feuerbach's anthropological materialism, by foregrounding the agency inherent in human sensibility, which is central for the wider project of re-shaping the material world. Although Marx acknowledges the importance of Feuerbach for the development of these ideas, one of the best-known documents of his consequential efforts to recast the concept of materialism is a set of critical notes known as the 'Theses On Feuerbach' (2000): 'Feuerbach', we are told, 'wants sensible objects – really distinguished from thought-objects: but he does not conceive human activity itself as *objective* activity ... Hence he does not grasp the significance of

revolutionary, practical-critical activity' (Marx, 2000: 171). As such, Marx chides, Feuerbach merely presents another variant of traditional materialism. By contrast, he suggests, the true task of materialism would be to outline an approach that is intellectually adequate to the actualisation of philosophical ideas, to 'revolutionary, practical-critical activity' – in short, to changing the world. This is why, as Schmidt points out, Marx's concept of materialism aims at a critique of social objectivity. But there is another instructive point that can be gleaned from this short passage, namely: Marx's redefinition of the then prevalent philosophical conception of subjectivity. That is to say, Marx sought to recast the (Kantian) concept of the subject – the 'I' – as, in the first place, passively apprehending the material world as an object of intuition before mastering it intellectually through its conformity to certain mental structures that are deemed to be universally human (space, time, causality). However, although Marx concedes Kant's point that the subject is central to producing knowledge of the material world, he denies that the role of human sensibility is merely passive in this process. Rather, he ascribes sensibility – and hence human activity more generally – a transformative role. As Peter Osborne points out, 'This new materialist redefinition of the human subject as sensible practice (practical activity as the sensuous being of the human), rather than a subject being defined by its knowledge of an object, has profound consequences for the traditional philosophical concept of human essence' (Osborne, 2005: 29). Instead of appearing as a mere 'abstraction inherent in each single individual', the inter-relatedness of human activity means that the old conception of society as an aggregate of competing individuals no longer holds. Instead, Marx foregrounds the relational character of socially transformative practice under the banner of his new materialism – a materialism aimed at changing society.

Finally, it bears stressing the importance of Engels' reformulation of his and Marx's concept of materialism in later works like *Anti-Dühring* (1987a), *Dialectics of Nature* (1987b) and *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1990), as well as the reception of these works by Lenin. (As we will find, it is the Engelsian-Leninist position that prompts the Frankfurt School's reformulation of materialism.) On Engels' late account, his and Marx's common goal had been to demonstrate a 'general law of development of nature, society, and thought', which is at once historical and ontological (Marx and Engels, 1990: 361). Engels thus equates certain socio-political developments with particular natural processes. As he argues, 'what is valid for nature' – the material world as such – 'must also be valid for history'; 'Political praxis is ... the consummation of historical' and, by extension, natural 'laws' (Elbe, 2013). This schema has epistemological implications. For Engels, the 'law' of the dialectic, which he and Marx had taken over from Hegel, is, in fact, 'split into "two sets of laws"': into 'the dialectic of "the external world"', on the one hand, 'and the dialectic of "human thought"', on the other (Elbe, 2013). In this sense, Engels' view aims at a materialist reversal of Hegel's philosophy. 'The inversion of the dialectic in Hegel rests on this, that it is supposed to be the "self-development of thought", of which the dialectic of facts is ... only a reflection, whereas the dialectic in our heads is in reality the reflection of the actual', material, 'development going on in the world of nature and of human history in obedience to dialectical forms' (Marx and Engels, 1975: 520). In this sense, Engels suggests, Hegel's dialectic is marked by a simple mind-matter dichotomy, which is unduly weighted in favour of thought. It is not Spirit which drives the historical process, but an as yet unnamed material force. (By contrast, it will be recalled, for Marx this force had been human activity: practice.) Undoing this confusion is supposed to put the dialectic back on its feet. On the one hand, this is intended

to demonstrate the interconnectedness of all fields of intellectual inquiry (philosophy, political economy and the natural sciences are all seen as evincing the same dialectical-historical tendency); and, on the other hand, this unifying endeavour is designed to put socialism on the authoritative ground of empirical science. However, Engels' view that the dialectic 'in our heads' is merely a reflection of 'actual developments in the world' undercuts the primacy of praxis, and with it critique, which he and Marx had previously insisted on. Engels portrays consciousness as a mere 'product of evolution and a passive reflection of the process of nature, not however as a productive force' (Schmidt, 1971: 55–6). In other words, as Schmidt points out, Engels' later characterisation of his and Marx's concept of materialism portrays the external world as a rigid, immutable given, in which humankind is 'limited to a mere mirroring of the factual', i.e. the 'uncritical reproduction of existing relationships in consciousness' (Schmidt, 1971: 56). It seems clear, then, that if the Frankfurt School's conception of a Marxian materialism entails that human beings have the power to practically affect their material circumstances (a return to Marx's early insight), then the cogency of this view will depend on how effectively they can challenge Engels' position. In order to gain a fuller sense hereof, however, it remains to consider a final episode from the history of materialism, namely: the reception of Engels' ideas by Lenin.

Engels' late re-formulation of his and Marx's concept of materialism resounds in Lenin's meta-scientific opus *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1961) – a work that went on to significantly shape the theoretical foundations of Soviet Marxism. On the surface, Lenin's book is couched in a string of factional debates concerning recent developments in the natural sciences. The discovery of radioactivity, in particular, is supposed to have led to a widespread rejection 'of an objective reality existing outside the mind'; a sentiment that – in turn – provoked 'the

replacement of materialism by idealism and agnosticism' (Lenin, 1961: 252). Lenin's misgivings are directed chiefly at Alexander Bogdanov's three-volume work *Empirio-Monism* (1904–6), which – for its part – draws on theories developed by the Austrian physicist Ernst Mach. In brief, Mach argues that physics proceeds not from the study of matter, but from the study of sense-experience: 'not bodies produce sensations, but element-complexes (sensation-complexes) constitute the bodies' (Mach, 1959: 29). Bogdanov follows Mach by advocating a strict empiricism, which rules out any form of *a priori* knowledge. As he argues, 'The real world is identical with human experience of it' (Rowley, 1996: 5). His specifically Marxist manoeuvre is to recast the individual experiences described by Mach into those of a collective subject: the proletarian class itself. Accordingly, knowledge of the external world – and the ability to change it – is not based on the merely subjective whims of individuals. Rather, it is made up of the 'shared perceptions of the collective consciousness of a society' (Rowley, 1996: 5). However, as Lenin charges, Bogdanov's idiosyncratic adaptation of Mach cannot escape its rooting in a fundamentally individualistic outlook. Accordingly, the prioritisation of sense-experience is said to displace the primacy of mind-independent matter – a circumstance whose political consequence is taken to mean that materialism, which Lenin equates with political praxis, is transformed into subjective quietism. Accordingly, the purportedly bourgeois 'belief that our knowledge of the world is constructed out of a field of sense-data' is seen as creating 'an insuperable barrier between human consciousness and the external world' (Richey, 2003: 43). Lenin's effort to defend the priority of matter thus requires an alternative account of how human beings relate to the material world – an alternative epistemology. As Lenin argues, rather than constituting bodies, sensation appears as 'the direct connection between consciousness and the external world' (Lenin, 1961: 51).

In a clear echo of Engels' later works, sense data is said to mirror the world as it really is, independently of (and external to) consciousness. Consequently, Lenin argues that 'sensation, perception, idea, and the mind of man generally' are to be regarded 'as an image of objective reality' (Lenin, 1961: 267). This framework is supposed to guarantee the simple primacy of matter over ideas since 'consciousness is only an image of the external world, and it is obvious that an image cannot exist without the thing imaged, and that the latter exists independently of that which images it' (Lenin, 1961: 69). The proof that these images are bearers of objective truth is supposed to be provided by scientific experimentation, the analogue of which is seen as political praxis. However, here Lenin runs into difficulties since his suggestion that 'it is absolutely unpardonable to confuse ... any particular theory of the structure of matter' with the 'epistemological category' of matter itself, suggests that the primacy of matter is somehow immune to scientific contestation (Lenin, 1969: 129). Accordingly, his effort to escape the trappings of Idealism (the mastery of reality in thought) runs the danger of reproducing, rather than refuting, the position he rallies against. Indeed, the problem that Adorno, Schmidt and others point to in this regard can be summed up as follows: if no 'particular theory' can pose a challenge to the unshakeable reality of matter as an 'epistemological category', then matter itself – along with the revolutionary politics that it is supposed to guarantee – is dogmatically elevated to a metaphysical invariant.

It goes beyond the limitations of the present chapter to explore in detail how Lenin's reflections bear on his explicitly political thought, and, furthermore, on his consequential revolutionary activities. The mediations are complex. Suffice to note that Lenin's views became fundamental for formulating the theoretical self-understanding of the Soviet Union as the quasi-inevitable product of history's untrammelled, 'dialectical' progress. It is *this* official iteration of a Marxist

materialism that was forcefully contested by the members of the Frankfurt School, especially following the publication of Marx's *Grundrisse* in 1939. This juncture invites a preliminary observation. To the extent that one can speak of materialism in terms of a unified concept, it seems to fall under what Adorno and Horkheimer describe as a 'dialectic of enlightenment' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 26): on the one hand, the philosophically problematic insistence on the simple primacy of matter can serve as an emancipatory blow against the entrenched, and apparently divinely ordained social structures of, say, the *ancien régime*; however, on the other hand, a suggestion such as Lenin's, that human consciousness merely reflects mind-independent matter, risks reproducing these structures under a different name – as incontestable facts of a seemingly inevitable historical process, which tends (in Adorno and Horkheimer's estimation) to culminate in barbarism rather than socialism. In other words, a materialist programme like that of the Frankfurt School – to 'reject the illusion that ... the power of thought is sufficient to grasp the totality of the real' (Adorno, 1977: 120) – cannot be put into practice if matter is transformed into a philosophical ideal.

## ADORNO'S 'IMAGELESS' MATERIALISM

Having briefly outlined some major markers from the history of materialism – from d'Holbach to Lenin – it remains to consider the Frankfurt School's particular contribution to the development of this theme. Instead of surveying its members' individual positions, the following section will focus on one paradigmatic example, which speaks to many of their common concerns, namely: Adorno's notion of an 'imageless' materialism. As will become apparent, Adorno outlines a philosophically self-reflexive challenge to the scientific tendencies of Marxist materialism

by elaborating on a number of the Institute's core ideas: a form of mimetic rationality that would radically reconfigure the relationship between humankind and the material world under the yoke of capitalist modernity; the suffering body as a negative expression of humankind's wish for physical fulfilment; and an associated form of historiography that would resist the progressive narratives of vulgarised leftist discourse. In one way or another all of these themes are echoed in a memorable passage from Adorno's magnum opus *Negative Dialectics*, titled 'Materialism Imageless'. There Adorno writes:

Representational thinking [*Abbildendes Denken*] would be without reflection – an undialectical contradiction, for without reflection there is no theory. A consciousness interpolating images, a third element, between itself and that which it thinks would unwittingly reproduce idealism. A body of ideas would substitute for the object of cognition, and the subjective arbitrariness of such ideas is that of the authorities. The materialist longing to grasp the thing aims at the opposite: it is only in the absence of images that the full object could be conceived. Such absence concurs with the theological ban on images. Materialism brought that ban into secular form by not permitting Utopia to be positively pictured; this is the substance of its negativity. At its most materialistic, materialism comes to agree with theology. Its great desire would be the resurrection of the flesh, a desire utterly foreign to idealism, the realm of the absolute spirit. The perspective vanishing point of historic materialism would be its self-sublimation, the spirit's liberation from the primacy of material needs in their state of fulfilment. Only if the physical urge were quenched would the spirit be reconciled and would become that which it only promises while the spell of material conditions will not let it satisfy material needs. (Adorno, 1973: 207)

Above all, this passage seems to stake an epistemological claim: that a purportedly materialist form of cognition which interpolates images – 'a third element' – between consciousness and 'that which it thinks', in fact, 'unwittingly reproduces idealism'. Adorno's phrasing thus recalls the traditional opposition of materialism and idealism – the realm of 'material needs' vs. that of 'absolute spirit'. It acknowledges a 'risk that

supposedly materialist thinking will involuntarily turn into its opposite' (Jarvis, 2004: 96), i.e. into a form of subjective domination, which Adorno associates with certain unspecified 'authorities'. To be sure, Adorno's reference to 'representational thinking' calls to mind the various forms of 'reflection theory' that punctuate the history of materialism from Democritus to Locke. In this respect, the German term *Abbild* – image, copy – takes centre stage. The locus of the problem, Adorno suggests, lies in 'the Eastern countries' (Adorno, 1973: 206). Notwithstanding this indelicate indictment of the so-called 'East', it is striking that Adorno speaks here of a 'materialism come to political power', of 'governmental terror machines' that 'entrench themselves as permanent institutions, mocking the theory they carry on their lips' (Adorno, 1973: 204). Accordingly, his invective appears to be directed chiefly against the official materialist doctrines of the Soviet Union, not least amongst them Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. This suspicion is confirmed by the fact that Adorno explicitly names Lenin in the paragraph preceding the one from which the long citation above is drawn. As he writes, 'When Lenin, rather than go in for epistemology, opposed it in compulsively reiterated avowals of the noumenality of cognitive objects, he meant to demonstrate that subjective positivism is conspiring with the powers that be' (Adorno, 1973: 205–6). This is further borne out in a lecture dated 17 January 1963, where Adorno describes 'the big book by Lenin about *Empirio-Criticism*, which through a sort of dogmatic repetition declares the objective reality of the world vis-à-vis its reduction to subjective givens' (Adorno, 1974: 200). Accordingly, the question arises as to what kind of materialism is at issue here – what kind of politics is supposed to follow from it? Certainly, any attempt to answer these questions cannot go unqualified today. Inasmuch as the theoretical and political sway of the Soviet Union has been irrevocably consigned to the history books, Adorno's

objections to the functionaries of dialectical materialism may appear to have lost much of their currency. Nevertheless, 'Materialism Imageless' points beyond its immediate context by holding fast to what Adorno describes elsewhere as a 'Utopia of cognition' (Adorno, 1973: 10). That is to say, 'the materialist longing to grasp the thing' means nothing less than a desire to radically reconceive how thinking bears on the material world, albeit not without certain caveats. For what can we really say about a 'cognition that neither merely depicts nor constitutes things – how is it to be thought?' (Schmidt, 1984: 25). After all, the Utopia implied by Adorno's concept of materialism – 'harmony between man and nature', as Schmidt puts it (1984: 25) – is subject to a ban on representation. As Adorno argues, 'one may not cast a picture of Utopia in a positive manner'; 'one can only talk about Utopia in a negative way' (Adorno and Bloch, 1988: 9). To form any image of Utopia is to predetermine it from the standpoint of the present situation and thus 'to garnish the status quo with its ultimate apologia' (Comay, 1997: 348). The question thus arises as to how we can make sense of Adorno's concept of materialism given that it resists any positive determinations.

One possible avenue would be to respond to this question negatively, i.e. by clarifying the terms in which Adorno criticises Soviet materialism, especially Lenin's theory of reflection. This will allow us to situate his views, and – by extension – those of the Frankfurt School more generally, in the long history of materialism sketched in the previous section. The following pages, then, will consider two prominent aspects of Adorno's 'imageless' materialism: its quasi-epistemological dimension and its somatic moment.

In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno argues that Lenin's concept of materialism is rooted in 'an Epicurean-style materialist mythology, which invents the emission by matter of little images' (Adorno, 1973: 205). As he writes, the 'naïve replica-realism' of Lenin's theory of reflection is rooted in a 'materialist

metaphysics, such as that advanced by antique Epicureanism, with its thesis that we continually receive little images from matter' (Adorno, 1974: 213–14). Adorno thus raises the question as to how matter, which Lenin characterises as being 'wholly without soul or spirit, i.e. causal-mechanical material in the sense of Democritus', comes to emit such images in the first place (Adorno, 1974: 214). What interests us here is how the analogy between Moscow and Athens allows Adorno to expose certain metaphysical presuppositions underlying Lenin's account of how consciousness relates to the material world. In this regard it is worth considering a lecture on Atomism, perhaps the earliest form of philosophical materialism, which Adorno gave in 1963.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on a major work by the pre-eminent Neo-Kantian historian of materialism, Friedrich Albert Lange (Lange, 1887; Schmidt, 1974), Adorno describes how, in Democritus and Epicurus' view, all matter continually emits 'fine particles', which are absorbed by our sense organs (Lange, 1887: 106). The origin of our sense impressions – mental images – is thus due to a constant flow of such particles from the surface of material bodies. As Lange expounds, it is thus that 'actual material copies of things' are said to 'enter into us' (Lange, 1887: 106). Accordingly, it is the impact of these particles on our sense organs that enables us to perceive the images supposedly sent out by matter. Adorno objects to the Atomists' views by asking how it is possible 'to simultaneously teach the being-in-itself of nature as something independent of us, whilst', at the same time, 'assuming that our sensory perception is the source of all cognition?' (Adorno, 1974: 212). In order to square this contradiction, Adorno suggests, 'Epicurus is forced to posit a metaphysical thesis, which is irreconcilable with Materialism's denial of metaphysics' (Adorno, 1974: 212), namely: that matter emits little images, whose truth is verified by sensory experience. In turn, Adorno asserts a convergence of the Atomists' views with Leninist reflection theory. As he argues:

This reflection theory, then, played a significant role in the history of Marxist materialism. To this day it lives on in the form of DIAMAT reflection theory, according to which theory is supposed to be an image of reality, regardless of the fact that whilst the spiritual and intentional may be directed at particular states of affairs – it may mean them, make judgements about them – it does not resemble them ... imagistically. (Adorno, 1974: 212)

To be sure, Adorno's identification of Lenin's dialectical materialism with Epicurean Atomism is uneasy. His suggestion that there is an absolute correspondence between Democritus' belief that nothing happens by chance and Lenin's alleged historical determinism, for instance, does not account for the role of Democritus' doctrine of the atomic swerve – *clinamen* – which states that the movements of atoms, the indivisible building blocks of matter, are ultimately random – a claim that is supposed to account for the existence of human beings' free will in an otherwise mechanistic universe. Nevertheless, Adorno argues, Lenin's theory of reflection reproduces those meta-physical presuppositions that it seeks to recant by assigning an extra-physical quality to ostensibly disenchanted matter. By positing the mysterious ability of mind-independent bodies to emit images whose truthfulness is confirmed through sensory reflection, and by elevating this reality to the status of an unalterable philosophical principle which ensures the efficaciousness of revolutionary praxis, Adorno charges that Lenin's concept of materialism succumbs to the very 'meta-physical subtleties and theological niceties' that it aims to overcome (Marx and Engels, 1996: 81). In other words, Lenin is said to fetishise matter by imbuing it with life-like qualities, whilst simultaneously reifying human consciousness by turning it into a passive object: a reflecting mirror. It follows that if the official materialist doctrines of the so-called 'East' aid the 'uncritical reproduction of existing relationships in consciousness', as Schmidt suggests, then the kind of Marxism that these doctrines serve to ground

is, at the very least, theoretically deficient. As Adorno contends, Lenin's trans-historical metaphysics of matter embeds human beings in a system of seamlessly determined nature which belies 'the possibility of freedom, whilst', paradoxically, 'speaking at the same time of spontaneous action, even revolution' (Schmidt, 1984: 18). Whether or not bad politics necessarily stems from bad theory, as Adorno implies, cannot be decided here. Suffice to note that his objections to Lenin are designed to underscore the historical constructed-ness of capitalist modernity, as well as the imperative to critically interrogate its apparent permanence.

But what does Adorno's criticism of Lenin say about his own conception of materialism? If 'Materialism Imageless' negates the images of Leninist reflection theory by polemically invoking the theological ban on images, then this strategy implies a different mode of grasping (and acting upon) the material world, which does not limit itself to mere mirroring, and which does not inflict on it the kind of violence that Adorno associates with identity thinking. In other words, Adorno seeks to cast into relief a different way of construing the relation between mind and matter; a relation which calls to mind the 'Utopia of cognition' cited above. Such a relation, however, resists positive portrayal, not least because the tools available for its construal are insufficient for expressing it. The task of philosophy is thus to think thought beyond its inbuilt limitations whilst using the restricted terms at its disposal. Materialism, on this reading, implies a complete overhaul of how human beings think the material world, and the possibility of its transformation, from the inside out. Such a complete overhaul, however, raises questions – not directly answered by Adorno – as to the kind of Marxism that is conceivable on this basis. What seems clear is this: whereas Lenin (following Engels) postulates socialism as a quasi-natural historical inevitability, Adorno (and the other members of the Frankfurt School) stress contingency, failure and the reversal of an



emancipatory tendency into its opposite; and whereas Lenin (again, following Engels) emphasises the mind's propensity to reflect the world, Adorno aims to negate the image of the status quo.

Having thus established the sense in which Adorno's confrontation with Leninist reflection theory throws into relief a new form of materialist epistemology whose utopian implications cannot be positively pictured, it remains to explore the aforementioned somatic dimension of his thought. In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno argues that 'the object', whose primacy is dogmatically asserted by Lenin, 'is a terminological mask' (Adorno, 1973: 192). It covers over an elusive excess of matter that cannot be captured by thought. Wittingly or not, 'Once the object becomes an object of cognition', Adorno suggests, 'its physical side' – its irreducibly material moment – 'is spiritualised' (Adorno, 1973: 192). As he contends, leaving this spiritualisation unchallenged reduces sensation – 'the crux of all epistemology' – to a 'fact of consciousness' (Adorno, 1973: 193). In this sense, theories of reflection, such as Lenin's, run the danger of misconstruing the thing that is registered in sensation as being merely another link in the chain of cognitive functions. By contrast, Adorno argues, sensation is not spent in consciousness. 'Every sensation is a physical feeling also' (Adorno, 1973: 193). It is such 'physical feeling' that Adorno associates with a 'resurrection of the flesh' in 'Materialism Imageless'. Curiously, Adorno explicitly denies the Christological connotations of his formulation. Instead, he cites the *Wisdom of Solomon* as his source (Adorno, 1974: 187). Whatever the provenance of Adorno's imagery, 'resurrection' is intimated negatively. Suffering becomes the somatic index of the non-identity between humankind and the material stuff of nature. This contrasts starkly with Lenin's Engelsian suggestion that matter is simply reflected by sensory experience. Adorno suggestively illustrates this point in a passage from *Negative Dialectics* titled 'Suffering

Physical'. As he writes, 'all pain and all negativity, the motor of dialectical thought, is the variously mediated, sometimes unrecognisable form of physical things' (Adorno, 1973: 202, translation altered). In a characteristic gesture Adorno identifies the antithetical moment of dialectical thought – 'negativity' – with 'pain'. His 'Utopia of cognition' thus presents itself as 'the mirror image' of a negative affect, which inversely signals a state of hedonic fulfilment (Adorno, 1974: 247). Adorno thus upends the Engelsian-Leninist topos of reflection. This is the sense in which, for Adorno, suffering is imbued with an ethical imperative. The 'physical moment' tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different "Woe speaks: Go". Hence the convergence of the specifically materialist with the critical, with socially transformative praxis' (Adorno, 1973: 203, translation altered). Once again, Adorno's multifarious concerns converge: materialism is assigned an ethical dimension, one which coincides with his view of critique as a form of socially transformative praxis. Schopenhauer, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud resound in these lines. As Adorno continues, 'the *telos* of such an organisation of society' as would allow for the satisfaction of want 'would be to negate the physical suffering of even the least of its members' (Adorno, 1973: 203–4). The insistence on a negation of 'physical suffering', in turn, recalls a formulation from another important document of Adorno's materialism, his 'Theses on Need' (1942). 'The question of the immediate satisfaction of needs should not be posed under the aspects "social" and "natural", "primary" and "secondary", "true" and "false". Rather it falls into the same category as the question of the suffering of the vast majority of all the people on earth' (Adorno, 2005: 43). In a 'classless society', he argues in an atypically affirmative manner, the relation between 'need and satisfaction *will* be transformed' (Adorno, 2005: 43, emphasis added). Notwithstanding the question as to what kind of anthropology informs Adorno's

slippery conceptions of need and satisfaction, this passage points forward to a central tenet of his unfinished final work, *Aesthetic Theory* (2002). The alleviation of bodily suffering, the reconciliation of subject and object, the overcoming of societal antagonisms – in short, Utopia – can only be achieved in semblance, through the labours of autonomous art, conceived of as the paradoxical product of modernity *par excellence*. In the present context this means that whilst the possibility of societal transformation is mandated by an individual experience of bodily suffering, the ‘satisfaction of material needs’ hinges on the continued criticism of a philosophical tradition, and a lived political reality, that has been prematurely declared obsolete. ‘The power of determinate negation’, as Adorno puts it in Hegelian terms, ‘is the only permissible figure’ of such fulfilment (Adorno, 1992: 18). It occurs in formally advanced works of art. With this in mind, let us recall briefly the long passage cited at the beginning of this section. If Adorno argues that ‘spirit’ would ‘be reconciled and would become that which it only promises while the spell of material conditions will not let it satisfy material needs’, then the implication seems to be that ‘such spirit may only emerge undiminished when the conditions of lack and privation, which it repressed, will come to an end’ (Buchholz, 1991: 144). This ‘end’ can only be arrived at critically – through the consummate negation of false life. Accordingly, Adorno argues that ‘one of the substantive misinterpretations of materialism believes that, since it teaches the preponderance of matter, or, indeed, of material conditions, this preponderance itself is what’s desired’ (Adorno, 1974: 198). Rather, he suggests, ‘the telos ... of Marxist materialism is the abolition of materialism, i.e. the introduction of a state in which the blind coercion of people by material conditions would be broken and in which the question of freedom would become truly meaningful’ (Adorno, 1974: 198). On Adorno’s reading, then, a truly Marxian concept of materialism is ultimately self-cancelling. This is the sense

in which he argues that ‘the perspective vanishing point of historic materialism would be its self-sublimation, the spirit’s liberation from the primacy of material needs in their state of fulfilment’ (Adorno, 1973: 207). That is to say, properly speaking, materialism would mean its own undoing, erasing even the trace of itself in the satisfaction of need. As such, it is not simply a counter-position to Idealism but rather the outcome of its immanent critique – an immanent critique that aims at an altogether different relationship between humankind and the material world, which goes beyond the coercive strictures of the status quo. Adorno’s ‘imageless’ mode of materialist cognition, then, points beyond the critique of ‘representational thinking’ to a ‘Utopia of cognition’ whose quasi-messianic ‘promise’ motivates the unlikely deployment of an ostensibly biblical motif in the critical re-imagination of a Marxian materialism that rejects the lure of positive portrayals of a reconciled future.

## SPECULATIVE REALISM

Having thus outlined Adorno’s misgivings concerning Lenin’s mode of ‘representational thinking’, it remains to explore the contemporary resonance of his critique. Accordingly, it is worth noting that central precepts of Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* have recently resurfaced in a variant of philosophical materialism known as Speculative Realism. This is especially true of Quentin Meillassoux’s book *After Finitude* (2008a), which has been described as reading ‘like a repetition of Lenin’s ill-famed *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* ... rewritten for the twenty-first century’ (Žižek, 2012: 625). Before proceeding to interrogate this claim, however, it bears emphasising the sense in which Lenin’s presence at this juncture is revealing: if it is true that *After Finitude* seeks to ‘complete and correct the programme of Marxist philosophy undertaken by Lenin’ (Brown, 2011: 163), as has

been suggested by some critics, then the question arises as to whether the kind of social/political change conceivable on this basis is prey to Adorno's critique of dialectical materialism. The point here will be to argue that, if Meillassoux's approach marks a resurgence of a quasi-Leninist metaphysics of matter, then Adorno's position – and by extension that of the Frankfurt School more generally – provides a timely model for rethinking materialism (and, indeed, Marxism) today. In order to do so, however, it is necessary to briefly summarise the central claims of *After Finitude*.

Put briefly, Meillassoux's argument is two-pronged: on the one hand, he suggests, it is possible to have determinate knowledge of mind-independent matter; on the other hand, he insists, one can demonstrate that the form of this mind-independent matter is radically contingent. He expounds these views in two steps: (1) Through a critique of what he calls 'correlationism'; (2) Through a radicalisation of what he describes as 'Hume's problem'.

As a first step, Meillassoux's effort to show that human beings can grasp mind-independent matter depends on his objections to a characteristic of modern philosophy, which teaches that 'we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being' – mind and matter – 'and never to either term considered apart from the other' (Meillassoux, 2008a: 5). In the main, Meillassoux argues, European philosophers since Kant have mistakenly surmised that nothing can be totally a-subjective since objectivity can only be construed on 'the foundations of the cognition in which it is grounded' (Kant, 1998: 507). He illustrates this point by citing a passage from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, which famously likens the endeavour of critical philosophy to 'the first thoughts of Copernicus' (Kant, 1998: 110), the so-called Copernican turn. Whereas, in Kant's view, traditional metaphysics assumed that 'our cognition must conform to objects' (the metaphorical

analogue of the sun's revolution around the earth), we must now consider the reverse: that objects 'conform to our cognition', i.e. that the earth revolves around the sun (Kant, 1998: 110). Without presuming to recount the intricacies of Kant's argument, the comparison with Copernicus is important because – as Meillassoux points out – it contains a slippage.

It has become abundantly clear that a more fitting comparison for the Kantian revolution in thought would be to a 'Ptolemaic counter-revolution', given that what the former asserts is not that the observer whom we thought was motionless is in fact orbiting around the observed sun, but on the contrary, that the subject is central to the process of knowledge. (Meillassoux, 2008a: 118)

If Copernican heliocentrism places reality at the centre of intellectual inquiry, then Kant's critical turn entails a geocentric counter-revolution through which humankind becomes the measure of matter. Notwithstanding the biases of Meillassoux's reading (Cole, 2015), his objection serves to frame the question that he shares with Lenin: how can thought grasp mind-independent matter? Meillassoux seeks to 'overcome the correlational obstacle' from the inside out by showing that Kant's 'critique of metaphysical necessity itself enables ... the speculative affirmation of non-necessity' (Hallward, 2011: 136). In short, the correlation between thought and being itself is presented as a mere contingency. As Hallward explains, 'in order to guard against idealist claims to knowledge of absolute reality', Kant 'accepts not only the reduction of knowledge to knowledge of facts', that is, to knowledge of appearances within certain intellectual strictures; he also accepts that this 'reduction' is itself nothing but one fact amongst others: 'another non-necessary contingency' (Hallward, 2011: 136). In this tacit admission, Meillassoux locates the supposed non-necessity of subject-object dialectics, which are presented as incidental to the history of philosophy. Immediate access to matter as such is thus deemed possible.

In a second step, Meillassoux attempts to radicalise the passages from Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* that contest the principle of sufficient reason. As he suggests, 'any cause may actually produce any effect whatsoever, provided the latter is not contradictory' (Meillassoux, 2008a: 90). In other words, 'we may well be able to uncover the basic laws that govern the universe – but the cause that underlies those laws themselves, and which endows them with necessity, will remain inaccessible to us' (Meillassoux, 2008a: 90). Meillassoux concedes Hume's basic point; however, he suggests that Hume shied away from the full consequence of his insight by declaring it as being beyond demonstration. By contrast, he contends, the impossibility of demonstrating that things are as they are of necessity in fact *proves* that no such necessity exists. 'Rather than try to salvage a dubious faith in the apparent stability of our experience' – like Lenin, Meillassoux speaks of fideism – 'we should affirm the prospect that Hume refused to accept': that 'an infinite variety of "effects" might emerge on the basis of no cause at all, in a pure eruption of novelty *ex nihilo*' (Hallward, 2011: 132). Here a decisive difference between Meillassoux and Lenin comes into focus. Whereas Lenin holds that ordinary sense experience provides the ultimate proof of matter's primacy, which, in turn, ensures the pre-eminence of transformative political praxis, Meillassoux argues that it is precisely the stability of ordinary sense experience which prevents us from surrendering to the full consequence of absolute contingency: complete, spontaneous transformation. As Hallward points out, the 'conversion of Hume's problem into Meillassoux's opportunity' thus requires a 'deflation of experience and the senses' (Hallward, 2011: 133); it demands 'that thought must free itself from the fascination for the phenomenal fixity of laws, so as to accede to a purely intelligible Chaos capable of destroying and of producing, without reason, things and the laws which they obey' (Meillassoux, 2008b: 274).

In this respect, Meillassoux is far from Adorno's insistence on the significance of sensory experience and human affectivity. Instead, he isolates the mathematical dimensions of objects from their physical extension: 'what is mathematically conceivable is absolutely possible' (Meillassoux, 2008a: 126). The irrefutable reality of mind-independent matter is supposed to be proven – *ex hypothesi* – in terms of pure number.

There are at least two aspects of Meillassoux's argument which resonate with Adorno's critique of Lenin: one regarding the place of transformative praxis, the other regarding materialism's relapse into idealism.

First, Meillassoux equivocates between meta-physical and physical necessity, between 'epistemology and ontology' (Hallward, 2011: 137). In short, he inverts the Engelsian-Leninist view that reality evinces a developmental logic, whereby both cells and societies evolve according to dialectical laws that are reflected in consciousness. After all, as we have seen, Meillassoux claims that 'there is no cause or reason for anything to be the way it is'. Consequently, the transformation of material conditions may be both absolute and instantaneous (Meillassoux, 2008a: 138). Although the consequence of the Engelsian-Leninist dialectic is a strong form of historical necessity, whereas the outcome of Meillassoux's speculative-realist deduction is an absolute form of contingency, both positions converge in mistaking metaphysical claims for ontological ones. Whereas the former over-determines the course of history, the latter can provide no account of what drives processes of transformation. In other words, whereas Engels and Lenin struggle to make room for spontaneous action, Meillassoux can provide no adequate substitute for what others have called 'substance, or spirit, or power, or labour' (Hallward, 2011: 138). That is, 'his insistence that anything might happen can only amount to an insistence on the bare possibility of radical change' (Hallward, 2011: 138). By contrast, Adorno insists on the need for radical societal transformation

without consigning it to the realms of absolute necessity or absolute contingency, but, rather, to the domain of possibility, however slim it may be.

Second, Meillassoux's defence of mind-independent matter tends to get tangled up in mathematical abstractions, which not only lose sight of the material reality they purport to safeguard, but which – on Adorno's model – might be seen as reproducing capitalism's abstract reduction of quality to quantity.

As a matter of course, every unit of measurement, from the length of a meter to the time required for a planet to orbit around a star, exists at a fundamental distance from the domain of number as such. If Meillassoux was to carry through the argument of 'ancestrality' to its logical conclusion, he would have to acknowledge that it would eliminate not only all reference to secondary qualities like colour and texture but also all conventional primary qualities like length or mass or date as well. What might then be known of an 'arche-fossil' ... would presumably have to be expressed in terms of pure numbers alone ... Whatever else such ... knowledge amounts to, it has no obvious relation with the sorts of realities that empirical science tries to describe. (Hallward, 2011: 140)

Meillassoux's misstep, then, lies in the assumption that such mathematical forms of argumentation can remedy the ills of capitalist abstraction, which seem to appear to him as 'mere errors of the intellect' that do not have 'any basis in a social, material and extra-logical reality' (Hallward, 2011: 140). That is to say, the mathematical form of Meillassoux's argument undermines its purportedly materialist content: the material condition of 'the tiny, fragile human body', to use Benjamin's evocative phrase (Benjamin, 2002: 144). The point, then, would be to say that Adorno's outline of an 'imageless' materialism gains currency in the present context because it models a radically open-ended criticism of capitalist modernity, which does not foreground mind-independent matter, so much as it insists on the importance of an on-going criticism of everything that exists.

## CONCLUSION

As has been argued, the Frankfurt School's particular contribution to the history of materialism lies in its foregrounding of certain epistemological, ethical and aesthetic impulses, which follow from a focus on individual experiences of visceral, somatic suffering in capitalist modernity. On these grounds, Adorno et al. aim to negatively intimate a Utopian mode of relating to the material world, including humankind's own corporeality, which resists the dogmatic prioritisation of mind-independent matter. Accordingly, the authors from the orbit of the Institute for Social Research are notable for seeking to challenge the orthodoxies of dialectical materialism by casting into relief a Marxism that would liberate humankind 'from the primacy of material needs in their state of fulfilment'. On this basis, the Frankfurt School tacitly devised models for a broadly Marxian form of social criticism that aimed to offset the perceived failings of Engels and Lenin's dogmatic metaphysics of matter. The resurgence of certain precepts of such a materialist metaphysics in the work of authors including Meillassoux, in turn, gives a renewed actuality to the Frankfurt School's position. However, the openness of their concept of materialism – its critical disposition – means that its applicability to current political struggles must continually be determined afresh by subsequent generations of readers.

## Note

- 1 Adorno refers in passing to the surviving fragments of Marx's doctoral dissertation, *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* from 1841. A more thorough investigation of this text might have prompted him to redraw the genealogy of Marx's concept of materialism in order to contrast it with its Leninist re-imagination – a task that is laudably undertaken in Schmidt's doctoral dissertation, which was written under the supervision of Adorno and Horkheimer.

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# Theology and Materialism

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Translated by Lars Fischer

The Frankfurt School stood in the tradition of the Enlightenment critique of religion, especially in its formulation by Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud. In response to the historical experiences of the twentieth century, it radicalized this critique in fundamental ways. For Horkheimer and Adorno, religion was no longer merely ‘opium’ or the ‘sigh of the harried creature’.<sup>1</sup> Their critique went much further. The First World War and the failure of the German Revolution had already rocked the belief in progress and the plausibility of religious attempts to ascribe meaning to reality. These attempts now fell into the rubric Adorno described as that of ‘unbelieving belief’, maintained only for the sake of adhering to some belief.<sup>2</sup> Auschwitz aggravated this state of affairs yet further. Reason had tipped over entirely into the irrational and the idea of God itself, which was supposed to guarantee the reconcilability of reason and the world, was no longer just implausible but had become irrevocably unthinkable: it could no longer be conceived

of in a consistent manner.<sup>3</sup> To ascribe a purpose to history or even to an individual life amounted at best to a mockery of suffering.<sup>4</sup> Religion no longer functioned as a form of opium offering some measure of manic compensation. Where it had not been absorbed by the culture industry anyway it amounted to no more than a lustreless reduplication of reality.<sup>5</sup>

## THE PROHIBITION OF THE IMAGE (*BILDERVERBOT*)

Their sociological and cultural diagnosis drove Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s approach to theological problems, which had been ambivalent all along, towards the ultimate aporia: on the one hand, the great promises of reconciliation and truth associated with theology must not be ceded to the prevailing utter meaninglessness of the reality we inhabit; on the other hand, historical experience flies



in the face of any form of hope. At the same time, it would be cynical to fob off the survivors with a relativistic or nihilistic shrug of the shoulders. Only a concept that 'goes beyond its affirmation by extant facts' could assimilate this contradiction. The potential for both truth and delusion resided precisely in the 'difference between the concept and its [factual] affirmation'.<sup>6</sup> Given this aporia, theological content could be taken up only *ex negativo*. Hence the much cited prohibition of the image in critical theory, which Adorno, Kracauer, and Löwenthal had already adopted in the early 1920s.<sup>7</sup> It represented the attempt to sustain the idea of reconciliation negatively, its factual impossibility notwithstanding. In the meantime, only the critique of the delusion could act as a placeholder for the possibility of redemption.<sup>8</sup> Any attempt to portray redemption in the here and now ignored its own historical contingency, thus becoming delusional and distorting everything.<sup>9</sup> 'Hence, anyone who believes in God cannot believe in God'. Instead, the 'possibility' associated with the divine name – this 'possibility' will be a recurrent focal point throughout this discussion – is maintained by the nonbeliever.<sup>10</sup> The theological reflections of the critical theorists largely gravitated around this aporia. As opposed to Kierkegaard, who on Adorno's reckoning had 'immobilized and hypostatized' the paradox,<sup>11</sup> they did not want to let matters rest there. Yet the possibility of an escape towards some 'other' state of affairs, in which utopia and the absolute would become one, could only ever be formulated by means of radical negation, by portraying reality without the slightest illusion. It was precisely this dilemma that underpinned the prohibition of the image. Horkheimer in particular never tired of emphasizing that 'German philosophy', and especially Kant's critical philosophy, shared 'with Judaism the notion ... that the critical issue is not so much the naming and determining of the absolute but rather the deciphering of the mundane and the

deposition of the idols'.<sup>12</sup> He thus amalgamated ideology-critical activity and the driving force underlying a possible negative theology. It was by revealing the historically contingent nature of the relative and conditional claims perceived of by human beings as unconditional truths that idols were deposed. Horkheimer referred to this approach as the 'awareness that the world is appearance' and therefore does not represent the ultimate reality.<sup>13</sup> The idea of truth, which can only be determined negatively for the time being, will only be fulfilled when humankind has been liberated.<sup>14</sup>

## THEOLOGY, METAPHYSICS, REVOLUTION

Neither for Horkheimer nor for Adorno was this selective recourse to a negative idea of God meant to endorse any particular religion. Indeed, on their account, even the metaphysical thought of antiquity had, from its very inception, been the inevitable critique of religious notions. Only philosophical-metaphysical reflection rendered conceivable the 'possibility' that revelation 'imposes and thus defiles' because obedience to it amounts to heteronomy.<sup>15</sup> Metaphysics, then, as philosophy, is by its very nature both a deliberative critique of religion and 'the attempt to salvage categories that are theological in origin'.<sup>16</sup> Philosophy had to reject the dogmatic-authoritarian surfeit of these categories, yet in so doing it passed on some of their potential. The religious notions of redemption had been (quite literally) more full-bodied than the disembodied philosophical concept of the immortality of the soul. As the credibility of institutionally established dogmas waned, modern philosophy gradually subverted its own earlier theological grounding, a development epitomized by positivism.<sup>17</sup> Religion itself, without a 'core of revelation', became little more than a 'mere cultural reminiscence' or consoling

'heartwarmer' at best;<sup>18</sup> or, at worst, a means of direct ideological domination.<sup>19</sup> Enlightenment reason had destroyed the certitude of salvation but failed to offer a substitute. Only a genuine revolution realizing the Enlightenment ideal of the autonomous individual would have facilitated the annulment of the existing order and the fulfilment of philosophy. The Critical Theorists were interested in the hope of redemption once invested in theology that had remained illusive 'because the moment for its realization was missed'.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, metaphysical-religious questions continued to be virulent within philosophy. Historically, then, both faith and reason had been equally rooted in the immanence of the factual, rendering history a 'permanent catastrophe' or what Benjamin called a constantly growing 'heap of rubble'.<sup>21</sup> Philosophy 'can do no more than patiently trace in ever new configurations and perspectives the ambiguity of melancholy'. 'Truth' it could attain only if one day 'genuine deliverance were to come forward from these configurations of the unreal after all'.<sup>22</sup> Only melancholy, the preconscious certitude that 'something is missing',<sup>23</sup> remained true to the hope that this might occur.

### **MIGRATION INTO THE PROFANE, OR: INTO THE FIERY NUCLEUS**

Horkheimer and Adorno juxtaposed the requisite negative inversion of religious consciousness critically to the extant religious tradition. Horkheimer distinguished between 'religion in the good sense' – the enduring hope that everything will change – and 'religion in the bad sense' – the ideology that 'gilds the scourged reality all the same'. Any attempt to ascribe purpose to human suffering, i.e., any attempt to develop a positive theodicy, resulted in the 'bad' variant. Not only was this form of apologetics alien to the 'good' religious impulse, the latter was

incapable of offering a justification even for itself.<sup>24</sup> Positive religion, then, was heteronomous and ideological on principle. Only if the 'yearning for something other than the world' assimilated doubt in the possibility of its fulfilment could it avoid immediately tipping over into ideology.<sup>25</sup>

Their stance reflected not only an emancipatory critique of religious tutelage but also a vision of secularization in the tradition of Cultural Protestantism and liberal Judaism, which envisaged the abandonment of residual irrational elements in accordance with the standards of bourgeois reason. Accepting the content of revelation after the critique of religion amounted, in Adorno's formulation, to 'playing off the even more out-dated against the out-dated'.<sup>26</sup> Hans Mayer recalled a conversation in Montagnola in which Horkheimer 'explained to me that the Jewish service needed to be reformed? In what way? By eliminating Hebrew and most of the rituals. I suggested that this went to the core of this religion ... This did not seem to impress him.'<sup>27</sup> Adorno was arguably the member of the inner circle of the Frankfurt School whose critical engagement of religious tradition was the most intense. His notion of what secularization needed to entail was altogether more radical than Horkheimer's. 'No theological content', he insisted, 'will continue to exist untransformed; all its elements will have to pass the test of migrating into the secular, into the profane'.<sup>28</sup>

The profanation postulate operated on a number of planes. It encompassed partisanship for intra-religious enlightenment and the appropriation of critical impulses within the religious traditions – and, ultimately, of the utopian momentum that supposedly inhered in those impulses. In some of his most audacious moments, Adorno sought not only to address the idea of profanation as a critical demand to religion but also to anchor it within religion itself, referring to the 'heretical theology' of religious mysticism. In this connection, he focused especially on 'the kabbalah', which, on his reading, was a

'heresy' that had been nonconformist from the outset. Drawing on Gershom Scholem, he celebrated its late Sabbatean variant as a precursor of the Haskalah. On Adorno's account, the crucial point was that the 'mystical ... motif, that the tiniest mundane trait is pertinent to the absolute' bound transcendence and immanence together and thus, instead of proclaiming an already redeemed world beyond, incorporated human history.<sup>29</sup> The 'historical truth' of this nexus 'can be seized only at the greatest distance from its origin, through complete secularization'.<sup>30</sup> It was not in its religious origin or its atheist neutralization that truth could be found, then, but only in its most alienated secular – utopian – forms. In a well-known letter to Benjamin, Adorno called on him – with reference to his Arcades Project – to undertake a 'radicalization of dialectics all the way into the fiery nucleus of theology'. This would also throw the 'societal-dialectical, indeed the economic motifs' into the sharpest possible relief.<sup>31</sup> Adorno's comments demonstrate just how inextricably Adorno's envisaged 'theology' was linked to the immanent. This forward-directed impulse explains why Adorno conceived of his metaphysics not as a *prima philosophia* but as a tentative, open-ended quest for the *ultima philosophia*.<sup>32</sup> Remote as this transcendental long-term objective may have been, the profanation concept had clear implications for the present. *All* positive religious speculation had to be abandoned. Transcendence 'transcends only where it conceals itself'.<sup>33</sup>

For Adorno, one way of responding to the demise of transcendence was to 'treat profane texts like holy scripture'.<sup>34</sup> In a world darkened by Auschwitz, thought could find 'refuge' only in the 'interpretive immersion' in the great texts.<sup>35</sup> They were handed down 'as though they were simply there and had authority'.<sup>36</sup> Hence they could serve as a point of departure for reflection even in the absence of objective meaning. A western canon of literature and philosophy was thus enlisted, which, for Adorno, had stored

up historical experience that pointed beyond the meaningless present. On the one hand, this approach led into the field of aesthetic and metaphysical experience. On the other hand, Adorno posited a form of recourse to tradition that brings it into the present as a prerequisite for any form of philosophy not reduced to mere positivism. Contrary to the illusion that the process of insight was transparent on its own terms, 'knowledge of the past' resided and 'pressed on' in every issue.<sup>37</sup> Rather than submit passively to this over-determination of the present by the past, one should develop a critical awareness of it in order to render the claims of the past and the demands of the present 'commensurable'. In the 'transition from philosophy to interpretation', the patient rearranging, time and again, of the elements at hand, their implicit historical dimension could suddenly illuminate the present and vice versa. This procedure secularized 'the irrecoverable archetype' of the exegesis of 'holy scripture' that had fallen silent.<sup>38</sup>

### THEOLOGY IN THE PROFANE: TILlich, BENJAMIN, KRACAUER

The antecedents of the idea of a hidden 'theology in the profane' can be traced to Adorno's teachers of the 1920s and 1930s. Protestant theological debates like the 'Discussion on the Task of Protestantism in a Secularized Civilization' on 17 June 1931, organized by Heinrich Frick with Paul Tillich as one of its participants, played a key role.<sup>39</sup> Tillich, who supervised Adorno's post-doctoral thesis (*Habilitation*) on Kierkegaard, had himself developed a concept of profanation as 'de-demonization'. For Tillich, 'Protestant form-creation' referred 'expressly religious forms to the profane that questions them'.<sup>40</sup> To Adorno's mind, this was not radical enough. It was possible that the 'historical function of Protestantism ... has been both fulfilled and

exhausted', and that, as a result, Christian concepts were now merely the 'empty husks' of historically obsolete responses to the world. All those contents that were still topical had already shed their religious form.<sup>41</sup> In a radio eulogy for Tillich broadcast in 1966, Adorno returned to the issue of profanation. Tillich's inexhaustible ability to engage other individuals and positions had matched 'the theological ideal of surrendering oneself': 'I gather in Paul we read, "Lose, so you may win"'.<sup>42</sup> Adorno's determination to anchor the migration into the profane now went further than it had done in 1931. Originally grounded in the critique of religion, his attempt to associate Tillich's habitus with the indirect theology he envisaged and identify it specifically with Paul now connected this line of argument to a (historically questionable) line of 'heretical' or 'mystical' tradition. Evidently, then, not only Horkheimer's but also Adorno's take on theology too mellowed over time.

Tillich's influence and his own various attempts to paint the profanation postulate, *post facto*, in kabbalistic colours notwithstanding, none of Adorno's intellectual interlocutors shaped his theology more strongly than Walter Benjamin. According to Benjamin's blotting paper simile, thought (the blotting paper) became saturated with the ink (the theology). Left to its own devices, it took up as much ink as possible and thus removed the writing (revelation).<sup>43</sup> The latter could now be reconstructed only from the palimpsestic blotting paper. Benjamin's imagery of historical materialism as a chess automaton that won every game yet was in fact secretly operated by a hunchbacked dwarf inside it functioned in a similar manner. Theology, 'which is small and ugly nowadays and in any case may not show its face', was the hunchbacked dwarf. In both instances, theology could survive only where it became the core or engine of materialism.

Adorno had already rejected the religious quest for meaning of his first teacher, Siegfried Kracauer, in the 1920s. With the

benefit of hindsight, the great stylistic and intellectual impact of the latter's essay, 'Die Bibel auf Deutsch' ['The Bible in German'], of 1926 is nevertheless evident. In it, Kracauer played the migration of truth into the profane off against Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig's translation of the Tanakh. Luther's bible translation had still been a political and religious act in one, he argued. Given their claim to make the divine word resonate anew in the present, Buber and Rosenzweig's recourse to archaic and primal modes of expression made their translation a work of neo-romantic literature at best. For the mundane world had long since superimposed itself on, and absorbed, the realm of religion. The latter was no longer able to articulate absolute truth. Only the focus on the imperfection of the profane could do so.<sup>44</sup> In the 1960s, Adorno's critique of the 'Jargon der Eigentlichkeit' [jargon of authenticity] took issue precisely with the sort of subreption of ostensible meaning by deploying seemingly portentous formulations that had roused Kracauer's criticism of Buber and Rosenzweig's translation. By suggestively invoking theological concepts, this jargon sought to construct immanent-ontological meaning. Its buzzwords were sacred without having a sacred content.<sup>45</sup> Against this swindle of unity, Adorno defended the notion of a form of radical transcendence without whose theological 'sting' redemption had been inconceivable.<sup>46</sup> The limits of conceptual synthesis had already resonated within religious notions of redemption. Consequently, as Hegel famously argued,<sup>47</sup> they also pointed to something extraneous. It was the quest to salvage this idea from the decaying religious-institutional traditions and redeem it for the benefit of this-worldly felicity that determined the critical theorists' engagement with religion.<sup>48</sup> As the 'unfolding of one single existential judgement', social criticism drew for its claim to truth on the denunciation of the whole as being 'universally irrational and untrue', they argued.<sup>49</sup>

## BETWEEN POSSIBILITY AND REALITY: MESSIANIC EPISTEMOLOGY

In contrast to the vague aforementioned jargon, the critical theory of society insisted that the possibility of reconciliation was and is, in principle, always given, no matter how insoluble the contrariety of society may seem. Analogously to Benjamin's account of the way in which pious Jews, while adhering to the prohibition on imagining the future, nevertheless assumed that 'every second could be the slight gate through which the Messiah might step',<sup>50</sup> the rejection of a fatalistic understanding of the course of the world generated the motivation to engage in criticism.<sup>51</sup> 'Only if that which is can be changed, is that which is not all.'<sup>52</sup> Yet as long as no practical way out was available, the reference to the possibility of change remained cognition's only source of light.<sup>53</sup> This begs the question of why the 'repeated promises of something other ... are constantly broken again'.<sup>54</sup> Adorno would presumably answer that the way in which those promises had been interpreted to suggest that their practical crossover was a foregone conclusion had perhaps been inadequate.<sup>55</sup> Adorno was similarly speculative in explaining whence the disastrous state of society might originate. In vague terms, he mused about a 'primeval irrational catastrophe', which superseded the religious narrative of the fall.<sup>56</sup> Suggestions that guilt reproduced itself *subjectively* 'in each one of us' were juxtaposed to the notion of an *objective* 'unfathomable calamity that occurred in primeval times',<sup>57</sup> a mishap in the process of creation, as it were, like the 'breaking of the vessels' in Lurianic kabbalah, that required no human participation.<sup>58</sup> This illustrates how consistently subjective, albeit unconscious, action and objective development were mediated in Adorno's concept of history.<sup>59</sup> On his account, reliable source material about these beginnings had been lost in the 'fog of primitive history', yet speculation about them was in any case futile since the

crucial issue was not its origin but the future resolution of the contradiction.<sup>60</sup>

For Adorno, the relationship between possibility and reality, as the relationship between thought and being, was of crucial importance. Dissociating himself from the crypto-theological production of ideology, the submissive accommodation to authority or despairing nihilism, Adorno raised the fundamental question of the possibility of metaphysics in a novel way.<sup>61</sup> The driving force here was a motif that he had characterized in a letter to Horkheimer of 1941 as an imperative in engaging theology ('or whatever one wants to call it'): one still needed to try and 'think the secret'.<sup>62</sup> What he still categorized as theology in 1941, Adorno subsequently subsumed under the rubric of metaphysics. Transcending thought poses the question of whether, all the social catastrophes and the anguish they caused notwithstanding, meaningful life was still possible.<sup>63</sup> Metaphysics and the possibility of a meaningful life intersected in the 'secret' as the other of conceptual thought. Philosophy as a form of profane theology (as presented in *Negative Dialectics*) sought to palpate dominant social concepts that shaped subjective thought to trace fissures within them. Having plummeted from its lofty heights, metaphysics was now dependent upon the recesses that remained in a fragile world dominated by heteronomous compulsion. Traces of the other were to be found only in the tiniest and least significant phenomena that conceptual thought had not yet seized. Metaphysics had 'migrated into micrology' to seek 'refuge from the totality'.<sup>64</sup>

Adorno's notion that residual traces of that which is 'right' might be found here drew on the assumption that all conceptual content was stimulated by non-conceptual impulses.<sup>65</sup> An urge towards the concept inhered in the phenomenon itself.<sup>66</sup> The concept depended fundamentally on contents, which only became palpable conceptually. Speaking in the lecture theatre in 1965, Adorno exemplified this with reference to

the metaphysical concept of freedom, which one could deploy only 'because its realization is viable', because its fulfilment was possible 'at any point in time'.<sup>67</sup> This was demonstrated empirically by the fact that the development of productive forces had long since provided the means to eradicate global deprivation.<sup>68</sup> Yet the potential inherent in the phenomena had barely begun to exhaust its conceptual leeway. Consequently, people failed to comprehend that 'in the world, in which we exist' nobody even came close to being 'what each one of us *could* be'.<sup>69</sup> 'Immanent critique' sought out instances in which a non-identical surplus revealed how inadequate individual judgements, qua their conceptual unambiguousness, actually were vis-à-vis the material.<sup>70</sup> It demonstrated how little justice finite identity did to the tangible infinity in its manifoldness and agility, a discrepancy to which the immobilized thought patterns of everyday consciousness were necessarily oblivious.<sup>71</sup> Any attempt, then, critically to transcend what was simply given faced the paradoxical task of taking into consideration 'its own impossibility'. 'For the sake of the possibility', any such attempt had to be aware of its own futility.<sup>72</sup>

Knowledge, then, had to 'abandon itself, à fonds perdu, to the objects'.<sup>73</sup> In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno may have portrayed the cultural process as a permanent tyranny over humans, resources, and internal drives,<sup>74</sup> but this by no means implied a deterministic philosophy of history. An intrinsic potential for, indeed, an urge toward, self-refutation inhered in the human ability to judge: 'Thought patterns want to transcend that, which is merely given'.<sup>75</sup> As opposed to the idealistic hope in conceptual and actual progress, based on reason or the belief in a higher being, critical consciousness was thrown back onto itself. All it could do was tirelessly and critically empathize with the given objects and draw truth from their inconsistencies until, ultimately, thought turned 'even on itself' and allowed the principle of identity to implode.

While nominalists abstracted from being and remained non-committal, rationalist dualists, who distinguished between conceptual conceivability and actual viability, contributed to the idealization of corporeal suffering. Adorno, by contrast, dialectically took up the struggle on two fronts. In terms of social theory, the mediation of concept and object established a form of social realism. To inter-subjectively constructed incorporeal institutions like the state, law, or money, Adorno attributed the characteristic of developing an objective life of their own and thus impacting on the thoughts and activities of their agents.<sup>76</sup>

## THE ONTOLOGICAL PROOF OF THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

In the face of Adorno's observations about the tangency of concepts and reality in the social sphere, any strict distinction between them was rendered brittle. Consequently, a number of fundamental questions in the history of philosophy assumed to have been resolved became virulent again. Adorno's exploration of the viability of metaphysics logically raised the question of whether Kant's radical refutation of the ontological proof of the existence of God had 'really solved the problem ... comprehensively'.<sup>77</sup> Kant's claim that being was not a genuine predicate had suspended a priori the interdependence of concept and object, form and content.<sup>78</sup> Yet it seemed clear to Adorno that the impact of incorporeal-material institutions could easily be sensed in one's own powerlessness – 'where it hurts?'.<sup>79</sup> Adorno coined the paradoxical term 'actually governing metaphysics' to characterize this dynamic.<sup>80</sup> Its hopelessness spread existential fear that pervaded even 'the most subtle layers of behavior'.<sup>81</sup> Late capitalist society, unwittingly reproduced by its subjects, manifestly defied a clear distinction between the sensuous and the conceptual.

On Adorno's account, then, world and ideology were continually converging in the sphere of identity.<sup>82</sup> This precipitated a loss of individual experience and led to metaphysical indifference and obliviousness to religious questions.<sup>83</sup> Horkheimer referred to this 'real metaphysics' – the repressive apparatus of integration – as the 'administered world',<sup>84</sup> Adorno as a 'context of deception'.<sup>85</sup> Its efficacy donned the mantle of perpetual laws of nature. Regardless of the odds, Adorno insisted that thought, as long as it was not abandoned, held on to the aforementioned 'possibility'.<sup>86</sup> It was the scepticism as to whether Kant's delineations really were the last word in this matter that explained this thesis. Thaidigsmann has called this scepticism 'the hidden metaphysical-theological motif' in Adorno's thought.<sup>87</sup> That said, it is remarkable how little space this fundamental complex took up in Adorno's work, given its systematic significance.

Drawing on his contention that one could not distinguish 'all that radically ... between the utopia to which thought, as concept, feels drawn and reality',<sup>88</sup> Adorno sought to render the onto-theological argument plausible as a purely negative one. As the affinity between the Non-identical and the *Ding an sich* [thing in itself] indicates, Adorno enlisted Kant against Hegel, leaving the absolute indeterminate, even though it formed a necessary conceptual prerequisite.<sup>89</sup> Thinking as such primarily referenced an unattainable transcendental ground of knowledge to which individual judgements were connected relationally. Without the 'idea of the absolute' as the necessary condition for truth, thought was effectively impossible, since judgements unrelated to a common generality could only be arbitrary.<sup>90</sup> In a conversation with Bloch, Adorno noted that 'the force of the concept' must also encompass 'its element of actuality'.<sup>91</sup> While every specific judgement was necessarily erroneous in relation to the whole, all philosophical truth claims, including Kant's own, depended on the successful execution of the ontological proof of the

existence of God in order to ground knowledge in a universal and binding generality.<sup>92</sup> Hence, in the final meditation in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno expressly equated the concept of the non-identical with the 'absolute, as it was envisaged by metaphysics'.<sup>93</sup> While the grey of the sensuous world alone offered no consolation, the dependence of consciousness on the 'concept of another colour' indicated its real, albeit 'dispersed trace in the negative whole'.<sup>94</sup> While the possibility of the absolute invariably imposed itself in the abstract, critical theory also converged on the corresponding object and the 'secret' of the non-identity between them. This was the source of Adorno's hope that social praxis could be different, that it could shed its inherent relationship of force.<sup>95</sup> According to Liedke, it was the assumed proximity between potentiality and actuality that prevented *Negative Dialectics* from 'plunging into the abyss', though it did pose the risk of encouraging a form of 'speculative materialism'.<sup>96</sup>

The metaphor of the 'dispersed trace' of 'another colour' underscores the call for mimetic openness to experience that transcends conceptual categories and grasps that which is missing, a form of experience that must accompany all perception. Where Kant's indispensable transcendental subject established absolute identity,<sup>97</sup> Adorno insisted that absolute non-identity was indispensable. Where concepts falter – in the case of successful aesthetic or physical encounters, for instance – thought fleetingly became aware of its fallibility and contingency. In such moments it moved towards the aforementioned 'secret'. In the face of objective obstacles in the object itself, self-denial rendered the 'last trace of the ontological proof for the existence of God, possibly its ineffaceable dimension', tangible.<sup>98</sup> The superiority of conceptual subsumption notwithstanding, it transpired that the constitution of the subject was absolutely dependent on something other.<sup>99</sup> In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno contented himself with

the ‘unverified expectation’ of that other and limited his onto-theological argument negatively to the justification in principle of the possibility that thought could enter into being.<sup>100</sup> Prima facie, theology, stripped down in this way, like all forms of enlightenment thought, sought to approximate the objective. In contrast to the taming of external chaos with blindly posited general concepts that had shaped the history of the species, it drew out the ‘idea of the objectivity of felicity’ through reconciliation.<sup>101</sup>

Kant had still posited the necessity of the idea of God as a rational, regulative concept that was categorically not subject to justified judgements. In the face of the actual suffering, Horkheimer and Adorno abandoned the moral teleology underlying Kant’s postulate of the existence of God.<sup>102</sup> This raised the question of whether dominant thought patterns could be transcended towards the this-worldly revelation of the ‘secret’.<sup>103</sup> In contrast to Kant’s conservative position, the critical theorists answered this question in the affirmative.

Adorno focused primarily on the social praxis of commodity exchange as the locus of mediation between consciousness and being.<sup>104</sup> In its current form the identity principle had to be understood in terms of the abstract value form underpinning it. Since the inception of the modern world, as revelation lost its authority, it had been conflating ‘the entire world into the identical, the totality’.<sup>105</sup> The ‘spell’ of the value form was increasingly creating a subjective consciousness whose perception of the world encompassed only a multitude of units of value destined for exchange.<sup>106</sup> At this juncture, Adorno amplified Marx’s critique of commodity fetishism, turning it into a comprehensive epistemological concept: ‘Social criticism is critique of knowledge and vice versa.’<sup>107</sup> In the mediation of being and social consciousness, Kant’s assumption of a timeless objectivity of logical categories turned out to be untenable. Just as prevailing norms were shaped by the material distribution of wealth, so too

factual knowledge was contingent upon historical constellations.<sup>108</sup>

Due to Adorno’s negative defense of the ontological proof of the existence of God, objects and things, possibility and reality, thinking and being moved so closely together that they began to morph into each other. To the irrationally interlocked ‘contradictions of reality’, *Negative Dialectics* juxtaposed the successful ‘convergence of all thoughts in an absolute’.<sup>109</sup> Only the latter could transcend the contradictions. Adorno’s hope was inextricably linked to this ‘convergence’, which vouched for God’s existence, understood as the possibility of a social utopia.<sup>110</sup> As he noted in 1962: ‘To think this through, with and against Kant, is my task and that of philosophy. The one thing I do know: If this is nothing then everything is but nothing’.<sup>111</sup>

### **TOTAL CHANGE: THE END OF LOGIC AND THE SELF-SUSPENSION OF EXCHANGE**

A statement by Lichtenberg that Adorno quoted in his Husserl study hints at the implications of the notion that the renegotiation of the ontological proof for the existence of God transcended the chasm between thought and being: ‘If one day an angel were to recite from his philosophy ... presumably some sentences would have to sound like 2 times 2 is 13.’<sup>112</sup> Theological visions of reconciliation migrated into the attempt to escape ‘the prison of logic’ with logic’s ‘own devices’.<sup>113</sup> For the time being, the extant ‘logic of things’, though contingent, remained valid if thought did not want to cross itself out in an act of misguided abstraction.<sup>114</sup> The idea of a divine logic – as a metaphor for a different order of thought and being – helps explain Adorno’s fascination with a ‘Jewish theologumenon’ handed down by Martin Buber that Benjamin, Bloch, and Scholem also discussed.<sup>115</sup> It stated that when things were finally put right everything would be ‘just a



little different', yet how exactly was unfathomable.<sup>116</sup> Only then would humans and objects be shifted [*verrückt*]<sup>117</sup> into 'their proper position'.<sup>118</sup> That the frame of reference encompassed both humans and objects implies that this redemption would take place in this world and impact it in its entirety, including its most mundane aspects.

The German term *verrückt* can mean to shift or move from one place to another or, as an adjective, denote madness. Adorno was intentionally playing on this double meaning. Precisely those things that might seem out of place or 'mad' by the standards of the existing order might turn out to be the only ones foreshadowing the proper, truly 'sane' order of things. The dynamics of Adorno's orientation toward the 'ideal of free and just exchange'<sup>119</sup> can be clarified by recalling Marx's underlying insight. Marx characterized bourgeois society as a nexus of independent producers of commodities organized in accordance with the division of labour and held together by the constant exchange of commodities.<sup>120</sup> In *Capital*, he focused particularly on the exchange of the commodity labour between the otherwise propertyless and the owners of the means of production. Insofar as the worker obtained the exchange value of his labour in the form of the indispensable means for the reproduction of his capacity to work, this exchange was obviously entirely just. Yet according to Marx, what distinguished labour from other commodities was its ability to produce additional value.<sup>121</sup> As the vendor, the capitalist obtained this surplus free of charge. With it he was able to cover his own livelihood and pay for additional labour and means of production, which allowed him to remain competitive. Hence, capital constantly increased its wealth through exploitation while maintaining the appearance of an entirely equitable relationship of exchange.<sup>122</sup> The exchange of labour was precisely the point at which, as Adorno put it, 'everything is in order while at the same time nothing is in order'.<sup>123</sup> The fundamental role, which Marx attributed

to the law of exchange in accounting for the persistence of the wrong state of affairs,<sup>124</sup> returned in Adorno's call to pin down the concept of exchange in order to facilitate the 'realization of the promise of exchange, which, in terms of its concept, is broken time and again'.<sup>125</sup> This allowed him to elaborate more specifically on his concept of convergence, for instance, when he noted that this realization would 'converge with its abolition; exchange would disappear where it was truly equitable'.<sup>126</sup> The exchange of equivalents in which equality pertained only to the 'exchange values of the exchanged commodities' would transcend itself, creating truly just relations in which there would no longer be any contradiction between object and concept. Qualities would no longer be abstracted to quantities, and use values no longer to exchange values.<sup>127</sup> Everything would be in its proper place, then, when the dialectic was reconciled in the demise of exploitation, domination, and violence. History would finally become open to 'the non-identical, which would emerge only once the compulsion of identity has dissolved'.<sup>128</sup>

Note the active form of this dissolution. It indicates a passive role of the finite subject in redemption. The finite subject was reliant upon the utmost 'grace', which 'tempers justice' and 'on which the cycle of cause and effect founders'.<sup>129</sup> With this 'act of grace'<sup>130</sup> Adorno circumscribed an additional element, which could not be anticipated qualitatively in extant reality because it had to be of an entirely new quality. From a specific constellation of concept and experience this insight, like a bolt of lightning, pointed beyond particular knowledge.<sup>131</sup> The escape from the cycle of exchange in all its self-contradictory forms and the attendant elusion of suffering depended on a form of transcendence of which thought was unable to conceive under its own steam.<sup>132</sup> Since this transcendence could be grounded only in an experiencing subject, the messianic perspective Adorno arrived at was fractured. Not least, it was

not some cosmological law but the subject's own social praxis that was supposed to be overcome.

### THE PHOTOGRAPH OF THE WORLD AS HELL: GNOSIS AND INVERSE THEOLOGY

As is well known, Adorno vehemently distanced himself from any concept of praxis of the kind postulated by vulgar Marxism.<sup>133</sup> Against blind forms of activism, Adorno focused on the disclosure of heteronomous modes of mediation to the individual. Consequently, his intertwining of metaphysics and the material created a hermeneutical proximity to gnostic concepts (as the etymology already indicates, given that the Greek term *gnosis* means knowledge). Prima facie, the notion that the world was 'faulty to its core' indeed recalled a form of cosmic dualism already characteristic of the Gnosticism of antiquity.<sup>134</sup> According to the Gnostics, the Biblical God was a demonic demiurge and the world thoroughly corrupt. Juxtaposed to this Biblical God was an unattainable God of light revealed to his followers by reason. Yet Adorno's hope of redemption from the corrupted world did not hinge on a hidden God of light. Instead, he saw the new myth precisely in the bright 'deus absconditus' of the principle of enlightenment. As an advancing form of identity, this 'entirely abstract and indeterminate God cleansed of all anthropomorphic-mythological qualities' morphed into a 'fatefully ambiguous and threatening' one. Demythologization turned out to be a form of demonization.<sup>135</sup> This ostensible God, 'masked by his own contradictoriness',<sup>136</sup> embodied only the 'repressive and pernicious character [*Unwesen*] of society'.<sup>137</sup> It represented 'not the divine absolute', then, 'but its ... opposite; if I wanted to put it in theological terms, I would have to say: hell'.<sup>138</sup>

For Adorno, the true God – the sensible organization of society – was concealed in

the non-identical beyond of consciousness. Adorno confronted the 'theological niceties' of the abstract law of value substantiated in the domination of humans not with an otherworldly authority but simply with subjective desire.<sup>139</sup> Knowledge of the existence of an absolute as the other of logic drove his socio-philosophical inventory beyond itself because 'without the hope in this-worldly improvement ... creation itself would inexorably turn into the work of a gnostic demon'.<sup>140</sup> Yet, in its antinomianism, critical theory by no means turned on Torah or Halakhah, as the Gnostics had done. Instead, it took issue with the unconscious impact of the mythical compulsions generated by the contention that there was no third alternative and the 'magic circle' that contention created.<sup>141</sup> The incriminated ideology underpinning the pernicious state of affairs, beholden as it was to conceptuality and the value form, would have to recede before the manifoldness of objects.<sup>142</sup>

In the well-known final aphorism in *Minima Moralia*, Adorno called on philosophy, 'in the face of despair', to look at the world as it would appear 'in a messianic light', in which its 'rifts and crevices' would be revealed.<sup>143</sup> In his Kafka essay he again drew out this scheme in a gnostic-antinomian manner, describing as the optimum 'light source' one which makes 'the fissures of the world glow hellishly'.<sup>144</sup> Adorno had already presented his interpretation of Kafka to Benjamin in 1934. Kafka's technique created a 'photograph of mundane life from the perspective of a redeemed life'. The photograph thus taken presented a terrible picture, which seemed lopsided and distorted because the camera was recording the absurdity of the wrong world from a 'right' perspective. One might call this 'image of theology ... "inverse" theology'.<sup>145</sup> The inversion in question amounted to a shift in theological perspective. Nothing could be said about the deity, but one could emulate its view of the world's faultiness. This presupposed an extraneous vantage point, which could only be constructed 'for the sake of the possibility'

but never actually assumed.<sup>146</sup> Since this vantage point remained philosophically unattainable, Adorno had to take recourse to Kafka's prose to verify the existence of this possibility. Three years earlier, he had attributed this sort of 'inverse, luciferic theology' to Brecht and Weill's opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* [*Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*]. It successfully constructed the whole, the negative totality, from the 'fragments' of 'disintegrating reality'.<sup>147</sup> Through the de-familiarizing inherent logic of aesthetic expression, successful works of art provided a detached representation of the totality as a monad. Idiosyncratically recombining the totality's component parts, they created an alternative world to that of social immanence. For Adorno, this capacity for the virtual refraction of faulty reality allowed art to approximate [visions of] utopia. 'Art owns truth as the appearance of being no mere appearance', he wrote.<sup>148</sup> It represented the possibility of experiencing an alternative order but was by no means a surrogate for praxis. It only provided possible ways of thinking.<sup>149</sup> By looking at the world from the outside, as it were, inverse theology, as determinate negation, was already a placeholder for the other. 'Accomplished negation, once thoroughly explored', revealed like a flash of lightning the 'mirror image of its opposite'.<sup>150</sup> In this sense, Adorno claimed both in his post-doctoral dissertation (*Habilitation*) on Kierkegaard and in *Negative Dialectics* that elements of immanence could become intelligible as bearing a utopian meaning; elements of reality could 'solidify into script', 'fissures of disintegration' become recognizable as 'ciphers of promise'.<sup>151</sup>

To create this script, Adorno wrote in *Negative Dialectics*, metaphysics needed to 'know how to wish for something', how to integrate desire and thought.<sup>152</sup> For Adorno, desire originated in the quest of the imposed vital needs for conceptual articulation. If the indeterminate suffering created by the violent conditions was consciously reflected upon and sublimated as desire, it would serve as

a source of judgement on the 'accomplished negation'. The wish that things should be different rendered the constituents of that negation legible. The minuscule gap presupposed by the extra-mundane vantage point of inverse theology between itself and faulty reality thus consisted in the corporeal experience of non-identity. Because the idealistic concept of the world's intellectual integrity fragmented at this point, Adorno considered the corporeal 'our stance on theology'.<sup>153</sup>

## BODY AND RESURRECTION

So far the content of the position God would hold in the conventional ontological proof for the existence of God has been left undefined. The missing link – the idea of the absolute or the other – was corporeal experience which, on Adorno's account, needed to be reflected: 'The intellect evolves from ... the urges'.<sup>154</sup> The somatic moment was 'irreducible as the not purely cognitive dimension of knowledge'.<sup>155</sup> Since the persistence of suffering was avoidable, it was irrational. Given that it ignored or even justified suffering, the rigid world beyond of traditional metaphysics had turned out to be a lie.<sup>156</sup> Adorno's metaphysics of the tiniest and shabbiest detail hinged not so much on the 'positive' moment of sensual joy but focused primarily on 'the unmeaningful stratum of life', the suffering and frail body. It sprang from the only remaining moral impulse, the universal 'revulsion, turned practical', against physical pain.<sup>157</sup> With it came the minimum demand that there should be no suffering. It culminated in the categorical imperative to arrange one's 'thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz may not repeat itself, so that nothing similar may occur'.<sup>158</sup>

Adorno complemented his solidarity with the tormentable body with the 'remembrance' [*Eingedenken*] of one's own human 'naturalness' and mortality. The point was by no means to idealize some infirm *conditio*

*humana* but to become fully aware of its horror, including the terror of death. For Adorno, the fact that a beloved human being was dead was unimaginable.<sup>159</sup> He paraphrased the attendant sentiments: 'The sense of unfinished business; things had really only just begun – all the things we should have done ... that one might make good on the omissions and that this miserable and fragmented life does not even suffice to bring one's own life and that of one's nearest and dearest to a meaningful conclusion'.<sup>160</sup> Adorno pitted this shock against a frigid culture that depended integrally on the repression of mortality. He thus rehabilitated the notion of the resurrection of the flesh against any form of purely intellectual metaphysics. Hope was hope for the flesh, and the theological notion of resurrection was conceptually more consistent than that of the abstract immortality of the soul.<sup>161</sup> The rational 'gravity' of the corporeal was juxtaposed to the irrationality of indeterminate and generalizing identitarian thinking. 'Should theology, which wants to abolish death, die, nobody will feel compelled to constrain death anymore.'<sup>162</sup> The idea of resurrection as the vanishing point of all critique also originated with Benjamin, who defended it against Horkheimer in the 1930s. Against the notion that history was open-ended and the past could be salvaged, Horkheimer repeatedly insisted that 'the injustice of the past is done and dusted. The slain really have been slain'.<sup>163</sup> Adorno, by contrast, aligned himself with Benjamin's motif of the 'collector' whose attention focused on the lost causes that had been overwhelmed by history. Indeed, he identified Benjamin's 'rescue of the hopeless', the recording of the history of 'creaturely suffering' and of that, which had not come about, as the 'central motive' underpinning his own work.<sup>164</sup> The potential reader of those records could only be situated in a better future, in which the suffering and joy of earlier generations would become accessible and be taken up again. Since no inner-worldly rectification of that, which was irrevocably in the past, was possible, a

redeemed humanity was conceivable only in theological terms. The need to conceive of resurrection tells us more about the forms of economically preformed thought than the reality or unreality of redemption. Thus, 'a caveat was immediately lodged on religious hope again, it was precluded from becoming positive'.<sup>165</sup> The dilemma of being compelled to think theologically against the faulty world, yet unable to do so within it, could not be neutralized. It drove Adorno to the notion that metaphysics was the 'intellectual effort to salvage that, which it dissolves'.<sup>166</sup> When he concluded his lectures on metaphysics by pointing to a convergence between the inadequacy of his own elaborations and 'the impossibility of thinking what must be thought',<sup>167</sup> he was not simply being ironic but also offering a concise outline of his programme. Fallibility was what vouched for the compatibility of the concept of redemption and the experience of its absence. Any suggestion of certitude would be ideology.

## METAPHYSICS AND EXPERIENCE

Thought that reached its limits but could substantiate no positive theology depended on other forms of evidence. Even if neither of them was entirely successful in this respect, Adorno's agreement with Benjamin that one should 'refrain from any overt usage of theological categories' reflected this.<sup>168</sup> Against the conclusions of the self-deluded intellect, solidarity with the 'tormentable body' insisted on the incorporation of experience. Adorno's entire 'critical ... transformation of religious tradition guided by freedom' culminated in his plea for a critical philosophy of experience.<sup>169</sup> Thought that concurrently dissolved its own conclusions as it proceeded would match the mimetic capacity to devote oneself in precisely this sense to the hopeless aspects of mundane existence so desperately in need of rescue. The 'ideal of surrendering oneself' denoted this way of proceeding.

Against the self-referential immanence of the generalized functional context, the subjectively experienced structure of the object would be decisive, and the object would determine whether that experience was successful or missed the mark.

In this context, Adorno referred to experiences that 'accrue or do not accrue' and spoke of a specific 'metaphysical experience'. Mysticism, tied to the object of holy scripture it interpreted, had once been its medium. Adorno's maxim of 'treating profane texts like holy scripture', applied to Proust and Beckett, brought such experiences into the present. In secularized 'metaphysical experiences' like *déjà vu* ('where have I seen this before'), or the juxtaposition of the sites of happy childhood memories and reality, the latter turns out to be altered and manifests itself as contingent.<sup>170</sup> Kracauer had described himself in 1922 as somebody who was waiting, no longer capable of believing, even while his 'hesitant openness' for the absolute betrayed his wish to do so.<sup>171</sup> After Auschwitz, Adorno rejected the possibility of positive metaphysical experience altogether and appropriated Kracauer's notion of 'waiting', bringing it to a head with a pessimistic turn. The only way of heightening metaphysical experience was now to wait in vain while wondering in a disillusioned manner whether this was really everything there is.<sup>172</sup> What remained was the alternative of either capitulating in the face of everyday depravity or reflecting critically upon it. The choice, then, as Adorno noted pointedly, was between 'theology' and 'tautology'. Faced with *this* alternative, he preferred the former.<sup>173</sup> This distinction was no less radical than Horkheimer's earlier juxtaposition of traditional and critical theory. In this scheme, knowledge as the replication of the given state of affairs – what Horkheimer called the conceptual 'duplication of the reality' knowledge 'had set out to comprehend'<sup>174</sup> – was tautological. Theological, on the other hand, was the negation of the 'categories ... that are valid in the existing order'.<sup>175</sup> Theology, then,

consisted in the immanent critique of the tautology whose only transcendent ingredient was the corporeal or metaphysical experience of the inadequacy of self-referential immanence.

The relationship between metaphysics and experience also ran through Adorno's philosophy of the arts. The undivided attention music demanded of the serious listener precipitated devotion to a fleeting object, he noted. 'Mahler's theology', for instance, was 'gnostic like Kafka's'. The only remaining transcendence was that of longing.<sup>176</sup> A similar gnosticism prevailed in Beckett, for whom the world was 'radically evil' so that its negation maintained 'the possibility of another world'.<sup>177</sup> For Adorno, the hopeless state of affairs in Beckett's dramatic art represented 'the only genuinely metaphysical creation since the war'.<sup>178</sup> In contrast to the desolate worlds of Beckett, the utopian contents of the classical arts now constituted no more than missed opportunities. Adorno's theological hope perished in and with Beckett.

## AMBIGUITIES IN THE RECEPTION HISTORY: JÜRGEN HABERMAS

There have been various theological attempts to incorporate Horkheimer's and Adorno's ideas. The topic seems to be altogether less popular outside of theology departments. Readers in the tradition of the ideology-critical self-understanding of the Frankfurt School frequently take recourse to the formulations and imagery pertaining to reconciliation, yet without referencing their religio-philosophical implications. Outside of this all too sympathetic coterie, the theological problems of critical theory are generally brushed aside as a dead end and metaphysical ballast. Both strategies are exemplified in the work of Jürgen Habermas. His essay, 'Der deutsche Idealismus der jüdischen Philosophen' ['The German Idealism of the Jewish Philosophers'] of

1961, concluded with a plea that, given the crimes of National Socialism, one should highlight the achievements of Jewish philosophers, though not for their sake but to benefit post-war Germany: 'If there were no German Jewish tradition, for our own sake we would have to invent it today', he wrote. For Habermas, this remarkably candid plea followed from the fact that the 'physical carriers' of this tradition had been murdered and the Germans were now in the process of 'forgiving and forgetting everything in a climate of noncommittal conciliatoriness'.<sup>179</sup> Against this trend, historical recollection needed to be kept alive. 'The Jews' German idealism', Habermas wrote, 'produces the leaven of a critical utopia; their aspiration finds its most precise, dignified, and beautiful expression in the very Kafkaesque final segment of *Minima Moralia*'. Indeed, Habermas concluded the essay with a complete rendition, without any further comment, of the already quoted aphorism, 'Finale', that invoked the 'messianic light' as a hypothetical source of knowledge.<sup>180</sup> Habermas, then, was interested in this aphorism not for its theological implications but as proof of a 'German Jewish tradition' (of which Adorno, incidentally, knew precious little). Among German Jews before 1933, the juxtaposition of 'Germandom and Jewishness' had been a controversial issue. In the volume that contained Habermas's essay, Horkheimer also explicitly touched on this historical debate. He argued, for instance, that Kant's critical philosophy and the Jewish prohibition of the image amounted to the same thing.<sup>181</sup> Habermas went further and sought to reactivate these problematic categories 'for our sake', in other words, for the (non-Jewish) Germans' benefit. For him, 'taking up the Jewish Question again without Jews' represented an 'historical irony'.<sup>182</sup> While the harmony of 'Germandom and Jewishness' had been the issue of 'a controversy among Jews from Germany' prior to 1933, it had advanced to becoming a German pet theory after the Shoah.<sup>183</sup> Habermas's

identification with an 'older' Critical Theory designated as Jewish thus turns out to be characteristic of a generation that 'had entered the university in 1949 with a reasonably clear awareness of the historical magnitude of Auschwitz'.<sup>184</sup> Jewish teachers seemed best suited to act as monuments to the grandeur and vagaries of the German educational tradition.<sup>185</sup> The consequences were evident in Habermas's reassessment of Schelling's 'Weltalter'-philosophy ['Ages of the World'-philosophy], which had been the focus of his dissertation, *The Absolute and History*. Drawing on his engagement of Critical Theory and Gershom Scholem, Habermas interpreted Schelling's cosmogonic notion of the 'contraction of God' not only as an expression of 'dialectical idealism in transition to materialism' but also took recourse to the kabbalistic motifs of *zimzum* and *tikkun olam*, which he had not invoked in his dissertation.<sup>186</sup> He argued that the philosophy of Ernst Bloch, for instance, derived from the same Schellingian philosopheme. It transported 'the legacy of the kabbalah from the spirit of Romanticism to the Protestant philosophy of German idealism', rendering 'the most Jewish elements of Bloch's philosophy concurrently the truly German' ones.<sup>187</sup> Habermas never tired of highlighting Scholem's achievements. Yet his ill-founded enthusiasm for the theological ideas of critical theory as the ostensible proof of a German-Jewish synthesis did not last. It was followed by the demonstrative renunciation of 'the pitch-black totality conception of the philosopher Adorno' in favour of his own utopia of communication.<sup>188</sup> The theological arguments of the 'first generation', which he had previously adopted as a matter of course – albeit not as worthy of philosophical discussion but merely as historical testimony to a productive German-Jewish dialogue – were re-evaluated in the process and interpreted as the illegitimate silver lining inherent in the conception of totality. Horkheimer and Adorno had been unable to develop the idea of a 'mimetic' form of

reason that could take the place of identitarian thought, Habermas claimed. At best, they had been able to point to it ‘in the imagery of Judaeo-Christian mysticism’.<sup>189</sup> Apparently, then, their excessive wariness of instrumental reason drove Horkheimer and Adorno to irrationalism. ‘An overdrawn promise of redemption and exaggerated pessimism complement each other in this reading’.<sup>190</sup> This polemic notwithstanding, traces of the earlier engagement are still evident in Habermas’s religio-philosophical texts. Practical reason missed its ‘purpose if it no longer has the capacity to rouse and maintain in mundane minds an awareness of the solidarity that is violated the world over, of that, which is missing, that, which stinks to high heaven’.<sup>191</sup> Habermas’s notion of the ‘verbalization of the sacred’, i.e., the translation of its semantic contents into profane reason, reiterated the aforementioned profanation postulate. This allowed Habermas to subscribe to Scholem’s and Adorno’s discussion of how the turnover from the theological to the profane transpired while nevertheless maintaining an agnostic notion of incommensurability: Adorno’s error, Habermas argued, consisted in his idealistic attempt to engage theology on an equal footing.<sup>192</sup>

This accusation of idealism renders the radical critique of religion and all forms of theology impossible. Faith and reason, immanence and transcendence break apart. The establishment of two separate, complementary truths eliminates the idea of the one truth that must exist because ‘there is no redemption unless it is all-encompassing’.<sup>193</sup> A liberated humanity would not be liberated if it coexisted with an unfree one; truth would not be true if it encompassed contradictions. As long as they remain unfree, individuals can only find their own way to salvation or seek to be reasonably happy. While neither the premises of reason nor those of faith can be imposed, theology and materialism must assume that the whole truth will ultimately come into being as the truth of humankind. The concept of theology at stake here is

obviously at odds with the academic disciplines that bear this name. Their contents, if we follow Horkheimer and Adorno – and Habermas’s notion of the ‘verbalization of the sacred’ – can be critically recovered only as catalysts of profane, practical reason. Conversely, the need to hold on to the one truth and the all-encompassing redemption drives profane reason towards theological problems of justification. The constant turnover of this immanent and transcendent motion is critical theory’s mode of reflection.

## Notes

- 1 Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *Werke* [MEW] vol. 1 (Berlin: Dietz, 1956), 378.
- 2 Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Aberglaube aus zweiter Hand’, in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 8 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 147–76, here 176.
- 3 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 4 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 273.
- 4 Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysik. Begriff und Probleme* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2008), 160.
- 5 See Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, in Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 5 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1987), 159.
- 6 Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Meinung, Wahn, Gesellschaft’, in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 10.2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 573–49, here 577.
- 7 See, e.g., Leo Löwenthal, Siegfried Kracauer, *In steter Freundschaft* (Springe: Zu Klampen, 2003), 54.
- 8 See Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 46.
- 9 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 345.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 394.
- 11 Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Kierkegaard noch einmal’, in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 239–58, here 250.
- 12 Max Horkheimer, ‘Nachwort’, in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 8 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1985), 175–93, here 182.
- 13 Max Horkheimer, ‘Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen’, in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 7 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1985), 385–404, here 389.
- 14 Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Einleitung zum “Positivismusstreit in der deutschen Soziologie”’, in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 8, 280–353, here 309.
- 15 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 389.

- 16 Adorno, *Metaphysik*, 155.
- 17 See Adorno, 'Einleitung zum "Positivismusstreit"', 285.
- 18 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Blochs Spuren', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 11 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 233–50, here 243; 'Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 14 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 169–447, here 333.
- 19 See Max Horkheimer, 'Montaigne und die Funktion der Skepsis', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 4 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1988), 236–94, here 262–6.
- 20 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 15.
- 21 Ibid., 314; Walter Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. I–2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 691–704, here 698.
- 22 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 138.
- 23 Ernst Bloch, Theodor W. Adorno, 'Etwas fehlt...', in Ernst Bloch, *Gesamtausgabe* vol. 16 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985), 350–67; Bertolt Brecht, *Werke* vol. 2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988), 349.
- 24 Max Horkheimer, 'Was ist Religion?', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 6, 288.
- 25 Max Horkheimer, 'Theismus – Atheismus', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 7, 173–86, here 186; 'Über den Zweifel', *ibid.*, 213–23, here 218.
- 26 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Vernunft und Offenbarung', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 10.2, 608–16, here 608.
- 27 Hans Mayer, *Ein Deutscher auf Widerruf* vol. 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982), 184.
- 28 Adorno, 'Vernunft und Offenbarung', 608.
- 29 Second interim typescript of *Negative Dialektik*, quoted in Ansgar Martins, *Adorno und die Kabbala* (Potsdam: Universitätsverlag, 2016), 138.
- 30 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Gruß an Gershom Scholem', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 20.2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 478–86, here 485.
- 31 Walter Benjamin, *Briefe* vol. 2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978), 676.
- 32 Theodor W. Adorno, Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Briefwechsel* (Munich: etk, 1991), 11.
- 33 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Zur Schlußszene des Faust', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 11, 129–38, here 129.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Der Essay als Form', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 11, 9–33, here 29.
- 37 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 63.
- 38 Ibid., 64; see Philipp Wussow, *Logik der Deutung* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007), 234–43; Martins, *Adorno*, 112–23, 127–30.
- 39 'Diskussion über die Aufgabe des Protestantismus in der säkularen Zivilisation', in Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 11 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1987), 345–405, here 355.
- 40 Paul Tillich, *Protestantismus als Kritik und Gestaltung* (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1962), 62.
- 41 'Diskussion über die Aufgabe des Protestantismus', 367.
- 42 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Erinnerungen an Paul Tillich', in *Werk und Wirken Paul Tillichs* (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1967), 11–46, here 25.
- 43 See Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. I–3 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 1235.
- 44 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Die Bibel auf Deutsch', in *Werke* 5.2 (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011), 374–86.
- 45 Theodor W. Adorno, *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 6, 419.
- 46 Ibid., 423.
- 47 Georg W. F. Hegel, *Werke* vol. 5 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), 137–9.
- 48 See Adorno, 'Vernunft und Offenbarung', 613–14.
- 49 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 55; Max Horkheimer, 'Traditionelle und kritische Theorie', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 4, 162–216, here 201.
- 50 Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte', 704.
- 51 See Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 396.
- 52 Ibid., 391, also 317.
- 53 See Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 283.
- 54 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 396.
- 55 Ibid., 15.
- 56 Ibid., 317.
- 57 Adorno, *Metaphysik*, 176; Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 279.
- 58 See Gershom Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980), 292.
- 59 See Theodor W. Adorno, 'Gesellschaft', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 8, 9–19, here 10.
- 60 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 315.
- 61 See *ibid.*, 385.
- 62 Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* vol. 2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004), 222.
- 63 See Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 355.
- 64 Ibid., 399.
- 65 See *ibid.*, 23.
- 66 Ibid., 396.
- 67 Theodor W. Adorno, *Zur Lehre von der Geschichte und von der Freiheit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2006), 249.
- 68 See Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 203.
- 69 Adorno, *Metaphysik*, 206.
- 70 See Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 183; *Einführung in die Dialektik* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010), 304.
- 71 See Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 190.
- 72 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 283.
- 73 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 43.
- 74 Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 57.
- 75 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 58.
- 76 See Adorno, *Einleitung in die Soziologie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 58–61.



- 77 Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie* vol. 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), 112.
- 78 See Immanuel Kant, *Werke* vol. III/IV (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), B: 626.
- 79 Adorno, *Einleitung in die Soziologie*, 65.
- 80 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 343.
- 81 Adorno, *Zur Lehre von der Geschichte*, 282.
- 82 See Theodor W. Adorno, 'Beitrag zur Ideologienlehre', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 8, 457–77, here 467–77; *Negative Dialektik*, 18.
- 83 See Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 59; Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 387.
- 84 See Max Horkheimer, 'Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen', 404. On the concept of the administered world see Hans-Ernst Schiller's contribution to this *Handbook*.
- 85 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 365.
- 86 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Resignation', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 10.2, 794–9, here 798.
- 87 Edgar Thaidigsmann, 'Von der Gerechtigkeit der Wahrheit', in *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 37, 2 (1995), 144–64, here 148.
- 88 Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie* vol. 1, 114.
- 89 See Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 286.
- 90 Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie* vol. 1, 114.
- 91 Bloch, Adorno, 'Etwas fehlt', 367.
- 92 See Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 378.
- 93 *Ibid.*, 398.
- 94 *Ibid.*, 370.
- 95 See *ibid.*, 396.
- 96 Ulf Liedke, *Zerbrechliche Wahrheit* (Würzburg: echter, 2002), 138, 128.
- 97 cf. Kant, *Werke* vol. III/IV, B: 132.
- 98 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Anmerkungen zum philosophischen Denken', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 10.2, 599–607, here 606.
- 99 See Theodor W. Adorno, 'Zu Subjekt und Objekt', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 10.2, 741–58, here 742.
- 100 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 25.
- 101 *Ibid.*, 347.
- 102 See Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 108.
- 103 See Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 27.
- 104 See *ibid.*, 149–50; Dirk Braunstein, Julia Jopp, Ansgar Martins, 'Häretischer Materialismus', in Marc Nicolas Sommer, Mario Schärli (eds.), *Unbeirrte Negation* (forthcoming).
- 105 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 149.
- 106 See *ibid.*, 337–9; 'Zu Subjekt und Objekt', 744–5; *Negative Dialektik*, 179–80.
- 107 Adorno, 'Zu Subjekt und Objekt', 748.
- 108 See *ibid.*, 745.
- 109 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Rede über Lyrik und Gesellschaft', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 11, 48–68, here 62; *Negative Dialektik*, 378.
- 110 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Graeculus (II)', in *Frankfurter Adorno-Blätter* vol. 8 (2003), 17.
- 111 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 112 Quote in Theodor W. Adorno, 'Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 5 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 7–245, here 48.
- 113 Adorno, *Einführung in die Dialektik*, 305.
- 114 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 313; *Einführung in die Dialektik*, 304.
- 115 For the trope in question see Martin Buber, *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman* (Frankfurt: Rütten & Loening, 1906), 99. For discussions elsewhere see Walter Benjamin, 'Franz Kafka', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. II-1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 409–38, here 432; Martins, *Adorno*, 45–9.
- 116 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 294; *Minima Moralia*, 127.
- 117 See MEW vol. 23, 90.
- 118 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Wozu noch Philosophie', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 10.2, 459–73, here 472.
- 119 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 150.
- 120 MEW vol. 23, 377.
- 121 See *ibid.*, 208–209.
- 122 See *ibid.*, 562–563.
- 123 Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie* vol. 2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), 262.
- 124 See MEW vol. 23, 613.
- 125 Adorno, *Zur Lehre von der Geschichte*, 238.
- 126 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Fortschritt', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 10.2, 617–38, here 637.
- 127 See MEW vol. 23, 611.
- 128 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 398.
- 129 Adorno, 'Zur Schlußzene des Faust', 136–7.
- 130 Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie* vol. 2, 287.
- 131 See Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 7, 392–3.
- 132 See Adorno, *Zur Lehre von der Geschichte*, 137, 238.
- 133 See Theodor W. Adorno, 'Marginalien zu Theorie und Praxis', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 10.2, 759–82.
- 134 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 41.
- 135 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 10.1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 254–87, here 283.
- 136 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 171.
- 137 *Ibid.*, 278. The usage of the term *Unwesen* here plays on the double meaning of the term. In common parlance it denotes unruly, mischievous and pernicious behaviour. At the same time it denotes the logical opposite of (though possibly also dialectical counterpart to) *Wesen* (meaning being, nature, or essence).
- 138 Adorno, *Zur Lehre von der Geschichte*, 212.

- 139 MEW vol. 23, 85; Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 30.
- 140 Adorno, *Zur Lehre von der Geschichte*, 209.
- 141 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 398.
- 142 See Julia Jopp, 'Von Markion zu Odradek', in Dirk Braunstein, Grażyna Jurewicz, Ansgar Martins (eds.), *Der Schein des Lichts, der ins Gefängnis selber fällt* (Berlin: Neofelis, forthcoming).
- 143 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 283.
- 144 Adorno, 'Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka', 284.
- 145 Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, *Briefwechsel* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994), 90.
- 146 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 283.
- 147 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Frankfurter Opern- und Konzertkritiken', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 19 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 9–255, here 193–4.
- 148 Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 199.
- 149 See *ibid.*, 338.
- 150 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 283.
- 151 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 399; Kierkegaard, in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 2, 198.
- 152 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 399.
- 153 Adorno, Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* vol. 2, 223.
- 154 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 202.
- 155 *Ibid.*, 194.
- 156 See *ibid.*, 128.
- 157 *Ibid.*, 358.
- 158 *Ibid.*, 202–3, 358.
- 159 See *ibid.*, 364.
- 160 Adorno, 'Erinnerungen an Paul Tillich', 38.
- 161 See Immanuel Kant, *Werke* vol. VII (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), A: 250–2.
- 162 Iris Dankemeyer, *Die Erotik des Ohrs*. (PhD Dissertation. FU Berlin, 2017), 295.
- 163 Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 16 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1995), 83.
- 164 Adorno, Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* vol. 1, 53.
- 165 Robert Ziegelmann, 'Das Leid in der Geschichte und die Bedingung der Möglichkeit kritischer Theorie', in Braunstein, Jurewicz, Martins, *Der Schein des Lichts*.
- 166 Adorno, *Metaphysik*, 35.
- 167 *Ibid.*, 226.
- 168 See Adorno, Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* vol. 1, 274.
- 169 Axel Hutter, 'Adornos Meditationen zur Metaphysik', in *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 46 (1998), 45–65, here 49.
- 170 See Adorno, *Metaphysik*, 214–23.
- 171 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Die Wartenden', in *Werke* vol. 5.1 (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011), 383–94, here 392.
- 172 Adorno, *Metaphysik*, 224; *Negative Dialektik*, 368. For an account, see Andreas Pangritz, *Vom Kleiner- und Unsichtbarwerden der Theologie* (Tübingen: Theologischer Verlag, 1996).
- 173 Adorno, 'Graeculus (II)', 38.
- 174 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Versuch, das Endspiel zu verstehen', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 11, 281–321, here 287.
- 175 Horkheimer, 'Traditionelle und kritische Theorie', 181.
- 176 Theodor W. Adorno, *Mahler. Eine musikalische Physiognomik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 13 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 207.
- 177 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 374.
- 178 Adorno, *Metaphysik*, 184.
- 179 Jürgen Habermas, 'Der deutsche Idealismus der jüdischen Philosophen', in Thilo Koch (ed.), *Porträts zur deutsch-jüdischen Geistesgeschichte* (Cologne: DuMont, 1961), 99–125, here 124.
- 180 *Ibid.*, 124–5.
- 181 See Horkheimer, 'Nachwort', and the earlier section on the prohibition of the image.
- 182 Habermas, 'Der deutsche Idealismus', 124.
- 183 See Christoph Schulte (ed.), *Deutschtum und Judentum* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1993).
- 184 Jürgen Habermas, *Im Sog der Technokratie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2013), 14.
- 185 See *ibid.*
- 186 Jürgen Habermas, 'Dialektischer Idealismus im Übergang zum Materialismus', in *Theorie und Praxis* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971), 172–227.
- 187 Habermas, 'Der deutsche Idealismus', 122.
- 188 Habermas, *Im Sog der Technokratie*, 21.
- 189 Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* vol. 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1987), 512.
- 190 Marc Nicolas Sommer, *Das Konzept einer negativen Dialektik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 127.
- 191 Jürgen Habermas, *Ein Bewußtsein von dem, was fehlt* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2008), 30.
- 192 Jürgen Habermas, 'Vom Funken der Wahrheit', <http://www.zeit.de/2015/15/theodor-w-adorno-gershon-scholem-freundschaft-briefwechsel/komplettansicht>
- 193 Rolf Tiedemann, 'Historischer Materialismus oder politischer Messianismus', in *Dialektik im Stillstand* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983), 99–142, here 135.

# Social Constitution and Class

Tom Houseman

Critical theory is not well known for its interest in phenomena such as class, which are conventionally held to belong to political economy. This is partly due to the attention-grabbing influence of the philosophical, sociological, cultural and aesthetic analyses produced by members of the Frankfurt School, which contributed to a popular misconception that critical theory marks a departure from the traditional heartland of Marxist thought. The apparent distance from Marxism was exacerbated by the strategic veiling of references to Marxist theory throughout the work of Adorno and Horkheimer in particular (Wiggershaus, 1994: 401; Rubin, 2002: 174–5), but also by a tendency to assume that Friedrich Pollock’s work on political economy spoke for the whole Frankfurt School, leaving Adorno and others to develop more philosophical and cultural critiques (Postone and Brick, 1982: 618–19).

This is, however, a grave misconception. The starting point for critical theory is class society. The dialectical character of Adorno’s

work is necessary precisely because it enables thought to encounter contradiction as ‘something more than an accidental error on the part of the thinker’ (Jarvis, 1998: 170), as something that inheres in the object of thought itself. The perversity of identitarian reason (Adorno, 1973) and the mythical character of enlightenment rationality (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997) belong to an antagonistic social totality in which that antagonism is not at all obvious to its participants. The basic premise of Adorno’s work, and indeed of Marx’s materialism, is a world governed by mediation, a world in which social reality appears to those involved in mystified, fetishized forms. Understood as a critical project of demystification, Marx’s *Capital* uncovers what is encrypted in the economic abstractions that dominate our everyday lives: the social relations of production (Bonefeld, 2016a: 61–6). The central contradiction of capitalist society, as revealed by Marx, is that the social relations of production are structured as a class antagonism but

this appears as its opposite, namely the free and equal exchange of commodities between seemingly independent individuals, each pursuing their own interests as equals by means of freely entered contracts.

In this way, ‘class society’ does not fully capture the place of class in critical theory. Instead, class must be conceived as a relation of struggle. The different poles of the class struggle are constituted by this relation, rather than being pre-existing entities that come together and begin struggling, competing or cooperating. Capital is the ‘not-labour’ moment of the capital–labour relation, and vice versa. Class struggle is ‘the fundamental premise of class. Better still: class struggle is class itself’ (Gunn, 1987: 16). This is not an inevitable or inescapable situation, a trans-historical truth to which critical theory resigns itself. Instead, for Adorno especially, the abolition of capitalist social relations of production, and indeed the abolition of class, is urgent and necessary (Bonefeld, 2016a: 71). Capitalist social relations take the form of petrified economic abstractions, and so the life and work of society appear as abstract economic mechanisms that are indifferent to human needs (Adorno, 1976: 80), allowing for the coexistence of extremes of excess and luxury alongside abject deprivation. This indifference also has a role to play in the perpetuation of atrocities, and the need to abolish capitalist social relations is the obvious implication behind Adorno’s famous ‘new categorical imperative’ that ‘mankind ... arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen’ (Adorno, 1973: 365). In contrast to those approaches that take (a specific) class as their positive starting point, something to be affirmed as an agent of radical change, critical theory argues that emancipatory praxis must confront class as the basis of the unintelligibility and irrationality of capitalist society. ‘Contrary to the rumour about critical theory’, therefore, ‘its critique of existing conditions does not entail an impoverished praxis. Rather, it entails the question of praxis: what

really does it mean to say ‘no’ in a society that is governed by the movement of economic abstractions?’ (Bonefeld, 2016b: 237).

This chapter fleshes out the above claims through a series of critical engagements with various traditional and Marxian approaches to theorizing class. Against sociological approaches to class, including Weberian and Marxist variants, I argue that the impulse to conceptualize class as a classificatory schema to organize complex social differentiation is an affirmation of the way that class *struggle* appears, in a perverted conceptual system, as its opposite. To take the results of fetishistic thought as its basis in this way, commits to a host of problematic theoretical and political positions. I then turn to the teleological Marxist conception of class as the trans-historical development of a revolutionary subject, and Lukács in particular, arguing that this rehearses the same problematic manoeuvre that underlies the sociological account of class, namely to erase the contradictions within the concept of class. Whereas sociological accounts start with assuming the noncontradictory existence of class, Lukács attempts to preserve the contradictions but fold them into a noncontradictory whole. In contrast, a critical theory of class does not attempt to reconcile the social contradiction. Rather, it locates class as an entirely negative category, both in terms of theory and praxis. Finally, I turn to the omissions of classical political economy to highlight the critical importance of class exploitation and the social constitution of the doubly free labourer on which this exploitation rests.

## SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO CLASS

### *Weberian Sociology*

The sociology of class emerged from the growing division between economics and other social sciences, in which the former, as

part of its marginalist revolution and the rise of microeconomics from the close of the nineteenth century, ejected any form of agency beyond utility-maximizing individuals and firms (Clarke, 1991: 37). As this new disciplinary division of labour emerged, Max Weber took up the analysis of class as a sociological phenomenon, cementing the demise of political economy for which class had been a central concern (which I return to, below). In *Economy and Society* (1978), Weber sets out class as a methodological problem: how to examine the complex intersections of different bases for social action in modern, mass society. Weber's solution was the construction of 'ideal types' that can be verified empirically, at least roughly, by the types of social action they are theorized to promote. Complex, pluralistic society is thus carved up methodologically into stratifications, and class is the economic version of social stratification, alongside the political (parties) and social (status groups). A class is defined in terms of differences in how agents act in the market (Wright, 2005: 210–16), which is ultimately determined by their 'position' in the economy: the resources they bring with them as they interact with the market, which determine the chances that they will achieve their goals, whatever they might be (Weber, 1978: 302). The sociology of classes therefore consists in theoretically modelling the opportunities and likely market preferences of the holders of specific types of assets, with the assumption that individuals with similar assets, and therefore similar prospects in the market, will behave similarly.

There is a formal connection between the classes (in that a class defined by its exclusive ownership of a particular resource logically entails the other classes lack this resource); however, this connection is far from constitutive. Weber stipulates that while class differentiation in capitalist societies occurs along the axis of property, including the 'positively privileged classes' of capitalists and landlords, as well as the 'negatively privileged classes' of workers and tenants,

stratification also occurs in terms of differential power within the market due to the possession of specialized skills or positions of authority, such as managers (Mommsen, 1989: 63–4). Consequently, the alignment or conflict between different classes' interests are contingent, within a broader matrix of power and social action that is also structured by political and social stratification.

The crucial point here is that class is an abstract and analytical device, which simplifies the complexity of plural modern society. The taxonomy of classes, their interests and their relations, are all open questions that may change from place to place and at different times. Class, for Weber, is not a question of struggle, nor really of relation, as classes do not confront each other directly, but rather interact with the market itself. The existence of classes as methodological categories is mirrored in the Weberian approach to class consciousness. Weber leaves open the possibility of members of a class becoming conscious of their shared situation and thus organizing as a class (Weber, 1978: 932). However, the normal operation of social action for classes is that individuals tend to conform to a pattern that corresponds to their position in the market. This is in contrast to parties and status groups which contain greater scope for concerted collective action. To the extent that 'ideal-typical' class analysis remains deliberately abstract, with the concrete details to be filled in by social action, the interests of a specific class 'lack any determinate form' and 'can be derived only from the average beliefs and activities of class members at a given point in time' (Wenger, 1987: 57).

Class, then, is a methodological device, a heuristic means to rationalize complex reality; as an empirical phenomenon, class is meaningful only to the extent that there is some similarity between the beliefs and behaviour of those placed in the same classification. This opens the door to the later characterization of class as cultural affectation (for instance, Bourdieu, 1984), but more

importantly removes any critical component of the concept of class. Classical political economy, which sociology and economics dissolved, was at least able to articulate class interest in such a way as to recommend specific courses of action; it had a role to play in each class' political education. The Weberian approach, by contrast, furnishes the members of a class with only their own reflections, allowing for no gap between perception and the economic situation. As Morton Wenger complains, this means

if in one century the majority of the feudal peasantry of Germany experiences economic hardship as a result of a depression in urban demand for farm products and perceives its interests as served by slaughtering the Jewish population, then, deploying Weber's logic, this represents their class interests at this point in time. (1987: 56)

The paradox of the empiricist and sociological approach to class is that it locates class as category in the production of knowledge, a methodological abstraction, while at the same time denying the epistemological validity of anything not empirically observable. This means, for Adorno, that sociology 'reduced the essential fact, namely, class, to an ideal type and banished it to the realm of methodology, while abandoning reality to a cult of unique events that the theory merely garnished' (2003: 101). The primary result of this 'cult of unique events' is that each classification becomes immediately suspect as soon as differentiation within an identified class becomes visible. This prompts the postulation of ever more granular stratifications, with overlapping schema and varying degrees of sub-classes and variations. Class, as a meaningful concept, falls victim to a methodological approach imported from types of social action more readily identified around organizational structures and conscious allegiance (such as Party or club membership). In the absence of such identifying features, class is condemned to fragment almost to the point where each individual comprises her own economic class.

### ***Gramsci and Marxist Sociology***

Drawing on both Weber and Marx, Antonio Gramsci's contribution to class theory can be seen as an attempt to rescue the sociological approach to classes as identifiable groups from its regress into fragmentation by grounding it in classical Marxism. The classical or orthodox Marxist tradition, associated especially with the Second International, was heavily influenced by figures such as Engels, Plekhanov and Lenin, who promoted *Capital* as the pinnacle of economic science, a work of political economy (rather than the critique of it), distinguished from Smith and Ricardo by its technical superiority (Clarke, 1991: 71–4). A distinctive feature of the Marxist orthodoxy is the progressive disarticulation of Marx's 'economics' from the social, political and ideological dimensions of the critique of political economy, which are held to be separate structures, each of which can be theorized (separately) from a Marxist perspective (Bonefeld, 2001: 5–6). As the property relations that underpin the bourgeoisie's exploitation of the proletariat are as much political and juridical as economic, class becomes separated from the 'proper' objects of economics, namely value, the circulation of money, and the different types of capital. Thus, the primary consequence of the economic reading of *Capital* is that the theory of class is relinquished to a separate Marxist discipline concerning one or more of the dependent structures – political, ideological, legal – that Marx did not have time to analyse in the same depth as his economics.

Class poses questions in this classical universe of interlocking but separate structures, one theoretical and one practical. Viewed from the economic 'base', it is a given that there are two different groups: one deploys its labour to ensure the survival of society, creating social wealth through its effort and creativity; the other is a parasite that persists by exploiting the first, growing ever richer. This is the essential fact of capitalism, and its

emergence, often theologically conceived as the inevitable result of the internal contradictions of feudalism, hardly matters (although see the section on Lukács, below). The practical problem is that in spite of the obviousness of this relationship of exploitation, the proletariat has so far failed to cast off its shackles and rid itself of the parasites, hence the Gramscian turn to ideology and the political and institutional context of class action. The theoretical problem for this tradition is ‘the embarrassment that not all individuals in bourgeois society can be fitted, tidily, into the groups which it labels as “capitalists” and “proletarians”’ (Gunn, 1987: 16). Gramsci’s sociological inheritance provides the answer to both questions by positing a variety of additional classifications in which to contain those that do not fit into the original two, such as middle classes and sub-class ‘fractions’, which may be assessed in terms of likely class allegiances that might further or impede socialist strategy (Bonefeld, 2014: 104).

Following Gramsci’s emphasis on the specific requirements of a successful political movement, the more sociological Marxist approaches pay particular attention to the idea of class leadership. This idea, and its development in the concept of hegemony, presupposes a plurality of different ‘social forces’, which forms the context in which class leadership can make sense. Society is ‘naturally’ one of difference, and unity (for instance in a historic bloc) is something artificial, against which Marx complains, in *Theories of Surplus Value*, that ‘in this society unity appears as accidental, separation as normal’ (1977: 398). Significantly, this entails some departure from the orthodox Marxist conception of class in terms of the social relations of production, understood as the capital–labour relation. Instead, a more diffuse understanding of how classes are ‘engendered’ by the social relations of production (Bieler and Morton, 2003: 476) is ‘often invoked but never conceptualised’ (Bonefeld, 2004: 236).

Marx’s two ‘great classes’ are broken down into a more diverse arena of ‘collective actors’

(Bieler and Morton, 2003: 476), making the logic of class struggle commensurable with the politics of how non-class social forces articulate and pursue their interests. Indeed, Cox argues that hegemony consists of three interacting types of force: ideas, institutions and material capabilities (Cox, 1981: 136), in an echo of Weber’s triad of class, party and status group. For the less pluralist Gramscian tradition extending from Poulantzas, this diversity of social forces extends inwards into class, with the ‘collective actors’ not being entire classes but rather ‘rival fractions’ within them (Bieler and Morton, 2003: 480). In this way, for instance, neoliberalism is interpreted as the project of a hegemonic class fraction, whose particular interests determine the social form of society in this period.

The focus on fractions, especially within the capitalist class, entrenches the Gramscian tendency to approach class as a group rather than a social relation. Fractions are identified according to the similarity and collusion of their members – a unity of interests – and the question of antagonistic relations between various social forces (which must be negotiable for hegemony to be possible) is established to some extent empirically (Poulantzas provides a good example of this: see Clarke, 1977: 19–20, and the rest of that article for how these problems undermine his theory of the state). As Bonefeld (1992, 2004) argues, this depoliticizes the capitalist economy by substituting ‘class struggle for class strategy’ (1992: 96), the latter being located in a political field of contesting ideas and political machinations. Despite the frequent references to the ‘social relations of production’ in the Gramscian literature, the way in which capitalism reproduces itself is rendered politically inert, and those social relations become something distinct from class.

While Althusser drew heavily from Gramsci, he resists the separation of (economic) social relations and (political) social classes. Althusser ascribes to the orthodox view of a Marxist economics, alongside a Marxist theory of politics and a Marxist

theory of ideology, but asserts that class belongs to all three simultaneously (Connell, 1979: 310). This avoids the economic reductionism inherent in orthodox Marxism, without overemphasizing the cultural or ideational existence of class as does Gramsci. However, this approach replicates the sociological conceptuality of class as classification: the goal is a positive, concrete description of the class situation whose measure is empirical accuracy rather than a (critical) enquiry into the constitution of the empirical appearance. The attempt to deal with class as the interaction of three relatively autonomous 'instances' gives rise to 'a truly formidable number of possible situations and schemes of analysis, which makes it possible to treat every situation as the exception it is' (Connell, 1979: 312). Here again is the theory of class degenerating into a positivistic 'cult of unique events' (Adorno, 2003: 101) that provide the concrete and contingent facts behind which sits orthodox Marxism's economic 'base', as explained by the scientific economics of Marxism. Althusser suggests that this accumulation of complexity rescues Marxism from the charge of determinism; however, as Richard Gunn aptly comments, this is 'like claiming that a machine is no longer a machine in virtue of the number of cogwheels in its motor drives' (1987: 22).

## CRITICAL THEORY AGAINST THE SOCIOLOGY OF CLASS

Conceptualizing classes as identifiable groups, which between them may successfully subsume every member of a society under one classificatory schema, pulls decisively away from the critical insights Marx develops in his critique of political economy. The capital-labour relation quickly degenerates into an ever-more fragmented taxonomy of different groups, strata and sub-class fractions. Even where this degeneration is halted, usually by the dogmatic assertion of the

ontological priority of the bourgeoisie and proletariat, the political result is the same: theory is tasked with strategizing to further the (theorized or articulated) interests of its chosen side. Crucially, classes become groups that have an empirical existence within a society 'structured' by the economic system of capital. To forward the interests of this or that class, to advocate its 'class leadership' and to theorize its routes to power, is to leave the economic categories untouched. This 'world-view describes capitalist economy as an irrationally organised economy of labour, and proposes socialism as a rationally organised economy of labour by means of conscious planning by public authority' (Bonefeld, 2016b: 240–1). Central economic planning, which thus derives partly from the sociological theory of class, preserves the perverse economic categories of capitalism, merely seeking to organize the distribution of outcomes between different groups: 'to secure for the slaves their existence within slavery' (Adorno, 2003: 105).

In contrast to the conception of class as group difference, critical theory conceives of class, and specifically class struggle, as a negative category. The capital-labour relation, which Marx uncovers as the constitutive basis of capitalist society, is a relation between categories, in a world where social relations appear as relations between things. Rather than being a system that works independently of its human participants (as it appears to economics), or a 'real' system of human oppression that is concealed by an ideological cloud (as it appears to structural Marxism), capitalism is a world of appearances: human social relationships (for instance, providing food for another) exist in the form of the interaction of quantities of things: commodities, and especially money. But this fetishized world remains a human world. It obtains through human action. 'Economic objectivity imposes itself over the social individuals because it prevails in and through them.... In this "coined" relationship, the social individuals vanish, only to reappear as personalities



of economic reason, calculating the movement of economic quantities, winnings and losses, and struggling for money-based access to subsistence' (Bonefeld, 2016a: 63). This is the substance of class in capitalism. Social relations are encrypted into economic categories, which acquire social reality in the form of roles (Marx uses the term '*dramatis personae*' (1976: 280)) that we must play, on pain of our losing access to the means of subsistence. Individuals are 'the personifications of economic categories, the bearers [*Träger*] of particular class-relations and interests' (1976: 92).

To personify the economic categories of capital and labour is not to personify one or the other as self-contained things. Rather, it means the internalization of the capital–labour *relation*, which manifests in a diversity of different configurations of interests, resources and behaviours (Bonefeld, 2014: 106; Gunn, 1987: 17–19). A single class relation (capital–labour) appears as a multitude of positions, including *but not limited to* capitalists and workers. Managers, self-employed entrepreneurs, shop-owners, retirees, housewives, prisoners, the disabled and many more: all confront their social world and the problem of subsistence as different configurations of the capital–labour relation, but where this relation 'cuts through' them rather than each inhabiting one side or the other (Gunn, 1987: 16–24). The employee who puts some of her savings into the stock market, for example, internalizes the concerns and class interests of both poles of the capital–labour relation. As the logic of capitalism that Marx uncovers entails the growth and concentration of capital, and thus the expansion and intensification of capital's insatiable hunger for (unpaid) labour, the personifications of employers and employees do form the norm of capitalist society, but not at the exclusion of other configurations of personified economic categories. In this way, capitalism produces both the empirical support for the sociological Marxist view of class and its falsification. The critical point is that conceptualizing class in terms of

*classification* takes the result of fetishism and personification as a positive and basic fact, and constructs its understanding of capitalist society and its political programme on this basis. Critical theory, by contrast, recognizes that class – and specifically the appearance of multiple positions that can be grouped together into different classes – belongs to a fetishized and irrational totality that must be subjected to critique in its entirety.

### **Reflections on Class Theory**

It may be objected that a critical theory of class, by conceiving of class struggle as something that does not appear immediately but rather takes the form of its opposite – as (sociological) class difference – tells us little about the actual configuration of interests and behaviours that shape day to day experience. This is already a misperception as the critical approach allows us to conceptualize, in terms of class struggle, the quotidian pressures that dominate the majority of our ordinary experience, from purchasing food to the offices, factories and other environments where we spend much of the day. But it is also pertinent to observe that it is critical theory, rather than sociological approaches to class, that is able to recognize the contradictions that structure and disorganize the class politics of the personifications of capital and labour, and therefore produce a more sober prognosis of the proximity of a historic change in the social relations of production.

In his 1942 essay, 'Reflections on Class Theory' (2003), Adorno takes up the familiar Marxist trope of the apparent decline of the working class as a potent force for revolutionary change. He argues, against the view that nineteenth century exploitation has given way to a more cooperative and humanized relation between employers and employees, that capitalist domination over labour has increased and intensified, past a tipping point at which class itself ceases to be recognizable: 'The omnipotence of repression and

its invisibility are the same thing.... So great has the tension become between the poles that never meet that it has ceased to exist' (Adorno, 2003: 97). In a perverse way, the capitalist class as the personification of self-valorizing value reasserts itself as the ideology of a classless society. Class struggle

disappears behind the concentration of capital. This latter has reached a magnitude and acquired a weight of its own that enables capital to present itself as an institution, as the expression of society as a whole.... By virtue of its omnipotence, the particular is able to usurp the totality: this overall social aspect of capital is the end-point of the old fetish character of the commodity according to which relations between men are reflected back to them as relations between things. (2003: 99)

As a result of the almost total asymmetry in the economic power of concentrated and centralized capital (a result of each successive crisis) in contrast to even organized labour in possession of the vote, the personifications of capital become ever-more anonymous, in spite of conspiracy theories that seek to give them recognizable faces and names (and ethnicities). In the face of the anonymity and irresistibility of the old foe, the exploited 'are unable to experience themselves as a class. Those among them who claim the name mean by it for the most part their own particular interest in the existing state of affairs' (2003: 97). Faced with the progressive invisibility of capital as a moment of class struggle, organized labour retreats into the affirmation of the sociological character of the class tied to labour, seeking to preserve its unity and political gains through a strategy of celebrating the particular dignity and moral improvement of proletarian culture (*Endnotes*, 2015: 96–7). *The Communist Manifesto*'s call for the workers to throw off their chains, and thereby abolish class itself, degrades into a moralizing defence of everything proletarian – flat caps and whippets, calloused hands and thick accents – in contrast to the perceived decadence and iniquity of the bourgeoisie. From this point, class becomes a form of identity politics: the

zealous policing of what counts as a positive in-group characteristic and what marks one as 'other'. Class identity then irresistibly intersects with other axes of oppression and exclusion, especially race and gender, which are (mis)characterized as non-economic forms of identity. The strategic and affirmative defence of proletarian identity and conditions almost inevitably became a denial of the political salience of racial and gendered injustice, for instance the British labour movement's decision to let the franchise question rest with 'universal' male suffrage, postponing women's suffrage as a lesser priority. Tendencies within radical politics, such as competitions over which group suffers the worst or most important oppression, partially emanate from the transcription of class into a sociological register, which is itself motivated by the growing impossibility of labour experiencing itself as a unity.

Adorno's insight in *Reflections on Class Theory* is that the fragmentation of the working class, conventionally narrated in terms of decline, is in fact characteristic of the very concept of class in capitalism, and is exhibited far more clearly by the bourgeoisie: 'As the anonymous unity of the owners of the means of production and their various appendages, the bourgeoisie is the class par excellence' (2003: 98). Far from acting as a concerted unity of interests, members of the capitalist class are locked in deadly competition with each other, and it is the potential for ruin at the hands of competitors that drives the endless quest for increased accumulation. Moreover, the capitalist class is not, and has never been, a competition of equals, but rather is structured by asymmetries in power, position, resources and advantages. This is not to say, along with the neo-Gramscians, that it is class fractions that are agential and therefore of explanatory and strategic importance, and we might well observe the same asymmetries among the members of a fraction. Instead it is to highlight, rather than efface, the contradictory nature of class. It is worth quoting Adorno at length here:

In other words, real though the class is, it is also ideology in equal measure.... [Marxism] denounces the bourgeois class as a unity, a class against the proletariat, in order to expose the fact that the universal interest it claims to represent possesses a particularist dimension. But this particularist unity is necessarily a non-unity in itself.... The critique of liberal society cannot stop short at the concept of class, which is both as true and as false as the liberal system itself. Its truth is its critical aspect: it designates the unity in which particular bourgeois interests are made real. Its untruth lies in the non-unity of the class.... Its real non-unity is veiled by its no less real unity. (2003: 98–9)

The only way to make sense of this is to recognize that class is not a question of self-coherent groups, but is nothing other than a relation of struggle, and one that appears in contradictory ways. Class is ‘a living contradiction. Contradictions cannot be classified’ (Bonefeld, 2014: 107). To live in a class society is to act and think as the personification of economic categories, and even where this produces classes in the sociological sense, membership of the same class ‘by no means translates into equality of interests and action’ (Adorno, 2003: 97), precisely because class society is a contradictory reality.

## LUKÁCS AND THE THEOLOGY OF CLASS

A significant problem for classical Marxists, not unrelated to the above discussion, is the self-proclaimed status of Marxism as the critique of capitalism from the historical perspective of the working class. To affirm the working class as an ontologically privileged subject of history is to assign a positive status to a component part of a fetishized, antagonistic and contradictory totality. The way out of this, at least for the classical Marxists who recognized it as a problem, is to ascribe the working class with a historical status that transcends the time of capital, thus exempting the proletariat from belonging ‘only’ to capitalism. The most sophisticated version of

this is Georg Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness* (1971), in which he attempts to develop a theory of class consciousness that both recognizes that we labour under the thing-like false objectivity of economic categories and seeks to ground the proletariat as a positive force against capitalism.

Lukács does this by turning to a Hegelian understanding of history as an unfolding dialectical process. Briefly, Lukács argues that the coinciding of the objective class situation and our subjective experience of it is profoundly blocked by what he termed ‘reification’, which consists in the fact that we are confronted by our own social activity, such as the labour process, in the guise of mysterious objects with their own independent existence and laws of motion, driven by ‘invisible forces that generate their own power’ (1971: 87). This is combined with the pressure of rationalization, in which the drive to efficiency produces an ever-more specialized divisions of labour in which each person becomes a smaller and more atomized part of an increasingly large and complex social totality, culminating in the subordination of the human to the machine.

Lukács’ solution to the problem of reification is that the objectification of the worker, her progressive transformation into a mere commodity, will push towards a point at which the dialectic implodes, and the workers’ subjective experience coincides with the social reality of their personification of objectified social relations (1971: 171). This would constitute the proletariat as a class possessing the self-consciousness of the capitalist epoch, allowing them to play a transformative role in the Hegelian unfolding of history. As the consciousness of the proletariat develops through its praxis, it begins to recognize its actual situation, in spite of reification, and threatens to overthrow capitalist class relations in their entirety. As such, it becomes capable of fulfilling the inner necessity of history:

Only when the consciousness of the proletariat is able to point out the road along which the dialectic

tics of history is objectively impelled, but which it cannot travel unaided, will the consciousness of the proletariat awaken to a consciousness of the process, and only then will the proletariat become the identical subject-object of history whose praxis will change reality. (1971: 197)

Even aside from the dogmatic idealism in presuming an innate dialectic of history (Bonefeld, 2014: 68), in which the proletariat acquires a messianic status, Lukács' attempt to identify the revolutionary proletariat as the identical subject-object of history runs into severe difficulty. Theoretically, it raises a perplexing question of how Marx (and indeed Lukács) was able to penetrate the veil of reification when this is something reserved for the privileged perspective of a class that has become history's self-consciousness. Lukács argues that the possibility of intellectually, that is, scientifically, understanding the inner necessity of history does not equate to the ability to 'change reality', which can only occur through praxis. However, this is a flawed argument as it separates science from consciousness, and intellectual labour from praxis, implying that scientific analysis is a shortcut to objective knowledge, which is precisely what the theory of class consciousness against reification rejects. If true consciousness is the exclusive prize of praxis, either the scientific knowledge Marx is supposed to have produced, and which underwrites Lukács' account of reification, is flawed in ways that it cannot know, and must await historical verification, or it somehow channels the self-consciousness of a class that has not, and currently cannot, yet come to exist.

In terms of practice, the problem is more pronounced. The self-consciousness of the proletariat, as the identical subject-object of history, is the achievement of a revolution that would destroy the false immediacy of reification, commodity fetishism and objectification. But in order for the revolution to occur, and the proletariat to fulfil their messianic historic mission, the proletariat must already possess a revolutionary – that

is, non-reified – consciousness as a class. Class consciousness is both a necessary precondition for the revolution and its eventual achievement. Lukács suspends this paradox in the idea of the Communist Party, which has not quite earned class consciousness through praxis but nevertheless embodies the vanguard, the most developed, form of that consciousness: the Party 'must exist as an independent organisation so that the proletariat may be able to see its own class consciousness given historical shape' (1971: 326). This (all too convenient) substitution of the proletariat's revolutionary class consciousness for the leadership of the Communist vanguard (which for Adorno is a purely idealist act of the identification of non-identical things) initiates a chain of possible substitutions in which the Party is substituted for the central committee, which is in turn substituted for the Leader, who thus becomes the living, pre-revolutionary embodiment of the proletariat's future self-identical class consciousness, and therefore the very self-consciousness of history. The messianic character of the proletariat is transferred to the head of the Party, who is therefore justified in purging the proletariat of its beliefs in its own name.

## CRITICAL THEORY AGAINST THE THEOLOGY OF CLASS

While his work is much more sophisticated than much of orthodox Marxism, and a significant inspiration for Adorno and the Frankfurt School in general, Lukács succumbs to essentially the same rationalizing impulse as sociological Marxist accounts of class: the attempt to erase the contradiction. Whereas sociological approaches assume at the outset that society is made up of difference, not contradiction, and classes are a way of organizing, stratifying and hierarchizing this world of discrete, different positions, Lukács preserves the contradictions in the

idea of reification and class struggle, but seeks to locate them, as does Hegel, in an ultimately non-contradictory whole, namely history. Contradiction is understood as having a destiny: it is a stage or a clause in a wider equation that will inevitably resolve into a self-identical subject-object: history's self-consciousness made flesh. Critical theory rejects this metaphysical and idealist apotheosis of noncontradiction as the inner truth behind a sequence of contradictions. If capitalism is to end, if the social relations of production are to be radically reconfigured – and materialism has no reason to consider this inevitable – it will not be the work of an agent that transcends history, although it may well be the result of that unpredictable (because it is contradictory) phenomenon, class struggle.

What this means for the critical theory of class is that class is entirely a negative category. It belongs completely to the false society, which is so contradictory as to require 'dialectics as the ontology of the wrong state of things' (Adorno, 1973: 11), and the same is therefore true of any particular class. To belong to the working class is not to be a member of a special club of the virtuous, it is not to possess some magical power of creation (as tends to be the view of those Marxisms that make labour a trans-historical category), nor is it to be the bearer of a privileged historical mission and its consciousness. To be in the great mass of people whose only access to subsistence is the sale of their labour power is 'not a piece of luck but a misfortune' (Marx, 1976: 644). Lukács is, however, right to suggest that the experience of those who survive by selling their labour power yields some insight into the nature of the system to which they belong, although this is not the historical self-consciousness he envisaged, and nor does it imply an awareness, in spite of reification and fetishism, of the exploitation which is the engine of class struggle. Instead, it is the constant, looming threat of not having enough money to survive, the

equation of unemployment and destitution, that provides the daily experience that tells the truth of capitalism:

Pauperization is the flip side of the free play of economic forces in the liberal system, whose theory is reduced ad absurdum by the Marxist analysis: with the growth in social wealth there is also, under capitalist relations of production with their immanent systemic compulsions, a corresponding growth in social poverty. (Adorno, 2003: 103–4)

As Adorno points out, though pauperization is a necessary consequence of capitalist social relations of production, it is not a mechanical law that asserts itself independently of the actions of individuals. The economic production of poverty is mitigated through 'extraeconomic' measures to raise the standard of living of the poorest, through minimum wage standards, unemployment benefits and social provision of certain goods, among other devices. Such measures are not the result of the operation of the economic logic of capital, but rather an index of the operation of class struggle. Class struggle between the poles of labour and capital has produced numerous such outcomes, but class struggle also produces configurations of interests within the capitalist class which pit the interest in lower wages and the disciplining power of poverty against an equally capitalist interest in minimizing poverty 'lest it blow the system apart' (Adorno, 2003: 104). This conflict of interests does not adhere to one or the other side of a schism within the capitalist class, *qua* Gramscian class fractions, but rather comprises part of the contradictory configuration of the interests of individual capitalists. Which impulse wins out, and determines the next phase of extra-economic mitigation (or indeed exacerbation) of social poverty, is a matter of class struggle. It is not preordained by the 'inner necessity' of history, but a contingent and active process that is itself mediated by the contradictions of a world in which social relations appear as the relations between things.

## CLASSICAL POLITICAL ECONOMY AND CLASS

The discussion of poverty brings us to another important component of a critical theory of class, namely the social constitution of the class struggle. This is best illuminated through a critical engagement with the classical political economists, especially Smith and Ricardo, who provided the categories that Marx's *Capital* critiques.

Contrary to a popular misconception that a class-based analysis of capitalist society starts with Marx, it was in fact a mainstay of classical political economy (Clarke, 1991: 10). Adam Smith inherited from his predecessors the task of identifying how an economy characterized by class differentiation fitted together, but was the first to do this systematically (Clarke, 1991: 20). Smith rejected earlier conceptions of the constitutive classes of a capitalist economy, which had hitherto revolved around either property (in the sense of landowning classes) or activity (such as agricultural labourers), and instead derived his classes from the contributing parts of the production of commodities: land, stock (capital) and labour. The three classes that appear in *The Wealth of Nations* are defined by the form of income that they receive – rent, profit and wages – each of which is regulated by a distinct set of principles, with corresponding interests and tendencies. Smith's enduring, if neglected, contribution to political economy consists in his attempt to theorize how the separate interests of the three classes might balance out within what he called commercial society. There is little space here to explore this system, but there are three features of Smith's understanding of class that warrant attention.

First, the identification of a class does not proceed as classification – the attempt to distil general categories from a range of observed characteristics, such as types of property, levels of wealth, or social status – but rather starts from the totality of the economic system and enquires after its component parts.

The various plausible types of revenue in a capitalist economy are held to correspond to one corner of the triad of rent, profit and wages, and therefore the apparent diversity of economic actors is ultimately reducible to the landowning, stockholding and labouring classes (Clarke, 1991: 26). Smith thus builds into the very definition of each class a necessary relationship with the others and to the functioning of society as a whole.

The second feature of Smith's theorization of class emerges from his view of role differentiation, visible in the component parts of production, as itself arising from the principles of private property and equal exchange upon which his system is based. Smith assumes these principles as having a natural provenance, written into an innate human tendency to 'truck, barter and exchange', and concludes that an undifferentiated society will gradually and naturally congeal into class differentiation, due to natural propensities that lead to the accumulation of stock and land by some individuals, and the desire to employ others (Smith, 1904: I.6).

Third, Smith's conception of capitalism includes the possibility – and indeed the likelihood – of class struggle, especially between the capitalists, who want to lower the cost of labour, and workers, who want to raise it. In a system of competing, self-interested economic agents, where classes have differing interests concerning the price of labour, Smith explicitly predicts unrest and violence (1904: I.8.13). It falls to the state to intervene forcibly if it must, but also to encourage institutions (including religious instruction, scientific education and 'public diversions') that might 'correct whatever was unsocial' in the behaviour of the common people and the upper classes alike (1904: V.1.200, see also Bonefeld, 2014: 172–4). By 'unsocial', Smith does not mean lacking in altruism, as his society is based squarely in self-interest. Instead, sociality is the recognition that all particular interests are served best by a thriving, expanding economy: 'It is not the actual greatness of national wealth, but its continual

increase, which occasions a rise in the wages of labour' (1904: I.8.22). The awareness of this harmony of interests in increasing accumulation, as growth 'trickles down' even to the lowest paid parts of the labouring class, does not emerge (or persist) automatically, but requires careful management by the state.

After the initial glowing reception of *The Wealth of Nations*, political and economic convulsions in the early nineteenth century illuminated the intractable difficulty of producing harmonious relations between the classes (Heilbroner, 2000: 79–81). Among a number of political economists attempting to reconcile Smith's system to a rather more pessimistic worldview, David Ricardo's contribution stands out as the most influential. Ricardo sought to rectify a number of technical problems in Smith's theory, not least the latter's vacillations on the determination of value and therefore profit, but more importantly, for our purposes, he also supplemented Smith's theory to suggest that class conflict might be provoked even during expanded accumulation. Ricardo, as did Smith, recognized that the interests that united members of the same class would not necessarily coincide with those of the other classes (particularly, the labourers' desire for higher wages, the landowners' desire for higher agricultural prices, and the capitalists' desire for low agricultural prices, low rent, and low wages). But whereas Smith thought all three classes' interests would be best served by economic progress, through the steady increase in productivity, Ricardo discerned mechanisms that ensured the fruits of accumulation would be concentrated in particular hands, precipitating frustration, dissatisfaction and eventually social strife. Against his own intention, by replacing Smith's equivocations over the basis of value with his more rigorous 'labour theory of value', Ricardo invited a conclusion that all of classical political economy strenuously resisted: that the capitalist's profit was necessarily a deduction from the labourer's share in the value of the product created, thus adding the politically volatile contaminant of

exploitation into Smith's system of interlocking classes (Clarke, 1991: 35–7).

With Ricardo, membership of a class does not merely confer a particular set of interests but also specific behavioural characteristics. As agents in the economy, individuals are not, for Ricardo, people but rather 'they are prototypes. Nor do these prototypes, in the everyday sense of the word, live: they follow "laws of behavior"' (Heilbroner, 2000: 94–5). In the case of capitalists, the blanket generality of Smith's self-interest acquires the more specific form of an unceasing drive to accumulate, hounded by competition and its attendant threat of ruin. The working class, by contrast, is condemned to undermine any chance of receiving wages above subsistence levels, by its 'hopeless addiction to what is euphemistically called "the delights of domestic society"' (2000: 95), whereby any increase in wages due to the relationship of supply and demand will result in a growth in the working population, therefore depressing wages again back towards their 'natural' value. Only this dynamic saves Ricardo's system from the conclusion that profit is a deduction from wages, and thus employment is a form of exploitation. It is the rejection of this caveat, allowing the presentation of Ricardo's system to take on a tone of indignation at the exploitation of labour, that forms the basis of 'Marxist' economics, which shared the same fate as Ricardo under the 'devastating' critique of the labour theory of value by the likes of Sraffa and Böhm-Bawerk (Clarke, 1991: 73).

### **CRITICAL THEORY AGAINST POLITICAL ECONOMY: SOCIAL CONSTITUTION**

Smith and Ricardo provide a much more solid basis for thinking about class than the sociological variants discussed above, including the Marxist accounts, which to varying degrees all derive from Smith (as argued by

Clarke, 1991). Class is conceived as a relation that is integral to the totality of social reproduction, and thus acts as a check on the fragmentation and degeneration of classification-based approaches. Also, Ricardo paves the way for considering labour to be different from all other commodities, as the source of value, and therefore the class that must sell its labour power sells something that exceeds the blanket fungibility of commodities in general. But Smith and even the socialist reading of Ricardo fail to adequately conceptualize how wealth is produced in the production process, and therefore misrecognize the extent and character of the class struggle.

Marx's critique of classical political economy revolves around the apparent paradox of a system built upon the principle of the exchange of equal values, but that is driven by the accumulation of *surplus* value: 'money is thrown into circulation to beget more money in the form of profit, which is realized by means of an equivalent exchange (M ... M', say £100 = £120)' (Bonefeld, 2016a: 67). In Adorno's formulation, the concept of surplus value resolves the mysterious character of an equivalent exchange between two unequal values (M ... M') (quoted in Bonefeld, 2014: 3). The secret of this magical self-valorization lies, for Marx, in the process of capitalist production, in which the consumption of the commodity of labour power produces a value that is greater than its own. Thus, during the working day labour reproduces its own value, the value of labour power, *and* creates a surplus in value that represents unpaid labour time. 'Capital, therefore, is not only command over labour, as Adam Smith thought. It is essentially the command over unpaid labour. All surplus-value ... is in substance the materialization of unpaid labour-time' (Marx, 1976: 672). The 'misfortune' of labour as a class is specifically this: the purpose of capitalist production is the extraction of surplus value by various means (for which see *Capital* Vol. I, Part 5 especially). That is, its purpose is maximization of unpaid

labour time as foundation of profit. Its purpose is not production of use-values to satisfy human needs, which, says Adorno (2006: 51), is 'never more than a sideshow and in great measure no more than ideology'.

The important point here, in terms of class struggle, is that the equivalent exchange relations between the seller and buyer of labour power are founded on the existence of two classes: one which owns the means of production, and one which produces surplus value. As Marx explains,

Capitalist production ... reproduces in the course of its own process the separation between labour-power and the conditions of labour. It thereby reproduces and perpetuates the conditions under which the worker is exploited. It incessantly forces him to sell his labour-power in order to live, and enables the capitalist to purchase labour-power in order that he may enrich himself.... In reality, the worker belongs to capital before he has sold himself to the capitalist.... The capitalist process of production, therefore, seen as a total, connected process, i.e. a process of reproduction, produces not only commodities, not only surplus-value, but it also produces and reproduces the capital-relation itself; on the one hand the capitalist, on the other the wage-labourer. (Marx, 1976: 723–4)

The capital–labour relation is founded on a class that has to work for its subsistence; that is, 'this worker must be free in the double sense' (1976: 272) of being 'free' of the means to subsist and 'free' to sell her labour power to whomever in return for wage-based access to the means of subsistence. The separation of the worker from the means of subsistence is thus fundamental to the class relationship. Under the established operation of capital accumulation, the logic of separation makes the sale of labour power appear as an equal exchange between seller and buyer, which is of benefit to both parties: the worker receives from the buyer the value of her commodity and the capitalist receives the right to consume labour power during the duration of the working day. For critical theory, valorization – wealth in the form of money that begets more money – is founded on the social relationship between the buyers of labour power



and the producers of surplus value, and this relationship has a specific history. The forcible, legally sanctioned and often violent expropriation of human beings from their various means of subsistence, which is documented so well by Michael Perelman (2000) and conceptualized insightfully by Negt and Kluge (2014), is the secret history of capitalist social relations. The violence of expropriation, depriving people of their means of support, is the hidden premise of the equality of capital and labour as contracting parties on the labour market: the one selling to make a living, the other buying to make a profit.

The critical point, however, is that this process of ‘so-called primitive accumulation’ is not historically confined to the prehistory of capitalist society, a bloody memory erased and forgiven by the more civilized operation of bourgeois relations of free and equal exchange. Rather, primitive accumulation is a necessary precondition of the doubly free labourer, and therefore of capital; it is the historical basis of struggle, ‘conflict and survival’ (Adorno, 2006: 49ff.). As Bonefeld argues, the chapter sequence of *Capital* Vol. I, in which the discussion of capitalist accumulation is followed by the section on primitive accumulation, is not an accidental presentation, where the latter is an afterthought or appendix (2011: 390). Instead, the legalized robbery of primitive accumulation, which makes capital accumulation possible, tells the truth of the latter (on this see Negt and Kluge, 2014).

Capitalist accumulation is fundamentally the accumulation of unpaid labour in conditions of generalized equivalence exchange relations. Within capitalism’s own conceptual system, there is nothing improper here: economic compulsion is not personal, and equivalent values are indeed exchanged. But under the logic of separation, which is inaugurated by primitive accumulation, the abstract economic compulsion that returns workers to work each day retains a striking similarity to the ‘old age activity of the conqueror, who buys commodities from the conquered with the money he has stolen from them’ (Marx,

1976: 728). The difference is that under capitalism, the worker does not confront the capitalist as the source of their compulsion to seek waged work, on pain of starvation. If anything, the employer offers the antidote to that threat, and the success of the business (and of capital accumulation in general) is the precondition of sustained access to waged work. The spectre of ruinous unemployment arises not from the malevolent designs of the bourgeoisie but from the barriers to the accumulation of surplus value. Thus, the class struggle whose most explicit form is the violence of primitive accumulation, morphs into a necessity to work, imposed by an abstract and impersonal system of economic quantities. For the class tied to work, the necessity of selling one’s labour power in order to access the means of subsistence belongs to an ‘objective motor’ by which ‘the life of all men hangs’ (Adorno, 1973: 320), and thus appears as a simple fact of life, as economic nature. Primitive accumulation reveals the social, violent and antagonistic basis of this ‘nature’, namely that capitalist society is not only ‘antagonistic from the outset’ but also that it ‘maintains itself only through antagonism’ (1973: 304, 311). This is precisely why critical theory refuses to treat class as a positive category. ‘The critique of class society finds the positive only in the classless society, in communism’ (Bonefeld, 2011: 397).

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has sought to outline a critical theory of class, revolving around the conception of class as insolubly contradictory and antagonistic in character. Class, and more properly *class struggle*, is a necessarily negative concept, and can only be properly apprehended as appearing in a twice-mediated form: first as the dry abstractions of economic categories, and second as the personification of these categories. Attempts to think class in terms of classification – an analytical

ordering of social differentiation into identifiable strata – takes the second form as basic, and so misses the contradictory existence of class that drives such classifications into ever-greater degrees of fragmentation. The dissolution of class into a form of affirmative identity politics, which is a symptomatic attempt to halt this fragmentation, is mirrored by the ‘theological’ approach that raises the working class to a messianic agent that will fulfil Hegel’s promise of a self-identical subject of history. A critical theory of class utterly rejects such a view, not merely for its obvious idealism that obfuscates suffering but also for its attempt to ascribe to suffering an ontological privilege as part of a (dialectical) truth of history as a totality. Critical theory conceptualizes class struggle as the substance of a perverse totality that ‘does not simply survive *despite* conflict, but because of it’ (Adorno, 2006: 50). The totality, society, is both a coherent whole and an antagonism. It is a system constituted by a struggle, appearing simultaneously as both a vast objective movement of economic quantities and the activity of free individuals in pursuit of their own interest. Critical theory seeks to comprehend class struggle as the social dynamic of existing society. Its untruth is the untruth also of class. For critical theory, to think out of contradiction rather than impose our rationalizations, as it were, from above, is essential. Adorno’s negative dialectics resists the temptation to reconcile the irreconcilable. To finish a quote I began earlier: ‘dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things. The right state of things would be free of it: neither a system nor a contradiction’ (Adorno, 1973: 11).

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# Critical Theory and Utopian Thought

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The relationship between critical theory and Utopian thought is often misunderstood. The influential theorists of the Frankfurt School, particularly Adorno and Horkheimer, but also Benjamin and Marcuse, were critical of the Utopian novels like Thomas More's *Utopia* [1516] because of the latent authoritarianism in the detailed social designs in this tradition. Yet a Utopian element can still be found in their visions of social liberation. Ruth Levitas notes that Western Marxism in the twentieth century 'has undergone a partial re-ordering of economism and is more sympathetic to the importance of ideas (and thus Utopia) in the process of social change' (Levitas, 1990: 157). In this context she points in particular to the Frankfurt School. As she puts it, 'there is a tendency here to use the term Utopia in a positive sense, as a glimpse of a longed-for condition, rather than in the strongly negative sense that has become characteristic of the dominant interpretation of Marxism' (102). What does Utopia mean, as seen from the perspective of critical theory?

Levitas and others make the following distinction: 'In exploring existing definitions of Utopia, we can consider three different aspects: content, form, and function' (Levitas, 1990: 4). The focus on content is certainly the most challenging, because 'Utopias are reflections of the issues that were important to the period in which their authors lived' (Sargent, 2010: 21). With regard to the forms of Utopia, it will help to distinguish 'literary Utopias, Utopian practice, and Utopian social theory' (5). Sections 1 and 2 of this essay will furnish commentary and clarification with regard to the first two of these elements. A central concern here will be the question of the function(s) of Utopian thinking. A discussion of certain theoreticians of Utopia, notably Ernst Bloch and Karl Mannheim, will take up this aspect. These considerations will be presented in Sections 3 and 4, after which, Sections 5 and 6 will examine the functional perspective on Utopia as presented in critical theory. A concluding segment will respond to Habermas's (1985: 144)

diagnosis of the contemporary 'exhaustion of Utopian energies', and the question of the possibility of a re-invigoration of Utopian thought today.

## LITERARY UTOPIAS AND THE BOURGEOIS PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

In 1930, a year before his appointment as director of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, Max Horkheimer published his study on *The Origins of the Bourgeois Philosophy of History*. This work appeared one year after the Frankfurt School's competitor, Karl Mannheim, published his *Ideology and Utopia*. Horkheimer argues the following:

If ideology produces deceptive facade, Utopia to the contrary is the dream of the true and just order of life. In this sense, Utopia enters into every philosophical assessment of human society. As perspectives from different social groups, ideology and Utopia need to be understood in terms of the social reality as a whole. (Horkheimer, [1930] 1971: 9)

Utopias are tied to social realities as much as are ideologies; because of this, critical theory can explicate both phenomena. Functional differences are stressed: the ideological facade mystifies the given society; the Utopian dream contributes to the philosophical assessment of it. The materials used to explicate these several theses begin with the classical literary Utopian novels of the Renaissance, starting with More's *Utopia*. This is distinctly different from older, e.g. religious, visions of future prospects. Instead, 'More introduces a new element in the appraisal of reality with his emphasis on the category of reason as an expression of human nature' (Honke, 1985: 170). Certainly, reason had been a criterion characteristic of the philosophical projects of antiquity, yet there was an additional difference in More's

humanistic and positive image of man, which was in no way hostile to the pleasures of the senses.

But if our authentic humanity, which is more appropriate to us than any other virtue, is constituted by relieving the distress of others, by remedying their sorrow, and thereby giving their life joy again, that is to say, pleasure, why should not Nature motivate each one of us to perform the same service? (More, [1516] 1998: 71)

Unlike Plato, for example, who furnishes a caste system in service to the ideal political order, More desires the unification of reason with happiness. Sensible planning will allow Utopia to 'reduce working hours' to six hours a day, and it would be this liberation that would make 'happiness in life' possible (More, [1516] 1998: 58). Essential to More's Utopian vision is the contrast between exploiting labor and conserving labor. With this in mind, Horkheimer develops his account of Utopia's primary purpose:

Utopia actually has two components: it is the critique of all that is – and an illustration of what should be ... [T]he intended result is essentially already included in the critique. A people's real situation can be inferred from their hopes; from More's Utopia of contentment, we can see the state of the masses in England, whose aspirations the humane chancellor was shaping. (Horkheimer, [1930] 1971: 64)

Horkheimer accepts Utopia as a valid criticism of a given state of affairs. For example, there is More's criticism of the expulsion of farmers in favor of the rearing of sheep. These could become 'so voracious and evil, that they would even eat humans' (More, [1516] 1998: 26). Many of the aspects of the fictional island of Utopia, from universal education, to the secret ballot in the election of public officials, to public housing, can be understood as the expression of real neediness. This is especially interesting when it comes to hopes that have, over time, ultimately been realized. Horkheimer is careful to consider the stages involved in the historical process. More's *Utopia* includes a

communist view of life where 'everyone owns everything' (106). This Horkheimer judges to be historically premature. He bases his judgment on the Marxist conception that capitalism must break up the order of feudalism, and develop its own productive forces, before socialism can succeed. Horkheimer contrasts this objectivist perspective of chronological periods in history against what he sees as the contrived nature of the early Utopian novels. 'The actualization of their imaginative visions would have meant an artificial subversion of the developmental process, which still required the unfolding of the creative initiative of the individual within free competition' (Horkheimer, [1930] 1971: 63). Without justifying the miseries of the past, these hardships were considered to be historically necessary. *Utopia* is, in 1516, only an 'expression of impotent longing' for the 'ultimate goal', while individuals 'suffer during a period that is necessary for historical development' (67). What More describes as Utopia would become social reality in many places, but only much later, e.g. the prohibition of the marriage of women before the age of 18 and the implementation of a right to divorce.

Just as a Utopia may be ahead of its time, an epoch may also lag behind its possibilities. In this sense, Horkheimer criticizes the Marxism of his time. It was not Utopian hope that influenced the theory of social change of the workers' movement at that time, but rather the false belief according to which progress, i.e. the transition to socialism, would be guaranteed by the objective laws of history. Ten years later, in exile, Horkheimer criticized the lack of the Will to Utopia: 'At one time the [Marxian] critique of utopia helped to maintain the thought of freedom as the thought of its realization. Today utopia is maligned because no one really wants to see its realization' (Horkheimer, [1940] 1968: 75).

Horkheimer is referring to the critique of Utopia made by Marx and Engels. They were less opposed to the literary Utopian novels

than to the early socialist settlement Utopias of Charles Fourier and Robert Owen. The latter were rejected as island-type solutions made peacefully – i.e. as *unrevolutionary* and *unscientific*. As much as Horkheimer agrees with this, his intention is to rehabilitate the Will to Change. 'The material conditions are fulfilled. If all necessities for change are at hand ..., then the alternative depends solely on the will of men' (Horkheimer, [1940] 1968: 76). Instead of waiting for history, what really matters is the will and the desire, the hope and the action of the people. The Alternative is defined through critique of what exists, that is, negatively. Neither literary designs nor experimental settlements can anticipate the future. 'One cannot pre-determine what a free society will do or allow' (62). Nonetheless it is possible to determine that the liberation of society is feasible; also which Utopias can be made real given the will to realize them. 'Critical theory explains: it does not have to be this way, human beings can change the world; the conditions are now at hand' (Horkheimer, [1937] 2005: 244).

When conditions are ripe, however, the absence of change must also be attributed to consciousness. A bitter experience has given rise to the need for the theoretical rehabilitation of Utopia: 'Not even the situation of the proletariat in this society is a guarantee of the correct awareness' ([1937] 2005: 230f.). When the development of a will to socialism is not guaranteed by objective processes, the subject's Utopian Will attains an even greater importance than it had in its earlier form in the Utopian novel.

## SCIENTIFIC MARXISM AND UTOPIAN SOCIALISM

It may come as a surprise that in 1966 a theoretician like Adorno, who is credited with wanting to ban all depictions of the liberated future society, engages in the editing and

publication of the work of Charles Fourier, the most Utopian of all Utopians.

Because the political and power interests of the Eastern Bloc have made the theorems of socialism into a dogma, there is a renewed interest today in concepts that emerged earlier and elsewhere, before they were stigmatized as Utopian. [...] The prohibition against thinking through what it should be like to make socialism into a science has not contributed positively to science or socialism. To condemn the imagination as merely fanciful is to conform to a kind of practice that is an end in itself, more and more stuck in that present which it once wanted to supersede. (Adorno, 1966: 6f.)

It is clear that Adorno does not want to go back to the time before scientific socialism – to that of the Utopian novels of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, or to the prototype socialist settlements of the nineteenth century. Robert Owen's theory and practice reveal also the dogmatism of the socialist settlement idea. 'In order to achieve all the benefits of cooperation, people must be gathered in small communities' (Owen, [1827] 1988: 24). What remains to be defended in Owen is his overflowing Utopianism. 'And the time will finally come, in which [...] all individuals will receive what they need – without money and without price' (30). Even as a recollection, the idea of a needs-based economy without money is still a viable criticism of state socialism, which did not even tolerate such a Utopian idea.

Walter Benjamin also discovered something to recover in the Utopian phantasies of Fourier:

According to Fourier, the well-thought-out and well-executed labors of social humanity would have the effect that four moons would light up the earthly night, that the ice would withdraw from the Poles, sea water would no longer taste salty, and that the beasts of prey would do good turns for all of humanity. This illustrates a kind of work that, instead of exploiting nature, is able to release the creations that slumber as possibilities within it. (Benjamin, [1940] 1965: 87)

Fourier, like the early Utopians, had dreams of reduced working hours; in the novels of

More and Campanella – to about six or four hours a day. Not only that, but he and Owen anticipated work in their settlements as 'healthy, pleasing, and desirable employment' (Owen, [1927] 1988: 30). Utopia was no longer only measurable quantitatively, but also qualitatively, as an improved experience of life.

The price of happiness for More was the exploitation of women and nature; these are missing in Fourier's Utopia. 'Social progress takes place only insofar as progress is made in the liberation of women' (Fourier, 1846, in Burckhardt, 2006: 107). Likewise, humanity's inner nature and our diverse human needs should be gratified rather than repressed. 'The diversity of tastes, which would be totally ruinous in a [monocultural] civilization, will be economically and productively advantageous in a [multicultural] association', as Fourier prophesies in his *Theory of Universal Integration* (156). Herbert Marcuse has pointed out that Fourier's goal of attractive work, which was still pure Utopia for Marx, is an attainable Utopia on a world-social scale today (see Marcuse, [1967] 1980: 17).

The return to early socialist Utopias is interesting in several respects. Adorno sees in them a critique of what had become actually existing socialism. Marcuse foresees the feasibility of earlier Utopias in the future. Benjamin emphasizes that critical theory has an obligation to the social Utopians of the past. He asserts that 'our generation has a rendezvous, at a time as yet undisclosed, with former generations. They are expecting us on Earth. Like every other generation before us, we have been granted a faint Messianic power that owes an obligation to the [Utopian] pleas of the past' (Benjamin, [1940] 1965: 78). For him the source of this power is *not* the 'ideal of liberated grandchildren', but the 'image of our unfree forebears' (88). Messianic revolution is a reckoning we undertake in remembrance of our ancestors' unmet necessities and needs. Both Benjamin and his friend Ernst Bloch share this retrospective starting point. But Adorno is

mistaken when he makes his appeal *For Ernst Bloch* that 'Bloch's idea is a messianic end of history' (Adorno, 2003g: 191). Benjamin's messianic idea is redemption from a history of catastrophes. Bloch's Utopian idea, on the other hand, is the fulfillment of all the Utopias of history. Vivid parallels are to be found in both, especially in the connections they make between the present day and the history of the world. 'From the falcon-like heights of Bloch's philosophical outlook, the utmost metaphysical loftiness and a coarse political grittiness were conjoined' (192). In the partially realized literary Utopias of the early modern period, Bloch sees an enduring cultural heritage. He also finds that there is a reward still to be gained from the early theories of socialism. In practice, the promise of these Utopias could not be fulfilled through the 'private idylls and the uncomprehending dreams of the settlers' (Bloch, [1923] 1985: 305), but Marxism – as a concrete Utopia – does have the capacity to do so.

### **BLOCH'S UTOPIAN THOUGHT: ON THE CONCRETENESS OF THE [IM]POSSIBLE**

The relationship between Ernst Bloch and the members of the Frankfurt School is biographically and theoretically conflicted. Even in exile, and despite his own wishes, he did not become a member of the Institute for Social Research; yet he spurred on their work. 'Bloch, together with Lukács and Karl Korsch, was a key figure [...] an important influence on the group of intellectuals (including Fromm, Marcuse, Tillich, and Adorno) centered in the Institute for Social Research in the 1930s' (Levitas, 1990: 102). Adorno confirms this influence in an essay in honor of Bloch's eightieth birthday in 1965:

Bloch's first book (*Spirit of Utopia*) was his foundation for all that came later, and seemed to me a singular revolt against the [political] acquiescence

that at that time threatened all thinking, even that of a purely formal nature. This [activist] intent, which precedes all theory about any subject matter, is something I have so deeply absorbed that I have had it in mind, implicitly or explicitly, in everything I have written. (Adorno, 2003f.: 557)

In 1968 Marcuse also noted that Bloch's 'work, *Spirit of Utopia*, [...] influenced my generation ... more than forty years ago' (Marcuse, 1970: 12). Bloch's 'Philosophy of Hope' involved a critique of the German Marxism of his time; just as did the critical social theory of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse. This began in 1914 with his critique of the SPD's consent to the loans for the First World War.<sup>2</sup> In addition to this collapse of Marxist internationalism, some theorists among the Social Democrats defended their conviction that capitalism, through its own internal contradictions, was being driven toward socialism. Bloch's criticism was directed precisely against this 'social-democratic automatism, which was nothing but a superstition that the world would improve all by itself' (Bloch, [1953a] 1985: 168). Contrary to this theory of postponement, he proclaimed that a concrete Utopia had to be a theory of praxis.

The Social Democrat, a completely non-Utopian type, becomes a slave of the objective tendencies ... Objectivist idolatry of the objectively possible just waits with a wink and a nod until the economic conditions have matured. But they never so fully mature or become so perfect that they need no subjective factor, no will to act, no anticipatory dream. (677)

The SPD, according to Bloch bereft of Utopianism, lacked the Will to Act in the revolution of 1918. In his view the will to act is *not* a substitute for objective circumstances: only a concordance of external and internal, of strength and effort, is concrete utopia. But once all conditions are met, change hinges upon the will. If the knowledge is lacking of what is really possible, or the will to realize the utopia is missing, the momentum of the revolutionary movement is



lost, and counter-revolution threatens on the horizon. Instead of building hope for a new era, foreboding will force an evasion into the mythology of the good old days. 'This is how the Nazis survived, but their deceptions could only go on unchallenged because the all-too-abstract (that is backward) Left had not adequately nourished the imagination of the masses' (Bloch, [1935] 1985: 149). Certainly people who live in real dread of imagined international Jewish conspiracies may seek security in their vision of ethno-nationalist community; they will not be talked into affiliation with an International of Hope. But it is important for critical theory to do more than just 'unmask ideologies', something which Bloch called the 'chilling current in Marxism' (Bloch, [1953a] 1985: 240). It must also keep alive the 'the real political tendencies, that are humanely material — and materially humane — i.e., possessing emancipatory substance'; these Bloch called 'the warming current in Marxism' (241). If the former can be disheartening, the latter is encouraging; but they both go hand in hand. It should also help to be aware of the historical legacies of earlier (e.g. peasant and bourgeois) forms of Utopia. The terrain of hope, yearning, and desire must not be abandoned to the enemy. 'For its part the success of German National Socialist ideology shows that the Marxist progress from Utopia to science had become all-too-great' (66).

In exile in the USA from 1938 to 1947 – during and after the period of German National Socialism – Bloch wrote *The Principle of Hope*. Its three volumes were later published from 1954 to 1959 in East Germany, to which he had returned after the war. Bloch would subsequently emigrate from East Germany to Tübingen in West-Germany in 1961.

In that year Adorno wrote an essay criticizing Bloch: 'Hope is Not a Principle' (Adorno, 2003f: 233). Nothing can be derived from hope alone. Given the new 1960s edition of Bloch's earlier volume, *Indications*

[sometimes translated as *Traces*], Adorno also charges that Bloch's philosophy remains 'untroubled by what has become of the indications of revolution in the thirty years since the first edition' (248). In Bloch's 'tale of the adventurous journey to our Utopian finale' (235), National Socialism becomes a mere interruption on this long road. Contempt for Bloch's 'hard-boiled naivete' (247) is combined with mock admiration: 'He is one of the very few philosophers who does not quake before the thought of a world without domination' (249) even when 'the possibility of making real what is promised remains uncertain' (242).

Uncertainty, however, is far from alien to the philosophy of hope. Bloch's philosophical system, in fact, takes National Socialism to be a form of the 'monstrous break with the trend toward progress' (Bloch, [1975] 1985: 187). He warns, however, that a phenomenon like Auschwitz cannot be causally explained, either by subjective delusion or objective oppression (Bloch, [1968] 1985: 319). Goodness, not evil, impels humanity onward. Bloch, for his part, speaks critically of Adorno's 'exalted despair' (Bloch, [1968] 1985: 324), against which his own theory counter-poses a 'militant optimism' (325). This, in contrast to all 'rotten negativity' or any 'automatic positivity' (324).

What is alien to Bloch's dualistic philosophy is the idea of a Dialectics of Enlightenment. In his estimation, history remains an open process: Utopia is but delayed by evil. 'A Nero, a Hitler, any of these flashes of satanic activity, must be understood as outbursts of the dragon in the previous abyss, not as an enduring force in the process of history' (Bloch, [1953a] 1985: 362). According to this, history itself does not lead to catastrophe, but each catastrophe stood opposed to the course of history and its inherent possibilities of the good. 'Satan', the one who contradicts, the one who opposes, is Bloch's name for this obstructionist evil. As he sees it, the witch trials blocked enlightenment, antisemitism blocked liberation (Bloch, [1961] 1985: 346).

He is not persuaded that the Enlightenment's demand for the rule of reason over humanity and nature has contributed to the failure of progress toward human emancipation.

Above and beyond all Bloch's social criticism, his philosophy remains primarily a theory of praxis. 'How can I slow down or prevent the deleterious possibilities that are unfolding? How can I promote the favorable opportunities, opportunities advantageous to us as a people, how can I promote them?' (Bloch, [1962, 1970] 1985: 410). We are not merely to escape to some haven from the present storm, as this may be determined by criticism alone, but to the attractive force of the telos/sun, around which all Utopias gravitate. This points to Utopia as a 'not-yet, in the sense of being a possibility that could exist if we were only to do something to make it happen' (Bloch, [1964, 1978a] 1985a: 352). Bloch answers with a tautology the question raised by critical theory concerning the extent to which people are capable of doing anything [radical, i.e. Utopian] within the existing society for a better social order: if Utopia is a concrete whole encompassing all possibilities of the good, he maintains then that its realization must be both possible and feasible. Karl Mannheim has further advanced this idea by understanding Utopias as the motive force for political action.

### **MANNHEIM'S UTOPIAN THOUGHT AS MOTIVATION FOR ACTION**

The sociology of knowledge, worked out by Mannheim in *Ideology and Utopia* [1929], must be seen as a rival philosophy vis-à-vis the critical theory being developed at the University of Frankfurt. Horkheimer and Mannheim both joined Frankfurt University in 1930, the former as Director of the Institute for Social Research, the latter as Professor of Sociology. Mannheim participated in discussions with Paul Tillich, and also with his

opponents, Leo Löwenthal, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor Adorno. Included among the many topics discussed was the social role of the intellectual (Hofmann, 1996: 31). Mannheim knew he would be reproached for trying to make Marxism into a neutral form of social analysis. In spite of Horkheimer's own ideas and criticisms of the concept of Utopia which were published in his 1930 study of bourgeois philosophy of history, he also wrote in 1930 against Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. His essay, 'A New Concept of Ideology', sharply criticized Mannheim's theories of ideology and Utopia. For Mannheim, ideologies of the existing order serve domination; Utopias challenge it. He therefore thinks that these two modes of thought may be attributed to the ruling classes or to upwardly striving classes via sociological explanation. Utopias, therefore, are always connected 'to certain historical stages and to certain social strata' (Mannheim, [1929] 1995: 180). The Utopia of the Kingdom of God on Earth, which Thomas Münzer had proclaimed, addressed the conditions of the peasants of the early modern era. So too liberalism's constitutional state met the needs of the aspiring bourgeoisie, as did the socialist Utopia of a free humanity standing in mutual solidarity for workers. Horkheimer comments: 'The belief that one can understand a *Weltanschauung* without taking into account its material development within its conditions of social existence, that is, through research solely into mental structures, is idealistic delusion' (Horkheimer, [1930] 1987: 288). Ideologies and Utopias do not directly correspond to the interests of certain strata, rather 'ideology and Utopia need to be conceived as attitudes of social groups within the totality of social reality' (Horkheimer, [1930] 1971: 9). Sociology of knowledge does not attain critical theory's criterion: to understand society as a whole. It is true that Mannheim does indeed deal with the influence of ideologies and Utopias on social change, but he does so in a one-sided way, according to Horkheimer. Mannheim

sees Utopia as an inner-intellectual motivation for political action.

From a sociological point of view, such intellectual constructions can take two forms: they are ideological when they are intended to mystify or stabilize the existing social order; Utopian when they lead to concerted collective action that seeks to change reality in such a way that it attains goals that surpass what is established. (Mannheim, [1935] 1986: 115f.)

The function of Utopia is, therefore, the evocation of collective engagement, the motivation for joint practice. Horkheimer by no means denies this motivation for action, but he connects subjective factors to objective conditions. Mannheim fails to examine how the concrete form of social relations 'affects the adherence to the old way of thinking, and on the other hand, how it influences action' (Horkheimer, [1930] 1987: 293). Those things that Mannheim investigates as the effect of mental attitudes, Horkheimer understands in a dialectical manner: Utopian thoughts exert influence, but they are themselves influenced by the circumstances.

A certain understanding of the historical alterability of social conditions is quite evident in Mannheim. Instead of connecting change to contradictions and conflicts, however, he connects visions of social Utopia to the historical stages of linear progress. If the Utopian expectations of a social stratum are disappointed, sociology of knowledge does not explain this out of a social dynamic, but solely from the Utopian idea itself. 'The Utopia of the aspiring bourgeoisie was generally about the idea of freedom. [...] And yet today, when these Utopias have become a reality, we now know exactly to what extent the idea of freedom of that time was not only Utopian but also contained ideological elements' (Mannheim, [1929] 1995: 178). To look back and assert that a failed Utopia was really just ideological would be problematic. Adorno, on the other hand, elucidates an alternative in a later paper, referring also to Mannheim. It is neither the Utopian nor the ideological aspects of a way of thinking as

such that are crucial, but rather how Utopias may convert into ideologies. Falsehood is not a statement about thinking, but a judgment about reality. 'Ideologies become untrue only because of their relationship to existing reality. They can be true in and of themselves, just as are the ideas of freedom, humanity, justice; but they are invalid if they are assumed to have already been made real' (Adorno, [1954] 2003e: 473). Adorno applies this mode of criticism to liberalism as well, and asks whether 'freedom is indeed achieved with the establishment of formal civic equality' (464). This is the approach of immanent criticism in the sense that liberalism is taken at its word. The ideology of freedom is thus measured against at the freedom of Utopia. Here critique is the 'confrontation of ideology with its own truth'. This is 'only possible insofar as the former contains a rational element with which critique can operate' (465).

According to Bloch, such an immanent critique is not possible with German National Socialism because it rejected the Utopian promises of liberalism and socialism, freedom and equality, in favor of the ethno-nationalist community and the persecution of the Jews. 'Hitler, for example, cannot be criticized by way of *Mein Kampf*. He has already fulfilled all that was prophesied in *Mein Kampf*. ... In contrast, I can criticize, immanently criticize, Marx, Engels, and Lenin from the writings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin' (Bloch, [1970] 1975: 140). Mannheim, on the other hand, even in exile in 1935, leaves the ideologies of fascism and German National Socialism unexamined – though his own knowledge of intellectual history spans a broad spectrum from chiliasm, to liberalism and socialism, to conservatism. The longing for a German national community cannot be attributed to any social stratum. Mannheim thus rendered the distinction between ideology and Utopia much more problematic than did Horkheimer's analysis.

Let us recall: 'If ideology produces deceptive facade, Utopia to the contrary is the dream of the true and just order of life'

(Horkheimer, [1930] 1971: 9). Mannheim, to the contrary, finds his criterion for this distinction only in a retrospective historical view. 'We will recognize as a Utopian tendency *only* a reality-transcending course of action, which is translated into practice, and partially or completely breaks with the really existing social order' (Mannheim, [1929] 1995: 169). But if this is so, the Utopias of chiasm, even the Utopia of More, would not qualify as Utopian since they had no success in terms of this-worldly historical impact.

Bloch's idea of an untapped reward yet to be found in Utopias of the past is unthinkable for Mannheim. He had difficulty enough just trying to distinguish among various modes of thought in his own time. 'Given the co-existence of rival contemporary social visions, it is extremely difficult to determine that which is a true Utopia of up-rising classes and that which is the mere ideology of dominant (but still aspiring) classes' (Mannheim, [1929] 1995: 178). This clearly shows the neutrality that Horkheimer criticized. Ultimately, the sociology of knowledge can only distinguish ideologies from Utopias in retrospect. By retracting use of the critique of ideology as a means to distinguish between false consciousness and correct analysis, Mannheim evades this problem. As he himself says, Mannheim thus creates a new concept of ideology that 'gives up every intention to de-mystify [...] and instead tries everywhere to work out the linkages between social strata and social perspective' (71).

If intellectuals who contribute to ideological critique are no longer legitimately tasked with exposing falsity, then Mannheim regards their new assignment as building a 'total overview and context within historical change' (Mannheim, [1929] 1995: 140). Intellectuals, as inhabiting a 'relatively classless social stratum' and possessing a 'socially free-floating intelligence' (135), are at liberty to construct and assume a universal perspective through independence, education, and sensitivity. This is supposed to obviate the particularism of social-stratum-specific

ideologies and Utopias. If, for Horkheimer, it is solidarity with the oppressed that guarantees the truth of the critical theory, Mannheim defends his neutrality vis-à-vis all social strata and classes. For him, socialism is only one Utopia among many. Marx, on the other hand, worked out a method to expose ideologies among competing perspectives. In Mannheim, the actual conditions under which human beings live and suffer are excluded; sociology of knowledge is thus supposed to preserve its neutrality against particular forms of thinking. The intellectuals, who should be able to keep an overview, thus become the real authority. Where critical theory disapproved of Bloch for hypothesizing all Utopias as premonitions of their pending redemption, it reproached Mannheim for diminishing all Utopias to mere viewpoints. What remained valid in Mannheim's reasoning for a critical theory of Utopia was his notion of a Utopian consciousness that gets beyond Horkheimer's criticisms and Bloch's theory of hope, and always urges engagement in action.

The Utopian element fully completes the conscious mind only when it abounds as a form life and experience, as a form of action, as a total worldview; then we can speak not only of forms of Utopia, but of 'the unity of the known with what it knows', i.e., of the various stages and forms of Utopian consciousness. (Mannheim, [1929] 1995: 182)

With regard to different forms of Utopia, Mannheim also provides an interesting indication of their different temporal horizons. The chiasm of Thomas Münzer, whose work was explicitly praised by Ernst Bloch and by Karl Mannheim (Mannheim, [1929] 1995: 185), is characterized by the idea of a historical breakthrough (196). Not waiting for, nor working toward, a better future, the Kingdom of God is to be Now and Here (189). Liberalism, on the other hand, represented the idea of slow progress (196). Socialism represented a synthesis, since messianic hope for salvation was connected with liberal insight into developmental

conditions (207). Here, with the socialism of Marx, we come to a multi-dimensional experience of time and history: a consciousness of current conditions, the trends they represent, and a vision of a better future (212).

A thesis which Mannheim shares with critical theory is the demise of Utopia. Horkheimer explained this with reference to the bureaucratization of the party and the union; Mannheim linked it to the integration of social democracy into the state. 'The more a party strives and grows into parliamentary co-rule, the more it gives up the vision of totality that radiates from the primordial energy of Utopian thought, all the more its transformational force is reduced to bare survival in concrete individual cases' (Mannheim, [1929] 1995: 216). Mannheim's fear of a world without Utopias has a certain affinity with the critique of instrumental reason: 'The disappearance of Utopia leads to a desiccated business mentality in which human beings become mere commodities and the Will to History is lost' (225). He declares that intellectuals need to protect and preserve Utopia, so that they will not need to criticize its abandonment.

## UTOPIAN THOUGHT AND DETERMINATE NEGATION

Because of the diminished Utopian thinking that he witnessed, Karl Mannheim raised a question as to the future bearers of Utopian thought. His answer – the intellectuals – was not much different than the perspective of critical theory. In his reflections on the revolutionary failure of the mass organizations, Horkheimer concluded: 'The activities of political groups and isolated individuals may contribute decisively to the preparations for freedom' (Horkheimer, [1940] 1968: 54). He may have been thinking of the circle of the Frankfurt Institute. But even more weighty than the question of *who* carries Utopian consciousness forward, was the question of

*how*. An alternative avenue is suggested emergent from a more modest view of theory. Adorno remarks in a conversation with Bloch: 'As little as we are able to pin-point all the features of Utopia, as little as we know what Justice would be, still we *do* know *exactly* what is wrong' (Bloch, [1964] 1978a: 362f.). But how is it possible to recognize the wrong without the criterion of right?

Prior to all theory is the often-overlooked physical experience of suffering. 'The physical dimension reports that suffering is to be alleviated, that it must not be' (Adorno, [1966] 2003c: 203). Knowledge in this sense represents a kind of mediation between the experience of suffering and the hope of Utopia, without either of the two dimensions being reduced to the other. Christian Kreis (2006: 11) calls this the 'self-constraint of Utopia' within critical theory. Take, for example, hunger as a painful experience – from which we envision Utopia as a world without hunger. This makes something explicit – that 'the feeling of compassion does get roughly generalized: no one should go hungry' (Adorno, [1951] 2003b: 178). This means that Utopia is something entirely apart from the established social order, and that its realization must include the eradication of world hunger. This is no pin-pointing of Utopia's features, it is at most a general outline of the Not-Yet. This is the foundation that precedes all thought. It is perfectly evident, but this is still not knowledge. Knowledge is only possible through theoretical critique. One example is the critique of the Enlightenment that Horkheimer and Adorno undertook in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written between 1939 and 1944. 'The criticism of Enlightenment thus undertaken is intended to formulate a positive concept of it, liberated from its entanglement in blind societal domination' (Adorno, [1947] 2003a: 16).

It is true that Horkheimer and Adorno do not think they can say what reason is, in and of itself, but they believe they can turn our attention to the social contradictions within which reason has historically been interwoven.

This is especially interesting when developing a critical theory of Utopia, since beginning with More, Utopia has been animated by the idea of individual happiness gained through the rational reorganization of society. If utilized as a mere means, however, reason can devolve into an instrument. Reason, as a capacity of subjective human beings, can step away and outside of them toward the world which has become an object. Control over the social world through reason gets converted into a new world of social control. This conversion is only possible because reason as such already bears features of control: social control and self-control. Control over nature begins with control over our innermost human nature, through discipline and work, which were already of central concern to Thomas More. This critique of reason is purposive; it is not a renunciation. It takes particularly seriously the claim of reason to be able to contribute to a better world, especially through immanent critique. 'At the same time, however, reason forms a version of calculative thought by which we may control the world for the purpose of self-preservation, and which acknowledges no further function than transforming an object from being mere sensory material to being material under its command' (Adorno, [1947] 2003a: 16).

The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* does not describe the decline of reason. Reason's claim to freedom is not invalidated because of its entanglement in the haphazard and indiscriminate; it remains – as Utopia. This dialectic is deeply historical. 'The French Revolution had been given much of its hopefulness through Utopia. This was also evident in the empowerment – and disempowerment – of German music and philosophy. In the aftermath, however, the established bourgeois order reduced reason completely to an instrument' (Adorno, [1947] 2003a: 108). Humanity's Utopianism in 1789, which took the shape of the Declaration of Human Rights, endures in both classicalism and idealism, but the powers of the existing order sharply emphasized the impotence of refined

culture vis-à-vis the mighty. Reason has forever been connected with self-preservation in relation to nature; so too, a customary competitiveness becomes the rational means for the preservation of capitalism. 'For the powerful the struggle for Fascist power is but cunning self-preservation; for the rest, survival means adaptation to injustice at any cost' (110). A promise of deliverance is not to be found in the abandonment of reason, but rather in critical theory, which can distinguish between really existing forms of instrumental reason and the sensible and rational possibility of establishing a social order of solidarity. Reason must liberate itself from its entanglement in domination. It will be measured by the demands it makes of itself, and these are understood to be thoroughly Utopian.

Reason as the transcendental, super-individual self, contains the notion of human beings living together freely, that is, where they have organized themselves into the general subject and sublated the contradiction between pure and empirical reason in the conscious solidarity of the whole. This would be the idea of the true universality, Utopia. (102)

But how is this Utopia, embedded as it is within the mandate of reason, to come to consciousness? For Horkheimer and Adorno there is a residue of Utopia in art and philosophy. The Utopia of a rationally organized society, whose pre-theoretical criterion is an abolition of suffering that makes happiness possible, miscarried in the revolutions of the eighteenth century. Art cannot be a substitute for such unrealized happiness, but it can be, as it was for Ernst Bloch, a kind of foretaste. 'Art is not only the emblem of a better way than that which prevails today in practice, but it is also a critique of that practice which means the rule of brutal self-preservation within the existing order and for the sake of the existing order' (Adorno, [1969/1970] 2003d: 26). But art is neither merely an emblem, nor a sampling of what is to come; rather, it is a form of critique, for its own sake, not for the sake of something else. 'The Utopian quality of art resides in assemblage

of that which exists and that which does not exist' (347). In this sense, art, like philosophy, is not merely a niche phenomenon or game. Precisely because art is a part of a world in need of being brought together, it is a critique against the world as it is.

Our lack of a liberated society is called to our attention in art – and philosophy. Just as art wants to convey more than it can actually display, true philosophy encompasses the objects of its study, but never defines them fully. Philosophy and art share the property of not bringing their content to manageable forms; instead they require that we apply ourselves and make an effort. 'Knowledge that wants to apprehend reality must want also to apprehend Utopia' (Adorno, [1966] 2003c: 66); 'Utopia is that kind of knowledge that tries to capture in its concepts that which cannot be comprehended, being aware that its concepts are not identical with what is real' (21). The intention is not to bring material under a single concept, instead concepts must approximate their object. If thought carefully approaches what it is thinking about, that which it is thinking about will go directly into thought. The purpose of critical theory is not to make what is known functional but to liberate what is known via its conceptual approximations.

Ever since Critical Theory has had a Utopian aim: the anticipation of a condition in which human beings are reconciled with themselves, each other, and nature. 'Such a Utopia emerged with the revolutionary avant-garde from its cover in German philosophy's rationalism and irrationalism, and proclaimed a reconciliation between nature and the self and the idea of an association of free men. Thereby it drew upon itself all the fulminations of the *ratio* [deformed rationality, where all is reduced to quantitative and calculative reasoning]' (Adorno, [1947] 2003a: 110). In thought that is both rational and irrational, Marx makes concrete his vision and goal: an association of free people as the realization of philosophy. The fulfillment of human needs is the basis for this association. Instrumental

reason, which fails to recognize humanity as an end in itself, provided what was needed for the murder of Jews as a means to an end. Benjamin translated Jewish messianic power into revolutionary power, but it was too weak. It was not the association of free people, but the *Volksgemeinschaft* [this community of blood and soil] that prevailed in Germany. Critical theory foresaw the failure of emancipatory politics in the coming collision with barbarism, and this led to the question of the absence of the revolution. If the external circumstances were at hand and are still present, 'the Alternative depends squarely on the will of human beings' (Horkheimer, [1940] 1968: 76). It is precisely this question of the Will to the Alternative, or I should say, the deformation of this will, through (1) its adjustment to the social-psychological influences of authoritarianism, (2) the affirmative character of the culture-industry, and (3) its barely recognized but bedazzling amalgamation of all this, that leads back to the question of the meaning of Utopia. Here it is difficult to accept Adorno's prohibition against any depiction of a future Utopian freedom, as he himself acknowledges in a conversation with Bloch. This is because 'prohibition of concrete statements about Utopia tends to defame Utopian consciousness itself, and to obscure what is really important, namely, this will, that is the Will to the Alternative' (Bloch, [1964, 1978a] 1985a: 363). Making the Alternative real, i.e. into Utopia, is possible only by changing what exists. This begins, according to Adorno, not with Utopia as idea, but with critical negation. 'What Utopia is, what Utopia can be imagined to be, is the transformation of the whole' (353).

If we think of something as having been totally transformed, we should not imagine that it represents *all* of the possible alternatives that might be seen as total transformations. Even Thomas More and Charles Fourier, who are so esteemed by Horkheimer and Adorno, could only think of a few possible alternatives. Experiences of misfortune do fuel Utopian thought and give rise to

images of alternative possibilities for happiness. 'Happiness has its own truth in and of itself. It is essentially an effect. It unfolds with the suffering' (Adorno, [1947] 2003a: 81f.). Utopia would therefore be a desirable condition in which suffering is eliminated, but which can only be conceived through the negation of the really existing order. What Adorno calls reconciliation cannot be described through specifics. Utopia is not to be thought of as the sum of all historically present possibilities, but as the very goal of history. It cannot be anticipated in thought, but must be determined by criticism. 'In all events, Utopia is to be found essentially in the determinate negation of that which merely is, and inasmuch as it concretely discloses what is as false, it always points at the same time to that which should be' (Bloch, [1964, 1978a] 1985a: 362).

Determinate negation is the task of critical theory; hence 'for the sake of Utopia it is forbidden to depict Utopia in an image' (Bloch, [1964, 1978a] 1985a: 361). But how then can Adorno's Will to the Alternative – It Must Be Different! – be preserved? How can the indeterminate Utopia be willed? Adorno resolves this problem through a scarcely noticed dual use of the concept of Utopia. On the one hand, he speaks of a Utopian consciousness, that is, on the subjective side, the capacity to engage in Utopian hope. 'Utopian consciousness means a consciousness for which the possibility that people no longer have to die does not have anything horrible about it, but is, on the contrary, that which one actually wants' (358). The question is not how the abolition of death would be feasible, but that it might well be desired in a consciousness capable of Utopian thought. This subjective side, because of its unbridled desires, makes possible *one sort* of Utopia. On the other hand, there is an objective side that Adorno says can sustain *multiple sorts* of Utopias. Adorno's Utopian consciousness is similar to Mannheim's Utopia as an inner-intellectual motivation for political action; they both come close to Bloch's

concrete, action-building Utopia of the possible. Adorno considers the task of Utopias to 'concretely say what would be possible in the present state of the productive forces of mankind' (363). In this way, his Utopia, in the tradition of More, Owen, and Marx, asks about the possibilities of human life in solidarity and common work, which Herbert Marcuse further extends.

### MARCUSE'S UTOPIAN THOUGHT AS THE ARTICULATION OF NEW NEEDS

In contrast to Horkheimer, who always maintained his reserve vis-à-vis the Utopian, and Adorno, who saw Utopia as an unknowable gravitational force around which art and philosophy revolved, Utopia was explicitly central in Marcuse's critical theory. In his posthumously published papers we find the following considerations:

I believe that the Utopian is today not only an historical concept, but also an historical imperative – a categorical imperative that must serve to prevent the fossilization of socialism under new forms of rule. Only when the enormous capacities of science and technology, of the scientific and artistic imagination, guide the construction of a sensuous environment; only when the work-a-day world loses its alienating character; only when productivity is supplanted by creativity, only then will the roots of domination within humanity wither away [...] The transformation of the [economic] foundations cannot proceed without the subjective factor – the human sensibility as a productive force. (Marcuse, 1999: 102f.)

The ritualization of socialism as dogma, which Marcuse analyzed in *Soviet Marxism* in 1958 (Marcuse, [1958] 2004a), formed the impetus for his rehabilitation of the Utopian. Like Bloch, Marcuse distinguishes between objective and subjective conditions that can make Utopia concrete. Technology and science belong to the side of the objective, creativity and sensibility to the subjective factors. The desire for a liberated society is not simply a Will that may be present, but a *need*,



which is first developed and articulated in Utopian thought. With regard to these areas, Marcuse broadens the scope of critical theory. There are not only the blockages, which oppose liberation, but also the potentials that must be sketched-out. 'Social theory is expected to be an analysis of existing societies [...] but also an illumination of trends (if there are any) that could lead beyond the existing state of affairs' (Marcuse, [1969] 2004d: 244). In 1967, Marcuse talks about 'The End of Utopia' in a lecture in Berlin. By this he meant that objective and subjective factors have really come into existence, and as such Utopia can be *attained* – thus the end of Utopia *as* Utopia. 'Since the technical and intellectual forces are present for this revolution now [...] we can indeed speak of an End of Utopia today' (Marcuse, [1967] 1980: 12).

At the same time, he talks about the emergence of 'Utopian possibilities' (Marcuse, [1967] 1980: 14). What Bloch designates as abstract and concrete Utopias – dream and wishes on the one hand, and possibilities of Alternatives on the other – are not sharply distinguished in Marcuse. As Peter-Erwin Jansen remarks, Marcuse instigates some 'confusion' here. This can be remedied if we recognize that Marcuse's insights from the mid-1960s onwards are nonetheless 'strongly based on 'Bloch's notion of a concrete Utopia' (Jansen, 2006: 37–8). A few years later in *An Essay on Liberation*, in 1969, Utopia and possibility coincide.

It is the dynamism of productivity that deprives Utopia of its traditionally unreal content; what is pejoratively labeled as Utopian is no longer that which has no place and cannot have any in the historical universe, but rather what is prevented by the power of the established societies from coming into being. The technological powers of advanced capitalism [...] possess latent Utopian possibilities, and the rational utilization of these powers on a worldwide scale would end poverty and scarcity in the foreseeable future. (Marcuse, [1969] 2004d: 244)

It is not technological progress alone, which Marx called the development of the

productive forces of the base, that is responsible for this advance; tendencies in the cultural superstructure and the psychological infrastructure of society also contribute. Marcuse looks at the pacification of the struggle for human survival through communal living as the foundation of Utopia. The power of the Utopian imperative is manifested in the aesthetic dimension which makes clear the 'difference between artistic and social reality. The break with the latter, its magical or rational contravention, is an essential quality' of art (Marcuse, [1964] 2004c: 83). Because art liberates the New from the existent social sphere, it is an ideal example of the Utopian mentality. On the attachment of the Utopian to objects of art, whether literature, painting, or novel, it is the need for beauty that can potentially nourish the need for social change. 'Moral and aesthetic needs become fundamental necessities, and these mandate new relationships among peoples, generations [...] and nature' (Marcuse, [1972] 2004e: 25). Marcuse's use of the term *need* is unusual. Needs can only be understood historically, so that their expressions and satisfactions can be altered. But the need for a qualitatively new life is in the first instance something satisfied by having basic needs met, such as eating, drinking, sleeping, sexuality, security, and social bonding. The development of Utopian needs is 'only possible after these requirements have been satisfied, so that time, place, and energy may be released for a realm beyond necessity' (Marcuse, 1999: 104). Still, Marcuse is not speaking here in terms of simplified hierarchical stages that would rise above well-known survival needs to new kinds of living needs. Needs for recognition, self-realization, and peace do get added, but also new dietary habits, forms of sexuality, and forms of associated living will change with history. But it is always a question of a *possible* needs development that is by no means *guaranteed*. Possibility is an ambivalent concept. It includes the Utopian and the dystopian. Here, the goal and the path to the

goal are crucial: 'The goal is human happiness' (Levitas, 1990: 133) and this means 'shortening the working day and the active participation of individuals' (Marcuse in Levitas, 1990: 144). But the following holds true: 'If the demand for the abolition of (alienated) labor does not exist, then what is to be expected is only that the new technical possibilities will in fact become new possibilities of repression and domination' (Marcuse, [1967] 1980: 15). Technical progress alone does not yet determine the direction of social change. Here Marcuse is referring back to Walter Benjamin's critique of technological progress. 'Instead of dredging and channeling rivers, technological progress directs a torrent of men into the beds of its trenches, instead of scattering seeds from its airplanes, it peppers cities with firebombs' (Benjamin, [1935] 1963: 44).

Now, it is not as if a need for trenches and incendiary bombs outweighed the need for canals and seeds. The use of productive forces as destructive forces has more to do with the failure to concretize the need for social transformation. This is made more difficult by the capacity of capitalism to integrate the oppressed through partial need satisfaction. Of his time, Marcuse maintains that 'the absorption of the greatest part of the working class into the capitalist social order is not a superficial phenomenon', because the working class 'benefits from the super-profits of neocolonial exploitation, military spending, and immense governmental subsidies' (Marcuse, [1972] 2004e: 15). Neither needs nor their satisfactions are neutral. Needs can be fulfilled by struggling against each other or by cooperating with each other. In any case, Marcuse proposes that some needs already suggest alternative forms of satisfaction. It may well be true that an individual's victories within a system of permanent societal competitiveness bring prosperity and recognition, but the price for this comes at the expense of repressed needs, whose expression is the business of Utopian thinking. Along with Mannheim's motivation to action

and Bloch's concrete Utopia, for Marcuse 'Utopia is primarily negation' (Levitas, 1990: 118). A recognition of new needs requires the determinate negation of established needs. 'Negation of the need to earn a living, negation of the need for a wasteful, destructive productivity ... negation of the need for fraudulent instinctual oppression' (Marcuse, [1967] 1980: 15).

Marcuse emphasizes that wage labor, productivity, and the repression of instincts here function as modes of need satisfaction under capitalism. He contrasts these with entirely new needs and feasible modes of gratification, which under capitalism go completely unrecognized. These include, for example, the need for 'rest', the need for 'being alone, with oneself or the self-chosen other', the need for the 'beautiful', for 'uninvited happiness', and the need for 'peace, which is today not a vital need of the majority' (Marcuse, [1967] 1980: 15). What distinguishes these needs from the everyday? His attempt to address this question involves a particularly suggestive perspective: 'We can distinguish true and false needs' (Marcuse, [1964] 2004c: 25); false needs are those whose satisfaction is at the expense of ourselves, our environment, and others, because they 'make it necessary to continue the frenzied chase to keep up with the Joneses and scramble over the detritus of planned obsolescence' (25). In the aftermath of neoliberalism, which presents capitalism itself as a machine for the production of ever new desires, Marcuse's criticism of purely private desires is, in the best sense, Utopian. It is interesting to note that, despite Marcuse's insightful criticisms of the absorption of the individual into the one-dimensional society, he still appeals to the personal responsibility of individuals in order to bring about change: 'What are true and what are false needs must be answered by the individuals themselves' (26). No philosopher-kings can, as in Plato, prescribe the criteria for correct needs; the fulfillment of needs remains a question of individual experience and political advice at the same

time. Appropriate needs point toward Utopia; new needs are its substance.

The critical negation of prevailing needs, the articulation of new needs, and the concretization of alternative satisfactions are the tasks of Utopia; yet the outcome and resolution require discussion. Utopian hope can only be really substantiated by critical theory; otherwise 'the controlled and manipulated productivity of labor and the controlled and manipulated satisfaction of needs mobilize not only consciousness, but also the instinctual structure to replicate the existing social order' (Marcuse, [1974a] 2004f.: 157). Because capitalism not only influences the economic base and the cultural superstructure, but also our psychological foundations, Marcuse is in search of Utopia's conditions of possibility.

In *Eros and Civilization* (1955), Marcuse worked out a theoretical foundation that enables aspects of the instinctual structure to be mobilized against existing society. He connects this to Freud's late analysis of human instincts, which distinguishes life-instincts and death-instincts, Eros and Thanatos. Both types of instinct, the drive toward creativity and social bonding, the drive to destruction and aggression, are, according to Freud, guided into forms that are socially acceptable. An internalized superego limits sexuality to marriage, aggression to the state of war. Marcuse expands upon this model by examining the reverse or reciprocal impact of society upon the assemblage of instincts in the individual. The death instinct and aggression, as they exist and persist in our society, are interpreted by Marcuse as an 'unconscious flight from pain and want' (Marcuse, [1955] 2004a: 33). In his retrospective view, the abolition of scarcity, which is now increasingly possible technically, should result in a weakening of the aggressive instincts and the strengthening of the life instincts. In this way Eros would become an ally of Utopian fantasy in humanity's psychological infrastructure. This is where the Utopian idea 'arises and is sustained of a culture based on

free libidinal associations and bonds' (178). The energy of Eros is understood by Freud as extending beyond the sexual, and as nourishing sublimated forms such as the bonds of solidarity and creative achievements. Marcuse uses this to more fully understand society. To him the categorical imperative of Utopia does not demand new people, but, that the 'roots of domination wither away in people' (Marcuse, 1999: 102), as has been mentioned above. The presupposition here is not that people are good by nature; instead it is a matter of the social dispositions gained through social learning. Freud identified the aim of the Erotic instincts as 'creating and maintaining ever greater social groups and bonds' (Freud, [1938] 1970: 12). Marcuse saw this as an opportunity for our 'self-sublimation into expanded and enduring relationships' (Marcuse, [1955] 2004a: 190).

Just as Thomas More's *Utopia* had previously sought the condition for happiness in his (veiled authoritarian) vision of reason, so too Marcuse says that the actualization of a Utopian happiness will hinge on rational thought. But here repressive reason 'is supplanted by a new rationality of gratification, in which happiness and Reason coincide' (Marcuse, [1955] 2004a: 191). Marcuse's intention is to identify the technical, aesthetic, and psychological conditions of a concrete Utopia. A concrete Utopia makes possible our activist interventions. Still, critical theory can only identify latent possibilities, point out problems, and designate trends. Utopia must outline the range of existing possibilities, which have yet to be recognized by people or desired by them. 'Within the framework of objective conditions, the alternatives [...] depend on the intelligence and the will, the consciousness and the sensibility of the people' (Marcuse, [1972] 2004e: 35). Of course, Utopian thought itself contributes its part to this development. As Levitas emphasizes, referring back to William Morris, all of this belongs to the 'function of Utopia, which is not just the expression, but the education of desire' (Levitas, 1990: 124).

The question of Utopian consciousness again becomes a question of its bearers. Marcuse mentions the New Left of the 1960s, the non-integrated, underprivileged peoples of the global South, and the racially oppressed (Marcuse, [1967] 1980: 46), and also the students availing themselves of the privileges of education (Marcuse, [1967] 1980: 47). If some persons claimed that the laws of nature afforded them the satisfaction of their basic needs through struggle, others required new ways of life to meet their concrete needs. In the 1970s, Marcuse sought Utopian potential to be found in the youth and environmental movements and above all in the women's movement as the 'potentially most radical political movement' (Marcuse, [1974b] 2004g: 131). These various and partial aims may well be merged together. Critical theory would need to elevate them into a long-term Utopian goal that could bridge the contradictions and needs articulated then and now by these social movements. 'The goal would be the development of socialism as a movement away from alienation and toward creative work, away from the mastery over nature toward a cooperation with nature, away from repression toward the emancipation of the senses, away from rationality of exploitation to the rationality of social solidarity' (Marcuse, [1974a] 2004f: 153). The specific intermediary political goals needed to make progress along this path are *not* task of Utopia, but rather political debate.

### **THE REHABILITATION OF UTOPIA: CRITICAL THEORY ON UTOPIAN THOUGHT**

In contrast to the confidence which kept scientific Marxism buoyed-up even in its decline, critical theory found it had to work to strengthen the sense of its Will to an Alternative. Just as for Horkheimer, 'the Alternative depends only on the will of men' (Horkheimer, [1940] 1968: 76), and for

Adorno the essential feature of Utopian consciousness is what Bloch called 'willing the other' (Bloch, [1964, 1978a] 1985a: 363), so too for Marcuse the alternatives depend on 'the intelligence, the will, the consciousness, and the sensibility of the human beings' (Marcuse, [1972] 2004e: 35). What Bloch identified as the importance of the subjective factor became even stronger, early on, in the development of critical theory. 'An objectively real possibility is on the verge of its factual being, yet it requires a subjective factor, so that the possibility is enriched precisely by those conditions which it requires to be factual' (Bloch, [1971, 1978a] 1985b: 281).

At the same time, critical theory knows that the odds do not favor such transformations. If the entire society reinforces its mechanisms of ideological mystification and its fetishized inversions of reality, such that exploitation appears as equal exchange, structured inequality as equal opportunity, domination as justice, and in which revolution can take on an authoritarian quality that leads from bad to worse, the chances of a Utopian upsurge are not good. The real theoretical challenge is to visualize the Alternative only as an outline, a plan, not as a finished work of art. In contrast to the latent authoritarianism of Thomas More's Utopian novel or Robert Owen's Utopian settlements, the restraint of critical theory is easily understood. In the end, it is left up to us. 'If a future society really does not function through the immediate of mediated use of force, but instead through agreements that it has itself settled on, we will not be able to anticipate theoretically the culmination of these agreements' (Horkheimer, [1940] 1968: 72). On the other hand, it is already Utopian to expect a qualitative difference between the present organization of society and the hoped-for agreements of the future. In spite of his critique of Mannheim's idealism, Horkheimer does agree with a concept of Utopia that finds its meaning in inspiring social groups toward action. Despite criticism of Bloch's optimism, Adorno must

agree with a concept of Utopia which locates its meaning in the actualization of objective possibilities.

But neither the subjective factor of inspiring ideas nor the objective factor of circumstances that may be concretely transformed can guarantee the actualization of Utopia as the determinate negation of the existing order. In the search for those who could carry on with hopefulness, Marcuse recognized that the Utopias of the New Left – seeking liberated individuality, a new morality, different attitudes in terms of gender relationships and in terms of our bonds with the natural world – could be reintegrated into the established order as steps toward the modernization of the state, capitalism, and patriarchy. Against these false satisfactions, which stand opposed to the real pacification of life's struggles, critical theory must call upon the as-yet-to-be claimed rewards within the Utopian impulse. Like any critique, a Utopia is always a child of its time, not an image of the future, but a product present conducive to the future. The challenge is: 'To abolish the mechanisms that reproduce the old needs, there must first of all *be* a need to abolish the old mechanisms' (Marcuse, [1967] 1980: 38).

After the death of Bloch and Marcuse in the 1970s, Jürgen Habermas tried to lead critical theory out of the dilemmas of subjective philosophy. On the one hand, he diagnoses the 'exhaustion of Utopian energies' (Habermas, 1985: 144), given the disappearance of the hopes which, in the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s, brought critical theory and political practice closer together. On the other hand, he displaces the potential for societal transformation – away from the contradiction between instrumental reason and Utopian reason – into the field of communicative rationality. A tendency toward reconciliation is to be found in language itself. In order to release this tendency, however, subjects would still be required to communicate without – under conditions free of domination – but according to certain rules. Communication that

is without any trace of domination, assuming that humans are capable of this, is yet another Utopian thought to be assiduously pursued. Instead of retreating to an ostensibly anthropological basis, however, it might be better to look for those who are carrying forth a Utopian consciousness today. Oskar Negt's (2012: 13) proposition that 'Utopias are the decisive sources of power for every movement of emancipation' has guided this exploration of Utopian theory. The question is: where are critical Utopias now to be found in contemporary social movements? To guard against the absorption of (new) Utopias into the established social order, we must heed the advice of Charles Fourier that Marx used as a criterion of social freedom – 'Reject restraint on thought and restraint on desire!' (Fourier, [1846] in Burckhardt, 2006: 116).

## Notes

- 1 *Translator's note*: Translations of all German language reference materials are mine, and remain sourced to the original German language texts; so too the parenthetical remarks [in brackets] are my additions. All iterations of *utopia* are rendered *Utopia*. Completed January 20, 2017 in honor of the day's massive, Utopia-inspired protests against the US presidential inauguration.
- 2 SPD was and is the Social Democratic Party of Germany.

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# Praxis, Nature, Labour

Stefan Gandler

The study of praxis holds the key to a critical and dialectical interpretation of Marxist theory. Nevertheless, at best, the vast majority of Marxist writing considers ‘praxis’ as secondary. At worst, like the Orthodox or Reformist interpretations of Marx’s work, the (critical and dialectical) implications of Marx’s theory of praxis are not understood at all, leading to often quite sterile discussions that are characterised by abstract idealism and mechanic materialism, simple objectivism and simple subjectivism, and, finally, the artificial separation between production and consumption as seemingly distinct spheres of social reproduction. Similarly, Althusserian structuralism fails to come to terms with the concept of praxis. Although it proposes a concept of ‘theoretical practice’, it is limited to the realm of thought. In distinction, praxis is the philosophical basis of a critical theory of society. In contemporary society, and against the background of (abstract) ecological thought and rejection of Marxism as Eurocentric,<sup>1</sup> its elaboration is most

important given the degree of human destruction of the environment that, as (abstract) environmentalism sees it, has moved on from the ‘old continent’ to the so-called periphery. While environmentalism bemoans the loss of the Amazonian rainforests as a destruction of our ‘collective lungs’, it does not concern itself with the mode of human social reproduction in the affected regions.

In Frankfurt School critical theory, to this day the outstanding theorist of human praxis is Alfred Schmidt.<sup>2</sup> Schmidt’s concept of praxis is not to be confused with either an atheoretical practiciness or purely abstract notions of what Althusser termed ‘practical humanism’.<sup>3</sup> Everyday consciousness believes itself to be in direct connection with the world of praxis, and, precisely as a result of the self-postulated circumstance of not being stained by any theoretical reflection or negative critique of the existing relations, believes that, in the realisation of everyday tasks, such reflection would be more a hindrance than a help. It is worth noting that



this posture could be based on practicalist hostility to theory and anti-humanist conceptions of society, which themselves could be based on formulations by Marx such as the following: '[Men] begin, like every animal, by *eating, drinking*, etc., hence not by "standing" in a relation, but by *relating themselves actively*, taking hold of certain things in the external world through action, and thus satisfying their need[s]. (Therefore they begin with production)'.<sup>4</sup>

However, and in distinction to such views, Alfred Schmidt argued that 'these formulations are not to be understood in the sense of practicist enmity toward theory'. Schmidt continues, with reference to historical praxis: 'Historical practice is in itself "more theoretical" than theory, as indeed it was in Hegel (although in his case of course it was determined in the last analysis as a mode of knowledge). Practice has already accomplished the mediation of Subject and Object before it becomes itself the theme of reflection'.<sup>5</sup> In other words, a fully *atheoretical* world does not exist. Indeed, theory is required because reality demands comprehension, and reality is always Man in his social relations, and these relations are always relations of social reproduction – of the human metabolism with nature.

This chapter presents Schmidt's critical concept of praxis as comprising definite social forms of the human metabolism with nature. Social reproduction entails the concept of labour as exchange with, and consumption of, nature. In this context, I argue that, understood critically, theory is not something applied to practice, as in the state socialist tradition from Lenin to Althusser. In fact, in this tradition, German idealism appears as its radicalised other, that is, as theory disengaged from practice. Rather, I hold that theory articulates and presents the knowledge of praxis – praxis is innately theoretical as social knowledge. The chapter elaborates this insight by first developing Schmidt's conception of praxis in two sections, focusing on notions of natural law, natural form,

and human labour. The aim is to establish a critical theory of Marx's conceptions of human labour and use-value. In a second section, the argument focuses on the concept of tool and the philosophical role that it plays in reflection on the means of production.

## HUMAN PRAXIS, NATURE, AND HISTORY

Alfred Schmidt formulates his critical theory of praxis in three different variants. Material being, which no doubt exists independently of human subjects, only 'acquires meaning' in a first formulation – ontological, if you will – after having passed through human praxis: 'It is true that material being precedes every form of historical practice as extensive and intensive infinity. But in so far as it is meaningful for men, this being is not the abstractly material being presupposed in its genetic primacy by any materialist theory, but a second being, appropriated through social labour'.<sup>6</sup> In a second formulation, Schmidt says that the existence of natural material objectivity, the precursor to human praxis, only comes to be 'pronounceable' once it has become, at least partially, an object of human praxis:

The social subject, through whose filter all objectivity passes, is and continues to be a component of the latter. No matter how much man, a 'self-conscious natural thing', goes beyond the immediacy of 'natural substance' found in each case, in transforming it through an ideal anticipation of his ends, the natural context [*Naturzusammenhang*] won't be ruptured in this way. Faced with this natural context (and in this Marx also follows Hegel's 'logic') purposeful doing can only assert itself by cunningly meshing with the process of the internal laws of matter. The fact that these laws exist 'in-themselves', independent of all praxis (and its theoretical implications) is, of course, *pronounceable* only insofar as the objective world has become a world 'for us'.<sup>7</sup>

This second formulation grasps the problem on the philosophical–linguistic level. Like the

first, it includes the broader problem that a materiality external to the immediate sphere of influence of human praxis can only be grasped by subjects in counterposition to matter already formed by praxis. This reaches the point that even the very term of the 'being untouched' of external nature can only be created by human beings who already practice a massive domination over nature: 'Even those objects which have not yet fallen into the sphere of human intervention depend on man insofar as their *being untouched* can only be formulated with relation to the human being'.<sup>8</sup>

In another passage, the philosopher from the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory indicates that the romantic yearning for the 'beautiful nature of God' is established historically at the precise moment in which the industrial development of a specific region or nation – with its consequent domination of nature through heavy machinery – had reached a certain level of development, as had the destruction of nature. Thus, it was at the dawn of capitalism that a few bourgeois gentlemen from the English industrial cities, dressed in their chequered shirts, started to scale the Alps – a desire that they declared to be irresistible.<sup>9</sup>

In a third formulation – in terms of the philosophy of consciousness – the material world, in its form of movement corresponding to the laws of nature, without a subject in itself, is only 'recognisable' if it has already been the object of human praxis: 'The *dialectical* element of Marxist materialism does not consist in the denial that matter has its own laws and its own movement (or motion), but in the understanding that matter's laws of motion can only be recognised and appropriately applied by men through the agency of mediating practice'.<sup>10</sup> In another passage, Schmidt formulates a similar idea in describing the relationship between materialism in general and 'dialectical materialism':

The fundamental materialist tenet could be summed up as follows: the laws of nature exist independently of and outside the consciousness

and will of men. *Dialectical* materialism also holds to this tenet, but with the following supplement: men can only *become certain* of the operation of the laws of nature through the forms provided by their labour-processes.<sup>11</sup>

In their productive activity, human beings confront the transformability of matter, and thereby recognise their subordination to the laws of nature. It is only by means of this recognition that they can, in turn, push back the barriers of nature where its objective content makes that possible. The double movement of praxis toward theory and theory toward praxis is visible in Schmidt's account. With reference to Marx's and Hegel's reflections on 'labour's purposes', among which productive praxis stands out, Schmidt proposes the following idea: 'Anticipatory knowledge presupposes practical action which has also been completed and from which this knowledge proceeds, just as, inversely, it forms the precondition of any such activity'.<sup>12</sup>

Now it is very important to insist that this reciprocal interdependence between praxis and knowledge does not simply put both on the same level. The mutually dependent relationship does not lead to a suspension of the primacy of matter *vis-à-vis* the subject and its capacity for knowledge and decision. But, at the same time, in Marxism this 'priority of external nature' is not static, but mediated.<sup>13</sup> 'Nature was for Marx both an element of human practice and the totality of everything that exists'.<sup>14</sup> These reflections are much more than philosophical subtlety. The path across the tightrope that a philosophy of praxis must walk is focused well by Alfred Schmidt:

These considerations are less trivial than they might seem, since if the concept of praxis is tightened excessively as it is by Fichte (as also in the early Lukács, who transforms historical materialism almost into an idealism of 'creation' in sociological clothing), it is toned down and becomes a concept of mere contemplation. 'Pure and absolute activity which is nothing more than activity' thus finally ends up in the 'illusion of "pure thought"'.<sup>15</sup>

We could make the following comment regarding this line of argument: the illusion of pure thought and pure activity leads, in political praxis, to the presumption that ideal processes determine material processes. To judge a specific policy within this logic, one merely examines the argumentative strategies of the agents and their followers in search of the internal coherence of reasoning (for example, in its moral argumentation), instead of wondering about the real motives behind those policies. In consequence, the effects of that policy are not considered and valued in and of themselves, but always with respect to whether these effects were desired or not.

In Marxist theoretical debates, the concept of praxis is indispensable in being able to confront the objectivist tendencies of both the reformist and Stalinist Lefts. Despite their considerable theoretical differences, one important parallel between the revisionist and dogmatic Lefts consists in the fact that both tend to understand the transition to socialism as an inevitable process. The reformist position is based on the idea that transition will occur through a *passage*, as smooth as possible, through a gradual transformation (which can only be sped up through reforms) of capitalist structures into socialist ones. The orthodox Marxists, in contrast, invoke the idea that a radical rupture must be reached at some particular moment. Despite this difference, they have something in common: both tendencies fear nothing so much as the spontaneous rebellion of the oppressed and exploited beyond the bounds of the party and the given organisational structures of social reproduction.

But to grant praxis such a central position in his theory, as does Alfred Schmidt in his philosophical investigation, throws these objectivist understandings of politics and history radically into doubt. The concept of praxis, which is fundamental for Marxist theory, contains an element of rebellion against all those who, from their desk, aspire to lead the activities of the rebels of all countries.

Since the concept of praxis already contains within itself the mediation of theory and activity, and, speaking more generally, of subject and object, and since it shows in theoretical reflections that the straight separation of the two (contained in the conception of *leading the masses through the Party*) leads to utter absurdity, this concept resists the authoritarianism of both the reformists and the orthodox. Given that both currents, confronted with the spontaneous rebellion of the masses, take pleasure in arguing that they lack theoretical knowledge and preparation, with the objective of taking charge of them again, the *philosophy of praxis*, which pleads the case of praxis on a highly theoretical level, is a splinter which is not very easy to remove. Conversely, this doesn't mean simply to take the side of spontaneous and non-reflective action, endorsing practice-ism over theory. Alfred Schmidt is more interested in showing that theoreticism (and stubborn insistence on one's own theoretical training against those who do not formally possess it) is not necessarily any closer to the process of theoretical knowledge than is praxis in the fullest sense of the word.<sup>16</sup> It should thus be understood that Schmidt insists on the fact that 'historical practice is in itself "more theoretical" than theory'.<sup>17</sup>

Despite everything, these reflections continue to be of great importance when the problem of the relationship between theory and practice, between subjective and objective relations, and between cadres and *party base*, are posed to us with an urgency that has not decreased. It remains valid today to insist that emphasising the meaning of praxis does not mean simply taking the side of subjectivity against the importance of objective relations. In the critical-philosophical concept of praxis, what is more interesting is grasping the dialectical relationship between these two instances, which can only be counterposed so simply on the terminological level, and to understand the importance of this relationship. Thus, we should follow Alfred Schmidt when he indicates that simple objectivism

and simple subjectivism should in no way be identified as unequivocal opposites, but rather that – in specific ideologies or forms of political action – both tend to coexist.

With Alfred Schmidt, we could say that both positions under critique – that of the dogmatic Left as well as its reformist variant – contain a peculiar combination of mechanical materialism and idealism. This does not mean that the defenders of those positions truly understand it in this way. It is precisely in the uncomprehended (or even unconscious) combination of these two philosophical traditions that the theoretical problem is buried.<sup>18</sup> Marx's contribution consisted in critically – which is to say, through reflection – contrasting the epistemological contributions of mechanical materialism to those of idealism, in order to thereby arrive at the developed concept of praxis. Schmidt emphasises that, for Marx, the question

...given the unavoidable historic tasks of humanity, is no longer one of arguing – on the basis of higher principles of being and knowledge (for which it matters little whether their interpretation is spiritual or material) – but rather one of setting out from the 'materiality' of the human living conditions – a materiality which is anything but ontological – which are 'practical' from the outset, that is, relations established by action': productive and class relations.<sup>19</sup>

## READING CAPITAL PHILOSOPHICALLY

For Schmidt, 'Marx was by no means at his most philosophical when he made use of the traditional, scholastic language of the philosophers'. Indeed, in his book on Marx's concept of nature, he warns the reader from the beginning that Marx's

middle and later, politico-economic writings will be consulted much more than is customary in interpretations of Marxist philosophy. Particular attention has been paid to the *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie (Rohentwurf)*, the preliminary draft of *Capital*, which is of the utmost importance for understanding the relation between

Hegel and Marx, and which has so far hardly been used.<sup>20</sup>

In this context of reading *Capital* philosophically, Schmidt emphasises the importance of the concept of use-value and of the natural form:

The natural form of the commodity, called by Marx its use-value, only appears in the analysis of the process of creating value in so far as it is the 'material substratum, the depository of exchange-value'. Here, on the contrary, we are concerned primarily with the philosophical elements of Marxist theory, and the process of production will be considered above all in its historical movement, as a labour-process bringing forth use-values.<sup>21</sup>

In the cited passage, Schmidt places at the centre of his observations the importance of use-value above all in relation to its *production*, and not so much to its *consumption*. Schmidt realises perfectly well the unity of production and consumption in Marx's theory, but setting out from the primacy of production, as we see clearly, for example, in the following formulation: 'Marx, like Hegel, regarded productive activity as consumption as well, which used up both the material worked on and the activity of work'.<sup>22</sup> At issue are the conditions of social reproduction.

Marx's two tendencies, though contradictory at first sight, namely of recognising the importance of use-values and thereby understanding very early on the danger of their destruction, on the one hand, while on the other hand referring to use-values systematically only in terms of a 'material substratum ...bearers of exchange-value',<sup>23</sup> are not two totally divergent tendencies within Marxian thought, but rather both the expression of a single situation.

Just as Herbert Marcuse, in his *Reason and Revolution*, views Hegel's affirmative expressions with regard to the existing social formation (for example toward the monarchy or war) as directly related to his ideas critical of bourgeois society, so too can we, by analogy, rationally conceive and understand

this contradiction within Marx. Thus, when Hegel glorifies war as something as beneficial for society as the storm is for the sea, freeing it of stagnation by stirring it up, this is not only the most shallow affirmation of the existing, but also one of his most critical formulations – one which could also be understood to mean that this social formation would collapse if not for war, since, as Hegel puts it in another passage, bourgeois society's reason ends at the border of the nation state.<sup>24</sup>

With reference to the problem at hand, we could then say: Marx's limitation in referring systematically to use-value – the natural form of the commodity – only in connection to the analysis of the production of value, is on the one hand a genuflection toward classical political economy studied in the present, but simultaneously and in the same sense, this theoretical limitation is nothing other than the account of the full subordination of use-value to value as manifested in the capitalist mode of production. This latter side is radicalised even further because Marx analyses use-value in relation to value, above all in its tendency to be destroyed by value. To celebrate use-value would not have provided any better solution to the actually existing problem, and nor would it have contributed to resolving it. To return to the parallel with Marcuse's critique of Hegel: just as the naïve musings on perpetual peace and the idea of being able to create and guarantee it within the framework of existing social relations and through international peacekeeping institutions<sup>25</sup> ultimately run off course and miss the central problem, so too a naïve fixation on the use-value side of production and consumption always runs the risk of being less critical than Marx's proposal on this point, which seems at first glance to be uncritical.

The reflection is on the knife's edge. Without doubt, we should not remain within Marx's undeveloped reflections on use-value – on the natural form of social reproduction – but here we run up against a question which is more than merely scholastic: how can we take this step today, when the formation of

society is not *in principle* different from what it was in Marx's times, without losing the realism that led to his critical insights, which, in large part, still have not been surpassed?

Maybe the key to this surpassing lies in the concept of labour power, that is, the most important and fundamental use-value for the human being is the human being itself. The first 'natural form' that humans encounter is their mother, and they later come to be increasingly conscious of the use-value of their own bodies and that of all other humans. Marx himself also says that labour power is a fundamental use-value, and, in a certain degree, the most important, since it is the only commodity that creates value (and that is fundamentally surplus value). Seen in this way, use-value is even more central to Marx's analysis than value, not only quantitatively (with regard to the number of pages devoted to it), but also in terms of its fundamental focus. This focus evidently sets out from the massive destruction and gradual annihilation of the human life of the English working class, which – on account of the factory inspectors, who were often brave and committed<sup>26</sup> – represents one of the best-documented cases of the capitalist destruction of use-value.<sup>27</sup> But this speech for the defence in support of Marx has not been inserted here in order to distract the reader from the limitations that Alfred Schmidt diagnoses in his treatment of use-value, but instead to indicate a danger that we see in the way that many today follow the fashion of referring to ecology and use-value.<sup>28</sup>

Marx has been criticised for not having analysed use-value, the natural form of social reproduction, sufficiently within his theory. This critique largely neglects the fact that the destruction of 'human use value' – especially in the form of the proletarian and the members of his family – occupies a central position in Marx's main work. The failure to recognise this could have a double meaning. Either it comes from the belief that the destruction of *external* nature in Marx, as the destruction of natural forms alongside

the *internal* (that proper to human beings), should be discussed in more detail; or, alternatively, it sets out from the belief that the very destruction of human nature *itself* is no longer a topic for discussion, because, in its extreme form, such destruction has been transferred from Europe to other continents, and that, in the (ostensible) mother continent of the capitalist mode of production, the destruction of external nature, at least at first glance, has become the most urgent problem. If the second variant were the case, then Marx's focus is surely closer to the truth than those ecological propagandists who see nothing more in the deforestation of virgin forests than the loss of *our* collective lungs, who do not know – and much less want to know – what happens in the affected region when these forests are destroyed, and who do not care at all that the inhabitants of those forest regions were destroyed long before the holes in ozone layers over the polar ice caps were discovered. It is this of false ecologism, which represents little more than the highest stage of pseudo-humanist Eurocentrism,<sup>29</sup> of those who remember basic human needs only when their necks burn, that we must beware. It is very interesting to note that such a view fits much less comfortably with Marxian theory than with the conceptions of those who seek to overcome the aforementioned limitations in Marx solely through an act of will or a mere redefinition of the problem.

According to Marx, social reproduction has a 'double form': a 'value form' and a 'natural form'.<sup>30</sup> The concept of natural form is presented by the use-value of a commodity. The commodity, in Marx's words, has a double-objectivity: the 'objectivity of commodities as values' versus their 'sensuous objectivity'. It is precisely its 'double' way of existing as something that converts this specific historical product into a commodity. It is from this 'plain, homely natural form', as Marx calls it [*hausbackene Naturalform*]<sup>31</sup> – which, in opposition to the value form, does not only appear in bourgeois forms of production, but in all forms of production throughout

history – that research into the Marxian concept of nature must set out.<sup>32</sup> In current Marxist debates on a non-Eurocentric interpretation of the concept of use-value, the possibility is seen of applying the Marxian concept of natural form not only to the 'sensuous objectivity of commodities as physical bodies', but also to other aspects of production, not directly related to the capitalist mode of production, which are older and which could even outlast it. In order to do so, regional traditions, peculiarities, and preferences, as well as culturally caused differences in how human products are made and consumed, were put in the centre of the discussion. It is certain that, in the framework of this theory, the necessity of this conceptual expansion is argued, but it should be documented – on the basis of Marx's texts, and with detailed arguments – up to what point this interpretation of the natural form of social reproduction could be justified by a Marxian conceptualisation.

The fundamental question on this topic could be put as follows: does Marx's concept of natural form refer exclusively to non-human, external nature, or also to the activity of humans and the manner in which they live? The mentioned interpretation of Marx would only be convincing on this point if the latter were the case, since these theories relate the concept of the natural form of social reproduction to the human *ethe*, which expresses itself in the concrete manifestations of society. In fact, these *ethe* are not in any way considered as something that belongs exclusively to the conditions of external nature.<sup>33</sup>

Alfred Schmidt offers a relevant observation for the problem of natural form. Its conception comes with certain reservations, since in Marx's theory – a dialectical theory – external nature cannot be strictly separated from the human influence exercised over it.

But as far as the world of experience as a whole is concerned, the material provided by nature cannot be distinguished from the practico-social modes of its transformation. The question of the quantitative and qualitative share of man and the material nature

in the creation of the product of labour is one to which there is no general answer for Marx. The fact that this relation cannot be fixed formally is an indication of the dialectical nature of the process.<sup>34</sup>

The concept of natural form, however much it comes from the natural character of the objects and instruments of labour, cannot be reduced to a merely external nature. Just as was emphasised in the discussion of the concept of praxis in Marx, the concept of a nature which is external to the human being is no longer possible, imaginable, or expressible outside its connection with the radical appropriation of that nature. But, as soon as human praxis confronts external nature, the latter – as ‘humanised nature’<sup>35</sup> – ceases to be strictly external.

Schmidt insists on this dialectical relationship of human intervention with nature and nature’s ultimately irrevocable external immediacy: ‘The immediacy of nature asserts itself at ever higher stages of the process of production, though now humanly mediated through men’.<sup>36</sup> In the reciprocal interpenetration of external nature and human praxis, the results of this process become as external to human beings as the immediate natural material: ‘Once created, the world of use-values compounded of labour and natural material (i.e. humanized nature) confronts men as something objective, existing independently of them. The material of nature itself confronted men in the same way in its first immediacy, when it had not yet been penetrated by men’.<sup>37</sup>

Nature and human activity are distinct in unity. They reciprocally interpenetrate one another in productive praxis in such a way that it may be comprehensible to use the concept of the natural form of social reproduction for the analysis of the historically definite forms of social reproduction. Above all, in reference to the material results of the culturally conditioned everyday processes that the mentioned theories analyse (the four *ethe* theory and the comprehension of communication as a production–consumption process), this use of the Marxian concept of the natural form of

social reproduction is substantially justified. Marx’s concept of the natural form of social reproduction not only represents the point of departure in such a search for a materialist theory of culture, but will also return – upon the completion of his ambitious theoretical project – as the final point of his analysis.

The concept of ‘historical *ethos*’, which is central in the above mentioned discussions in Latin America on a non-Eurocentric interpretation of Marx’s theory, can be understood simultaneously as the *foundation* and the *result* of the dialectical relation that exists between human subjectivity and all that exists independently of consciousness. The primacy of matter can be understood to be confirmed, by this application of the concept of natural form to the modes of subjective human behaviour in the production and consumption of use-values, and not – as it is sometimes naïvely suggested – as idealistically toned down. The critical character of the relationship between human productive force and natural substance is well brought out by Schmidt: ‘Human productive forces stamp the material of nature intellectually and practically. This process however completely confirms nature’s independence of consciousness rather than destroys it’.<sup>38</sup>

## NATURE AND TOOLS: ON THE MEANS OF LABOUR

In the critical conception of human praxis, the theory of production transforms into a critique of production. For this context, too, Alfred Schmidt’s theory of tools remains unsurpassed. The previous section posited a yet unresolved problem regarding the relationship between the instrument of labour and the object of labour,<sup>39</sup> and, therefore, also of the relationship of the tool to raw materials, which points to the need to refer to Marx’s ‘theory of the tool’.<sup>40</sup> For Marx, all that humans find pre-existing on Earth and on which they can work can be considered an

'object of labour'. Therefore, the Earth in its totality constitutes an 'object of labour' for the human beings who inhabit it.<sup>41</sup> Here, Marx distinguishes between 'objects of labour spontaneously provided by nature', which humans merely 'separate from immediate connection with their environment', and 'raw material'.<sup>42</sup> The 'raw material' is differentiated from the 'object of labour' in that it has already undergone a treatment which goes beyond mere detachment from nature as a whole, 'for example, ore already extracted and ready for washing', which has thus already been 'filtered through previous labour'.<sup>43</sup> Hence, the concept of the object of labour is broader than that of raw materials.<sup>44</sup> Evidently, for Marx, something analogous happens with the conceptual pairing of 'instrument of labour' and 'tool':

An instrument of labour is a thing, or a complex of things, which the worker interposes between himself and the object of his labour and which serves as a conductor, directing his activity onto that object. He makes use of the mechanical, physical and chemical properties of some substances in order to set them to work on other substances as instruments of his power, and in accordance with his purposes.<sup>45</sup>

But Marx understands the instruments of labour, which have already been transformed by human labour, as 'tools'.<sup>46</sup> This concept of the tool as an already-produced instrument of labour can also be found in Benjamin Franklin's definition of the human being as a 'tool-making animal'.<sup>47</sup> Marx does not make the distinction between instruments of labour in general and those which are produced – that is, tools – as unequivocally as the previously mentioned distinction between objects of labour in general and those which have been worked, which is to say, raw materials. In any case, Marx repeatedly observes the particularity which characterises the 'instruments [of labour] [*Arbeitsmittel*]... which have already been mediated through past labour' from those pre-existing instruments of labour which are used just as they were found.<sup>48</sup>

One explanation of the fact that Marx uses the term 'tool' rarely, employing instead 'instrument of labour', can consist in the fact that, effectively, today there exist fewer instruments of labour that have yet to be transformed by humans than there exist objects of labour which are still untransformed. Also, in the history of humanity – for example, in the material remains of extinct civilisations – it is easier to demonstrate the use of the latter than the former. While in unelaborated instruments of labour it is possible that, in dropping them after use, they leave no or little trace of that use, it is a different matter with objects of labour which have not been previously worked-upon, since in most cases these form a material part of the final product. In strictly logical terms, it is also correct to substitute the term 'tool' for that of 'instrument of labour', since 'tool' is a subcategory of 'instrument of labour', and consequently, every tool is also always an instrument of labour. The problem here is that the readers could get confused and create the impression that Marx used the two terms 'instruments of labour' and 'tool' synonymously.<sup>49</sup>

The consequences of this problem are not immediately serious because Marx, in his analysis, does not study closely those instruments of labour which are not themselves procured through labour, but instead refers almost always in his examples to those which have been produced.<sup>50</sup>

According to Alfred Schmidt, Marx's theory of the tool in *Das Kapital* is that of 'the existing, the materialised mediator between the labourer and the object of labour [*Arbeitsgegenstand*]'.<sup>51</sup> In saying this, he stresses the importance of tool-making for the entirety of human development, and above all the development of human intellectual capacities: 'There can be hardly any doubt that the most basic abstractions have arisen in the context of labour-processes, i.e. in the context of tool-making'.<sup>52</sup>

In this sense, the attempt to see a parallel between the processes of production and communication stands in the non-dogmatic



Marxist tradition. To the question of whether or not this attempt makes its authors idealist philosophers, we could respond that, in such matters, a separation cannot always be established with the kind of clarity we find in the textbooks of dogmatic Marxism. In this context, it is worth emphasising the closeness between Hegel and Marx regarding the theory of the tool. In this respect, Schmidt underlines Hegel's contribution to understanding the inner connection between the development of tools and the human capacity for communication:

Hegel, as well as Marx, was aware of the historical interpenetration of intelligence, language and the tool. The tool connects man's purposes with the object of his labour. It brings the conceptual element, logical unity, into the human mode of life. Hegel wrote in the *Jenenser Realphilosophie* [the Jena manuscripts]: 'The tool is the existent rational mean, the existent universality of the practical process; it appears on the side of the active against the passive, is itself passive in relation to the labourer, and active in relation to the object of labour'.<sup>53</sup>

It is precisely in Hegel's linking of the processes of production and communication in his formulations on the tool that Schmidt sees Hegel's importance for historical materialism.<sup>54</sup> In his discussion of the tool in *Capital*, Marx cites Hegel's understanding of the 'cunning of reason' in an effort to understand philosophically the 'cunning of man' in the use of tools, as Schmidt describes it in summarising Marx.<sup>55</sup> The human being – Marx writes – 'makes use of the mechanical, physical and chemical properties of some substances in order to set them to work on other substances as instruments of his power, and in accordance with his purposes'.<sup>56</sup> In a footnote inserted at this point in *Capital*, Marx immediately quotes the following well-known phrase from Hegel's *Logic*:

Reason is as cunning as it is powerful. Cunning may be said to lie in the intermediative action which, while it permits the objects to follow their own bent and act upon one another till they waste away, and does not itself directly interfere in the process, is nevertheless only working out its own aims.<sup>57</sup>

Despite this direct reference by Marx to Hegel in the context of his theory of the tool, we must note an important difference between the two philosophers. Alfred Schmidt draws attention to the fact that 'Marx had a far lower estimation' of the tool than did Hegel.<sup>58</sup> The latter viewed the ends of production as subordinated to its means, since the end is finite, and, therefore, 'it is not an absolute, nor simply something that in its own nature is *rational*'.<sup>59</sup> The tool, on the contrary, as the '*means is superior to the finite ends of external purposefulness: the plough is more honourable than are immediately the enjoyments procured by it and which are ends*'.<sup>60</sup> On the contrary, for Marx the tool is not something completely extrinsic to the product, and nor does he subordinate the latter to the former in terms of its capacity to immediately satisfy human needs, as does Hegel. While, for Hegel, the presumed durability of tools situates them on a higher level *vis-à-vis* those products which are extinguished in consumption,<sup>61</sup> Marx – here moving completely within the materialist tradition, which was generally far from asceticism and indeed opposed to it – 'had no intention of deriving any arguments against the satisfactions of the senses from their transitory nature'.<sup>62</sup>

Moreover, Alfred Schmidt distinguishes 'three forms of tool'.<sup>63</sup> 'The tool can maintain itself in its identical form, it can enter materially into the produce of labour and, finally, it can be completely consumed, without becoming part of the product of labour'.<sup>64</sup> It is evident that of these three types of tool, Hegel knows only the first. If Schmidt understands this as a limitation of the dialectical idealist's understanding of the tool, he clarifies that 'it had an element of truth in it, in that most tools remain the same in use, and are foreign to their product'.<sup>65</sup> In this respect, Hegel has limited his philosophical reflection to the predominant form of tool. In any case, we can see the degree to which the materialist Marx grasps reality better than Hegel, moreover, in the fact that he understands just

how relative the conceptual determinations of these various objects with regard to their position in the labour process are.<sup>66</sup>

Certainly, we could say that the Hegelian conception could grasp these components again at any moment of production, and that, insofar as his philosophy is dialectical, he ought to be able to understand conceptually the double form of objects. However, Hegel's emphatic discourse on the tool as the 'more honourable', and his disparaging appraisal of consumption [*abfällige Bewertung des Konsums*], indicate a static element in his theory. The concept of 'productive consumption',<sup>67</sup> which is central for Marx and indicates precisely the difficulty of fixing determinate elements of reproduction on one factor and in one static form, as Hegel does, is unfamiliar to the great dialectician, who, in his turn, gave Marx important indications for his theory of the tool.

Alfred Schmidt tends to be, in this conceptual tension between the theory of tools in Hegel and Marx, more to the understanding of the latter. The distance to Hegel's glorification of the tools for their *durability* is based, not only in a critical lecture of Marx's works, but also in his interpretation of one of the most ancient opponents to slavery, in the materialist theory of Western philosophy: Epicurus. In the last session of his final seminar that Alfred Schmidt gave only a few weeks before his death, he referred emphatically to Epicure's materialism, which rejected radically the idea that human pleasure, i.e. happiness, could be measured by time. In that sense, the Hegelian argument, that tools are more important than other objects of consumption because the tools endure normally much more time than any object of immediate consumption (as food, for example), is senseless in the Epicurean perspective, in which the importance of human pleasure depends exclusively on the quality of human wealth, and not its quantity. That is, social wealth is free time: time 'for enjoyment' (Marx) – freely disposable time (Adorno). In the words of Schmidt, Epicurean philosophy

entails a materialist rejection of any philosophical reflections on death. It considers that the fear of God comes from the fear of death: 'As long as the death has not occurred, it is not our business; but when it occurred, it is again not our business'.<sup>68</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The critical concept of human praxis does not, therefore, free practice from the social structures. Rather, it comprehends social structures as institutions of social practice, however perverted this practice might be in the form of the object. Instead of negating society abstractly, it refuses to accommodate for the sake of human existence. In this sense, the critical theory of praxis, as it has been established here, comprehends the intricate relations of material existence and idealist thinking as in dialectical materialism. In the form praxis, the laws of nature exist outside the consciousness and will of men, but, at the same time, men can become certain of them through the processes of social labour as conscious activity. Therefore, in this dialectical tension, materialism recognises praxis as fundamental – not as a static truth, but as a historical mediation. The critical understanding of this relation, as developed in the work of Alfred Schmidt, is essential in linking Marx's work with contemporary discussions of both political – reformist and orthodox left-thinking – and ecological agendas. Regarding the political agenda, their insistence on a clear separation of theory and activity expresses the rejection of the spontaneous rebellion of the exploited and oppressed as thoughtless activism; as laid out earlier, any clear separation between theory and practice is impossible. The dismissal of the emancipatory praxis of the masses as non-theoretical belongs to the same reality that left politics, ostensibly, seeks to overcome. On the other hand, and in keeping with the earlier illustration, the environmental activist

tends to focus almost exclusively on the deforestation of virgin forests and the destruction of the ozone layer. In this, they forget that the consciousness of these problems exist only because environmental destruction is a threat to human existence. Without considering the true critical significance of concepts such as praxis, labour, nature, or tool, thought risks falling into mere perspectivism – as in Althusserian structuralism – that naïvely adopts either a mechanistic or subjectivist point of view, staggering about from one to the other without being aware of it.

## Notes

- 1 Ulrich Brand, *Global Governance: Alternative zur neoliberalen Globalisierung? Eine Studie von Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung und WEED* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2000).
- 2 On Alfred Schmidt, see Hermann Kocyba's contribution to Volume 1 of this *Handbook*.
- 3 Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: Verso, 1996), chapter 7. According to Schmidt, Althusser 'does not interpret familiar Marxist ideas in structuralist language...rather he presents structuralist positions without ceremony as Marxist ones'. Alfred Schmidt, *History and Structure* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1983), 83. Werner Bonefeld, *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), chapter 2. Devoid of a conception of the actual relations of human praxis, one could argue with Adorno that practical humanism does 'not talk about the devil'. Instead, 'it looks on the bright side'. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London: NLB, 1974), 114.
- 4 Karl Marx, 'Notes on Adolph Wagner', in *Marx: Later Political Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 235.
- 5 Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: NLB, 1971), 194. In the German original, Schmidt writes here about 'historische Praxis', which would have been better translated as 'historical praxis', even though in English this term is less usual than the term 'practice' (compare Alfred Schmidt, *Der Begriff der Natur in der Lehre von Marx*, republished in revised and expanded form in 1974 [Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1974], 204). This edition of the book is identical – including the pagination – to the 1993 edition, with the only difference that the latter includes a new prologue from Schmidt, paginated with roman numerals (i–xvii). The same applies for the whole book: where Schmidt writes in German 'Praxis', in the English translation there always appears 'practice'.
- 6 Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: NLB, 1971), 194. He puts it similarly elsewhere: 'Like all materialism, dialectical materialism also recognizes that the laws and forms of motion of external nature exist independently and outside of any consciousness. This "in-itself" is however only *relevant* in so far as it becomes a "for-us", i.e. in so far as nature is drawn into the web of human and social purposes' (58f, emphasis by S.G.).
- 7 Alfred Schmidt, 'Praxis', in *Handbuch Philosophischer Grundbegriffe. Studienausgabe*, vol. 4, edited by Hermann Krings, Hans Michael Baumgartner, and Christoph Wild (Munich: Kösel, 1973), 1117, emphasis by S.G.
- 8 Ibid. On the linguistic plane, this circumstance can be observed above all in literary activity, in which virgin nature is discovered at the same moment that its definitive conquest appears as the order of the day. Thus, the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley describes Mont Blanc in 1816, in his poem of the same name, as 'Remote, serene, and inaccessible' after its summit had been reached five times by groups of climbers in the twenty years following its first ascent in 1786; Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Mont Blanc, Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni' (Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* [London: Hookham, 1817, facsimile reprint: Oxford, Woodstock, 1989], line 97).
- 9 Alfred Schmidt mentioned several times in his classes the following situation: The first ascents of high mountains, above all the Alps, are an excellent example of the relation between external untouched nature or materiality, on the one hand, and subjectivity or praxis, on the other. The idea of an untouched nature has, from a certain moment of its potential, imaginable *tangibility*, an incredible force of attraction, and thereby, this intangibility – which is from the beginning linked with the imagination of its potential tangibility – turns into the reality of already having been touched. The first high peak to be climbed by humans, according to the historical register, is Mont Blanc, the highest in Europe. This first great alpine ascent took place three years prior to the French Revolution. It is not only industrial development, but ideological development as well, that provokes and makes possible the yearning to reach the apparently unreachable parts of external nature. Compare: Horace Bénédict de Saussure, *Premières ascensions au Mont Blanc: 1774–1787* (Paris: Maspéro. 1979).

- 10 Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: NLB, 1971), 97. In the English translation of Schmidt's book, the following footnote is included after 'motion': "'Movement" and "motion" are alternative renderings of the German word "Bewegung", both of which are required by the English context at different points' (220 n17a).
- 11 Ibid., 98, second emphasis by S.G.
- 12 Ibid., 100. 'Labour's purposes' is, in the German original, 'Die bei der Arbeit verfolgten Zweck-Inhalte' (Alfred Schmidt, *Der Begriff der Natur in der Lehre von Marx*, republished in revised and expanded form in 1974 [Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1974], 99).
- 13 'Marx, like Feuerbach, wrote of "the priority of external nature", although with the critical reservation that any such priority could only exist within mediation' (Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* [London: NLB, 1971], 26–7; Alfred Schmidt cites Karl Marx, 'The German Ideology' in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. R. C. Tucker, second edition, [New York: W.W. Norton, 1978], 44).
- 14 Ibid., 27.
- 15 Alfred Schmidt, 'Praxis', in *Handbuch Philosophischer Grundbegriffe. Studienausgabe*, vol. 4, edited by Hermann Krings, Hans Michael Baumgartner, and Christoph Wild (Munich: Kösel, 1973), 1117. Schmidt cites here according to Marx and Engels, 1969, *Die Deutsche Ideologie*, in *Werke*, vol. 3 (Berlin: Dietz., 1969), 452f.
- 16 Brecht expresses a similar idea when, in his *Flüchtlingsgespräche* [*Refugee Dialogues*], the character of the intellectual confesses to the character of the proletariat: 'I always think of the philosopher Hegel. I have taken some of his books out of the library so that you will not be behind, *philosophically speaking*' (Bertolt Brecht, *Flüchtlingsgespräche* [Frankfurt am Main: Reclam, 1961] 76, emphasis by S.G.). In any case, this should only be understood negatively, i.e. as an ironic critique of theoreticism and not as a banal cult of the proletariat. As a disdainful allusion to the conceptual capacities of the working class, amateurishly praised, which finds its expression in the substitution of classics with *textbooks* by the communist party, the character representing the proletariat adds shortly thereafter, referring again to Hegel: 'They gave us extracts of his works. In him, as in crabs, one must focus on the extracts'. There exists in English a published adaptation of the text for theatre performance: 'Conversations in Exile', adapted by Howard Brenton from a translation by David Dollenmayer, in Bertolt Brecht, *Theater*, 17, 2, 1986.
- 17 Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: NLB, 1971), 194.
- 18 In this regard, see also: 'Marx does not "combine" (which would be a pure eclecticism) reflective motives rooted in idealism and materialism, but rather puts forth the idea (which had appeared in different shades from Kant to Hegel) that the immediate is already mediated, against its previously idealist formulation' (Alfred Schmidt, 'Einleitung', *idem.*, *Beiträge zur marxistischen Erkenntnistheorie* [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969], 11).
- 19 Ibid. Schmidt cites here from Marx's 'Notes on Adolph Wagner', in Marx: *Later Political Writings*, trans. and ed. T. Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 235, Marx's emphasis. Schmidt continues here by referring to Mao: 'These reflect in each case not only the degree to which society has already achieved true power over nature, but they also determine the what and the how of human knowledge, of the general horizon in which it moves' (ibid.).
- 20 Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: NLB, 1971), 16–17.
- 21 Ibid., 15.
- 22 Ibid., 71.
- 23 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 293.
- 24 G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §324. See also Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955), especially 220–3.
- 25 Hegel reproaches Kant for this *philosophical eye-wash*: 'Perpetual peace is often demanded as an ideal to which mankind should approximate. Thus, Kant proposed a league of sovereigns to settle disputes between states, and the Holy Alliance was meant to be an institution more or less of this kind. But the state is an individual, and negation is an essential component of individuality. Thus, even if a number of states join together as a family, this league, in its individuality, must generate opposition and create an enemy'. Ibid., §324, addition, 326.
- 26 'The social statistics of Germany and the rest of Continental Western Europe are, in comparison with those of England, quite wretched. But they raise the veil just enough to let us catch a glimpse of the Medusa's head behind it. We should be appalled at our own circumstances if, as in England, our governments and parliaments periodically appointed commissions of inquiry into economic conditions; if these commissions were armed with the same plenary powers to get at the truth; if it were possible to find for this purpose men as competent, as free from partisanship and

- respect of persons as are England's factory inspectors, her medical reporters on public health, her commissioners of inquiry into the exploitation of women and children, into conditions of housing and nourishment, and so on. Perseus wore a magic cap so that the monsters he hunted down might not see him. We draw the magic cap down over our own eyes and ears so as to deny that there are any monsters'. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 91.
- 27 In the end, simply emphasising the importance of use-values does not eliminate the problem that external or internal natures are only understood – to use Kant's language – as a *means* and not an *end*. This relates to the economist's view of social relations, a view which Marx adopts not because he finds it especially convincing, but because he is interested in analysing a society in which human beings can live, if at all, only because they possess the use-value of creating value. But, in the end, Marx is interested in something more than an 'economy oriented toward use-value'. Without using Kant's language, there is in every description of the living conditions of the English working class a resonance of what interests him, but which he very rarely dares to state: a society in which, as Brecht says, 'man is no longer a wolf to man'.
- 28 Compare: Frieder Dittmar, 'Wale und Atome. Greenpeace als Institution der globalen Öffentlichkeit', *Die Beute. Politik und Verbrechen* (Berlin: Ed. ID-Archiv, 1995), 7, 9–17.
- 29 Ulrich Brand, *Global Governance: Alternative zur neoliberalen Globalisierung? Eine Studie von Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung und WEED* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2000).
- 30 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 138.
- 31 Ibid. (Original: Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Vol. I, in Marx and Engels *Werke*, vol. 23, [Berlin: Dietz, 1975], 62.)
- 32 See, for example, Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: NLB, 1971), 66: 'If exchange-value is a "non-natural characteristic" typical of the bourgeois form of production, in the use-value the commodity confronts us in its "plain, homely natural form". The present investigation is particularly concerned with the latter form of the commodity'.
- 33 See Bolívar Echeverría, 'La "forma natural" de la reproducción social', *Cuadernos Políticos*, (Mexico City: UNAM, 1984), 41, 33–46.
- 34 Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: NLB, 1971), 67. Here, Schmidt adds: 'If labour is the formal "creator of value", the stuff of nature is its material creator. Hence, through what we have already said of the character of labour, the division of natural material and labour cannot be absolute. At the level of the individual use-value, it may *in abstracto* be possible to make a distinction between what derives from labour, i.e. from the activity of men, and what is provided by nature as the "material substratum" of the commodity'.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: NLB, 1971), 67.
- 37 Ibid., 66. It is from this understanding that both the theory of alienation and, in the final instance, the critique of ideology were set out in Marx and in Western Marxism.
- 38 Ibid., 66f.
- 39 'The simple elements of the labour process are (1) purposeful activity, that is work itself, (2) the object on which that work is performed, and (3) the instruments of that work'. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 284.
- 40 See, in this regard, Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: NLB, 1971), 99–107, here: 103.
- 41 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 284. Today even the Moon and outer space have begun to serve as objects of labour for humans, albeit only in an experimental stage at this point.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 'All raw material is an object of labour [*Arbeitsgegenstand*], but not every object of labour is raw material; the object of labour counts as raw material only when it has already undergone some alteration by means of labour'. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 284–5.
- 45 Ibid., 285.
- 46 Compare: 'As soon as the labour process has undergone the slightest development, it requires specially prepared instruments. Thus we find stone tools [*Werkzeug*] and weapons in the oldest caves'. Ibid.
- 47 Benjamin Franklin, cited in Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 286. Elsewhere in *Capital*, Marx contrasts this definition to that of Aristotle's definition, according to which the human being is 'by nature a citizen of a town'. While this is 'characteristic of classical antiquity', Franklin's definition is 'characteristic of Yankeeedom'. This should not be understood to mean that, in Marx's opinion, Franklin's definition is only valid for the United States, but merely that it goes hand-in-hand with the ideology of that society (444, 7). Marx, generally quite succinct in his use of reflections on 'human nature', makes use of both authors on this question, albeit with the limitation that 'man, if not as Aristotle thought a political animal, is at all events a social animal' (444). We can observe a certain distance

- between Marx and the authors in question due to the ideological tendency of the latter, which expresses something about the problem forcibly confronted by critical theory when it attempts to formulate assertions regarding 'human nature'. See Stephan Bundschuh, *Und weil der Mensch ein Meinsch ist: anthropologische Aspekte der Sozialphilosophie Herbert Marcuses* (Lüneburg: Zu Klampen, 1998) for a first systematic study of this issue.
- 48 Among other things, Marx distinguishes between instruments of labour 'in general' and those 'already mediated by labour', referring to the subcategory of those which, without intervening directly in the labour process, are nevertheless its unconditional premise: 'Once again, the earth itself is a universal *instrument* of this kind, for it provides the worker with the ground beneath his feet and a "field of employment" for his own particular process. *Instruments* of this kind, which have *already been mediated through past labour*, include workshops, canals, roads, etc.' (Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 [London: Penguin, 1976], 286–7, emphasis by S.G.). Ben Fowkes translates Marx's concept of 'Arbeitsmittel' simply as 'instrument'. In other cases, mentioned above, he translates the same term more precisely as 'instrument of labour' (compare Marx, *Das Kapital*, Vol. I, in *Marx and Engels Werke*, Vol. 23 [Berlin: Dietz, 1975], 195). When Marx separately mentions the use and construction of instruments of labour, he equally indicates the conceptual difference between instruments of labour in general and their elaborated form, which is to say, tools: all instruments of labour are used, but only tools are fabricated (*Capital*, 286).
  - 49 Alfred Schmidt also refers to 'the instrument of labour, which was for Marx identical with the tool' (*The Concept of Nature in Marx* [London: NLB, 1971], 103).
  - 50 See, for example, Marx's mention of the oldest known human instruments of labour, in which he emphasises their character as a tool, that is, their having been made available previously through human labour: 'domesticated animals, i.e. animals that have undergone *modification by means of labour*, that have been bred specially, play the chief part as instruments of labour along with stones, wood, bones and shells, which have *also had work done on them*' (Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 [London: Penguin, 1976], 285–6, emphasis by S.G.).
  - 51 Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: NLB, 1971), 103. Ben Fowkes here translates (in 1971) 'Arbeitsgegenstand' as 'subject of labour', as it was used in the English translation of *Capital* published in Moscow. Fowkes revises that in 1975, when elaborating his own English version of *Capital*, and translates 'Arbeitsgegenstand' now more precisely as 'object of labour'. (Compare *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, 102 with Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. I, trans. S. Moore and E. Aveling [Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1954], 125 ff.)
  - 52 Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: NLB, 1971), 102.
  - 53 Ibid. Here Schmidt cites Hegel, *Jensener Realphilosophie* (Leipzig: Meiner, 1932), 221.
  - 54 Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: NLB, 1971), 105, notes: 'Lenin stated correctly that Hegel was a precursor of historical materialism because he emphasised the role played by the tool both in the labour-process and in the process of cognition'.
  - 55 Ibid.
  - 56 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 285.
  - 57 Hegel, cited according to *Capital*, 285, 2. Compare, moreover, Hegel's observations which precede his reflections on tools in the *Logic*: 'That the end relates itself immediately to an object and makes it a means ... may be regarded as *violence* ... But that the end posits itself in a *mediate* relation with the object and *interposes* another object *between* itself and it, may be regarded as the *cunning* of reason'. W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic* (London: Routledge, 2002), 746.
  - 58 Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: NLB, 1971), 104. See also, on Marx: 'He was wary of fetishizing the tool in relation to the immediate use-values created with its help, as Hegel had done' (Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 [London: Penguin, 1976], 285, 2.).
  - 59 W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic* (London: Routledge, 2002), 747.
  - 60 Ibid. The immediate philosophical relationship between Hegel's *Logic* and Marx's *Capital* gets lost for the reader in English on account of the different ways in which the German term 'Mittel' is translated: in the *Logic*'s case as 'means', and in *Capital* as 'instrument', for example in the case of the central Marxian concept of 'Arbeitsmittel' translated by Fowkes as 'instrument of labour', instead of 'means of labour', as mentioned above.
  - 61 'The tool lasts, while the immediate enjoyments pass away and are forgotten. In his tools man possesses power over external nature, even though in respect of his ends he is, on the contrary, subject to it' (ibid.).
  - 62 Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: NLB, 1971), 104.
  - 63 Ibid., 103.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 'Hence we see that whether a use-value is to be regarded as raw material, as instrument of labour or as product is determined entirely by its specific function in the labour process, by the position it occupies there: as its position changes, so do its determining characteristics'; and 'Again, a particular product may be used as both instrument of labour and raw material in the same process. Take, for instance, the fattening of cattle, where the animal is the raw material, and at the same time an instrument for the production of manure'

(Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 [London: Penguin, 1976], 288–9).

67 Ibid., 290.

68 Alfred Schmidt, quoting Epicure from memory, in German: 'Solange der Tod nicht eingetreten ist, geht er uns nichts an; ist er aber eingetreten, geht er uns abermals nichts an' (Alfred Schmidt, Seminar '*Einführung in die Geschichte der Philosophie [Introduction to the history of philosophy]*', last session: 12 July 2012, J.W. Goethe-University Frankfurt/Main, video recording, part 2, minute 36. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Py2pmR4fpH0>).

# Critical Theory and Epistemological and Social-Economical Critique

Frank Engster

Spiegel: 'Professor, two weeks ago the world seemed still to be ok...'

Adorno: 'Not for me!'

The understanding of the socio-historical conditions of consciousness was at the core of early Critical Theory's<sup>1</sup> attempt to combine social-economic and epistemological critique. Since Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno primarily developed this approach, the chapter focuses on their accounts.

First, I look at their understanding of the socio-economic and epistemological critique of society. I then discuss how their notion of mediation – which materially socializes the German idealist notions of subject and object by drawing on the critique of political economy – is formulated in regard to this notion of critique. Finally, I take a closer look at the fundamental core of this critique: the social mediation that constitutes a specific capitalist objectivity, specific capitalist subjectivity and a correspondening non-identity.

## THE IDEA OF CRITIQUE

Horkheimer's programmatic 1937 essay 'Traditional and Critical Theory' marks a turning away from not one but two traditions. It explicitly criticizes the understanding of critique, mediation and subject-object in philosophy and the sciences. But Horkheimer also strives to overcome the critique that this tradition had already been subjected to from a traditional Marxist perspective. Even though Horkheimer was still committed to emancipation from the standpoint of labour, the essay was an attempt to break with the positivism of both traditions,<sup>2</sup> opening them up to a new *critical* theory in distinction to the positivist world-view Marxism of the Second and Third Internationals.<sup>3</sup> This theoretical development came along with a critique of notions of historical progress – evolutionary in traditional bourgeois theory, revolutionary in the Marxist tradition – for the supposed forward march of history had not led to overcoming capitalist society.



Instead the latter had become one-dimensional, wherein social reproduction in the form of economic compulsion produced the immanence of a false totality and thus a self-closure.

In Critical Theory, the critique of this closure avoids Hegel's speculative dialectic which takes contradictions as proof of an ideally speculative solution. But it also avoids the traditional idea in Marxism according to which the antagonism between labour and capital contains its own progressive resolution. These insights led to Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*<sup>4</sup> and to the importance of 'eros' and 'drive' in Marcuse, to Adorno's notions of a 'universal context of delusion'<sup>5</sup> (*'universaler Verblendungszusammenhang'*), the 'non-identical' and the critical force of individual reflection, and to Horkheimer's total domination of 'instrumental reason' as well as notions of subjective 'non-compliance'. Indeed, it also led to Horkheimer's later flirtations with messianic, utopian and religious notions.<sup>6</sup>

As a theory oriented on the Marxian insight (taken from Hegel) that 'presentation is critique and vice versa',<sup>7</sup> Critical Theory's approach to contradiction established the defining character of Critical Theory, which holds that the exposure of social content *is* critique. The former and the latter also expose contradictions in social and historical development: scientific and social progress, illumination and universalism, freedom and autonomy are not contradicted because they are simply hindered or held up by their opposite. Rather they create their opposites. This fateful immanent turn is key to the argument in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (DoE) (Horkheimer/Adorno, 2002) and *Negative Dialectics* (ND) (Adorno, 1973). This understanding of immanence has important consequences for the field at stake here: the connection between the capitalist economy on the one hand and the forms of thought in capitalism on the other.

The aim of such a critique (which draws on Kant, Hegel and Marx' notion of radical

critique) is to find the conceptuality of object and subject in their socially specific capitalist conditions. Following Marx, Critical Theory holds that the categories of political economy 'express the forms of being, the characteristics of existence',<sup>8</sup> constituting a social objectivity and a corresponding objective subjectivity. Thus, capitalist objectivity comprises a specific *socio-natural* objectivity and capitalist subjectivity likewise comprises a *socially specific* subjectivity that appears as timeless and quasi-natural. Yet, Critical Theory also inverted Marx' approach to ask: why can thought – in everyday life or in philosophical thinking – *not* adequately grasp its own capitalistic social conditions? Why do the conditions and mediations of thinking remain opaque and lead to naturalized and ideological forms?<sup>9</sup> Further, while capitalism leads to enormous increases in productivity, why is there no corresponding emancipatory consciousness?

## CRITICAL THEORY AS SOCIETY'S SELF-CRITIQUE

Even though Adorno and Horkheimer rather modestly referred to themselves as sociologists, their main calling was philosophy.<sup>10</sup> In combining both sociology and philosophy, they sought to unite empirical research with epistemological critique and social philosophy.<sup>11</sup> Drawing upon Kant and Hegel's notion of critique, Horkheimer and Adorno's aim was to 'socialize' the philosophical concept of critique and its central notions (consciousness and self-consciousness, reason, identity, totality, subject-object, spirit, etc.) by grounding them in the *Critique of Political Economy*<sup>12</sup> and Freudian psychoanalysis.<sup>13</sup> Yet their goal was not to turn the Hegelian Spirit 'on its feet', reducing the idealist view of knowledge, rational self-understanding and reason to vulgar materialism (as Traditional Marxism had done with Marx and Hegel). Instead, Critical Theory endeavoured

to use the categories of the critique of political economy to demonstrate the social character of philosophical categories. This implies philosophy, especially German Idealism and its understanding of philosophical problems, is a perverted form of thought in that it merely reflects one's own society. However, since society and its social contradictions always already appear in philosophical terms as problems of reason and cognition, knowledge and thinking, the social nature of these contradictions and problems disappear *in this form of appearance*. Thus philosophy in general and German Idealism in particular already represent in its form of thought and its central categories the reified, alienated and inverted character of bourgeois society.

Yet this does not invalidate philosophical thought, rather, this process of mystification is emblematic of nothing less than the hidden genesis of thinking and knowledge in *general*, for all thought is – and this is the main epistemological insight Horkheimer and Adorno took from Marx – socially constituted (which does not mean socially *constructed*), but trapped in false immediacy and immanence that cannot grasp its social origins. Moreover, this hidden genesis reaches the point of self-reflection in philosophy. Consequently, philosophy can be turned into a self-critique of thinking, especially when German Idealism is read in conjunction with Marx: the aim of Critical Theory is to uncover the social constitution of categories of thought and of being that present themselves as natural or ontological.

According to Adorno, the disappearance of the social first 'appeared' in the non-empirical, a priori status of Kant's 'transcendental subject', and it reached its climax in Hegel's overcoming of that transcendental subject in the supra-individual 'Spirit'. Yet both find their truth-content in their inversion of the social and natural conditions of thinking into the supremacy objectifying reason holds over its objects. Moreover, in their philosophy the self-reflection of thinking must necessarily understand and at the same time misunderstand its social conditions and social genesis, and thus its own thinking.

Art, which plays a major role especially in Adorno's writing,<sup>14</sup> is used in the same way as philosophy: 'The basic levels of experience that motivate art are related to those of the objective world from which they recoil. The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form. This, not the insertion of objective elements, defines the relationship of art to society'.<sup>15</sup>

But while in philosophy, and especially in German Idealism, an unresolved reality finds closure in a systematic immanence, in art this unresolved reality is reformulated in the explicit non-systematic and configurational form of art itself. Therefore, while philosophy offers an adequate critique of systemic closure in thinking, art expresses the unresolved reality in a non-systematic way.

Thus, on the one hand, the 'first' truth of philosophy is to reflect on its own categories – being, form, consciousness, reason etc. – the disappearance of the social in thought, while on the other hand, philosophy is needed to draw attention to these social origins of thought, in order to change the former and the latter. 'Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realise it was missed'.<sup>16</sup> That is why the duty of historical materialism is first of all, in Adorno's words, the 'anamnesis of the genesis'.<sup>17</sup> This anamnesis, which Adorno conceives of as 'dissolution of things understood as dogmatic',<sup>18</sup> does not in fact intend to reconstruct the social and historical genesis of thinking, at least not in a systematic or scientific sense. Instead, it traces the process of disappearance in thinking that becomes both practical reality and its blind spot, and it is because of this blind spot that he draws on both Marx' critique of the political economy and Freud's psychoanalysis and his notion of the unconscious.

## THE CRITICAL STATUS OF THEORY

Adorno and Horkheimer's materialist theory of knowledge is distinct not only from

Traditional Marxism's quasi-official 'reflection theory',<sup>19</sup> but also from Lukács<sup>20</sup> and Alfred Sohn-Rethel's formulations of the former.<sup>21</sup> The difference lies in the *critical* status of Adorno and Horkheimer's Theory.<sup>22</sup> Lukács' attempt to formulate a materialist theory of knowledge privileged a non-contemplative, practical, epistemological standpoint: that of the proletariat as the 'identical subject-object of history'.<sup>23</sup> Sohn-Rethel claimed to reconstruct the social genesis of the conditions of the non-empirical forms of cognition akin to Kant's 'transcendental subject'.<sup>24</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, however, turned away from such emphatic – and, in the case of Lukács, even revolutionary – expectations of a materialist theory in general and of a materialist theory of epistemology in particular. Instead of constructing a coherent materialist theory of thought, they pointed out the shortcomings and aporias of such an attempt: such a theory points to the domination of subjectivity that must be the object of critique, or to be more precise, that must be the object of subjectivity's *self*-critique. The aim therefore is not to replace the existing theories of knowledge with one of properly rational (self-)understanding, but rather to show the domination and harm caused by forms of thinking and subjectivity – not in the least against subjectivity itself.

This self-reflexive *critical* theory thus reveals the irrational and the ideological in the seemingly rational and objective on the side of the socio-economic constitution of social objectivity, and the corresponding subjectivity of individual experience, consciousness, thinking and science. This individual subjectivity, however, has to be derived from the supra-individual subjectivity of capitalist society's objectivity since Critical Theory regards this capitalist society as an 'autonomous subject' (Marx). This is because social relations manifest themselves in the form of an incomprehensible movement of economic objects upon which society's reproduction depends. The critique of society as an automatic subject thus shows the constitutive untruth of both society as object and society

as subject while also revealing the conditions that constitute individual subjectivity and its corresponding socially necessary forms of thinking.

The real object of critique is neither the supra-individual subjectivity of society's objectivity nor the subjectivity of individuals, but their mutual social mediation, and that mediation is their social mode of existence. The duty of critique is thus to show the irrational, ideological and reified effects of this process of social mediation on subject and object. Rather than grounding a scientific theory or Hegelian speculative identity, the critique of social mediation reveals its subjective and objective untruth. Hence, the critique of social mediation points to that which the process of mediation compulsively subsumes but cannot totally sublate. If there is an idea of *truth* in Critical Theory, it is one that appears negatively:<sup>25</sup> in the unresolved contradictions, promises and desires in society; in the forgotten moments and possibilities in history; in what remains powerless, overwhelmed and in misery; in what resists identification; and in that something simply is lacking. Even if, or precisely because, all this only appears negatively, critique is then 'based' on what breaks and thwarts the mediation between the supra-individual and objective subjectivity of the capitalist society and the subjectivity of individuals.

Moreover, critique also points to the dark, fatal side of social mediation: when illumination and universality, progress and freedom become their opposites. By showing their regressive development, Critical Theory uses the immanent turn of these ideas for an immanent critique that still tries to rescue them for emancipation, particularly in Horkheimer and Adorno's main works *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Negative Dialectics*.

This (self-)critical, negative status of critique has led to charges that Critical Theory cannot explain or legitimize in any positive manner its own theory and its refusal to sanction the world.

Critical Theory was aware of this quandary. Instead of a systematic or scientific explanation, it saw the purpose of critique as pointing to the 'damaged life'<sup>26</sup> of unconscious 'second nature',<sup>27</sup> thus indicating its ideological and traumatic effects but also what in history has been forgotten or lost, what remains unfulfilled or, not least, what resists as the hope, the promise and the desire for a better life that, after all, remains as unfulfilled as insatiable.

## TOTALITY AS MEDIATION

Totality is not an affirmative but rather a critical category.<sup>28</sup>

Since Critical Theory posits critique inside the perverted mediation of capitalist objectivity and subjectivity, then its 'first' critique is that there *is* mediation at all. This critique is directed against the type of understanding that takes different scientific objects and methodologies for granted without even asking how society presents itself, thus paving the way for a positivist thinking that takes the different objects of knowledge and its scientific spheres as immediately given.<sup>29</sup>

For Adorno, following Hegel, the immediate is always already mediated and this mediation, following Marx, is socially determined and historically specific. Consequently, positivist thinking can neither adequately pose the question of mediation, nor can it adequately challenge its own thinking. The former and the latter are the goal of critical theory's specific notion of *critique*.

Since this form of critique aims to point to an individual subjectivity that, however false, irrational or unconscious it might be, still – or even especially then – corresponds to the constitution of social objectivity, this also means that Critical Theory holds onto the notion of *totality*. More specifically, it follows an idea of totality that derives from Hegel and Marx: that totality *is* mediation.<sup>30</sup>

Consequently, this idea of totality-as-mediation also means a *dialectical* conception of mediation, which does not exist outside, prior to or detached from the mediated, but rather comprises the interrelated constitution of objectivity and subjectivity. However, with the perverted character of this subject–object mediation and its immanent turn from progress into regression, Critical Theory modifies Marx' critique of Hegelian totality: inverting Hegel's speculative identity which turns the negativity of the mediation of subject–object into the positivity of their correspondence and mutual progress (which is Hegel's supra-individual Spirit). It does so by refusing this affirmative turn by holding back the 'closing' and 'positive turn' brought by the second negation in Hegel's 'negation of negation'.<sup>31</sup>

However, in this refusal of the 'second' affirmative and closing negation there is also a positive determination. But now the determination lies in the independence and self-determinateness of what is not sublated in mediation by negativity and withdraws itself, giving it back its dignity by opening the way for emancipation in non-representative thinking.<sup>32</sup> To avoid 'Being' disappearing into an identity with thinking, Adorno not only insisted on the 'preponderance of the object'<sup>33</sup> but on 'Something' ('*Etwas*'),<sup>34</sup> since to speak about 'the' object already makes it an undetermined material of thinking, while thinking itself becomes identical with its abstraction from its substrate. This, according to Adorno, is already the 'first' abstraction in Hegel's concept of Being against which Adorno vehemently claims: 'There is no Being without Entities'.<sup>35</sup>

But as much as Adorno refers to what is not sublated and resists its determination, he also shows the truth of Hegel's speculative version of mediation and totality: they become true through 'reconciliation under duress'.<sup>36</sup> This leads to an immanence that is true through the very same extortion, but becomes untrue because what is not sublated

is forced to appear as if it is identified.<sup>37</sup> This true and false process of forced reconciliation culminates in the total immanence of what Hegel developed as the supra-individual Spirit [*Geist*].

Total immanence is fatal even as it remains contradictory. For, in contrast to Hegel's 'cunning of reason', the hidden burrow of the good 'old mole' – as Marx borrowed from Shakespeare<sup>38</sup> – and to Traditional Marxism's notion of class antagonism, there is no emancipatory urge in the contradictions of the capitalist society. Rather, social contradictions are the antagonism, maybe even the agony of the false world.<sup>39</sup> The fatality of the immanence of totality is not only that enlightenment, democracy, liberalism and progress turn into their own opposite, but that also the possibility of their overcoming and the attempt to form alternatives culminated in the authoritarian and repressive forms of real socialism and Stalinism. That is why Critical Theory positions its critique not only after the failures of the Enlightenment, but also after the failures of the attempts to practically overcome these.

Thus confronted with such a false totality, Critical Theory's negativity should not to be conflated with resignation,<sup>40</sup> but immanent critique is 'the only' way out so far.

## THE NEGATIVE TURN OF DIALECTICS AND THE PLACE OF CRITIQUE: THE PREPONDERANCE OF THE OBJECT AND THE NON-IDENTICAL IN MEDIATION

Critical Theory's first move against Hegel's emphatic-affirmative version of the dialectical mediation of subject–object precedes Marx' materialism. It is a constant reference to Kant. Critical Theory draws upon the critical distinction Kant makes between the 'transcendental subject' and the 'thing in itself' [*Ding an sich*]. The gap between the former

and the latter limits knowledge to individual experience. This leads Adorno to use the thing in itself against Hegel's attempt to overcome the limits of the Kantian notion of reason.

The thing in itself stands for three critical 'materialist interventions' that run through Adorno's entire work: (1) the 'preponderance of the object', (2) the 'non-identical' and (3) the way that both work together to open up philosophy which in its systematicity reflects the forced closure and false immanence of social mediation.

What first concerns the 'preponderance of the object'<sup>41</sup> is that it marks the turn into an explicit *materialist* dialectic: 'It is by passing to the object's preponderance that dialectics is rendered materialistic'.<sup>42</sup> But the materialism of this preponderance is nevertheless still governed by the more fundamental rule of dialectical mediation as such: that the immediate is always already mediated.<sup>43</sup>

The object, too, is mediated; but according to its own concept, it is not so thoroughly dependent on the subject as the subject is on objectivity. Idealism has ignored such differences and has thus coarsened a spiritualization that serves abstraction as a disguise.<sup>44</sup>

For Hegel there exists nothing un-mediated by the supra-individual Spirit which *is* the reality of the mediation of subject–object and all subjective knowledge is as much mediated as its objects and content. For Adorno, on the other hand, Spirit cannot abstract from the finite. Or rather: Spirit itself *is* this abstraction. Only by paying the price of hypocrisy can Spirit deny its own genesis: that its origin is *an abstraction from its finite conditions*.

The materialism of the preponderance of the object lies neither directly on the side of the object nor on the side of its social or subjective mediation. It lies in what – and that is the second reference to the thing in itself – mediation does not sublate and what withstands identification. This grounds a

materialist critique that speaks in the names of what resists: including use-value,<sup>45</sup> nature,<sup>46</sup> the body<sup>47</sup> and its agony, the misery of the mind and suffering in general, but also the autonomy of subjectivity and, not least, the hope of the utopian 'total otherness',<sup>48</sup> or simply what provides comfort and shelter. It is a criticism that neither points to empirical facts or evidence nor makes scientific claims. The aim is to speak in a non-representational manner in the name of what is forced into objectivation and generalization, culminating in Adorno's concept of, or better reference to, the 'non-identical', elaborated in particular in *Negative Dialectics*.

Although 'preponderance of the object' means the inevitability of both nature and society, the subject has an autonomy and independence that is neither derivable from nor reducible to its natural or social conditions – the subject arises from a *process of (self)objectification*. Acknowledging the preponderance of the object thus provides no insight into the conditions of thinking, knowledge and subjectivity. For, since as subjectivity's 'first', self-constitutive condition is to objectivity itself, the first condition of its emancipation would be to return to the object in order to acknowledge its preponderance, but also the preponderance of the social mode of (self)objectification.

There is thus a positive determination and even an emphatic expectation in Adorno's negative dialectic, namely ensuring the impossibility of the absolute detachment or total independence of subjectivity and of the Hegelian Spirit from material conditions. For the more the subject tries to itself from its conditions of possibility and denies them, the more it grounds its existence in repression and domination that will, like in a 'return of the repressed', turn against the subject itself – and here, Adorno's emphatic taking the side of the object brings to the fore *negative* dialectics for the subject. The critique of this social process of self-objectification is the third materialist intervention.

## THE LOGIC OF IDENTIFICATION AND THE HIDDEN CONNECTION BETWEEN CONCEPT-THINKING AND COMMODITY-FORM: MEDITATION BY ABSTRACTION AS SOCIAL SYNTHESIS

'Identity is the primal form of ideology'.<sup>49</sup>

Critical Theory uses Marx to criticize the mediation of subject–object in a two-fold way. First, the mediation is socially and historically specific<sup>50</sup>. Second, in capitalism, the social and historically specific character of mediation is a synthesis of the individual mind with the unconscious but practical social activity that constitutes a capitalist social objectivity with the character of a second nature. Yet, the actual object of critique lies in the calamitous entanglement that results from this mediation: the very same subjectivity that unconsciously but practically constitutes social objectivity, thinks of it as an immediate given,<sup>51</sup> quasi-ontological objectivity.<sup>52</sup> Since this objectivity becomes supra-individual domination behind the backs of all individuals and individuality as such, this social objectivity is regarded as mere material for a subject that imagines itself as dominant.<sup>53</sup> The subject belongs therefore to the inverted and mystified social objectivity over which it deems itself to be in charge; in this entanglement Adorno radicalizes Marx's notion of the subject as a personification of economic categories and a 'character mask'. This domination of the subject over its own other – over its outer and inner objectified nature – in an immanent process, renders this dialectic negative: while on the one hand social and historical disasters have the character of an inevitable natural necessity or destiny, on the other hand, even what in nature strikes back is due to the control and domination over the inner nature of the individual's body and mind and of its outer nature.

Adorno's critique holds that this objective entanglement of the subject to its own

perverted world appears as process of *identification*. Hegel conceptualized this logic of identification as concept-thinking in his *Science of Logic* and phenomenologically in his *Phenomenology* as the supra-individual Spirit.<sup>54</sup> Adorno develops an immanent critique of this Hegelian notion of identification with reference to Marx' critique of economic exchange and equivalence. According to Adorno, the 'principle of exchange' is the 'identifying principle of thought'.<sup>55</sup> Hence concept thinking and the idea of a supra-individual Spirit are entangled with 'exchange', although their internally related social genesis is obscured.

If mankind is to get rid of the coercion to which the form of identification really subjects it, it must attain identity with its concept at the same time. [...] The exchange principle, the reduction of human labor to the abstract universal concept of average working hours, is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification. Exchange is the social model of the principle, and without the principle there would be no exchange; it is through exchange 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.<sup>56</sup>

To trace the logic of identification back to the social form of capitalist mediation marks a decisive shift from Traditional Marxism, which argued that labour was the social mediation of subject-object and the essence of the historical process, and aimed at the liberation of labour from capitalist domination. Critical Theory, in contrast, searches for the mediation between object-subject and their reciprocal constitution in the commodity-form and sphere of circulation. In this effort at establishing the social nature of the capitalist social relations it followed Lukács, Benjamin, Sohn-Rethel, Korsch, Bloch and others.<sup>57</sup> The critique of the commodity-form exposes not only its functions in modern society, but also how it unconsciously becomes the dominating form of second nature.

## SOCIAL SYNTHESIS AS SUBSUMPTION AND FORCED IDENTIFICATION

The critique of social synthesis via the commodity was undoubtedly central to early Critical Theory,<sup>58</sup> especially Adorno.<sup>59</sup> His first remarks about the commodity-form can be found in his habilitation<sup>60</sup> as well as in his inaugural lecture of 1931.<sup>61</sup> Further remarks appear in his studies about the sociology of music undertaken between 1932 and 1935<sup>62</sup> and later in his main works, notably *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Negative Dialectics*. His last remarks are in his final major and unfinished work, the *Aesthetic Theory*.<sup>63</sup> As a whole, Adorno's critique was influenced by Marx' critique of the commodity-form as a perverted form of social mediation, and by Lukács' and Sohn-Rethel's philosophical and epistemological reformulation of the latter.<sup>64</sup> In addition – like Lukács and Sohn-Rethel – Adorno was also influenced by Weber's notion of modern rationalization.<sup>65</sup>

However, while these remarks appear throughout Adorno's works, they ultimately remain systematically unelaborated, much like his interpretation of the critique of political economy.<sup>66</sup> Consequently, his critique must be reconstructed through fragments and intuitive leaps. That being said, one can still identify the continuity of the idea that the hidden connection between the economy and thinking somehow lies within the homologous logic of identification of the concept and exchange. For, even if Adorno refrains from historically reconstructing or logically constructing the genesis of this connection<sup>67</sup> – it is less than a strict causality but more than a mere analogy or isomorphy<sup>68</sup> – the idea that both identifications are mechanisms of *abstraction*<sup>69</sup> and assertions of power appears throughout his work. Moreover, he also repeatedly points out that such abstraction is the hidden connection between Spirit, commodity exchange and their associated

properties: the concept, concept-thinking, rationality and scientific objectivity for the former; exchange-value, the automatization of exchange-value in capital, economic rationality and objectivity, reification and alienation for the latter.

The act of exchange implies the reduction of the products to be exchanged to their equivalents, to something abstract, but by no means – as traditional discussion would maintain – to something material. [...] Exchange value, merely a mental configuration when compared with use value, dominates human needs and replaces them; illusion dominates reality. To this extent, society is myth and its elucidation is still as necessary as ever. At the same time, however, this illusion is what is most real, it is the formula used to bewitch the world.<sup>70</sup>

The abstraction made by conceptual thinking and exchange-value constitutes nothing less than the difference between the subject and the object. Abstraction constitutes objectivity for a subject, which responds by objectifying its own subjectivity. Abstraction thus becomes double-faceted instrumental domination; both concept and exchange-value *make* their object commensurable through generalization, reduction and hence the subsumption of the specific, particular and singular under the generality of the concept and of the exchange-value. The mediated is thus made commensurable by an act of identification that hides its domination in this very same process: while concept-thinking grasps the object as a pure object of identification and aims for the correspondence of thinking and being,<sup>71</sup> exchange-value becomes identical with the use-value it ‘grasps’. The dominance of exchange-value over use-value corresponds not only to the dominance of concept-thinking over the identified to the point that ‘all qualitative moments whose totality might be something like a structure are flattened in the universal exchange relationship’;<sup>72</sup> What is thereby unconsciously executed by individuals is their own praxis that manifests itself behind their backs and becomes a second nature which gains

independence from the acting individuals. The capitalist valorization and accumulation of exchange-value becomes a power of its own and manifests itself as – just like Hegel’s Spirit – the ‘real total movement of society’.<sup>73</sup> ‘In the form of the exchange principle, the bourgeois ratio really approximated to the systems whatever it would make commensurable with itself, would identify with itself – and it did so with increasing, if potentially homicidal, success. Less and less was left outside’.<sup>74</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The epistemological and social-economic critique of early Critical Theory, and Adorno’s in particular, is characterized by brilliant insights rather than a systematic exposition of how the economic object presents itself in capitalist society. Their most important insight was that epistemological and social-economic critique starts from the false semblance of the sphere of commodity-exchange and -circulation rather than from labour, production and the social metabolism with nature. On this basis, early critical theorists concerned themselves with the critique of the social constitution of a socially objective social rationality and its corresponding socially necessary epistemology as realized in both scientific rational thinking and ideological phenomena such as nationalism and antisemitism. Hence the real object of critique is the unconscious, inaccessible process of social constitution, which in the form of the mediation by concept-thinking and exchange-value constitutes both subject and object. Unlike Hegel’s dialectical logic of identification and correspondence, this process leads to reification and alienation, personified ‘character masks’ (Marx) and socially necessary ideology. Hence the identification of concept and exchange-value is real – as objective illusion. This is why Adorno’s inversion of Hegel’s notion that



‘the true is the whole’ says that ‘the whole is untrue’ – the false process of identification is the truth of capitalist society. Immanent critique, in turn, endeavours to unveil and overcome this social untruth by critiquing this subjective–objective process of identification. For the exchange principle this immanent critique means that ‘when we criticize the exchange principle as the identifying principle of thought, we want to realize the ideal of free and just exchange. To date, this ideal is only a pretext. Its realization alone would transcend exchange’. Concerning his critique of the concept, immanent critique means that Adorno wants to ‘overcome the coercive nature of the concept by means of the concept’.<sup>75</sup> This is the ‘systematicity’ of immanent critique. However, ‘the limit of immanent critique is that the law of the immanent context is ultimately one with the delusion that has to be overcome’.<sup>76</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Critical Theory with upper case letters refers to the early Frankfurt School or its so-called ‘first generation’.
- 2 Horkheimer, 2002b: 213, 217; Postone, 1993: 107ff.; Honneth, 1993: 187–214.
- 3 To be precise it was already a *return* to Marx, as according to Horkheimer’s essay ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’, Critical Theory was founded by Marx, cf. Horkheimer, 1980: 626.
- 4 Marcuse, 1964.
- 5 Adorno, 1997: 168.
- 6 For an overview cf. Breuer, 1977.
- 7 Marx, 1987.
- 8 Marx, 1973: 107.
- 9 For critical theory, ideology comprises the necessary illusion of capitalist society. If in the classical Marxist context the question after World War I was ‘only’ why the proletariat was not gaining revolutionary consciousness, this question took a dramatic turn with the rise of fascism and was reformulated as follows: why do the masses not only have no emancipatory or even revolutionary consciousness, but voluntarily choose to support a type of domination that is actually against their interests – not only as a member of a class, but even as self-responsible individuals? The techniques and mechanisms of forming mass-consciousness were perhaps the most important new phenomena in the time of early Critical Theory. The Institute researched the former with a very serious but contested use of psychoanalysis. Many of the controversies among Critical Theorists concerned not only classical Marxist issues but how to adequately use the psychoanalytical terms and arguments, especially those related to the theories of Erich Fromm and Siegfried Kracauer, who provided the best research in these areas.
- 10 McCarthy, 1993.
- 11 This connection was often criticized for the lack of grounding in empirical analysis and operating with a philosophical concept of history, cf. Honneth, 1993.
- 12 Important for the authors of Critical Theory first of all was *Capital* Vol. I, but also Marx’ *Economic and Philosophical Manuscript from 1844*, especially for the concept of reification and alienation.
- 13 Programmatic already at the beginning of ND: 10, and then ongoing.
- 14 It’s important to keep in mind that in the case of Adorno, half of these writings concern culture, aesthetics, music and literature.
- 15 Adorno, 1997: 6.
- 16 This is the famous first sentence in the introduction to ND: 3.
- 17 Sohn-Rethel, 1978a: 139.
- 18 Adorno, ND: 196.
- 19 Referring to Engels’ *Dialectics of Nature*. Lenin developed reflection theory in the course of his polemics with empirio-critics, cf. Lenin, 1970.
- 20 Lukács, 1971; Lukács’ *Theory of the Novel* was also influential on Critical Theory. Karl Korsch’s *Marxism and Philosophy*, published at a time when Marxism was still dominated by the traditional Marxism of the Second International, was likewise important for Critical Theory.
- 21 See the chapter on Sohn-Rethel in Volume 1 of this *Handbook*.
- 22 For the critical status cf. Jameson 1971, 1990; Rose 1978; Jay 1984; Jarvis, 1998.
- 23 For Adorno’s critique on Lukács, cf. Adorno, 1977.
- 24 Sohn-Rethel, 1978.
- 25 ‘The idealistic magic circle can be transcended only in thoughts still circumscribed by its figure [...]. Pure identity is that which the subject posits and thus brings up from outside. Therefore, paradoxically enough, to criticize it immanently means to criticize it from outside as well’ (ND: 145); for the importance of negativity cf. Buck-Morss, 1977.
- 26 Adorno’s *Minima Moralia. Reflections of a damaged life*, together with DoE and ND, is Adorno’s third programmatic title. With its reference to Aristotle’s *Magna Moralia* it is close to ethics and

- also attempts to open up a minimum gap for individual self-reflection in the hermetically sealed world of capitalist identity, see Adorno, 1974.
- 27 ND: 38, 67ff., 295, 356ff. The notion first came from Hegel. But when Adorno refers to Marx' *Capital* when stating that 'the law of capitalist accumulation ... has been mystified into a law of nature', then he refers not, like Hegel, to a second nature in which the spirit recognizes itself. Instead Adorno refers to the materialist turn of second nature via economic commodification, quantification and valorization not only of nature and use value, but of social relations in general; this was overlooked in Cook, 2011: 8.
  - 28 Adorno et al, 1976: 12.; similar Adorno, 1976b: 107.
  - 29 This understanding began with the aim of disciplinary research inside the Institute for Critical Research and was later fought out in the so-called positivist dispute in German sociology, cf. Adorno et al, 1976; for the beginnings see Bonß, 1993.
  - 30 'Totality is a category of mediation' (Adorno et al, 1976: 107).
  - 31 Cf. ND: 158ff.
  - 32 Long before post-structuralism, Critical Theory's critique of generality and identity tried to speak in the name of what isn't sublated in a non-representative way – the non-systematic constellations in Adorno and his focus on aesthetics, Benjamin's notion of pictures, Marcuse's non-conformism and subjectivity of desire, drive and eros, and Horkheimer's messianic – but without rendering its 'positive' consequences into a politics of recognition, speaking in the name of a minority or alterity or in deconstructing the correspondence between text (text in the largest sense) and meaning. Critical Theory remained loyal to the universalism of Enlightenment; it would be problematic to take it without further ado as a post-structuralism avant la lettre.
  - 33 ND: 192.
  - 34 ND: 22, 27, 29, 34 and ongoing, in particular 135ff.
  - 35 ND: 134.
  - 36 Even if this sentence entitles a text on Lukács (Adorno, 1977), it can be taken as the overarching formula to combine the his conception of negative dialectics with that of the dialectics of enlightenment.
  - 37 ND: 10f.
  - 38 Marx, 1951.
  - 39 'There is no right life in the wrong one' (Adorno, 1974: 39).
  - 40 This 'pessimistic turn' in the history of Marxist-oriented critique of capitalist society has been often discussed. For Critical Theory in general cf. Postone/Brick, 1982; for Horkheimer's 'pessimistic turn' cf. Postone, 1993. To align this pessimism in the broad history of social critique cf. Agger, 1992: 57ff. Conveniently in his last text, written in 1969, in the period of the German student revolt, Adorno responded to this accusation of resignation, cf. Adorno, 1998.
  - 41 The translations of the central works of Critical Theory, especially Adorno's, are sometimes problematic when it comes to decisive passages. This also affects the secondary literature. In particular the general concepts like *Bewusstsein*, *Selbstbewusstsein*, *Verstand*, *Vernunft* and *Geist* must be treated very carefully because of their differences. Also 'preponderance' (of the object, ND: 192) is not the same as 'primacy'. Adorno's critique of the fallacy of the – here explicitly – primacy of the *subject* is keen to avoid a vulgar materialist turn like he found in Traditional Marxism.
  - 42 ND: 192; for the object's preponderance see the whole chapter in ND: 183ff. For the three stages in Adorno's concept of materialism in his late work cf. Schmidt, 1983, 2002.
  - 43 Largely elaborated in Adorno, 1982.
  - 44 Adorno, 2014: 155.
  - 45 Pohrt, 1976.
  - 46 Cf. Alfred Schmidt's *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (Schmidt, 1973), encouraged by Adorno and directed against 'productivism' in both western capitalist and eastern socialist states; cf. also Vogel, 1996.
  - 47 ND: 203. In particular Feminist and Disability Studies have pointed out the importance of the body in Adorno, cf. Heberle, 2006; Lee, 2005.
  - 48 Both Horkheimer and Adorno in their late period referred to the utopian: Horkheimer more to preserve the hope inherent in utopian and religious thinking, Adorno more to have a placeholder for a different society and because of the vacancy of any revolutionary force. Quite telling is Horkheimer's *Spiegel-Interview* from 1970, <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-45226214.html>
  - 49 ND: 148.
  - 50 Alfred Schmidt pointed out the importance of history in two writings on structuralism's 'attack against history'. For the English version see Schmidt, 1981.
  - 51 'The totality of the process of mediation, which amounts in reality to principle of exchange, has produced a second, deceptive immediacy' (Adorno, 2001: 124).
  - 52 This ontologization of the social, Adorno most explicitly critiqued, contra Heidegger, in *The Jargon of Authenticity*, cf. Adorno, 1973b.
  - 53 ND: 19 and then throughout.
  - 54 ND: 11 and then throughout.
  - 55 ND: 190, 146–7. In some translations 'commodity exchange' is translated as 'barter'. Even if this

- translation is problematic, it still gives a hint of Adorno's understanding of an exchange that historically goes beyond capitalist commodity production and his derivation of the exchange principle from the tradition of gift and sacrifice. This was often discussed, cf. Koltan, 1999; Müller, 1988: 177; Habermas, 1991a: 428 ff.
- 56 ND: 146, similar 47. Translation amended from the German original.
- 57 In these period-identical formulations about the whole world becoming a commodity, compare Lukács, 1971: 86: 'The commodity can be understood in its undistorted essence only when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole'; Bloch, 1991: 107: 'this process of the whole world becoming a commodity' (similarly in Bloch, 1970).
- 58 'This is elaborated in Marx' chapter on fetishism, truly a piece from the heritages of classic German philosophy' (ND: 189f.).
- 59 Horkheimer in his early writings referred more than Adorno to Marxist terms like labour, production and class. Later, in contrast to Adorno, he mostly avoids Marxist terminology. Despite all later restraint, Horkheimer always agreed with the centrality of the category of commodity and of Marx in general.
- 60 Adorno, 1989.
- 61 Adorno, 1973a.
- 62 Cf. Adorno, 2002, here focusing on the commodity character of art; likewise in the culture industries chapter of DoE. It is important to notice that this critique is also thoroughgoing in his works on culture.
- 63 Adorno, 1997.
- 64 About the hidden influence of Lukács, see Claussen, 2008: 82ff. For the connection of epistemological and social critique based on the commodity-form in Lukács, Sohn-Rethel and Adorno, see Engster, 2016.
- 65 The critique of rationality from Lukács, Horkheimer, Adorno and others led even to the term 'Weberian-Marxism'. However, for Adorno and Horkheimer, the 'disenchantment of the world' by rationalization was a turn back into mythology, cf. DoE: ff. and then especially 'Excursus I': 35–62.
- 66 Hans-Georg Backhaus claimed that 'Adorno and Horkheimer [...] totally ignored the value-form analyses' (1997: 76). Habermas, 1987: 178 and Jay 1996: 146f. make similar claims, while Braunstein: 2011 is less strong in this regard. Adorno's own most precise elaboration is to be found in his work on philosophical terminology, cf. Adorno, 1973c.
- 67 Jameson, 1990.
- 68 Much criticized is Adorno's extension of his critique of the commodity-form and fetishism to mass-culture, and his theory of the culture industry as a form of industrial mass-production and monopoly capitalism; see, for example, Miklitsch, 1998.
- 69 In ND it is already explicit on p. 8 and then throughout.
- 70 Adorno, 1976a: 80; ND: 178.
- 71 Rose, 1978: 35ff.
- 72 ND: 88; similar sentences appear throughout: 'imposes on the whole world an obligation to become identical, to become total' (ND: 146. Translation amended in line with German original).
- 73 Quote ND: 304, cf. also 244. Adorno's idea that exchange-value makes everything identical with itself leads to the thesis that use-value in late capitalism becomes the empty bearer of the exchange-value, stripped of all content and faking it. Wolfgang Pohrt and others have radicalized this idea, cf. Pohrt, 1976. For a general critique of this 'use-value fetishism', cf. Hafner, 1993. For money as the blind spot in the whole critique of social mediation by commodity-form, see Engster, 2014.
- 74 ND: 23. Translation amended in line with German original.
- 75 Mullen, 2016: 94. In particular, the last chapter of ND is dedicated to this. It was radicalized, as often was noticed, in Derrida's deconstruction, cf. Wellmer, 1998: 183.
- 76 ND: 182.

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# Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy: From Critical Political Economy to the Critique of Political Economy

Patrick Murray

The story behind the title of this chapter concerns a sea change in critical theory from critical political economy to the critique of political economy. The title marks the distance from studies of the Frankfurt School and political economy, such as Giacomo Marramao's 'Political Economy and Critical Theory', to a reconsideration of the Frankfurt School in relationship to 'the new readings of Marx' (*die neue Marx-Lektüre*).<sup>1</sup> I will explore two features of the failure of critical theorists to grasp the Marxian critique of political economy: what Moishe Postone calls traditional Marxism and the shift from traditional Marxism to a Weberian 'critique of instrumental reason'. Postone links the two:

Lacking a conception of the specific character of labor in capitalism, Critical Theory ascribed its consequences to labor *per se*. The frequently described shift of Critical Theory from the analysis of political economy to a critique of instrumental reason does not, then, signify that the theorists of the Frankfurt School simply abandoned the former in favor of

the latter. Rather, that shift followed from, and was based upon, a particular analysis of political economy, more specifically, a traditional understanding of Marx's critique of political economy. (Postone, 1993: 119)

I want to discuss the conceptual horizon shared by classical (and neoclassical) political economy, traditional Marxism, and the critique of instrumental reason in terms of 'the illusion of the economic'.<sup>2</sup>

## **'THE ILLUSION OF THE ECONOMIC' AND THE HORIZON OF POLITICAL ECONOMY**

One way of expressing Marx's fundamental critique of political economy is to say that political economy is lost in 'the illusion of the economic'. Marx explains how David Ricardo dismisses the crisis tendency of general overproduction by discounting social forms: 'In order to prove that capitalist production cannot

lead to general crises, all its conditions and distinct forms, all its principles and specific features – in short *capitalist production* itself – are denied’ (Marx, 1968: 501). Marx later comments, ‘This fiction arises entirely from the inability to grasp the specific form of bourgeois production and this inability in turn arises from the obsession that bourgeois production is production as such’ (529). The ‘fiction’ to which Marx refers is ‘the illusion of the economic’. It is the notion of an economy-in-general, or ‘production as such’, to which the capitalist mode of production is reduced, precisely by performing the violent abstraction of negating all its constitutive social forms and purposes. Marx needled political economists by pointing out that any actual mode of production, whether based on slave, serf, or free labor, can be regarded as ‘production as such’ – just subtract all its constitutive social forms.

The conceptually impoverished horizon of discourse of political economy is what is left when the scientific revolution brought about by Marx’s critique of political economy is missed. Simon Clarke contrasts that horizon with Marx’s:

There was a scientific revolution in nineteenth-century social thought .... It was inaugurated by Marx’s critique of the ideological foundations of classical political economy, which he located in the political economists’ neglect of the social form of capitalist production. (Clarke, 1982: 240)

The neglect of social form generates ‘the illusion of the economic’, the illusion of an actual economy-in-general, where needs, wealth, labor, and production have no specific social form or purpose. Classical and neoclassical economics take this illusory object to be the locus of inquiry.<sup>3</sup> Inasmuch as traditional Marxism misses Marx’s critique of political economy, it operates within the same universe of discourse. The sea change represented by new readings of Marx as critic of political economy, as opposed to radical political economist, promises to put critical theory on a stronger conceptual footing.

## CRITICAL POLITICAL ECONOMY AND FRANKFURT SCHOOL PESSIMISM

In treating Marx as a critical political economist and failing to grasp Marx’s critique of political economy, Frankfurt School thinkers, notably Friedrich Pollock, Max Horkheimer, and Jürgen Habermas, kept themselves from grasping the contradictory, crisis-prone dynamism of capitalist production. They landed on a conception of capitalist crises rooted in distribution; crises that can be managed by the state. Friedrich Pollock used the phrase ‘the primacy of the political’ to capture this new constellation.<sup>4</sup> The result was a pessimism regarding historical change and a misjudgment of the kind of change needed. Directing their criticism at Horkheimer and Adorno, Moishe Postone and Barbara Brick trace the root of critical theory’s pessimism to its traditional Marxism:

The critical pessimism so strongly expressed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Eclipse of Reason* must be understood not only with reference to its historical context. It must also be understood as expressing an awareness of the limits of traditional Marxism in the absence of a fundamental reconstitution of the dialectical critique of what, in spite of its significant transformation, remains a dialectical social totality. (Postone and Brick, 1993: 246–7)

Postone’s reinterpretation of Marx’s critical theory as a critique of political economy means to show that, due to the contradictory dynamics of capitalist production, the historical possibilities for radical transformation of capitalist society have not reached a standstill. His reinterpretation also points to the abolition of value rather than a redistribution of value as the goal of historical transformation.

## THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL AND DIE NEUE MARX-LEKTÜRE

I want to pursue a narrative of the new reading of Marx that brings out its debts to Theodor Adorno and especially to students

of his from the 1960s, among them Alfred Schmidt, Hans-Georg Backhaus, Helmut Reichelt, Hans-Jürgen Krahel, Helmut Reinicke, Herbert Schnädelbach, and Jürgen Ritsert. Chris Arthur (2002: 12) observes, regarding Backhaus, 'The interesting thing about Backhaus is that he came out of Frankfurt school *critical theory*'. In his *Dialektik der Wertform* (1997), Backhaus published notes he took in a 1962 seminar that Adorno directed on Marx and the Basic Concepts of Sociological Theory. These notes, along with studies such as Gillian Rose's *The Melancholy Science*, Dirk Braundstein's *Adornos Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, Christian Lotz's *The Capitalist Schema*, and Werner Bonefeld's *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy*, advance the idea that the Marxian critique of political economy is central to Adorno's critical theory.

A secondary Frankfurt School root of the new reading of Marx, namely the work of Henryk Grossman and Paul Mattick, Sr, will be considered.<sup>5</sup> There is a line from Grossman to Mattick Sr and Roman Rosdolsky on to Paul Mattick Jr, Fred Moseley, and the International Symposium on Marxian Theory (ISMT) that Moseley initiated.<sup>6</sup> Postone treats Pollock, Horkheimer, and Habermas at length but not Adorno or Grossman. The narrative that arises from his *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* pits a critical theory that plumbs Marx's critique of political economy against a Frankfurt School lodged in critical political economy that morphs into a critique of instrumental reason and dead ends in pessimism. That narrative positions Postone's book and other new readings of Marx outside the traditional scope of the Frankfurt School as an alternative stream of critical theory to later thinkers identified with the Frankfurt School, notably Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth. The alternative narrative offered here identifies Postone's work and other new readings of Marx as a branch of the Frankfurt School with roots in Adorno, Grossman, and students of Adorno.

Only three members of the Institute for Social Research were educated as economists: its first director, Carl Grünberg; his former student Henryk Grossman; and Friedrich Pollock. They and the non-economists of the Frankfurt School were all indebted to Marx's ideas; the present question is to what extent members of the Frankfurt School pursued the Marxian critique of political economy.<sup>7</sup> However, the question is not as black and white as pitting critical political economy against the critique of political economy. On the one hand, there is a wide range of social theories operating within the conceptual horizon of political economy; on the other hand, there are multiple dimensions and levels to the critique of political economy. Over time, different members of the Frankfurt School adopted various ideas within the conceptual horizon of political economy and took up – or failed to take up – various aspects of the critique of political economy.

## THE CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

In identifying Friedrich Pollock, Max Horkheimer, and Jürgen Habermas as traditional Marxists, Moishe Postone tags them critical political economists. I agree with Postone's assessment that the critique of political economy is largely or wholly absent from their thinking. Therefore, these three members of the Frankfurt School will get less attention in the present chapter than will two who receive less scrutiny from Postone: Theodor Adorno and Henryk Grossman.<sup>8</sup> Critical political economy adopts the conceptual horizon of political economy; the critique of political economy opens onto a very different discursive horizon. Attention – or lack of attention – to specific social forms and purposes distinguishes the two. The critique of political economy self-consciously makes specific social forms and purposes integral to its fundamental concepts.



By contrast, political economy is oblivious to social forms or neglects or discounts them or treats them haphazardly.

Paul Mattick, Jr. (1993: 124) describes the difference between the critique of political economy and its target this way: 'Marx's critique – his "scientific revolution" – therefore involved not merely a reworking of economic categories but the construction of another set of concepts, explicitly social and historical ones'. The fundamental point of the critique of political economy is that concepts of specific social forms of needs, wealth, labor, production, and distribution must be integral to a scientific account of any actual human provisioning process. General observations can be made about them, but needs, wealth, labor, production, and distribution never exist in general: any 'economic' inquiry that purports to study them is bogus.

### ***Historical Materialism and the Critique of the 'Bourgeois Horizon'***

The revolutionary shift from the discursive horizon of political economy to that of the critique of political economy is multi-dimensional – phenomenological, ontological, methodological, sociological, and political. Marx's critique of political economy is rooted in the critique of what he calls the 'bourgeois horizon' and in the historical materialism that he developed with Friedrich Engels. Over and over, Marx attributes the conceptual failures of those in the political economy tradition to the 'bourgeois horizon' of their thinking:

Yet even its best representatives remained more or less trapped in the world of illusion their criticism had dissolved, and nothing else is possible from the bourgeois standpoint [*bürgerlichen Standpunkt*]; they all fell therefore more or less into inconsistencies, half-truths and unresolved contradictions. (Marx, 1981: 969)

Marx identifies the 'bourgeois horizon' as the philosophical orientation that structures

political economy, much of modern philosophy, and many forms of socialism.<sup>9</sup> In the patterns of bourgeois thinking, we find a series of bifurcations: mind versus world, subjective versus objective, form versus content, concept versus object, passive versus active, and immediate versus mediated. Marx's appeal to praxis in the first thesis on Feuerbach is directed against the 'bourgeois' split that underlies the distinction between idealism and materialism. A key target of Marx's critique of political economy is the bifurcation between production and distribution. That false division allowed John Stuart Mill to achieve 'a more developed and critical awareness' than previous classical political economists by recognizing the historical character of distribution, while remaining within the horizon projected by 'the illusion of the economic' with respect to production (Marx, 1981: 1018). Traditional Marxism likewise represents 'a more developed and critical awareness' stuck within the horizon of political economy.

In the *German Ideology*, Marx and Engels emphasize that a mode of production involves a particular way of life:

This mode of production [*Weise der Produktion*] must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* [*Lebensweise*] on their part. (Marx and Engels, 1976: 31)

Here is historical materialism's breakthrough: there is no production in general; production always has a specific social form and purpose – and they matter in many ways. To think otherwise is to fall into 'the illusion of the economic', as political economy and traditional Marxism do.

In reflecting on Marx's concept of value, Postone relates the phenomenological error of conceiving of distribution and production as separable to the misinterpretation of the historical materialist distinction between forces and relations of production:

value should not be understood merely as a category of the mode of distribution of commodities ... rather, it should be understood as a category of capitalist production itself. It seems, then, that the Marxian notion of the contradiction between the forces and relations of production must be reinterpreted as referring to differentiable moments of the production process. (Postone, 1993: 24)

The language of 'differentiable moments' makes the phenomenological point that forces and relations of production are inseparable aspects of actual relations of social reproduction.

### ***Backhaus and Postone on the Critique of Political Economy***

To develop an account of what is involved in the critique of political economy, we may draw on two leading figures in the new reading of Marx: Hans-Georg Backhaus and Moishe Postone.<sup>10</sup>

When we turn to the remarkable opening pages of Backhaus' (1980) seminal essay, 'On the Dialectics of the Value-Form', we quickly encounter a series of powerful ontological, methodological, sociological, and substantive observations. (1) Marx's theory of value has been mistakenly identified with the classical (Ricardian) labor theory of value, which is asocial and ahistorical. Marx's theory of value is cut from different cloth. It is not about 'labor'; rather it is entirely about the specific social form of labor. Value is not embodied 'labor'; it is a ghostly social objectivity, the necessary, fetishistic outcome of a specific social form of labor. (2) Marx has been mistaken for a political economist; he is a profound critic of political economy. (3) What I. I. Rubin (1972: 73–4) called the 'qualitative sociological' side of Marx's theory of value has been missed. (4) Marx's theory of the value form – money is not value but it is the necessary expression of value – has been overlooked or misunderstood. When Marx's theory of value is confused

with Ricardian theory, failure to understand the value form is unavoidable, since the classical theory of value offers no basis on which to show that money is the necessary form of appearance of value. (5) The dialectical method of Marx's presentation in *Capital* has been either ignored or badly misunderstood. (6) 'It is first to be recalled that the use-values are always posited in the price-form'; that is, by 'exchange-value' Marx means price from the first sentence of *Capital* (Backhaus, 1980: 105). Marx's account of the value form is not some 'dialectical' tale about how bartering useful things transforms itself into commodity exchange. (7) 'Innumerable authors ignore the claim of the labour theory of value to derive money as money and thus to inaugurate a specific theory of money' (102–3). Once again, the classical theory of value does not provide the conceptual basis for Marx's theory of money. (8) 'The analysis of the logical structure of the value form is not to be separated from the analysis of its historical, social content' (107). Of course, if value were embodied 'labor', it would have no 'historical, social content'. Methodological considerations involved in the critique of political economy cannot be separated from substantive economic and sociological ones.

Since what Postone calls traditional Marxism counts as critical political economy and is 'bound within the framework of classical political economy' rather than free by the critique of political economy, we may take the several points he makes in criticizing traditional Marxism as windows onto the critique of political economy:

Interpretations of the determining relations of capitalism in terms of the self-regulating market and private ownership of the means of production are based upon an understanding of the Marxian category of value that remains bound with the framework of classical political economy. Consequently, that form of critical social theory itself – the social critique from the standpoint of 'labor' – remains bound within that framework. It does differ in some respects from

political economy, of course: for example, it does not accept the bourgeois mode of distribution as final, and calls it into question historically. Nevertheless, the sphere of distribution remains the focus of its critical concern. Whereas the form of labor (hence, of production) is the object of Marx's critique, an unexamined 'labor' is, for traditional Marxism, the transhistorical source of wealth and the basis of social constitution. The result is not a *critique of political economy* but a *critical political economy*, that is, a critique solely of the mode of distribution. It is a critique which, in terms of its treatment of labor, merits the name 'Ricardian Marxism'. Traditional Marxism replaces Marx's critique of the mode of production and distribution with a critique of the mode of distribution alone, and his theory of the self-abolition of the proletariat with a theory of the self-realization of the proletariat. (Postone, 1993: 69)

Here we can sort out several points to which we will add from other of Postone's observations: traditional Marxism (1) focuses on distribution rather than labor and production; (2) in so doing, it assumes that production and distribution are separable; (3) it fails to recognize the specific social form of labor and production; (4) instead, it adopts the asocial and ahistorical Ricardian conception of the substance of value as embodied 'labor'; (5) in conceiving of value as embodied 'labor', that is, human labor regardless of its social form, it regards value as transhistorical; (6) since the deepest root of capitalism's dynamism lies in the contradictory drives in production, it 'does not and cannot directly provide the basis for a historical critique of capitalism or for an explanation of its dynamic character' (Postone, 1993: 52); (7) it conceives of revolution as the triumph of 'labor' rather than a transformation of the social form and purpose of labor; and (8) since it lacks the idea of a specific social form of production, it fails to grasp that 'the way in which people perceive and conceive of the world in capitalist society is shaped by the forms of their social relations, understood as structured forms of everyday social practice' (176).

## A CRITIQUE OF THE IDEA OF INSTRUMENTAL ACTION

Action is purposive and, in that regard, can be considered instrumental: action is instrumental in achieving an action's aim. I set my alarm at night so that I wake up on time in the morning. In that familiar sense, the terms 'purposive' and 'instrumental' are commonplace. To speak of action in that everyday way as instrumental is to speak of an aspect of action; it is not to identify a kind of action. How would instrumental action, taken to be a kind of action, distinguish itself from other actions? The answer must be that instrumental action is *purely* instrumental. Instrumental action, or purposive-rational action [*zweckmässige Tätigkeit*], presupposes a world stripped of social forms and purposes, devoid of moral, aesthetic, gendered, social, legal, and political features – a world without a way of life. Only then could action be purely instrumental.<sup>11</sup>

We might also say that instrumental action presupposes affect, intention, and action nominalism: instrumental action assumes that there are no morally, aesthetically, socially, legally, or politically determinate kinds of action. If action came in such kinds, it could never be (purely) instrumental.<sup>12</sup> A world without social forms and purposes would lack normatively charged kinds of action, but that world, presupposed by instrumental action, does not exist. Since there can be no object to which the concept of instrumental action could direct us, it is a pseudo-concept. The fears of a 'totally administered world' or a 'technocracy' ruled by instrumental action are bad dreams triggered by troubling features of the actual capitalist order under which we live.

Nevertheless, instrumental action has come to be thought of as a particular kind of action. For some thinkers, such as Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt, productive labor is conceived of as instrumental action in a transhistorical or 'quasi-anthropological'

way. That is, across human history, productive labor just is instrumental action. The scope of instrumental action, however, is historically variable, and Habermas and Arendt worry about the spread of instrumental action into regions of social life where it does not belong – Habermas under the heading of the ‘colonization of the life-world’ and Arendt under ‘the rise of the social’.<sup>13</sup> Moishe Postone finds both these lines of thinking in Max Horkheimer:

Horkheimer, despite some equivocations, identifies labour in and of itself with instrumental action.... but this can hardly explain the growing instrumental character of the world – the growing domination of ‘value-free’ means over substantive values and goals, the transformation of the world into one of means. (Postone, 1993: 180)

Although Horkheimer may conceive of labor simply as instrumental action, like Max Weber he conceives of instrumental reason as a product of the modern world. Like Habermas and Arendt, Horkheimer is troubled by the growth of instrumentality.

Let us return to Postone’s observation that the move of some members of the Frankfurt School, notably Horkheimer and, later, Habermas, from critical political economy to the critique of instrumental action was easy because the underlying conceptual terrain remains the same. Because Pollock, Horkheimer, and Habermas fail to grasp the constitutive social forms of capitalist society, starting with the capitalist form of social wealth, value, they end up thinking about shadows of those constitutive forms, in particular instrumental reason, which proves to be a pseudo-concept. The sterile conceptual terrain shared by critical political economy and the critique of instrumental reason is projected by ‘the illusion of the economic’. Critical political economy and the critique of instrumental action are directed at an object that does not exist, production-in-general.

Marx is not engaged in radical political economy. Rather, he undertakes a critique

of political economy that makes the constitutive social forms and purposes of the capitalist provisioning process the focus of inquiry. Instrumental action has no place in his thought. Instead, he grasps all the action involved in producing and distributing wealth on a capitalist basis as constituted by specific social forms, the value forms, and the acting subjects as personifications of these forms – what Adorno called ‘character masks’. We see this in how *Capital* is structured. Commercial activities, that is, activities in the sphere of simple commodity circulation, are constituted first by the commodity form and money and by the social roles of buyer and seller. But as we read on in *Capital* we learn that the sphere of commodity circulation is the cheery form of appearance of the deeper and ominous reality of capital’s circulation. Commodities turn out to be not simple commodities but rather commodity capital: useful things produced for the specific social purpose of yielding a profit upon sale. The entire account of the production process in *Capital* is treated under the rubrics of absolute and relative surplus-value, which is to say that labor and production in *Capital* are always form-determined by capital, whose single-minded purpose is the production and accumulation of surplus value. With the recognition of the phenomenon of relative surplus value, it is checkmate for the very idea of instrumental reason. Relative surplus value arises from the material transformation of production processes by their specific social purpose of pumping out ever more surplus value. Such production methods lack the neutrality of purpose that instrumental action presupposes. There is no conceptual space in *Capital* for (purely) instrumental action.

*Capital* provides a socio-epistemological account of how capitalist social forms give rise to the pseudo-concept of instrumental action, which helps capital cover its tracks. Postone calls attention to the instrumental character of commodity-producing labor, that is, wage labor:

As we have seen, commodity-determined labor is, as concrete labor, a means for producing a particular product; moreover and more essentially, as abstract labor, it is self-mediating – it is a *social means* of acquiring the products of others. Hence, for the producers, labor is abstracted from its concrete product: it serves them as a pure means, an instrument to acquire products that have no intrinsic relation to the substantive character of the productive activity by means of which they are acquired. (Postone, 1993: 181)

It is true that commodity-producing labor is a '*social means* of acquiring the products of others'. It is also true – and peculiar – that 'the substantive character of the productive activity by means of which' those working for a wage acquire products has 'no intrinsic relation' to that substantive character. That expresses Marx's point that the substance of value is abstract labor and that the social kind of labor that produces value is 'practically abstract' because, when its products are sold, concrete labor is socially validated *as* abstract labor.<sup>14</sup> In that transformation from commodities into money, the 'substantive character' of value-producing labor (its concrete character, say, tailoring) is extinguished. Nevertheless, the labor of value-producing workers is not simply pure 'means' or 'instrument'.

Value-producing labor cannot serve only workers as a means, since commodity-producing workers are able to work only because they are hired by capitalists, a social arrangement that involves specific relationships and purposes. Profit is the aim of the capitalist; the wage is the goal of the worker. Value-producing labor serves both worker and capitalist only by being surplus-value-producing labor. The labor of wage workers, then, is not 'pure means', since it aims at the wage, which is a particular social form of income that presupposes a class-constituting private property system, profit as the goal of production, and a monetary system in which money possesses that uniquely abstract sort of social power – purchasing power.

Postone criticizes the Frankfurt turn to the critique of instrumental action, but the

criticism needs to reach down to the very idea of instrumental action:

Although social labor is always a means to an end, this alone does not render it instrumental ... in precapitalist societies, for example, labor is accorded significance by overt social relations and is shaped by tradition. Because commodity-producing labor is not mediated by such relations, it is, in a sense, de-signified, 'secularized'. (Postone, 1993: 180)

When Postone writes here that being aim-oriented does not make social labor instrumental, he must mean purely instrumental. Postone's description of 'commodity-producing labor' as 'de-signified' calls to mind Karl Polanyi's characterization of capitalism as the 'disembedded economy'. If capitalism is the 'disembedded economy', from what, exactly, is it disembedded? To answer, as Polanyi's unqualified phrase suggests: to be disembedded from specific social relations altogether, plunges us into 'the illusion of the economic', the imaginary notion that capitalist production is production-in-general.

Postone makes it clear that, while capitalism is disembedded from 'overt social relations ... shaped by tradition', new, non-overt social relations – not the absence of specific social relations – take their place. In describing value-producing labor as 'self-mediating', Postone interprets Marx as identifying a historically unique form of the social mediation of labor and production, not denying the presence of social mediation. On the contrary, as Marx insists: 'Mediation must, of course, take place' (Marx, 1973: 171). Postone links the 'de-signification' of labor in capitalism with instrumental action as follows: 'Labor acquires its meaning from the social relations in which it is embedded. When these social relations are constituted by labor itself, labor exists in "secular" form and can be analyzed as instrumental action' (Postone, 1993: 221). Because the social character of surplus-value-producing labor is not overt, it is easily mistaken for instrumental action, but it cannot properly be analyzed

as instrumental action. It is the other way around: instrumental action is properly analyzed not as an actual kind of action but rather as a shadow form cast by surplus-value-producing labor, which is the constitutive social form of labor in capitalist societies.

Postone rejects identifying the general concept of social labor with instrumental action but then identifies labor in capitalism with instrumental action: 'Social labor as such is *not* instrumental action; labor in capitalism, however, *is* instrumental action' (Postone, 1993: 180, emphasis in original). Of Horkheimer's identification of labor with instrumental action Postone comments, 'Horkheimer, in effect, attributes a consequence of the specific character of labor in capitalism to labor in general' (181–2). But *is* instrumental action 'a consequence of the specific character of labor in capitalism'? That conclusion does not follow, since labor in capitalism is surplus-value-producing labor, which is a specific social form of labor – though not an overtly social one embedded in traditions.

It may seem that if instrumental action is not labor as such, as Horkheimer and Habermas contend it is, then it must be some specifically historical kind of labour – what else? In that case, what better candidate is there than labor in capitalism? Postone does conclude that instrumental action is labour in capitalism. But such reasoning relies on a false dilemma, for instrumental action is neither a general concept of labor nor a specific social kind of labor. Instrumental action is no actual form of social labor at all, and since there is nothing for it to refer to, the notion of instrumental action is a pseudo-concept. Labor in capitalism is not instrumental action. Labor in capitalism is surplus-value-producing labor, which is a type of labor that has a definite – not an arbitrary – purpose and is laden with moral, social, legal, and political significance.

Postone focuses on the peculiar social character and purpose of production in capitalism in order to make sense of the idea of

instrumental action and the primacy of means over ends:

Thus production for (surplus) value is production where the goal itself is a means .... The instrumentalization of the world, within such a framework, is a function of the determination of production and social relations by this historically specific form of social mediation .... Production for the sake of production signifies that production is no longer a means to a substantive end but a means to an end that is itself a means, a moment in a never-ending chain of expansion. *Production in capitalism becomes a means to a means* .... the domination of means over ends noted by Horkheimer .... is rooted in the character of labor in capitalism as a social means that is quasi-objective and supersedes overtly social relations. (Postone, 1993: 181–2)

Capitalist production supersedes overtly social relations but not social relations altogether. And, in capital's accumulation process, surplus-value does endlessly function as a means to the production of more surplus-value. That makes the purpose of capitalist production strange and not 'substantive' in a traditional sense. But in capitalism, value is the social substance, and money takes the place of overt social relations – 'all bourgeois relations are gilded' (Marx, 1970: 64). But instrumental action is not 'a consequence of the specific character of labor in capitalism', because action in capitalism is not instrumental action. A phrase such as the 'instrumentalization of the world' is a way of talking about capital's domination without mentioning capital.

Postone, of course, is talking about capital and about the social mediation of labor in capitalism:

As the duality of concrete labor and labor-mediated interaction, labor in capitalism has a socially constituting character. This confronts us with the following, only apparently paradoxical, conclusion: it is precisely because of its socially mediating character that labor in capitalism is instrumental action. Because the mediating quality of labor in capitalism cannot appear directly, instrumentality then appears as an objective attribute of labor as such. (Postone, 1993: 182–3)

This is a neat twist on the fetishism of the classical, 'embodied labor' theory of value, for which the value character of the commodity is taken to be a socio-natural property of it. But commodities *are* values, products of surplus-value-producing labor. They are not pure means; they are not products of instrumental action. What Postone describes as the 'only apparently' paradoxical conclusion that 'it is precisely because of its socially mediating character that labor in capitalism is instrumental action' is actually a contradiction: labor cannot lack social character because of its social character. The paradox is that labor appears to lack any social character because of its social character. Because labor in capitalism is socially mediated, even though by non-overt social mediations and an oddly empty and monotonous purpose, it is not instrumental action. Indeed, because there is no labor that is not socially mediated and directed by particular social purposes, there is no instrumental action. Because capitalist production is embedded in the value forms and the purpose of accumulating capital, it appears to be disembedded, and surplus-value-producing labor appears to be instrumental action.

Tony Smith takes a position similar to Postone's on the relationship between labor in capitalism and instrumental action. At the conclusion of *The Logic of Marx's 'Capital'*, Smith (1990: 196) writes: 'I shall briefly and provisionally examine three of the most significant theoretical alternatives to Marxian value theory: neoclassical economics, Weberian social theory, and Neo-Ricardian (Sraffian) economics'. In defending Marxian value theory as the key to grasping modern society, Smith rejects all three alternatives, each of which operates under 'the illusion of the economic'. Smith examines the claim that 'Weberian social theory offers an alternative to value theory', namely the notion of instrumental reason. Smith writes,

[Weber does] propose certain basic categories from which the key features of the capitalist mode

of production can be derived. The central category here is that of technical (formal) rationality.... Capitalism can indeed be grasped as a system in which formal rationality holds sway in the economic sphere, in contrast to other modes of production where traditional considerations or a material rationality are more essential. (1990, 197–8)

For Smith, capitalist social relations are unlike 'other modes of production where traditional considerations or a material rationality are more essential'. But capitalist rationality is not purely formal rationality any more than labor in capitalism is (purely) instrumental action. Formal rationality and instrumental action in the Weberian sense taken up by members of the Frankfurt School are indifferent to social form and purpose. Capitalist rationality (preoccupied with accumulating surplus value) and the labor in capitalism (which produces that surplus value) involve definite social forms and purposes.<sup>15</sup>

## HENRYK GROSSMAN AND THE DESTABILIZING DYNAMICS OF CAPITALIST PRODUCTION

Henryk Grossman does not fit neatly into Postone's category of traditional Marxist. Grossman's value theory is largely classical. In the 'value-price transformation', however, Grossman sees that Ricardo's theory of value, according to which individual commodities sell at their individual values, is untenable. A number of Ricardo's contemporaries recognized that. Where those critics abandoned a labor theory of value, Marx, as Grossman recognizes, radically reconceived it. Marx shifted value theory to the level of the total social capital. But Grossman does not follow Marx on two other fundamental criticisms. First, Ricardians see value as embodied 'labor', labor of whatever social sort; indeed, the topic of the specific social form of labor does not enter into Ricardian thinking. Marx, by contrast, grasps value as a

‘purely social substance’, a ‘ghostly objectivity’ that is wholly the consequence – not of ‘labor’ – but of ‘practically abstract’ labor, the specific social form of labor in capitalism (Marx, 1976: 128). Second, Ricardian theory has no, and can have no, account of the value form: it has no explanation of why value must be expressed as money. On these points, Grossman does not adopt Marx’s advance over Ricardo; here he fits the mold of a traditional Marxist.

Postone identifies traditional Marxism with a focus on distribution rather than production. Grossman does not fit that description. On the contrary, the major thrust of Grossman’s work is to criticize those Marxists, including Luxemburg, Kautsky, Hilferding, and Otto Bauer, who restricted capitalism’s crisis tendencies to problems in the sphere of distribution. Grossman explores the crisis tendencies that Marx located in the sphere of production with his study of ‘the breakdown of the capitalist system’ (Grossman, 1992). The key to the crisis tendencies mounting in production lies in what Postone calls ‘the value treadmill’. As increases in the productive power of labor are generalized across a branch of production, workers produce more units per hour, more use-values, but no more value, thereby cheapening commodities. The value treadmill, Marx argues, is due to the fact that abstract labor is the substance of value:

As productivity [*Produktivkraft*] is an attribute of labor in its concrete useful form, it naturally ceases to have any bearing on that labour as soon as we abstract from its concrete useful form. The same labour, therefore, performed for the same length of time, always yields the same amount of value, independently of any variations in productivity. But it provides different quantities of use-values during equal periods of time. (Marx, 1976: 137)

From the standpoint of the total social capital, gains in relative surplus value are made when improvements in the productive power of labor drive down the value of labor power by cheapening the commodities that workers

buy. But these productivity gains have a contradictory tendency: they tend to push down the rate of profit by increasing the organic composition of capital. (There are multiple countertendencies.) Grossman concentrates on this contradictory dynamism of capitalist production, which drives what Postone (1993: 238) calls the ‘shearing pressure’ that makes capitalist production historically dynamic – his answer to the pessimism of the Frankfurt School.

The fact that Grossman can stress the contradictory character of capitalist production and yet still be a Ricardian value theorist brings out a point about value and abstract labor made by Geert Reuten.<sup>16</sup> One can grasp the destabilizing dynamics of capitalist production yet still hold a Ricardian conception of value inasmuch as one fails to recognize that value is produced by a historically specific kind of labor and fails to grasp why value is necessarily expressed as money. Reuten’s point is that one can take abstract labor to be a transhistorical category and identify it as the substance of value – which provides the conceptual basis for the value treadmill – yet remain a Ricardian because abstract labor is not a social kind of labor. It is not a kind of labor at all. Marx’s critique of political economy moves beyond Ricardo by recognizing that value is produced by a specific social kind of labor, namely, privately undertaken labor that is socially validated through the sale of the commodities it produces – ‘practically abstract labor’.

Rick Kuhn observes, ‘The “neo-harmonists” such as Karl Kautsky and Rudolf Hilferding, on the other hand [to Grossman], argued that disproportion in production could be overcome by means of government policy’ (Kuhn, 2016: 96). Kuhn’s point reveals a striking parallel with Postone. Just as Grossman rejects the ‘neo-harmonists’, Postone rejects Pollock’s comparable thesis of the ‘primacy of the political’. Grossman and Postone both stress the destabilizing dynamics of capitalist *production*: capital is its own barrier.<sup>17</sup>



Grossman's attention to specific social forms – the hallmark of the critique of political economy – is a mixed bag. He recognizes that abstract labor is the substance of value, which allows him to locate capital's contradictory dynamism in production, but he fails to see that value-producing labor is 'practically abstract' labor. He calls attention to the double character of capitalist production as 'simultaneously' a labor process and valorization process as well as to Marx's identifying the factors of production in capitalism as constant and variable capital. But Postone criticizes Grossmann's and Franz Borkenau's attempts to provide a historical materialist account of modern natural science. For Postone (1993: 176), the critique of political economy puts 'the emphasis on the *form* of social relations as an epistemological category'. But Borkenau and Grossman focus on the technical character of labor in the period of 'manufacturing' (prior to 'large-scale industry') rather than on labor's specific social character. Grossman's socio-epistemological efforts, then, belong to critical political economy, not the critique of political economy.

Grossman anticipates the preoccupation of the new reading of Marx with Marx's method: 'My view is that the unsatisfactory state of the literature on Marx is ultimately rooted in the fact – which will appear strange to some – that until today no one has proposed any ideas at all, let alone any clear ideas, about Marx's method of investigation' (Grossman, 1992: 29). Grossman introduced the idea of *successive approximations* [*Annäherungsverfahren*] as the way to interpret Marx's method in *Capital*. That way of understanding *Capital* was adopted by important Marxist thinkers including Maurice Dobb and Paul Sweezy. Though there are many controversies over Marx's method in the new readings of Marx, Grossmann's successive approximations conception has largely given way to a systematic dialectical conception of Marx's method of presentation in *Capital*. The two interpretations share a conception of *Capital*

as having different stages of analysis based on different levels of abstraction, but they differ importantly.

First, levels of approximation in Grossman's approach are conceived of as existing independently, either possibly or actually, as, for example, with Engels' idea that simple commodity circulation in *Capital* refers to an actual historical stage of 'simple commodity production'. In systematic dialectics all the stages in the presentation refer to levels of abstraction from the same object of inquiry – not to independently existing stages.

Second, the successive approximations approach is a one-way street, analytical rather than dialectical: the later stages presuppose the earlier ones, but the earlier ones do not presuppose the later ones. If the earlier levels in the presentation presuppose the later stages, as in a systematic dialectical structure, then the earlier ones do not – cannot – refer to independent stages. Returning to simple commodity circulation, a systematic dialectical understanding of *Capital* holds that there is a dialectical development from simple commodity circulation to the circuit of capital. That dialectical transition – a subject of controversy (Campbell, 2013) – reveals that simple commodity circulation presupposes the circuit of capital; the systematic dialectical account is a two-way street, a dialectic of mutual presupposition.

The difference matters. In *Money and Totality*, Fred Moseley (2016) argues that there is no 'transformation problem' and that the mistaken notion that there is results from the failure to grasp the method of *Capital*. The key to his 'macro-monetary' reading of *Capital* is that the crucial givens in the circuit of capital, the original M and the M' of the M-C-M' circuit, which appears first in chapter 4 of *Capital I*, are the actual sum of money invested by the total social capital (M) and the actual sum of money returned to that investment (M'), respectively. That account is incompatible with the successive approximations approach. Since in capitalism individual

commodities tend to sell not at their individual values but rather at their prices of production, Moseley reasons, the actual prices at which the elements of constant and variable capital are purchased are prices of production, not individual values. In other words, the complaint that Marx did not transform the inputs to the circuit of capital from values to prices of production, which is thought to create the ‘transformation problem’, is misconceived. By the time of writing the *Grundrisse* (1857–8), Marx knew that commodities did not sell at their individual values, so that the classical labor theory of value was untenable and had to be abandoned or reimagined. The transformation problem does arise for Grossman’s successive approximations approach, however, because it interprets the earlier stage as claiming that individual commodities sell at their individual values. The fact that this is known to be false is not a problem to Grossman, since the ‘approximations’, which are known to be false, are successively ‘corrected’ by better approximations to the truth.<sup>18</sup>

That takes us to a third difference: in the successive approximations approach, what is claimed at earlier stages of approximation is shown by later stages of approximation to be false. According to the successive approximations approach, we come to recognize that the claim it attributes to *Capital* I, namely that commodities exchange at their values, is actually false. Rather, individual commodities sell at prices of production, a concept that is developed only at a later stage of approximation (in *Capital* III). According to the successive approximations interpretation of Marx’s method, *Capital* proceeds by making a series of claims known to be false, until, by making fewer and fewer abstractions from the reality of the capitalist mode of production, one approaches the truth about it. In a systematic dialectical approach, by contrast, the claims made at the higher levels of abstraction, that is, in the earlier stages of the presentation, are true and remain true throughout. Two key examples are the claims

that the price of the total heap of commodities – but not of commodities taken individually – is determined by its value and that the total surplus value (interest plus profit of enterprise plus rent) – but not the profit realized by the sale of individual commodities – is determined by the amount of surplus labor represented in that heap.

## THEODOR ADORNO AND HIS STUDENTS

Christian Lotz observes: ‘The majority of Anglo-American scholarship on Adorno fails to see that Adorno remained committed to Marx’s Critique of Political Economy’ (Lotz, 2014: 25, n.4). Gillian Rose’s book *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor Adorno* (1978) is one of the exceptions. Rose rejects the narrative that Adorno moved away from Marx’s theory of value to adopt a transhistorical critique of instrumental reason. Adorno, she writes, ‘did not share Horkheimer’s concern with instrumental reason and the logic of domination. The concept of reification and Marx’s theory of value are much more important in Adorno’s analysis of society’ (Rose, 1978: 5). Confirming Rose’s view, Lotz quotes Adorno:

It occurs to nobody that there might be services that are not expressible in terms of exchange value. This is the real pre-condition for the triumph of that subjective reason which is incapable of thinking of truth as intrinsically binding, and perceives it solely as existing for others, as exchangeable (Adorno, GS4, 222). (Lotz, 2014: 21)

For Adorno, the ‘real pre-condition’ of Horkheimer’s ‘subjective reason’ is generalized commodity circulation and its ideological effects. Instrumental reason is an ideological shadow of the law of value.

Both Lotz and Rose go against the grain by insisting that Adorno is neither a critical political economist nor a critic of instrumental reason. Rather, Adorno is operating

within the horizon of the critique of political economy. However, both Lotz and Rose are critical of what they see as Adorno's truncated appropriation of the critique of political economy: Adorno restricts it to commodity fetishism and the sphere of commodity circulation. Lotz points out that Adorno called encountering Alfred Sohn-Rethel's interpretation of 'real abstraction' – in the exchange of commodities and money, every commodity under the sun is transmuted into a sum of money – the single most important intellectual experience he had (Lotz, 2014: 25, n.4). Lotz runs with that, stating that the core of Adorno's philosophy 'is the exchange principle of *Capital* interpreted through the lens of Sohn-Rethel's theory of the relation between commodity form and thought form' (25, n.4). On Lotz's reading, the shortcomings of Sohn-Rethel's appropriation of Marx carry over to Adorno.<sup>19</sup>

Lotz takes Adorno to be working within the horizon of the critique of political economy, but it is a foreshortened one that limits itself to the fetishism of commodity circulation. 'Put in Marx's language', Lotz writes, 'Adorno does not realize that the simple circulation process remains "an abstract sphere of the bourgeois process of production as a whole, which through its own determinations shows itself to be a moment, a mere form of appearance of some deeper process lying behind it, even resulting from it and producing it" (MEGA II.2.68)' (Lotz, 2014: 20–1). That deeper process, presupposed by simple circulation, is capitalist production. Lotz sums up his complaint: 'Adorno identifies capitalism with the exchange principle' (22). Thus, Lotz takes issue with Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* for failing to trace the ideological structure of the 'culture industry' 'back to the structure of production' (23). While this charge of restricting the critique of political economy to the exchange principle holds for Sohn-Rethel and 'exchange-only' value-form theorists, it is not the last word on Adorno.<sup>20</sup>

Gillian Rose, too, sees Adorno as working within a fragment of the critique of political economy. Rose begins with the observation, 'Adorno's thought depends fundamentally on the category of reification' (Rose, 1978: ix). She goes on to criticize Adorno for being fixated on commodity exchange: 'Adorno's theory of reification was based on commodity fetishism in a way which depended not on Marx's theory of work or the labour-process (alienation) but on Marx's theory of value, especially on the distinction between use-value and exchange-value' (43). She elaborates:

'Reification' has often been used in order to generalise the theory of value and of commodity fetishism without taking up the theory of surplus value or any theory of class formation, and without developing any theory of power and the state. (28)<sup>21</sup>

In the critique of Adorno made independently by Lotz and Rose, we see Postone's critique of traditional Marxism's focus on distribution taken to a higher power: Adorno thinks within the horizon of the critique of political economy but limits himself to exchange.

A number of scholars, including Dirk Braunstein, Werner Bonefeld, and Chris O'Kane, find in Adorno a more complete adoption of the critique of political economy. A document that supports their view is the set of notes taken by Backhaus to a 1962 seminar on Marx and sociological theory that Adorno led.<sup>22</sup> Before moving on from the conceptual level of commodity circulation, Adorno distinguishes the fetishism involved in thinking of a commodity's value as natural, not social, from the fetish character of the commodity:

We really are dependent on the world of commodities. On the one hand, commodity fetishism is an illusion; on the other hand, it is utmost/ultimate reality – and the superiority of the reified commodity over humanity stands testament to this. That the categories of illusion are in truth also categories of reality, this is dialectic. (Adorno, 1997: 507)

In the illusion, 'the commodity no longer appears as a social relation, but it seems as if value was a thing in itself' (Adorno, 1997: 506); in the reality, as values, commodities have power over their producers.<sup>23</sup> The illusion and the reality are consequences of the commodity form.

In characterizing Marx's critique of political economy, Adorno shifts focus from commodity circulation to capitalist production:

What does critique of political economy mean in Marx? 1. Critique of the classical theory of liberalism. 2. Critique of the economy itself .... Marx is concerned with an immanent critique of liberalism .... Liberal theory is confronted with its own claim with regard to the act of exchange. 'You say that equivalents are exchanged, that there is a free and just exchange, I take your word, now we shall see how this turns out'. (Adorno, 1997: 504)

Paradoxically, the exchange of equivalents – labor power for wages – lays the foundation for the extraction of surplus value from the wage worker: the equity of the exchange principle conceals class antagonism and exploitation:

On the one hand, exchange takes place in the form of equivalents: the former [the worker] gives his labour time and receives what is required for the reproduction of his labor power in return .... One exchanges the same for the same and simultaneously the same for not the same. Behind this lies the entirety of class relations. Only because the worker has nothing else but his labour power does he accept these conditions. (Adorno, 1997: 509)

Adorno recounts how Marx's theory of surplus value overturns liberalism and punctures its justification of the capitalist mode of production. The egalitarian exchange principle presupposes the class relations that make capitalist production possible: 'The relation of exchange is in reality pre-formed by class relations: the heart of the theory is that there is an unequal control of the means of production' (Adorno, 1997: 505). Commodity circulation manifests, while concealing, class conflict and capital's drive for endless accumulation. Despite his fascination with exchange and his enthusiasm for

Sohn-Rethel, for Adorno: 'the sphere of circulation is secondary' (508).

In addressing the destabilizing dynamics of capital accumulation, Adorno sounds like Grossman or, more so, Postone:

Capitalists are forced to try to accumulate surplus. For this purpose, they are impelled to develop machines in order to replace living with dead labour. If not, then they are laid low in competition. Here, a moment of the sphere of circulation impacts on the sphere of production. However, because they are forced to, capitalists create the conditions of productive forces that do not need the chains of capitalist economy. Second, they thereby create a dynamic which turns against themselves; more and more labour is set free, thereby creating the conditions of crisis and the continuously increasing threat to the system itself. In order to maintain itself, the system must produce precisely such moments through which it increasingly undermines [*untergräbt*] its own possibility. The purpose of spontaneity is to get this process under control, which is headed for the destruction of the whole, so as to transform [*aufheben*] the whole to a higher mode of production. (Adorno, 1997: 508–9)

For Adorno, capital cannot free itself of a contradictory dynamism that keeps it on a perilous course of historical possibilities.

Adorno contrasts the critical power of Marx's critique of political economy, which discloses the social forms that constitute a society as capitalist, with the apologetic character of subjectivist economic theories. Marx's critique of political economy

raises the problem of constitution ... it enables more of reality to be expressed. The point is whether the constituents of totality can be grasped. The question of constitution is already present in the ostensible discretion concerning where to cut through reality for the purpose of abstraction. The subjective doctrine is essentially apology. The analysis of the question of price is an epiphenomenon in contrast to the questions of constitution. (Adorno, 1997: 511)

For Adorno, the critique of political economy and the associated critique of forms of thought that represent life in capitalist societies advance a critical theory that focuses on the peculiar social forms and purposes that

constitute capitalist society. In capitalist society, products take the commodity form, becoming fetishes that dictate to their producers through the impersonal system of prices. The voluntary, egalitarian, and harmonious appearance of commodity exchange masks a crisis-prone production process fueled by class antagonism and exploitation:

Society stays alive, not despite its antagonism, but by means of it; the profit interest and thus the class relationship make up the objective motor of the production process, which the life of all men hangs by, and the primacy of which has its vanishing point in the death of all .... What historically made this possibility may as well destroy it. (Adorno, 1983: 320)

Adorno's grasp of the critique of political economy does not restrict itself to commodity circulation; it comprehends the class antagonism and precarious historical dynamism inherent in capital's accumulation process.

## CONCLUSION: CRITICAL THEORY BEYOND 'THE ILLUSION OF THE ECONOMIC'

The sea change that has been moving at least some quarters of Critical Theory to renew the Marxian critique of political economy calls into question the conceptual horizon that underlies both critical political economy (traditional Marxism) and the critique of instrumental reason, a horizon projected by 'the illusion of the economic'. That illusion of an actual economy-in-general, which arises from obliviousness to or neglect of the specific social forms and purposes that constitute any actual mode of production and way of life, is an ideological shadow cast by the social forms that do structure capitalist production. 'The illusion of the economic' impedes critical social theory by putting questions concerning the constitutive social form and purpose of wealth, labor, and production out of consideration. As a consequence, critical political economy and the

critique of instrumental reason attempt to criticize capitalist society by employing categories adopted from economics. In doing so, however, they trade in the pseudo-concepts of 'the economic' and 'instrumental action', concepts for which there can be no referent.

By contrast, we have seen how, in different ways, Henryk Grossman, Theodor Adorno, and a group of Adorno's students that includes Hans-Georg Backhaus and Helmut Reichelt all transcend the limitations of traditional Marxism and the critique of instrumental reason. In their account the critique of political economy calls economics into question at the level of its fundamental concepts, challenging its socially empty categories and identifying and criticizing the capitalist forms of wealth, labor, production, and distribution. Overcoming capitalism is then not a matter of redistributing surplus value but of moving past value as the social form and measure of wealth. Understood as a critique of 'the obsession that bourgeois production is production as such', the critique of political economy opens doors to an expansive critical theory of society.<sup>24</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Marramao, 1975. On '*die neue Marx-Lektüre*', see Elbe, 2010; Henning, 2008; Bonefeld, 2014; and Bellofiore and Riva, 2015.
- 2 On 'the illusion of the economic' see chapter 14 in Murray, 2016. Marx points out the ideological function that 'the illusion of the economic' plays; political economy posits 'society in the abstract' and conflates it with bourgeois society: 'The aim is, rather, to present production – see e.g. Mill – as distinct from distribution etc., as encased in eternal natural laws independent of history, at which opportunity *bourgeois* relations are then quietly smuggled in as the inviolable natural laws on which society in the abstract is founded. This is the more or less conscious purpose of the whole proceeding' (Marx, 1973: 86–7).
- 3 Since there is no such object, economics lacks an object of inquiry; see Backhaus, 1997. Werner Bonefeld writes, 'Critically conceived, *Capital* is therefore not an economic "text"'. Economics

- is the formula of an inverted world' (Bonefeld, 2014: 6).
- 4 Of Friedrich Pollock's thesis of the 'primacy of the political', Moishe Postone and Barbara Brick write: 'an understanding of the contradiction between the forces and relations of production as one between distribution and production – that is, in terms of the growing inadequacy of the market and private property to conditions of developed industrial production – implies that a mode of distribution based on planning and the effective abolition of private property is adequate to those conditions.... The pessimism of his theory is rooted in its analysis of postliberal capitalism as an unfree, yet noncontradictory society' (Postone and Brick, 1993: 222).
  - 5 Rick Kuhn sums up the reception of Grossman: 'Neglect and misinterpretation have been the main responses to Grossman's work, including among Marxists' (Kuhn, 2016: 92).
  - 6 Rick Kuhn writes of Paul Mattick Sr: 'Paul Mattick espoused Grossman's contributions to Marxist economics in English and German for fifty years' (Kuhn, 2005: 91). On Mattick Sr see Roth, 2015. Rosdolsky, 1977, is loaded with references to Grossman.
  - 7 There are other critiques of political economy. Thorstein Veblen is widely regarded as the founder of institutional or evolutionary economics; George Bataille explores 'general economy' in *The Accursed Share*; various feminist critiques of economics have been developed by Marilyn Waring, Julie A. Nelson, Nancy Folbe, Diane Elson, Marianne Ferber, and others. All further references to the critique of political economy will be to the Marxian one.
  - 8 John Abromeit (2011: 177–80) questions Postone's account of Horkheimer.
  - 9 Marx writes to Annenkov that Proudhon 'does not rise above the bourgeois horizon' (Marx, 1963: 190). Marx harshly criticized the socialist Gotha Programme for its 'bourgeois phrases', which attributed a '*supernatural, creative power to labour*' (Marx, 1966: 3).
  - 10 Werner Bonefeld (2014: 3–4) observes: 'the "new reading of Marx" ... was principally developed by Hans-Georg Backhaus, Helmut Reichelt and also Moishe Postone'. Bellofiore and Riva (2015: 24–5) write: 'Backhaus can be considered as the initiator of *NML [neue Marx-Lektüre]*.... Under Adorno's influence, he elaborated the essential elements of a new interpretation of Marx'.
  - 11 In introducing the concept of instrumental reason ('subjective reason') in *Eclipse of Reason*, Max Horkheimer acknowledges but immediately dismisses the ubiquitous presence of social norms: 'Naturally the circumstances of each situation, as well as laws, customs, and traditions, should be taken into account. But the force that ultimately makes reasonable actions possible is the faculty of classification, inference, and deduction, no matter what the specific content – the abstract functioning of the thinking mechanism' (Horkheimer, 1974: 3). Of course the normative 'circumstances' of human action and reasoning 'should be taken into account' – except that they are irrelevant!
  - 12 In remarks on Bertrand Russell, Horkheimer calls attention to this presumptive moral nominalism in regard to human actions. He takes Russell as a representative of subjective reason but praises his inconsistency: 'Despite his philosophy, which holds "ultimate ethical values to be subjective", he seems to differentiate between the objective moral qualities of human actions and our perception of them: "What is horrible I will see as horrible". He has the courage of inconsistency ... If he were to cling to his scientific theory consistently, he would have to admit that there are no horrible actions or inhuman conditions, and that the evil he sees is just an illusion' (Horkheimer, 1974: 8).
  - 13 See Habermas, 1987 and Arendt, 1958.
  - 14 On 'practically abstract' labor see chapter 4 in Murray, 2016, and Bonefeld, 2010.
  - 15 I am indebted to Jeanne Schuler for her ideas on why instrumental action is a pseudo-concept.
  - 16 See Reuten, 1993, and chapters 4 and 18 in Murray, 2016.
  - 17 Postone (1993: 102, n.59) observes that Maramao 'approvingly presents aspects of Henryk Grossmann's analysis as an interpretation of Marx very different from that dominant in the Marxist tradition' but 'does not follow through its implications'. That suggests that Postone sees his own work as following through on Grossman.
  - 18 Postone (1993: 133) relates the question of the 'transformation problem' directly to the difference between critical political economy and the critique of political economy: the treatment of the transformation problem 'has suffered from the assumption that Marx intended to write a critical political economy'.
  - 19 Of Sohn-Rethel, Postone (1993: 178) writes, 'He argues that the sort of abstraction and form of social synthesis entailed in the value form is not a labor abstraction but an exchange abstraction'.
  - 20 On 'exchange-only' value-form theory, see chapter 15 in Murray, 2016.
  - 21 Rose's closing points are pursued in Bonefeld, 2014.
  - 22 The notes were published as an appendix to Backhaus, 1997. An English translation of these notes and an introduction by Chris O'Kane, drafts of which he kindly shared with me, are forthcoming

in *Historical Materialism*. The translations of texts from that seminar included here draw on that draft translation but contain my revisions.

- 23 Werner Bonefeld (2016: 235) observes, 'In the blink of an eye, the economic movement of society can cut off a whole class of individuals from access to the means of subsistence, just like that, indifferent to their needs and regardless of their efforts'.
- 24 For their help, I want to thank Werner Bonefeld, Chris O'Kane, Christian Lotz, David N. Smith, and especially Jeanne Schuler.

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# The Critique of Value and the Crisis of Capitalist Society

Josh Robinson

## THE CRITIQUE OF VALUE

The critique of value, or *Wertkritik*, presents a radical and thoroughgoing critique of categories of bourgeois society and particularly of the extent to which both our actions and our thoughts are unavoidably saturated with these categories – categories which as real abstractions take on a socially objective character. This critique concentrates its critical force against the closely related tendency to treat as universal, timeless and natural givens what are in fact specifically capitalist concepts that not only develop as a result of (and thus bear the imprint of) a history of coercion and violence, but also silently reproduce the conditions of the possibility of the furtherance and exacerbation of this history. In this respect it takes its lead from its thinkers' interpretation of the famous claim in the first sentence of *Capital*, that 'the wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production dominates appears as a "monstrous collection of commodities", the individual

commodity as its elementary form' (Marx, 1962: 49), according to which the commodity form is the historically specific – and highly restricting – form which social wealth takes under capitalism. The distinction of this social, material wealth, understood as an abundance as much of experiences of richness as of access to things, from the abstract, alienable and alienating wealth (such as in the forms of possession and property) of capitalist society, lies at the heart of the critique, which aims at and aspires to the liberation of material wealth from the commodity form, and thus from abstract value. Insofar as this critique represents what the young Marx termed the 'ruthless critique of all that exists' (Marx, 1956: 344), it is thus a critique both of the extent and of the very fact of the mediation of human life through the categories of the economy – a mediation that is so thorough that it generally appears as entirely natural, and that forms an all-encompassing system of social relations.

Despite – or perhaps more accurately, precisely because of – the ways in which it responds to and develops aspects of Marx's thought, the critique of value represents a radical break from traditional Marxism, or what its theorists have tended to refer to as workers'-movement Marxism. The critique of value emerged in the Federal Republic of Germany in the mid-1980s. Its principal theorists – including Robert Kurz, Ernst Lohoff, Roswitha Scholz and Norbert Trenkle – came together out of a diverse range of intellectual and organizational traditions, the prevailing currents of which were on the one hand the predominantly Maoist cadre organizations of the *K-Gruppen* that had been particularly strong in the Federal Republic during the 1970s (when their total membership was estimated at about 15,000), and on the other hand the new social movements, squatters' movement and *operaismo*-influenced *Autonome* which had in different ways emerged from the Extra-Parliamentary Opposition of the late 1960s (cf. Larsen et al., 2014b: xix–xx). Until 2004 its formative theoretical development was concentrated in the pages of the journal *Krisis*, the first seven issues of which were published under the title of *Marxistische Kritik* between 1986 and 1989; a split in the editorial group in 2004 led to the emergence of *Exit!*, edited by several figures formerly associated with *Krisis*, which also continues to publish value-critical theory.

In this respect the critique of value is a relatively recent formation, and its roots are intermingled across multiple critical traditions. The early 1980s had seen the emergence of theoretical discussions and debates, reading groups and seminars that brought together people from a wide range of traditions – outside the two principal currents mentioned above, notable influences included the thought of Trotskyist traditions, the peace movement and the anti-nuclear movement. The development of a shared conceptual repertoire out of this heterogeneous range of traditions and influences took

considerable discussion and debate – not to mention the falling away of a large number of initial participants to leave a core group that was much smaller. While this smaller group continued to contain representatives from a diverse range of traditions, there was nonetheless identifiable a set of shared theoretical interests that exerted a decisive influence on the formation and subsequent development of the critique of value. The particular influences include Frankfurt School Critical Theory, most specifically Adorno's immanent critique of the way in which many philosophical concepts carry the mark of a history of domination and heteronomy: the critique of value seeks further to develop this critique from the perspective of that which resists the apparent objectivity of social categories, and is oriented toward ending the domination that they represent. Other influences include Marcuse and some of the discussions around the analysis and critique of the value form that emerged in the 1970s. This was complemented by an interest in crisis theory (and particularly in the writings of Paul Mattick Sr) which had found attention in contemporary debates in the pages of journals such as *Prokla*, and which resonated with interests in the reduction of working hours and in the development of other forms of work that had emerged from parts of the environmental movement.

What characterizes the critique of value – and what distinguishes it from the traditional Marxism from which it represents a departure – is the aspiration to formulate and develop a radical, thoroughgoing critique of capitalism that proceeds from a fundamental critique of the elemental aspects of capitalist society – the commodity form, and commodity production. It seeks critically to reveal and to undo the extent to which life in capitalist society – not only the institutions of capitalist industry and the state, but also the very concepts with which we think and act – is permeated by assumptions that are themselves bound up with the commodity form. Its orientation toward emancipation thus consists

to a considerable extent in the programmatic insistence that critical social theory escape the presuppositions of the society that is the object of critique. In this respect it has in common with a wide range of critical social theory an aspiration not only to account for but also to undo structures of domination: it seeks to formulate what Adorno terms an 'ontology of the wrong state of things' (Adorno, 1966: 22) that is oriented toward its radical change.

The diversity of the critique of value's theoretical and activist heritage is reflected in the fact that it has hitherto had very little connection with the academic production and reception of theory. Its principal theorists have generally written alongside or between other employment, and their theories have received relatively little attention within academic writings; two significant exceptions to this are the figures of Roberto Schwarz, former professor of literary theory at the Universidade de São Paulo and the Universidade Estadual de Campinas, whose reception of Kurz's *Collapse of Modernization* (Schwarz, [1991] 2004) has inspired considerable interest in the critique of value in Brazil, and Anselm Jappe, member of *Krisis* and subsequently of *Exit!*, author of *The Adventures of the Commodity* (2003), and best-known in the anglophone world as a biographer of Guy Debord, who has taught at the Accademia di Belle Arti de Frosinone and at art schools in Tours, Bourges, Besançon and Tourcoing. In many respects this reflects a tradition of theorizing (and indeed, of intellectual life more generally) outside the institution of the university that is much richer in Germany than is the case within the anglophone world, but it also testifies to a commitment to critical-theoretical reflection and development outside the institutional walls of the academy.

The development of the critique of value has nonetheless involved a productive and frequently collaborative exchange with more institutionally established critical theories. In addition to the figures associated with the first generation of the Institute for Social

Research (and Adorno in particular), the influences on its formation included Rudolf Wolfgang Müller's *Geld und Geist* (1977) and the work of Barbara Brick and Moishe Postone (1982). Engagement with the work of the latter would subsequently prove particularly influential: his essay on antisemitism and National Socialism (1980) triggered considerable discussion on the critical-Marxist left in the Federal Republic, while several members of *Krisis* were involved in the German translation of *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* ([1993] 2003a, 2003b).

## REAL ABSTRACTION AND THE CRITIQUE OF CAPITALIST CONCEPTS

At the heart of the critique of value's theoretical departure from traditional Marxism is its re-evaluation of the particular categories of labour and value, which are rethought in three closely related ways. The first, from which the other two follow, is that these are not natural universal categories of human sociality, but rather phenomena that are specific to capitalist social relations. Labour, that is, is understood as the specifically capitalist form of abstract, commodity-producing labour, rather than as a general and transhistorical concept of intentional activity oriented toward the production of an object or an experience that someone (whether or not the producer in question) will consume or appreciate. Similarly, value is conceived not as a timeless conception of personal or social benefit, but as the specifically capitalist, abstract, quantitative and quantifiable value of the commodity form. Following from this, the second rethinking is that neither value nor labour is understood as a pole or standpoint from the perspective of which capitalist social relations can be criticized: they are rather themselves the object of critique. The third is that neither is thought of as the basis for the construction of the blueprints for a utopian (or indeed actually existing socialist)

society. Labour – abstract labour, the abstract category of labour under which all manner of radically different tasks are subsumed – is rather the subjugation under the regime of abstract time of the worker who carries out an aspect of the production of goods that will be used by people whom she does not know. Value, meanwhile, is the never only monetary expression of the expenditure of this reified, abstract labour time – never only monetary precisely because of the tendency for these in fact specifically bourgeois categories to present themselves as universal and natural givens.

This thoroughgoing critique of the categories of political economy distinguishes the critique of value from what its proponents term traditional or workers'-movement Marxism, the adherents and theorists of which are accused of treating the Marxian categories as 'empty husks that lie outwith or prior to the analysis itself', with the result that in their analysis the 'Marxist' character of their work consists solely in expressing the results of their research within these categories (Lohoff, 1986: 51). In doing so, they miss the force of Marx's work, and set out an alternative political economy, rather than its critique:

In no way does the dynamic of the logic of the unfolding of the categories flow into the analysis. They are treated statically, as invariable, transhistorical laws of the capital relation that from the beginning remain permanently fixed. Marx, in contrast, was always essentially concerned with the relation between the conceptual-logical and the historical development of capital. The categories that he worked through determine capital in its processual development. (Lohoff, 1986: 51)

This approach sees in Marx the critical project of the formulation of the categories which correspond to the development of the capitalist mode of production – critical in the sense not only that the uncovering of their historical and social specificity undermines their claim to universal, transhistorical validity, but also that it is oriented towards their dismantling. And more specifically, it

is a rejection of the understanding that value is what is produced by labour (understood ahistorically as all deliberate activity oriented toward the production of a personal or social benefit), according to which the problem of capitalism is the fact that this value is not equitably distributed (that is, that the expropriation of surplus value by the capitalist constitutes an injustice, which ought to be remedied by the fair redistribution of the surplus value away from the exploitative class, and to the workers who produce the value). Against this view, the critique of value is aimed not at overturning an injustice with respect to the distribution of the value produced by labour, but rather at abolishing the domination over life exerted by the reified categories of abstract labour and abstract value.

In this respect the critique of value develops a tendency which is present in Marx's late writings, but not thought through to its fullest extent. The critique of value thus seeks to take the implications of Marx's mature critical theory beyond the limits of his own writings:

Marx distinguishes between abstract and concrete labor, and calls this the dual character of labor particular to commodity-producing society. He thus suggests – and also states explicitly – that it is not until the level of this doubling, or splitting, that a process of abstraction takes place. Abstract labor is abstract insofar as it moves away from the concrete material properties and particularities of the respective specific activities – for example, the work of a tailor, a carpenter, or a butcher – and is reduced to a common equivalent. But Marx overlooks here (and in any case, Marxism has yet to develop an awareness of the problem at this level) that labor as such is already such an abstraction. And not simply an abstraction in thought like a tree, animal, or plant; rather, it is a historically established, socially powerful, actually existing abstraction that violently brings people under its thumb. (Trenkle, [1998] 2014c: 2–3)

Central here is the distinction between concrete labour – the concrete, particular activities carried out during the labour process – and abstract labour – the conception of human labour as such that is indifferent to its material

content. Whereas for Marx abstract labour is the source of exchange value while concrete labour, as the particular activity by which use values are produced, is the source of material wealth (Marx, 1961: 23), for Trenkle even the thought of concrete labour as such is already an abstraction. The notion of concrete labour as such already presupposes a conception of labour as productive activity that is distinguished from the other aspects of life. As Trenkle argues, it would not have made sense for a medieval peasant to measure the time spent on the harvest in hours and minutes ‘because this activity merged with his life, and its temporal abstraction would have made no sense’ (Trenkle, [1998] 2014c: 6). No more than use value is concrete labour to be conflated with the material wealth that represents the realization of human potential set free from the constraints of commodity production. The conception of concrete labour already depends on the establishment of an autonomous sphere of economic production, and on the separate autonomous spheres of leisure, culture, politics and religion which house that which is not deemed to be productive.

This abstraction exerts a force on human life as what Trenkle, following Alfred Sohn-Rethel, terms an *actually existing* or ‘*real abstraction*’ resulting from spatio-temporal activity’, and thus an abstraction which ‘does not originate in men’s minds but in their actions’ (Sohn-Rethel, 1978: 20, emphasis original). This is a concept that Sohn-Rethel develops from Marx, arguing that in the process of exchange qualitatively different activities and objects are rendered identical. This is a concept (if not a term) which goes back to Marx’s contention that the abstraction of the concept of labour from the concrete particularity of the activities that are thought under it is the result not simply of a mental process according to which these activities are thought together under a single concept, but rather of a particular set of social and economic actions that have become habitual and commonplace:

[T]his abstraction of labour as such is not the intellectual result of a concrete totality of labours. The indifference to particular labour corresponds to a social form in which individuals move from one labour to another with ease, and the particular kind of labour is coincidental to them – thus they are indifferent to it. Here labour has become, not only in its concept but also in reality, a means of creating wealth as such, and has ceased to be entangled with individuals in their particularity as a determination. (Marx, 1961: 635)

Rather than the result of an intellectual process, the abstraction is already present in the workings of a social and economic system in which goods are produced for sale on the market. Abstract labour exerts a force on human activity not by means of our conceiving of labour in the abstract, but rather as the logic that underlies the abstract equivalence of commodity production and exchange – a logic that is revealed by the critique of political economy. This is what is at stake in Lohoff’s claim that the category of abstract labour is ‘not simply a prerequisite of the capital relation, but rather, at least in its more developed form, its product’ (Lohoff, 1986: 51): the capital relation and the form of wage labour that it enables create the concept of abstract labour that comes to pervade even the concept of concrete labour. The objection to abstract labour is not simply that it prevents us from thinking human activity oriented toward individual and social benefit except as mediated through the terms of exchange value, but rather the restrictive power which this abstraction exerts over our lives and actions.

Where the critique of value differs in its conception of the real abstraction from that of Sohn-Rethel is in its expanded application, beyond the sphere of commodity exchange. For Sohn-Rethel restricts his concern to the market, in which the sensuous particularity of commodities (and the sensuous particularity of the labour that produced them) is effaced as they are exchanged as fungible equivalents (cf. Jappe, 2013: 7–10). In this respect, in Sohn-Rethel’s theory ‘the social “nexus” always appears as a distinct activity, because

he conceives the sphere of circulation of commodity production as the alien element in society, but production for this sphere, conversely, as an anthropological constant' (Kurz, 1987: 83), and he is accused of having 'an abstract, ahistorical understanding of "untainted" production which is only ever haunted by exploitative intentions from the outside' (Kurz, 1987: 83). For the critique of value, in contrast, the abstract labour time that is expended in commodity production already presupposes the mediation of social reproduction through a comprehensive system of production and circulation, and thus of exchange on the market (Trenkle, [1998] 2014c: 8).

In commodity production there takes place something like the real subsumption of sensuous-material wealth under exchange value, as production carried out for the sake of the profit motive fundamentally alters what is produced. The manner in which the production of commodities alters their material constitution – understood not simply as their physical and chemical properties, but also as the ways in which we are able to interact with them, from the process of their making to the use we make of them. It is not simply that exchange value is indifferent to the sensuous particularity of the commodity by which it is represented, but rather that production for the sake of maximizing exchange value leads to changes – for the worse – in the product. While it is true that no chemist has discovered exchange value in a pearl or a diamond (Marx, 1962: 97–8), it is also the case that no one but a capitalist has undertaken research to discover what can be added to flashlight bulbs in order to *shorten* their lifespan (cf. Slade, 2007: 80–1).

## **PATRIARCHY, DISSOCIATION AND THE CRITIQUE OF THE SUBJECT**

What is diagnosed and criticized here is something like a double process of abstraction or of mystification. In the first part of the

process, the value of the commodity (as the unity of use and exchange value) claims to stand for something universal and transhistorical – for individual and social benefit *tout court*. In the second, the use value which is defined against exchange value within the commodity, and which itself appears to represent the universal and transhistorical material content that only appears in the form of the commodity under capitalist social relations, is on close examination revealed not only to be conceptually dependent on and unthinkable without the exchange value that is peculiar to this commodity form, but also to have undergone specific, material changes – to the detriment of the product, of the person who will buy it, and often also both of those who make it and of those who live close to the site where it is made or where the waste products of its manufacture are disposed of – as a result of its subordination to the logic of exchange and of profitability within the process of production.

Moreover, the claim of abstract value to stand for human benefit as such masks the fact that economic value is predicated on the separation – or dissociation – of the public and private spheres, in which the 'male' public sphere of abstract labour, state, politics (and art and science) understands and presents itself as superior to the 'female' private sphere of familial, sexual and reproductive labour (Scholz, 1992: 25). Scholz theorizes this as 'value-dissociation', a process by means of which 'all the sensuous content that does not go into the abstract value form without leaving a remainder, but nonetheless remains a prerequisite of social reproduction (sensuality, emotionality etc.), is delegated to woman' (Scholz, 1992: 23). Abstract, economic value is thus predicated on its exclusion of the activities that are in fact the condition of the possibility of its reproduction (Scholz, 1992: 24). And just as the critique of value seeks not for a more equitable distribution of the value produced by abstract labour but rather for the abolition of both labour and value, Scholz's critique goes

beyond the appeal for the recognition of the activities of the private sphere as labour: 'the women's movement has no need to redefine feminine activity as "labour" in order to prove its (moral and economic) value, for "labour" in this sense is itself as it were the "root of all evil"' (Scholz, 1992: 20). Such an appeal to the value of domestic labour takes abstract value's claim to universality at face value, and in doing so misses the fact that, in Scholz's terms, 'the "feminine sphere" and the characteristics that are ascribed to women merely represent the flip-side of the coin of abstract "labour" in patriarchy as it is mediated through the value form' (Scholz, 1992: 20). The critique of value aims at the abolition of the masculine and feminine sphere alike.

The dissociation of the feminized sphere is not merely a side-effect of the fetishism of value and labour and of the production of commodities as an end in itself, but is rather in a relationship of 'dialectical mediation with value':

That which is dissociated is not a mere 'subsystem' of this [value] form (such as is the case for foreign trade, the legal system or even politics) but essential and constitutive for the social relation as a whole. That is to say, the relationship between value and dissociation is not one of immanent logical 'derivation'. Dissociation is value and value is dissociation. Each one is contained within the other, but without being identical with it. (Scholz, 2000: 18)

The fetishistic form of value as an end in itself, that is, is not the cause of the dissociation; the two are mutually dependent and mutually constitutive. For Scholz the dissociated sphere is that which cannot be grasped by value, akin to but not coterminous with what Adorno theorizes as the non-identical, that of the object which is particular and qualitatively different, which is effaced by the object's subsumption under its concept (Adorno, 1966: 17). The difference lies in the fact that dissociation is not the imposition onto the dissociated of an external structure that is indifferent to its particularity; rather, 'the dissociated represents the dark

underbelly of value itself', dissociation is 'a precondition which ensures that the contingent, the irregular, the non-analytical, that which cannot be grasped by science, remains hidden and unilluminated, perpetuating classificatory thought that is unable to register and maintain particular qualities, inherent differences, ruptures, ambivalences, and asynchronies' (Scholz, [2009] 2014: 132).

This process of dissociation has hugely significant implications for the theory of the subject, the constitution of which is revealed to depend on its failure to recognize the falsity of its claim to universality. For the subject is constituted in opposition both to the 'non-subject', who carries out the functions that are split off from the rational political and economic subject, and to the demonized 'un-subject' onto whom all the subject's evil aspects can be projected, allowing the white, male, Christian subject to appear as virtuous and morally unblemished (Lohoff, 2005: 23–4, 26). The dissociation of the sphere of domestic and reproductive labour is the condition of the possibility of the emergence of a (masculine) subject who acts within the public sphere. At the same time, the emergence of the subject form depends on its creation of a repository for all shameful or evil motivations and behaviours. In the emergence of capitalism this is the figure of the Jew, and Lohoff traces a connection between the religiously motivated medieval antisemitism of the blood libel and the exterminatory racial version found in National Socialism – in this respect Lohoff dissents from the thesis of the radical distinction between racial and religious antisemitism, but does so not by theorizing National Socialism as a kind of relapse to 'medieval' ways of thinking, but rather by seeing religiously motivated early-modern antisemitism as itself already heralding the history of modernization (Lohoff, 2005: 25–6). The constitution of the subject form is thus dependent on a false universality – the misrecognition as universal of a form that is in fact highly gendered and racialized.

## LABOUR AND THE FETISH OF CLASS STRUGGLE

This critique of the subject provides the theoretical context for the critique of value's rejection of labour and (anti-)political orientation away from the labour movement as the force of social emancipation. The political left is criticized for only taking exception to the exploitation of labour by capital, but never to labour itself – the labour movement 'only ever wanted the "liberation of labour" but not the liberation *from* labour' (Gruppe Krisis, 2004: 16, emphasis original). This leads to what is diagnosed as a 'fetish of class struggle', the critique of which follows from the critique of the ahistorical conception of labour according to which the working class 'appears as the absolute entity of "labour" in an a historical sense', which leads to a politics which are directed not 'against the social relation as such (which always also comprises the "working class")', but merely against the subjective action of the "capitalists" in accordance with their "interests"' (Kurz and Lohoff, 1989: 11).

Class struggle remains immanent to the presuppositions and the categories of commodity production, and by supporting the working class in its opposition to capital, continues to support the opposition, rather than taking aim at the very division of the world into classes: "'Class struggle" is in this sense nothing other than the subjective side of the "self-movement of capital" – that is, of the self-valorization of value in the form of an unconscious social relation that is external to individuals' (Kurz and Lohoff, 1989: 11–12). The adoption of the perspective of the working class thus remains trapped within the confines of commodity fetishism no less than bourgeois subjectivity. That is to say, the adoption of the perspective of the working class renders any critique impossible: 'Thought that is developed on the basis of this untrue, constituted subjectivity remains unable to conceive of its true form, of which the commodity form of social reproduction is

the foundation' (Kurz and Lohoff, 1989: 12). The adoption of the perspective of partisanship for or belonging to the working class represents a limitation of thought. The adoption of a positive and affirmative reference to class, and to class conflict, which is assumed in advance and taken as the starting point of any critique, prevents the radical critique of the bourgeois categories and institutions of nation and state – for these are products of the same stable as that of the working class.

In his account of 'Struggle without Classes', Trenkle concludes that the future 'belongs not to class struggle, but to an emancipatory struggle without classes' (Trenkle, [2006] 2014a: 221): here the focus is on the dissolution of the proletariat as class. Trenkle thus seeks to identify 'approaches and moments which point to the perspective of a liberation from the totality of commodity society' in struggles that go beyond the capital–labour relation and its negation, arguing that while struggles and movements such as those of 'the Zapatistas, the autonomous currents of the Piqueteros, and other grass-roots movements' must not be romanticized or idealized, they nonetheless contain perspectives, approaches or tactics which can help liberate social, material wealth from the constraints of the value form (Trenkle, [2006] 2014a: 220–21). His concern is with the nature of the struggles that have emerged in recent years, and with their prospects of leading to social emancipation, in the light of four principal trends that he identifies that characterize the labour in contemporary society. The first is the tendency toward the replacement within the labour process of direct production with processes of surveillance and control – which is internalized to an ever greater extent, most obviously in the case of freelance and self-employed labour, but also in the case of the initiatives described in the jargon of contemporary management as enhancing the enrichment or personal responsibility of employees. In this respect what is easily presented as empowerment of employees in fact involves their adoption,



coerced or induced, of the functions of monitoring and controlling themselves: the contradiction between labour and capital is shifted 'to a point within individuals themselves' (Trenkle, [2006] 2014a: 204).

The second is the tendency away from the identification with a single and determinate part of the production process – in the form not only of the 'job for life' at a single company, but also with a particular occupation or trade. The demand for a flexible workforce preaches the doctrine of compulsory availability, whatever the task and the conditions. 'Whoever wants to survive must be prepared perpetually to switch between the categories of wage labor and self-employment, and to identify with neither – although, of course, even this brings no guarantee' (Trenkle, [2006] 2014a: 205). The third tendency is the emergence of hierarchies and divisions that 'cut across the categories of capitalist function rather than overlapping with them', both within the workforces of sites as discrepancies and tensions are opened up between permanent and casualized workers, and across society as a whole as the differentiations between different sectors with respect to pay, working conditions and status are exacerbated (Trenkle, [2006] 2014a: 205–6). The fourth is the explosion in long-term unemployment and the resulting emergence of a new underclass characterized primarily by the fact that its members are deemed dispensable and redundant by the process of production and valorization.

These trends help to account for the paradox that even while 'social contradictions are being exacerbated, class-contradictions are being defused' (Schandl, 2002: 12). The opening up of contradictions and tensions that are not strictly those between capital and labour, and the increasing internalization of those that are into subjects that are as it were stuck in an abusive and dependent relationship on labour that renders them increasingly superfluous, lead to a situation in which, in Schandl's terms, the process of declassing 'does not pertain solely to the

so-called proletariat, but encompasses everybody' (Schandl, 2002: 12). Against this background, the emergence of any kind of class struggle, let alone the anti-class struggle of a negatively conscious proletariat oriented toward its own abolition, would involve either the active struggle to create a negative proletarian self-consciousness that is oriented toward its own abolition, or the assertion that the actually existing struggles that emerge at the moment are somehow in truth or essence those of a revived working class. This latter manoeuvre in particular involves either the categorical extension of the working class into 'a metacategory which fundamentally encompasses capitalist society in its entirety' and is thus meaningless (Trenkle, [2006] 2014a: 209), or the reinscription of all conflicts as class struggle, with the result that there is no analytical basis for the exclusion from the concept of working-class struggle of, for example, reactionary populist and ethnic-nationalist movements, or the fundamentalist pentecostal religious revival moments of Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa (Trenkle, [2006] 2014a: 215).

The first option, however, is diagnosed as the product of economic and social conditions that no longer pertain:

The movements of social resistance at the start of the nineteenth century emerged against the background of a repression of non- and proto-capitalist living conditions that were incompatible with the industrial-capitalist mode of production. In the light of this collective experience and of the tremendous imposition that was daily factory labor and the selfishness of capitalist competition, cultural patterns of interpretation and forms of practical solidarity were developed in resistance, which ultimately led to the formation of the consciousness of belonging to a class with a common fate. (Trenkle, [2006] 2014a: 219)

The four tendencies of contemporary labour society identified above do not constitute a process where the moments of the richness of life are under threat of extinction by the emergence of industrial production. The underlying structure here is an exacerbation of the

tendency described in Adorno's account of the dependence of leisure or free time on the state of society as a whole, which 'holds human beings under a spell' with the result that 'they do not dispose over themselves truly freely either in their labour or in their consciousness' (Adorno, 1977: 645). Critique is focused not simply on the increasing commodification of a leisure industry in which the products of labour (be they goods or services) are sold back to those who produce them for use in the free time that is determined solely negatively against labour time, but rather on the expansion of labour by means both of the increasing internalization of the capital-labour relation into the individual consciousness, and of the increasing permeability of the limits that no longer rigidly demarcate its border to what is not labour, resulting in the inability to switch off from work, and the saturation of even notionally free time with a mentality of labour – tendencies which are further sharpened by the rise of the gig economy.

Against the context, the attempt to create the consciousness of a cohesive proletariat represents a Sisyphean struggle against economic forces that prevent this cohesion. As Trenkle observes, there is 'no new working class emerging here; what is rather taking place is the action of people who have been formed into subjects of labor and the commodity but who can no longer ordinarily function as such' (Trenkle, [2006] 2014a: 219). Moreover, the attempt to establish the class-consciousness of a coherent class – let alone a negative consciousness oriented against its own abolition – risks missing the more urgent task, as expressed in Schandl's formulation that 'it is not deproletarianization against which it is imperative to struggle, but rather the ever-present process of dehumanization' (Schandl, 2002: 12).

## TERMINAL CRISIS

The fragmentation of class struggle is theorized as the reflection of a process in the

fragmentation of capitalism, and more specifically the 'intensification of the logic of capital in the stage of its decomposition' (Trenkle, [2006] 2014a: 219). This decomposition is what is identified as the terminal crisis of capitalism, the diagnosis of which is set out in the text with the strongest claim to being the founding text of the critique of value, Kurz's account of 'The Crisis of Exchange Value', which was published in the first volume of *Marxistische Kritik* in 1986, and which sets out, by means of an analysis and exposition of Marx's account of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, the crisis theory that will underpin the critique of value. Kurz examines the implications of the divergence of abstract value from material social wealth according to which production and productivity refer at once to the creation of material wealth as the things that are required for life and that make life worth living, and to that of abstract economic value. For Kurz, it is not simply the case that capital prioritizes abstract value over material wealth to the point of indifference to the latter, such that as long as enough abstract value is produced it is of no consequence to capital whether its commodities fulfil any useful or beneficial social function: that as long as a market can be found, that is, from the perspective of capital it makes no difference whether its products are swords or ploughshares. Even the absolute quantity of value produced is irrelevant, for capital 'is fixated only on surplus value' (Kurz, [1986] 2014: 48).

Kurz proceeds by means of an elucidation of Marx's analysis of the category of relative surplus value, and specifically the phenomenon whereby increases in productivity as a result of the development of new technologies can enable a workforce of the same size to produce a greater quantity of commodities – or the same level of production to be maintained with a radical reduction in labour power. Productivity, then, increases. But this increase is brought about by a change in the organic composition of capital, as the ratio

of constant to variable capital grows significantly: it requires a higher investment in the technological means of production. As a result, there is a decrease in the quantity of surplus value embodied in each individual commodity: the constant capital (the technological means of production, the value of which is merely sustained and reproduced in the production of commodities) grows, while the variable capital (that is, labour power – the part of capital that produces additional value) decreases.

The central dynamic here is that of technological developments that reduce the amount of labour time required to produce a given commodity. Initially, the introduction of the new technology on a particular site or within a particular enterprise enables its inventor or first adopter to increase the surplus value in production, leading to an additional or extra profit, even when undercutting competitors. However, as these competitors are driven out of business, the new technology becomes the norm across the sector, and the additional profit disappears again – with this the rate of surplus value reverts to the original figure, and the absolute quantity of surplus value decreases with respect to the original figure before the introduction of the new technology. Scientific and technological developments are decisive here. In this respect Marx's famous observation in the *Grundrisse* that the state of advancement of science and technology influences the creation of wealth much more than the number of hours of labour time expended (Marx, 1983: 600) plays a central role in the development of value-critical crisis theory.

Capitalist competition, the driver of which is the profit motive, enables growth in prosperity and absolute rises in prosperity, but, as Claus Peter Ortlieb has shown, only up to a certain point (Ortlieb, [2008] 2014: 92–8). Before this point is reached, this competition appears to be the driver of innovation and creativity as such – which in a respect it is, but its primary aim not to make better (or more desirable) products (although this can of

course in some case be a means of satisfying the profit motive by capturing market share), but rather of doing so more efficiently (that is, by expending less labour power). But after this point has been reached – when the rate of surplus value reaches 1 – the continued expulsion of labour from the process of production, which continues to be driven by the profit motive, slowly comes to destroy the basis for the production of surplus value, and with it the production of commodities.

Although capitalist competition appears to drive both creative invention and increases in material wealth, in fact these are as it were positive side-effects of the pursuit of increased valorization. But this only functions while there is a correlation between value and material wealth. Once this correlation is broken, when the mass of surplus value has reached its peak, it becomes increasingly clear that these side-effects are temporary, and that growth in productivity is in fact indifferent to material wealth: 'if the destruction of material wealth serves the valorization of value, then material wealth will be destroyed' (Ortlieb, [2008] 2014: 112). It is not only the case, firstly, that capital is indifferent to the content of what it produces – that there can be competition for the more efficient production of more effective weapons, for example, as well as for goods that enrich life – or, secondly, that the production of goods can take place at the as it were incidental cost of environmental degradation or the decrease in quality of life, as natural resources are destroyed for the sake of increased valorization, and experience is impoverished as a result of the increasing commodification of life. It is also the case that if it serves valorization, commodities themselves will be destroyed, as was seen for example in the case of the bulldozing of thousands of foreclosed homes in the United States in 2010–11. Such processes go beyond the merely incidental destruction or degradation of non-commodified material wealth in order to produce value in the form of the commodity, but rather involve the wilful destruction of the material wealth of

commodities for which there is no market, in order to increase the sale price of other such commodities.

Acts of destruction of this kind testify to the growing divergence of the production of value from the enrichment of life in the fullest sense. Rather than driving innovation and creativity, commodity production harnesses and restricts it, letting it flourish only when it (as if incidentally) allows it to produce more abstract value. Or, put differently, the innovation, creativity and productivity with which commodity society is concerned are those that enable the production of more abstract value – whatever the cost. And yet the two forms of wealth remain commonly conflated, despite their increasing divergence from one another – perhaps the most striking contemporary manifestation of this phenomenon is theorized by Lohoff and Trenkle as ‘inverse capitalism’, in which the real economy with its production of goods has become dependent ‘on the growth of fictitious capital’ (Lohoff and Trenkle, 2012: 211). This concept of fictitious capital is developed from Marx, who coined the term in the third volume of *Capital* to analyse the crisis of 1857 to refer to the phenomenon whereby capital seems to multiply itself as a single debt is sold on, and yet functions as capital in different forms in the hands of different people (Marx, 1964, 3: 483–5). But whereas in Marx’s time fictitious capital played a subordinate role to functioning capital, the inverse capitalism that Trenkle and Lohoff theorize consists in the fact that fictitious capital has itself become the motor of accumulation.

As the financial rewards from the production of commodities fall away, capital takes flight in search of valorization to the speculative economy and to what Lohoff terms ‘second-order commodities’, commodities ‘which demonstrate the specific use-value of representing *future* value’ (Lohoff and Trenkle, 2012: 19, emphasis original). In this respect the massive growth in the speculative economy seen in recent years is not the cause of the ongoing financial and economic crisis,

but rather a means of initially deferring what was previously theorized as a long-overdue crisis of the Fordist economy, which subsequently opened a new phase of capitalist expansion and accumulation. This theorization underlies the prescience of the critique of value’s analyses – or, more cruelly, the criticism, in the words of the old joke, that the diagnosis of the decline in the production of surplus value has successfully predicted six of the last three crises. However, the force of the critique of value is not its ability to forecast the state of the economy, but rather its theoretical account of capitalism’s tendency toward crisis – not multiple punctual or cyclical crises, but rather a single process of crisis which is repeatedly deferred.

The more recent discussions thus share and develop the conclusion to which Kurz had come more than two decades previously with respect to the increasing expulsion of living labour from the process of production:

The new and final crisis of capitalism is fundamentally different from previous crises. All the crises that have happened up until now were crises of the growth of capital which could only temporarily interrupt the process of accumulation; the new crisis, however, reveals itself to be the end of the process of the accumulation of abstract wealth itself, because concrete material wealth can no longer be engendered within the limits of the value relation. The new crisis is thus no temporary crisis of overaccumulation or overproduction, but rather a crisis of the creation of value itself, from which there can no longer be a way out for capital. (Kurz, [1986] 2014: 54)

This diagnosis of the terminal crisis is at once the perspective from which the theoretical developments of the critique of value are produced and the optic through which its insights are made, the adoption of which signalled the renaming of the journal *Marxistische Kritik* as *Krisis* for the publication of its first (double) issue after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990. This change in name represents, as the issue’s editorial makes clear, no break from the development of the Marxian tradition, but rather the recognition that ‘working out

the revolutionary explosive force of Marxian theory involves precisely the radical critique of “Marxism” (Lohoff and Tomazky, 1990: 5).

## EMANCIPATION AND ANTI-POLITICS

The editorial to *Krisis* 8/9 advances the programmatic claim, in the light of Kurz’s account of the crisis of exchange value, that the increasing manifestations of and appeals to crisis – of the family, of the environment, of the individual, of state finances – are in fact the crisis of commodity-producing society itself, and attributes the failure of the proposed solutions to their failure explicitly to call into question the commodity form itself – which ‘to the consciousness that is imprisoned within the value form can only appear as the failure of every possible kind of solution’. As a result, ‘crisis becomes a synonym for apocalypse, and is thus forbidden from being thought’ (Lohoff and Tomazky, 1990: 7). In this respect the critical theory of crisis also involves a critique of the subject – both of the subject of cognition that cannot escape the presumptions of the value form, and of the search for an emancipatory subject that will bring about social and political transformation.

This goes hand-in-hand with an account of social domination as the subordination of life under the imperative for value to be valorized, akin to Postone’s conception of the abstract social domination that ‘subjects people to impersonal structural imperatives and constraints that cannot be adequately grasped in terms of concrete domination’ (Postone, [1993] 2003a: 3–4). In her analyses of patriarchy in commodity society, Scholz terms this a ‘subjectless domination’, in the sense that those who exercise domination ‘are not self-conscious subjects, but rather act in a historically unconsciously constituted framework of sociality’: even the dominant man who has ‘set mechanisms in motion in the formative

cultural and political institutions’ finds that they turn to dominate him as they ‘begin to lead a life of their own’ (Scholz, 1992: 22). Trenkle similarly theorizes the dependence of the establishment of capitalism on the ‘male-inscribed modern subject of labor and commodities, whose central essential characteristic is that the entire world becomes to him a foreign object’ (Trenkle, [2008] 2014b: 146). As more and more labour power is expelled from the process of production, the basis of this subjectivity becomes redundant, which ‘unsettles one of the basic pillars of male identity’, but because this process ‘leads to an intensification of competition at all levels of everyday life’ the result is not the progressive dismantling of this toxic identity, but rather its exacerbation, as qualities such as ‘hardness, assertiveness, and ruthlessness are more in demand than ever’ (Trenkle, [2008] 2014b: 149).

Scholz analyses the consequences for gender of conditions under which ‘capitalism is ceasing to be capable of reproducing humanity’ (Scholz, 2000: 17), paying particular attention to the effects of what Regina Becker-Schmidt terms the ‘double socialization’ of women, whereby they are simultaneously responsible for family and profession alike (Becker-Schmidt, 2008: 66). Theorizing the coincidence of the increasing (often compulsory) permeability of the divide between the two gendered spheres, and the frequently celebratory theorization of binary gender, Scholz observes that this has taken place ‘without fundamentally eradicating the hierarchy of genders’ (Scholz, [2009] 2014: 135). For gender is not simply a narrative or a signifier that can be deconstructed by means of a discursive intervention, but rather a structure of domination with its own history. Far from being an emancipatory liberation from ‘modern subjects with their fixed (sexual) identities’, what Scholz terms ‘postmodern flexi-individuals’ are themselves also the result of a patriarchal set of economic and social conditions: both are subject forms that are

'structured by patriarchy in its commodity-producing form'. 'The new compulsory flexi-subject which postmodern capitalism relentlessly demands is thus nothing other than the continuation of the modern subject in splintered form, that continues to await its emancipatory abolition' (Scholz, 2000: 7).

Such an abolition involves a radical transformation of the sphere in which all political tendencies of both left and right have accepted and indeed support a 'social apartheid' whereby distinctions are drawn between those who are able to sell their labour and those who are not, a situation that is exacerbated in a situation in which 'the successful sale of the commodity labour power has become the exception rather than the rule', in which left and right 'no longer disagree as to *whether* an ever larger proportion of the population should be pushed to the margin and excluded from this form of participation in society, but only as to *how* this selection should be bulldozed through' (Gruppe Krisis, 2004: 7, emphasis original). The opposition between the 'neoliberal fraction leaves the dirty work of social Darwinism to the trusty "invisible hand" of the market' (Gruppe Krisis, 2004: 7) by dismantling the social safety net provided by the welfare state in order to marginalize those who cannot keep up with the competition and its opponents, and its opponents who are equally committed to the view that 'a human being without work is no human being at all' (Gruppe Krisis, 2004: 9) is a dispute merely as to the means by which people should be forced to work in order to gain access to a share of social wealth, both proceeding on the shared presumption of the necessity of labour, at least for those who have no source of income except by means of the sale of their labour power.

Politics depends on the separation of the political and economic spheres, as the satisfaction of needs is left to an economic mechanism that is deemed to be outwith the scope of decisions as to how society is organized. The critique of value thus rejects any struggle

that presupposes or supports the continuation of this hypostatized separation:

The aim of politics can only be to conquer the state apparatus in order to carry on with labour society. The opponents of labour thus wish not to occupy the control centres of power, but to shut them down. Their struggle is not political, but anti-political. (Gruppe Krisis, 2004: 48–9)

With the decline in the quantity of surplus value produced per commodity as a result of the continued expulsion of labour from the process of production as a consequence of ever more sophisticated automation, the foundation on which this separation rests is being slowly undermined. The ensuing progressive divergence of value from material wealth testifies to the need to wrest this material wealth from the control of value, in an anti-political struggle that is directed against the very presuppositions of the separation of the political from the economic.

There is no reason why this erosion of the political should represent more of an opportunity than a threat: the critique of value testifies to the inevitability of collapse of capitalism, but not to the inevitability of communism. With the decline in the power and efficacy of social mediation through the value form, there is a danger of a renewed assertion of more direct power in the form of resurgent authoritarian populisms, whether they come to power in the form of authoritarian measures imposed in response to an emergency or terrorist threat, or are swept into office on the back of the popular appeal of a pseudo-antipolitics that claims to reject the conventions of politics and resounds with the sense of loss of the labouring subject (and the ensuing threat to masculinity) with slogans such as the promises of 2016 to 'take back control' and 'make America great again'.

The kind of anti-politics that is required for any emancipatory response to the ongoing crisis involves the breaking of the hold value over material wealth, and the development and establishment of practices that gain direct and communal access to material

wealth. That is to say, the kinds of anti-political movement that are required have to go beyond and call into question not only the relationship between labour and capital, but also the mediation of material wealth through value. In this respect, programmes for a universal basic income perpetuate the self-evident certainty that money is the only means by which this wealth can be attained, and that the state must mediate it, while attempts to develop a 'free economy' are themselves confined within the assumption of the separation of the political from the economic, which rather than representing the germ that could flourish into an emancipated life can in fact only ever be a marginal form within the interstices of the decaying capitalist economy (Flatschart, 2012: 38–40). But the blockade of thinking material and in particular social wealth outside the constraints of the value form is not simply an error in thinking, but a powerful real abstraction that has developed over the course of a history of unfreedom that spans generations: the challenge posed by the critique of value is to establish the practices that can dismantle their power in order to unleash the world's potential shared wealth.

Such practices would necessarily involve an orientation toward universality that breaks the claim of politics – the sphere of the false universal – to stand for universality. In part this means raising the demand for free and universal access in opposition to the current mediation of access to social wealth through the commodity form and the principle of exchange. But it also means the development of new ways of making decisions as to how resources should be expended, and as to the forms that social wealth should take – rather than, for example, continuing to restrict access to complex technologies (or indeed those that pollute) to those who have the ability to pay (Lohoff, [2009] 2014: 180–1). A minimal condition of the development of such practices is the unforgetting of the distinction between the potentially emancipatory content of any emergent initiatives, and the reified, competition-driven ways in

which we are conditioned to act as commodity subjects (Lohoff, 2006: 82). Above all, it means continually striving to orient ourselves toward the possibility of what Lohoff terms 'a life beyond the religion of valorization and the subject' (Lohoff, 2006: 89).

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# The Frankfurt School and Fascism

Lars Fischer

On 9 May 1945, one day after VE Day, Theodor W. Adorno, who was in Los Angeles, wrote to Max Horkheimer, who was in New York. ‘I feel the need’, he explained,

to send you a few lines today, even though I have no ‘pragmatic’ reason to do so, simply because it is a pity that we have not experienced the demise of the Nazis together. Hitler’s regime has, after all, been the immediate cause of all the external developments in our lives for the last twelve years, and the expectation that things might change has been one of the decisive forces that have kept us alive. Conversely, the fact that our two lives have become conjoined is inextricably linked to fascism. Due to this phase good fortune and misfortune have become indissolubly entangled for us.<sup>1</sup>

The centrality of fascism in general and National Socialism in particular to the Frankfurt School’s evolution that Adorno stressed so clearly in this letter is obvious enough. It needs to be historicized in an appropriate manner, though. The dealings of the Frankfurt School with National Socialism were indeed immediate and they were, in the

first instance, of an empirical and practical nature. Much as the members of the Frankfurt School and their associates sought to develop a conceptual understanding of fascism in general and National Socialism in particular – as significant political movements and regimes whose policies and crimes they witnessed – this was a rather different undertaking from subsequent (and current) attempts to develop some sort of definitive, succinct and yet all-encompassing definition of fascism and/or National Socialism. To be sure, their concept of fascism doubtless became rather too inclusive in the course of the war. Even so, at the time, the task of identifying who or what was fascist was, for the most part, not one of the principal challenges faced by Horkheimer, Adorno, and their colleagues and associates because they lived in a world in which fascists and their supporters for the most part proudly professed their own fascism in all too inescapable a way. For all that fascism was generally rather more hesitant to speak its name after 1945, evidence

for the ‘afterlife’ of National Socialism in post-war Germany too was so palpable and abundant that it could be identified without any great finesse. The critical theorists’ assessments of fascism were heavily conceptual because they assumed that all descriptive work needed to be inherently conceptual to be of any genuine use, not because they assumed they were in the process of analytically isolating some unique category called fascism. They, in any case, focused most of their descriptive and conceptual work on fascism on German National Socialism, occasional cross-references to Italy or to ‘*international fascism*’ notwithstanding.<sup>2</sup>

The discussion of fascism among the members and associates of the Frankfurt School comprised a variety of positions and although Horkheimer and Adorno sided with Friedrich Pollock’s concept of state capitalism, no one ‘official’ stance ever emerged – I will discuss the one (rather improbable) text that arguably comes closest to formulating an ‘official’ position on the topic in some detail later. Indeed, at least in terms of their prognoses, even Horkheimer and Adorno did not see entirely eye to eye, as the latter noted in his letter of 9 May 1945:

As usual when we disagree it has turned out that we were both right. My bourgeois thesis that Hitler could not last has come true, albeit with a delay that makes it ironic. In other words: the forces of production of the economically more advanced countries proved stronger than the technological and terrorist spearhead of the late-comer: The war, following the overall historical trend, has been won by industry against the military. Yet your thesis about the historical force of fascism is also true, except that this force, like the embourgeoisement of Europe following Napoleon’s fall, has moved its abode.... Technically speaking, the [German] attempt to come to an understanding with the West at Russia’s expense has failed but it was inspired by the world spirit.<sup>3</sup> The conflict between the two absolute tickets from which there will no longer be any escape is clearly looming.<sup>4</sup>

I will return to Horkheimer and Adorno’s notion of ‘ticket mentality’ and their take on

the fate of fascism after 1945 towards the end of this chapter.

What all the contributions to the debates among the members and associates of the Frankfurt School had in common, however, was the fact that they were meant to serve one purpose before all others: to facilitate the most effective possible opposition to Nazi Germany and its fascist allies. This desire was to varying degrees complicated by the fact that for all those involved, the distinction between fascism in particular and capitalism in general was ultimately one not of kind but of degree – ‘Fascism has only revealed what was already inherent in liberalism’.<sup>5</sup> Yet this by no means prevented most of the members of the Frankfurt School from actively supporting the US war effort with their expertise – and with Horkheimer’s unreserved encouragement. To be sure, given the Institute’s dwindling finances, he was also relieved that some of its members were able to secure employment elsewhere, but it is quite clear that Horkheimer whole-heartedly endorsed their activities anyway. As is now well documented,<sup>6</sup> from 1942 onwards, Franz Neumann, Herbert Marcuse, Otto Kirchheimer, Leo Löwenthal and Arkadij Gurland worked in various capacities for the Office of War Information (OWI) and the Research and Analysis Branch (R&A) of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Pollock acted as a consultant for the Justice Department and participated in discussions about post-war European reconstruction under the auspices of Eleanor Roosevelt; and Adorno too co-authored at least two memoranda with Marcuse for circulation in Washington.<sup>7</sup> Neumann rose to deputy head and eventually acting head of the R&A Central European Section. Marcuse joined him there and was widely respected as ‘the leading analyst on Germany’.<sup>8</sup>

Raffaele Laudani has argued that the R&A Central European Section produced ‘a cohesive interpretation of the Nazi “enemy” with a clear Frankfurt imprint’, though he also concedes that Neumann and his colleagues

'nearly always lost' the 'political "battles"' they provoked 'inside the American administration'.<sup>9</sup> As the war drew to a close, they played a crucial role in putting together a *Handbook on Nazi Germany* and *Civil Affairs Guides* for the War Department's Civil Affairs Division,<sup>10</sup> and Marcuse drew up a list of entrepreneurs and economic officials who, despite not being members of the Nazi party or apparatus, had played an essential role in Nazi Germany.<sup>11</sup> Neumann eventually travelled to London, where he headed up a special research group on war crimes and worked with Robert H. Jackson, the US chief prosecutor at Nuremberg. In this capacity he evidently pushed his 'spearhead' theory of antisemitism so successfully that it was adopted by Jackson, which helps explain why the Shoah played such a relatively subordinate role at Nuremberg.<sup>12</sup> In other respects, his suggestions were repeatedly ignored, however, and Neumann resigned only days after the main trial opened.

There is a certain irony to Neumann's 'career' in the OSS, given that he had initially warned against undue identification with the United States. In his preface to the State Socialism issue of the *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* (on which more later), Horkheimer wrote: 'The unprecedented governmental power necessarily associated with state capitalism is now in the hands of a democratic and humanitarian administration'.<sup>13</sup> He then went on to stress the importance of ensuring it stayed there and the difficulties this was likely to entail. Commenting on a draft version of the preface, Neumann wrote: 'It goes without saying that I disagree with your positive assessment of American democracy but I am happy to drop my objection, given the political situation'.<sup>14</sup> It is indicative of the complications that arose from the contention that fascism in particular and capitalism in general differed not in kind but by degree that Adorno took issue with the same passage, albeit precisely with the opposite motivation: given Horkheimer's evident scepticism about the viability of a democratic

form of state capitalism, the statement that the current 'democratic and humanitarian administration' already held the 'unprecedented governmental power necessarily associated with state capitalism' in its hands might well be understood as a 'veiled attack on the Roosevelt administration'.<sup>15</sup>

Ambiguities of this kind were also reflected in the terminology deployed by Horkheimer and his colleagues and associates in their grappling with fascism. The terms fascism, National Socialism, state capitalism, authoritarianism and totalitarianism were occasionally contrasted but most of the time they were used more or less interchangeably. State capitalism, to some extent, was the odd one out insofar as we do find the occasional vague hint at the possibility – more precisely perhaps: at the desperate hope – that it might also be able to exist in a democratic, non-totalitarian guise.

In part, this relatively loose use of terminology reflected a genuine double bind that invariably arises if one insists, as one should, that fascism in general and National Socialism in particular were ultimately not fundamental aberrations from the course of Western history but a logical consequence of certain potentially problematic elements integral to that history. Fascism and non-fascism, far from being radically distinct entities, are thus placed on a continuum and the crucial question then concerns the transition, the qualitative leap, from a non-fascist state of affairs in which the potential for fascism nevertheless inheres to a fascist state of affairs in which, in turn, many of the characteristics of the non-fascist state of affairs are still present and yet take on a radically different meaning.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is evident that the relatively loose use of terminology also reflected erroneous assumptions on the part of the Frankfurt School about the overarching socio-economic processes they were encountering and which they saw, at the time, as leading inexorably to only one possible outcome, which they identified fundamentally with fascism. Yet the critical theorists'

concepts need to be judged not against current insight but against the backdrop of the convulsions of the first half of the twentieth century. That capitalism underwent massive changes and experienced a profound crisis at the time is obviously undeniable. Across the board, be it in the United States, in Europe or the Soviet Union, industrial production was subject to a previously unimaginable degree of centralization, streamlining and state intervention, leading to an equally unprecedented regimentation and functionalization of labour. From the perspective of the 1930s and 1940s, this economic regimentation was largely matched by ever more crass forms of political and cultural regimentation, which eventually played out against the backdrop of a previously unimaginable measure of destruction and barbarism. The apocalyptical account of an inexorable descent into a fascist/National Socialist/authoritarian/totalitarian hell on earth, which the Frankfurt School offered in the 1940s, may seem too teleological, mono-directional and all-encompassing with the benefit of hindsight. And yet, to want to accuse the Frankfurt School of undue alarmism seems an odd conceit against the backdrop of increasing repression and terror, the danger and then reality of the Second World War and, especially, the Shoah – not yet in its capacity as conceptual putty but as an ongoing, unfolding, seemingly interminable genocide.

When all is said and done, however, the Frankfurt School's relatively loose use of terminology was also just that – loose. Or, to be more precise, it was indicative of the overlap of a number of conceptual concerns that, certainly for Horkheimer and Adorno, were ultimately complementary yet competed with one another as they sought to work them out. I repeat: it is important to remember that many of the questions that continue to preoccupy scholars of fascism to this day were, for Horkheimer, Adorno, and their colleagues and associates of immediate practical import. That fascism differed in possibly decisive ways from what went

before was inescapable, yet neither could one reasonably claim that it had nothing in common with the order it replaced. Was fascism, then, ultimately, more of the same in a more extreme form or was it a qualitatively distinct phenomenon? Was fascism ultimately created and determined by economic necessity or had fascism submitted the economy to its own political ends (or was it in the process of doing so)? Given its extreme, violent and rapacious nature, was fascism inherently unstable and set to implode of its own accord in a relatively prompt fashion or did it represent a new order that could be sustained indefinitely or at least for the foreseeable future? As we will see, the question of fascism's potential to remain stable in the long run was a major preoccupation for the critical theorists. The explanation for this is simple enough: any suggestion of its acute instability might have been taken to mean that fascism was a problem that would resolve itself in fairly short order and/or whose implosion might yet precipitate a successful (proletarian) revolution in Central Europe. Assuming fascism was indicative of a new developmental phase of capitalism, was this new form of capitalism inevitable and/or irrevocable? If fascism was a form of state capitalism and state capitalism was the newest form of capitalism, could this new form of capitalism also take on a democratic guise or was fascism the only mode of sociation that it allowed for, and what exactly did that mode of sociation entail? And if fascism did represent the newest developmental phase of capitalism, would it be possible to defeat fascism without also overcoming capitalism?

In response to these and a host of attendant questions, the critical theorists deployed a range of conceptual approaches including the state capitalism concept, the racket theory,<sup>16</sup> the evolving conceptual frameworks of the integrative force of the culture industry, the dialectic of enlightenment and the administered world – and, far from least and closely connected to all of these, the core contention Adorno formulated in 1940 as follows: 'if it

is true that one can understand antisemitism only if one understands National Socialism, then it must be equally true that one can understand National Socialism only if one understands antisemitism'.<sup>17</sup> As we will see, contrary to the widely accepted narrative, Horkheimer and Adorno were in fact quite selective in their endorsement of Pollock's concept of state capitalism. Clearly, though, Pollock's emphasis on the elimination of the sphere of circulation in state capitalism resonated strongly with them and it is hard to resist the impression that this was so because it allowed them to hang their conceptualization of antisemitism rather neatly (to their minds) on a materialist and 'empirical' hook. As Adorno had written to his parents in February 1940, 'fascism in Germany, which is inextricably linked to antisemitism ... represents a universal tendency with an economic foundation, which you yourself, Dear WK [i.e., Adorno's father, Oscar Wiesengrund], recognized fairly early on, namely, the demise of the sphere of circulation'.<sup>18</sup> The ongoing attachment to this notion is indicated not least by the prominent role this particular 'element of antisemitism' continued to play in their discussions, even as their much more broadly contextualized work on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* progressed apace.<sup>19</sup>

The Frankfurt School's grappling with fascism per se, then, was, for the most part, pragmatic in nature, on the one hand, and ultimately subsumed under more wide-ranging conceptual concerns, on the other. This was also reflected in Adorno's letter to Horkheimer of 9 May 1945. Having just emphasized how central a role fascism had played in their lives, Adorno promptly added:

It is remarkable that life nevertheless takes on so much momentum of its own that one becomes quite oblivious to this reason, much as the bet on which his fortunes hinged is forgotten in the course of Faust's long existence. Only Mephistopheles perfunctorily and hastily thinks of it again at the end, yet it no longer bears any genuine meaning for the life, which has become autonomous.<sup>20</sup>

## TEXTS

The final two issues of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, now *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* – volume 9, numbers 2 and 3 – formed the crucial focal point of the Frankfurt School's contemporaneous grappling with fascism. Adorno expressly referred to the first of these as 'the State Socialism issue' [*Staatskapitalismusheft*].<sup>21</sup> It contained the following essays:

Frederick Pollock, 'State Capitalism';  
A. R. L. Gurland, 'Technological Trends and Economic Structure under National Socialism';  
Otto Kirchheimer, 'Changes in the Structure of Political Compromise';  
Max Horkheimer, 'Art and Mass Culture';  
T. W. Adorno, 'Spengler Today'.

The journal's final issue drew in part on a lecture series delivered by Institute colleagues at Columbia University in November and December 1941. The lectures were:<sup>22</sup>

Herbert Marcuse, 'State and Individual under National Socialism';  
A. R. L. Gurland, 'Private Property under National Socialism';  
Franz Neumann, 'The New Rulers in Germany';  
Otto Kirchheimer, 'The Legal Order under National Socialism';  
Frederick Pollock, 'Is National Socialism a New Order?'

The line up of the issue, which came out towards the end of May 1942,<sup>23</sup> was as follows:

Max Horkheimer, 'The End of Reason';  
T. W. Adorno, 'Veblen's Attack on Culture';  
Herbert Marcuse, 'Some Social Implications of Modern Technology';  
Frederick Pollock, 'Is National Socialism a New Order?';  
Otto Kirchheimer, 'The Legal Order of National Socialism'.

Presumably Neumann's lecture was omitted due to its overlap with the relevant discussion in his *Behemoth*, the first edition of which came out just before the final issue of the journal.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to these two journal issues and Neumann's *Behemoth*, further key texts were:

Horkheimer's 'Die Juden und Europa' ['The Jews and Europe'] (1939);<sup>25</sup>

Horkheimer's 'Autoritärer Staat' ['Authoritarian State'], originally written in 1940 with what would become the State Socialism issue of the *Studies* in mind.<sup>26</sup> In the event, it appeared in the mimeographed memorial publication for Walter Benjamin published by the Institute in 1942;<sup>27</sup>

Horkheimer's text on 'The Sociology of Class Relations' (1943);<sup>28</sup> and Adorno's corresponding 'Reflexionen zur Klassentheorie' ['Reflections on Class Theory'] of 1942,<sup>29</sup> neither of which were published at the time.

All nine volumes of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*/*Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* – and with them most of these texts – are now readily available online. Neumann's *Behemoth* has consistently been widely circulated and repeatedly reissued, and diehard scholars of critical theory can even access all five drafts of Horkheimer's 'Sociology of Class Relations' online among the digitized holdings of the Horkheimer Archive in Frankfurt. Consequently, the debates reflected in these texts can easily be reviewed by anyone whose interests go beyond the aspects I can reasonably discuss in this chapter.

Helmut Dubiel and Alfons Söllner published a German-language selection of these texts in 1981, focusing specifically on analyses of the National Socialist economy, law and state.<sup>30</sup> While a selection obviously needs to be selective, Horkheimer and Adorno would surely have been deeply resentful of this separation of the more obviously political and economic contributions from those that were, *prima facie*, more 'feuilletonistic' in character, insistent as they were that 'the analysis of a single work of art can lead more deeply into the inner structure of society than the most elaborate questionnaire with a giant apparatus for investigation and with tremendous statistical results'.<sup>31</sup>

## STATE SOCIALISM

It is generally accepted that a fundamental divide ran through the Frankfurt School in the late 1930s and early 1940s in terms of their understanding of the nexus between fascism and capitalism. This controversy pitted Neumann, Gurland and Kirchheimer, on the one hand, against Pollock, Horkheimer and Adorno, on the other.<sup>32</sup> On Pollock's account, fascism corresponded to a new, qualitatively distinct phase of capitalism, that of state capitalism in its totalitarian guise (though, as already indicated, he had relatively little to say about its potential non-totalitarian counterpart, democratic state capitalism). The chief feature of state capitalism was the redundancy of the market whose functions had been resumed by the political sphere. That political sphere, in turn, now consisted of a range of competing rackets. While Pollock thus insisted on the primacy of politics in state capitalism, and Horkheimer and Adorno endorsed his position, Neumann, Gurland and Kirchheimer continued to insist on the primacy of economic factors in understanding the dynamics at work in Nazi Germany.<sup>33</sup> It is no coincidence that this disagreement mapped neatly onto the assessment of the significance of antisemitism. While Adorno and Horkheimer insisted on the centrality of antisemitism to National Socialism and linked it to the ostensible demise of the sphere of circulation supposedly characteristic of state capitalism, Neumann maintained that 'one can offer an account of National Socialism without attributing a central role to the Jewish problem'.<sup>34</sup>

Yet while all this is certainly the truth and nothing but the truth, it is anything but the whole truth. To what extent Horkheimer and Adorno genuinely subscribed to Pollock's conceptualization of state capitalism is, as already indicated, a rather moot point.<sup>35</sup> While generally full of praise, Horkheimer had already expressed certain reservations about Pollock's outline for the essay that was going to open the State Capitalism issue of

the *Studies*. He had two principal reservations. Firstly, he feared that the portrayal of state capitalism, including its totalitarian variant, i.e., fascism, as the logical and ultimately inevitable contemporary guise of capitalism could be understood as an expression of partisanship for totalitarian state capitalism, a concern he reiterated on reading a draft of the essay itself.<sup>36</sup> That this was an ongoing issue for Horkheimer is demonstrated by the fact that he also raised it in the context of his harsh critique of Henryk Grossmann. Grossmann, Horkheimer suggested, was being Hegelian in that he subscribed to 'Hegel's crucial mistake', which had lain 'in his confusing theory and justification ... Do you really think', he asked Grossmann rhetorically, 'that the objective necessity of fascism, which draws all the currents of late capitalism into itself like a vortex, cannot be demonstrated just as easily as that of all the previous phases – perhaps even more so?'<sup>37</sup>

A second, more general worry was that Pollock's account was, by Horkheimer's and Adorno's standards, insufficiently dialectical. In his outline, under the final heading, 'End of the Economic Era', Pollock had suggested a scheme of thesis (feudalism), antithesis (private capitalism), and synthesis (state capitalism).<sup>38</sup> To Horkheimer's mind, the conceptualization underlying this scheme was 'still extremely shaky'. After all, it was 'certain aspects of Imperial Germany', not fascism, that 'seemed like a sort of synthesis between feudalism and private capitalism'.<sup>39</sup> He also expressed his unease at Pollock's contention that, in the new (state capitalist) state, 'the seemingly independent institutions namely party and economy are only its specialized arms':<sup>40</sup>

Party and economy (their coordination with 'and' is presumably just an oversight) are not just slaves but just as much masters, or rather: the means shape those who deploy them – and by economy I don't mean just the laws of the market under liberalism and by party not just the hierarchical form but also the interests that assert themselves within it.<sup>41</sup>

Having been asked by Pollock to comment on a draft of the article itself, Adorno was highly alarmed. As he explained to Horkheimer, the 'critical suggestions' he had made to Pollock

could deal only with details and questions of presentation and it would have been simply impossible to alert him to the actual extent of my concerns. Impossible, first, because as a non-economist I do not have the authority required to present those concerns but also, second, because it would have been psychologically irresponsible of me to articulate a critique genuinely reflecting my point of view. I can best summarize my concerns about this essay by saying that it represents an inversion of Kafka. Kafka presented the hierarchy of the office as hell. Here hell turns into a hierarchy of the office. Moreover, the whole thing is so thetical and it is written to such an extent, in the Husserlian sense, 'from above' [*von oben her*] that it lacks all conviction [*Eindringlichkeit*], not to mention the undialectical assumption that a non-antagonistic economy can exist within an antagonistic society. I anticipate a genuinely aporetic situation. If the essay comes out in this or a similar form it will only harm the reputation of the Institute and, above all, Fritz's own reputation, and unleash sardonic howls of triumph from the Lowes,<sup>42</sup> Neumanns *e tutti quanti*. On the other hand, it would be a grave setback for the State Socialism issue if it were not published.<sup>43</sup>

His own essay on Spengler 'only works as a philosophical link to the problem of state capitalism', Adorno added – clearly demonstrating the integral connection Horkheimer and Adorno envisaged between the 'political' and 'feuilletonistic' contributions in the journal – but it was 'far too modest to carry such an aspirational issue'. The only solution, Adorno suggested, would be for Horkheimer to rewrite Pollock's essay in a manner combining it with the motifs 'in your "State Capitalism"'. After all, the central motifs in Pollock's text

obviously originate in your essay but they have been simplified and de-dialecticized [*entdialektisiert*] to such an extent that they have been turned into their opposite. I am pretty certain that, if one could convince Fritz that this offers an opportunity to publish your theory in connection

with his work and merge the two pieces, he would go along with anything, and you would be able to turn it into the essay we envisaged. Perhaps the essay could appear under both your names, which would surely be a matter of great satisfaction for Fritz.<sup>44</sup>

Adorno did admit, though, that it was hard to dismiss ‘the argument that it would be a shame and uneconomical simply to omit your essay on state capitalism in such an issue’.<sup>45</sup> By ‘your “State Socialism”’, Adorno meant Horkheimer’s aforementioned essay on the ‘Authoritarian State’ (eventually published in the commemorative publication for Benjamin), which had originally borne the title ‘Staatskapitalismus’. This surely means that Horkheimer’s essay on the authoritarian state is a much better source for the understanding of Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s approach to state capitalism than Pollock’s flagship article on state capitalism in the *Studies*.

Horkheimer thereupon tried to impress on Pollock once again, this time in somewhat clearer language, though to little effect, the need to place greater emphasis on the ‘entanglement and ambiguity of the phenomena ..., the crossover between the concepts etc’. He urged Pollock to revise the text so that ‘it might all come across in a slightly less rigidly administrative manner’.<sup>46</sup> Adorno seems to have been slightly more successful in suggesting to Pollock, as he reported to Horkheimer, that he revise ‘the final part of the essay on democratic state socialism’ by giving it ‘the guise of questions and issues for future research. The intercalation of this protective device seems to me to be the only way to avoid embarrassing ourselves in the eyes of our friends by giving the impression that we endorse theses, which simply cannot be endorsed. What do you think? In terms of the content’, he continued,

the crucial problem is: does the tendency towards a crisis-free command economy presented in the text really express the objective tendency of reality or does the current antagonistic state of affairs continue to preclude the notional purity of this

construct in future too? I feel in no position genuinely to answer this question. My instinct is as follows: the truth of the concept lies in its pessimism, i.e., the view that the chances of domination in its immediately political guise being perpetuated are greater than those of getting out [from under it]. Wrong is the optimism, even for others. What is being perpetuated is not so much a stable and in some way rational state of affairs but rather, for the foreseeable future, a relentless succession of catastrophes, chaos, and terror – but with that, conversely, also a renewed chance of escape.<sup>47</sup>

Eventually, Horkheimer wrote a rather longer preface than usual for the State Socialism issue to place Pollock’s article in the ‘right’ context. Adorno certainly felt that Horkheimer had done an excellent job of solving ‘the tactical challenge of ruling out the misunderstanding that Fritz’s essay actually acknowledges the possibility of a non-antagonistic form of state capitalism [on the one hand] without making the slightest concession to the official Marxist optimism [on the other]’.<sup>48</sup>

Responding to the draft of the preface, Neumann wrote to Horkheimer:

you interpret Pollock’s essay in a manner that renders it entirely harmless so that it [the essay] entirely contradicts your interpretation [of it]. Anyone who reads Pollock’s essay and your preface must conclude that you have misunderstood each other. I appreciate entirely why you have undertaken this reinterpretation [*Uminterpretierung*]. You want to avoid distancing yourself from Pollock. I think it would be much better to let the disagreements become apparent, rather than hiding them and suggesting to the uninitiated that the two directors of the institute are talking past each other.<sup>49</sup>

In his response, Horkheimer assured Neumann that,

since my trust in your study of the economic processes in Germany is unlimited, I take your word for it that Germany in its current state comes nowhere close to being a form of state capitalism. On the other hand, I cannot shrug off Engels’s opinion that society is heading towards such a state of affairs. Consequently, I have to assume that it is in all likelihood looming and, to my mind, this renders Pollock’s construction a valuable basis for discussion, all its flaws notwithstanding.



He added that he could only agree with everything that Neumann had to say about the 'profound identity' between the fascist state of affairs and its predecessors.<sup>50</sup>

Nor does the story end there. Rolf Wiggershaus has pointed to Neumann's essay on 'Approaches to the Study of Political Power', published in 1950.<sup>51</sup> There Neumann explained that 'the Soviet Union presents a clear-cut marginal case where political power not only has made itself supreme but has become the fount of whatever economic power positions exist', adding that, 'had there been no war or had the Nazis been victorious, the Soviet pattern would have prevailed' in Nazi Germany too.<sup>52</sup> In short, he conceded that a primacy of politics was conceivable and that the momentum in Nazi Germany was indeed headed in that direction. Adorno, conversely, felt no compunction about praising Neumann's *Behemoth* to his students in 1968 as 'the most congruous socio-economic account of fascism to date',<sup>53</sup> though admittedly this praise hinged principally on Neumann's implicit appropriation of the racket theory. Neumann, Adorno emphasized, had demonstrated that the ostensible integration of society under National Socialism had been superficial at best. In fact, 'under the mantle, the very thin mantle of the total state, an almost archaic and anarchic struggle between the various social groups' had raged.<sup>54</sup>

### **HORKHEIMER'S 'PREFACE' IN THE FINAL ISSUE OF THE *STUDIES IN PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE***

One might well argue, then, that Horkheimer's preface to the State Socialism issue of the *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* is the closest there is to an 'official' contemporaneous statement on fascism by 'the Frankfurt School', especially since, Horkheimer's re-interpretation of Pollock's article aside, Neumann too – who had characterized

Pollock's essay on state socialism as 'contradicting the Institute's theory from beginning to end' and signalling a 'departure from Marxism'<sup>55</sup> – expressly confirmed that 'I find the formulations excellent and fully agree with the first 4¾ pages ... The formulations are exemplary and I would not want to change them in any way'.<sup>56</sup>

Given my earlier remarks about the critical theorists' preoccupation with the transition or qualitative leap between non-fascism and fascism it will hardly come as a surprise that Horkheimer began his preface by explaining that 'the articles in this issue deal with some problems implied in the transition from liberalism to authoritarianism in continental Europe'.<sup>57</sup> Note also the reference to authoritarianism rather than fascism. He then went on to develop a typological juxtaposition of pre-modern society (implicitly), 'classical' liberal capitalism (or, as Adorno called it, 'competitive capitalism' [*Konkurrenzkapitalismus*]),<sup>58</sup> monopoly capitalism and state capitalism. Initially, he explained,

private industry consisted of numerous independent entrepreneurs who in each country competed with likewise independent traders and bankers for social power. The outcome of this struggle expressed itself in the relative size of the capital controlled by each of them. Dominion over men and things was distributed among the members of this diversified social group according to the rules of exchange.

In contrast to the early modern absolute state that had gone before,

power had become decentralized; it had been transferred from relatively well-organized privileged bodies to the multitude of proprietors who possessed no other title than their wealth and their resolve to use it. The course of social production was the resultant of their respective business policies.

The 'seigneurial ordinances' of pre-modern society had been 'replaced by anonymous laws and autonomous institutions, by economic, legal, and political mechanisms

which reflected the size and composition of the nation's industry'. In the next phase,

[c]ompetition among independent entrepreneurs eventually culminated in the giant concerns of monopolist industry. Under their hegemony competition assumed a different form. Their urge to compete with equals within the nation declined, and with it the motive for increased investment and full employment. The great leaders of business and other avenues of social life found their peers only across the various national borders. Rivalry among equal powers shifted more and more to the international scene alone.

At this point Horkheimer moved beyond the predominantly economic line of argument, stressing that 'the transition affected culture as a whole'. He then moved straight on to 'the advent of fascism' – without offering any explanation as to how fascism related to monopoly capitalism.<sup>59</sup> 'Would it not be a good idea', Adorno had asked after reading the draft of the preface,

to say something explicit about the relationship between monopolism and fascism? I would be all the more in favor of a differentiation at this point because Kirchheimer's essay ['Changes in the Structure of Political Compromise'] is far too crude in equating the two. One could do this in a very Hegelian way and conceive of fascism as monopolism that has come into its own. Through its totalization, monopolism develops the new quality of fascism. The total domination of the monopolies transforms economy and society because it is identical with the elimination of the very market previously dominated by the monopolies.<sup>60</sup>

Yet evidently Horkheimer was not convinced of the need to explain this transition. 'With the advent of fascism', then,

dualisms typical of the liberalistic era, such as individual and society, private and public life, law and morals, economy and politics, have not been transcended but obscured. Individuals have become less and less independent of society, while society has fallen to the mercy of mere individual interests. With the decline of the individual, moral feelings that stood against authoritarian law have lost their force, while authoritarian law has been entrusted to a perverted moral sense.<sup>61</sup>

Combining the state capitalism concept, racket theory and elements clearly prefiguring the notion of the 'administered world', Horkheimer continued by arguing that

[r]igid discipline such as ruled inside the factory has now spread throughout the hinterland, borne forward by élites who in their composition and function have combined economy and politics. The leaders of industry, administration, propaganda, and the military have become identical with the state in that they lay down the plan of the national economy as the entrepreneur before them had laid down policy for his factory.<sup>62</sup>

The 'streamlined unconcern for material and ideal barriers' shared by the rackets that had usurped the state and their need to defend their status against the claims of the general-ity did not, however,

endow the ruling group with a real solidarity ... To counterbalance their antagonism, no common faith exists, as among the medieval clergy, no belief in chivalry and princely blood, as among the seigneurs of absolutism ... The unity of fascist leaders is cemented merely by their common fear of the people they tyrannize, by their dread of ultimate doom.

In fact, 'the big industrialists attack the fuehrers for their expensive political apparatus; the fuehrers blood purge the underfuehrers because of their radical claims; the generals would like to get rid of all of them'. The ruling 'clique', in short, 'does not become the dupe of its own ideologies; it shuffles them about freely and cynically according to the changing situation, thus finally translating into open action what modern political theory from Machiavelli and Hobbes to Pareto has professed'.

The next two sentences then read:

These are the basic features of authoritarian society as it took shape after the debacle of European liberalism, and most typically in Germany. Under National Socialism the distribution of goods is carried on by private means, though competition has become even more one-sided than in the era of the 200 families.

Evidently, then, fascism, authoritarianism and National Socialism could all be equated.

This alone makes it very difficult to discern what Horkheimer assumed the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity to be in these developments. Did 'the debacle of European liberalism', for instance, mark a caesura or simply a stage in the logical progression of capitalism? That Horkheimer and his colleagues should not have been troubled by this lack of clarity, I would argue, only bears out my contention that the Frankfurt School did not see itself as engaging in the purist distillation of an essentialist concept of fascism but was putting up a desperate fight to take on, both in conceptual and practical terms and in the most pragmatic way they knew how, a host of evidently interrelated and deeply troubling developments.

'Intra-national competition', Horkheimer continued, 'turns into oppression.... As long as its power had been decentralized', he explained,

industry, propelled by its self-interest, had to cater to the needs of the population and, willy-nilly, promoted technical, political, and social progress, at least to a certain degree. But under its totalitarian set-up big industry is in a position not only to impose its plan upon its former competitors, but to order the masses to work instead of having to deal with them as free parties to a contract. Popular needs determine production far less than they did through the market, and industry converges on the production of instruments of destruction.

Having reiterated the notion of the elimination of the market that was crucial to the state capitalism concept, Horkheimer now moved squarely into dialectic of enlightenment territory. 'Planned waste of intelligence, happiness, and life',<sup>63</sup> he continued,

succeeds the planless waste caused by the frictions and crises of the market system. The more efficiently authoritarian planning functions and the more smoothly nature and men are exploited, – the more are subjects and objects of the plan dominated by dead matter and the more senseless, exorbitant, and destructive becomes the whole social apparatus which is maintained for the perpetuation of power exclusively.<sup>64</sup>

All the rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, 'the blind calculative rationality of business life, so bitterly denounced by fascism, has carried over to the authoritarian society'. In it, the previous 'irrational rationality' of liberal capitalism had been replaced by 'madness with method'. While genuine socialism would be characterized by a humankind that is 'conscious of its common good and solidarity' and 'guides its own destiny', under 'this so-called socialism ... the natural conditions, the pressures of the masses, the rivalries of cliques play themselves off against each other in the sinister hearts of the *fuehrers* and emerge as the blind laws of fascist economy'. To be sure, 'during the earlier periods of private industry', too, 'the achievements of men turned increasingly against them; no masterpiece of engineering, no gigantic factory, no ladies paradise arose without enhancing the power of society as well as its misery'. Now, however,

in authoritarian society, technical, social, military advances are the handmaids of doom and disaster. Every frontier torn down by fascism only strengthens the walls separating men from each other, every means of communication it improves only places them farther apart, every scientific invention only blinds them the more to nature.<sup>65</sup> Progress in the abstract triumphs. The world belongs to the clever, and the devil take the hindmost, –

he continued, and then added: 'this is true more than it ever was', a formulation that surely epitomizes the intimate entanglement of continuity and discontinuity in Horkheimer's account. 'The soul of fascism', he went on, was 'the principle of letting nothing lie still, of stirring everyone to action, of tolerating nothing that has no utility, in a word, dynamism ... Moral taboos and ideals are abolished; true is that which has proved serviceable'.<sup>66</sup> What Horkheimer described in this instance as 'the soul of fascism' would, of course, resurface in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of the Enlightenment that had yet to develop a sense of its true purpose and power

and thus transcend its own limitations. 'Can anyone dare question the serviceability of the secret police, of concentration camps, blood purges against the insane, anti-Semitism, relentless activization of the people?' Horkheimer continued.<sup>67</sup> 'Fascists have learned something from pragmatism. Even their sentences no longer have meaning, only a purpose'.<sup>68</sup>

Fascism, he suggested,

feels itself the son, nay the savior, of the world that bore it. That world collapsed, as Marx had prophesied, because after it had reached a certain point in its development, it was unable to fulfill human needs. Technological unemployment has evidenced the crisis which cannot be alleviated by returning to the market system.

This would suggest that there was indeed no way back.

'National Socialism attempts to maintain and strengthen the hegemony of privileged groups by abolishing economic liberties for the rest of society', he went on. Turning finally to 'the German people' in general, Horkheimer suggested that 'in tolerating Hitler', they 'went along with the facts; given the prevailing inequality and injustice it was politic to profit from the weakness of the old world powers and to supplant them. With the world as it was, Hitler seemed more practical than Stresemann. National Socialism became the die-hard competitor on an international scale. And now', he concluded the general section of his preface, in a perhaps somewhat surprising twist, 'the question is whether the long established houses can remodel their enterprises fast enough to get rid of it'. Evidently, then, fascism need not have the last word after all.

Horkheimer then turned to Pollock's essay on state capitalism. Its topic was

an authoritarian society that might embrace the earth, or one that is at least autarchic. Its challenging thesis is that such a society can endure for a long and terrifying period. Basing itself on the most recent economic experience, it comes to the conclusion that all technical economic problems

that worried the business world can be handled through authoritarian devices. The article attempts to destroy the wishful ideas that fascism must eventually disintegrate through disharmonies of supply and demand, budget deficiencies, or unemployment.

That said, he clarified, 'the study is not confined to authoritarian society alone but conceives the latter as a sub-species of state capitalism, thus raising the question whether state capitalism might not be workable within the framework of democracy rather than terror'.<sup>69</sup> Then followed the aforementioned 'positive' remarks about US democracy that had worried both Neumann and Adorno. In the final short paragraph, Horkheimer relativized the significance of Pollock's essay by noting that it 'outlines the economic structure of state capitalism' and emphasizing that the remaining articles in the issue 'study the links between authoritarian society and the past, as well as the disharmonies that dominate its existing forms'.<sup>70</sup>

## AUSCHWITZ

Within about a fortnight (at most) of the publication of the final issue of the *Studies* and the Institute's commemorative volume for Benjamin, the BBC broke the news of the German genocide against European Jewry to the wider public (though it seems unlikely that somebody who was as well informed and connected and as heavily involved in trying to rescue Jewish relatives and associates from Europe as Horkheimer would not already have had a fairly good idea of what was going on). The impact of the Shoah on Horkheimer and Adorno is well documented. None too surprisingly, it led them to take an even bleaker view of the direction in which the world seemed to be heading. They also became rather less forgiving in their assessment of the role of the German population.<sup>71</sup> They now reasoned that the still very young history of fascism (or state capitalism) on its

own could not possibly account for the 'endless series of inconceivably horrible deeds, the most fiendish acts of organized murder and destruction ever accomplished by any people since the beginning of history' that were now being perpetrated by 'the German nation'.<sup>72</sup>

This explicit reference to 'the German nation' is indicative of a tension, which, from the final years of the war onwards, characterized their assessment of fascism/National Socialism for a while. Confronted with the Shoah, the critical theorists became increasingly preoccupied, even more so and – especially – more explicitly than before, specifically with German National Socialism, on the one hand, while the universalizing tendencies of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* project also led them to worry very seriously about the possibility that fascism, after the defeat of Nazi Germany, would come to dominate the West in its entirety, not least given the forces it would need to mobilize to fend off Soviet Communism. This is what Adorno meant when he wrote, in his letter to Horkheimer of 9 May 1945, that 'the historical force of fascism ... has moved its abode', and that 'the conflict between the two absolute tickets from which there will no longer be any escape is clearly looming'.<sup>73</sup>

'Ticket thinking' featured prominently in the seventh of the 'Elements of Antisemitism' Horkheimer and Adorno added to the version of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* published in Amsterdam in 1947. They argued that there was a tendency for people no longer to make actual judgements and ideological choices. Instead, they increasingly bought into comprehensive ideological package deals in an effectively automated manner that corresponded to the developmental phase of state capitalism.<sup>74</sup> While many of their observations are compelling, the implication seemed to be that this new mode of 'ticket thinking' marked the universalization of antisemitism and hence of fascism, though it arguably makes much more sense in the context of the administered world. Ultimately, what clearly

emerged from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, *Eclipse of Reason* and the concept of the administered world was the enormous destruction constantly wrought on human life by modern society even when its potential for fascism was not realized.

## AFTER 1945

Once it became clear, not only that fascism was not in fact taking over the West, but also that the development in many of the Western countries might well be characterized by a previously unprecedented measure of liberal-democratic governance and social redistribution, Horkheimer and Adorno, as far as I can see, conceptualized National Socialism as both an extreme case and as the dysfunctional other of the administered world. Take Adorno's suggestion of 1959 that National Socialism had 'anticipated the current mode of crisis management in a violent form'; it had been 'a barbaric experiment in state control over industrial society'.<sup>75</sup> In an interview published posthumously, nine days after his death, in West Germany's foremost weekly news magazine, *Der Spiegel*, Horkheimer made the same argument.

Fascism ... was the violent anticipation of the universally administered society ... National Socialism was unable to function seamlessly because the instruments for the domination of nature had not yet been perfected. Yet in principle National Socialism had already contrived a fully automated society, as it were – a society without morality and spirit.<sup>76</sup>

As long as the West remained more prosperous than 'the East' (i.e., the countries in the Soviet sphere of influence), 'the fascist variant is more likely to appeal to the masses than the eastern propaganda while, on the other hand, one does not feel pressed to resort to the fascist *ultima ratio*', Adorno wrote in 1959.<sup>77</sup>

Their formulations reflect the complex and potentially paradoxical dialectic they

were trying to address. Strictly speaking, if fascism was the extreme case of the administered world then the evolution of the administered world needed to be stopped in its tracks before it could unfold its potential for fascism again. If, on the other hand, fascism was the dysfunctional other of the administered world then the administered world needed to be defended against anything that might subvert it sufficiently to necessitate a return to fascism. Adorno's frequently (mis-) quoted statement that 'I consider the afterlife of National Socialism *within* democracy potentially more dangerous than the afterlife of fascist tendencies *against* democracy'<sup>78</sup> might suggest that, on balance, he was more worried about fascism as the extreme case of the administered world.

On the other hand, remarks he made in the lecture theatre in 1968 seem to point in the opposite direction. In the same lecture in which he praised Neumann's *Behemoth* to his students as 'the most congruous socio-economic account of fascism to date',<sup>79</sup> he explained to them that he saw a fundamental dialectic at work in the ever more comprehensive integration of society. Adorno suggested to his students that

increasing social integration as a visible phenomenon is generally accompanied by a tendency towards disintegration in the sense that the various social processes that are melded together but for the most part stem from diverging sets of interests, instead of maintaining the measure of neutrality, of relative indifference towards one another that was characteristic of earlier phases of social development, become more and more antagonistic towards one another.

'It seems to me that this is particularly evident', he added, 'in extreme situations in late bourgeois society like fascism'. What, then, Adorno continued, of the current situation, i.e., 1968? One of the potentially counter-intuitive implications of the racket theory is that not ever increasing all-encompassing social conformity and uniformity and state control is the precursor of fascism, but precisely its opposite: the fundamental

disintegration of society and the appropriation of state functions by competing rackets. Adorno therefore argued that the tendency he had previously described as coming to a head in fascism probably did not pertain to the 'more peaceful late bourgeois society' of 1968 because the current 'pluralism we are constantly being told about' was not so much a reality as an ideological claim and 'the various parallel forces are in fact encaptured and integrally determined by the all-dominating social system under which we live'.<sup>80</sup> Put very bluntly indeed one might say: fascism was characterized by great disunity and thus talked all the more about unity; 'more peaceful late bourgeois society', by contrast, talked a great deal about pluralism and diversity but was in fact profoundly integrated and streamlined. In short, it was the continued functionality of what Horkheimer, as we saw, described as a 'fully automated society ... without morality and spirit' that vouched for the fact that society was not threatened by the sort of disintegration to which fascism might be seen as the solution.<sup>81</sup> This account of fascism as both the extreme case and the dysfunctional other of the administered world renders no obvious way out and clearly points towards the continued need for metaphysics and 'theology or whatever one wants to call it'.<sup>82</sup>

The legacy of the Frankfurt School's grappling with fascism/National Socialism, then, is the commitment to dealing with this apparent paradox. We are tasked with pinpointing the potential for fascism wherever it shows itself while at the same time adhering to the principle of *determinate* negation and thus insisting on the very real differences between the potential for fascism and its actual realization. Adorno's new categorical imperative depends not only on a keen awareness of the fact that 'the objective social prerequisites that precipitated fascism continue to exist',<sup>83</sup> but also on the appreciation of what Auschwitz actually was, in other words, of what was so unprecedented and singular about Auschwitz that the need to prevent its recurrence merits a new categorical imperative in the

first place. The facile lumping together of distinct phenomena or their indeterminate negation across the board amounts not to a realization of this categorical imperative but demeans it and obstructs its implementation.

‘The black outlook notwithstanding – on which we were always in agreement’, Adorno wrote in his letter to Horkheimer on 9 May 1945,

there are grounds for joy all the same; on the one hand, because in a world that topples from one catastrophe to another even a short reprieve is a joy; on the other hand, because the utmost dread was still called Hitler and Himmler and while it could recur elsewhere it has not done so yet. Things turned out better than you thought this time and maybe they will also turn out better than both of us think in future.<sup>84</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* vol. 3 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005), 100; Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1996), 633.
- 2 Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 467; Herbert Marcuse, *Technology, War and Fascism* (London: Routledge, 1998), 245.
- 3 This was an ongoing concern of Adorno’s. As he wrote in 1959, the development of international relations was among the foremost ‘objective’ factors nurturing the ‘afterlife’ of National Socialism in post-war West Germany: ‘It seems to justify post facto Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union. Given that the Western world essentially defines its unity in terms of its resistance against the Russian threat, it looks as though it was sheer folly for the victors of 1945 to destroy the proven bulwark against Bolshevism [i.e., Germany] only to rebuild it again a few years later’ (Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit’, in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 8 [Darmstadt: wbg, 1998], 560).
- 4 Adorno, Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* vol. 3, 101; Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 634.
- 5 Max Horkheimer, ‘On the Sociology of Class Relations’, Max Horkheimer Archive [MHA], University Library Frankfurt, MHA: IX, 16, 4 (identical wording in all five versions).
- 6 Raffaele Laudani (ed.), Franz Neumann, Herbert Marcuse, Otto Kirchheimer, *Secret Reports on Nazi Germany. The Frankfurt School Contribution to the War Effort* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Marcuse, *Technology, War and Fascism*.
- 7 Rolf Wiggershaus, *Die Frankfurter Schule* (Munich: dtv, 2008), 339. Theodor W. Adorno, *Briefe an die Eltern, 1939–1951* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 196, 132, 151.
- 8 Quoted in Laudani (ed.), *Secret Reports*, 3.
- 9 Ibid., 8.
- 10 Ibid., 12.
- 11 Ibid., 14.
- 12 Ibid., 20–21. Neumann argued, even in full knowledge of the German genocide against European Jewry, that antisemitism was merely ‘the spearhead of terror’ because ‘the persecution of the Jews, as practiced by National Socialism, is only the prologue of more horrible things to come’. The Jews were just ‘used as guinea pigs in testing the method of repression’. ‘The extermination of the Jews’, he concluded, ‘is only the means to the attainment of the ultimate objective, namely the destruction of free institutions, beliefs, and groups. This may be called the spearhead theory of anti-semitism’ (Franz Neumann, *Behemoth* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1944], 550–1). See Lars Fischer, ‘Review: Jack Jacobs, The Frankfurt School, Jewish Lives, and Antisemitism’, in *German Quarterly* 89, 1 (2016), 93–7, here 93–6.
- 13 Max Horkheimer, ‘Preface’, in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9, 2 (1941), 195–9, here 199.
- 14 Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 109.
- 15 Ibid., 134; Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* vol. 2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004), 196.
- 16 See Gerhard Scheit’s contribution to this *Handbook*.
- 17 Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Nationalsozialismus und Antisemitismus’, in Adorno, Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* vol. 2, 539–95, here 541. On the Frankfurt School’s grappling with antisemitism, see my contribution, ‘Antisemitism and the Critique of Capitalism’, in this Volume of the *Handbook*.
- 18 Adorno, *Briefe an die Eltern*, 65–6. I mention this not least in connection with John Abromeit’s interesting suggestion that the relatively positive evaluation of the ‘classical’ capitalist entrepreneur that formed the foil against which they threw the functioning of state capitalism into relief could be understood as evidence of a reconciliation between Horkheimer and his father (John Abromeit, *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011], 419).
- 19 See, for example, Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 601–2. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the question of the Jews’ association with

- the sphere of circulation featured prominently in the third of the seven 'Elements of Antisemitism'.
- 20 Adorno, Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* vol. 3, 100–1.
  - 21 *Ibid.*, 139; Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 54.
  - 22 See Friedrich Pollock, 'Is National Socialism a New Order?' in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9, 3 (1941/42), 440–55, here 440, n1.
  - 23 Adorno wrote to his parents on 15 May that the issue would now come out in a matter of days, and on 5 June he inquired whether they had received both the journal and the Institute's commemorative publication for Walter Benjamin (Adorno, *Briefe an die Eltern*, 144, 146).
  - 24 Neumann, *Behemoth*. The preface is dated 23 December 1941. On 19 April 1942, Adorno suggested to his father that he should obtain a copy of Neumann's book from Leo Löwenthal (Adorno, *Briefe an die Eltern*, 138).
  - 25 Max Horkheimer, 'Die Juden und Europa', in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 8 (1939/40), 115–36; 'The Jews and Europe', in Stephen Bronner, Douglas Kellner (eds.), *Critical Theory and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 77–94. On this text, see my contribution to this Volume of the *Handbook*, 'Antisemitism and the Critique of Capitalism'.
  - 26 See MHA: IX, 12, 1–7.
  - 27 Max Horkheimer, 'Autoritärer Staat', in Institut für Sozialforschung (ed.), *Walter Benjamin zum Gedächtnis* ([New York Los Angeles], n.p., 1942), 123–61; also in Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 5 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1987), 293–319; 'The Authoritarian State', in Andrew Arato, Eike Gebhardt (eds.), *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1985), 95–117.
  - 28 Horkheimer, 'Class Relations'. This text, parts of which were included in *The Eclipse of Reason*, has had a somewhat unfortunate editorial history. The editors of Horkheimer's *Gesammelte Schriften* have published a specially commissioned German translation of the final version (Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 12 [Frankfurt: Fischer, 1985], 75–104) without, however, taking into account the hand-written comments on that version because, on their understanding, these were only meant to correct the 'clumsy' English. Conversely, Todd Cronan has recently published what he claims is the 'original essay in full and in its original English-language format' online (<http://nonsite.org/the-tank/max-horkheimer-and-the-sociology-of-class-relations>). As far as I can see, he has reproduced the longest of the versions preserved among Horkheimer's papers, which is almost certainly *not* the final version.
  - 29 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Reflexionen zur Klassentheorie', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 8 (Darmstadt: wbg, 1998), 373–91; 'Reflections on Class Theory', in *Can One Live After Auschwitz?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 93–110.
  - 30 Helmut Dubiel, Alfons Söllner (ed.), *Wirtschaft, Recht und Staat im Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt: EVA, 1981).
  - 31 [Idea, Activities and Program of the Institute of Social Research], second English-language draft, 22 June 1938, MHA: IX 55, 1, 19.
  - 32 See Eva-Maria Ziege, *Antisemitismus und Gesellschaftstheorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2009), 104–8; Moishe Postone, Barbara Brick, 'Critical Theory and Political Economy', in Seyla Benhabib, Wolfgang Bonß, John McCole (eds.), *On Marx Horkheimer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 215–56, here 215–25.
  - 33 Without wanting in any way to feed into the bizarrely decontextualized canard that Horkheimer and Adorno somehow abused Sohn-Rethel or willfully withheld assistance they easily could have provided him with, I would suggest that they certainly did miss a beat in allowing their philosophical differences to outweigh their initial enthusiasm for Sohn-Rethel's extremely interesting analyses of the economy and class structure in Nazi Germany. See Carl Freytag, Oliver Schlaudt (eds.), Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Die deutsche Wirtschaftspolitik im Übergang zum Nazifaschismus* (Freiburg: ça ira, 2016); Johannes Agnoli, Bernhard Blanke, Niels Kadritzke (eds.), Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Ökonomie und Klassenstruktur des deutschen Faschismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973); Christoph Gödde (ed.), *Theodor Adorno und Alfred Sohn-Rethel. Briefwechsel 1936–1969* (Munich: etk, 1991).
  - 34 Franz Neumann, copy of letter to Theodor W. Adorno, 14 August 1940, MHA VI 1a, 21–3. See also Jack Jacobs, *The Frankfurt School, Jewish Lives, and Antisemitism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 59.
  - 35 Indeed, in John Abromeit's recent account of Horkheimer's 'turn' to state capitalism, Pollock plays only a rather subordinate role (Abromeit, *Max Horkheimer*, chapter 9).
  - 36 Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 46, 91.
  - 37 *Ibid.*, 411.
  - 38 MHA: VI, 31, 333–5, 3.
  - 39 Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 47.
  - 40 MHA: VI, 31, 333–5, 2.
  - 41 Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 47.
  - 42 This was a reference to the sociologist Adolph Löwe who had recently moved from Manchester to the New School.
  - 43 Adorno, Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* vol. 2, 139; Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 54.



- 44 Adorno, Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* vol. 2, 140; Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 55.
- 45 Adorno, Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* vol. 2, 140–1; Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 55.
- 46 Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 91.
- 47 Adorno, Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* vol. 2, 160–1; Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 96.
- 48 Adorno, Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* vol. 2, 194; Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 132.
- 49 Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 110.
- 50 Ibid., 116.
- 51 Wiggershaus, *Frankfurter Schule*, 324.
- 52 Franz L. Neumann, 'Approaches to the Study of Political Power', in *Political Science Quarterly* 65, 2 (1950), 161–80, here 176.
- 53 Theodor W. Adorno, *Einleitung in die Soziologie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1993), 79.
- 54 Ibid., 79–80.
- 55 Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 103, 107. Neumann argued that Pollock's position was simply a reformulation of Mannheimian sociology, adding that 'I have put Pollock forward as an honorary citizen of Mannheim but note to my great satisfaction that the English are gradually bombing Mannheim to pieces'. In his response, Horkheimer explained that 'your pathos against the Mannheimian renegade Pollock strikes me as being theoretically no less far-fetched than many of the things I do not like about his essay' (ibid., 119).
- 56 Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 109.
- 57 Horkheimer, 'Preface', 195.
- 58 Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 133; Adorno, Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* vol. 2, 195.
- 59 Horkheimer, 'Preface', 195.
- 60 Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 133; Adorno, Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* vol. 2, 195.
- 61 Horkheimer, 'Preface', 195.
- 62 Ibid., 195–6.
- 63 Ibid., 196.
- 64 Ibid., 196–7.
- 65 Ibid., 197. Responding to the draft of the preface, Adorno had written: 'I would only want to note that it may be that not only alienation but its opposite too increases under fascism' (Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 134; Adorno, Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* vol. 2, 196).
- 66 Horkheimer, 'Preface', 197.
- 67 Ibid., 197–8.
- 68 This notion, which is obviously one of the precursors of the 'ticket mentality' idea, also played a crucial role in Adorno's analyses of fascist propaganda – which one might consequently, without all too much exaggeration, classify as studies of propagandists who happen to be fascists, rather than studies specifically of fascist propaganda. See Theodor W. Adorno, 'Anti-Semitism and Fascist Propaganda', in Ernst Simmel (ed.), *Anti-Semitism. A Social Disease* (New York: International Universities Press), 125–37; 'The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas' Radio Addresses', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 9.1 (Darmstadt: wbg, 1998), 7–141.
- 69 Horkheimer, 'Preface', 198.
- 70 Ibid., 199.
- 71 See, for example, Max Horkheimer, 'Program for an Inter European Academy', MHA: IX, 39, 1, 12.
- 72 Ibid.
- 73 Adorno, Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* vol. 3, 101; Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 634.
- 74 For a slightly more detailed discussion see my contribution on Antisemitism in this Volume. See also Eva-Maria Ziege, 'Elemente des Antisemitismus', in Gunnar Hindrichs (ed.), *Max Horkheimer/Theodor W. Adorno: Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 81–95, here 92–4.
- 75 Adorno, 'Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit', 562.
- 76 Max Horkheimer, 'Es geht um die Moral der Deutschen', [interview] in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 7 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1985), 480–5, here 483.
- 77 Adorno, 'Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit', 561.
- 78 Ibid., 556.
- 79 Adorno, *Einleitung in die Soziologie*, 79.
- 80 Ibid., 80.
- 81 Horkheimer, 'Es geht um die Moral der Deutschen', 483.
- 82 Adorno, Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* vol. 2, 222; Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 163. On this issue see the chapter by Julia Jopp and Ansgar Martins in this *Handbook*.
- 83 Adorno, 'Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit', 566.
- 84 Adorno, Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* vol. 3, 101–2; Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17, 634.

# Society and Political Form

Alexander Neupert-Doppler

Translated by Niall Bond and Werner Bonefeld

## INTRODUCTION

‘We know only a single science, the science of history’ (Marx and Engels, 1975: 28). This sentence defines the programme of the Frankfurt School’s critical theory. Society, its object, is mainly conceived of as historical and mutable. The question of what the social conditions of capitalism are – and how to conceive of surpassing them – is equally of concern to critical theories of the State. With their point of departure in Marxist thought, two prevailing theoretical currents were formed during the twentieth century. On the one hand, Lenin’s theory of the class state opposes the capitalists’ and the revolutionaries’ States. On the other hand, social democracy considers political States as merely neutral instances. For the former, as Marx and Engels (1996: 35) expressed it in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, the State ‘is merely the organised power of one class for oppressing another’. According to this premise, a State cannot be an independent

institution, but is necessarily the committee of a ruling class. For the latter, the State is an independent order, a playground for action; accordingly, the aim of political practice is to implement social reforms within nation states. As Simon Clarke (1991: 4) has shown, form theory can be distinguished from either approach.

If the theory of state monopoly capitalism underestimated the autonomy of the state, the social democratic theory underestimated the limits to that autonomy. What was needed was a more adequate theory of the nature and limits of the power of the capitalist state. It was clear that the state could not be reduced to an instrument of the capitalist class, but nor could it be seen as the neutral terrain of the class struggle.

According to form theory, ‘the class character of the state (is) determined ultimately by the *structural* relationship between the state and the economy, embedded in the *form* of the state determined by its function within the system as a whole’ (5). How has the debate on the state as the political form of

capitalism developed? To what extent has the critical theory of the Frankfurt School made contributions to this debate and what are its consequences for political practice?

The theory of the state as the political form of capitalism also follows from the theories of Marx and Engels, who in their early works had already described the modern State as the 'form in which, the individuals of which society consists have subsequently given themselves collective expression' (Marx and Engels, 1975: 80). As the expression of society, the State is neither independent nor neutral. Politics and the economy, the State and capital, law and exchange, the nation and the world market are not contrasts: they are complementary through their constitution as separate spheres. Historically, the emergence of commodity production and organization of centralized states are processes that transpired at the same time; but how should the logic behind their complementarity be interpreted? In 1923, the Soviet legal scholar Evgeny Pashukanis (1989: 139) expressed the question as follows:

Why does class rule not remain what it is, the factual subjugation of one section of the population by the other? Why does it assume the form of official state rule, or – which is the same thing – why does the machinery of state coercion not come into being as the private machinery of the ruling class; why does it detach itself from the ruling class and take on the form of an impersonal apparatus of public power, separated from society?

For Pashukanis, the answer lies in the function of the State as a (liberal) *Rechtsstaat*, that is, a State that contains the class struggle and regulates competition on the basis of law. The strengths and weaknesses of his analysis of the legal form are treated in Section 1.

However, the functions that a state might take on do not explain the form itself. During the 1930s and 1940s, the contributions of the Frankfurt School – Otto Kirchheimer, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Franz Neumann and Friedrich Pollock – were precisely focused on the decline of some

liberal states. In their view, the rule of law was adequate to a capitalism based on competition; monopoly capitalism expressed itself, however, in the so-called Authoritarian State. The separation of State and Society, the most important definition of the form of the liberal State, collapsed under Fascism and National Socialism, just as it did under State socialism and even during the New Deal in the United States under Roosevelt. The role of critical theory as an intermediary between earlier approaches (such as Lukács' and Pashukanis') and later approaches is dealt with in Section 2.

One fundamental insight adopted by the critical theory from Marx and Lukács is the distinction between the essence of capitalist societies and its forms of appearance. In this argument, the commodity form, which posits human labour power as a commodity, and the legal form, which posits the individuals as legal subjects, express the essence of exploitation and domination in the form of free labour and abstract legal equality. Just as Marx conceives of the forms of commodities, money, capital and interest as forms of definite social relations, the forms of law, politics, the State and the nation are forms of these same relations, too.

What had once been a heterodox position, discussed by the Frankfurt School during its period in exile, became central to the debate about the character of the capitalist State that began in West Germany in the late 1960s and resonated also in France and England (Bonefeld, 2014: 185). Clarke attributes this change in direction to the failure of traditional Marxist State theories which either underestimated the importance of States as class states or overestimated the importance of States as welfare states.

The inadequacy of these theories of the state become increasingly manifest through the 1960s. On the one hand the growth of the welfare state [...] undermined the crude identification of the state with the interests of monopoly capital. [...] On the other hand, the limited impact of the welfare state on problems of poverty [...] undermined

the rosy social democratic view of the state. (Clarke, 1991: 4)

The debate was directed against the State fetishism of social democracy; the subject was ‘the “welfare state illusion” and the contradiction between wage labour and capital’ (Müller/Neusüß, 1971). Functions of the welfare state were therefore relativized in form theory. ‘Once the state has been established as such an autonomous body, endowed with a monopoly of the legitimate exercise of force, it can take on further functions, although it can only perform such functions within the limits of its form’ (Clarke, 1991: 13). The results of this debate are discussed in Section 3.

A typical weakness of critical State theories is the fixation on the State in the singular. Colin Barker has critically observed that both discussions of the *Rechtsstaat* – the State of the rule of law and that of the welfare state – tend to treat ‘the state as if it extended only in singular. Capitalism, however, is a world-system of states, and the form that the capitalist state takes is the nation-state form’ (Barker, 1991: 204). Clearly globalization raises important questions about the character of the national state, which will be discussed in Section 4.

Finally, we arrive at the question of the character of political practice that had not been explored explicitly in critical state theory. While the traditional State theories include clear political strategies, namely the revolution against the bourgeois class state through the proletarian class state or integration into a State of political representation, deemed neutral, critical theory lacks this – direct – connection between theory and practice. This was recognized most clearly by John Holloway and Sol Picciotto. While some contributors to the debate declared that form theory amounted to a fundamental theory of the state, and operationalized Gramsci’s theory of hegemony or Poulantzas’ theory of the balance of forces for actual political analysis, for Holloway (1991: 228) the task consisted

in ‘[d]eveloping much more explicitly certain concepts employed or implied in the best of the recent work on the state: namely the concepts of fetishisation and state form [...]’. The task is not to reject state theory but to draw out and develop the political implications’. The conclusion focuses on the political implications of form theory.

### COMMODITY-FORM AND THE FORM OF LAW: ON *RECHTSSTAAT* AND CAPITALIST COMPETITION

Marx commences his critique of political economy with the commodity as its elementary form, arguing that ‘[t]he wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an “immense collection of commodities”’ (Marx, 1990: 125). The thrust of his critique of the capitalist form of social wealth is formulated in the section on commodity fetishism: ‘The definite social relations between men themselves assume here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things’ (165). Marx attributes the fetish character of the commodity form to the capitalist social relations of production. Form analysis is dedicated to uncovering the social content of the capitalist forms of commodity exchange, in which capital and labour appear as formally free and equal subjects of law.

Pashukanis commenced the third chapter of his book, *Law and Marxism, A General Theory*, published in 1923, with the sentence: inasmuch as ‘the wealth of capitalist society appears as “an immense collection of commodities”, so this society itself appears as an endless chain of legal relations’ (Pashukanis, 1989: 85). What aspects of the State as a political form result from this? For Pashukanis, the relations of exchange and the legal relations are complementary. Indeed, he develops Marx’s critique of the commodity form towards a critique of legal form (Neupert, 2013). In this argument, commodity form

and legal form are constituted forms of definite social relations. These social relations do not appear directly. Rather, they appear in legal form and commodity form as seemingly independent relations of law and wealth. The individuals thus appear as legal subjects and economic personifications of a process of capitalist wealth that manifests itself behind their backs. As Marx (1990: 166–7) put it, ‘they do this without being aware of it’.

The circumstance that the social relations appear in the form of independent relations of law and wealth, which assert themselves as seemingly independent objective forces over and through the acting subject, entails form analysis as critique of fetishism. Buckel (2007: 234) writes, ‘social forms require [...] a fetish theory; they are nothing other than congealed human relations, which vanish in their appearance’. Pashukanis’ theory of law can thus *inter alia* be read as a contribution to the critique of fetishism.

The sphere of dominance which has taken on the form of subjective law is a social phenomenon attributed to the individual in the same way that value – likewise a social phenomenon – is attributed to the object as a product of labour. Legal Fetishism complements commodity fetishism. (Pashukanis, 1989: 117)

If the exchange of commodities, relations of law and statehood were mere institutions, it would suffice to analyse their interaction. However, if capitalist society is the common basis of these forms, critique has to reveal their complementarity. This context is what allows for the transfer of social form analysis from the commodity form to the legal form, the implications of which Pashukanis finds in Marx (1990: 178): ‘In order that these objects may enter into relation with each other as commodities, their guardians must place themselves in relation to one another as persons [...]. The guardians must therefore recognise each other as owners of private property [...]. The content of this juridical relation (or relation of two wills) is itself determined by the economic relation’.

Formal legal equality is not just a precondition for commodity exchange, the exchange of commodities itself is its content. In exchange, the different commodities are posited as equal values, and as equivalent values their distinct qualities disappear, just as when different human beings are regarded as equal when considered as legal entities. Critique begins with the contradiction between content and form. ‘The constant sale and purchase of labour-power is the *form*; the *content* is the constant appropriation by the capitalist, without an equivalent, of a portion of the labour of others which has already been objectified, and this repeated exchange of this labour for a greater quantity of the living labour of others’ (730, emphasis added).

What Marx described here is the social relationship of exploitation of the worker by the capitalist, which does not appear in accordance with its essence. Rather, it appears in the form of a legal relationship between the seller and buyer of labour power. In its appearance, exploitation assumes the form of formal legal equality. The contradiction between formal equality and actual inequality constitutes the difference: objects are only equal as commodities; the individuals are only equal as legal subjects. What is implicit in law according to Marx – its foundation in the capitalist social relations of production – ultimately becomes explicit in Pashukanis’ discussion of the relationship between the commodity form and the form of law. ‘Only when bourgeois relations are fully developed does law become abstract in character. Every person becomes man in the abstract, all labour becomes socially useful labour in the abstract’ (Pashukanis, 1989: 120–1). By linking the development of capitalism to the imposition of uniform law, Pashukanis places his theory in a broad historical context. Looking back at the past, he distinguishes modern contractual or criminal law from older orders, such as privileges or kin liability (179). For Pashukanis, the most important characteristics of the legal form are homogeneity and individualization (99–100).

In contrast to pre-modern class privileges, for example, law does not address groups, but individuals. Just as privileges corresponded to feudal forms of property, law now corresponds to capital (123). It is true, he concedes, that the real historical development from a plurality of laws to a homogenous, calculable law 'took place in a far less well-ordered and consistent manner than the logical deduction above might suggest. Yet this deduction alone reveals the universal significance of the historical process' (114).

For Pashukanis (1989), socialism reveals the meaning of historical development. The 'making of human relations into legal relations' (40) that mediate exploitation 'in the form of a contract' (45) would become superfluous, which would lead to 'the disappearance of the juridical factor from social relations' (61). What is of interest to Pashukanis is the meaning of subjective law – the property, contract and criminal law – for commodity exchange. An end to legal form is only conceivable once commodity exchange has been surpassed. It is true that there are dispersed clues to a utopia of public rules, but 'any society which is constrained, by the level of development of its productive forces, to retain an equivalent relation between expenditure and compensation of labour, in a form which even remotely suggests the exchange of commodity values, will be compelled to retain the legal form as well' (63–4). Thus, the question of bringing merely formal legal equality to an end is a matter of socialist construction. The abandonment of objective law can be seen in the notion of a transitional state [*Übergangsstaat*], which implements socialism without consideration of subjective rights. 'The Soviet state does not admit any absolute and untouchable subjective private rights. But it counterposes to this fetish neither some classless principle of social solidarity [...] but the concrete task of constructing socialist society and destroying the last vestiges of capitalism' (35). Pashukanis remains a Leninist.

Pashukanis sees the common grounds for forms of commodity and of law in the economy, but he also concedes that the State can play a role, which brings us closer to the question of the State form. 'The state authority introduces clarity and stability into the structure of law, but does not create the premises for it, which are rooted in the material relations of production' (94). Pashukanis at least explicitly addresses the State's function of imposing legal norms through violence [*Gewalt*]. Without a State administration, finances and an organized army (75), law could not be imposed. Without law, there would be no commodity exchange and without the State there would be no law. While he describes law as a really practised social form, he treats the *Rechtsstaat*, a State governed by the rule of law, as an objective illusion. He thus understands the modern *Rechtsstaat* as a fetish form that is 'separate from the representatives of the ruling class [...] that stands above every individual capitalist and functions as an impersonal force' (141). At the same time, he remains faithful to the idea of the primacy of the real economy. A critique of the State as the political form of the capitalist relations of production is not possible on this basis.

Society doubles itself up into society and state, that is, state is the political form of society. [...] The political state is the premise of the non-coerced, depoliticized exchange relations between the buyers of labour power and the producer of surplus value, who in spite of their manifest inequality pursue their interests in liberty as equal legal subjects, based on the rule of law. (Bonefeld, 2014: 166)

Pashukanis' critique of legal fetishism, focuses attention on some defining aspects of the form of the capitalist State. It is only as a public apparatus that the State can guarantee legal equality between unequal individuals. Other functions, for example regarding equal voting rights or redistribution of wealth, are not yet recognizable in the context of the Russian Revolution or are of no interest to

Pashukanis. That is why he believes he had clarified the starting question which was to open later debates. Because the State under the conditions of free competition exists in the form as a liberal *Rechtsstaat*, it can fulfil its function as a guarantor of legal equality, property and commodity exchange.

For Franz Neumann, the legal theoretician of critical theory, Pashukanis makes the most important contribution to the theory of law and the State. 'Except for the book by Pashukanis, a lawyer from Moscow, *Law and Marxism*, the Communist side made no contribution to State and legal theory worthy of mention either' (Neumann, 1978a: 135). What critical theory took on from Pashukanis – the connection between the form of commodity and the form of law – is recognized in the later debate on the State as an important function of the State. However, Pashukanis had not recognized the State as the political form of definite social relations. Instead, he conceived of it akin to Lenin as a class state. It was possible for the State to discard 'the mask of the constitutional state altogether, revealing the nature of state power as the organized power of one class over the other' (Pashukanis, 1989: 150). The proletarian Soviet State alone – as an openly class state – self-confidently dispensed with the illusion of the *Rechtsstaat*, because it 'acknowledges quite openly and un-hypocritically that it is a class state' (Lukács, 1970: 68). But this abandonment of law through the naked violence of party dictatorship never led to a republic beyond State and society, but instead led to what critical theory was to refer to as an 'Authoritarian State'.

### **THE FORM OF LAW AND THE FORM OF THE STATE – THE AUTHORITARIAN STATE AS A FORM OF MONOPOLY CAPITALISM**

The beginnings of a critical theory of State and Law were marked by disappointment

over the October Revolution. Instead of creating democracy without the State, a State socialism emerged, replacing formalized violence with open violence. In his text on the Authoritarian State of 1940, Horkheimer (1985: 99) observed:

Instead of dissolving in the end into the democracy of the councils, the group can maintain itself as a leadership. [...] Even though the abolition of the state was written on its banner, that party transfigured its industrially backward fatherland into the secret vision of those industrial powers which were growing sick on their parliamentarianism and could no longer live without fascism.

Georg Lukács, whose collection of essays, *History and Class Consciousness* appeared in 1923, like Pashukanis' book, offers more political arguments. Through his analysis of the *Rechtsstaat* as a form of capitalist rule, he offers critical theory its bases, while, however, becoming an apologist of the Authoritarian State in the Soviet Union himself. This is why his contributions have to be dealt with here. For Lukács, the form of law and the institution of the *Rechtsstaat* present the inversion of social inequality as formal equality; he also discussed the obscuring of domination as the fetishism peculiar to the economic and the political forms of capitalist domination. Just as 'the fetish of the pure objectivity of economic relations obscures the fact that they are relations between men ... the – likewise fetishistic – legal form of organised violence distracts attention from its potential presence in and behind every economic relation' (Lukács, 1974: 240–1).

The State itself is the juridical form of violence, which remains obscured as such. Lukács' leitmotiv here is obscuring. When describing the commodity fetish, he writes of its 'reified character' on the one hand and of a 'fiction of the immortality of the categories' on the other (Lukács, 1974: 14). Human behaviour is based on the commodity form, while the conditions themselves appear immutable. As pointed out by Adorno, critique is both an epistemological and a social

critique. Which is why the object of Lukács' critique is primarily the insights advanced by bourgeois philosophy and bourgeois political economy. 'Economy, law and the state appear here as closed systems which control the whole of society by virtue of the perfection of their own power and by their built-in laws', whereas 'their apparent independence of each other, their way of concentrated themselves into self-regulating systems, [is] the fetishistic semblance of autonomy' (230, 231). While dialectical critique recognizes the connection between the forms of commodity, law and the State, their autonomy is nevertheless real. Thus, for him, false consciousness is not a particularity of the bourgeois classes; there is also the danger of the embourgeoisement of the proletarian consciousness. 'Even in the very midst of the death throes of capitalism, broad sections of the proletarian masses still feel that the state, the laws and the economy of the bourgeoisie are the only possible environment for them to exist in' and hold an 'instinctive attitude towards the state, which appears to the man of action as the only fixed point in a chaotic world' (262, 263).

To the extent that the State exists in the form of the *Rechtsstaat*, the fetishism of law, as analysed by Pashukanis, is complemented by State fetishism. If conceived of as an apparatus that stands over the classes, the monopoly of violence appears as a means of social peace that stands over the classes. Violence assumes an independent existence in the form of the state and disguises itself as a guarantor of equality. Inequality appears as right [*Recht*] 'in the mind of the masses' that is characterized by 'nationalist prejudice' and 'illusions about democracy' (Lukács, 1974: 265). Formal legal equality, national community and the political equality in representative democracy form the bases of an objective State fetishism and 'only when this veil is torn aside does historical knowledge become possible' (14). For Lukács, tearing this veil is only possible through the Bolshevik Party's role as the avant-garde.

'The Communist Party must exist as an independent organisation so that the proletariat may be able to see its own class consciousness given historical shape' (326). The problem of fetishism, in which the difference between content and form is consolidated, is to be solved by the Party.

The Leninists Pashukanis and Lukács are in agreement on justified practice. The Soviet State allows for no private rights (Pashukanis), and is an openly class State (Lukács). Instead of veiling social conditions such as domination in production, inequality in law or violence in the *Rechtsstaat*, violence in the revolution is unmasked as the naked violence of one class in keeping another class down. The mask of the *Rechtsstaat* should, in Lukács' view, not be retrieved by the socialist State. On the one hand, this theory appears pragmatic as it fits with the reality of the civil war in Russia, and on the other hand it appears optimistic, because both theoreticians apparently can only imagine the revolutionaries' state as a transition to full, i.e. class- and stateless, communism.

As pointed out by Marcuse (1958: 249), in the Soviet Union as elsewhere, in contrast to its ideology, the state remains 'a superimposed independent power, personal relationships cannot be dissolved into a *res publica*'. Instead of becoming a world republic, State socialism emerges. The development of Stalin's 'socialism in one country' is the starting point of critical theory. According to Horkheimer (1985: 101–2), state socialism

is the most consistent form of the authoritarian state which has freed itself from any dependence on private capital. It increases production at a rate only seen in the transition from the mercantilist period to the liberal era. The fascist countries create a mixed form. Though here too surplus value is brought under state control and distributed, it flows under the old name of profits in great amounts to the industrial magnates and landowners.

One remarkable aspect of Horkheimer's concept of the Authoritarian State is its scope, since it is meant to encompass both the



Soviet Union and fascist countries. To the extent that critical theory understands *Staatlichkeit* – the quality of being a State – as a political form of society, the transformation of the State from a liberal *Rechtsstaat* to an authoritarian State of coercion [*Zwangsstaat*] must also be an expression of social tendencies. This transformation must thus be less a break with than a demasking of violence from on high. ‘The equality of the commodity owners is an ideological illusion which breaks down in an industrial system and which yields to overt domination in an authoritarian state’ (Horkheimer, 1985: 108). With open domination not mediated by the form of law, the fetishism of law that belonged to it is also extinguished. ‘Mediation has now been abolished. Fascism is [the] truth of modern society’ (Horkheimer, 1990: 79).

Horkheimer’s friend Friedrich Pollock was responsible for economics at the Institute. After travelling to the Soviet Union in 1927 and 1928, he developed his concept of ‘State capitalism’ at the beginning of the 1930s. Although it was initially applied to State socialism, he also described German National Socialism – in contrast to Neumann – as authoritarian State capitalism.

Is it useful to label the new order ‘State Capitalism’? Serious objections may be raised against this term. There are already grave doubts as to whether it makes sense to call the National Socialist system a state. The word state capitalism, besides, is possibly misleading because it may be understood to denote a society wherein the state is the sole owner of all capital. This is definitely not the case for National Socialism. Nevertheless, the term ‘State Capitalism’ describes better than any other term four properties of the new system: (1) that the new order is the successor of private capitalism, (2) that the state assumes important functions of the private capitalist, (3) that capitalistic institutions like the sale of labor, or profits, still play a significant role, and (4) that it is not Socialism. (Pollock, 2014: 450)

National Socialism is capitalism and by no means socialism. Changes exist in the concentration of capital and in authoritarian State interventions in the economy, in which

all dictatorships are similar. A characteristic of this new order is rule by ‘administrative orders which have come to supersede the rules of civil law’ (447); classes are ‘fused ideologically in the people’s community’ [*Volksgemeinschaft*] (444).

Pollock’s account has many strong suits – for instance when it analyses the end of classical ownership capitalism and describes the authoritarian ideology of the *Volksgemeinschaft* [the people’s community or ethnic community]. The transition from liberalism to statism also corresponds to global trends in the 1930s and 1940s. However, with regards to State theory, one can express doubts, which Pollock himself addresses by asking whether it makes any sense to call the National Socialist system a State. In doing so, he refers to considerations presented particularly by Kirchheimer and Neumann.

While Pashukanis spoke of the State as a form of a detached apparatus, this definition of its form also includes the monopoly on violence, the general legal order and rational bureaucracy. But all of the above were missing in National Socialism. First, the form of law presupposes the general applicability of laws. A free market economy in the liberal bourgeois meaning also presupposes the calculability of State action. ‘When the state interferes with liberty and property, the interference must also be calculable. It must not be retroactive, for then it would nullify already existing expectations. The state must not interfere without law, for then the interference would not be predictable’ (Neumann, 2009: 443).

A general law for all was abolished with the race laws. Ex post facto laws are also part and parcel of dictatorships. Arbitrary measures are routine, and the rule of law, as Pollock pointed out, was set aside. Such a falling apart of the form of law is what Kirchheimer had been observing in Germany. ‘Under the veil of the community ideology, the system of general legal conceptions equally applicable to all cases falls’ (Kirchheimer, 1941:

456). There were markets and laws, but also a command economy instead of economic freedom and arbitrary rulings instead of equality before the law. Collective rights, for instance that of forming unions, were abolished. For Kirchheimer it was clear that 'under the new system, a legal rule can have only a purely provisional character; it must be possible to change a rule without notice, and, if necessary, retroactively' (466).

Herbert Marcuse contributed to these observations on the end of the *Rechtsstaat* under National Socialism.

The original concept of the law as universally and equally applicable for all was discarded and replaced by a plurality of particular legal forms, one for the German race, one for inferior races, one for the Party, another for the army, a third for ordinary members of the German folk [*Volksgenossen*]. (Marcuse, 1998: 94)

Neumann went even further than Kirchheimer, who had seen the determining factors of the form of law capsize under National Socialism, and even went so far as to deny the existence of an ordered bureaucracy and a monopoly on violence in National Socialism.

Under National Socialism, however, the whole of the society is organized in four solid, centralized groups, each operating under the leadership principle, each with a legislative, administrative, and judicial power of its own. [...] There is no need for a state standing above the groups. (Neumann, 2009: 468–9)

Just as Pollock, he lists big industry, the army, the bureaucracy and the Party as the dominating groups that form more of an alliance than a unitary State. 'A state is ideologically characterized by the unity of the political power that it wields. I doubt whether a state even in this restricted sense exists in Germany' (467). Neumann calls this domination without law and a monopoly of violence an '*Unstaat*' (16) or 'non-state' (vii).

Following his observations, in contrast to the Soviet Union, National Socialist Germany did not amount to State capitalism. Neumann prefers to use the term 'monopoly capitalism',

which is strongly marked by the trusts of big industry. It 'is a monopolistic economy – and a command economy' (Neumann, 2009: 261). In contrast to the Soviet Union, in which State planning was at the service of late industrialization in the race to catch up, National Socialism contented itself with using existing big industry. This difference is also anchored in the ideological goals of either movement. While Stalin wanted to achieve socialism in one country and thereby secure the State's territory, Hitler's ideology of 'vital space' or '*Lebensraum*' was directed against the recognition of territorial borders.

Pollock's prudent definition of State capitalism, in which the State takes on new functions, would be reconcilable with Neumann's theory of monopoly capitalism in National Socialism. However, it does contrast with the comparison of Germany and Russia as Authoritarian States. While Pashukanis and Lukács wished for State socialism as an openly class State, where, however, 'the bureaucracy is a separate class with special privileges and powers' and the State is 'again a reified, hypostatized power' (Marcuse, 1958: 171, 105), National Socialism was lacking 'features of the modern State – the authority of the law, the monopoly on violence and sovereignty. All three of these characteristics no longer prevail in the National Socialist State' (Marcuse, 1998: 94).

While socialism sought to do away with the contradiction between society and (the class) state, between real inequality and formal equality in a union of free people, fascism sought to dissolve the distinction between State and society in another way: ideologically as *Volksgemeinschaft* – the people's community, and in practical terms as the naked domination and immediate disposal of individuals – rather than through the mediation of social forms. Law as formal equality and the neutrality of the monopoly on violence at the basis of the fetishism of both law and the State disappear in the arbitrariness of open violence and in totalitarian access to individuals by collective domination.

In State socialism, the realization of the utopia fails and a new ideology emerges. Fascism as a political form of monopoly capitalism unmasks the earlier judicialized exercise of violence. What is fundamental is the close reciprocal effect between the economic and political forms. For a critique of the State as a form of capital, a manifold distinction emerges, which becomes clearer looking back at private capitalism and its political form of the *Rechtsstaat*. 'The legal freedom of the proletarian, political equality but social and economic unfreedom are the foundations of the bourgeois *Rechtsstaat* or bourgeois state of the liberal rule of law' (Neumann, 1978b: 128f.). But these forms not only disguised domination and 'capitalist calculability', as in Pashukanis and Lukács, but also 'guarantee a minimum of liberty, since formal liberty has two aspects and makes available at least legal chances to the weak' (Neumann, 1996: 138).

Mediating class domination through formal law serves the propertied classes, but at least limits domination through law and the separation of powers. Without exception, critical theory attributes the *Rechtsstaat* to private capital. Monopoly capital in crisis corresponds to the authoritarian interventionist State. It is not a matter of indifference whether the State itself becomes a socialist State-capitalist or whether even the formal neutrality of the State apparatus is destroyed in the non-state of arbitrary violence. In the non-state, 'except for the charismatic power of the Leader, there is no authority' (Neumann, 2009: 470). It was the appropriate form for 'the first Anti-Semitic movement to advocate the complete destruction of the Jews' (111). The disguised violence that critical theory unmasked in the forms of law and the State and wishes to surpass from the vantage of utopian thought is preferable to the open violence of the Nazis. In 1939, Horkheimer, who triggered the debate, did not believe in a return to liberalism.

Perhaps after a long war the old economic conditions will be re-established in individual territories for a short time. Then the economic development will repeat itself [...] Since the failure of the market economy, people have faced, once and for all, the choice between freedom and fascist dictatorship. (Horkheimer, 1990: 92)

Late capitalism is not possible without the strong State, which in one case or the other will intervene economically. The break between the liberal *Rechtsstaat* of the nineteenth century, the subject of Pashukanis' analyses, and the authoritarian State of the twentieth century, regarded by Horkheimer as the trend, also marks the question of the form of politics in subsequent debates. What becomes clear here is that the trend towards the Authoritarian State has not been broken even when it does not appear as an open dictatorship, and even if domination by capital is again being mediated by economic and political forms.

### **FORM OF THE STATE AND FORM OF POLITICS – THE WELFARE STATE AS A POLITICAL FORM OF LATE CAPITALISM**

According to Pashukanis, the analysis of social forms did not mean the detailed description of economic, legal or State institutions, but the theoretical elaboration of their fundamental connections. Just like any other theory, theories of form have to be aware of their scope and their limits. As a critique of their age, they are on the one hand historically specific, and on the other hand they enter intellectual history and can be referred to as such. Just as Neumann in particular took up points made by Pashukanis, and critical theory in general was able to continue referring to Lukács, this tradition continues.

For the German debate on the State, the tradition of critical theory is fundamental. 'The German critique drew theoretically in

the first instance of the traditions of the contemporary Frankfurt School of sociology, which combined Marxism with a sociological tradition descending from Weber' (Clarke, 1991: 6). Weber's concept of the State, inter alia due to Lukács' influence, is a point of departure of critical theory. 'A state is that human community which (successfully) lays claim to the monopoly of legitimate physical violence within a definite territory (Weber, 1994: 310–11). Neumann saw a criterion for the collapse of the State under National Socialism in the dissolution of the monopoly of violence. His concept of law has its roots here, because what capitalism needs according to Weber is 'a law which is as calculable as a machine' (1966: 20). Weber's error consisted in attributing violence to the State alone, thereby overlooking the fact that such violence is an expression of the domination of capital, which is also implicit in the apparent objectivity of capitalist economy.

What is of interest for questions of State theory is a shift that can be seen in the second half of the twentieth century. While the fetish character of the State as a capitalist form appeared in legal equality for Pashukanis, Lukács and early critical theory, the theories of the State of the 1960s and 1970s came to focus on the question of social integration.

Regarding the *State Derivation Debate*, Blanke, Jürgens and Kastendiek (1978: 118–19) made clear that:

[t]he aim of analysis is not, however, to realize in retrospect the 'course of history' but to present the forms in the context in which they stand 'logically', that is, in which they reproduce themselves under the conditions of a particular historically concrete form of society [...] The question of how this formation takes place in detail, how it is transported into structure, institution and process of the state, can no longer be answered by form analysis.

In this argument, the link between commodity form and *Rechtsstaatlichkeit* can be shown; however, individual laws and the particular actions or the functions of the State cannot be derived from it. Nevertheless, social forms provide the framework for such

actions. What the actors of the State must and can do is certainly contingent upon the form of the State. Financing the State apparatus is always dependent upon the valorization of capital. The very possibility of social policy is related to this prerequisite. Although there were already attempts in some countries to maintain social peace by means of social interventionism as early as the nineteenth century, the concept of the 'authoritarian welfare state', employed by Wolfgang Müller and Christel Neusüß (1971: 28) in the continuation of Horkheimer's authoritarian state, only makes sense from the twentieth century onwards. Still, Marx had already pointed to the role of the state in easing the tension between the common good, class interests and capital interests.

For protection against the serpent of their agonies, the workers have to put their heads together and, as a class, compel the passing of a law, an all-powerful social barrier by which they can be prevented from selling themselves and their families into slavery and death by voluntary contract with capital. (Marx, 1990: 416)

Protection is not just a matter for workers. 'The law curbs capital's drive towards a limitless draining away of labour-power by forcibly limiting the working day on the authority of the state, but a state ruled by capitalists and landlords' (348). The State of capital restricts capital for its own sake. Authoritarian States in monopoly capitalism have exceeded the function of setting such limits, typical for the form of the *Rechtsstaat* in private capitalism, as critical theory has shown.

Following on from Marx's critique of fetishism, in their critique of the welfare state of the 1970s Müller and Neusüß speak about the welfare state illusion [*Sozialstaatsillusion*].

Here, the masses appear as objects of public services staking claims to legal entitlement, while the State appears as an administering subject – the goods fall from the sky in a manner of speaking. However, a social theory that proceeds scientifically must assume that the mass of products, before it can be distributed, had been produced by

those people to which they will be (only in part) distributed, produced by the masses on the whole [...] And the State cannot be examined as a 'distributing', 'welfare' and 'social state', but its functions have to be contemplated with a view to the fact that [...] precisely as a 'social state', the State takes on particular functions for the process of reproducing capital because of its contradictory historical development in particular historic stages of development. (Müller/Neusüß 1971: 32)

The welfare state remains a State of capital. The German reality described by them is corporative capitalism. Employers' federations and trade unions regard themselves as social partners, whose compromises are judicialized by the State and secured through redistribution. The welfare state functions amplify the fetishism of the capitalist state form.

The same fetishism can be seen in the form of the state. According to the bourgeois conception [...] the state has always existed since man is by nature a creature of the state [...] The fact that it is the particularization of a specific mode of production (capitalism) is turned on its head. The reification and autonomization of the state is a necessary illusion resulting from the bourgeois mode of production. (Müller/Neusüß, 1971: 57)

The concept of fetishism is far more appropriate here than that of illusion. After all, we live as legal entities and lay claims to State benefits as citizens. Nevertheless, the concept of the welfare state illusion fits to the extent that the critique is not directed against the possibility of social policy as determined by its form, so much as an overestimation of its redistributive capacities.

Mystification [*Verhüllung*] is anchored in the reality of the capitalist circulation of commodities [...]. This sphere is where the illusion of the possibilities of redistribution are founded [...] These illusions founded in the context of the circulation are opposed on the other side by the realistic insight into the narrow limits of State redistribution measures by integrating the sphere of production into the economic analysis of distribution processes. (Müller/Neusüß, 1971: 36)

Today above all, at a time in which European welfare states are being dismantled, and in

regions of the world in which such State redistribution never took place, we should not lose sight of their distinction between social democracy and socialism. Redistribution of wealth within the existing forms does not challenge the Whole. What can be redistributed in a welfare state is money and goods whose existence depends on the valorization of capital. In the end, it is not the natural right to food, clothing, housing and general happiness that has led to the achievement of the welfare state. Just as in the form of law, which guarantees according to Neumann a minimum of freedom, a welfare state guarantees a basic satisfaction of needs, often connected with authoritarian demands on its citizens.

For form analysis, the manner in which social demands are negotiated is of particular interest. While the form of law had already existed historically in the monarchical States of enlightened absolutism, the capitalist form of politics is based on the prerequisite, as Agnoli (2004: 52) put it in his *Transformation of Democracy* of 1967, that 'the power of the State on the one hand and the power of society on the other appear to be separate'.

Here, State-fetishism means the effect of the form of the State, which appears as the 'in point of fact superordinate power, remote from the fray of group strife, that altogether seriously and with great moral earnestness creates general welfare through policies of social compensation' (Agnoli, 2004: 54). With the promise of equality the State gains more weight. Going beyond Pashukanis' analysis of the form of law, Agnoli establishes how the form of politics, that is, the manner in which social demands are negotiated, fits into this context.

The liberal rule of law and even more universal suffrage have contributed to covering things up, because they solemnly sanction (the former in any legal transaction and the latter every four years) the equality of citizens [...] With regard to the list of electable candidates, every one of them has just one vote and is an equal bearer of active suffrage. (Agnoli, 2004: 55)

If the principle of one man one vote in representative democracies, just as equality before the law in the *Rechtsstaat*, appears as a potential counterweight for economic and social inequality, it is in actual fact its complement. This applies to all political actions which 'take the *form* of struggles to establish, or disagreements on how to interpret, rights [...], their *content*, however, is economic, i.e., dictated by movements of production and value realization' (Blanke et al., 1978: 124; emphasis in the original). The trend towards an administrative and welfare state (Agnoli, 2004: 31) is in this respect a consistent follow-up, because the State no longer contents itself with just setting the basic framework for capitalism, but also regulates social crises and conflicts through economic policy, offering attenuation through social policy and channelling through parliament. The commodity form entails a legal form and manifests itself in the form of the state as a seemingly distinct sphere of social organization. The separation of economy and state is innate to the capitalist form of politics, which serves as the interface between state and society.

According to Pashukanis, Neumann and others, law is a means of economic regulation. It mediates the capitalist exchange relations. In the later discussions, law is complemented by politics. Where politics intervene in society as social policy, the *Rechtsstaat* becomes a welfare state, a *Sozialstaat*. The form of the State as a public power and the form of the citizens as legal entities are the prerequisite of a political form of democratic representation, which ostensibly provides for the determination of some abstractly conceived common good by means of election. For Agnoli, the capitalist form of democratic representation channels demands for conditions into acceptance of capitalist domination.

Politics thus become a continuation and confirmation of the economy, and the State becomes a concentrated form of economic compulsion [...] As opposed to being a potential means of emancipation from this compulsion, the political system is

geared to lead the class [tied to work] to confuse its economic and social claims and identify them with representatives of the domination. (Agnoli, 2004: 124)

In contrast to Pashukanis and Lukács, who regard the (proletarian) State as an instrument for surpassing the (capitalist) State, and equally in contrast to Horkheimer and Neumann, who offer theoretical critique of Statism and the collapse of the (liberal) State, the critique of the State in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s becomes an issue of praxis. Agnoli draws the conclusion that no hope should be placed in the establishment of a welfare state. Because this is not an alternative to capitalism but the political form of corporative capitalism, a truly revolutionary movement has to develop alternative forms, such as councils. Instead, many European countries saw the founding of new left-wing and green parties in the 1980s and 1990s, and those parties did much to contribute to reintegrating the social movements that sprang up in, around and after 1968. Forty years later, Ingo Elbe commented on the debates on politics, form and fetishism:

Through participation in the political sphere of the legislative, on the one hand, the imagined autonomy of representatives becomes a political fetish, proclaiming eternity, autonomy, neutrality and the priority of political participation, while on the other hand, in the course of the process of forming the will of parliament, parliament truly gains autonomy with regard to the particular interests of individuals, groups and classes of bourgeois society. (Elbe, 2008: 338)

One aspect which is dealt with insufficiently in the – German – state debate is the issue of the nation, as laid out in the Introduction to this chapter with reference to Barker (1991). While the forms of commodities, value, money and capital tend both logically and historically towards globalized forms of society, the national framework of the State, law and politics requires explanation. While form theory conceptualizes the State as the political form of definite social relations and as the independent power of social order, which

governs on the promise of a legal equality of an abstract citizenry and which concedes welfare support as a means for protecting the system, 'the limits of state intervention cannot be understood without reference to the limits of the national form of the state' (Clarke, 1991: 53).

## THE FORM OF POLITICS AND THE NATION – THE STATE AS A POLITICAL FORM IN GLOBAL CAPITALISM

Contrary to national ideology according to which the State is an expression of a national community, even older critical theory pointed out that:

The modern state [...] has not been created by the nation, but resulted from the introduction of commodity production, which has preceded the appearance of modern nations. When the product of labour is a commodity convertible into money, this money can be used to build the state and to establish a bureaucracy and standing army. (Neumann, 2009: 100)

Within States which are initially mostly monarchical or absolutist, nationalism is first an ideology of the revolutionary bourgeoisie – an ideology which helped justify the representative State. Not the king and court were conceived of as founding the representative State, but all of the citizens as the nation. Thus, Beilly, the representative at the National Assembly, had the king informed that 'the assembled nation was "no longer taking orders"' (Thamer, 2004: 33). If the common origins of the nation and the State are an ideology, the fusion of the nation state was no coincidence. On this subject, Adorno wrote:

But the nation, the term as well as the thing, is of more recent date. After feudalism perished, a precarious form of centralized organisation was to tame the diffuse combines of nature so as to protect bourgeois interests. It was bound to become a fetish unto itself; there was no other way it might have integrated the individuals, whose economic

need of that form of organization is as great as its incessant rape of them. (Adorno, 1997: 339)

What made it possible for the nation to become a fetish for people was identification with their State. Although there is of course an idea of the nation without the State, for instance in the German ideology of the *Kulturnation*, the unity of the cultural and the national State became the norm in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The territorial State was intended to be made to accord with the territory which was being claimed for the nation. The scope of laws referred to this border, and citizens' rights were conceived of as rights of those who belonged to a nation. Politics referred to the framework of a national economy. What is ignored is that capitalism did not originate in a national space and grew beyond it, but was global in its origins.

It was not a general and straight growth from local and regional markets to nationwide internal markets and only then beyond to the world market, but to the contrary, the world market collapsed catastrophically over the structures of agrarian society and its limited markets, then forcibly leading as a consequence and not as a cause [...] to the formation of the structures of the nation state and national economies. (Kurz, 2005: 52)

As for the internationalism of the labour movement, Robert Kurz sums it up as a lip credo, because the 'bias in national identity and the bourgeois nation state have been the most decisive ball and chain to bind the socialism of the labour movement to the capitalist system [...] since at least 1848' (Kurz, 1999: 913). Because reformist labour parties, mediated by law and politics, focus on the State and the nation, they declared their allegiance to those same capitalist forms that, ostensibly, they were combatting. 'The notion of the national state entails the international relations, and these international relations are founded on the world-market relations of price and profit' (Bonefeld, 2014: 152). For the State as a form of bourgeois society, it is thus the case that 'the term

bourgeois society does not stand, and has never stood, for a national society (151). The idea of the State without delimitation from other States, and law without territory, are meaningless, and competition among States is a complement to the principle of competition within society. Can nation thus be conceived of as the definition of the form of the State?

In this context, one particular aspect has to be retained which distinguishes the national form from on the one hand other forms, and on the other hand from nationalism. While the practice of politics, which asserts social claims over law, invariably ‘appeals to the State’s promise of equality’ (Grigat, 2007: 353), in the concept of nation, the inequality between citizens and non-citizens of a nation state becomes manifest. The fact that States and nations can only exist in the plural has two effects, according to Stephan Grigat (248):

In the State fetish, humans are always confronted by a power that they themselves created however unconsciously [...] In a way different from the fetishism of commodity, money and capital, they are keen to serve the power of the state, which is expressed inter alia in nationalism.

While nationalism as an ideology involves elevating just any nation, the form of the nation also has a very tangible material effect on its members. The State fetishism results from the form of the state as a particular instance of society. Nationalism, on the other hand, is merely an interpreting ideology.

For post-war societies of the capitalist West, Marcuse points out that identifying with the nation state is not to be understood as a betrayal of internationalism, but has more deeply rooted causes.

The integration of the largest part of the working class into the capitalist society is not a surface phenomenon; it has its roots [...] in the political economy of monopoly capitalism: benefits accorded to the metropolitan working class thanks to surplus profits, neo-colonial exploitation, the military budget, and gigantic government subventions. (Marcuse, 1972: 6)

However, and as Clarke (1991: 54) observed: ‘the nation state cannot stand above capital, since capital is a global phenomenon’. Nation states compel their populations to be competitive on the world market and they do so as a condition of achieving a measure of social integration. ‘It is the limits of the national form of the state which ensure that the actions of state are confined within the limits of capital, and which equally ensure that the state cannot resolve the inherent contradictions of capital accumulation’ (54). Just like the power of the State and law, exploitation and commodity exchange, capital and the welfare state appear as independent fetishes, but mutually condition one another, the same applies to the nation state and global capital: ‘The global and the national are different-in-unity, there are moments of the social relations of production, which constitute their distinct forms of existence’ (Bonefeld, 2014: 159). What does the domination of forms mean for human emancipation?

## THEORY OF PRAXIS – IN, AGAINST AND BEYOND THE STATE

The central theme to be found in this corpus – from Marx and Engel’s dispersed comments on the form State, through Pashukanis’ and Neumann’s critique of the *Rechtsstaat*, right down to the debates on the limits of the welfare state and the nation state – is the question of the State and emancipation. Pashukanis’ question as to why the State exists as a particular form has been answered. As Joachim Hirsch, who has participated in the state debate since the 1970s, put it:

Yes, this question was clarified. The answer, in brief, was that the State was neither an independent subject nor a neutral instrument that can be used at random by a power wielding group or class [...], but is instead a structural component of capitalism, its particular political form. The capitalist class and exploitative relationships have been formed in such a way that the economically



dominating class cannot dominate politically directly, but can only achieve its domination by means of an instance separated from the classes, the State. At the same time, the State remains subjected to the structural and functional logic of capitalist society. It is not an instance outside capital. The bourgeois State is therefore a class state without being the direct instrument of a class. And this 'separation' or 'relative autonomy' of the State is the basis of the illusion of the State. (Hirsch, 2010)

What has not been resolved, however, is still the political consequences of the critique of the state as the political form of society. In accordance with Pashukanis' and Lukács' ideas, law and politics can only become superfluous as forms of capitalism through the surpassing of capitalism. They thus agree with Lenin's theory of the class state, which is never neutral, including during the period of transition to communism. 'The proletariat needs the state, not in the interest of freedom but in order to hold down its adversaries, and as soon as it becomes possible to speak of freedom the state as such ceases to exist' (Lenin, 2015: 126). Nevertheless, as Marcuse argued, state socialism did not overcome the authoritarian character of the state. Horkheimer and Neumann even warn us that naked violence without legal form is worse. A pragmatic response to this can be found in Hirsch's account. It is true that the 'peculiarisation of the State is the decisive foundation of the fetishism of the State' (Hirsch, 2005: 59), but 'the State is not only an abstract fetish. It is also a field of social struggle' (Hirsch, 2003).

Hirsch objects to the social democratic illusion of State neutrality, but considers it worthwhile to engage in politics. After all, the commodity form of labour does not determine its price, and the form of law does not per se determine the content of laws. Fights over wages and election outcomes shape the manner of capitalist society. In this context form theory is important to guard against illusionary expectations. However, Hirsch's scheme presupposes subjects who are aware of their subjugation to abstract social forms and confirm this through their praxis.

What remains unclear in this strategy of (subversive) hibernation is how the horizon of critical theories of the State can survive. That horizon can be recalled through Marx's description of the Paris commune: '[The commune] was a Revolution against the State itself' (Marx, 1986: 486). It is 'the reabsorption of the State power by society as its own living forces instead of as forces controlling and subduing it, by the popular masses themselves, forming their own force instead of the organized force of their suppression – the political form of their social emancipation' (487). Of course, this form only existed as a breaking out of existing forms.

Holloway defends the position of not postponing the break with fetish forms to a revolutionary future, but to transform it into praxis. 'The task, therefore is [...] to develop [...] forms of organisation which stand in opposition to the fetishised and fetishising forms of bourgeois politics and economics' (Holloway, 1991: 258). He recognises that tangible struggles that might lead to social movements and new forms of organization are subject to dangers of integration. 'Struggles are channelled into political and economic forms, neither of which leaves room for raising questions about the structure of society as a whole' (Holloway, 2002: 94). Parties and trade unions have been tailored to the existing mode of society: they posit laws and collective agreements and have to want the State. After all, fetishism is not simply an illusion, but an expression of day to day contradictions. 'We create and re-create [the state] by paying taxes, by obeying the laws, by voting in elections' (Holloway, 2010: 134). For Holloway (2002: 92), '[t]o criticise the state means in the first place to attack the apparent autonomy of the state, to understand the state not as a thing in itself, but as a social form, a form of social relations'.

This critique of the state ultimately refers to the utopia of another reality. If indeed the State is not the opposite of capital, not a neutral means but the political form of exploitative and violent capitalist society, this raises

the question of a fundamentally different perspective. Hirsch uses concepts such as 'association' and 'federation' as fundamentally distinct modes of 'living together' (Hirsch, 1998: 105). The critique of the state entails also critical theory's distinction between the violence of the State and capital disguised in economic and political forms and the naked violence beyond such forms practised today by lynch mobs, Islamists or war lords. Horkheimer's (1985: 99) disappointment over the revolution which failed to '[dissolve] in the end into the democracy of the councils' points as a critique to an impeded future, because if 'there was anything in the twentieth century akin to a concrete utopia, that was the utopia of the councils' (Negt, 1976: 462). The councils were a means, the practical anticipation of a project of human emancipation. Weber himself laid out the criterion of this project: 'If there existed only social formations in which violence was unknown as a means, then the concept of the "state" would have disappeared'. Weber recommended calling this 'anarchy' (1994: 310).

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# The Administered World<sup>1</sup>

Hans-Ernst Schiller  
Translated by Lars Fischer

Horkheimer and Adorno first publicly introduced the term ‘administered world’ during a radio discussion with Eugen Kogon in 1950.<sup>2</sup> The term became more widely known when it featured in the subtitle of Adorno’s collection *Dissonanzen. Musik in der verwalteten Welt* [Dissonances. Music in the Administered World], published in 1956. The notions associated with the term have deep roots in the previous evolution of critical theory. This concerns the theory of state capitalism developed by Friedrich Pollock and the concept of reason discussed especially in Horkheimer’s *Eclipse of Reason* but also in numerous essays written in the 1930s and 1940s. With his essay ‘Some Social Implications of Modern Technology’ of 1941, Herbert Marcuse also contributed to the genesis of the concept. In *One-Dimensional Man*, he arrived at conclusions similar to those of his colleagues: ‘The world tends to become the stuff of total administration’.<sup>3</sup> The term is nevertheless associated primarily with Horkheimer and Adorno. In developed class

societies, the crucial underlying notion suggests, ‘administration’ becomes a form of domination characterized by a formalizing, quantifying and categorizing mindset and an instrumental praxis. It proliferates across all sectors of society, from the sphere of production via the state bureaucracy to the culture industry, and also shapes the relationships of the individual to itself and to others. This form of administration creates an administered world.

## BACKGROUND IN THE EVOLUTION OF CRITICAL THEORY I: PLANNED ECONOMIES AND STATE CAPITALISM

Already in the first essay with which Pollock staked his claim as one of the pioneers of emerging critical theory, published in 1932, he was concerned with ‘the colossal enterprises in industry, trade, and finance’.<sup>4</sup> He was particularly interested in the incremental

abrogation of market mechanisms reflected in the fact that states had to avoid the collapse of economic giants. The phrase 'too big to fail' may have been coined only in the crisis of 2008 but the concept had already been applied in 1929 and the years that followed. The need to create a new social order based on a planned economy engineered with the means of 'total organization' – rather than the partial organization characteristic of capitalism – resulted not from any inherent economic necessity but from the barbarous means and boundless profligacy required to maintain capitalism and develop it further.<sup>5</sup> Planned economies depended on the 'centralized direction of the economy' and a unified 'analysis of demand'.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, it was predicated on 'mass production in large enterprises' and technological and organizational advancement. This included 'the improvement of the means of communication, the development of statistical methods and technical mechanisms for their deployment, which only a decade ago would have seemed to amount to an inconceivable mechanization of bookkeeping'.<sup>7</sup> Pollock did not suggest that within a planned economy every single enterprise had to be subjected to central tutelage. That it was 'possible to fuse the principles of centralization and decentralization' was the crucial point.<sup>8</sup>

Against the backdrop of the Great Depression, Pollock wondered about the degree to which it was possible to introduce elements of planning while maintaining capitalist relations of ownership.<sup>9</sup> Was it possible, in other words, for the incremental replacement of the market by state intervention and the increasing significance of planning in the large enterprises to gel into a capitalist planned economy? To his mind, central planning and capitalist relations of property were, in principle, compatible. If 'the power of disposal is ceded to the planning authorities' then ownership of the means of production became 'what in very many cases it already is today, that is, the guarantee of a more or less secure economic

rent'.<sup>10</sup> Pollock was nevertheless sceptical about the prospects of a capitalist planned economy. In no social order to date had 'the receipt of rent at society's expense with no discernible trade off at all been sustainable in the long run'.<sup>11</sup>

Once he developed the ideal-typical concept of state capitalism in 1941, Pollock dropped this questionable line of argument.<sup>12</sup> This concept was designed to encompass the disappearance of the market economy and the assumption of its rationalized regulatory functions by the state planning bureaucracies, the ruling parties, and the large enterprises, on the one hand, and the preservation of the private ownership of productive wealth and the profit motif, on the other. According to this definition, the Soviet order at the time was not a form of state capitalism, nor, when it was expressly mentioned, was it subsumed under this category.<sup>13</sup> With the advent of state capitalism, the 'mechanics of *laissez faire*' were replaced by 'governmental command'. Political means took the place of economic ones.<sup>14</sup> This notion of a 'transition from a predominantly economic to an essentially political era' paved the way for the racket theory subsequently propagated by Horkheimer.<sup>15</sup> Given its contention that economic problems were replaced by administrative ones,<sup>16</sup> the state capitalism concept paved the way for the theory of the 'administered world'. Within the parameters of state capitalism, administration was defined as rational activity undertaken to implement the central plan. Its ideal was 'scientific management' and the principle of rationalization, which entails the economization of each and every individual activity in accordance with the principle of the most economical means, the capture of all resources with the most advanced means of data processing and, of course, the monitoring of all operations by management. The adversaries of the administered world are improvisation, muddling through, conjecture, disorder and waste.

While Horkheimer did adopt the concept of state capitalism in the essays he wrote in

the early 1940s, his fundamental point of reference was the ‘authoritarian state’, which, on his account, existed in two guises: as state capitalism and as state socialism or ‘integral statism’.<sup>17</sup> If one reads Pollock’s essay on state capitalism and Horkheimer’s discussion of the authoritarian state in conjunction, the following forms emerge:

**Table 50.1 Horkheimer and Pollock: State-forms 1941**

authoritarian state		state capitalism	
state socialism (integral etatism)	fascist countries	democratic? (non-fascist)	

While Horkheimer in large part accepted Pollock’s diagnosis – especially regarding the liquidation of the market economy, i.e., of the liberal phase of capitalism – his perspective was markedly more radical. No form of ‘democratic state capitalism’ featured in his account. The only hope lay in the resolute introduction of the council system.<sup>18</sup> It alone might merit the epithet democratic. In authoritarian states, authority was exercised by the bureaucracy. The latter ‘regains the control of the economic mechanism which slipped away from the bourgeoisie under the rule of the pure profit principle’.<sup>19</sup> That Horkheimer did not treat non-fascist forms of state capitalism in his discussion of the authoritarian state is hardly surprising. On the other hand, there can be little doubt that the diagnoses subsumed as characteristic of state capitalism were also meant to apply to those developed countries not run by one-party rule.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno too adopted the theory of state capitalism. The notion of the administered world was clearly prefigured in the text. Human beings, so the argument went, were reduced to ‘mere objects of administration’. The latter ‘preforms every dimension of modern life including even language and perception ... Alongside the capacity permanently to abolish any form of poverty, impoverishment in the form of the dichotomy between power and powerlessness is also growing beyond measure’.<sup>20</sup>

## BACKGROUND IN THE EVOLUTION OF CRITICAL THEORY II: THE CONCEPT OF REASON

The principle of rationalization connects the notion of the administered world to a theme that was central to critical theory from its very inception, namely, that of reason. Already in his inaugural address as director of the Institute for Social Research of January 1931, Horkheimer identified the ‘nexus between specific existence and general reason’ as the central problem of interdisciplinary social research.<sup>21</sup> This theme pervaded the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (later *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*) from its first issue to its last and featured in many of Horkheimer’s as well as Marcuse’s essays. In ‘Philosophie und kritische Theorie (Philosophy and Critical Theory)’, Marcuse identified the concept of reason as the lasting legacy of the traditional philosophy drawn to a close by Hegel. It was the only category within philosophical thought through which it ‘remains connected to the fate of humanity’.<sup>22</sup> His big Hegel book of 1941, *Reason and Revolution*, is also part of this story. Yet, while Marcuse’s emphasis ultimately lay mainly on the history of ideas, Horkheimer was much more clearly interested in the objective reality of reason. Needless to say, Horkheimer too depended on traditional and contemporary thought as a means of theoretical reflection upon reality. Even so, his focus was from the very beginning centred on the historically specific ‘interplay of humans in society’ as ‘the mode of their reason’s existence’.<sup>23</sup> In this context, reason always had a twofold meaning: on the one hand, it referred to the general state of affairs, i.e., the institutions, which individuals, by pursuing their goals, reproduced – such as value, capital, the state; on the other hand, it designated the subjective position in relation to the objectivity of nature and society.

Both aspects were connected, but they were not identical and could be distinguished, to use Horkheimer's terminology in *Eclipse of Reason*, as 'objective' and 'subjective' reason. In modern society, social objectivity took on the guise of the 'anonymous might of economic necessity' to which people had to accommodate themselves.<sup>24</sup> The subjective dimension resulted from the fact that 'the most comprehensive accommodation of the subject to the reified authority of the economy ... is the guise of reason in bourgeois reality'.<sup>25</sup> Yet, that objectivity's appearance as an anonymous and inherent necessity was an illusion. It actually reflected the vested interests of individuals or specific groups: 'Production is not geared to the life of the generality as well as taking care of the needs of the individual; it is geared to the vested interest of the individual and also takes care, if need be, of the life of the generality'.<sup>26</sup> As far as the concept of reason was concerned, the theory of state capitalism implied that the superficial mediation through functional necessities fell away and the vested interests of society became the direct object of accommodation. It was

no longer the objective laws of the market that prevailed in the activities of the entrepreneurs and precipitated the catastrophe. Rather, as resultants whose inevitability in no way falls short of the blindest price mechanisms, the conscious decisions of the managing directors execute the old law of value and thus the fate of capitalism. The rulers themselves believe in no objective necessity, even if they occasionally give that name to their machinations.... Only their subjects acknowledge the inviolable necessity of the development, which renders them yet more powerless with every decreed increase in their standard of living.<sup>27</sup>

In this new constellation, too, the concept of reason retained a critical and normative function. The difficulties of the concept ultimately originated in the fact 'that the universality of reason cannot be anything else than the accord among the interests of all individuals alike whereas in reality society has been split up into groups with conflicting interests'.<sup>28</sup>

Matters were complicated by the insight that paved the way towards the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: that an intricate, hitherto unresolved nexus existed between social domination, self-control and the domination of nature.<sup>29</sup> The elimination of social domination that forms the utopian vision's point of departure could be achieved only together with a reconciliation of living matter.<sup>30</sup> The realization of reason, then, implied a new relationship not only among human beings but also between human beings and nature. Yet in modern class society the domination of nature was an imperative that had been automatized in the apparatuses of production and domination. Subjective reason, then, was not just the logic of the individual subjects in specific sets of social relations but also the logic of those relations themselves that had taken on a life of their own in the gigantic apparatuses of production. Only this made subjective reason 'the concept of rationality that underlies our contemporary industrial culture'.<sup>31</sup> Subjective reason could disembody itself from the twofold context of objective between reason and recognition of the wilfulness of nature and the realization of a true generality of social institutions.

Subjective reason that failed to do so was what Horkheimer, in *Eclipse of Reason*, termed instrumentalized reason, the guise of reason in the administered world whose crucial characteristic, as Adorno put it, was 'the concentration of ever greater economic and social units to facilitate nescient and baleful sectional ends'.<sup>32</sup> Whether the unquestioned ends that had taken on a life of their own were really as opaque as Adorno claimed is a moot point, however. The fundamental goal underlying those unquestioned and effectively unquestionable ends pursued by the apparatuses of production as well as educational institutions was, after all, still the production of abstract wealth and the exchange value of capital in its general guise as money. Educational institutions contributed to that goal not least by obscuring it. The valorization of value, profiteering, or growth, as it

is euphemistically called, is in no way connected to any concrete form of objectified wealth.<sup>33</sup> It would seem, alas, that Horkheimer and Adorno themselves, during the Cold War, were inclined to obscure this goal. Indeed, this may be the fundamental problem with the concept of the administered world – that it does not give the still constitutive role of the extended production of capital its due.

### ADMINISTRATION AS A MINDSET AND FORM OF DOMINATION

The administration of the administered world is predicated on a mindset that emerged with modern science and first became social reality in the industrial application of technology in the capitalist factory. In *Eclipse of Reason*, Horkheimer portrayed this mindset as subjective reason developing a life of its own. Its characteristics were the principle of utility or instrumentalism and the classification and formalization of its objects. Its purpose was predetermined and supposed to be achieved ‘as completely as possible and with the least effort possible’.<sup>34</sup> It was predicated on the application of legal norms, organizational targets and profit rates, which could not themselves be questioned with the means of instrumental reason. They were realized through the assessment of objects such as the inventory in an enterprise, the personnel, and individuals’ leisure activities. This assessment was predicated on taxonomies superimposed upon humans and goods. One draws by numbers, follows ‘abstract procedure’.<sup>35</sup> The classificatory concepts had to allow mathematical regularities to be construed between the various data. Work processes had to be comprehensively parsed and the time requirements for each step measured and translated into a norm. In the meantime, university bureaucracies raise student data and distinguish funding sources in order to channel student streams and tailor them to targets. State bureaucracies raise data to

assess claims, undertake surveillance or persecute. Commercial administrations chase data on consumer habits to facilitate more targeted advertising and arouse new cravings. Yet time and again all this effort comes up against new constraints. ‘Nothing in the administered world works seamlessly’.<sup>36</sup> Registration and calculation turn out to be Sisyphean tasks. There are always cases that slip through the net, that precipitate the infamous need for yet more regulation, new laws and judgements, new classifications and ever more data. Today’s rationality of administration turns out to be dialectical: through its own dictates it produces the irrational elements that frustrate its calculations. The administered world turns out to be no less unbridled than the production of abstract wealth with which it is intertwined.

The utilization of data and calculations is not the only characteristic of administration as a mode of domination. To be sure, inefficient workers can be sacked and whoever seems suspicious when monitored is likely to be subjected to force. But an inherent nexus also exists between the administrative mindset and the domination of man and nature.<sup>37</sup> This was a particular concern of Marcuse in *One-Dimensional Man*. This form of rationality subjugates by treating living matter that pursues its own goals as a mere object. It is interested exclusively in measurability and regularity within the registered parameters. The formation of modern science marked the decisive step in elevating the domination of nature to a principle. By denouncing the teleological dimension of the *causa finalis* as a form of obscurantism, one was justified in subjugating nature, as matter that had no inherent value of its own, to the ends of production. ‘The quantification of nature’, Marcuse wrote, ‘separated reality from all inherent ends and, consequently, separated the true from the good, science from ethics’.<sup>38</sup> Inadvertently or not, by reducing deadened nature to mathematical regularities in its experiments, science was inherently connected to its technological application.



Marcuse concluded 'that the general direction in which it came to be applied was inherent in pure science even where no practical purposes were intended'.<sup>39</sup> The application of this mindset to human beings in the fields of medicine, psychology and social engineering reduced individuals to mere objects, subsequent corrective measures designed to prevent human beings from ever being treated *exclusively* as objects or means notwithstanding. State and commercial bureaucracies may negotiate their goals but the basic relationship remained one of objectification and reification.<sup>40</sup> The ideology of contract theory was unmasked for what it is when agreements could be coerced and refusal to comply carried sanctions. In the welfare state, too, the employees were subject to targets and evaluations. 'In the medium of technology, man and nature become fungible objects of organization', Marcuse wrote,<sup>41</sup> and 'this is the pure form of servitude: to exist as an instrument, as a thing'.<sup>42</sup>

### THE PITFALLS OF A SUPERFICIAL CRITIQUE OF THE BUREAUCRACY

Since the total rationalization of the administered world is a coercive function of power, a critique merely of the bureaucracy must fall short. When articulated by market liberals this critique primarily serves to weaken the legislature without being able or willing to democratize the bureaucracies (and it in any case focuses only on the state administration). In Adorno's rather neat formulation, 'the bureaucracy is the scape goat of the administered world'.<sup>43</sup> On the one hand, the superficial critique of the bureaucracy fails to appreciate that a good administration, which combats corruption, can benefit society. 'Like procedural law, the abstract procedure, which allows the bureaucrat to process each case automatically with "no respect of persons"', represents an element of justice, a guarantee, given its universal frame of

reference, that arbitrariness, coincidence, and nepotism do not govern man's fate'.<sup>44</sup>

On the other hand, the superficial critique of the bureaucracy fails to recognize that the bureaucracy is intricately connected to the mode of production. As Adorno described the process, 'the technological work process has transcended the critical industrial sector ... and proliferated life as a whole'.<sup>45</sup> The 'links of mediation' that were at play here, alas, 'have barely been exposed by research'.<sup>46</sup> In the meantime, Harry Braverman's study, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, has filled in some of the blanks. Braverman has demonstrated compellingly how the growing significance of the office and the desire for it to function in accordance with scientific management standards follows from the evolution of the capitalist mode of production. Marx already referred to the 'pettiest spiteful despotism' of capital in the factory work process.<sup>47</sup> Yet Taylorism perfected its execution of control – in the twofold sense of surveillance and domination. Taylorism was 'the explicit verbalization of the capitalist mode of production', a 'science of work', which 'in reality is intended to be a *science of the management of other's work* under capitalist conditions'.<sup>48</sup> For Taylor, 'scientific management' hinged on '*the dictation to the workers of the precise manner in which work is to be performed*'.<sup>49</sup> The experience and skill of the individual workers are thus devalued, the intellectual operations are delegated as far as possible to the planning and labour office in an attempt to create a knowledge monopoly, which can be utilized '*to control each step of the labor process and its mode of execution*'.<sup>50</sup> With the growing need for coordination and monitoring, the demand for clerical work also increases. Bolstered yet further by the requirements of marketing and accountancy, clerical labour 'begins to approach or surpass the labor used in producing the underlying commodity or service'.<sup>51</sup> Crucial to Braverman's account is the insight that the clerical work was organized in accordance with the same principles as production itself.

'The purpose of the office is control over the enterprise, and the purpose of office management is control over the office'.<sup>52</sup> These proven principles spread to the state bureaucracy, which, be it as tax, welfare, educational or military administrations, fulfil economic functions too and, in all of the developed industrial states, have expanded throughout the twentieth century. In the meantime, principles of scientific management have been enshrined through the state bureaucracy in areas of activity which until two or three decades ago were considered unsuited to those principles: university studies, research in the humanities and social sciences, the caring professions and social services. This trend can justly be subsumed under the concept of the administered world, provided one bears in mind the open-ended character of its totalizing momentum.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, this momentum amounted to advancing sociation and social integration.<sup>53</sup> They subscribed to the Marxian theory that, as the domination of nature progressed, individual relations of dependency grounded organically in familial relationships or brute force were superseded by functional relations of dependency, which, like market relations, only emerged through individuals' social activities.<sup>54</sup> To the same degree as untreated nature disappeared or was declared inviolable and enclosed in nature reserves, social relationships were subjected to abstract norms, to the 'alienation of the individual from itself and others'.<sup>55</sup> This development continues as the capitalist production of value takes hold of ever new objects: communication and mobility, health and education, water provision and human genetics, animals and plants. For the reasons examined by Braverman, valorization and commodification, the transformation of the world into commodities, transpired hand in hand with the extension of the bureaucracy. As Adorno put it, 'the integration of society has grown in the sense of an increasing sociation. The social net is woven more and more closely and there are

fewer and fewer areas and spheres of so-called subjectivity that have not been seized directly and more or less comprehensively by society'.<sup>56</sup>

### **SELF-REIFICATION, AUTHORITARIANISM AND THE ATROPHY OF RESPONSIBILITY**

The administered world's sense of totality is demonstrated with particular clarity by its imprint on the individual. The administration of human beings amounts to their objectification and reification. This mechanism is internalized, which leads to the *self*-reification of those compelled to accommodate themselves to the administered world. This was already the subject matter of Adorno's aphorism 'Novissimum Organon' in *Minima Moralia*. As he put it in 1950, 'everyone is their own clerical case worker, as it were'.<sup>57</sup> In his essay of 1967, 'Erziehung nach Auschwitz' [Education after Auschwitz], he offered a condensed account of the kind of person calibrated for reification whom he also identified with the manipulative character previously introduced in *The Authoritarian Personality*. A manic dedication to organizational activity and efficiency, a fetish for technology, and emotional frigidity were among the characteristics of this kind of person. 'People of this kind first make themselves resemble objects and then, if they can, others too'.<sup>58</sup> Developments in the decades since have only confirmed the acuity of this diagnosis of self-reification. One engages in time management, learns to deal with one's feelings, holds 'emotional bank accounts', and crafts the identity one needs in any given context. The term adaptation no longer refers merely to one aspect of the natural process of evolution or to one aspect of the socialization into human society that transpires instinctively through mimetic behaviour. Instead, it has taken centre stage and become a commandment and creed. One has to, and wants to,

conform and this strategy boils down to a principled willingness to engage in self-reification and self-instrumentalization. 'The process of adjustment has now become deliberate and therefore total'.<sup>59</sup>

Since human beings in the modern world are not merely the proverbial cogs in the machine but also subjects that bear responsibility for themselves in the market place, the desire of subjectivity for emotions and identification has to be taken into account. Consequently, the administered world is also the world of the cult of personality, of the principle of individuality. Preoccupation with oneself plays a considerable role. Yet the much vaunted act of taking care of oneself frequently seems lifeless – as Adorno put it, 'the idea of a passionate human being today seems almost anachronistic'<sup>60</sup> – and attaches itself to superficial issues, even when psychological concepts are invoked. For this phenomenon he coined the term pseudo-individualization.<sup>61</sup> In the radio discussion in 1950, Horkheimer uttered a harsh critique of psychoanalysis, which applies with even greater justification today to its cognitive-behavioural competitors: 'In psychoanalysis the process of administration is continued within the human being itself'.<sup>62</sup> On the one hand, the rise of psychology and therapy demonstrated that for many, the process of adaptation was not, after all, as seamless as the functioning of the social machine would require. On the other hand, (psychoanalytic) therapy itself played an integral role in the process of alienation. In the form 'in which it is currently practised', Horkheimer argued, it implied 'that human beings should feel well under the general pressure'.<sup>63</sup>

The totalized administration is also closely connected to the authoritarian character. While Horkheimer and Adorno occasionally felt compelled to relativize authoritarianism in their theoretical accounts of National Socialism, the suggestion that it is a matter of the past that has been pushed back and now leads a mere

niche existence should be rejected. Man in the administered society is the authoritarian character.<sup>64</sup> In the administered world, Horkheimer explained, human beings

always think in terms of those on top and those at the bottom. They immediately classify every person as belonging to a particular class, a particular political party, a particular country, a particular race. They think in terms of black and white. Black is the group, which is not one's own; white is one's own group with which everything is in order and as it should be. They feel a tremendous yearning to belong to one of these groups, which is then the good group. This results from the fact that their ego, their spontaneity, and their will power have become weak and limp and they can only get a sense of themselves when they think of themselves as a member of a strong community.<sup>65</sup>

The nexus between administration and the authoritarian characters lay not just in this mindset, however, but also in the hierarchical organization of bureaucracies. Max Weber had lent bureaucratic obedience the halo of morality:

When a superior authority insists on an order that he considers wrong, the honour of the civil servant lies in his ability to go against his own judgement and nevertheless carry out the order, under the responsibility of the superior, as conscientiously and precisely as though it did conform to his own conviction. Without this truly moral discipline and self-denial the entire apparatus would disintegrate.<sup>66</sup>

Historical experience has shown that this 'honorable' stance of the civil servants can facilitate the most atrocious crimes. Yet under less sinister circumstances, too, the division of labour in the social apparatuses promotes irresponsibility and unscrupulousness. Anyone who has been involved with a social security office and has not become inured yet will be only too familiar with this tendency. Attempts to think beyond one's own immediate remit are considered particularly counterproductive, even when the practised restraint places, say, the wellbeing of a child at risk or undermines arduous individuation processes.

## THE ADMINISTERED WORLD AND THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

Professionalized irresponsibility also features in the cultural sphere. For Adorno this was exemplified by an incident that transpired early in 1952 when he protested against the republication of Heinrich Mann's novel *Professor Unrat* under the title of the successful screen adaptation *Der blaue Engel* [The Blue Angel].<sup>67</sup> From the material he was subsequently sent by the publisher it emerged that all parties involved had really been against the change of title. 'Nobody is responsible', he wrote.

This, in turn, reflects a much more fundamental phenomenon: the evaporation of guilt. The transfer of life to administration not only facilitates the perpetration of any number of atrocities without seeing oneself as a perpetrator. When an attempt is made, just for once, to hold an individual responsible, he can also make his excuses with utter subjective conviction. This effect ranges from seemingly negligible issues, like the changing of the title of a good novel into that of a bad film, all the way to outright atrocities.<sup>68</sup>

As already mentioned, the term administered world became more widely known because it featured in the subtitle of a collection of essays that Adorno published in 1956 as *Dissonanzen. Musik in der verwalteten Welt*. The thrust of the essays was twofold: they took issue with the 'infantilized music' in the Warsaw Pact states, on the one hand,<sup>69</sup> and the culture industry in advanced capitalism, on the other. He criticized the social character of the choral and youth music movement of the 1950s, which hinged on the classification and hatred of deviation, on industriousness and on the hypostatization of community. The administered world demanded 'functional music' [*Gebrauchsmusik*], purposive and streamlined pieces.<sup>70</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno had already stressed the centrality of stereotypy to the administered arts and exposed its diversification – offering something for everyone – as a means of universal capture. The intensifying integration and

socialization of relationships at the heart of capitalist development was particularly palpable in the culture industry. Human imagination was shaped by the dream factories, film and television foremost among them. Somebody who read a book was called upon to reproduce its imagery with his or her own imagination and thus in an individual way. If one watched a screen adaptation one was not only relieved of the imaginative labour but the images attained such force that they inevitably superimposed themselves upon the individual imagination. Subjectivity in the administered world was fundamentally characterized by the atrophy of spontaneity. It endangered the authentic production of art, which had to be wrested from the culture industry. 'The current paralysis of musical forces', Adorno wrote, 'represents the paralysis of all forms of free initiative in the administered world, which is unwilling to tolerate anything outside of itself that is not integrated at least as an oppositional variant'.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, the very way in which institutions used the term culture already bore the imprint of the culture industry:

He who says culture, also says administration [...] The subsumption of phenomena as diverse as philosophy and religion, science and art, ways of living and mores and, not least, the objective spirit of an age under the one term of culture already betrays in advance the administrative glance, which collects, classifies, assesses, and organizes everything from above.<sup>72</sup>

## THEORETICAL PRECURSORS I: MARX AND ENGELS

In terms of the concept's theoretical antecedents, Marx and Engels form the first and principal point of reference for the notion of the administered world. Horkheimer in particular took up the thesis that administration would play an ever greater role and inverted its polarity.<sup>73</sup> The need for a 'board' that 'keeps the books and accounts for a society producing in common' was already

registered by Marx in the *Grundrisse*.<sup>74</sup> This board was supposed to certify entitlements and engage in acts of distribution that could not be re-circulated in the primitive form of money, in other words, that were personalized and could be redeemed only by the board. Even 'after the abolition of the capitalist mode of production but while maintaining social production', a passage in the third volume of *Das Kapital* contended, 'the determination of value continues to transpire predominantly in such a way that the regulation of labour time and the distribution of social labour among the various spheres of production and, not least, the bookkeeping that records all this, become more essential than ever'.<sup>75</sup>

On this point, Engels agreed with his friend Marx: 'The rule over people will be replaced by the administration of objects and the direction of production processes'.<sup>76</sup> Neither did the notion that capitalism would evolve via joint stock companies and trusts into state capitalism which would be the next preliminary step towards a socialist resolution of the conflict between the forces and relations of production diverge substantially from Marx's thought processes.<sup>77</sup> Not that this is a flawless line of argument, but one certainly cannot attribute it exclusively to Engels and then, looking back over the most horrendous decades of the twentieth century, shake one's head in disbelief. And yet, even from the perspective of 1940, this construct seems irredeemably naïve. In 'Autoritärer Staat', Horkheimer quoted Engels's developmental scheme – which ended with the state 'taking over the direction of production' – in some detail.<sup>78</sup> What Engels had failed to see was the possibility that such a state, having become not only the 'ideational' but the actual 'embodiment of the country's entire capital',<sup>79</sup> could draw on repression and the loyalty of the masses to function as an authoritarian state.

The prospects Engels construed seem hopelessly naïve and utopian today:

The capitalist mode of production pushes more and more towards the transferral of the large

socialized means of production into state ownership and thus itself shows the way towards the execution of the revolution. *The proletariat will seize state power and transfer the means of production, initially, into state ownership.* Yet in so doing it will dissipate as the proletariat and annul all distinctions and antagonisms of class and thus also the state *qua* state.... The intervention of state power into social relations will become superfluous in one sphere after another and gradually cease of its own accord.... The state is not 'abolished', it withers away.<sup>80</sup>

The forces of production would lie 'in the hands of the associated producers', and 'the social anarchy of production' that was characteristic of capitalism would be replaced by 'a planned social regulation of production according to the needs of all and of each individual'.<sup>81</sup>

The decisive question, which Engels failed to raise, was that of how one could prevent the administration of objects from becoming the pretext for the domination of people. Its urgency was demonstrated by the development of the Russian Revolution. State socialism became, in the words of Horkheimer, the 'most consistent form of authoritarian state'.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, Horkheimer was not oblivious to the fact that integral etatism also held a promise for 'the millions at the bottom'.<sup>83</sup> 'Wherever else in Europe tendencies towards integral etatism are stirring there is a prospect that this time it will not become entangled in bureaucratic domination again', he wrote.<sup>84</sup> Decisive were the actions of the masses themselves: 'The radical change that will put an end to domination will reach as far as the will of those who are liberated'.<sup>85</sup> Everything depended on the actualization of a true democracy in the form of a council system. 'In a new society only the uncompromising independence of the non-delegates will prevent the administration from turning into domination'.<sup>86</sup> In the radio discussion with Adorno and Kogon in 1950, Horkheimer still noted that 'people today are in the grasp of the bureaucracy, but they need not be'.<sup>87</sup>

In the course of the Cold War, Horkheimer abandoned such hopes. He now considered

'the tendency towards absolute administration' and integration inescapable and irrevocable,<sup>88</sup> and dropped the notion of 'self-governance', which had also been the critical vanishing point of Marcuse's concept of bureaucracy.<sup>89</sup> 'As long as its development is not disrupted by catastrophes', Horkheimer explained in 1971, 'society, following its inherent logic, gravitates towards a state in which administration gains ever more significance at the expense of individual spontaneity so that production and the tasks it depends on are no longer reliant upon "free enterprise" but effectively turn into automated processes'. Horkheimer now assumed 'that the path leads inexorably to total administration'.<sup>90</sup>

## THEORETICAL PRECURSORS II: MAX WEBER

The significance of Max Weber for the concept of the administered world is generally overstated. At its core, the concept drew on other sources and it predated the critical theorists' serious engagement of Weber's conceptualization of bureaucracy, which only occurred in earnest in the 1960s. To be sure, they too could not simply ignore Weber's theories. Adorno and Horkheimer praised the renowned sociologist's erudition and intellectual force. The designation 'Weber-Marxism' is nevertheless misleading. It was apparently coined by Jürgen Habermas and has variously been repeated since.<sup>91</sup> Weber-Marxism is a wooden iron that forcibly conflates mutually contradictory elements without allowing their contradictions to be articulated or resolved. On the one hand, Weber's endeavour presupposed theoretical Marxism and he owed important impulses to it. Not least, Marx had pointed to protestant Christianity as the form of religion best suited to the capitalist mode of production.<sup>92</sup> Yet Weber also sought to create a counterweight to Marxism and

maintained a polemical relationship to it.<sup>93</sup> On the other hand, the engagement of Weber by Horkheimer and Adorno, and the same holds true of Marcuse, was fundamentally critical in nature. For one thing, in connection with his studies of protestant ethics they defended the Marxian positions Weber had opposed. They denied that the religious ideas of the Reformation played a 'principal role in the emergence of the bourgeois world'. These ideas had not, in and of themselves, been original. Rather, 'their momentous proliferation from the pulpit can be understood only in connection with the economically determined rise of the bourgeoisie'.<sup>94</sup>

Yet their critical discussion did not hinge merely on the defence of Marx against Weber. It also concerned the core of Weber's theory, his concept of rationality. They did give Weber credit for having predicted the increasing bureaucratization 'with great precision'.<sup>95</sup> Yet for Adorno, Weber's concept of rationality stood on its head, making him a 'trustworthy mouthpiece of his class'.<sup>96</sup> Weber's rationality was defined in utilitarian terms. It hinged on the 'technically most adequate means' without any examination of the objective rationality of the ends.<sup>97</sup> An objectively rational end, for Adorno, would be to maintain and secure the lives of 'the socialized subjects in accordance with their unfettered potential'.<sup>98</sup> Yet in fact, the more the rationality of means was refined and extended, the more life was impoverished and threatened. Provided everything ran 'normally', individual subjective interests were governed by rationality, yet the whole was uncontrollable and crisis-ridden, a game played without a safety net and at the risk of annihilation. 'The rationality of ends and means at the individual level', Adorno noted, 'not only does not balance out the irrationality of the whole but ... actually reinforces it'. Society as a whole continued to be at the mercy of a blind interplay of forces.<sup>99</sup>

Little is gained by responding to Adorno's (or Marcuse's) critique of Weber

with a reference to the fact that Weber also deployed a second concept of rationality. To be sure, to the utilitarian, formal rationality he also juxtaposed a material rationality. Yet on closer inspection, it too turns out to be a matter of subjective discretion. The distinction between material and formal rationality comes nowhere close to the concept of an objective or substantive reason whose frame of reference must be society in its entirety, i.e., the true generality. According to Weber, material rationality is a rationality of values. It makes claims of an ethical, power-political or some other kind.<sup>100</sup> Yet it is impossible to account for the legitimacy of the values in question. When Weber refers to a rationality of values he is concerned with the immanent systematic consistency of values. These criteria can also be applied to values one does not share.<sup>101</sup> Within this scheme, partisanship for alternative values – equality vs. class interests, say, or veracity vs. national supremacy – is ultimately not subject to a rational decision.

Weber's distinction between formal and material rationality, along with the notion of a rationality of values, falls into the realm of subjective reason, then. Of equal concern is his relationship to irrationality. Weber was blind to the irrationality, which, as the Critical Theorists demonstrated in connection with the authoritarianism of leading Reformation figures, inhered in the bourgeois spirit from its inception.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, his rationality of ends was not only compatible with irrationality but itself characterized by a measure of irrationality. It is this nexus that renders the relationship between reason and irrationality dialectical, and it is its non-dialectical character that sets Weber's conceptualization markedly apart from that of the critical theorists who insisted that 'bureaucracy ... is irrational'.<sup>103</sup> This statement, which referred to the tendency of individual functions to take on a life of their own and the self-multiplication of the need for regulation,

can also be generalized. If one takes the basis of economic calculation into consideration, the rationality of ends, applied to the economic realm, is irrational. As things stand, the economic handling of use values presupposes their transformation into exchange values. Yet in the exchange relationship between commodities, the relationships between those who work also appear as those between objects. Weber's concept of rationality, Adorno argued, was naïve because he did not touch on the crucial concern: 'in the world we inhabit, relationships between human beings, due to the structure of the exchange process' were 'reflected back to us, as though they were the characteristics of objects'.<sup>104</sup>

Marcuse presented a detailed critique of Weber's concept of bureaucracy at the 15th Congress of German Sociologists in 1964. According to Habermas, he made quite an impression.<sup>105</sup> Building on the insight that Weber's formal rationality was itself characterized by traits of domination (see the section 'Administration as a Mindset', above), Marcuse focused on the contention that a bureaucracy that proceeds rationally remains dependent on an irrational power that utilizes it. The 'bureaucracy submits to an extra- and meta-bureaucratic power ... When rationality is embodied in the administration and *exclusively there* then this legislative power must be *irrational*. Weber's concept of reason culminates in the irrational concept of *charisma*'.<sup>106</sup> That said, Weber had at least recognized the risk 'that the rational bureaucratic apparatus of administration, by virtue of its rationality, submits to an alien authority'.<sup>107</sup> Just as the progressing domination of nature was subordinate to capital as the self-valorizing value, state (and other) bureaucracies needed a leader. 'Disastrously', Adorno explained in the radio discussion with Horkheimer and Kogon, 'irrationality is rationalized'.<sup>108</sup> Or, as he put it elsewhere, 'rationality ... falls into irrationality's sphere of influence'.<sup>109</sup>

## HABERMAS AND THE 'COLONIZATION OF THE LIFEWORLD'

Jürgen Habermas adopted but also contained the notion of the administered world in his concept of the 'colonization of the lifeworld'.<sup>110</sup> As is well known, the concept of the lifeworld was introduced by Husserl in the context of his reflections upon the *Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften* [Crisis of the European Sciences]. Habermas appropriated the term in order to construe theoretically a field of action within which communicative action could reside. Communicative action that transpired in the lifeworld was oriented towards common understanding and sought forms of consent that, in the modern world at least, were rationally motivated, i.e., based on arguments grounded in normative regularity, factual veracity and emotional genuineness. Any form of action oriented towards common understanding transpired in what is assumed to be a shared situation. The entirety of assumed commonalities, underlying convictions or notions that go without saying, formed the lifeworld. It was the reservoir that fed the definitions of the situation. These underlying convictions formed 'patterns of interpretation, value and expression' to which Habermas assigned the terms culture and language. They were not, in the first instance, thematic and could not be designated knowledge because knowledge 'stands in internal relation to validity claims and can therefore be criticized'.<sup>111</sup> Yet it could also transpire that the assumption of commonalities was incorrect. In that case, the definitions of the situation themselves were problematized in communicative action.

The fundamental problem with Habermas's social theory springs from the fact that he wants to anchor communicative action and the lifeworld as its practical locus in a specific social sphere that is distinct on principle from the economic and administrative spheres. In the latter, action was strategic and instrumental, and common underlying assumptions

and thought patterns that could turn out to be mutually contradictory did not seem to exist. Conversely, it is something of a stretch to imagine that gainful employment as an activity, though supposedly not communicative, belongs to the lifeworld. As 'performance' it certainly belongs to the functional context of the economic system.<sup>112</sup> Since Habermas does not explicate the distinction between action and performance, one might think of the Marxian distinction between the labour process and the valorization process. Yet one of the presumptions underlying Habermas's theory of communicative action was that Marx's theory of value was incorrect.<sup>113</sup> According to Habermas's colonization theory, the lifeworld (understood in the sense outlined above) was embroiled in defensive action against the intrusion of dictates from the economic and administrative subsystems that have taken on a life of their own.<sup>114</sup> Their imperatives, according to Habermas, were monetization and bureaucratization. By colonization he meant 'the penetration of forms of economic and administrative rationality into areas of action that resist being converted over to the media of money and power because they are specialized in cultural transmission, social integration, and child rearing, and remain dependent on mutual understanding as a mechanism for coordinating action'.<sup>115</sup> The core site of this colonization Habermas saw in the modern welfare state, which guaranteed freedom, on the one hand, but also had an individualizing and atomizing effect, on the other.<sup>116</sup> Habermas also focused on the commercialization of leisure ('mass consumption') and the juridification of relationships within families and schools.

The fundamental problem with this concept resides in the notion that monetization and bureaucratization supposedly confront a lifeworld in which, as Habermas himself reflected and is all too evident from the reality around us, the economic and administrative principles, their 'steering media', throughout modern history have been firmly grounded all along.<sup>117</sup> In *Misère de la philosophie*



[The Poverty of Philosophy], published in 1847, Marx already pointed to the fact that 'things, which until then had only been imparted but never exchanged, given but never sold, acquired but never bought: virtue, love, conviction, knowledge, conscience etc. ... all became objects of trade'.<sup>118</sup> This makes it difficult to argue that juridification and monetization emerged only with the welfare state and thus impinged on the lifeworld from the outside. In fact, these processes asserting modern economic principles have been at work from the outset and shape the attitudes of those they impact. In this context, monetization and juridification are intertwined. As Habermas acknowledged, the power of the economic subsystem over social services, the familiar economization of the social, was implemented by the administration in legal form.<sup>119</sup> Yet in all spheres the economization of the social transpired in at least two phases, which could be identified with the Marxian concepts of formal and real subsumption to the exchange value.<sup>120</sup> The economization of welfare consists not merely in the fact that one now needs to pay for services which are needed regularly, like medical or care services. This has been the case for some time and merely reflects the professionalization of the services. Decisive in the process of economization is the ingress of typically administrative forms of action into the fundamental work processes and their analysis, planning, streamlining and documentation. These are all processes that since the beginning of the twentieth century have constituted the phenomenon of economic rationalization and are well known from large industrial enterprises and their production sites and open-plan offices.

That said, Habermas's social theory – the only influential approach in recent decades, apart from systems theory – can be understood as an attempt to establish the modern lifeworld as an independent sphere geared to rational agreement and capable of resisting the impositions of administration and

commerce, though without questioning them in principle. His approach is plausible insofar as those impositions of monetization and regulation are indeed experienced by the subjects in their everyday lives as something coming from the outside. Yet the distinction, on principle, between the spheres of the capitalist economy, on the one hand, and state administration, on the other, each with their inviolable right, complemented by the lifeworld as a distinct sphere constituted by its own principle of rational agreement, is theoretically questionable.

### THINKING WITH AND BEYOND THE CONCEPT: BAUMAN AND FOUCAULT

Two concepts, developed after the death of the critical theorists, seem to confirm the theory of the administered world but also highlight certain weaknesses. In his *Dialectic of Modernity*, Zygmunt Bauman, while offering a deficient, apparently second-hand account of *The Authoritarian Personality*,<sup>121</sup> comes fairly close to the critical theorists' approach. According to Bauman, the Holocaust was 'a by-product of the modern drive to a fully designed, fully controlled world'.<sup>122</sup> Something similar could occur whenever democracy was abolished and replaced by 'an almost total monopoly of the political state'.<sup>123</sup> For Bauman, the '*pronounced supremacy of political over economic and social power, of the state over the society*' was the decisive factor.<sup>124</sup> The similarities to the concept of the authoritarian state are obvious. Given this supremacy of the state, the instrumental rationality inherent in the modern bureaucracy and the lack of moral responsibility, reflection and impetus fostered by the functional division of labour could take unrestrained effect. Bauman illustrated this by citing an expert on gas vans. 'The bureaucratic mode of action, as it has been developed in the course of the modernizing process', Bauman wrote,

contains all the technical elements which proved necessary in the execution of genocidal tasks.... Bureaucracy is programmed to seek the optimal solution. It is programmed to measure the optimum in such terms as would not distinguish between one human object and another, or between human and inhuman objects. What matters is the efficiency and lowering of costs of their processing.<sup>125</sup>

Here too the affinity to the critique of one-sided rationality formulated by Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse is obvious.

What distinguished Bauman's approach from that of critical theory is the absence of a teleological scheme. The authoritarian or totalitarian state features not as the necessary outcome of an inexorable development but as a constant threat that can be counteracted. This corresponds to the historical experience of the post-war era. An additional concern for Bauman was the cooperation of the victims as exemplified by the actions of the Jewish Councils in the ghettos. Above and beyond the distressing example of the Jewish Councils, this behaviour constituted an element of modern sociation illustrated by today's neoliberal welfare legislation with its 'integration agreements', or the 'target agreements' in contemporary universities.

Precisely because of its extremity, the Holocaust revealed aspects of the bureaucratic oppression which otherwise might have remained unnoticed.... Most prominent among these aspects is the *ability of modern, rational, bureaucratically organized power to induce actions functionally indispensable to its purposes while jarringly at odds with the vital interests of the actors.*<sup>126</sup>

The critical theorists did not return to this dimension of administrative domination in the post-war era.

In the late 1970s, Michel Foucault focused on the ideas of German ordoliberalism and sought to ground them in a history of 'governmental rationality' that he pursued back into the eighteenth century. We need not concern ourselves with the wilfulness of his historical derivation and its blind spots, or even his oddly flat discussion of administration.<sup>127</sup>

For our discussion here, the crucial point is that Foucault focused on the market economy, which, according to Horkheimer, Pollock and Adorno should no longer have existed. Although prices were deregulated in West Germany between 1948 and 1953,<sup>128</sup> Horkheimer, Pollock and even Adorno, though he was more careful in his formulations,<sup>129</sup> maintained their position that the market economy had come to an end, and refused to re-examine their diagnosis of the 1930s and 1940s in the light of new developments. There can be little doubt that this mistaken but presumably convenient conviction obstructed the further development of critical theory. While the cultural liberalization from the 1960s onwards caught those who were convinced that the trajectory towards the authoritarian state was inexorable unawares, forms of market-conform individualization against the backdrop of the welfare state were simply no longer taken into consideration. This is all the more remarkable, given that Foucault's theory of the 'entrepreneur of himself'<sup>130</sup> was already anticipated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

The more universally the modern industrial system demands of everyone that they serve it, the more all those who do not belong to the ocean of white trash ... turn into wee experts, becoming employees who need to fend for themselves. As qualified labour the independence of the entrepreneur, which no longer exists, spreads to everyone admitted as a producer ... and forms their character.<sup>131</sup>

That the concept of the administered world requires some adjustment should not detract from its continued heuristic and explanatory functionality. Technological developments have increased the potential for the unfolding of the trinity of registration, calculation and domination further than was remotely conceivable in the middle of the twentieth century. This holds true for labour processes within which digitization has opened up new areas of standardization and control.<sup>132</sup> It also holds true for people's private lives, in which the tyranny of the norm is established by the

welfare bureaucracy and the culture industry. The latter relies primarily on self-help literature, the function of stars and film characters as role models, and the streamlining of the major news outlets. And it holds true, not least, for state security apparatuses, especially for the secret service, with their dystopian capacities for surveillance. In the hand of authoritarian governments they facilitate comprehensive control, intimidation and punishment.

## Notes

- 1 This contribution is a revised and updated version of my essay, 'Erfassen, berechnen, beherrschen: Die verwaltete Welt', in Ulrich Ruschig, Hans-Ernst Schiller (eds.), *Staat und Politik bei Horkheimer und Adorno* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2014), 129–49.
- 2 Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Eugen Kogon, 'Die verwaltete Welt oder: Die Krisis des Individuums', in Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 13 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1989), 121–42.
- 3 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 169. See also Herbert Marcuse, 'Das Veralten der Psychoanalyse' [1963/68], in *Schriften* vol. 8 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984), 60–78. Though he did not use the term 'administered world' in this text, his account and critique of the phenomena in question were very similar to those of Horkheimer and Adorno.
- 4 Friedrich Pollock, 'Die gegenwärtige Lage des Kapitalismus und die Aussichten einer planwirtschaftlichen Neuordnung', in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 1, 1–2 (1932), 8–27, here 11.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.*, 24.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 18, 26–7.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 12 See Friedrich Pollock, 'State Capitalism', in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9, 2 (1941), 200–25, here 209.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 221, note 1, and *passim*.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 207.
- 15 *Ibid.* See Kai Lindemann, 'Der Rackettbegriff als Herrschaftskritik', in Ruschig, Schiller, *Staat und Politik*, 104–28, and Gerhard Scheit's contribution in this *Handbook*.
- 16 Pollock, 'State Capitalism', 217.
- 17 Max Horkheimer, 'Autoritärer Staat' [1940/1942], in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 5 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1987), 293–319, here 300.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 297, 304.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 310–11.
- 20 Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1969), 45. During the Cold War, Horkheimer revised his assessment of the Soviet Union. If in 1941 the Soviet order was classified as a form of state socialism or integral etatism quite distinct from (authoritarian or non-authoritarian) state capitalism, by 1959 it too was subsumed under the category of state capitalism: 'In Russia, however, that state capitalist state of affairs reigns which dictates that, given internal and external pressures, industrialization must transpire more quickly and the people must be made to function with more brutal means than was the case even in England in the early liberal era' (Max Horkheimer, 'Philosophie als Kulturkritik', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 7 [Frankfurt: Fischer, 1985], 81–103, here 91). This line of argument hardly seems plausible, given that there was no private ownership of the means of production in the Soviet Union. Horkheimer's pro-Western partisanship coexisted with this contention that a 'convergence of the two mutually hostile worlds' was in the process of evolving (*Ibid.*, 92).
- 21 Max Horkheimer, 'Die gegenwärtige Lage der Sozialforschung und die Aufgaben eines Instituts für Sozialforschung', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 3 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1988), 20–35, here 32.
- 22 Herbert Marcuse, 'Philosophie und kritische Theorie', in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 6, 3 (1937), 631–47, here 632.
- 23 Max Horkheimer, 'Traditionelle und kritische Theorie', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 4 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1988), 162–216, here 177.
- 24 Max Horkheimer, 'Autorität und Familie' [1936], in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 3, 336–417, here 377.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 372–3.
- 26 Horkheimer, 'Traditionelle und kritische Theorie', 187.
- 27 Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 44–5.
- 28 Max Horkheimer, 'The End of Reason', in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9, 3 (1941/42), 366–88, here 370.
- 29 See Hans-Ernst Schiller, *Das Individuum im Widerspruch. Zur Theoriegeschichte des modernen Individualismus* (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2006), 204–9.
- 30 See Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 44–5.
- 31 Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), v.

- 32 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Individuum und Organisation' [1953], in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 8 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972), 440–56, here 446.
- 33 See Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *Werke* [MEW] vol. 23, 166–8.
- 34 Adorno, 'Individuum', 441.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 447.
- 36 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Marginalien zu Theorie und Praxis' [1969], in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 10.2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), 759–82, here 772.
- 37 The German term for administration, *Verwaltung*, and the term administration, which is also used in German as a Latinate loanword, are directly connected to the concept of ruling/domination. The German term is derived from the Common Germanic 'walten', which means 'to dominate, to be strong'. The term administration draws on the Latin verb *ministrare*, which means 'to serve'. One should surely refrain from drawing ethno-psychological conclusions from the fact that the Germanic term perceives of the power relationship from above and the Latinate term from below. The etymology of the term *Verwaltung* nevertheless goes rather well with the German authoritarian state.
- 38 Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 146.
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 The concept of reification at stake here is not the same as 'Versachlichung' that is used by Marx in *Das Kapital* (see MEW vol. 25, 838).
- 41 Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 168.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 43 Adorno, 'Individuum', 446.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 447.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 450.
- 46 *Ibid.* 'Bureaucratic domination is inseparable from progressing industrialization; it transfers the optimized performance capacity of the industrial enterprise to society as a whole' (Herbert Marcuse, 'Industrialisierung und Kapitalismus im Werk Max Webers', in *Schriften* vol. 8, 79–99, here 90–1).
- 47 MEW vol. 23, 674.
- 48 Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital. The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* [1974] (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998), 60, 62[emphasis in the original].
- 49 *Ibid.*, 62 [emphasis in the original].
- 50 *Ibid.*, 82 [emphasis in the original].
- 51 *Ibid.*, 209.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 211.
- 53 See Per Jepsen, *Adornos kritische Theorie der Selbstbestimmung* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2012), 111, 134, 143. Jepsen identifies the administered world as the key concept underlying the notion of a 'comprehensive social integration of the individuals'.
- 54 See MEW vol. 42, 89–98.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 95.
- 56 Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophische Elemente einer Theorie der Gesellschaft* [1964], *Nachgelassene Schriften* vol. IV.12 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2008), 106.
- 57 Adorno, Horkheimer, Kogon, 'Die verwaltete Welt', 124.
- 58 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Erziehung nach Auschwitz' [1966/67], in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 10.2, 674–90, here 684.
- 59 Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 95.
- 60 Adorno, Horkheimer, Kogon, 'Die verwaltete Welt', 129.
- 61 *Ibid.*, 134.
- 62 *Ibid.*, 130.
- 63 *Ibid.*, 132. For a more differentiated account, see Hans-Ernst Schiller, *Freud-Kritik von links. Bloch, Fromm, Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse* (Springe: zu Klampen, 2017), 9–10, 243–4.
- 64 See Adorno, Horkheimer, Kogon, 'Die verwaltete Welt', 136.
- 65 *Ibid.*, 137.
- 66 Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* [1922] (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, <sup>5</sup>1972), 833.
- 67 See Theodor W. Adorno, 'Ein Titel', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 11 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), 654–657.
- 68 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Unrat und Engel', *ibid.*, 658–60, here 659.
- 69 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Die gegängelte Musik' [1953], in *Dissonanzen. Musik in der verwalteten Welt* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 46–61.
- 70 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Kritik des Musikanten' [1954], *ibid.*, 62–101, here 70.
- 71 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Das Altern der neuen Musik' [1954], *ibid.*, 136–59.
- 72 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Kultur und Verwaltung' [1960], in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 8, 122–46, here 122.
- 73 Ulrich Ruschig, 'Weiterdenken in marxistischer Tradition: Die Lehre vom autoritären Staat', in Ruschig, Schiller, *Staat und Politik*, 73–103.
- 74 MEW vol. 42, 89.
- 75 MEW vol. 25, 859.
- 76 MEW vol. 19, 224. Even Adorno maintained that 'a rational, transparent, truly free society could no more do without administration than it could without the division of labor more generally' (Theodor W. Adorno, 'Gesellschaft' [1965], in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 8, 9–19, here 17).
- 77 See MEW vol. 25, 452.
- 78 MEW vol. 19, 221.
- 79 *Ibid.*, 222.
- 80 *Ibid.*, 223–4. Emphasis in the original.
- 81 *Ibid.*, 223.
- 82 Horkheimer, 'Autoritärer Staat', 300.

- 83 Ibid., 303.
- 84 Ibid., 301.
- 85 Ibid., 303.
- 86 Ibid., 313.
- 87 Adorno, Horkheimer, Kogon, 'Die verwaltete Welt', 122.
- 88 Max Horkheimer, 'Verwaltete Welt. Gespräch mit Otmars Hersche' [1970], in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 7, 363–84, here 377.
- 89 Herbert Marcuse, 'Some Social Implications of Modern Technology', in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9, 3 (1941/42), 414–39, here 432.
- 90 Max Horkheimer, 'Zur Zukunft der kritischen Theorie. Gespräch mit Claus Grossner' [1971], in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 7, 419–34, here 420–1.
- 91 Jürgen Habermas, 'Drei Thesen zur Wirkungsgeschichte der Frankfurter Schule', in Axel Honneth, Albrecht Wellmer (eds.), *Die Frankfurter Schule und die Folgen* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986), 8–12, here 9.
- 92 MEW vol. 23, 93.
- 93 See Adorno, *Philosophische Elemente*, 20; 'Marginalien', 776. For a critical assessment of Weber's analysis of the 'spirit of capitalism', see Heinz Steinert, *Max Webers unwiderlegbare Fehlkonstruktion. Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2010).
- 94 Max Horkheimer, 'Egoismus und Freiheitsbewegung' [1936], in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 4, 9–88, here 44.
- 95 Adorno, *Philosophische Elemente*, 21.
- 96 Adorno, 'Marginalien', 775.
- 97 Adorno, *Philosophische Elemente*, 21.
- 98 Adorno, 'Marginalien', 775.
- 99 Adorno, *Philosophische Elemente*, 201.
- 100 Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 45.
- 101 Max Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf* [1919] (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1995), 37–8.
- 102 See Horkheimer, 'Egoismus und Freiheitsbewegung', 59; Herbert Marcuse, 'Ideengeschichtlicher Teil', in Max Horkheimer (ed.), *Studien über Autorität und Familie* (Paris: Alcan, 1936), 136–228; Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1941), chapter 3.
- 103 Adorno, 'Marginalien', 776.
- 104 Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophie und Soziologie* [1960], *Nachgelassene Schriften* vol. IV.6 (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011), 99.
- 105 Jürgen Habermas, 'Jüdische Philosophen und Soziologen als Rückkehrer in der frühen Bundesrepublik. Eine Erinnerung', in *Im Sog der Technokratie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp 2013), 13–26, here 25–6.
- 106 Marcuse, 'Industrialisierung und Kapitalismus', 92.
- 107 Ibid., 94.
- 108 Adorno, Horkheimer, Kogon, 'Die verwaltete Welt', 127.
- 109 Adorno, 'Individuum', 445.
- 110 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* vol. 2 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 322.
- 111 Ibid., 400.
- 112 Ibid., 335.
- 113 See *ibid.*, 202, 338–43; Hans-Ernst Schiller, 'Zurück zu Marx mit Habermas. Eine Aktualisierung', in *An unsichtbarer Kette. Stationen kritischer Theorie* (Lüneburg: zu Klampen, 1993), 152–81, here 154–5.
- 114 Habermas, *Theory*, 356.
- 115 Ibid., 322.
- 116 Ibid., 347–51.
- 117 Ibid., 343.
- 118 MEW vol. 4, 69.
- 119 Habermas, *Theory*, 342.
- 120 MEW vol. 23, 533.
- 121 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), 152–3.
- 122 Ibid., 93.
- 123 Ibid., 113.
- 124 Ibid., 112 [emphasis in the original].
- 125 Ibid., 104.
- 126 Ibid., 122 [emphasis in the original].
- 127 Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 107–10.
- 128 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 80, 87.
- 129 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Theorie der Halbbildung' [1959], in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 8, 93–121, here 117.
- 130 Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 226.
- 131 Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 115.
- 132 See Matthias Martin Becker, *Automatisierung und Ausbeutung. Was wird aus der Arbeit im digitalen Kapitalismus?* (Wien: Promedia, 2017).

# Commodity Form and the Form of Law

Andreas Harms

Translated by Joseph Fracchia

## INTRODUCTION

The critical theory of the Frankfurt School contains a critique of right and law in capitalist societies. This critique was intermittently connected with Marxist theories of law and Marxist critiques of the law. Eugen Pashukanis's *General Theory of Law*, which first appeared in Russian in 1924, was of particular importance for the development of a critical theory of law. This is true both for the beginnings of critical theory and also for the critical theory of the 1960s and 1970s. In his *General Theory of Law*, Pashukanis derives the form of bourgeois law from the commodity form. He sees the form of law and the form of the commodity as parallel forms of appearance of bourgeois socialization [*Vergesellschaftung*]. The critical theory of the 1960s and 1970s particularly represents an attempt to go beyond Pashukanis's derivation of the form of law from the relations of exchange. Negt and several other authors attempted instead to derive the form

of law from the particularities of the capitalist production process and not just from the process of circulation. And with Habermas, finally, right and law are formal dimensions of communicative action and should therefore be attributed to critical theory only to a limited degree.<sup>1</sup>

The chapter first addresses the foundations of the concept of law in Marx and Pashukanis, in order then to treat critical theory's reception and critique of Pashukanis. For the development of the concept of law in critical theory, the experience of National Socialism was of great significance. This is especially evident in the works of Pollock and Neumann, and Horkheimer and Adorno, too. In connection with this, the next step is to elaborate Adorno's critique of law as a form of bourgeois socialization in which he also presents a critique of Hegel's concept of law. Marcuse, on the contrary, appears to adopt Hegel's concept of law and Bloch seems to want to situate himself positively in relation to idealist concepts of the law.

## THE FOUNDATION OF CRITICAL THEORY'S CONCEPT OF LAW: MARX AND PASHUKANIS

Various authors adduce time and again two passages from the entire corpus of Marx's work as the basis of a Marxist theory of law: on the one hand, the chapter on the commodity in the first volume of *Capital* (1867); on the other hand, the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875). For Pashukanis, as for critical theory, the commodity chapter in *Capital* is definitive. In the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* Marx drafts a two-phase model of transition from bourgeois society towards a communist society. In the first phase the socialist society is still tainted with the 'birthmarks' of bourgeois society and the economic principle of equivalence still dominates; and in the second phase, the principle, 'From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs' prevails (Marx, 1875). What induced Marx to address the significance of law as a form of social interaction was the program of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) which was influenced by Ferdinand Lassalle, who wanted to transform the collective working class demands of Social Democracy into demands for rights. Thus Marx countered the program's demand for the 'emancipation of labor' in the sense of a more just distribution of the fruits of labor with the provocative question of whether the given distribution of the fruits of labor is not in fact the only just distribution in the prevailing mode of production (Marx, 1875: 18). Marx, in short, wants to derive law from social conditions, particularly from the exchange of equivalences. And in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* Marx poses the rhetorical question of whether the conditions of justice do not derive from the economic sphere, and with this question he denies that the legal relations determine the economic relation.

Marx had already developed this general assessment in the second chapter of the first

volume of *Capital*. There he devotes himself to the process of the exchange of commodities and addresses the commodity owners who mediate this process. He characterizes the commodity owners as 'character masks' because they act as the quasi-substitutes for commodities and execute, if unconsciously, the movements of value within the process of commodity exchange. In this passage, Marx posits money as the particular, socially determined use-value that functions as the universal equivalent of all other commodities, and he explains:

Commodities cannot themselves go to market and perform exchanges in their own right. We must, therefore, have recourse to their guardians, who are the possessors of commodities. Commodities are things, and therefore lack the power to resist man. If they are unwilling, he can use force; in other words, he can take possession of them. In order that these objects may enter into relations with each other, their guardians must place themselves in relation to one another as persons, whose will resides in those objects, and must behave in such a way that each does not appropriate the commodity of the other, and alienate his own, except through an act to which both parties consent. The guardians must therefore recognize each other as owners of private property. The juridical relation, whose form is the contract, whether as part of a developed legal system or not, is a relation between two wills that mirrors the economic relation. (Marx, 1976: 178)

This fragmentary excerpt is emblematic for Pashukanis's reception of Marx. Neo-Marxist authors on the contrary attempt to find the basis for a critical concept of law in Marx's very early writings, above all in his critique of the law against the theft of wood, written in 1842, with which he commented journalistically on the debates of the Rhineland Parliament on that issue (Marx, MEW 1: 28–77). For the lawyer Marx, it was essentially a matter of determining whether a law or statute actually fulfills the general concept of law – and in Marx's view the law against wood theft, with its prohibition on gathering firewood that only affected the poor, did not. Ernst Bloch also took up this approach (see later).

In addition to the two passages mentioned above, Pashukanis also relies on Marx's Introduction to the *Grundrisse* (1857–59) in developing his *General Theory of Law and Marxism*. There Marx differentiates epistemologically between a self-propelled form of thought and the real process of the formation of the concrete. In his critique of political economy Marx conceives of, for example, the 'world market' as concrete, as a real object within a given totality of determinations and conditions. Marx thus moves from simple, abstract concepts (e.g. labor) to the concrete. Pashukanis develops his critique of law in a similar manner. He interprets the historical formation of the discipline of legal theory as the constitution of abstract concepts of law such as legal norm, legal relation, and legal subject. For Pashukanis each particular legal content expresses itself in abstract legal norms (Pashukanis, 2003: 47).

Already at this point Pashukanis establishes an implicit differentiation between the form of law and the content of law that is also characteristic of critical theory. In contrast to the question of the just or correct contents of the legal norms, and in distinction to traditional Marxist views about law as an expression of the bourgeois class interests, Pashukanis does not want to understand bourgeois law as an image of the interests of the bourgeois class, that is: he does not want only to establish that certain legal norms correspond to the material interests of a particular class (Pashukanis, 2003: 54ff); rather, he wants to investigate the 'form of law as a historical form' of definite social relations. In his view, all other schools of law fall short of this goal – and that includes theories of natural law and rational law, psychological and sociological theories of law, including Hans Kelsen's theory that Pashukanis assigns philosophically to neo-Kantianism and the tradition of legal positivism, and also the legal theories of 'many Marxists' (54). In any case, he insists, the identification of law with the 'idea of unconditional submission' to an external norm-setting

authority cannot be 'the foundation of the legal form' (109).

Thus, Pashukanis holds that the juridical categories are only apparently universal in character; they present only the legal norms of a historically specific form of society, that is, a commodity-producing society (Pashukanis, 2003: 70). With this approach Pashukanis addresses the modern bourgeois system of law and its self-understanding as a general legal theory; and he accords them a truth and a reality in order then to, say, deconstruct them. He grasps the categories of law through and beyond their ideological character as 'objective forms of thought' that correspond to 'objective social relations' (74) – similar to the categories of political economy that he views as imagined forms 'by means of which the society based on the exchange of commodities conceives of the labour relation between individual producers' (73). Pashukanis clearly recognizes the problem that arises with the development of a concept of law, the problem namely of describing law as an objective form and thereby failing to grasp the particularity of law, the problem of comprehending law as something that is supposed to be an expression of a social relation that it at the same time regulates. According to Pashukanis, law can only present the form of a '*specific* social relation' (79, italics in original). Pashukanis surmises that this specific relation lies in the relation of commodity owners to one another.

His depiction of the law parallels Marx's depiction of the 'immense collection of commodities' in which the wealth of capitalist societies appears (Marx, 1976: 125); Pashukanis characterizes bourgeois society as 'an endless chain of legal relations' (2003: 85). Legal norms belong to the society from which they spring (see Pashukanis, 2003: 85–6). For that reason, the law is only right, and therefore at all relevant, as an 'objective social phenomenon' (87). Here, he takes up the most obvious, the property relation, as the 'lowest level of the legal superstructure', and he sees this, following Marx, as



an expression of the relations of production (90–1). For Pashukanis, the state is the second level to be derived from the relations of production. This derivation corresponds to his rejection of understanding law purely as a relation of ought.

Against this background Pashukanis puts the concept of the legal subject at the center of his analysis. The legal subject is for him both the ‘atom of legal theory’ (Pashukanis, 2003: 109) and also the expression of that freedom in commodity-producing societies. As he puts it, ‘property becomes the basis of the legal form only when it becomes something which can be freely disposed of in the market’. In contrast to natural law and rational law, the concept of the (legal) subject is not to be developed out of some general idea; rather, and corresponding to Marx’s unfolding of the commodity form in *Capital*: social relations deriving from the capitalist production process assume the form of things, and the commodity is transformed from a ‘concrete multiplicity of useful attributes’ into ‘simply a material shell of the abstract property of value’ (111–12). Following Marx precisely in this regard, Pashukanis insists that the exchangeability of commodities that is formed behind the backs of the actors presupposes a conscious act of will. The ‘reified’ social relations establish and require ‘a particular relationship between people with products at their disposal, or subjects whose “will resides in those objects”’ (112, citing Marx, 1976: 178).

In the ‘abstract human labor’ that is congealed in the commodity, the concrete relation between person and thing appears only as the abstract will of the property owner; thus, ‘all concrete peculiarities which distinguish one representative of the *genus homo sapiens* from another dissolve into the abstraction of man in general, man as a legal subject’ (Pashukanis, 2003: 113). But if ‘objects dominate man economically ... then man rules over things legally, because, in his capacity as possessor and proprietor, he is simply the personification

of the abstract, impersonal, legal subject, the pure product of social relations’ (113). For Pashukanis, therefore, both the commodity-producing society as well as its legal theory abstract the category of the legal subject from the exchange act: ‘In the act of alienation [*Veräußerung*], abstract property right materializes as a reality’ (123). Finally, Pashukanis attributes the social phenomenon that rule manifests itself in the form of subjective legal Rights to the same social processes that objectify the product of labor as economic thing: Pashukanis therefore compares law with a ‘mystical’ attribute of value and complements Marx’s commodity fetishism with a legal fetishism (117).

At this point, we will not pursue Pashukanis’s further elaborations of penal and public law nor of morality and punishment. However, given his classification of public law as the law of lesser quality, as a secondary law ranking behind the more original civil law, it is necessary to illuminate his concept of the state. Pashukanis recognizes that the legal relations under the conditions of commodity-producing societies presuppose a ‘condition of peace’ (Pashukanis, 2003: 135). Only in commodity-producing societies is the ‘state machine’ realized as an ‘impersonal general will’, as the ‘power of right’ (143). This fusing of the state with the ‘abstract objective norm’ leads Pashukanis back to the precondition of the market, namely: the existence of free and equal legal subjects. Their interaction precludes the use of immediate force. Pashukanis is also known for his thesis about the withering-away of the state that he also developed by relying on Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, in which communism as an ultimately stateless society is taken as the goal to be finally attained after a transitional socialist phase. Lenin took this up even more schematically in *State and Revolution* ([1917] 2014), with especial emphasis on the take-over of the bourgeois state for the realization of socialism and later communism. For Pashukanis, the transition from socialism to communism

means not only a 'withering away of the categories of bourgeois law', but rather more generally the 'disappearance of the juridical factor from social relations' (Pashukanis, 2003: 61). According to Pashukanis, and in line with Marx's view in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, the 'narrow horizon of bourgeois law' will be overcome once the transitional socialist period has run its course and the 'form of the equivalent relationship has been finally dispensed with' (61, 63).

## RECEPTION AND CRITIQUE OF PASHUKANIS

Pashukanis's major work experienced two waves of comprehensive reception and critique: initially after the appearance of the first German-language translation (1929; English 1951) and his murder under Stalin in 1937; then again, but not until the end of the 1960s. Both waves must be sketched here because of their relations to critical theory.

Outside of critical theory, and with regard to jurisprudence as the theoretical and historical background of Pashukanis's work, Hans Kelsen is of particular interest; even before his major work *Pure Theory of Law* ([1934] 1967), Kelsen had already developed his methodological standpoint in *General Theory of Law in Light of a Materialist Conception of History* (*Allgemeine Rechtslehre im Lichte materialistischer Geschichtsauffassung*, 1931). In this essay he criticized Marxist theory of law, above all in the form that Pashukanis gave it. Epistemologically, Kelsen posits a categorial separation between Being and Ought, and he proceeds on the assumption that the approach to knowledge produces the object of knowledge. This leads him to a strict differentiation between, on the one hand, the question of whence the validity of law originates, and on the other, the question of the rationale or justification of a given (concrete) legal content. Kelsen rejects natural law theory or rational philosophy of law

as unhelpful. Kelsen understands the concept of the legal subject only as an attributed point of the norm, and thus also in his early work, *Boundaries between Legal and Sociological Method* (1922). Clearly, Kelsen was a theoretical antagonist not only of Pashukanis, but also of other critical theory thinkers. The links between Pashukanis and critical theory were established by Georg Lukács and also by the lesser-known Karl Korsch.

Korsch was a lawyer and a professor of law, but because of his political involvement with the SPD and later the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) he was subject to an occupational ban (*Berufsverbot*) in the Weimar Republic. After 1923, he also helped mold the beginnings of the Frankfurt School at the Institute for Social Research. Korsch is considered an undogmatic Marxist who, next to Lukács, exercised a not insignificant influence on Western Marxism. Korsch reviewed Pashukanis's *General Theory of Law and Marxism* (Korsch, [1930] 1966). Korsch criticized his work for equating the form of law and the form of the commodity. He insisted on a fundamentally differentiated, critical use of the base-superstructure scheme that he thought he had found in Pashukanis's work. The economic relation, Korsch argued, is fundamental, while legal and also political relations, on the other hand, are derived from the economic. Korsch particularly criticized Pashukanis for an alleged fixation on the sphere of circulation and instead treated the sphere of circulation as only a part of the total social relations of production. Korsch wanted to analyze this relation and to explain law on this basis. In this regard, Korsch points to Lukács who, in a few short passages in his essay 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' (1923), established the reification of jurisprudence and elaborated this notion as follows (Lukács, 1971: 107ff).

For Lukács, a form-content problem emerges in natural law even before the reification of jurisprudence. The concepts of form and contents in this context are reminiscent of Pashukanis's concept of legal form.

For Lukács, the form-content problem is above all a matter of strategies of justification of natural law at the emergence of bourgeois law. In any case, Lukács finds this problem of natural law resolved through the insistence that the ‘formal equality and universality of law, that is, its rationality’ determines at the same time the contents of law. Lukács briefly confronts various schools of jurisprudence and philosophy of law, which he sees as paralleling the rise and frictions of the bourgeoisie as a class. He views these schools as reflexes of the changing needs and interests of the bourgeoisie or, if one will, as the ideological superstructure and self-description of certain historical phases of commodity-producing societies. Lukács finds fault with the new ‘critical’ theories of law of his time for which the adjective ‘critical’ is intended to invoke a relation to Kant, and insofar as these theories of law can be considered neo-Kantian. Like Pashukanis, Lukács’s critique is aimed particularly at Hans Kelsen for wanting to exclude from jurisprudence its social context and the social-scientific aspects. In Lukács’s view, Kelsen treats law as a ‘formal system of calculation’. Lukács rejects Kelsen’s attempted ‘epistemological clarification’ of the subject of law because it does not contain any explanation of the ‘problem of the genesis of law’. Lukács sees the individual sciences as not in the least capable of solving the conundrum of a transcendental material substratum, that is, the mystery of totality. Finally, Lukács advances the thesis that one cannot find in bourgeois society either *the* or *a* basis of validity for formalistically constructed concepts.

The formalistic construction of concepts that Lukács criticizes are actually to be found in Kelsen’s theory of law. Thus the critiques of both Pashukanis and Lukács aim in a similar direction, even if they were not explicitly coordinated. They aim at Kelsen’s denial of the social totality that is the precondition and foundation of every legal relation; they scrutinize the concepts and the conceptual systems of the commodity-producing society;

and they do so on the understanding that law manifests the social totality in its particular form. Their ideological critique focuses on the manner in which Kelsen interprets the social relations between owners of commodities as natural properties, leading to their reification and fetishization. They thus raise the question of the social validity of law that, according to Kelsen, cannot be determined as such. It can only be derived from the normative order itself or from a highest norm, but that does not stand in any relation to a social totality (as Kelsen later argued in *Pure Theory of Law*, 1934).

In this regard, Korsch’s critique of Pashukanis does not quite seem understandable, especially his critique both of Pashukanis’s alleged fixation on circulation as the original source of the rationale of law and also of his simplified use of the base-superstructure scheme. Korsch’s critique is unjustified, for Pashukanis too attempts to take a view of the totality, that is, he does not consider ‘only’ circulation while disregarding production as a part of the circulation of capital.

Pashukanis’s work was discussed more deeply and more comprehensively in the Neo-Marxism of the 1960s. Indeed, it became the core text for the conceptualization of a new critical theory of law. The extensive literature in German-speaking as well as European and North-American regions cannot be reviewed here (but see Head, 2008); some exemplary attempts from the field of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School can be mentioned. In this respect, the critique of Pashukanis ran in part parallel to the critique of ‘dogma of the continuity and unity of Marxism’ (see, for example, Paul, 1972: 202). Adducing Bloch’s *Natural Law and Human Dignity* (which will be considered separately below), Paul identifies his critique of law as a ‘transcendental critique of ideology’, which, he argues, had already come to the fore in Marx’s time as a critique of law as an ostensibly independent system of rules. Rejecting the writings of the late Marx, Paul (like Böhler, 1971)

also subdivides *General Theory of Law and Marxism* into critical-emancipatory and scientific-deterministic parts, the latter characterized by the assumption of progressive social evolution proceeding along the lines of quasi-natural laws. Paul wants to connect positively to Pashukanis's argument against the so-called general theory of law as a relatively recent discipline in jurisprudence, to which Pashukanis attributes a 'principally ideological function' of an institutionalized 'formalization or juridification of the life-world, and with which its relation to wage labor is veiled. Paul thinks, however, that Pashukanis neglects the research perspective of legal theory and lets a formal analogy with Marx's analysis of the commodity suffice. But Paul's error here consists of not recognizing that Pashukanis's critique of fundamental legal categories was not aimed at exposing bourgeois law as an incomplete and therefore unjust law; it was aimed rather at criticizing this particular form of law, that is, because of the universality of the commodity-form, an objectively necessary appearance, but one that conceals the social totality.

Norbert Reich, on the contrary, sees in *General Theory of the Law and Marxism* a theory of civil law, which moreover ascribes to law only a bourgeois reality. He therefore essentially views Pashukanis's work with skepticism (Reich, 1972: 155). Reich's sharpest objection is directed at the withering-away thesis: the 'actual problematic content' is Pashukanis's negative evaluation of the law during the transitional period, during socialism, and therewith his 'utopia of law' (Reich, 1969: 155). For Reich therefore, since Pashukanis understands law only as bourgeois law, he can only conceive of the law of the transitional period to communism as a moribund bourgeois law. He thus concludes that Pashukanis cannot acknowledge jurisprudence as an autonomous science. Law and legal theory have for Pashukanis only a limited reality, namely: exclusively within bourgeois society (Reich, 1972: 30). Reich's evaluation here is thoroughly correct,

for Pashukanis, basing himself on Marx, declares: 'Only when bourgeois relations are fully developed does law become abstract in character. Every person becomes man in the abstract, all labour becomes socially useful labour in the abstract, every form of work becomes socially useful work in general, every subject becomes an abstract legal subject' (Pashukanis, 2003: 101).

In the 1970s, Oskar Negt temporarily occupied himself with the Marxist theory of law. His short essay '10 Theses on a Marxian Theory of Law' (1975) was most influential. In it Negt bases himself on Marx's critique of political economy and seeks to derive the law from the sphere of production. He understands law as a subdivision of the total production- and reproduction-cycle of capital: production, distribution, circulation, and consumption. Negt also emphasizes the overall significance of production in relation to circulation. Legal norms, he insists, are no longer to be explained according to a principle of immaculate origin; nor does the idealized legal person exist (any longer), for this person has lost its autonomy. Negt assumes that the realization of the promise of emancipation that was originally inscribed in the legal order of bourgeois society requires the dissolution of this order in order to redeem its promise. Negt views law as an element of fully developed commodity production in which labor power itself has assumed the form of a commodity and in which state holds the monopoly on violence. In differentiating his position from Pashukanis's, however, Negt locates the origin of law, not in the sphere of circulation, but in the sphere of production; with Marx he argues that the capitalist production process is the starting point of analysis, and not circulation which mediates the relations of production. Negt thus conceives of exchange as a means of mediating the capitalist form of wealth, that is, the production of surplus value: the commodity labor-power is exchanged for a wage in order to produce surplus value. The exchange value of the commodity labor-power is the socially

necessary labor-time required for its reproduction and the wage presents an exchange between equivalent values. As Marx had already argued, surplus value does come about in an exchange between equal values. It comes about through the employment of labor power in production. For its buyer, the utility of labor power, its use-value, lies in its capacity to produce a value greater than its own. According to Negt, moreover, innate to surplus value production is the inversion of the equivalent exchange relations between the buyers and the seller of labor power. Indeed, it creates an objective illusion that as such does not arise in the exchange of other commodities.<sup>2</sup>

### **LAW AND STATE IN MONOPOLY CAPITALISM AND NATIONAL SOCIALISM<sup>3</sup>**

In 1937, Franz Neumann, who had earlier argued for the establishment of a social state of law [sozialer Rechtsstaat] that was to achieve the objectives of social freedom as laid out by the SPD (Neumann, [1930] 1967), interpreted National Socialism as the suppression of the bourgeois rights of freedom and equality and of rational law in general (Neumann, [1937] 1978). In exile in 1936, he submitted a second doctoral thesis in English (Neumann, 1986) which argued that the main characteristic of the legal state comprises a definite abstract form of law that made the conduct of the economic relations predictable, but that concealed the existing relations of power [*Herrschaftsbeziehungen*], while nevertheless guaranteeing a minimum of personal and political freedom. Neumann then interpreted National Socialism as the decay of the liberal legal state and of government on the basis of a non-directive, abstract form of law. Neumann already saw the social foundations of legal equality endangered by processes of economic concentration in the Weimar Republic. And in National Socialism

he viewed law, insofar as it can be spoken of as such, as a means for the advancement of particular social interests through legal entitlements, be it in the form of concrete statutory measures and/or through the interpretations of general clauses to suit the preferences of the NSDAP. Because it lacked a general rule of law, Neumann denied the existence of right [*Recht*] in National Socialism. More generally, however, he established a positive conception of modern law, which he established through a close analysis of the concepts of the legal state [*Rechtsstaat*] and the general character of law.

Friedrich Pollock analyzed National Socialism as a particular form of capitalism. In contrast to Neumann, Pollock did not explicitly address the concept of law nor its particular characteristics. But he too took National Socialism's abrogation of the guarantees of freedom and equality as the object of his critique. In so doing, he developed the concept of state-monopoly capitalism that he formulated through a critique of National Socialism as a political order. He describes it as a system of totalitarian state-capitalism, which goes beyond state-monopoly capitalism. In this respect, National Socialism is a new socio-economic system (see Pollock, 1942: 440, 448, 449). It comprises a series of new rules in place of the hitherto prevailing economic methods and modes of functioning (Pollock, 1941: 200ff.). The constitutive elements of this new formation involve state planning and also state regulation of prices or price policies, the subordination of various branches of capitalist interests to the general plan, and the scientific control of production. He conceives of the National-Socialist state as a totalitarian state which is founded on a war economy that is characterized by general mobilization and founded on weapon production. Finally, Pollock poses the question of what a world-wide realization of totalitarian state-capitalism would look like. In analogy with the abolition of slavery in the United States, he explains that a slave-holding society cannot exist in conjunction with a social

form that is based on free wage-labor. For Pollock, in short, free wage-labor is in a specific sense linked to the existence of law and the legal state. It is on the basis of this observation that he argues that the foundation of the form of law is the equal and free subject of the commodity exchange relations.

For the understanding of legal form, Horkheimer's 1937 essay 'Traditional and Critical Theory' is of particular relevance, especially its epistemological reflections. These amount to an ideological critique of jurisprudence akin to the arguments put forward by Pashukanis and Lukács. Horkheimer bases himself expressly on Marx and the categories he developed – commodity, value, and money – and refers to the 'regulatory effects of exchange' (Horkheimer, 2002: 225). His conceptualizations include the concept of social class, and for the 'liberal period' he establishes that 'economic predominance was in great measure connected with legal ownership of the means of production' (234). In contrast to that earlier period, Horkheimer sees the later 'concentration and centralization' of capital to be characterized by the separation of the legal ownership from the management of the company (235). In conditions of monopoly capitalism, the relative autonomy of the individual is abolished. In fact, as emphasized by critical theory, the social relations make themselves manifest as relations between economic things; the economic explanation of social phenomena prevails.

In his later essay, Horkheimer subjects the Western concept of reason to critique – although this seems to have already been pushed *ad absurdum* by the advancing catastrophe of National Socialism. At issue is the question whether it is worthwhile to retain the concept of (bourgeois) reason at all. In the French Revolution reason was connected with human rights. Since then, the development of the capitalist social relations changed its meaning to instrumental rationality. Only 'rationalistic behaviour' has remained (Horkheimer, 1978: 28). For Horkheimer,

the trajectory of law can be interpreted in a similar manner. Just as the concept of reason asserts itself in late capitalism as a technocratic and functional term, the law which at first embodied bourgeois notions of human rights, the legal state, democracy, and equality now asserts itself as an expression of the given conditions of material production.

## ALIENATION IN MODERN LAW

After the Second World War, critical theory remained stamped by the experience of National Socialism and the Holocaust; and this is especially true of the works of Adorno and Horkheimer. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and especially in 'Elements of Antisemitism', Adorno and Horkheimer interpreted the modern, not religiously motivated antisemitism in National Socialism likewise as an expression of the liquidation of the freedom and equality of the bourgeois subject – but also as a subject of circulation, of commodity exchange (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 137ff). As Neumann and Pollock had already done, Adorno and Horkheimer interpreted the National-Socialist regime as a non-state ['Unstaat'] that had mutated into a reign of lawlessness and in which the (bourgeois) state and the fascist party each struggled for the realization of its own claim of totality. According to their interpretation, it was out of this opposition between a totalitarian state and a totalitarian movement that a new social form was developed during the Second World War – one in which the ruling groups would directly control the population without the mediation of the at least rational apparatus of force that had hitherto been called the 'state'. In addition to violence, they also included propaganda as a means of the realization and maintenance of this condition.

These comments from Adorno and Horkheimer follow on from those of Neumann and Pollock. However, they must

not be interpreted only against the background of National Socialism and the decay of the liberal and/or socially reformed bourgeois state from which it emerged. They must also be seen in relation to what they perceived as the failure of social revolution. The simultaneous regression of reason and rise of superstition that they witnessed go hand in hand with a regression of law. Pollock's and Neumann's interpretations of the fateful transformation of the old bourgeois state in National Socialism is functional and thus falls within the framework of classical interpretations of National Socialism: the state is presented either as an arduously accomplished legal and social state that protects the individual, or it is presented as an instrument empowered by the bourgeoisie, its means of ruling. Adorno and Horkheimer, however, do not commit themselves as to whether the state should be considered a neutral instrument that stands between the (antagonistic) interests of bourgeoisie and working class.

With their critique of reason and knowledge, Adorno and Horkheimer take a rather different approach, also relevant to their concept of law, when they explain:

The abstract self, which alone confers the legal right to record and systematize, is confronted by nothing but abstract material, which has no other property than to be the substrate of that right. The equation of mind and world is finally resolved, but only in the sense that both sides cancel out. The reduction of thought to a mathematical apparatus condemns the world to be its own measure. What appears as the triumph of subjectivity, the subjection of all existing things to logical formalism, is bought with the obedient subordination of reason to what is immediately at hand. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 20)

Adorno aims this critique at positivism; then later, specifically in the *Negative Dialectics* (1966), he aims it at law [*Recht*]. In the context of his confrontation with Hegel in his later works, Adorno makes a series of comments. He views law [*Recht*] as a phenomenon of late-bourgeois society that, as part of the whole, symbolizes the question posed in

*Negative Dialectics*. In his lectures on negative dialectics, Adorno describes his work as the concept of a philosophy that 'does not presuppose the identity of being and thought, nor does it culminate in that identity. Instead it will attempt to articulate the very opposites, namely the divergence of concept and things, subject and object, and their unreconciled state' (Adorno, 1965/66: 15ff.). In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno turns the concept of the 'non-identical' against the positivist conception of science. In his argument, the positivist conception of science presupposes the identity of an object with its concept, that is, it treats object and concept as identical: an Identity, however, based solely on the assumption that the (measureable) commonalities of the different objects, presents in fact their essence. This identification of the social object cuts something out, that is: the non-identical that can never be fully grasped with abstracting thought. He therefore considers identity thinking as part of the social context of illusion [*Verblendungszusammenhang*]. That is to say, Adorno cannot develop the Hegelian dialectic in a direct manner because he does not accept that the negation of the negation results in something positive. Negative dialectics is not in any way affirmative. Rather, the non-identical posits an entirely unreconcilable contradiction within the identity of the social object. Thus, in Adorno's critique of modern law:

Law is the primal phenomenon of irrational rationality. In law the formal principle of equivalence becomes the norm; everyone is treated alike. An equality in which differences perish secretly serves to promote inequality; it becomes the myth that survives amidst an only seemingly mythologized mankind. For the sake of an unbroken systematic, the legal norms cut short what is not covered, every specific experience that has not been shaped in advance; and then they raise the instrumental rationality to the rank of a second reality *sui generis*. The total legal realm is one of definitions. Its systematic forbids the admission of anything that eludes their closed circle, of anything *quod non est in actis*. These bounds, ideological in themselves, turn into real violence as they are sanctioned by law as the

socially controlling authority, in the administered world in particular. In the dictatorships they become direct violence; indirectly, violence has always lurked behind them.

That the individual is so apt to find himself in the wrong when the antagonism of interests drives him into the legal sphere – this is not, as Hegel would persuade him, his own fault because he is too benighted to recognize his own interest in the objective legal norm and its guarantors. It is the fault of the constituents of the legal sphere itself. (Adorno, 2004: 309)

Following a brief discussion in which he contrasts Hegel's arguments in 'Law and Morality' with the real world of law and morality, Adorno continues decisively:

Every positive, substantially elaborated doctrine of natural law leads to antinomies, and yet it is the idea of natural law which critically maintains the untruth of positive law. Today it is the reified consciousness that has been retranslated into reality and there augments domination. Even in its pure form, previous to class content and class justice, that consciousness expresses domination, the gaping difference between individual interests and the whole that is their abstract aggregate. From the outset, by subsumption of everything individual under the category, the system of self-made concepts that serve a mature jurisprudence to cover up the living process of society is opting in favor of the order imitated by the system of classification. [...] The more consistently the legal norms are worked out, however, the greater their incapacity to absorb what essentially defies absorption. (Adorno, 2004: 310–11)

To begin by interpreting this last sentence: Here Adorno understands law in bourgeois society with its differentiations in content (the material, goals, and contents of the laws) and its formal differentiations (actual material institutions such as a constitutional court or the separation of powers as a system of government) as symptomatic of both the abstractions of late-bourgeois commodity-producing society and the power of abstraction that it places on the individual. Not only does Adorno's non-identical vanish in the manifestation of law; additionally, law, as a system abstracting from social relations, must necessarily be geared to certain

characteristics of individuals, which belong to them as the objectified subjects of late-bourgeois society. Only in this way can Adorno speak of the irrational rationality of the system of law, because law accords to each individual rights and duties. On this point the individuals are presumed to be equal – and it is precisely therein that Adorno finds the silencing of the particular that characterizes each individual. The individual does not experience any justice through the formal principle of equivalence that defines the circulation of commodities. And law cannot offer justice to the individual either. Here Adorno differentiates between the presumed equality of all individuals (at least the equality in the capacity of being a legal subject) on the one hand and on the other hand the given concrete legal contents of norms. Because he recognizes that the focal point of modern law is its tendency to abstract from the real, Adorno recognizes too the real force of legal structures and finds them not all too distant from the immediate force of a dictatorship. In so doing, Adorno nevertheless differentiates between the forceful abstraction through law and its unjust contents. From the outset Adorno goes well beyond traditional Marxist interpretations: class justice and class law exist of course for him in the sense of a concrete historical molding of the contents of law tailored to certain interests of the bourgeois class or individual groups. However, beyond that he recognises the negative dialectic of law. In this manner the shortcomings of law are not coincidental, mere expressions of the assertion of class power. In fact they are necessary shortcomings which present definite social relations in the form of the legal object.

In Adorno's interpretation, the legal ideas of the natural law theories presume the existence (historically in opposition especially to the 'unfree' feudal order) of a claim to freedom and equality as a natural human quality that presents itself in particular concrete historical modes. Furthermore, he understands the independence of the legal system



as a particular process of abstraction. He even conceives of the law as a 'constitutive abstraction' from individual interests. In fact, he does not even see equity come into play any longer as a corrective in modern law.

Turning against Hegel, Adorno argues against a reconciliation of the subject and the objective legal order, of conscience and legal norm, of particular and universal. For Adorno, irreconcilability is not only a problem of modern law, and especially not a problem only of the economy in which the subjects appear as 'character masks' (Adorno citing Marx); the problem lies rather in the fact that individuals are always already exposed to objective forces in all areas of life, including the psyche. In this respect, the 'universal makes sure that the particular under its domination is not better than itself' (Adorno, 2004: 312). Adorno therefore sees modern law as a particular mode of the universal, with its supremacy and its power to subject its own rule the particular, that is: the individuals with their notion of their own particularity, with their own subjective illusions. Thus in Adorno too we find a linkage between modern law and the individuation of Men as universal principle (see 312). Finally, in his confrontation with philosophical nominalism, and although Adorno himself did not express this explicitly, a connection can be established between the law or 'jurisprudence' as a phenomenon of bourgeois society and the critique of the 'positivist epistemological ideal' that does not tolerate any contradiction, least of all an 'immanent contradiction', a point that holds especially with regard to a method that, according to Adorno, suppresses that which it is supposed to comprehend (313, 314). In this respect, the individual experiences society as an objectivity that precedes consciousness.

Adorno's metaphorically rich descriptions of law recall those of Pashukanis, who initially construed bourgeois law similarly as a component, or even as *the* particular component of the modern. For that reason, Pashukanis characterized law as '*ratio scripta*' of the commodity-producing society'. On this plane, these explanations are not

yet differentiated from the modern sociology of Max Weber, for example. Pashukanis, however, goes beyond sociology in that he simultaneously formulates a critique of law and a critique of ideology, especially of law as a fetish. This is ultimately aimed against the objective illusion of bourgeois society [*Verblendungszusammenhang*] that presents social relations as natural or given by nature; more precisely formulated and with Marx's support, the value-abstraction subsists in the social individual as a legal subject. Adorno similarly recognizes the power of social objectivity in modern law: the universal always takes precedence over the particular. This objectivity of the universal appears both in the factual differentiations of law with particular legal contents (for example, the labor law protection against termination) and institutions (for example, the social security system) for which the workers' movement had struggled for at least a century; and it also appears in the objective assumptions of law, especially the assumption of Men as legal subjects. In this respect, modern law establishes the mode of individuality; it is through law that every individual appears in his or her putative particularity. That is, the particular not only presupposes the universal, it also appears in it; in the case of legal form the particular appears in its abstract capacity of being a legal subject.

However, with the example of law that he adduces as *pars pro toto* of the shameless character of late capitalism and its irresolvable irrationality, Adorno limits himself to these descriptive elements. For him, there is no solution. This is in contrast to Pashukanis and Lukács, who anticipate the end of law as a historical phenomenon with the abolition of the capitalist mode of production – even if Pashukanis's theses especially are derived from a thoroughly mechanistic argument about the abolition of the commodity form and therewith of the legal form. Not addressed by Adorno in this regard is the question of what is the peculiarity of law, what makes it a phenomenon of 'irrational

rationality', and what the critique of ideology and consciousness entails as a judgment on existence. Adorno sees the bourgeois metaphysical promises as ultimately unfulfilled; they can be fulfilled neither by the institution of law nor by other forms of mediation in bourgeois society. And he concludes that the stronger the law functions as the principle means of the administered world and differentiates itself in the name of freedom and equality (which is ultimately the same as universalizing Men as a legal subject), the clearer it becomes that law fails in its double meaning as a principle of sociability and as metaphysical invocation of the autonomy of the subject.

### THE 'SALVATION' OF THE LEGAL SUBJECT

Herbert Marcuse's reading of especially Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* is a good starting point for further elaborating the foundations of a concept of law for critical theory (Marcuse, 1960: 183ff.). Marcuse understands Hegel's system as a whole as a link between philosophy and social theory and recognizes that Marx's critique of political economy reformulates several motives of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. Marcuse interprets Hegel's dialectic as one that culminates in the affirmation of the given; the Marxian dialectic by contrast is 'negative' in the sense that the given must be abolished and transcended. Marcuse mostly paraphrases Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, but he also interprets it in a particular manner. He views Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* as ultimately a philosophy of the state that would lose its 'progressive character' with the fate of the society itself (Marcuse, 1960: 184). Hegel places the will, or the subject of will [*Willenssubjekt*] at the beginning and mid-point of his philosophy of law, and derives the entire sphere of law from the free will of the individual. In this argument the legal

form subsumes the particular, that is to say, it entails a tendency towards abstraction. Yet, at the same time, it presents the assertion of the particular will as a 'limited ego'. The concept of the mutual recognition of freedom is essential for Hegel, for the act of (legal) appropriation can only be complete when others acknowledge this act (Marcuse, 1960: 185). In these exemplarily adduced figures of thought from Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* we can recognize Marx's commodity owner without whom the commodities would not succeed in getting to the market, and whose reciprocal recognition as exchange positing subjects is, Marx argues, also the foundation of property rights. In this respect, Hegel sees the universalized free will as the precondition of private property.

Hegel's interpretation of the state on the other hand is characterized by the fact that the subjectivity that is evident in, and developed through, reciprocal recognition culminates in an 'all-powerful state' (Marcuse, 1960: 200). Marcuse does not share Hegel's justification of either the state or the family. He does, however, agree with Hegel's description of the 'rabble' as an existing contradiction of bourgeois society (206). For Hegel, the contradictions are to be solved through the political institutions of society, through legal security, police, and cooperation. The rights of property express themselves in legal form. Marcuse criticizes this conflation of right and law, especially the fact that the rule of law is aimed at the 'universal person' but not at the concrete individual (207). Nevertheless, he finds a certain reconciliation in the contradiction between right and law.

For example, man enters into contracts, exchange relations, and other obligations simply as the abstract subject of capital or of labor-power or of some other socially necessary possession or device. Accordingly, the law can be universal and treat individuals as equals only in so far as it remains abstract. Right is hence a form rather than a content. The justice dispensed by law gets its cue from the *general form* of transaction and

interaction, while the concrete varieties of individual life enter only as a sum-total of attenuating or aggravating circumstances. The law as a universal thus has a negative aspect. It of necessity involves an element of chance, and its application to a particular case will engender imperfection and cause injustice and hardship. These negative elements, however, cannot be eliminated by extending the discretionary powers of the judge. The law's abstract universality is a far better guarantee of right, despite all the shortcomings, than is the individual's concrete and specific self. In civil society all individuals have private interests by which they are set against the whole, and none of them can claim to be a source of right.

It is true at the same time that the abstract equality of men before the law does not eliminate their material inequalities or in any sense remove the general contingency that surrounds the social and economic status they possess. But by the force of the fact that it disregards the contingent elements, the law is more just than the concrete social relations that produce inequalities, hazard and other injustices. Law is at least based on a few essential factors common to all individuals. (Marcuse, 1960: 207–8)

In contrast to Adorno, Marcuse adheres to right as law with all necessary abstractions from the particular. Here, too, Marcuse differentiates himself from Pashukanis, with whose major work, Marcuse's bibliography makes clear, he was familiar. Marcuse sees the essential characteristic of law in the form of law and therewith in its capacity for abstraction; not, however, in its politically conditioned contents, which are dependent on particular interests. As a form, Marcuse understands right (in this regard synonymous with law) insofar as it does not recognize the particular individual, but rather a contract-making subject endowed with a free will. Inasmuch as law is universal, and thus abstract in form, it treats individuals as equals – which for Hegel entails their recognition as property owners. Equal rights stands for the right to private property (Marcuse, 1960: 208). Marcuse defends right and law.

He considers them as institutions of fundamental equality even though they do not lend themselves to the achievement of a concrete material equality.

At this point it is worth looking briefly at Ernst Bloch's *Natural Law and Human Dignity*, published in 1961. Bloch's account is based on the humanist contents of Marx's work and develops a concept of justice for late capitalism – at least, that is, its critical intension. Ultimately, however, he relies above all on ideas of natural law and rational law for the development of a concept of a socialist society. Bloch's account can be understood as a transition from the critique of law and Horkheimer's and Adorno's skepticism about law to the Neo-Marxist accounts of the 1960s and 1970s, which I introduced at the start with reference to the work of Paul and Böhler. Bloch recognizes a discrepancy between the ideals of the bourgeois revolution and the reality of a profit-driven society (Bloch, 1986: 175–6, 187). His account develops certain elements in the young Marx's critique of law, for example his writing about the law against wood theft. But Bloch also relies on Pashukanis and similarly recognizes a certain 'fragility' in the theoretical justification of this kind of public law compared with the theoretical-philosophical derivation of private laws. According to both Pashukanis and Bloch, private law belongs to the sphere of commodity circulation. It mirrors the recognition of the claims and rights of individuals among one another as proprietors of commodities and money. Bloch considers public law to be built out of 'significantly less solid material' (*bedeutend unsoliderem Material*) even in the 'democratic heyday of the bourgeoisie' (1986: 218).

In contrast especially to Pashukanis, Bloch remains a defender of subjective public rights, however weak they might be. In this context, he criticizes the liquidation of subjective rights in Stalinism. In this manner he connects with Pashukanis's own tragedy: in his later writings Pashukanis increasingly denied the existence and justification of subjective

rights, yet he was himself paradoxically a victim of Stalin's purges. Bloch also criticized the notion of a working class in whose will right and also morality are supposed not only to merge, but also to disappear, and ultimately, as a superstructural phenomenon, to blend together completely with the political (Bloch, 1986: 240). Bloch develops Lukács's and Pashukanis's critique of Kelsen and finds that in Kelsen's legal theory the legal subject is all but eliminated (147). In Bloch's argument, the origin and the content of law preclude the postulate of purity that Kelsen attributed to it. For Bloch, too, 'the legal subject within bourgeois society is a universal abstract, hypostatized possessor of commodities' – which is why the material substratum of law must not be suppressed and ignored. That is, theory must not limit its concern to the purity of a system of norms (147; translation slightly altered). Bloch reasserts Pashukanis's and Lukács's ideology critique of modern jurisprudence. However, he does not share Adorno's skepticism towards law. Indeed, he hoped for a socially and technologically improved future – with a substantially renewed law.

Jürgen Habermas is the most recognized figure of the so-called second generation Frankfurt School thinkers. His work on legal philosophy developed from *Knowledge and Human Interest* (1971) and *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) towards his major work on the philosophy of law, *Between Facts and Norms*, which appeared in 1992. This later work does not stand in a direct relation to his earlier texts. In *Knowledge and Human Interest*, Habermas still argues 'critically' insofar as he conceives of philosophy in emancipatory terms beyond the natural-science model of knowledge. In *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas develops his argument of the *Theory of Communicative Action* and asserts initially that the law is a means of limiting the strategic action about which the actors themselves had agreed (Habermas, 1996: 26–7). He initially differentiates between legal rules and their legitimate efficacy, and further between legality

and legitimacy. Codification of the legal rules means that the actors temporarily ignore the question of legitimacy in favor of setting the formal rules of the game, guarding against arbitrariness. In this first step, Habermas separates the validity of law from its legitimacy. Since the validity of the legal rules contain a normative claim, Habermas identifies legal norms as both punitive laws and as laws of freedom (29–30). Legitimacy derives from the discursive formation of opinion and will among the freely associated persons.

Modern law, for Habermas, is ultimately the most important mechanism of social integration. He gives, however, no answer to the question of why the social context should be regulated by law at all, and not in some other way. His reflections are rather based on empirical observation and historical analyses and on the pre-assumptions of the philosophy of language. Like Max Weber, Habermas seems to limit his explanation of the constitution of the legal form to the dissolution of the premodern life-worlds and traditions. Punitive law tailored to legal procedure can only unfold its socially integrative powers if the individual addressees of legal norms understand themselves in their collectivity as the rational authors of these norms. Habermas sees the motivation for norm-conforming behavior as coming from either the recognition, on the part of the addressees of law, of the rationality and therewith the legitimacy of a norm, or because the factual enforcement of law by means of sanctions forces people into compliance. Habermas and his students like Klaus Günther are satisfied with formal explanations that rest on a procedural theory of justice. He delivers not a critique of modern law, but rather its justification.

## SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

No specific concept of law can be attributed to critical theory – regardless of whether the term critical theory is strictly limited to the

authors surrounding Adorno and Horkheimer and the earlier Frankfurt Institute, or whether it is used to designate a certain current of critical social theories related to Marx. Nevertheless, in the critical theory tradition there is a recurring critique of the bourgeois ideology of legal freedom and equality, the concept of the legal state, and above all criticism of the failed promises of law and justice in bourgeois society. Finally, the system of law was perceived, above all by Adorno, as the expression par excellence of an alienated modernity.

Pashukanis stands at the beginning of a critical theory of law, even if he, as a theoretician of the Soviet state, cannot be incorporated into the historical context of Frankfurt School critical theory. But by way of Korsch, among others, his writings found entry into the theoretical basis of the narrow circle of critical theory; and his work later, in the so-called neo-Marxist period of the 1970s, found considerable resonance and positive reception. Pashukanis's reading of Marx can first of all be understood as a critique of bourgeois models of science and knowledge, but not, however, as a critique of the separation between the bourgeois postulates of freedom and equality on the one hand and the legal reality on the other, nor as a critique of law as a principle of social justice. His critiques of bourgeois ideology, like those of Lukács, are exemplarily evident in his critique of Kelsen's legal theory. In distinction to Kelsen's argument about an immanent structure of law, Pashukanis argues that law forms part of the social totality of the capitalistically constituted relations of social reproduction. For Pashukanis the commodity form is of decisive importance for the understanding of the bourgeois rule of law.

In the writings of the authors of the so-called first generation of critical theory, the analysis of legal form is not systematic and based on the commodity exchange relations. The one exception to this account is Oskar Negt's much later analysis of legal form. He locates its foundation in the sphere of production, instead of the sphere of circulation.

All in all, a thorough critique of law as the legal form of definite social relations cannot be found in critical theory. Arguments by Bloch and his followers in the 1970s fall back onto traditional schemes arguing that the postulates of rational law and natural law call for the completion of the bourgeois revolution, realizing the demands for human emancipation. Marcuse connects law to the decision making of a subjective will. Bloch attempts to recharge the law positively with a concept of justice. Neumann and Pollock, on the contrary, explored it through an analysis of capitalist development: against the background of the rise of National Socialism and a capitalism described as monopolistic, they traced a change in the function of law and identified a decline of the legal state. For Neumann and Pollock, the form of law and the principles of the legal state are accomplishments of modernity that have to be defended. For Adorno and Horkheimer, National Socialism stood for the liquidation of equality and freedom, including especially the universality of the law in general and therewith the legal subject.

Adorno points, however, beyond this critique. In *Negative Dialectics* he considers modern law as having the role of a *pars pro toto* in the alienation of the subject – this is because modern law creates a double reality that is alien to the supposed actual one. Here Adorno is less interested in the question of the internal contradictions of law, but rather in an existing fundamental contradiction in modern forms of the subject as a subject of Rights; for law, however concrete and specific in its recognition of social interests, is not in a position to give the subject what it needs. Adorno finds the reason for this in the fact that the non-identical cannot be conceived of through commodity form and form of law; nor can it be grasped through capital's valorization logic. He therefore sees in modern law an instance of the destructiveness of the modern. The autonomization of law as a seemingly independent power remains incomprehensible. What alone remains 'comprehensible is the laws of autonomisation' (Adorno).

## Notes

- 1 On Habermas, see Henning in Volume 1, Chapter 24, of this *Handbook*.
- 2 Other language discussions of Pashukanis were similar and can be summarized as follows: Pashukanis understands all the legal relations as relations between the owners of commodities and therewith constricts the concept of law to the capitalist exchange relations. From a systematic viewpoint, Pashukanis works on the plane of circulation and from a historical viewpoint on the plane of simple commodity-production. He does not integrate the production of surplus value into a functional view of modern law (see for example: Collins, 1984: 108ff.; Cotterell, 1976: 111–19; Fine, 1979; Warrington, 1981: 1–22). At the same time, Pashukanis's approach was developed further in various ways, for example by Balbus (1977: 571–88) and Picciotto (1982: 169–80). For recent work on Pashukanis in English, see Michael Head, *Evgeny Pashukanis: A Critical Reappraisal* (2008) and in Italian see Carlo Di Mascio, *Pašukanis e la critica marxista del diritto borghese* (2013). The debate about a materialist theory of right and Pashukanis's importance therein is not closed, see for example, Sonja Buckel, *Subjektivierung und Kohäsion: Zur Rekonstruktion einer materialistischen Theorie des Rechts* (2007).
- 3 This discussion makes no pretense of completeness; the works of Walter Benjamin and Otto Kirchheimer cannot be addressed here, and Alfred Sohn-Rethel can only be mentioned.

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# Walter Benjamin's Concept of Law

Amy Swiffen

## PART I: BENJAMIN'S CRITIQUE OF VIOLENCE

This essay aims to clarify the relevance of Walter Benjamin's concept of law for contemporary socio-legal theory by providing an exegetical account of the text 'Critique of Violence' (1978). The Critique was written against a backdrop of political turbulence in post-WWI Germany. The theme of law's relation to violence upon which it dwells speaks to the context of parliamentary breakdown and political violence that plagued the country in the lead up to the rise of fascism. What interested Benjamin was the conditions of possibility for 'legal violence', by which he meant the use of legitimate or sanctioned violence (e.g. criminal law power).<sup>1</sup> By 'law', Benjamin meant European law based on a Westphalian model of state sovereignty. The question he pursued in this context is what are the conditions of possibility for legal violence, Answering this question

led him to a formulation of a concept of law defined as a relation of violence.

The influence of the text in Anglo-American legal and political theory really began when it was translated in 1978. Since then it has played an important role in debates on the limits of democracy and the ethics of political violence, for thinkers including Jacques Derrida (2002), Giorgio Agamben (1998, 2005), Judith Butler (2006, 2012), and Slavoj Žižek (2008, 2016).

### *Beyond a Means/Ends Evaluation of Violence*

One of the compelling things about Benjamin's text is its unique approach to legal theorising, which attempts to consider the phenomenon of legal violence autonomously, that is, without reference to any external criteria of evaluation and irrespective of any particular case. One point of entry into this approach is the way Benjamin



frames how two opposing traditions of legal theory known as positive law and natural law each evaluate legal violence. Natural law is premised on the idea that law exists *sui generis*, as an objective entity with specific properties (Pavlich, 2011). Historically, natural law approaches have often drawn on ancient Greek concepts of natural justice and/or the classical perspectives of St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, who presupposed a Christian God as giver of a natural law that human beings participate in by virtue of the capacity for reason. More recently, natural law thinkers have moved away from the idea of a divine law-giver in favour of affirming human nature or the inner morality of law itself as the source of legal authority (Finnis, 1980; Fuller, 1969). In general, natural law perspectives tend to make the assumption that the authority of law is derived from some inherent principles or processes that define law as such. Forms of law that do not approximate this authority (variously understood) cannot be properly called 'law' (Kainz, 2004).

What interested Benjamin was the naturalist perspective on violence, which he argued regard violence as 'a product of nature, as it were, a raw material' (Benjamin, 1978: 278). From this perspective, violence has no meaning in itself, rather, it is material or instrument that can be used as a means to legal ends when it is appropriate to do so. He offers examples of this naturalisation of violence, notably 'Darwinistic philosophy', which regards violence as the 'only original means, besides natural selection' (278). When it comes to evaluating legal violence, therefore, a naturalist perspective would look to the ends to which it is put. If the ends are just and the violence used is rationally designed to achieve them, then the violence is legal as well.

Benjamin's objection to this approach is the limited nature of the evaluation of violence. By looking at whether the ends of the violence are just/legal, it is possible to evaluate legal violence in a particular case but it

is not possible to evaluate the law's use of violence 'in principle' (278). In other words, a 'criterion of ends' cannot justify the law's use of violence per se. As Benjamin notes, such a perspective has difficulty addressing the question of whether legal violence can be unjustified even when the ends are just, or whether legal violence can be justified even if the ends are unjust. In response, Benjamin wishes to develop 'more exact' criteria that would be capable of discriminating among uses of violence 'within the sphere of means themselves without regard for the ends they serve' (277).

To pursue this possibility he turns to positive law, which historically emerged in response to natural law conceptions of political power based on the divine and/or patriarchal authority in the family. Legal positivism reframed the concept of law as a rationally purposive activity, and in so doing separated the question of morality from legal analysis. The early positivist accounts of Thomas Hobbes, John Austin, and Jeremy Bentham attempted to define law as a social construct and a product of history. In Austin's words, from this perspective the existence of law is one thing, its merit or demerit another (Austin, 1954: 185).

The positivist approach has been reformulated in various ways since the original 'command theories' of Bentham, Austin, and Hobbes. For example, Hans Kelsen incorporated the concept of norms in *The General Theory of Law and State*, writing that 'legal norms can have any kind of content and be valid' (Kelsen, 1945: 113). H.L.A. Hart focussed on how rules constituted by a social order generate legal authority (Hart, 1961; see Pavlich, 2011). In this sense, positivism separates the question of the justness of legal ends from the analysis. In other words, it makes a distinction between sanctioned and unsanctioned violence 'indendently of their cases of application' (Benjamin, 1978: 279).

Despite their opposition both natural law and positive law also share a 'common

dogmatic assumption' that just ends can be attained by justified means and justified means used to achieve just ends (278). Benjamin asks, what if it were the case that justified means on the one hand and just ends on the other were in irreconcilable conflict? Not only would the opposition between natural law and positive law disappear, but neither would be in a position to shed light on the question. Benjamin argues that what is required is a standpoint outside of both positive law and natural law, which is to say, outside of means/ends reasoning completely.<sup>2</sup> Benjamin finds positive law a preferable starting point in this regard because it makes a distinction: between forms of violence 'within the sphere of means themselves', thus making it possible to begin to speak of different kinds of violence (279). The most basic distinction is between legal and non-legal violence. Benjamin notes that in European law the private use of violence that is generally considered outside the bounds of legality, regardless of whether the ends are just or overlap with legal ends. There is a tendency 'to deny the natural ends of individuals in cases where they could be usefully pursued with violence' (238). Legal orders tend to establish 'in all areas where individual ends could be usefully pursued by violence, legal ends that can be realised only by legal power' (238). Benjamin argues, this tendency suggests that the law regards non-legal violence as a threat, 'not because of the ends it might pursue but by its mere existence outside the law' (239). In other words, there is something about the existence of violence outside of the legal field that is threatening to a legal order. Legal orders have an 'interest in a monopoly of violence', not because of justice or for efficacy in achieving legal ends, but seemingly as an end in itself (239).

### ***The Dual Function of Violence***

Yet, Benjamin notes there are situations that seem to contradict this interpretation,

specifically cases where the law allows violence that is normally unsanctioned. One of these cases is the right to strike. Benjamin argues that a strike, though it is an omission of action, should still be considered violence. As he writes, in a strike a 'moment of violence is introduced ... in the context of a conscious readiness to resume the suspended action under circumstances that have nothing to do with this action or only superficially modify it' (1978: 281). In other words the work stoppage is a means to the end of compelling the owner to negotiate. It is a form of extortion used to secure the ends of workers. Thus, with the right to strike a legal order allows violence whose ends are 'natural and non-legal' (282).<sup>3</sup>

The picture becomes even more complex when we consider that though with the strike power the law 'acknowledges a violence whose ends, as natural ends, it sometimes regards with indifference', however, in a crisis situation of a general strike it will 'confront [the violence] inimically' (282).<sup>4</sup> A general strike is of course a large scale action that transcends particular industries and workplaces. For example, the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 involved 35,000 workers in a city of 200,000 going on strike for six weeks. The strike ended when the North West Mounted Police used violence to break it up, killing two workers in the process, injuring thirty-some, and arresting hundreds (Silver, 2003). Benjamin describes the seeming contradiction in the law's response to the strike power as a reflection of the fact that the violence of the strike is both inside and outside the law.

The strike power is not an 'isolated' or 'fortuitous' example: in this regard something similar is seen in military violence, which is understood as 'the most natural' means for asserting sovereignty and 'paradigmatic' of all violence used for natural ends (Benjamin, 1978: 282). Military violence is characteristic of war and normally considered to be operating outside the law.

Benjamin points out a series of exceptions to this, however, including legally compelled military service. With conscription, the law subordinates the lives of individuals to that of the state and sanctions military violence even though its 'natural ends may conflict with legal ends' (240). In this sense, military violence and the strike power are examples of violence that are both inside and outside the law. Thus, Benjamin argues that violence is not 'as it first appears', merely a means to an end; it also has the potential to modify and change the law (282). With conscription and the right to strike, legal orders make exceptions for violence that is normally prohibited in order to ward off an even greater violence, which Benjamin suggests has a 'lawmaking' capacity (284). What concerns a legal order is not violence that is used as a means to an end; what it fears is violence that is able to legitimate, change, or make a claim to law.

Thus, Benjamin argues that violence has two functions from the perspective of a legal order. It has a 'law-preserving' function, which is when violence is used to protect and maintain the law (284).<sup>5</sup> It also has a law-making function, which Benjamin suggests is at the origin of every legal order. These two forms of violence can be conceptualised separately in that law-making violence is typically 'required to prove its worth in victory' (think of war, revolution, or conquest), while law-preserving violence is 'subject to the restriction that it may not set itself new ends' (think of the criminal law power and public health legal responses) (284). However, they are not fully distinct. As Benjamin writes,

The function of lawmaking violence is twofold, in the sense that lawmaking pursues as its end, with violence as the means, what is to be established as law, but at the moment of instatement does not dismiss violence; rather, at the very moment of law-making, it specifically establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power. (295)

Law-making violence founds law and remains operative within it as a preserving

force. At the same time, however remote law-making violence may seem from the present it remains latent within every act of law preserving violence. From the perspective of history, therefore, law appears as a dialectic of law-making and law-preserving violence. Together the two forms of violence reflect the 'duality in the function of violence' relative to law (284). This duality is implied in Benjamin's discussion of the strike power and military violence. The law makes an exception for these forms of violence under specific circumstances to preserve the law in the face of its law-making power.

### ***Violence and the Origin of Law***

Given Benjamin's conclusions about the relationship between law and violence the significance of the death penalty takes on great importance. He argues that where the 'highest violence' occurs in a legal system, the origins of law 'jut manifestly and fearfully into existence' (1978: 286). In the death penalty, the law-preserving and law-founding functions of violence appear in upmost proximity. It is useful to note that the death penalty was the subject of considerable debate when Benjamin wrote the Critique of Violence, with a few states having already abolished it.<sup>6</sup> One of the central issues of the debate was whether the death penalty was a necessary deterrent or an inhumane punishment. Benjamin felt that both arguments missed the point. The purpose of the death penalty is not deterrence, or else it would be important for a legal system to apply it in all appropriate cases.<sup>7</sup> In reality, lethal punishment is applied with considerable 'uncertainty' (285). Equally, anti-death penalty arguments that invoke the right to life are 'uninformed' about the nature of law's relationship to violence (242). They do not see that an attack on a legal order's use of lethal violence is not an attack on this or that particular law, but an attack on the 'law itself in its origin' (242; see Azoulay, 2009).

Following this reasoning, Benjamin argued that the decline in the use of the death penalty was a reflection of a historical dimension of the law's relationship to violence as it manifests in European and colonial legal orders. Benjamin writes, 'all law-preserving violence, in its duration, indirectly weakens the law-making violence represented by it. [...] This lasts until either new forces or those earlier suppressed triumph over the hitherto law-making violence and thus found a new law, destined in its turn to decay' (1978: 300). In other words, as law-making violence becomes remote from law-preserving violence (in the sense of space and time), it becomes a weaker legitimating force. The decline reason is of the death penalty is related to the fact the subject of legal violence 'knows himself to be infinitely remote from the conditions in which fate might imperiously have shown itself in such a sentence' (286). From such a perspective, legal violence appears pernicious and as 'something rotten in law' (286). In this sense, the death penalty can function as an index of the decay of a legal order.

Benjamin periodises the form of law with the emergence of state-administered legal systems (see Hostettler, 2009). Under classic monarchical forms of government, he suggests that because legal legitimacy was tied to the body of the monarch, which provided a category 'determined by place and time' for evaluating legal violence (Benjamin, 1978: 287). The legality of violence was evaluated in relation to its connection to the body of the monarch. In contrast, modern legal orders are characterised by a constitutional division of powers in which the conditions of legality are 'elevated by no such distinction' (287). Either because of temporal or geographic distance, a legal orders lose awareness of the violence that is represented and enacted in them. Modern legal orders are 'destined' to decay, according to Benjamin, because 'consciousness of the latent presence of violence in a legal institution disappears' (288).

Benjamin suggest a symptom of this decay is that law-making violence no longer

appears to be 'crowned by fate' (286). He refers to the myth of Niobe as an example of what he means with idea of violence crowned by fate. Niobe had 14 children with Amphion, a half god and co-founder of Thebes. She boasted of the size of her family to Leto, who bore Zeus' children, Apollo and Artemis. In response to her boasting, the gods killed all of Niobe's children. When she discovers her children are dead, Niobe asks Zeus to turn her to stone, which he does (Cook, 1964: 6–30). What happened to Niobe is an example of violence crowned by *fate*. Niobe's boasting 'calls down fate upon her not because her arrogance offends against the law but because it challenges fate' (Benjamin, 1978: 294).

The notion of 'fate' that Benjamin is invoking is written in ancient in Greek as '*atē*', which can be translated as 'fateful doom' (Krell, 2005: 13).<sup>8</sup> *Atē* was the gods' response to *hubris*, the human error of pride, which represented not a moral error, but a transgression into the realm of the gods (Lacan, 1992: 259). Niobe crossed this limit in claiming credit for something (the size of her family) that was beyond her control. Having crossed this line, her guilt lay in the mere fact of her humanity. Thus, the violence directed at Niobe's children is not a punishment for a crime, but an immediate manifestation of 'the frontier between men and gods' (Benjamin, 1978: 295). Benjamin suggests that law-making violence is akin to this kind of mythic violence in that it 'establishes a law far more than it punishes for the infringement of one already existing' (294).

However, the association with ancient myth brings to light a problem with law-making violence in the modern context. In Greek myth, mythic violence was 'crowned by fate' in the sense that it came from the realm of the gods. In the modern context, however, mythic violence is no longer guaranteed by the gods and absent this transcendent seal 'turns into decay' in the sense that it is not sanctioned only 'under the title of power' (288). Law-making violence appears

as 'bloody power over mere life for its own sake' (297). This is the principle of all state-based violence and 'what is guaranteed by all lawmaking violence' (295).

## PART II: DERRIDA'S CRITIQUE OF THE CRITIQUE

At this point, Jacques Derrida's commentary on Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' in the essay 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"' (2002) is important to address as it unpacks some of the implications and assumptions structuring Benjamin's arguments. At the same time, much of the contemporary uptake of Benjamin's essay is responding in some way to Derrida's reflections in 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"' (2002). The focus in that essay is twofold: first, Benjamin's seeming assumption that a relation of violence is able to transform itself into law, and second, his implication that law's origin lies in a historical moment of violence. Derrida's method is to deconstruct the various oppositions that Benjamin develops (e.g. law-making/law-preserving violence) by showing how they cannot be rigorously opposed and are in a relation of 'differential contamination' (2002: 272). For instance, he highlights that Benjamin's formulation implies that law-preserving violence works retroactively to signify the law-making violence 'on behalf of which it will claim to have been speaking from the beginning' (269). At the same time, law-making violence supposedly serves as the legitimating force for law-preserving violence, which implies that it precedes it. This means that law-making violence is both past and present at the same time. It also means that it is never complete in some sense as it is only constituted as law-making from the perspective of law-preserving violence that is to come. Far from being a discrete origin point, therefore, law-making violence is 'a call for self-preserving repetition' and that '[p]reservation in turn refounds' (Derrida, 2002: 272).

Note that Derrida's reading does not refute Benjamin's concept of law so much as reframe it as a perpetually incomplete dialectic of violence supplemented by a performative self-referentiality. This performative dimension of law's relation to violence is 'the mythical foundation of law', and 'inscribes the possibility of repetition at the heart of the originary' (272). The notion of 'iterability in originality' implies that a legal order is threatened from within by the violence that founds it (275). By identifying the performative function of the relation between law and violence that Benjamin describes, Derrida tries to show that the process of law-making never ends, and as a result the authority of law is always incomplete and open to being otherwise.

### *Divine Violence*

At this point, another element of Benjamin's Critique of Violence becomes relevant to address, one which is located beyond the law-making and law-preserving relation that has been described so far. Near the end of the Critique, Benjamin asks, 'what kinds of violence exist other than all those envisaged by legal theory' (1978: 293)? In other words, what kinds of violence exist other than the categories described above (legal violence, non-legal violence, law-making legal violence, and law-preserving legal violence)? This question leads to the possibility of a third form of violence termed 'divine violence', which Benjamin describes as 'pure' violence in that it is not related to means/ends logic in any way (297). To explore the idea, Benjamin returns to the example of the strike, this time focussing on the idea of a proletarian general strike drawn from the work of Georges Sorel (1908/1999). Sorel distinguished between a proletarian general strike and a political general strike based on the idea that a political general strike does not challenge state power nor does it intend to replace the state. Instead, it is a means to an end of more limited goals. A true proletarian general strike puts forward plans for 'no

definite project of future social organization but instead confronts men with a catastrophe' (Sorel, 1999: 46, n.31). As Benjamin writes, it 'announces its indifference towards material gain through conquest by declaring its intention to abolish the state' (Benjamin, 1978: 291). This means that the political and proletarian general strike represent different forms of violence according to Benjamin, a political strike is 'alloyed' violence in that the withdrawal of work is a means to an end (289). It is an instrumental use of violence to achieve workers' goals. In contrast, a proletarian strike is 'unalloyed' violence in the sense that it makes no definite demands. It is an end in itself; it is 'pure means' in this sense (289). This notion of purity Benjamin attempts to capture with the concept of divine violence. He likens it as well to the violence represented by the biblical injunction against killing (thou shalt not kill), which would seem to be quite different from a general strike. Yet, it is another example of pure means according to Benjamin. He writes, the commandment exists 'not as a criterion of judgement, but as a guideline for the actions of persons or communities who have to wrestle with it in solitude and, in exceptional cases, to take on the responsibility of ignoring it' (298). This implies the imperative does not command action but leaves open how it is to be applied, including when it might be refused. Like the proletarian strike, therefore, the first commandment is 'pure' in the sense that it has no end besides its own actualisation.

Alloyed and unalloyed forms of violence have very different relations to law according to Benjamin. Mythical violence binds life to law; in contrast, divine violence is boundary destroying. He writes that 'if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; ... if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood' (297). Benjamin also suggests that divine violence acts on behalf of what he terms the 'soul of the living' (298). He elaborates, 'man cannot, at any price be

said to coincide with the mere life in him', implying that divine violence corresponds to a dimension of life that exceeds biological existence (298).

### ***Derrida on Divine Violence***

Like all the oppositions in Benjamin's Critique, however, Derrida finds that the opposition of divine violence and mythic violence also does not completely hold. To address this he steps outside the text and refers to events that occurred after Benjamin's death in 1940. The preface to 'Force of Law' wonders what Benjamin would have had to say 'on the subject of the "final solution"' (the Holocaust) (Derrida, 2002: 260). The essay's postscript returns to the question with the concepts of mythical and divine violence in mind. On the one hand, Derrida suggests that the final solution could be understood as the extreme example of the mythic violence of law: a legal order that went 'all the way to its own limit' in the attempt to found and preserve itself (296). As a form of mythic violence, Benjamin would have put divine violence in opposition to the final solution. However, Derrida argues that the deconstructability of the distinction renders this placement problematic.

Derrida suggests it is possible to 'recall the uniqueness of the "final solution" from a place other than this space of the mythological violence of law' (2002: 295). What is 'almost unbearable' in Benjamin's text is the temptation to think of the holocaust 'as an uninterpretable manifestation of divine violence' that is 'annihilating, expiatory and bloodless' (298). He continues, the Nazi legal order 'kept the archive of its destruction ... with a terrifying legal, bureaucratic, statist objectivity and ... it produced a system in which its logic, its logic of objectivity, made possible the invalidation and therefore the effacement of testimony and of responsibilities' (2002: 296). What Nazism attempted to do was to 'exclude the other witness; to

destroy the witness of the other order' (296). Derrida asks, can such an act be seen to be 'of a divine violence whose justice is irreducible to law, of a violence heterogenous to the order of both law and right ... or of the order of representation and myth' (296)? The possibility that one could answer affirmatively interpret the holocaust as 'an expiation and an indecipherable signature of the just and violent anger of God' is terrifying for Derrida (298). For this reason, he parts ways with Benjamin writing that the concept of divine violence resembles 'too closely, to the point of spectacular fascination and vertigo, the very thing against which one must think and act, do and speak' (298). In wake of Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence', Derrida concludes the challenge is not to embrace divine violence but to 'think, know, represent for ourselves, formalize, judge the possible complicity among [Benjamin's discourse] and the worst (here the "final solution")' (298).

### PART III: RESPONSE TO DERRIDA'S CRITIQUE

With Derrida's rejection of the concept of divine violence in mind we can now turn to how Benjamin's concepts of law and of divine violence have been taken up in social and political theory. Each of the three thinkers discussed below respond to the questions that Derrida's deconstruction poses in different ways. Each thinker also draws on similar aspects of Benjamin's critique to develop their argument that is, the relation between law and violence, between law and guilt, and the force of the first commandment. Each one is also willing to embrace the possibility of divine violence in ways that Derrida was not. Butler and Agamben focus on Benjamin's references to 'mere life' and 'sacred life', though in very different ways. In contrast, Žižek attempts to specify the meaning of divine violence by

drawing on Lacanian theory and the concept of the *passage à l'acte*.

#### Butler

In *Parting Ways* (2012), Butler discusses 'Critique of Violence' and particularly the idea of divine violence, which she characterises as the possibility of a 'violence against violence' that could redeem 'sacred life' at the expense of 'mere existence' (2012: 82). What does this formulation mean? To begin, Butler agrees with Derrida that Benjamin's conception of law-making violence does not come into being naturally, nor can it be justified by any existing instance of law-preserving violence. She agrees that in Benjamin's concept of law every act of legal violence works to reinscribe 'the founding act in a regulated way' (71–2). In other words, a legal order is sustained by the enactment of law-preserving violence as a performative reiteration of its origin in violence. However, she disagrees with Derrida's rejection of divine violence, arguing that it can be separated from what she describes as Benjamin's 'messianic-Marxist' embrace of destruction (76). Instead, she argues that it holds the promise of 'a noncoercive' form of violence (70; see Ball, 2016). Much depends on what exactly 'noncoercive violence' could mean. To shed light on this, it is useful to consider how Butler reconciles Benjamin's refusal to categorically reject killing (the deal-breaker for Derrida) with the ethical commitment to nonviolence that is implied by his critique of 'bloody' mythic violence. This can be seen in the way she interprets Benjamin's references to Sorel's concept of the general strike.

In her discussion of the political and proletarian strike, Butler points out that for Sorel, 'the [proletarian] general strike has a character of *infinity*', (Sorel, 1999: 46, n.31). She takes this to mean that a general strike is 'pure, immediate, unalloyed violence' in that it refuses the basic imperative required

to reproduce capitalism, which is working under the division of labour (Butler, 2012: 86). As noted above, Benjamin characterises a strike as violence in the form of omission, a refusal of action. In the context of a proletarian general strike, such refusal 'brings the legal system to its knees' because it renders the foundation of the capitalist system inoperative (Butler, 2012: 86). In Butler's language, it refuses the repetitions of implementation by which the law preserves and instates itself as law across time' (90–1). The point is not to demand certain policies of the state, or even to replace the state with something else, but to 'negate the state itself' (95). In this sense, a true proletarian strike would be catastrophic but not bloody.

Butler argues that this kind of pure violence is non-coercive because it does not come from outside and impose itself on a situation. It is wholly immanent to the legal order that it also threatens. For example, the proletarian general strike exceeds the capitalist system but also can exist only by virtue of the capitalist system. The violence of a proletarian general strike negates the very condition of possibility of the proletarian class itself. Its violence lies in the recursive turn of deposing the division of labour itself. Whether blood is shed in the course of the strike is incidental to its violence. Divine violence therefore becomes historically embedded in that its character is determined by the particular social and political order in which it occurs. With this interpretation, Butler attempts to reconcile the ambiguity that troubles Derrida by taking Benjamin's claim that divine violence is 'bloodless' to mean that it is self-directed and strikes at its own capacity for action. Under this definition, the 'final solution' could never qualify.

Implicitly addressing Derrida's hesitation in this way, Butler's goes on to consider how divine violence undoes the coercive force of a legal order at the level of individual subjectivity. Based on her interpretation of a proletarian general strike, she suggests that divine violence involves 'freeing oneself

from the bonds of guilt upon which legal regimes rely' (2012: 95). This idea is further illuminated through her interpretation of the Niobe myth. Recall, Benjamin's point in invoking the story was that the violence of *até* is similar to law-making violence in that it is a manifestation of a limit more than a punishment. In that context, Benjamin also writes that the 'idea of man's sacredness gives grounds for reflection that what is here pronounced sacred was, according to ancient mythic thought, the marked bearer of guilt: life itself' (251). Butler focusses on this notion of life as the bearer of guilt and elaborates, 'Law thus petrifies the subject, arresting life in the moment of guilt.... The punishment produces the subject bound by law – accountable, punishable, and punished' (2012: 78). Thus, Niobe's metamorphosis into stone represents the internalisation of guilt, which is a form of subjectivation that constitutes the legal subject as always already subject to the law.

Divine violence, she suggests, must be understood in relation to this form of legal subjectivity and the ethics proper to it which is driven by a desire to be free of guilt and thereby free of the law:

The desire to release life from a guilt secured through legal contract with the state – this would be a desire that gives rise to a violence against violence, one that seeks to release life from a death contract with the law, a death of the living soul by the hardening force of guilt (82).

In fact, divine violence is a manifestation of this desire, which is created by the legal order itself.

The ultimate responsibility for divine violence lies with mythic violence itself. In contrast to Derrida, who refuses to embrace the idea of 'pure' violence, Butler's interpretation acknowledges the possibility of bloodshed and killing but locates the responsibility for it with the legal order that gives rise to the desire behind it. She writes, 'what is done for the sake of "the living" may well involve the taking of mere life' because 'Divine



power ... can only do its act if mythic power has constituted the guilty subject, its punishable offense, and a legal framework for punishment' (2012: 80, 81). In this sense, B envisions divine violence as a violence that is self-negating and motivated by desire to release life from guilt.

## **Agamben**

The relationship between life and law implied in Benjamin's critique is also central to Agamben's theory of sovereignty, which develops what Agamben characterises as 'the irreducible link uniting violence and law' that Benjamin laid bare (1998: 63). In particular, he develops the link between sovereignty the idea of bloody power over mere life. Agamben argues that the essence of political sovereignty is a relation to 'pure bare life' in a legal state of exception (1998: 164). A 'state of exception' is when the law's authority remains in force, but the rule of law is suspended, typically through some type of sovereign decision reflected in an executive order or decree. In a state of exception, legal norms that would mediate the relationship between life and law in the usual case (e.g.: political and civil rights) are suspended.

Agamben argues that the power is the heart of the authority of law. Sovereignty is in the power to make such an exception to determine whether life is included in the law as a legal subject or whether to exclude it from legal protection and include it as bare life (164). The link between law and violence creates a zone of indistinction between law and violence within the law itself. Agamben's references to divine violence place emphasis on the fact that if life is captured by the law in a state of exception, divine violence represents an 'existence outside the law' (2005: 53–4, 64 and 1998: 64–5). For Agamben, Benjamin's concept of divine violence attempts to 'ensure the possibility of a violence that lies absolutely

outside and beyond the law and that, as such, could shatter the dialectic between law-making and law-preserving violence' (2005: 53).<sup>9</sup>

Agamben's take on the status of 'purity' in Benjamin's concept of divine violence is to go to other texts where Benjamin discusses the idea. In 'On Language as Such and The Language of Man' (1978), Benjamin elaborates how human life is inseparable from communicative language and that language as a means of communication is the 'medium' of our being (Agamben, 1999: 33). However, Benjamin states the 'weakness' of human language lies in the fact that it cannot bring the form of this relation to expression (Agamben, 1999: 33). Only a 'pure' language of names could express the linguistic being of the human being, that is, only a pure language could express our 'way of meaning', or the way that human beings exist in language (1978: 314–32). This relates to Benjamin's concept of divine violence in that pure language is not another language outside of or beyond human language. Rather, pure language is revealed in human language by exposing it as such. Thus, purity is not to be understood as something beyond the human, nor as an intrinsic property of a subject (Agamben, 2005: 62). Rather, the possibility of 'communication itself immediately' is something that is revealed within human language as its incapacity (2005: 62). Similarly, pure violence is 'the exposure' of the relation between law and violence (62). It 'neither posits nor conserves violence' itself (65).

Agamben argues that an example of this 'pure' action can be seen in the short story by Herman Melville, 'Bartleby the Scrivener' (Agamben, 1998: 47). In the story, the narrator runs a law office and employs a man named Bartleby, who one day, upon being asked to help proofread a document, replies, 'I would prefer not to'. From that moment on, Bartleby performs fewer and fewer tasks, always responding with the same phrase: 'I would prefer not to'. Eventually, he is fired

and asked to leave, to which he responds he would prefer not. Bartleby will neither leave the offices nor do any work and his boss feels he cannot force him to go. He thinks of a friend who committed a murder in his private office, but cannot bring himself to use violence. Finally, he moves his law office to get away from Bartleby. However, soon the new tenants come to him for help because Bartleby is still there. He prefers not to leave. The narrator returns to the old offices to find Bartleby has been taken to prison. He plans to visit him only to discover that he has starved to death on account of preferring not to eat.

Agamben suggests that Bartleby's non/action can be understood as pure in Benjamin's sense because it immediately 'writes its own passivity' (1993: 37). It is not a means to an end (e.g. it is not being done to elicit a response from his boss) and it does not communicate a message. There is no mediation between means and ends. It seems to be done simply for its own sake. Agamben suggests the key element that makes Bartleby's preference not to analogous to divine violence is that it takes its own potentiality as its object (37). It is like a proletariat strike in the sense that the refusal to work renders the conditions of its own possibility inoperative. Bartleby's refusal similarly occurs at the level of his own existence. Both actions actualise their own potential to not be.

Thus, Agamben could be said to agree with Butler that divine violence implies an action that is internally/self directed in some sense, but there is a difference that is reflected in his discussion of Benjamin's reference to the first commandment, which draws on two comments made in other texts on the relationship between scripture (the Torah) and justice: one is in a letter to Gershom Scholem and the other in an essay on Kafka. To Scholem, Benjamin writes, 'the Scripture without its key is not scripture but life' and in regards to Kafka he writes, 'the law which is studied but no longer practiced is the gate to justice' (Benjamin in Agamben, 2005: 63). Agamben argues that in these statements Benjamin suggests a figure

of law after divine violence, that is, after the law's current relation to violence has been deposed. For Butler, therefore, the force of the first commandment is associated with the ethical desire of the subject of law that defines divine violence. Whereas for Agamben, the first commandment is an example of law after the nexus of law and violence has been deposed by divine violence. His reading of Benjamin suggests that law exists after divine violence, but in a form that does not wield bloody power over mere life.

Agamben has attempted to develop the idea of law without violence in various. This idea animates what Antonio Negri has characterised as his more utopian writings, such as the *Coming Community* (1993) and *Means without Ends* (2001). In these works, he elaborates the idea of 'playing with the law' and 'whatever being' as forms of relating to a law without force/violence (see Swiffen, 2009). He does not say much about what divine violence might look like beyond the discussion of Bartleby. His focus is on the possibility of 'another use of law' after divine violence (2005: 64). For instance, he suggests another use of law could be similar to how children 'play with disused objects', which does not restore them to their 'canonical uses', but frees them from them 'for good' (Agamben, 2005: 64).

## Žižek

To varying degrees, it seems that Agamben and Butler want to distance the concept of divine violence from bloodshed. Butler and Agamben both define divine violence as a form of self-negation that cancels out its own being. Butler allowed that bloody violence could be part of such action, though the moral culpability for it lies with the form of law that presupposes a subject off/to law. Žižek uptake of divine violence takes a different approach. When asked in an interview what is Benjamin talking about with the concept violence he replied: 'Revolution – that

is, a moment when you take the "sovereign" (this is Benjamin's word) responsibility for killing someone' (2007). He continues: 'I'm sorry, but Benjamin is pretty precise', he is talking about 'that moment when you take ... responsibility for killing someone' (2007). To understand where these statements are coming from it is necessary to turn to Žižek's treatment of the question of divine violence in *Violence* (2008) and *Against the Double Blackmail* (2016).

In *Violence*, Žižek does not shy away from the ambiguity of that made Derrida step away. He acknowledges the proximity of the idea of 'pure' divine violence and extreme forms of mythic law-founding violence. In both cases, violence is neither an expression of a crime or its punishment, or a sacrifice to a higher purpose (2008: 198). However, Žižek introduces a further distinction within this category of pure violence. He writes, 'Divine violence is thus to be distinguished from [mythic violence], *as well as* from pure violence as anarchic expression' (emphasis added, 201). To develop this distinction, Žižek draws on psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's notion of the *passage à l'acte*, which is characterised as 'an impulsive movement into action which cannot be translated into speech or thought and carries with it an intolerable weight of frustration' (2008: 76). Such 'movement into action' is not rooted in any kind of socio-economic protest or assertion of religious fundamentalism. It is not a symbolic message or meaning to be communicated, but an immediate attempt to gain visibility outside of any symbolic order.

An example Žižek explores is the riots in suburbs in France in 2005, which lasted for three weeks and involved burning cars and buildings. A significant segment of the participants were the children of African immigrants and their actions took place in the context of growing tensions over youth unemployment and police harassment. As Žižek describes, the participants were 'a social group composed of French citizens [that] saw itself excluded from the social and political space of citizenship' (2008: 77). However, he argues that the

riots were not a means of achieving inclusion or convey a meaning, but actions oriented to gaining an immediate visibility. If the main premise of the riots was that the participants are French citizens but not fully recognised as such, the actions were an end in themselves: 'we're here, no matter how much you pretend not to see us' (77). Žižek writes, the riots had no larger 'positive vision.... They were neither offering a solution nor constituting a movement for providing a solution'.... The medium itself was the message' (78). This type of action is 'blind;' *l'acte*, the violence bears witness to 'the lack of the symbolic order reflected by the participants' own 'inability to locate the experience of their situation within a meaningful whole' (76, 81; see also 2016: 39).

To support the distinction between divine violence and anarchistic expression, Žižek draws from the Lacanian idea of the symbolic order (the big Other) as constituted by lack that is perpetually disavowed and he associates it with the internal limit of mythic law that Benjamin described. Recall, the dialectic of law-making and law-preserving violence that constitutes mythic law undermines itself over time, according to Benjamin. Žižek's formulation implies the 'big Other' appears much like the Greek notion of fate and the realm of the gods in the ancient world: as an objective reality that transcends the subject. Lacan argues that our symbolic reality is sustained by a relation to a limit or impossibility of recognition within this order upon which the coherence of our subjectivity is maintained. Žižek suggests that the Paris riots immediately embodied this lack in the context of French society through the manifestation of useless violence. In this way, Žižek makes a link between the useless violence of a *passage à l'acte* and the pure violence without end described by Benjamin. In Lacanian theory the *passage à l'acte* is fundamentally reactive. It is a 'catastrophic suicide' where the source of violence is also 'the site of the impotence' of the symbolic order (2008: 201).

In *Against the Double Blackmail*, Žižek discusses the 2005 Paris riots again, this

time in connection with the unrest in 2014 in Ferguson, USA. The residents of the town of Ferguson took to the streets in response to the police shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager suspected of robbery. As Žižek writes, 'the poor black majority of the town took the killing as yet more proof of systemic police violence against them' (2016: 35). He characterises their 'violent demonstrations' as an 'exemplary' case of divine violence (37). He writes, 'what strikes the eye is the total absence of any positive utopian prospect ... [they] are motivated and sustained by a vague call for justice' (37). Žižek goes on, 'does not the same hold [for] the French suburban riots of 2005, when we saw major outbursts of public violence?' (38). They are similar in that 'the 2005 revolts in France were outbursts with no pretensions to vision. There were no particular demands made by the protesters in the Paris suburbs. There was only an insistence on recognition, based on a vague, non-articulated, resentment' (38). However, they are also different in that Žižek suggests that the case of Ferguson the action 'is active, it imposes, enforces a vision' (213).

In general, it is the gesture of manifesting the lack in the symbolic order that distinguishes what Žižek calls the 'zero-level' violence of the *passage à l'acte* (2008: 81). The difficulty is there are no criteria to identify an act of divine violence. As a result, its status is radically subjective and involves the assumption of a singular responsibility of a decision 'with no cover from the big Other' (202). It is this radical dimension of subjective responsibility that distinguishes Žižek's reading of divine violence.

In response to Derrida's hesitation over the possibility of a divine violence that is unjust, Žižek responds, we must 'simply accept the fact that divine violence *is* brutally unjust: it is often something terrifying, not a sublime intervention of divine goodness and justice' (2016: 40). He continues, 'there is nothing noble or sublime about what Benjamin calls

divine violence – it is "divine" precisely on account of its excessively destructive character' (41). What is most difficult to accept about divine violence is 'precisely [this] meaninglessness' (39). Thus, in contrast to Derrida who rejects the concept for this reason, and to Butler who argues divine violence is a form of non-violence, and to Agamben who prefers to focus on the idea of a law without violence, Žižek embraces the possibility of the very worst, suggesting that taking on such responsibility is part of the structure of divine violence as such.

## CONCLUSION

The relevance of Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' lies in the concept of law that it develops, which is unique in the way that it identifies a relation to violence as constitutive of legal authority. In attempting to define the conditions of possibility of legal violence, Benjamin reveals a form of law that is inseparable from violence. He identifies bloody power over human life at the foundation of modern European and colonial legal orders. The question that is difficult to answer is what was Benjamin's position on the question of justice in this context. Can it occur only through the enactment of 'pure' violence outside of legal and moral frameworks? In deconstructing the conceptual oppositions that Benjamin elaborates, Derrida highlights the undecidability of this question and ultimately rejects the concept of divine violence. The other commentaries discussed above reacts in different ways to the radical implications of the concept.

One important thing that Derrida's reading brings to light that Butler, Agamben and Žižek each recognise is the performative aspect of legal violence within a historical framework. Benjamin's concept of law as a dialectic of violence is supplemented by Derrida's demonstration of how law is not grounded

in a historical origin but instead constituted through an originary iterability that is never complete and never finished. Butler takes up this analysis and it informs the core of her reading of divine violence. Yet, she also tries to redeem the concept by defining it as a form of inwardly directed violence animated by an ethical desire to free life from the law. The cause of such desire is the way the subject is always already subject to the legal order itself, which by implication bears the moral responsibility for the bloodshed that may come along with undoing it. She embraces the concept of divine violence half-way, wanting to shift part of the responsibility for its enactment from the subject and onto the law. Žižek's position seems to be that Divine violence in some sense requires a subjective assumption of the possibility that made Derrida shy away. Agamben does not spend a great deal of energy working out the ethical implications of divine violence, preferring it seems to focus on the utopian possibility of a law without violence that he argues is suggested by Benjamin's reference to the first commandment.

## Notes

- 1 The German word *Gewalt* originates from the Old High German verb *waltan*, which roughly translates into 'to be strong', 'to dominate', or 'to master'. In modern German *Gewalt* covers a variety of meanings, including violence, force, coercion, power, and authority. As Étienne Balibar notes: 'the term *Gewalt* thus contains an intrinsic ambiguity: it refers, at the same time, to the negation of law or justice and to their realization or the assumption of responsibility for them by an institution (generally the state)'.
- 2 Benjamin argues what is needed are mutually independent criteria both of justified means and of just ends, but he brackets the question of the criterion of justness in the essay, and focusses exclusively on 'the justification of certain means that constitute violence' (279).
- 3 Extortion involves obtaining material benefit through the use of 'threats, accusations, menaces or violence' of such a nature that they compel 'an individual, organisation, or business entity'

to give up something of value they otherwise would not (Criminal Code of Canada, RSC 1985, c C-46).

- 4 It is interesting to note that prior to the legal definition of the right to strike, workers had essentially unlimited freedom to strike (Tucker and Fudge, 2010).
- 5 Benjamin's typology of violence on this point can be paralleled to what legal theorists have called 'constituent' and 'constituting' power (see Sieyès, 2002). For example, in democratic legal orders constituent power is often associated with 'the people' and the enactment of the constitution. Constitutional government is a constituted power generated from the consent of the people as constituting power (Loughlin and Walker, 2007).
- 6 By 1921, Venezuela (1863), San Marino (1865), Portugal (1867), Costa Rica (1877), Ecuador (1906), Uruguay (1907), and Columbia (1910) had all removed the death penalty from their criminal law (Kronenwetter, 1993).
- 7 Benjamin's position anticipates contemporary research into the ineffectiveness of the death penalty in preventing crime (see Erickson and Gibbs, 1978 and Radelet and Ackers, 1996).
- 8 An example is Oedipus, who unknowingly killed his father, married his mother, and brought a curse upon Thebes. The myth of Antigone is another example. The play ends not only with Antigone's suicide, but the suicide of the wife and son of the king of Thebes.
- 9 Agamben suggests that the notion of divine violence was instrumental to the development of Carl Schmitt's concept of sovereignty, which is characterised as the power to declare a state of exception (Agamben, 2008). He argues that Benjamin and Schmitt were engaged in a metaphysical debate over the identity of pure violence. On the one hand, Benjamin sought to isolate and define a form of violence that was autonomous from law. On the other, Schmitt sought to fully assimilate violence into law through the concept of 'bracketing' war in the sovereign decision (Schmitt, 2006, 100). In contrast, for Benjamin pure violence is always necessarily outside of law.

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# Security and Police

Mark Neocleous

The history of bourgeois modernity is a history in which security occupies centre stage. This is clear from both the long tradition of bourgeois political thought and the extensive reiteration of security by contemporary politicians: from Thomas Hobbes to David Cameron, so to speak. From Hobbes we get the idea that the only solution to the insecurity of the state of nature is a contract exchanging our obedience to the Leviathan for the security it is expected to offer; the state takes centre stage as the provider of the one thing all humans are said to desire. From Cameron we get the idea, delivered in his 2015 Christmas message to the nation, that ‘if there is one thing people want at Christmas, it’s the security of having their family around them and a home that is safe’. From Hobbes’s account of why we flee the state of nature through to Cameron’s account of what we all want for Christmas: security.

The extent to which security is the leitmotif of bourgeois modernity is evident in the fact that in a so-called ‘age of rights’, security

is often presented to us as *the* most fundamental of all rights. According to the United Nations, the fundamental rights of all human beings are ‘life, liberty and security’. This claim repeats the revolutionary discourse of rights in the eighteenth century, and one thinker who noticed the implications of such a claim was Karl Marx. In his exchange with Bruno Bauer over ‘the Jewish question’ in 1843, Marx runs through the various declarations of the rights of man announced in the late eighteenth century, along with the constitutions which tended to follow such declarations. Marx points out that the rights in question, though revolutionary in some (liberal) ways, are still nonetheless the rights of a member of *bourgeois* society, ‘of egoistic man, of man separated from other men and from the community’. ‘Let us hear what the most radical Constitution, the Constitution of 1793, has to say’, he suggests, and then notes Article 2 of that Constitution: ‘These rights ... are: equality, liberty, security, property’. Marx works through these ideas. Liberty,



for example, is 'the power which man has to do everything that does not harm the rights of others', according to one Declaration, or 'being able to do everything which does not harm others', in another. J. S. Mill would later confirm this in his articulation of the 'harm principle' in *On Liberty*, but Marx treats it as nothing less than the 'right of ... separation, the right of the *restricted* individual, withdrawn into himself'. The practical application of this right to liberty is man's right to private property, Marx notes, 'the right to enjoy one's property and to dispose of it at one's discretion ... without regard to other men, independently of society'. This 'right of self-interest ... makes every man see in other men not the *realization* of his own freedom, but the *barrier* to it'. Such observations essentially launch Marx's well-known critique of rights discourse through the rest of his work, but note what he says about security at this moment. Citing Article 8 of the French Constitution of 1793 – 'security consists in the protection afforded by society to each of its members for the preservation of his person, his rights, and his property' – Marx makes the following comment: 'Security is the highest social concept of civil society, the concept of *police*, expressing the fact that the whole of society exists only in order to guarantee to each of its members the preservation of his person, his rights, and his property'.<sup>1</sup> Marx has put his finger on the core ideological concept of bourgeois modernity.

It is perhaps one of critical theory's most significant failings to have not taken up Marx's suggestive observation about security as the supreme concept of bourgeois society. Marx himself makes little of his own observation, and yet it would seem to offer the basis of a challenge to the whole problematic of 'security' within bourgeois order. On the one hand, his observation explodes the tedious debate that takes place within 'traditional' theory about any 'balance' between security and liberty: it is quite clear from any reading

of the history of bourgeois thought that security overrides liberty every time, as evidenced by the fact that Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, Jeremy Bentham, Montesquieu, David Hume, Thomas Paine and many other liberal thinkers ultimately hold the view that liberty 'consists in security or in one's opinion of one's security', as Montesquieu puts it.<sup>2</sup> Liberty has been so bound up with security in the liberal mind that it is essentially subsumed under the idea of security. On the other hand, Marx's observation allows us to see that the permanent disturbance of all social conditions and relations that attends the constant revolutionising of capitalist production<sup>3</sup> means that capital is fundamentally an order of *social insecurity*, but one which simultaneously gives rise to a *politics of security*.

If we take seriously a comment Marx makes in his debate with Ruge, that the main task before us is not to change the world in the way envisaged by some socialists but, rather, the *ruthless* critique (or even, depending on translation, *reckless* critique) of all that exists, including and especially politics, law and religion,<sup>4</sup> then we might say that for us right now the target of such a ruthless and reckless critique has to be that new hegemonic category – one might even call it a political religion – named 'Security'. Such a *critique of security* requires understanding security not as a universal value but as a mechanism of domination deployed by state and capital, part and parcel of the wider politics of fear which underpins bourgeois modernity. Far from being something that could ever be genuinely achieved, security exists for the opportunities it offers to get things done in its name. Security is a mechanism to mobilise, discipline and punish. In other words, security is a power for the fabrication of social order, which is the very reason why security points always to the concept of police and why the *critique of security* folds into a *critical theory of police power*.<sup>5</sup>

## SECURITY: CAPITAL (OBEDIENCE)

Capital creates insecurity, and insecurity creates a demand and desire for security. To this demand and desire, capital responds with all its usual flair and creativity. Security is therefore highly productive for capital.

To be productive for capital, security must first be translated into the materiality of the commodity. Marx notes that as soon as something emerges as a commodity it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness, in such a way that gives the commodity a mystical value. If this is so for the commodity in general, then commodities presented in security terms are at an added advantage as they appear to serve the satisfaction of a very basic, and yet also very indeterminate, human need. But Marx's point is that commodity production *per se* is far from obvious and trivial. And tracing the contours of the production of security commodities takes us to the heart of the process whereby security becomes fetishistically inscribed in commodified social relations. This is the basis of the security industry. The expression 'industry' here refers not only to the connection between security and the commodity form but also to the rationalisation, distribution, production and consumption of security. It likewise incorporates that self-portrait of state power, the spectacle of security.<sup>6</sup>

The security industry does not engage in security because of an interest in actually eradicating insecurity. But neither does it do so because it is interested in 'social control' or 'surveillance'. Rather, it has a far more mundane interest: making a profit. To make a profit the security industry must *sell* security. And to sell security it must play on fears and insecurities, must generate further fears and insecurities, and must pander to the idea that our fears and insecurities are very real and must be dealt with in some way. The security industry therefore interpellates consumers as both *sovereign* subjects ('the customer is king') and as *fearful* subjects ('the customer is insecure'). And the customer must

be reminded time and again of just how insecure they are, revealing more than anything the extent to which capital has found a way of dominating and terrorising human beings within their very hearts and souls. This is one reason why struggles against 'security measures' alone are always so limiting: without connecting security to capital, such struggles never address the basic antagonism of bourgeois society.

The security industry is thus where capital and security come to contemplate themselves in a world of their own making, playing a key role in the fabrication of the much wider culture of fear and insecurity that is used to shore up both state and capital. Where the security state uses fear and insecurity to sustain support for the national security project, the security industry turns fear and insecurity into the consumption of commodities. Where the security state thus perpetually offers more and more 'solutions' in the form of new security policies, the security industry offers 'solutions' in entirely commodified forms, as more and more commodities are simply marketed as solutions to one insecurity after another. The security industry thus mobilises, organises and exploits a purported human need to reinforce the logic of both security and the commodity form across the face of society.

To the extent that both capital and the state live off the production of fear and insecurity, they must also ensure that security is something never really achieved. Behind the slogan 'Security now!' lies the real double-sided message: on the one hand, 'Security with the next security product' (the message from capital); on the other hand, 'Security with the next security measure' (the message from the state). Yet both the security industry and the security state perpetually cheat us of what has been promised. The promissory note is endlessly prolonged, revealing that, ultimately, the promise is illusory: all that is confirmed is that the real target will never be reached. Security is revealed as an illusion. But it is an illusion that has forgotten that it is

an illusion. In this sense, security is totalitarian, manipulating the idea of a fundamental need in such a way as to preclude effective opposition against the whole.<sup>7</sup>

Part of security's power lies in its demand that we passively accept all the things done in security's name and all the things state and capital want us to take most seriously as needing securing: property and propriety, capital and commodity, law and order. Security believes in itself and demands that the world should believe the same.<sup>8</sup> Security wants us to believe that nothing other than that which is called security is good, or at least that whatever else might be considered good is nowhere nearly as good as security itself. Moreover, it wants us to believe that that which is good must be secure. Security thereby subjugates living humans to security itself. In so doing, it masks the real impoverishment of human life. Worse, it functions in such a way that this impoverishment is understood as the very thing that needs to be secured. If the main task of ideology is to get us to believe that 'the bourgeois way of thinking is the normal way of thinking',<sup>9</sup> that the key bourgeois concepts are in fact 'common sense' and that this social order is somehow natural, then security is ideology par excellence, integral to the system of manipulation and domination which now encloses the world, one which relies more than anything on subjects becoming dependent on and then articulating for themselves a set of ideas that end up animating them as well as dominating them. This is a domination in which each individual trembles lest they be found guilty of transgressing the boundaries imposed by security and its demands, and despite the fact that they believe that their own need and desire for security is itself natural. This is why security is so demanding: it is nigh on impossible to unravel the demands that security imposes on us and the immense labour that security incessantly performs on us, a labour that in turn produces new demands on us as subjects, new norms by which we are measured, new targets towards which we

should be striving, new mechanisms through which hopes and dreams are to be thwarted.

Much of this can be witnessed in the phenomenon that has been described as neoliberalism. A great deal can and has been made of the ways in which neoliberalism involves a transformation of the individual, seeking to realise capital's ultimate goal 'to confiscate the soul'.<sup>10</sup> 'Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul', as Margaret Thatcher once put it.<sup>11</sup> Taking such a claim seriously means reading neoliberalism not simply in terms of its *destructive power*, for example in destroying certain kinds of rights and institutions, but also in terms of its *productive power*: in its ability to *create* new kinds of social relations, new ways of living and new political subjects. Now, the literature on the new neoliberal subject recognises more than anything that what is being produced is an entrepreneurial self and a productive subject: a monetised, atomised and calculating subject that is required and expected to endlessly perform as a neoliberal subject in the social realm as well as in the marketplace.<sup>12</sup> But this production of new subjectivities is also very much an *orientation of the subject around security*. The obligation to work on oneself as a neoliberal subject includes an obligation to work on oneself as a subject of security; the entrepreneurial-subject is to also be a security-subject. Neoliberalism thus forges new political subjects through security, operating for security and organised around security. In other words, security-conscious neoliberal subjects.

Because the neoliberal subject is expected to be an *active* subject, this activity is also meant to respond to the demands of security as well as the demands of capital. As is well known, under neoliberalism it is no longer enough for us to simply work, earn our money, go home and spend it. Rather, we are meant to *believe* in the work we are doing and to *actively show that we believe in it*, identifying with the organisation and signing up to the company's mission, vision and values.

Neoliberalism manipulates and recasts our subjectivity such that we not only continue to interiorise the bourgeois norms of self-possession and self-management, but that we also increasingly feel obliged to *show* that we have interiorised them, to the extent that the neoliberal workplace increasingly comes to be regarded as a kind of ‘community of desire’, as Frédéric Lordon puts it. And yet this poses a problem for capital, which constantly questions the worker’s desire. In Lordon’s example: the employee-subject swears that they have no other passion than the manufacture of yoghurt, our company’s business, but *can we really believe them?*<sup>13</sup> The answer has to be no, and so the desire must be constantly expressed, measured and assessed, since it is always in danger of fading. A similar point might be made about the neoliberal security state: the citizen-subject swears that they have no other interest than the security of the social order, but *can we really believe them?* The answer must again be no,<sup>14</sup> and so the desire must also be constantly expressed, measured and assessed, since it is always in danger of fading. Herein lies the basis for all the actions we are now being trained to undertake as security-conscious neoliberal subjects, such as learning ‘resilience’ and being constantly ‘prepared for emergency’. And the more frantically entrepreneurial we become in terms of thinking of ourselves as subjects of security, the more passive and obedient we become towards security itself. The entrepreneurial-security subject is simultaneously the obedient-subject. As with so many aspects of neoliberalism, what is of most interest is its disciplinary moment, and at the heart of this lies the logic of security and its conjunction with capital. The explosion and expansion of security in the last two decades is conventionally connected to the problem of terrorism (the ‘war on terror’), but it might just as easily be connected to the attempt to engrain neoliberalism into the hearts and minds of political subjects. Security has become a neoliberal mobilisation regime.

Part of the illusion of security is that we are meant to bow down before it without even asking what it is or how it came to be granted such a status. To exist without reply, security seeks to nullify all dissent and suppress any rebellion *even before such dissent and rebellion have begun*. Any objections or resistance to any of the policies – not least the economic policies – being carried out by the powers which claim to exercise security on our behalf are met either with security measures of the most coercive kind or with the expectation that reason must abase itself before it, all our critical faculties set aside as security and its leading defenders tell us to shut up, listen and obey. Those arguing against austerity, for example, are treated first and foremost as a threat to national security. Thus far from security being emancipation, as some people working in the academic sector of the security industry like to claim *and which is the very belief that security wants us to hold*, the articulation of security as an overarching principle of politics – the idea, in other words, that security is the absolute foundation of all politics, or that security has to be the starting point for any political thought, or that security is the grounds on which we must accept the protection of the state, or that what all of us would most like for Christmas is security – is nothing less than the articulation of a demand for obedience. Security is in this sense central to the containment of social change, nothing less than the principle and process of pacification, if by ‘pacification’ we understand not simply the military crushing of resistance but, rather, the *fabrication of social order*.<sup>15</sup> This is the heart of the police idea, to which I turn below, but it has been historically true of the whole project of security from its inception – the invention of ‘social security’ in the early 1930s and then ‘national security’ in the late 1940s evidence of the state’s recognition of the ability to get things done in the name of security, from reordering the social world to reordering the international world<sup>16</sup> – and is proving to be

equally true of security as it plays out in the current conjuncture.

What does this obedience in the name of security produce? The answer is not difficult: obedience itself. Obedience produces obedience, as Michel Foucault once commented about what he called ‘pastoral power’.<sup>17</sup> It reproduces itself as a system of obedience. That is, one accepts the principle of security in order to become obedient and one reproduces this state of obedience in a striving for the mythical state of security. The ultimate goal is that one manages oneself in the way that a security operative would have us be managed. This is the very point to which Hobbes alludes in the final paragraph of *Leviathan*, it is the very same point ventriloquised by all contemporary politicians when they speak the language of security, and it is the point implicit in much of the discourse and policies surrounding terrorism, which is the very reason why so much anti-terror legislation concerns itself not so much with terrorists but rather with the obedience of the population in general.<sup>18</sup> Obedience thereby becomes a permanent way of being, and we are encouraged to believe that obedience is essential to the security of the subject. Obedience becomes fundamental to the principle of *raison d'état*, demanded by the state for security reasons, and our training in obedience a training of and for political order. And, given the security–commodity nexus, what we are being made obedient for is nothing other than the domination of our lives by capital.

Security, then, demands that we bow down to security. It demands that we feel secure in our insecurity as bourgeois subjects but also insecure in our security as bourgeois subjects. It demands that we commit ourselves not to making history but, rather, to the eternal recurrence of the same: to securing capital and the state rather than anything against it or opposed to them. Like capital, security wants us to believe that it is our fate. In this regard we might refine a point made in the 1930s by Max Horkheimer when he commented that those who do not wish to talk about

capitalism should keep quiet about fascism: those who do not wish to talk about capitalism should keep quiet about security.<sup>19</sup> But might there not be another more telling point to make, about fascism itself, connected to the idea of a *mobilisation in the name of security*, and which requires us to refine Horkheimer’s point in another way? Namely that those who do not wish to talk about security should keep quiet about fascism.

## SECURITY: FASCISM (LIBERALISM)

First and foremost, any mobilisation in the name of security takes place through practices of information and suspicion. Witness here the ‘If You See Something, Say Something’ campaign in the US Homeland Security project. This campaign is in one sense intended to help the state move beyond the problem of ‘racial profiling’, but in so doing it expanded the problem exponentially: if threats to security can no longer be defined by a fact of racial otherness, they must nonetheless still come from somewhere or someone. Or, rather, they can come from anywhere and anyone. And so we must all keep watch. As articulated by State Secretary Janet Napolitano in 2011, the process is designed ‘to inform and empower a broader, more inclusive range of people and institutions to become a part of the homeland security architecture of our country’.<sup>20</sup> If *you* see something, say something, because *you are part of the security architecture* and must therefore act accordingly.

The video on the ‘If you see something ...’ website plays heavily on the idea that citizens should act on anything suspicious, even when they think it might not be anything of real concern. This is the police logic inherent in security: anything slightly ‘out of order’ is by definition suspicious and thus to be regarded as a security threat. This logic is played out elsewhere. In the UK, for example, virtually everyone is to now be a kind of

security officer, often in the guise of immigration informant. For example, academics must report on international students so that Universities and Colleges can supply details about the students to the Home Office, while marriage registrars must notify the Home Office of any marriages which they think are 'suspicious'. More generally, the UK Home Office encourages its citizens to report anything or anyone they think suspicious to the Home Office Intelligence Management System (in 2013 some 75,000 reports were sent in). The Home Office webpage states: 'If you suspect that someone is working illegally, has no right to be in the UK or is involved in smuggling or other criminal activity, we want to hear from you'. It then assures people that they can submit information anonymously if they so wish but also that any information they give remains confidential. Security demands that citizens are to become the intelligence officers of the modern world.

At the same time, however, slogans and suggestions along the lines of 'if you suspect someone' and 'if you see something, say something' are also meant to be understood in a slightly revised form: 'if you *do* something, someone will be watching you'. After all, if *you* are part of the security architecture, then *so too is everyone else*, and so you can expect your neighbours, colleagues, family, friends and lovers to be watching you, just as you are meant to be watching them. Hence you will be reported if you are a 14-year-old taking a home-made clock to school, a four-year-old trying to say the word 'cucumber' and being misunderstood as saying 'cooker bomb', or a traveller speaking Arabic on a plane, to give just three recent examples.<sup>21</sup> Not only do we never know when we are being watched, but in the name of security we must also act as watchmen. This is the intensified culmination of a world in which security is the supreme concept: every human subject is a suspicious person. More to the point, every human being is a suspicious person in both senses of the term, for the phrase 'suspicious person' has a double-meaning. 'I am a suspicious person'

connotes being inclined to suspect: I am a person who has suspicions. But 'I am a suspicious person' also connotes giving grounds for suspicion: I am a person who is suspected by others. The suspicious mind is policed by the person with a suspicious mind, and we are all in both categories. Security now demands that we play this doubly suspicious role, as security operative and potential terrorist, amateur detective and budding conspirator. The outcome is the debasing of any attempt at human solidarity, as every citizen is now also meant to be a collaborator with the security regime.

Such debasing is central to any political movement which places security at its core, for it allows such a movement to step easily from security to exclusion, from exclusion to expulsion, and from expulsion to extermination. Despite all the talk about security being a human right, security being a fundamental need, security being emancipation, one thing is clear: security politics is first and foremost a politics of exclusion. Security is cultivated and mobilised by enacting a set of exclusionary practices. Conversely, exclusion is cultivated and realised on security grounds. This is why texts on security are always texts about exclusion, implicitly if not explicitly. The mutual presupposition of exclusion through security measures and security through exclusion practices has a long history, underpinning as it does all the historic practices through which civil society and borders – both internal as well as external – have been policed, of how the working class was originally excluded from the body politic, and of how this class along with the dangerous classes, the urban poor, the racially inferior, the threatening immigrant, the sexually deviant, the politically oppositional and the colonial subject have been administered in ways excluding them from certain spheres of civil society and the state, certain occupations and careers, certain powers and pleasures.

All of which is to say that political mobilisation in the name of security will always be a mobilisation of a deeply authoritarian kind.

This is the very reason that security is a fundamental feature of fascist discourse and practice: it is no accident that fascism calls its operations 'security measures', enacts mass 'security confinement' in 'security camps' and exercises its power through 'security police'. The kind of work carried out in the name of security has a kind of elective affinity with fascism, enabling a series of quick and easy moves made from security to exclusion to expulsion to extermination.<sup>22</sup> If we take the mass murder of six million as the culmination of fascism, then we can follow one eminent historian in thinking of the Holocaust as *the fusion of anti-Semitism with security issues*.<sup>23</sup> It is therefore no exaggeration to say that any revival of fascism will come through a political mobilisation in the name of security, and that any such mobilisation will start (has started?) with the exclusion of marginal and minority groups.

Yet maybe there is an even more telling point to make: that any such revival of fascism would hardly be necessary given all the things that can be done for 'security reasons' in the name of liberalism and the capitalist state. Security confinement, imprisonment without trial, torture, rendition, summary execution, suspension of liberties and rights that are never then reinstated, the introduction of new emergency powers that are never then lifted, war declared but never ended: it is now clear that all these things and many more are made possible in the name of security, without needing to institute a fascist regime. And if the response to this is that nothing close to the Holocaust would ever be perpetrated by liberalism, note the following story told by one ex-security operative who had spent many years working for one of world's largest 'security agencies'. In 1991, John Stockwell worked out that the CIA project in Angola which he had helped to engineer had resulted in the deaths of over 20,000 people. He then decided to do some maths.

Coming to grips with these US/CIA activities in broad numbers and figuring out how many people have been killed in the jungles of Laos or the hills

of Nicaragua is very difficult. But, adding them up as best we can, we come up with a figure of six million people killed – and this is a minimum figure. Included are: one million killed in the Korean War, two million killed in the Vietnam War, 800,000 killed in Indonesia, one million in Cambodia, 20,000 killed in Angola – the operation I was part of – and 22,000 killed in Nicaragua.<sup>24</sup>

Six million dead at a minimum estimate and not counting either those killed in the name of security by other regimes in the same period or those killed in the quarter of a century since. Not 'The Six Million', as those murdered in 'security camps' in the name of the Aryan race are known, but another six million murdered in 'security operations' by liberal states. This is security as the slaughter bench of history.

## SECURITY: POLICE (LABOUR)

Marx's astute observation that security is the supreme concept of bourgeois society is followed by him with an equally astute follow-up connecting security with the concept of police. His comment is a reminder of the extent to which we are told that the police power is exercised in the name of security. But it is also a reminder of the fact that we need a far more expansive concept of police than that found in police studies, criminology and mainstream theory, all of which fall back on the same old tired assumptions and clichés: that 'police' refers straightforwardly to the organ of state charged with enforcing law and order and that the main arguments to be made about this institution concern how to make it more democratic, less discriminatory or less militarised.

What was once known as police science was nothing less than a central means of understanding and sustaining the exercise of state power; this is one reason why Hegel, who also grasps the fundamentally antagonistic nature of bourgeois society, places the police power at the heart of his philosophy of

right. Such a science picks up on the fact that 'police' refers to the legislative and administrative regulation of the internal life of a community to promote general welfare and the condition of good order, encapsulated in phrases such as 'police and good order' or 'good police and order', the contemporary versions of which are 'law and order' or 'public order'. In its concern with order, police holds an incredibly broad compass, overseeing and administering a necessarily large and heterogeneous range of affairs, to the extent that police is in some sense without parameters. The police power sees to everything that might be necessary to maintain order within a community. This is why in its origins the police mandate extended to the minutiae of social life, including the means of comfort; public health; food and wine adulteration; expenses at christenings, weddings and funerals; sumptuary law; Sunday observance and the behaviour of citizens at church or during festivities; the maintenance of roads, bridges and town buildings; the regulation of the provision of goods and services; the performance of trades and occupations; religion, morals and manners; the behaviour of servants towards their masters; and, of course, security. The point already made about contemporary security measures – that anything slightly 'out of order' is by definition suspicious and thus a security threat – is thus at the heart of the police power and traceable to its very origins.

In the fourth volume of his *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, published in 1769, William Blackstone deals with a 'species of offences which especially affect the commonwealth', which he calls offences 'against the police and oeconomy'.

By the public police and oeconomy I mean the due regulation and domestic order of the kingdom: whereby the individuals of the state, like members of a well-governed family, are bound to conform their general behaviour to the rules of propriety, good neighbourhood, and good manners; and to be decent, industrious, and inoffensive in their respective stations.<sup>25</sup>

Note that the issue is not crime, but order, in the sense that the police ensures that manners, behaviour, propriety and industry are conducted *properly*; the police oversees the proper. Lest one think that Blackstone's comment is archaic and out of date, his general claim still rings true despite the liberal revolution of the late eighteenth century which broke the police power into various components of state power in general ('medical police' became 'social health' and then 'the health service', for example; the police of poverty became 'welfare' and, more tellingly, 'social security'; questions of food adulteration are handed over to organs with names such as the 'Food Standards Agency'). Thus a police treatise supposedly far more 'modern' than Blackstone's and written well after the functional differentiation of police powers, Ernst Freund's *Police Power* (1904), opens by noting that of all the state powers, 'the police power is the most comprehensive, and therefore necessarily the vaguest'. He continues: 'The term police has never been clearly circumscribed. It means at the same time a power and function of government, a system of rules, and an administrative organisation and force'.<sup>26</sup> It is for this reason that all of the key concepts of the police power – 'security', 'safety', 'law and order', 'public morals', 'keeping the peace' – are necessarily broad and ambiguous, because the mandate of good order requires that police powers are necessarily so.

The police power in this sense has its own special standing, as the chapter on 'Police Affairs' in Peter the Great's 'Regulation of the Main Municipal Administration', 1724, put it.

The police has its own special standing, namely: it facilitates rights and justice, begets good order and morality, gives everyone security from brigands, thieves, ravishers, deceivers and the like, drives out disorderly and useless modes of life, compels each to labor and to honest industry, makes a good inspector, a careful and kind servant, lays out towns and the streets in them, hinders inflation and delivers sufficiency in everything required for human life, guards against all illnesses



that occur, brings about cleanliness on the streets and in houses, prohibits excess in domestic expenditures and all public vices, cares for beggars, the poor, the sick, the crippled and other needy, defends widows, orphans, and strangers according to God's commandments, trains the young in sensible cleanliness and honest knowledge; in short over all these the police is the soul of the citizenry in all good order and the fundamental support of human security and comfort.<sup>27</sup>

The *special standing* of the police power is partly the basis for its claim to be *the soul of the citizenry in good order*, and in this role the police power lays claim to be *the very foundation of human security*. This is how the police power comes to intervene at any moment anywhere, 'for security reasons', even when those 'security reasons' are far from apparent to the rest of us. It is also how the police power comes to act when something has been declared 'disorderly'. It is not enforcing the law that drives the police power, but enforcing order; not the eradication of crime, but the eradication of disorder. Slogans such as 'crime prevention' and 'law enforcement' are little more than rhetorical legitimations for the exercise of the state's political administration of civil society through police power. It is this that renders police power a 'formless ... nowhere tangible, all-pervasive, ghostly presence in the life of civilized states'.<sup>28</sup>

Police is therefore best understood as an *activity* rather than an institution, a *process* rather than an organisation. At the same time, however, the activity of keeping order and the process of ensuring security is underpinned by a far more specific concern: to 'compel each to labour and honest industry', as Peter the Great's 1724 reform has it. In other words: work. The police power involves a set of apparatuses and technologies not only constituting political order in general, but constituting the law of labour in particular.<sup>29</sup> This much is clear from the very first police science, as Foucault notes when he writes that the question Colbert asked in the seventeenth century remains pertinent today: 'Since you have established yourselves as a people, have

you not yet discovered the secret of forcing all the rich to make all the poor work? Are you still ignorant of the first principles of the police?'<sup>30</sup> Thus when Blackstone defines police as the regulation and order of the kingdom whereby the citizen-subjects are made to conform to the rules of industry as well as propriety and decency, the implication is clear: the police exists to make people work. The police power constitutes wage labour. There is no market without police power. Police power is at the heart of the making and remaking of the working class.

Recognising this fact goes some way to explaining why it is that the state spends far more time and energy policing the proletariat than the bourgeoisie.<sup>31</sup> It equally explains why it is that prisons are disproportionately peopled by members of the working class. But more than anything it goes some way to explaining why 'offences against the public order' (as Blackstone calls them) such as 'vagabondage' and 'vagrancy' are so central to police treatises and legislation.

'The Vagrant Act is specially intended to reach [the] class of idlers'. So said Christopher Tiedeman in his 1886 *Treatise on the Limitations of the Police Power*, one of the leading law texts in the field for many years. 'A wanderer through the land, without home ties, idle, and without apparent means of support, what but criminality is to be expected from such a person?' And yet it is not so much the potential crime committed by actual vagrants that is important but, rather, the opportunities afforded to the police power by the category 'vagrancy' itself. People can be arrested under vagrancy laws 'on mere suspicion' and 'the whole method of proceeding is in direct contradiction of the constitutional provisions that a man shall be convicted [only] after proof of the commission of a crime'. In contrast, the vagrant 'may never have committed a crime, but he is arrested on the charge of vagrancy, and ... the burden is thrown upon the defendant to disprove the accusation'. The important point being registered by Tiedeman, one reiterated

in more or less every legal text on the police power, is that vagrancy law allows the prosecution and persecution of people simply on the basis of 'a status or condition' and largely on the grounds of suspicion. 'In connection with the punishment of vagrancy, provision is made for the punishment of ... *any suspicious person who cannot give a reasonable account of himself*'.<sup>32</sup> The UK's Vagrancy Act of 1824, for example, was the ultimate catch-all legislation, with its centrepiece being Section 4, still in operation, which enables people to be arrested and punished for being 'a rogue and vagabond', for being 'idle and disorderly', for 'wandering abroad', living in a tent, lodging in a barn or in the open air, or for just plain 'not giving a good account of himself or herself'. Vagrancy legislation is the ultimate form of police legislation: it criminalises a status rather than an act (the offence of vagrancy consists of being a vagrant); it serves to justify an arrest made when no other grounds for arrest exist; it gives utmost power to the discretion of the police officer; and it seeks not to punish a crime as such but, rather, to eliminate what are regarded as threats to social order. Most importantly, it is vagrancy law that has been instrumental in creating a class of labour.

Vagrancy law was of course central to the process of 'primitive accumulation' and the violent separation of labourers from any means of subsistence other than the wage. This is why Marx spends so much of Volume 1 of *Capital* dissecting 500 years of vagrancy law. It is also why vagrancy is regarded by the ruling class as a crime against capitalist order; a kind of *urcrime*, from which all other crime stems. ('The vagrant has been very appropriately described as the chrysalis of every species of criminal', notes Tiedeman; 'the comprehensive definition [of vagrancy] affords the means of dealing with the criminal elements of the population and keeping them ... under restraint', notes Freund.)<sup>33</sup> Suppress vagrancy to get people to engage in some kind of 'lawful calling'. Suppress vagrancy and people will be put to work.

In this light we might re-read the section on 'primitive accumulation' in Volume 1 of *Capital* as an *extended discourse on the police power*. It realises, in a roundabout way, Marx's observation in 1844 that the concept of police nestles alongside security as the supreme concept of bourgeois society. I suggest that it also provides the basis for what should be one of critical theory's foundational claims about police power: not only is there no market without police power, but that very power turns out to be central to the constitution of wage labour. Just as security needs to be understood through its integral links with capital, so police power needs to be understood through its integral links with labour. In the name of bourgeois security, police power is *class war from above*. The fact that police discourse is replete with the language of war and bourgeois ideology obsessed with the permanent police wars being fought against crime, drugs and disorder reminds us that the fabrication of bourgeois order *is* war: a police war and the class war, one and the same.<sup>34</sup>

The more total a concept becomes, the more unimaginable the means by which those living under its spell might break that domination. Such is the nature of security. The more total an activity becomes, the more unimaginable becomes the means by which those living under its spell might break that domination. Such is the nature of police. We are meant to obey the demand for security in the way that we are meant to obey the police power: as if there is no alternative. But to imagine a world without police is to imagine a world without capital, which is in turn to imagine a world not organised around the logic of security. The immense difficulty of such imagining is indicative of the extent to which security monopolises the terms of political debate, reinforcing the police power; it is indicative of the extent to which police power saturates the social world, reinforcing our submission to security; and it is indicative of the extent to which security and police reinforce our submission to capital.

## Notes

- 1 Karl Marx, 'On the Jewish Question' (1844), in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), pp. 162–4.
- 2 Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), trans. Anne Cohler, Basia Miller and Harold Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), Pt. 2, Bk. 12, Chap. 1.
- 3 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 6 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1984), p. 487.
- 4 Karl Marx, 'Letters from *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*' (1843), in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 3, p. 142.
- 5 Mark Neocleous, *The Fabrication of Social Order: A Critical Theory of Police Power* (London: Pluto, 2000); *Critique of Security* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008); *War Power, Police Power* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014). Also Mark Neocleous and George S. Rigakos (eds), *Anti-Security* (Ottawa: Red Quill Press, 2011).
- 6 The spectacle of terrorism is one part of the spectacle of security, just as the terrorism industry is in fact one part of the much larger and older security industry. See Mark Neocleous, *The Universal Adversary: Security, Capital and 'The Enemies of All Mankind'* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016).
- 7 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 3.
- 8 I am playing on Marx's comment on the German regime in 1843, in his 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction' (1844), in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 3, p. 179.
- 9 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 29 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1987), p. 315.
- 10 Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany* (1930), trans. Quintin Hoare (London: Verso, 1998), p. 75.
- 11 Margaret Thatcher in Interview with Ronald Butt, 'Mrs Thatcher: The First Two Years', *The Sunday Times*, 3 May, 1981.
- 12 Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neo-liberal Society* (2009), trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2013), p. 3.
- 13 Frédéric Lordon, *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire* (2010), trans. Gabriel Ash (London: Verso, 2015), p. 84.
- 14 The answer has to be 'no' because to unreservedly believe anyone is committed to the security of the social order would be to rest assured that this person is not and never could be a security threat. But no-one can ever genuinely occupy that position. This is why even the politicians who run the system are placed under surveillance. This fact is true of all states, but in 2012 the Hungarian state took it one step further with a new national security law that required government officials to 'consent' to being placed under surveillance. The officials were told that their phones would be tapped, their homes bugged and their emails read, but that this would happen only for 60 days each year. The beauty of the move was that they were not to know which 60 days. Hence they would have to behave as *though they were always being watched*. In other words, they would have to behave in such a way as to *avoid being considered a threat to security*.
- 15 Mark Neocleous, 'Security as Pacification', in Mark Neocleous and George S. Rigakos (eds), *Anti-Security* (Ottawa: Red Quill Books, 2011), pp. 23–56; Mark Neocleous, 'Fundamentals of Pacification Theory: Twenty-six Articles', Tyler Wall et. al. (eds), *Destroy, Build, Secure: Readings on Pacification* (Ottawa: Red Quill Books, 2017), pp. 14–27.
- 16 See Mark Neocleous, 'From Social to National Security: On the Fabrication of Economic Order', *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 37, No. 3, 2006, pp. 363–84; Neocleous, *Critique of Security*, chapter 3.
- 17 Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979–1980*, trans. Graham Burchell (Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2014), p. 270.
- 18 It is now clear that whatever complicated history 'terrorism' has had, one of its main functions now is to reinforce the logic of security. This is why those criticisms of the terrorism industry which point to its irrationality, along the lines that more people in the US are killed by bee stings or in bathtub accidents than they are by terrorism, and which therefore suggest that a more rational security policy would focus on, say, teaching people how to avoid bee stings or bathtub accidents, miss the point entirely: the point of the terrorism industry is not to make us more secure but, rather, to turn us over to the logic of security in its entirety. The point of the terrorism industry is to *make security unanswerable*. This is why the terrorism industry must be seen as part of the security industry, as we noted above.
- 19 Max Horkheimer, 'The Jews and Europe' (1939), trans. Mark Ritter, in Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas MacKay Kellner (eds), *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 78.

- 20 Remarks by Secretary Napolitano at the NYU School of Law and the Brennan Center for Justice, 'Strength, Security, and Shared Responsibility: Preventing Terrorist Attacks a Decade after 9/11', 7 June, 2011.
- 21 Alex Hern, 'Texas schoolboy handcuffed for bringing homemade clock to school', *The Guardian*, 16 September, 2015; Ben Quinn, 'Nursery "raised fears of radicalisation over boy's cucumber drawing"', *The Guardian*, 4 March, 2016; Liam Stack, 'College Student Is Removed From Flight After Speaking Arabic on Plane', *New York Times*, 17 April, 2016.
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- 23 Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2001), p. 645.
- 24 John Stockwell, *The Praetorian Guard: The U.S. Role in the New World Order* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1991), p. 81.
- 25 William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, Vol. 4: *Of Public Wrongs* (1769), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 163.
- 26 Ernst Freund, *The Police Power: Public Policy and Constitutional Rights* (Chicago: Callaghan and Co., 1904), pp. 2, 3, 89, 220.
- 27 'Regulation of the Main Municipal Administration', 1724, cited in Evgenii V. Anisimov, *The Reforms of Peter the Great: Progress Through Coercion in Russia* (1989), trans. John T. Alexander (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), pp. 217–8.
- 28 Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence' (1920–21), trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1: 1913–1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard, 1996), p. 243.
- 29 Geoffrey Kay and James Mott, *Political Order and the Law of Labour* (London: Macmillan, 1982).
- 30 Michel Foucault, *History of Madness* (1961), trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2006), p. 62.
- 31 Note, for example, that in the UK the state employs 3,700 people to chase benefit fraud, but only 700 people to chase tax evasion, despite the fact that the cost of benefit fraud is estimated at £1.3 billion a year while tax evasion costs somewhere between £34 billion and £120 billion a year. (Figures are for 2016, cited in Juliette Garside, 'Benefit Fraud or Tax Evasion?', *The Guardian*, 13 April, 2016.)
- 32 Christopher Tiedeman, *A Treatise on the Limitations of the Police Power in the United States* (F.H. Thomas Law Book Co., 1886), pp. 116–26, emphasis added.
- 33 Tiedeman, *Treatise on the Limitations of the Police Power*, p. 117; Freund, *The Police Power*, p. 100.
- 34 Because it is fought in the name of security, this is a war that goes by the name of 'peace', a peace violently constituted and forcefully maintained, but masked by the repertoire of police ideology ('community policing', 'serving the people', 'keeping us safe', and on it goes).

# On the Authoritarian Personality

James Murphy

## INTRODUCTION

The authoritarian personality – or, in some cases, the authoritarian character – was a category deployed by the Frankfurt School in the early twentieth century to name the relationship between the effects of late capitalist society on the personality structure of individuals and the rise of fascism in the industrialized west. Introduced by Erich Fromm in the 1920s in order to try and make sense of why the German working class switched so quickly from the left to the right after the failure of the German Revolution, the concept quickly came to occupy a prominent position in the glossary of terms with which the developing Frankfurt School for Social Research sought to examine the causes of fascist political forms. It was essential that this attempt take place on ‘social-psychological’ terrain. Figures such as Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, Leo Löwenthal, and Theodor W. Adorno drew on this term in particular, to shift the object of

criticism in the broad critique of fascism unfolding in the mid twentieth century, from the content to the social and libidinal conditions of conscious experience. At the same time, it helped provide a common vocabulary with which to consider psychological phenomena, such as sadomasochism, from a sociological vantage point and vice-versa. This was the purpose of one of the Frankfurt School’s first collaborative works, entitled *Studies on Authority and Family* and published in 1936. The study sought to develop a social-psychological explanation for the loss of internalized authority or ‘conscience’ among masses of salaried workers and framed that explanation in terms of what they called the ‘crisis in the family’, or the child’s terribly de-centering experience of an absolute conflict between the law of the father and the law of the state.

Though the basic coordinates of the concept appeared and reappeared in several guises throughout the history of the Frankfurt School (‘character’, ‘libidinal

structure', 'personality structure', etc.), its latest articulation is both the most precise and comprehensive. This last treatment of the authoritarian personality appeared in 1950 with the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality*, a five-year long research project based in Berkeley, California focusing on the prevalence of authoritarian personalities in the United States by Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel Brunswik, Daniel Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford.

*The Authoritarian Personality*, published in 1950, was the product of a collaborative social-psychological investigation into the potentiality for fascist sympathies among the American population. The research team was officially co-directed by Theodor W. Adorno, a German philosopher, sociologist, and musicologist known as a prominent member of the Frankfurt School, and R. Nevitt Sanford, an American sociologist at the University of California Berkeley, but included as part of its 'senior staff' a German psychoanalyst named Else Frenkel Brunswik, and an advanced student in psychology at UC Berkeley, and later a professor of psychology at Yale University, named Daniel Levinson. 'The major concern' of the study, the authors wrote in the introduction,

was with the *potentially fascistic* individual, one whose structure is such as to render him particularly susceptible to anti-democratic propaganda. We say 'potential' because we have not studied individuals who were avowedly fascistic or who belonged to known fascist organizations. At the time when most of our data was collected fascism has just been defeated in war and, hence, we could not expect to find subjects who would openly identify themselves with it; yet there was no difficulty in finding subjects whose outlook was such as to indicate that they would readily accept fascism if it should become a strong or respectable social movement. (Adorno et al., 1950: 1)

In other words, the problem facing the research team was to determine how 'likely' it was that fascism would come to the United States. It was therefore essential to establish the specific laws of the personality structure independent of other forces at work in the situation, while also grounding those laws in the dynamic

relationship between an individual and their environment. This required returning to precisely that period of infantile sexuality dismissed by the revisionists so as 'to discover correlations between ideology and sociological factors operating in the individual's past – whether or not they continue to operate into his present' (Adorno et al., 1950: 6).

The study drew direct inspiration from Fromm and others' earlier social-psychological investigations, but also sought to metabolize the many criticisms the early attempts had generated by the end of World War II. For instance, in contrast to Fromm's more socially deterministic conception, they defined personality in the following way:

Although personality is a product of the social environment of the past, it is not, once it has developed, a mere object of the contemporary environment. What has developed is a *structure* deep within the individual, something which is capable of self-initiated action upon the social environment and of selection with respect to varied impinging stimuli, something which though always modifiable is frequently very resistant to fundamental change. (Adorno et al., 1950: 7)

As this passage indicates, the problem was how to see the individual's subjective role in the reproduction of objective social form – how, in other words, the individual was both produced by and productive of social conditions, or how the subject was an 'effective effect' of late capitalism. The authoritarian personality in particular therefore referred to the sort of character structure that authoritarian *societies* demanded of individuals. It was the reflection within the structure of the individual's unconscious of the social process – a process which itself depended on that individual and their character for its existence. It was not therefore that the individual's desires 'produced' authoritarian social forms, nor was it the social form that entirely produced the individual's desires, but rather a constant interpenetration of the two that, nonetheless, tended to draw energy away from the non-identical individual and toward production for exchange.

A few preliminary remarks on the relationship between empirical social research and the authoritarian personality are also warranted, however. As Max Horkheimer argued in his inaugural address upon assuming directorship of the Institute in 1931, the most important problem facing the social sciences in the early twentieth century was that they remained idealist in their approach to social objects. All hitherto existing social theories, he claimed, 'presuppose[d] a complete correspondence between ideal and material processes, and neglect[ed] or even ignore[d] the complicating role of the psychical links connecting them' (Horkheimer, 1972: 12). By reducing the diversity of social phenomena to a single, unified methodological principle, they failed to register the methodological tension between their specific social position and the object on which they reflected, society itself. What would allow this tension to reappear, or what would reopen the tension, would be the introduction of *empirical social research* into the conception of the social whole – specifically, to index the process of social philosophical reflection to the findings of each of the separate sciences. The reason for this, in Horkheimer's view, was that, in each of the separate sciences, reflection on the whole, reflection on what is real or unreal, finds a corrective in 'concrete research on the object' – in physics, for example, the 'laws of physics' are subject to a permanent process of empirical experimentation (or perhaps 'reality testing') to ensure that they do, in fact, correspond to some kind of external reality understood as what-is-other-than-law, or what is other than scientific knowledge. Unlike ontological or positivist frames of inquiry, the separate sciences required an effort of methodological self-correction or self-modification in response to a particular set of findings. One could therefore say that the Frankfurt School under Horkheimer's direction deployed the separate sciences in order to open social theory up to its outside, to the object conceived as what is other-than-thought, as what 'acts upon' thought – even

if most scientific disciplines end up reifying what-is-other-than thought by simply pitting a second self-identity (i.e. 'data') against the first, the methodological principle in need of correction.

Hence 'social research' was social in two respects. First, it took its own position of enunciation as an object of reflection. Empirical social research was both the effect of social forces and itself a social force – it could either mystify the reality of society, as in the case of idealist variants that represent society as an undifferentiated whole, or break silences surrounding unconscious processes and forces such that social progress could become possible (if not actual). Second, it was itself a form of 'social life' insofar as the commitment to the separate sciences required interdisciplinary collaboration at every moment. Each separate science that engaged in concrete empirical research involved a methodological sensitivity to the other of its scientific procedure, yes, but only within its own narrow disciplinary confines. In order for each separate science's concrete sensitivity to the outside to become a truly productive force, it had to be translated into the language of other separate science in an act of philosophical second reflection. One could describe the second generation of Frankfurt School scholars' practice of 'critical theory' as nothing other than this labor of translation.

The authoritarian personality, then, was precisely the sort of concept that simply could not have been constructed without multiple inputs from Marxist social theory and historiography, Hegelian dialectics, Freudian psychoanalysis, and different forms of 'critical and administrative' social research. The social basis for this was that the massification of society was a social process whose tendencies reflected several different 'methodologies'. It involved the quantitative reproduction of qualitatively homogeneous instances over an entire population, but also the 'speculative' process of fetishism, the capture of individual desire by a commodity

form that never appears as such, that always ‘transcends’ experience. Thus a comprehension of the methodological principles – and their evolution – is essential to a full comprehension of the concept itself.

There was, of course, considerable continuity among the many definitions and interdisciplinary approaches to the problem of the authoritarian personality. Horkheimer’s characterization in his short piece ‘Lessons of Fascism’ from 1950 is perhaps the most succinct and comprehensive. It was also one of the most mature definitions, reflecting over 19 years of collaborative research on the problem in several disciplines and contexts. The personality structure of authoritarian individuals, he writes, will be characterized by

a mechanical surrender to mechanical values; blind submission to authority together with blind hatred of all opponents and outsiders; anti-introspectiveness; rigid stereotyped thinking; a penchant for superstition; vilification, half-moralistic and half-cynical, of human nature; projectivity. (Horkheimer, 1950: 230)

Psychologically speaking, then, one can see that each of these character traits possesses a sadomasochistic texture. They all present a specific mode of aggression or of ‘causing pain’ as the object of the instincts, i.e. as the means by which the individual experiences pleasure. This element of the definition is drawn directly from Freudian psychoanalysis; it first appears in his work in the form of ‘libidinal’ or ‘character types’ modeled on the different phases of psychic development, but later reappears in expanded form in Wilhelm Reich’s and Erich Fromm’s writings. As both authors pointed out, the libidinal underpinnings of the authoritarian character are specifically sadomasochistic; what satisfies an authoritarian personality is both to obey and then to be obeyed, or to be punished and then go on to punish others – in short, to delight in the dissolution of the ego into a violent libidinal oscillation between the superego and the id. Sociologically speaking, they reflect the consequences of

the collapse of liberalism into late capitalism and the slow, libidinal violence of the culture industry for individuals and their earliest, most intimate and formative social experiences.

The following entry will therefore examine several different accounts of the social-psychological process, and the specific form of authoritarianism to which it gave rise. It begins with the first concrete application of empirical social (psychological) research in Erich Fromm’s *The Working Class in Weimar Germany: A Psychological and Sociological Study*. From there it moves by way of Herbert Marcuse’s critique of Fromm’s rejection of Freud’s libido theory to the Berkeley Research Team and the *Authoritarian Personality* published in 1950, and elucidates the social metapsychology of the authoritarian personality structure in Adorno and Horkheimer’s fully libidinal conception in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and ‘Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda’. In this way, it is hoped, the historical and methodological life of the concept of ‘authoritarian personality’ can be grasped in its 19-year development, from 1931 up to 1950.

## **SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY AND THE WORKING CLASS IN WEIMAR GERMANY**

Erich Fromm detailed his particular social-psychological method in his 1931 essay ‘Method and Function of Analytic Social Psychology’, where he argued that psychoanalysis’ contribution to sociology was to provide a vocabulary with which to articulate the individual’s specifically libidinal and unconscious identification with the economic and cultural forms of a given society. Returning to the early Freud, Fromm argued that the ‘self-preservative’ drives, such as hunger, are ‘tied up with material production’ – their specific form is determined directly by the nature of society’s economic relations, the ‘substructure’.



The form of the erotic drives such as love, on the other hand, are largely determined by the 'ideological superstructure', those social relations determined not by the need to survive but by 'those precise satisfactions that are socially available and desirable from the standpoint of the ruling classes' (Fromm, 1978: 480). For Fromm, then, the 'libidinous and largely unconscious behavior' of the individual body numbered among the forces of production that could be productively or unproductively related to all other forces of production, while 'culture' or 'ideology' functioned as the apparatus of capture responsible for ensuring that those libidinal forces remain productively related to the reproduction of society as a whole.

However, Fromm's conception of libido differs from Freud's. Fromm objected to what he took to be the exclusion of social determinations from the account of psychic development, and famously accused Freud of 'biologizing' the process of subjectivization by reducing it to the encounter between instincts located somewhere in the body and the natural world of objects. Rather than decisive childhood experiences of libidinal frustration leading to defense- and reaction-formation, Fromm's notion of character develops in immediate response to the contemporary determinations of the *socio-economic structure* transmitted to the individual via conscious experience. 'Libido' or 'sex drive' only name something like the 'creative openness' of the individual human being's energies – they are what allow for the 'active and passive adaptation of the biological apparatus, the instincts [on the whole], to social reality' (Fromm, 1978: 480). They can do so because both sets of drives are understood to be *part of the socio-economic substructure*, i.e. they are already understood as 'productive'. The only difference is that their product is not the sort of material goods that keep human beings alive (food, water, shelter, etc.) but rather 'ideologies', socially necessary fantasies that ensure the individual's continued contribution of their erotic energies to the reproduction of society as whole (Fromm, 1978: 491).

The social-psychological problem is thus how to understand the relation *between* economic and cultural or ideological relations – in other words, to ask how the individual *comes to enjoy* the socially specific form of the self-preservative process. Fromm's conceptual response is what he calls 'the libidinal structure of society', a forerunner to his later concept of 'social character' that he defines here as 'the "cement", as it were, without which ... society would not hold together' (Fromm, 1978: 493). But in order to verify that this concept had some real concrete purchase on actual individuals, quantitative empirical research was also necessary. If these concepts naming qualitative aspects of 'authoritarianism' could not find a corollary pattern in data drawn from quantitative questionnaires, i.e. questionnaires addressed to the masses themselves, the notion of the libidinal structure, and of the authoritarian personality, would remain abstract.

This was precisely the purpose of *The Working Class in Weimar Germany: A Sociological and Psychological Study*, which began in 1931 and sought to examine the libidinal structure of fascist Germany as it manifested in the psychological structure of individual workers. Fromm's research team set out to determine the exact degree of 'authoritarianism' exhibited by the German working class 'since the triumph of National Socialism revealed a frightening lack of a will to resist among the German workers' parties, in sharp contrast to their numerical strength as indicated by the polls and mass demonstrations prior to 1933' (Fromm, 1984: 42–3). The study employed a combination of questionnaires and direct interviews designed to draw out the 'precise structure of the individual workers' beliefs', the deep emotional commitments framing their conscious perception of themselves and the world. It was therefore not sufficient simply to 'record' the answers to the questionnaires and interview questions; one had also to 'interpret' these answers so as to determine their social significance, i.e. what they revealed about the

individuals' emotional ties to the form of society in which they lived. This interpretive element, which depended on psychoanalytic practices, was precisely what made this study unique in the critique of fascism.

Once recorded, individuals' responses were classified according to 'how individual' or 'how authoritarian' they were. In order to be classified as 'individual', answers had to clearly arise from 'an unprejudiced attitude, which had been formed by experience and was not merely an expression of conformity with a given standard' rather than an attitude that 'relied on stereotypes acquired at school or copied from Mr. Smith or Jones' (Fromm, 1984: 54). Anti-authoritarian types had strong, independent views on the quality (or lack thereof) of a given cultural trend, while authoritarian types, on the other hand, had a distinct penchant for 'stereotyping', or for reducing the complexity of the encounter between their individual life-experiences and cultural phenomena to a pre-existing, socially approved schema. The question of conformity was therefore of paramount importance, for it demonstrated the extent to which those individuals whose conscious opinions were, say, 'socialist' or at least conformed to the publicly stated position of the socialist parties, in fact possessed an authoritarian libidinal structure. To provide another example, the study also focused on many of those individuals who purported to believe that 'war could be abolished by a proletarian revolution' or 'that capitalism was to blame for inflation and Socialism would lead to a better world' nonetheless possessed a 'personal attitude' that 'betrayed the wish to submit to a strong leader and also a desire to dominate the weak' (Fromm, 1984: 225). These sorts of conflicts appeared with sufficient regularity that the research team could designate them as 'syndromes', or bundles of symptoms that correspond to the different character types. In this case, then, the 'authoritarian character', defined by the sadomasochistic desire to submit to strength and dominate weakness, can be broken up into two 'sub-groups' of

the character type, one of which emphasized masochism and the other sadism.

### **THE AUTHORITARIAN PERSONALITY AND THE CRITIQUE OF NEO-FREUDIAN REVISIONISM**

While his early work was indisputably pioneering and revelatory for the Institute, Fromm's increasingly dismissive relationship to the drive theory irritated his contemporaries. Marcuse, Adorno, and Horkheimer rejected Fromm's revision of Freud, which they all accused of rehearsing the kind of idealist social theory with which the Institute sought to break. The problem, as Marcuse wrote in 'Critique of Neo-Freudian Revisionism', published as an appendix to *Eros and Civilization*, was that Fromm and other revisionists like Karen Horney proceeded by 'expurgating the instinctual dynamic and reducing its part in psychic life' (Marcuse, 1974: 240). This allowed the psyche to 'be redeemed by idealist ethics and religion', so that 'the psychoanalytic theory of the mental apparatus can be rewritten as a philosophy of the soul' (Marcuse, 1974: 240). The consequence is that

secondary factors and relationships of the mature person and its cultural environment acquire the dignity of primary processes – a switch in orientation designed to emphasize the influence of the social reality on the formation of the personality. However, we believe that the exact opposite happens – that the impact of society on the psyche is weakened. (Marcuse, 1974: 240–1)

The concept of identification therefore alters its meaning altogether, for it no longer functions as an account of the history of the ego's *constitution* but simply its *modification*. For Fromm and Horney, the ego is present, at least implicitly, from the very outset; it is a condition of psychological development and not its product. 'Individual' and 'environment' must therefore be given at the beginning of psychological development, so that

'libido' simply refers to the individual's susceptibility to the influence of that environment through the sexual instincts' capacity for sublimation. The identification between the two occurs through the simple continuity of lived experience, a continuity grounded in the permanent 'openness' of character to transformation no matter how oppressive the social conditions confronting that individual.

For Freud, on the other hand, identification allows for an account of what Adorno called the 'inner historicity' of the ego, or the way in which the ego develops out of an infantile bundle of auto-erotic impulses into a full self-reflexive agency (Adorno, 2014: 327). As Freud insists in 'On Narcissism', identification thus accounts for both the emergence of the ego in the first place and its later modification in the child's passage from auto-erotic immaturity to full adulthood; it is not simply the means by which instincts transform into a socially acceptable form. Hence the cluster of developmental problems named by the 'Oedipus Complex', which Fromm claimed was simply a naturalized form of the 'patricentric-acquisitive' society, in fact refers to the basic mechanisms by which the ego comes to be. What this process reveals, for Marcuse, Adorno, and Horkheimer, is not that there is something natural about repression or domination, but rather that every social form in the history of human life on earth has developed *by way of* the repression of what is natural, the libido. This is not a natural or necessary property of human beings, but rather a continuously and contingently reappearing facet of human social forms. The ego does not therefore structure the becoming of the self, but is rather itself a moment of that becoming – an effect, and not a ground.

The major difference with Fromm thus arises from the different mechanisms each critical theorist identifies as responsible for the genesis of the authoritarian personality. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the problem of authoritarianism has to do with the unleashing of repressed drives via the regression of

the mature subject to various 'pre-genital' shapes of the libido. There must therefore be a childhood sexuality for the subject to regress too, and hence the mature subject must include the Oedipus Complex in its history if this regression is to be intelligible. The social-psychological problem is therefore to show how the ego can be weakened to such an extent that it can no longer maintain the diversion of libido away from its original Oedipal constellation. These criticisms of Fromm played a crucial role in distinguishing the Berkeley research team's framework from Fromm's, and also help explain much of the reason why the *Authoritarian Personality* differed in its approach and to some extent its conclusions from *The Working Class in Weimar Germany*. Unlike Fromm, the team was concerned with the *possibility* that individuals would become fascists, not the explanation for *why they had already become* fascist. This made all the difference, especially with regard to the question of libido and the role of infantile sexual development.

Rather than considering those life experiences that 'lie in the realm of the personal or the accidental' to be superfluous to the notion of social character, the Berkeley team sought to place these idiosyncratic developments at its center (Fromm, 1978: 483). The libido theory was therefore essential, for, as Adorno emphasizes in 'Types and Syndromes', it is extremely important to recognize that there is just *one* authoritarian personality or 'syndrome', and that therefore 'there exists something like "the" potentially fascist character, which is by itself a "structural unity"' (Adorno et al., 1950: 751). Individuals who possessed an *anti*-fascist character, on the other hand, 'were much more diverse' (Adorno et al., 1950: 1). The difference between them had everything to do with the form libidinal satisfaction had taken for individuals prior to the moment of decision regarding this or that partisan situation. In this way, then, they hoped to show how 'the socioeconomic situation of a particular group' was in fact *constituted* through the personality, and not itself

the primary or most direct determination of the personality itself.

The Berkeley team's questionnaire was strikingly similar to Fromm's. Its first two components also involved interviews and more straightforward questions addressed to participants' conscious experience. But there was also one major addition, the thematic apperception test, which involved a 'projective technique in which the subject [was] presented with a series of dramatic pictures and then asked to tell a story about them' (Adorno et al., 1950: 14–17). This technique allowed the individual to produce a series of results that, 'when interpreted, reveal[ed] a great deal about his underlying wishes, conflicts, and mechanisms of defense' (Adorno et al., 1950: 17). Projection thus became one of the essential components of the construction of the authoritarian personality, and especially the projection of long-forgotten or repressed infantile experiences that played only a diminutive role in Fromm's approach. These results, alongside the responses to interview questions, enabled the team to determine which variables ought to be included in the quantitatively driven questionnaires while, conversely, 'the accumulating quantitative results indicate what ought to be concentrated upon in the interview' or apperception tests. Hence the results of all three tools allowed for a kind of cyclical, self-corrective praxis to emerge that deepened Fromm's original attempt at interdisciplinary social research.

The study became most famous for its development and deployment of the 'F-scale', an opinion-attitude test drawn not from prevailing opinions or popular trends, but rather 'from the clinical material already collected, where, particularly in the subjects' discussions of such topics as the self, family, sex, interpersonal relations, moral and personal values, there had appeared numerous trends which, it appeared, might be connected with prejudice' (Adorno et al., 1950: 222). Hence the F-scale was the most 'self-referential' scale designed by the team, a quality which allowed it to serve a twofold purpose. First,

it would allow for an even *more* indirect approach to prejudices and biases within the individual, for none of its items directly concerned issues of race or ethnicity. Thus it would avoid the distortions introduced by scale items that were 'too explicitly ideological', or that 'might be too readily associated with prejudice in some logical or automatic way' (Adorno et al., 1950: 222). Second, it would allow for a more synthetic approach to the question of the 'total personality' of the authoritarian type, so that, unlike the other thematically specific scales, the F-scale would 'yield a valid estimate of antidemocratic personalities' *on the whole* 'at the personality level' (Adorno et al., 1950: 222–3).

Each of these variables 'were thought of as going together to form a single syndrome, a more or less enduring structure in the person that renders him receptive to anti-democratic propaganda' (Adorno et al., 1950: 228). 'The most essential feature of this structure', the authors continue,

is a lack of integration between the moral agencies by which the subject lives and the rest of his personality. One might say that the conscience or superego is incompletely integrated with the self or ego, the ego here being conceived of as embracing the various self-controlling and self-expressing functions of the individual ... It is a function of the ego to make peace with conscience, to create a larger synthesis within which conscience, emotional impulses, and self operate in relative harmony. (Adorno et al., 1950: 234)

More than anything else, 'ego-weakness', the individual's inability to meet the demands placed upon the psyche by the coercively individualistic and competitive form of liberal democratic society, stood out as the predominant quality of the authoritarian personality. The consequence is a psycho-emotional structure that is 'anti-democratic' to the extent that its capacity to integrate its various psychological levels (id, ego, superego) and thereby *become democratic* has been blocked.

Several different 'sub-syndromes' within the authoritarian personality emerged from

the project, each corresponding to a different mode of ego-weakness. There was the syndrome of *surface-resentment* manifesting a series of 'justified and unjustified social anxieties' unrelated to underlying 'psychological fixations or defense mechanisms'; the *conservative* pattern involving 'acceptance of traditional values' so that 'the individual is largely under the sway of [the superego's] external representatives' and motivated by 'a fear of "being different"'; the *authoritarian* type who 'is governed by the superego', exhibits 'strong and highly ambivalent id tendencies', and is motivated by 'the fear of being weak'; the *tough guy* in whom 'repressed id tendencies gain the upper hand, but in stunted and destructive form'; and finally, the last two, both of whom 'seem to have resolved the Oedipus Complex through a narcissistic withdrawal into their inner selves': the *crank*, whose 'main characteristic is projectivity and ... main fear is that the inner world will be "contaminated" through contact with dreaded reality', and the *manipulative individual* who 'avoids the danger of psychosis by reducing outer reality to a mere object of action', so that 'he is incapable of any positive cathexis' (Adorno et al., 1950: 753).

While the conservative and authoritarian syndromes were the most frequent, the last two, the crank and the manipulative type, were the most violent, for both sought not simply a justification for their hostile feelings toward the other but in fact to *eradicate* the other. The manipulative type in particular, 'potentially the most dangerous' syndrome of them all, was 'defined by stereotypy in the extreme' as well as 'a kind of compulsive overrealism which treats everything and everyone as an object to be handled, manipulated, seized by the subject's own theoretical and practical patterns' (Adorno et al., 1950: 767). The consequence is an extreme 'coldness', even toward the projected objects of one's aggression. For the manipulative type, 'anti-Semitism is reified, an export article: it must "function"'; 'their goal is' thus 'the construction of gas chambers rather than the

pogrom' (Adorno et al., 1950: 768). This type 'is found in numerous business people and also, in increasing numbers, among members of the rising managerial and technological class', so that one could say that the manipulative type represents the *maximal objectification of the subject by the production process*. It is in the manipulative type that the reification of social relations encounters its limit, for their very character-structure is such that their experience of things reflexively reifies them. The manipulative type is a kind of libidinal conduit for pure reification.

### ADORNO AND HORKHEIMER: THE FEAR OF CASTRATION

As has already been mentioned, stereotyping remained one of the central features of the authoritarian personality in both Fromm and the Berkeley research team's approach. 'Stereotypy' broadly speaking is the name for those categories of experience from which all tension has been withdrawn, specifically the tension between the form and the content of the experience itself. Specific differences quickly dissolve into general traits that, cut off from their primary reference point and explanatory intention – particular or partial objects and qualities – become self-referential and abstract. Taken as the basis for relating to others, then, stereotypes motivate an ethics of coldness or even violent 'subsumption' of others under categories of value that place them outside the reach of civil society or basic human empathy.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer take up the problem of fascistic stereotyping in terms of 'false' versus 'reflective' projection. All experience, they claim, involves a dialectic of introjection and projection: the subject internalizes various qualities of the object, and then, once they have been so internalized, projects them outwards once again in the form of 'external objects'.

The process resembles that of Kantian 'synthesis', whereby the categories of the understanding are spontaneously combined with intuitive material in order to generate a coherent experience of the world as it exists 'for the subject'. Similarly, for Freud – and for Adorno and Horkheimer following Freud – the world as it is experienced is a result of the subject's projection outward of those elements of objects that have penetrated from the system of perception-consciousness to the deeper mnemonic systems, and then, in accordance with the subject's own libidinal proclivities, reorganized into forms whose coherence depends on the subject's libidinal needs. 'From the traces the thing leaves behind in its senses', Adorno and Horkheimer write,

The subject recreates the world outside it: the unity of the thing in its manifold properties and states; and in so doing, in learning how to impart a synthetic unity not only to the outward impressions but to the inward ones which gradually separate themselves from them, it retroactively constitutes the self. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 155)

In order to constitute the ego itself, that is, to generate the ego as an object of the drives and therefore an agency capable of intervening in the drives' choice of object and mode of satisfaction, the individual must project the same constancy and dynamism it has introjected from objects into the world in the shape of a 'self'. This object of projection, though an effect of prior processes, itself has the capacity to shape those processes by inhibiting or facilitating the satisfaction of the drives. It is an 'effective effect' of the encounter between the drives and the world.

'Reflective projection' thus involves the subject's constant attempt to submit its own projections to reflection, or to constantly compare those objects of experience it has constituted out of the traces left in its memory to the new impressions entering via perceptive consciousness, thereby 'holding open' its own projections. In other words, reflection on projection holds open the possibility

that its projections are incomplete and in need of revision from the vantage point of the external world, or, more specifically, of what is other-than-thought. This requires that the subject have the capacity to distinguish between those projections that belong to the ego and to conceptual thought and those introjected qualities that belong to the object, or to the specific properties of what is *other than the ego*, what imposes itself on the individual psyche in the form of an alien power. A healthy, strong ego will therefore make it possible for the individual to be self-reflective, or to bring its own unconscious trends and tendencies into consciousness and adopt a critical, thoughtful attitude toward them. In the act of self-reflection,

the antithesis is perceived in the subject, which has the external world within its consciousness and yet recognizes it as other. Reflection on that antithesis, therefore, the life of reason, takes place as conscious projection. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 156)

'False projection', on the other hand, works in the opposite direction. It reduces the contours of objects to what the ego finds satisfying, thereby shielding the ego itself from the need to alter the conditions of its own satisfaction. Introjection is overtaken by projection, so that all that is introjected is a kind of copy or imitation of the projected object. The consequence is stereotyping, which is the essence of the manipulative type discussed above. For the manipulative type, the whole world is experienced through the lens of an unassailable process of permanent synthesis. Process itself, therefore, comes to function as the category of categories insofar as the manipulative type projects 'manipulability', susceptibility to subsumption, onto the world as its core metaphysical principle. The manipulative type cannot introject any whole or partial object that does not conform to this schema.

The source of the collapse of introjection into projection is a series of overwhelming and threatening impressions from the object that leave the desire for self-preservation

dissatisfied. The ego comes to 'feel' threatened, and therefore to experience the object's threatening qualities as definitive of the object itself. All that comes to be introjected is an increasingly crude object of 'threat', so that what is projected at the level of the ego is not a reflective agent capable of registering the contours of objects but rather a 'powerful' or 'threatening' self characterized by aggressivity and insensitivity toward the world. In other words, the subject loses control over its projections and becomes *paranoid*:

Because paranoiacs perceive the outside world only insofar as it corresponds to their blind purposes, they can only endlessly repeat their own self, which has been alienated from them as an abstract mania. This naked schema of power as such, equally overwhelming toward others and toward a self at odds with itself, seizes whatever comes its way and, wholly disregarding its peculiarity, incorporates it in its mythic web. The closed circle of perpetual sameness becomes a surrogate for omnipotence. It is as if the serpent who said to the first humans 'ye shall be as gods' had kept his promise in the paranoiac. He creates everything in his own image. He seems to need no living thing and yet demands that all shall serve him. His will permeates the whole universe; nothing may be unrelated to him. His systems know of no gaps. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 157)

The 'stereotype' is thus the substance of the paranoid consciousness, an abstract category through which one violently refracts the diverse qualities of other individuals or the objective world in order to make them accessible to a weakened ego. The paranoiac becomes authoritarian in precisely this aggressive identification of the object with themselves rather than themselves with the object. In this way, the paranoiac compensates their weakened ego by forcing all experiences to assume a narcissistically satisfying form.

Pathic projection therefore weakens the already weakened ego even further, specifically by displacing the true origin of the pathological forces motivating the projection and therefore occluding the very reality whose alteration would alleviate the

paranoiac's anxieties. They find themselves in a self-perpetuating spiral, for the socially tabooed drives whose dissatisfaction undermines the ego's capacity for reflection and whose amelioration might lead to that ego's empowerment are projected into the outside world. 'Under the pressure of the superego', they write,

the ego projects aggressive urges emanating from the id which, through their strength, are a danger to itself, as malign intentions onto the outside world, and succeeds in ridding itself of them as reactions to that outside world, either in fantasy by identification with the alleged malefactor or in reality by ostensible self-defense. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 159)

These hostile forces, whose danger becomes intelligible to the individual by recalling the threat of castration, therefore elicit a regression to a narcissistic condition in which the integrity of the self becomes a problem. The superego, which ought in a healthy psyche to be a source of strength for the ego, collapses under the weight of the surging impulses emanating from the id and transforms into a conduit for their satisfaction. All resistance to paranoiac projection disappears and it becomes impossible to resist the power of the id's aggressive impulses. 'Pathic projection is a desperate exertion by an ego which, according to Freud has a far weaker resistance to internal than to external stimuli', Adorno and Horkheimer write; 'under the pressure of pent-up homosexual [i.e. narcissistic] aggression the psychic mechanism forgets its most recent phylogenetic attainment, the perception of self, and experiences this aggression as an enemy in the world, the better to master it' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 159).

The true source of ego-weakness, then – a social order which, although it has largely integrated traditional forms of class-antagonism via the welfare state and the culture industry, remains an essentially class-contradictory one – is projected into the outside world in distorted form: the 'other', the Jew. The paranoid psyche is perfectly

structured for anti-Semitic beliefs, for it is ultimately devoted to the relentless projection of an enemy, an object of the wanton aggression it cannot sustain within its own libidinal economy and for which no member of the community can serve as a suitable object. Hence the Jew-as-other is essential to the emergence of authoritarian personalities and the success of the National Socialist order, for it facilitates the production of the sorts of unconscious energies on which fascist demagogues and leaders prey.

Now that power is no longer needed for economic reasons, the Jews are designated as its absolute object, existing merely for the exercise of power. The workers, who are the real target, are understandably not told as much to their faces; the blacks must be kept in their place, but the Jews are to be wiped from the face of the earth, and the call to exterminate them like vermin finds an echo among all the prospective fascists of all countries. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 137)

The fascist leader therefore instrumentalizes racist tropes and beliefs so as to ensure that no ego-formations interrupt the flow of energy leading from the bodies of the masses into their own political projects. Ego-weakness is both the means and the end of this process.

To elucidate the specific psychological mechanisms of this social process, Adorno and Horkheimer turn directly to Freud's one overtly social-psychological text, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, which Adorno reconstructed in his 1951 essay 'Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda'. The essay takes up Freud's de facto social theoretical problem on his own terms, namely: 'what makes the masses into masses?' The short answer is the individual's specifically libidinal identification with authoritarian leader-figures or, in some cases, 'leading ideas'. These leaders facilitate the disintegration of the individual's *superego*, their independent, internal authority or 'conscience', and replace it with the group ego of the infamous 'primal horde'. This is not at all difficult to do, as the form

of late capitalist production itself militates against the development of a strong ego:

The people [the fascist leader] has to reckon with generally undergo the characteristic modern conflict between a strongly developed rational, self-preserving ego agency and the continuous failure to satisfy their own ego demands. This conflict results in strong narcissistic impulses which can be absorbed and satisfied only through idealization as the partial transfer of the narcissistic libido onto the object. This, again, falls in line with the semblance of the leader image to an enlargement of the subject: by making the leader his ideal he loves himself, as it were, but gets rid of the stains of frustration and discontent which mar his picture of his own empirical self. (Adorno, 1978: 126)

Freud defines the individual's superego as the guiding principle of their character, as the effect of a whole history of sedimented identifications with various authority-figures whose precise constellation constitutes the conscience. Rather than a superego presiding over a unique character or personality structure, the authoritarian looks to identify themselves *entirely* with the leader – quite literally to 'incorporate' the leader (or leading idea) as the frame of their conscious experience, as the principle determining their introjection of various objects and re-projection of them in the form of conscious experience. The result is the 'fascist *community of the people*' that

corresponds exactly to Freud's definition of a group as being 'a number of individuals who have substituted one and the same object for their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego'. The leader image, in turn, borrows its as it were primal father-like omnipotence from collective strength. (Adorno, 1978: 126)

This substitution of a group ego for the individual superego is what gives rise to the mass's 'passive-masochistic attitude', the individual's identification with aggressive and hostile forces before which the only rationally self-interested gesture is one of total capitulation. The individual regresses so violently and suddenly that they skip directly over the moment of identification with the



image of their own parents and return to the phylogenetically transmitted experience of the horde's submission to the primal father, a figure of pure hostility and deprivation who had to be killed in order for the brothers of the horde to satisfy their drives. This moment resurfaces in the infant's libidinal development the first time they experience parental anger or disapproval. The parents' body and psyche is so much more powerful that the only choice left to the child is total submission: one loves and invests in the desires of the other precisely because one is terrified of them. This first 'oral' phase of libidinal development is therefore highly *ambivalent*, for the child's relation to the parent is the unhappy unity of two polar opposite drives, one aggressive and one erotic.

This is also why it is essential to grasp the continuity of 'ambivalence' in the development of the paranoid authoritarian personality, for just like the 'ambivalent' form of late capitalism, i.e. its class-contradictory character, the psychological mechanism by which the individual navigates class contradiction is also ambivalent. Once the generalized hostility of the late capitalist social form has weakened the ego and forced its regression to the oral phase, an ambivalent identification with the leader becomes both possible and necessary. And here as well, as Adorno points out, one can see the genius of the demagogue, who need not understand group psychology in order to make use of it because they are themselves exemplary of its techniques and categories. In this case, for example, the fascist leader is *also* narcissistic and aggressively so, so that they personify in their comportment the very hostility toward the individual demonstrated by the form of late capitalism itself. His indifference or coldness toward the paranoid masses is precisely what attracts them to him:

The paranoid element in the devotees responds to the paranoid as to the evil spirit, their fear of conscience to his utter lack of scruples, for which they feel gratitude. They follow the man who looks past them, who does not treat them as subjects but

hands them over to the operations of his many purposes. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 157)

To be objectified, or more precisely to idealize the source of one's objectification, is of the essence of this ambivalent identification. For that is precisely what occurs: individuals become certain of themselves by supplicating themselves entirely before the source of their uncertainty, the indifferent primordial father. At the same time, however, they sense that the leader's superiority is artificial, superfluous – that they could themselves easily take his place and perform in his stead. Hence they get to feel simultaneously superior to the superlative figure in the group, an unresolved tension internal to the leader-figure that intensifies the sadomasochistic tensions endemic to the authoritarian personality.

This is just one of many tensions or contradictions that the leader maintains at the level of their presentation. Their sheer capacity to continue advocating their views despite their irrationality only contributes to the impression that they are in fact an overarching authority whose strength legitimizes their superiority. The consequence is twofold. First, there is the individual's *idealization* of the leader, who then becomes the object of the narcissistic libido that could find no satisfaction in the individual's own ego. This resolves the contradictions plaguing the ambivalent form of the oral identification. Second, there is an *identification* with all other individuals who have idealized the leader at the level of the ego itself. The individual therefore ceases to view themselves as an individual at all, but rather as one member of an enormous fascist family. Other individuals come to appear as siblings, each of whom falls equally short of the idealized father-figure, and each of whom equally depends on the father-figure for narcissistic compensation. The feeling of power the individual has lost reappears in the experience of the 'mass of individuals' who line up behind the fascist leader, thereby allowing them to elevate the one in whom they

recognize their own weakness to a position of supremacy.

So much, then, for the libido, but this is not all. There is also a need here for an ‘other’ to provide an object for the *death drive* which, due to the collapse in the individual’s capacity for erotic cathexis of the world, has little to check or temper it. Moreover, because the substitution of the group ego for the individual superego precludes the possibility of hating or resenting others who belong to the same group (a hatred which, in Freudian terms, is structurally necessary, since the other members of the group have become ‘siblings’ in the fascistic family and therefore possible competitors for the leader’s [i.e. the parents’] attention), some other ‘other’ must be invented. The racialized other thus emerges as a substitute for the actual others toward whom one would like to be aggressive and absorbs the free-floating feelings of aggressivity in the group. ‘This is the line pursued by the agitators’ standard “unity trick”’, Adorno writes.

They emphasize their being different from the outsider but play down such differences within their own group and tend to level out distinctive qualities among themselves with the exception of the hierarchical one. ‘We are all in the same boat’; nobody should be better off; the snob, the intellectual, the pleasure seeker are always attacked. The undercurrent of malicious egalitarianism, of the brotherhood of all-comprising humiliation, is a component of fascist propaganda and fascism itself. (Adorno, 1978: 131)

The ‘other’ that comes to constitute the object of the mass’s hatred does not therefore truly exist – they are in fact a fantasy projection, an unreal entity that functions as the negative image of the collective dissatisfaction of the death drive among the members of the mass. It is in this sense that the anti-Semite ‘creates’ the Jew, as Jean-Paul Sartre put it. It is not that the fantasy image is not identified with really existing individuals in the world – actually-existing Jews, as it were – but rather that what makes the other the object of mass aggression is not its own properties or qualities, but the

way that these qualities fit into the projected fantasy of satisfying destruction.

## THE CULTURE INDUSTRY AND THE END OF INTERNALIZATION

For Adorno and Horkheimer, the name for the additional element over and above capitalist social relations that contributed to the development of authoritarian personalities was ‘culture industry’, a regime of apparatuses responsible for enclosing or ‘integrating’ individuals’ libidinal energy into the circulation of commodities. The culture industry refers to a non-subjective but intentional social tendency whose essence is the extension of the work process into the leisure time of the individual. ‘Entertainment is the prolongation of work under late capitalism ... the only escape from the work process in factory and office is through adaptation to it in leisure time’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 109). It is therefore incorrect, in Adorno and Horkheimer’s view, to describe the function of the culture industry as ‘distraction’ – it is rather *focus*, specifically a focus on the form of cultural objects, which is identical with exchange-value. ‘No stimulant concocted by the experts may escape the weary eye; in the face of the slick presentation, no one may appear stupid even for a moment; everyone has to keep up, emulating the smartness displayed and propagated by the production’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 110). The culture industry is a fundamentally leveling force in which it is the production of culture itself rather than any particular cultural object that constitutes the object of the consumers’ libido. Freud calls the pleasure involved in this perpetual state of pseudo-satisfaction *Vorlust*, which can best be translated into English as ‘titillation’. It is not the *actual* satisfaction that comes from the release of tension, but rather the *anticipation* of satisfaction at the level of fantasy that the consumer finds enjoyable.

The culture industry does not sublimate: it suppresses. By constantly exhibiting the object of desire, the breasts beneath the sweater, the naked torso of the sporting hero, it merely goads the unsublimated anticipation of pleasure, which through the habit of denial has long since been mutilated as masochism. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 111)

Hence what the individual experiences as pleasure is in fact a form of dissatisfaction in which the role of fantasy in healthy psychic activity is inverted: rather than the *satisfactions of hallucination*, the culture industry presents the consumer with *the hallucination of satisfaction*.

The consequence of this tendency is that individuals come to experience a sort of indeterminate or 'absent' authority, a sense that 'they' are doing things to which the individual must conditionally adapt themselves. There is no specific representative of this absent authority; it never steps forth in personified form. Even the rulers come to personify their social function, as in the case of the manipulative, managerial character, so that no subjective independence appears in the whole of the seamlessly integrated production process. There is therefore no possibility whatsoever of this authority reciprocating the individuals' investment in it – it is a purely 'hostile' force that, although it gives shape to the individuals' libido in disciplinary fashion, never enters into conscious experience as a potential object of introjection. The 'rational' choice for the individual, the sensible course of action, is to surrender one's rational faculties altogether and identify completely with the irrational forces with which they're confronted; otherwise they will perish. It is this last point in particular that motivated Adorno to claim that the 'wrong life cannot be lived rightly' (Adorno, 2005: 39), or that there is no rational and justified response to rampant social irrationality.

It is therefore not entirely correct to say that individuals 'identify' with the culture industry, for there is nothing for them to identify with. 'Identification' involves a fundamental

gesture of *internalization*, i.e. integration into the constellation of internal perceptions that are then projected into the world in the form of a 'self'. The culture industry keeps its coercive forces and capacities hidden from those subject to them, so that the idearepresentations of the drives that have been fixed to the production process never enter into the consciousness of the individual – they remain unconscious. Individuals do in fact model their individuality on the culture industry, which is to say that they do nothing to *assert* their individuality against prevailing trends or otherwise cultivate an individual 'style' in the modernist sense. But this has more to do with the repression of the drives than it does with any sort of modification of them through identification – hence the difference between 'suppression' and 'sublimation' mentioned above.

The consequence of the culture industry's (re)production of the individual for exchange is that all individuals reappear as 'little Hitlers', not-yet-fascists who lack the ego-strength to realize their individuality against the homogenizing effects of late capitalism. As a consequence, there is no longer the possibility of recalling the social character of past epochs in order to pit the collective energies of individuals against the form of the production process, as Erich Fromm had hoped to do. All individuals are fully integrated into the relations of production in such a way that any and all resistance will *itself* have to have an individual form; there is no subject of resistance immanent to the relations of late capitalist production, no social position or perspective from which to contradict 'the course of the world, which continues to hold a pistol to the heads of human beings' (Adorno, 1992: 80). Each individual is left in a state of atomized isolation and with feelings of 'coldness' toward all other individuals – it ceases to be possible, in other words, to *feel* the presence of others, to desire them or be desired independent of the homogenizing mediation of the culture industry. The consequence is the authoritarian personality.

## CONCLUSION

The concept of the authoritarian personality, and especially its deployment as a frame for empirical social research by the Berkeley Research Team, directly inspired hundreds of similar studies over the next 50 years. As Joel Meloen points out, more than 2,000 studies were published on the problem of the authoritarian personality, and especially the F-scale, between 1950 and 1990 (Meloen, 1991: 119–27). But the larger insistence on the relevance of the libido theory that marked the sometimes controversial history of the concept was also echoed in a number of different social and philosophical theories through the latter half of the twentieth century. For instance, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1983) returns to the problem of how individuals libidinally invest in their own domination, even if their conception of the libido differed substantially from that of Adorno and Horkheimer (there are, however, several fascinating parallels at the level of their conception of partial objects). Similarly, the *Theory of Bloom*, a text published by several of Giorgio Agamben's students writing for the journal *Tiqun* in France, draws heavily on the critique of separation in terms of libido. But perhaps the most faithful inheritor of the larger framework within which the concept of the authoritarian personality took shape is Slavoj Žižek. He insists throughout his work on the libidinal nature of racism and fascist social relations and especially on the way in which racialized others serve as a means for the displacement and condensation of class contradiction (Žižek, 2009). But Žižek's work rarely if ever references the Frankfurt School's research directly. With regard to theoretical developments that reference the Frankfurt School directly, readers should consult Jessica Benjamin's work on the 'end of internalization' and the consequences of the 'fatherless society' for feminism (see Benjamin, 1977 and 1978).

To speak briefly to other modes of influence, the study also provided an important counterpoint to those critiques of fascism and totalitarianism that sought to oppose them to liberalism, such as Hannah Arendt or Claude Lefort. Adorno and Horkheimer in particular were firm in their conviction that the greatest danger facing humanity 'after Auschwitz' (Adorno, 1973: 362) was not the traces of overt fascism left over at the end of World War II, but rather the fascistic or manipulative tendencies toward authoritarian behavior in liberal democracy itself. Short of a revolutionary reorganization of capitalist relations of production and liberal democratic law and culture, nothing could ensure that the production of authoritarian personalities would not continue uninterrupted beneath the veneer of democracy. This more than anything, Adorno in particular contended, was the danger to be taken seriously when viewing the world from the vantage point of the results of the Frankfurt School's research – a concern that some scholars have also taken up in the form of 'left wing authoritarianism' (see Meloen, 1991).

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# Antisemitism and the Critique of Capitalism

Lars Fischer

It would be impossible to overstate how central a role the conceptualization of antisemitism played in the evolution of the Frankfurt School's critical theory. The latter is inseparable from, and incomprehensible without, the former. It is all the more remarkable that the reception of the Frankfurt School's grappling with antisemitism did not begin in earnest until the late 1970s.

Eva-Maria Ziege has shown in her compelling account of the intellectual development of the Frankfurt School (Institute of Social Research) in exile, that the core group around Horkheimer and Adorno by no means abandoned or even attenuated its fundamental Marxist orientation, though it did take an esoteric turn.<sup>1</sup> The conscious elimination of conventional Marxist terminology from the original, privately circulated version of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* prior to its publication in 1947<sup>2</sup> reflects this esoteric turn yet does not indicate that Horkheimer and Adorno abandoned the fundamental critique of capitalism. As Moishe Postone and

Barbara Brick have pointed out, 'the frequently described shift of critical theory from the analysis of political economy to a critique of instrumental reason does not ... signify that the theorists of the Frankfurt School abandoned the former in favour of the latter. Rather, that shift was based on a particular conception of political economy' (on which more in a moment).<sup>3</sup>

It was initially Adorno who alerted his colleagues to the crucial heuristic significance of antisemitism. 'I am gradually finding, not least under the influence of the latest news from Germany', Adorno wrote to Horkheimer on 5 August 1940 (roughly a year before the Nazi regime decided to go ahead with the genocide),

that I just cannot stop thinking about the fate of the Jews. It often seems to me that everything we were accustomed to seeing in terms of the proletariat has been concentrated today with horrendous force upon the Jews. No matter what happens to the [research] project, I ask myself whether we should not say what we want to say

in connection with the Jews, who now represent the counterpoint to the concentration of power.<sup>4</sup>

In the proposal for the research project he mentioned in the letter, Adorno had written that, 'if it is true that one has to understand National Socialism to understand antisemitism, then it is equally true that one has to understand antisemitism to understand National Socialism'.<sup>5</sup>

This was an obvious reference to Horkheimer's 'The Jews and Europe' of 1939, which began with the words: 'Whoever wants to explain antisemitism must speak of National Socialism'.<sup>6</sup> Yet Adorno's reading contrasted sharply with Franz Neumann's contention that 'one can offer an account of National Socialism without attributing a central role to the Jewish problem'. Neumann took it for granted that Adorno himself did not believe otherwise and had suggested so in the proposal merely for tactical reasons. Neumann insisted that antisemitism had 'receded as a central ideological tenet' of National Socialism. Even when writing grant proposals, Neumann admonished Adorno (and, by extension, Horkheimer), 'one should not give up one's theoretical position entirely'.<sup>7</sup>

This disagreement on the significance and meaning of antisemitism can be mapped neatly onto the controversy between Neumann, Gurland and Kirchheimer, on the one hand, and Pollock, Horkheimer and Adorno, on the other, regarding their respective characterizations of contemporaneous capitalism.<sup>8</sup> Confronted with a massive surge in economic centralization, state intervention, social regimentation, populism and political authoritarianism in the interwar period, Pollock argued that capitalism had entered into a new phase, that of state capitalism, in which the market had effectively been eliminated and overall control had reverted to the political sphere (now organized in the form of rackets). While Neumann, Gurland and Kirchheimer continued to insist on the primacy of economic factors in understanding the capitalist order,

Pollock argued for the primacy of the political, and Horkheimer and Adorno adopted his point of view. Horkheimer and Adorno subsequently placed considerable emphasis on the demise of the sphere of circulation as one of the elements facilitating antisemitism not just because they were all too familiar with the conventional association of the Jews with the sphere of circulation but primarily because the elimination of the market played a central role in Pollock's understanding of state socialism. Hence, as Ziege has pointed out, when Horkheimer and Adorno dedicated *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to Pollock, they were acknowledging not only a profound debt of friendship and collegiality but a fundamental intellectual debt too.<sup>9</sup>

Since state capitalism, according to Pollock's understanding, existed both in democratic and totalitarian forms, much of the critique formulated by Horkheimer and Adorno with a focus on National Socialism – and, by extension, most of what they had to say about contemporaneous antisemitism – was in fact meant as a critique of capitalism in general. Taking this background into account, it is evident that the Frankfurt School's two key programmatic texts on antisemitism – Horkheimer's 'The Jews and Europe' of 1939 and the 'Elements of Antisemitism' that conclude *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – by no means develop radically opposed perspectives, as has frequently been suggested. Rather, 'The Jews and Europe', for all its flaws and infelicities, was a stepping stone towards the rather more multifaceted and complex stance developed in the 'Elements of Antisemitism', and a number of thoughts first formulated in 'The Jews and Europe' recur in the 'Elements'. To be sure, Adorno's insistence that henceforth 'what we want to say' could best be said 'in connection with the Jews' rather than 'in terms of the proletariat' does signify a particular acuity and prescience *vis-à-vis* the threat faced by European Jewry, and would have made little sense had it not been for that threat. I would argue, though – and I should state in the interest of

full disclosure that I have changed my mind on this – that Adorno's plea did not amount to a radical sea change. After all, he wanted to say 'what we want to say', and not something fundamentally new, 'in connection with the Jews'.

While it is true that in their account of the evolution and dynamics of antisemitism in the 'Elements of Antisemitism' (and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a whole) Horkheimer and Adorno drew on explanatory factors rooted deeply in the history of human cultural and psychic history, their account was neither ahistorical nor did they conceive of antisemitism – or instrumental reason – as unchanging transhistorical phenomena. There may be much to criticize about the ways in which they mediated between long-term continuities and the specificity of individual historical contexts, but they were clearly aware of the need to do so and sought to meet this challenge. This point bears emphasizing since any critique of capitalism must obviously be based on factors specific to capitalism and to capitalism only. However, it need by no means be based *only* on factors specific to capitalism either. As Postone and Brick have pointed out, Pollock, and Adorno and Horkheimer with him, seem to have paid insufficient attention to the sphere of production (rather than that of circulation) and consequently treated labour as a transhistorical category. Yet far from this signalling a departure from the Marxist critique of capitalism, they were, in so doing, in fact hostage to 'a traditional understanding of Marx's critique of political economy'.<sup>10</sup>

Horkheimer and Adorno's reasoning in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, then, was by no means ahistorical or naively transhistorical. Indeed, one of the great strengths of the account of antisemitism they offered in the 'Elements of Antisemitism' lies in the fact that they viewed its historical evolution and the crystallization of various explanatory factors as an essentially cumulative process. Rather than assuming that various historical forms of anti-Jewish sentiment or practice

had simply been superseded and displaced, or that diverse explanatory factors were mutually exclusive, Horkheimer and Adorno treated them all as having been transcended in the Hegelian sense of *aufgehoben*. To be sure, earlier forms of enmity towards the Jews were not simply perpetuated, they were transformed in the process and their significance and meaning could be dramatically altered as the constellations within which they continued to function changed. However, neither did the loudest form of antisemitism on the market at any given point in time simply supersede all earlier or other forms of anti-Judaism and anti-Jewish sentiment. This dialectical approach to dis/continuities in the evolution of (modern) antisemitism is also well suited to dispelling some of the false dichotomies that currently pervade the debate about the origins and dynamics of contemporary Muslim antisemitism.<sup>11</sup>

At the heart of the Frankfurt School's direct grappling with antisemitism were four texts/projects. These are:

- 1 Horkheimer's article, 'The Jews and Europe', written on the eve of the Second World War, amended slightly to reflect the outbreak of war, and published in the issue of the Institute's own journal, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, for 1939/40;
- 2 The unpublished, four-volume Labor Study ('Antisemitism among American Labor'), based on a major empirical research project undertaken by the Institute with funding from the Jewish Labor Committee in 1944/45;
- 3 The final section of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 'Elements of Antisemitism';
- 4 *The Authoritarian Personality*, one of the *Studies in Prejudice*, published in 1950 and based on a major empirical research project undertaken under the auspices of the Institute that was funded by the American Jewish Committee.

The evolution and interrelatedness of these texts and projects has been expertly reconstructed by Ziege and Jacobs.<sup>12</sup> I will focus primarily on the two more programmatic texts: 'The Jews and Europe' and 'Elements of Antisemitism'.



## 'THE JEWS AND EUROPE'

Horkheimer consciously modelled 'The Jews and Europe' on Karl Marx's 'On the Jewish Question'. Marx's 'On the Jewish Question' was written in two parts. In the much more extensive first part, Marx outlined his understanding of modern society without any meaningful reference to the Jews on whom he focused only in the short second part. 'The Jews and Europe' comprises three sections. The Jews do not feature in the first two sections (making up two thirds of the text), in which Horkheimer presents National Socialism as a totalitarian form of state capitalism. Only in the final section of the text did he come to discuss the situation of the Jews. Clearly, Horkheimer was emulating Marx's attempt to present the question of what the status of Jews should be in society as one integral to the constitution of society as a whole. Gershom Scholem's reaction to 'The Jews and Europe' indicates that this did not go unnoticed. 'It is not enough to take up Marx's essay "On the Jewish Question" (which was already very weak and lopsided a century ago) once again in today's words', he wrote, commenting explicitly on Horkheimer's essay, to Adorno on 15 April 1940.<sup>13</sup>

Readers not familiar with the text can easily assess the bare bones of Horkheimer's line of argument by turning to the abstract published in English with the article.<sup>14</sup> Given that the first two sections focus on a general analysis of National Socialism, most readers are likely to be rather surprised when they arrive at the third section, which begins with the words: 'That is how it is with the Jews' (unless, of course, they are familiar with Marx's 'On the Jewish Question', in which case they will recognize the logic).<sup>15</sup> The Jews who did then appear in the third part of Horkheimer's essay were Jews too desperate or deluded to comprehend that their current ostracization was the logical consequence of the same fundamental rationality that had previously facilitated their emancipation. Just as their emancipation had resulted not from

abstract principles or good will but from the restructuring of society as a whole dictated by the economic necessities of emerging capitalism, so it was the current transformation from liberal to state capitalism that rendered them obsolete and thus made them an ideal scapegoat. As Gerhard Scheit has pointed out, the way in which Horkheimer lays into 'the Jews' in this section is deeply disconcerting. On the other hand, insofar as Horkheimer's critique reflected his deep desperation over the liberal politics of appeasement to which significant numbers of Central and Western European Jews had subscribed, Horkheimer's remarks are not as outlandish or misguided as they may seem to contemporary readers.<sup>16</sup> Where Horkheimer was definitely wide of the mark was in his inference that antisemitism was a feature of fascism on the rise that would become obsolete once it was firmly established. He argued that its purpose was propagandistic: it served to demonstrate that the fascists meant business. Now that National Socialism was secure in Germany, its antisemitism played principally to populations susceptible to fascism in other countries.

'The elimination of anti-Semitism is identical with the struggle against the authoritarian state', Horkheimer concluded. Having appropriated Marx's logic in 'On the Jewish Question' that one needed to talk about society as a whole if one wanted to talk about antisemitism (or the position of Jews in society more generally), what was still missing was the insistence on its inversion.<sup>17</sup> That Horkheimer saw the subsequent development in exactly these terms is evident from a draft of the letter he eventually sent to Harold Laski in March 1941. It contains what is probably the most widely quoted formulation by Horkheimer on this matter: 'As true as it is that one can understand Antisemitism only from our society, as true it appears to me to become that by now society itself can be properly understood only through Antisemitism'.<sup>18</sup> The sentence immediately preceding this statement has drawn less

attention. 'It appears to me as if the old instruments would no longer suffice', Horkheimer wrote, 'not even that treaty [treatise] "Zur Judenfrage"''.<sup>19</sup>

### 'ELEMENTS OF ANTISEMITISM'

The final section of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,<sup>20</sup> 'Elements of Antisemitism', comprises seven theses, of which six already formed part of the privately circulated version of 1944. Prior to the publication of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in 1947, Horkheimer and Adorno added a seventh thesis.<sup>21</sup> In the preface, Horkheimer and Adorno acknowledged that they had written the first three theses 'with Leo Löwenthal'.<sup>22</sup>

*Thesis One.* The core contention of the first thesis is easily identified: antisemitism is not an aberration from, but an integral outgrowth of, the existing social order. 'The Jews', Horkheimer and Adorno wrote, 'are today the group that, in practice and in theory, draws to itself the annihilatory urge that the wrong social order brings forth' (197). While the fascist viewpoint was predicated on the assumption that humanity's future depended on the annihilation of all Jews, its liberal counterpart was based on the claim that a united, unitary humanity already existed, in which distinct Jewish features were at best a throwback, soon to be ironed out by assimilation. Consequently, the latter amounted to an affirmation of the status quo and those who propagated it committed what, from the viewpoint of critical theory, was probably the foremost sin, that of 'invoking the finite as infinite, lies as truth' (46). The fascist contention that the fate of the Jews was central to the future of humanity was true in the sense that the fascists had made it true. The liberal claim was true in the sense that social formations were indeed becoming increasingly homogeneous. For while the Jews had scrambled to conform to the standards of liberal bourgeois society by exercising a

high measure of enlightened self control and shaking off the embarrassing traces of their earlier discrimination, the bourgeois order had regressed into the ethnic and racializing forms of community that were now in the ascendancy. Race, Horkheimer and Adorno insisted, was no authentic, natural category but signified a reductionist notion of nature as a solely oppressive force and an obstinate insistence that the particularisms that prevailed under the existing order were in fact universalisms. Consequently, 'the liberal Jews now find themselves at the receiving end of the social harmony to which they aspired', albeit 'in the form of the *Volksgemeinschaft*', Horkheimer and Adorno noted acerbically (199). The bourgeois Jews' fundamental misunderstanding had been the assumption that antisemitism was an aberration from the existing order, when in fact it was its logical outgrowth. Yet, 'the persecution of the Jews, like persecution in general, is inseparable from that social order' (199).

*Thesis Two.* In the second thesis, Horkheimer and Adorno took recourse to Freud's *Culture and Its Discontents* as an interpretative device and portrayed antisemitism as a means consciously deployed by the powers that be to channel discontent in a way that did not endanger the existing order. The attractiveness of antisemitism as a popular movement, they argued, lay in the fact that, for its adherents, it was a luxury. To be sure, there had been some pretense that the expropriation of the Jews could benefit the non-Jewish population materially, but nobody genuinely believed this. The actual benefit derived from antisemitism lay in the fact that it signalled an affirmation of the individuals' rage and destructive urge by the collective. Antisemitism was a luxury because it created a realm in which, for once, individuals were not expected to subordinate their sentiments and desires to considerations of purpose and utility. To the many, it was attractive not although but, rather, precisely because it was ultimately ground- and senseless.

At root, then, antisemitism was an unconscious rebellion against the self-denial, sublimation and rationality the process of civilization had imposed upon humankind. Ultimately, those who blindly lashed out against the Jews were as oblivious to their true motives as were their (Jewish) victims. It is for this reason that antisemitism could serve the powers that be. They deployed antisemitism 'as a distraction, a cheap means of corruption and a terrorist warning'. The 'respectable rackets' (i.e., democratic state capitalism) nurtured it, the 'disrespectable' ones (i.e., fascist state capitalism) practised it (200). Antisemitism was an intrinsic trait of civilization, and one of its rituals. Indeed, contrary to the long-standing libel that Jews engaged in ritual murder, it was the pogroms that were the true ritual murders.

The various political and economic arguments articulated by antisemites were no more than half-hearted rationalizations. Given that neither they nor their victims actually understood their motives, there could be no such thing as genuine antisemitism (in the sense of a substantiated conviction).<sup>23</sup> Hence, Horkheimer and Adorno reasoned rather troublingly, not only the victim groups but also the roles of murderer and victim were, in principle, interchangeable. All that was required for a group to be suitable as a victim group was that it stood out in some way and that it was defenceless. 'The adults for whom baying for Jewish blood has become second nature are just as clueless' as to their reasons for doing so 'as is the youth expected to spill it' (200–1). The powers that be, however, who commissioned the antisemitism and who did know why, 'neither hate the Jews nor do they love their followers' (201). The latter, whose pursuit of their economic and sexual interests was curtailed by the ruling order, could at least give free rein to their hatred (of the Jews). Given that this hatred was in fact displaced, it obviously could never soothe the itch that was actually making them act out and was therefore potentially boundless.

In what sense did the Jews stand out as a defenceless group? Where Jewish emancipation had occurred, the Jews were easily identifiable as the beneficiaries of political liberalism. Yet for the majority of the population, the liberal promise of universal human rights, of happiness even for those who held no power, remained an unattainable ideal and it struck them as a lie and a mockery. Forced to forego the benefits of the liberal promise themselves, they turned on those who did benefit from it. Indeed, wherever they saw a flicker of any of the hopes, desires and urges they were forced to suppress in themselves, they increasingly felt the need to annihilate that flicker.

*Thesis Three.* In the third thesis, Horkheimer and Adorno discussed the issue of the Jews' association with the sphere of circulation and its relevance in explaining (bourgeois) antisemitism. Their line of argument was remarkably close to that of Karl Marx in the second part of 'Zur Judenfrage'. The materialism and hunger for profit of which the Jews were being accused was in fact an integral trait of society as a whole, whose members sought to dissociate themselves from this trait by pointing to the Jews as the supposedly sole representatives of qualities that had in fact come to dominate society in its entirety.

This was not just a propaganda trick. Rather, the Jews had genuinely been placed in a position that made them the visible representatives of capitalist exploitation. Workers were directly confronted with their exploitation not when they received their wages but when they found out how little they could get for those wages; not, in other words, in their dealings with their employers, but when they came face to face with the shop keepers. It was they who acted as 'the bailiff for the system as a whole and took on the odium' of capitalism *pars pro toto* (204). To be sure, Jews were never exclusively responsible for the sphere of circulation, but they had been 'trapped in it for too long for their character not to reflect the hatred they have always had to bear' (204).<sup>24</sup>

Thus far, Horkheimer and Adorno stayed within the frame of reference outlined in the previous thesis. The notion that traces of the wounds inflicted upon the Jews in the past would provoke further aggression from the descendants of the perpetrators is entirely plausible. Yet their line of argument then began to stray disconcertingly towards an actual (rather than an ascribed or projected) identification of the Jews with the sphere of circulation. 'The Jews were colonizers of progress', they contended, 'they carried capitalist forms of existence from country to country and attracted the hatred of those who had to bear the cost of progress. Due to the economic progress that is now their undoing, the Jews have always been a thorn in the side of the artisans and peasants whose status capitalism hollowed out' (204). In truth, they had always continued to be court Jews, even in the age of emancipation, protected by the powers that be only when it served their purposes. The legal equality they had supposedly gained was never more than a privilege that could be, and now was being, revoked again. The transformation to state capitalism rendered the sphere of circulation obsolete, hence the Jews now fell prey to the very progress whose pioneers they had been for so long.

Horkheimer and Adorno did not succeed in formulating this thesis in a genuinely coherent manner. In this respect too, the parallels to 'Zur Judenfrage' are apparent. Like Marx, they blur the line between a critique of the way in which certain traits are commonly identified as supposedly Jewish and participation in that very practice, and they too seem to be too invested in the latter to leave the reader feeling entirely comfortable. By way of a rationalization one might perhaps suggest that these difficulties arose because Horkheimer and Adorno failed to draw a clear enough distinction between historical reasons that explain why the Jews were considered a suitable foil for antisemitic projections, on the one hand, and the contemporary content of those projections, on the other. Yet this rationalization alone cannot

fully explain away Horkheimer and Adorno's relapse behind their own previously articulated insights into the projective nature of antisemitism.

*Thesis Four.* In the fourth thesis, Horkheimer and Adorno turned to the dis/continuities between Christian anti-Judaism and modern antisemitism, a contentious issue among scholars of antisemitism to this day.<sup>25</sup> Given their understanding of the historical evolution of antisemitism as a cumulative process, they were able to offer a more differentiated analysis of this issue than most of their peers – and, indeed, than much of the relevant scholarship since. They proceeded in two steps, explaining first why religious tradition, perhaps counter-intuitively, was still relevant, and then identifying what they considered the principal cause of the anti-Jewish animus within that tradition.

As they pointed out, organized political antisemitism, for the most part, had expressly sought to shift the emphasis away from the religious to national and racial distinctions between Jews and non-Jews. This, they argued, simply reflected the decreasing influence of religion in society: 'Criticizing the Jews for being obdurate nonbelievers no longer sets the masses in motion', they wrote (205). It is noteworthy, then, that Horkheimer and Adorno's reasoning regarding the continued influence of Christian anti-Judaism was developed, not in opposition to, but against the backdrop of the assumptions about secularization widely accepted until the 1980s. Horkheimer and Adorno suggested that the argument needed to be turned from its head onto its feet. The antisemitic ideologues protested too much, indicating just how deeply religious tradition was in fact still ingrained in their ideology. Far from simply being left behind, religion had been transformed into society's 'cultural heritage', and the 'alliance between enlightenment and power'; in other words, its turn from a dialectical and critical to a functional and affirmative force made society oblivious to the true roots of this cultural heritage (206). The yearning and discipleship previously realized in the religious

sphere now found its outlet in the political sphere and directly benefited fascism, not only by helping to create its blindly obedient followers but also insofar as the only content of Christianity that survived this transformation was rabid hatred of the nonbelievers.

Horkheimer and Adorno then moved on to draw the following distinction between Biblical Judaism and Christianity. Understood as a deity capable of subordinating nature, the Jewish god was necessarily abstract and distant. His ineffable power and magnificence was comforting and frightening in equal measure, and the contrast between humankind and god remained absolute, much as god's covenant with the people of Israel and the messianic promise served to mitigate it. Jews, individually and collectively, were expected to lead their lives in accordance with the religious laws but insofar as the Jewish god was both omnipotent and just, the issue of salvation clearly lay exclusively in god's hands and, as such, remained uncertain.

Christianity, by contrast, with its trope of god becoming man in Jesus Christ, had diminished the distinction between god and humankind, suggesting that his majesty was dwarfed by his love for humankind, thus leading to idolatry as the boundaries between the status quo in this world and the promised world to come became blurred. Consequently, mainstream Christianity had come to promise salvation in the world to come to those who followed its prescriptions in this life without actually being able to vouch for the fact that the promise would be kept. Only the 'paradox Christians ... from Pascal to Lessing and Kierkegaard to Barth' had faced up to this lack of certitude and placed it at the heart of their theology. This had made them both radical and tolerant (209). Yet they were the exception. The rule was that Christians therefore depended on the temporal destitution of those who denied that human beings could foresee their salvation with certainty – i.e., the Jews – to reassure themselves of that very certainty.<sup>26</sup> 'The adherents of the father religion', Horkheimer and Adorno wrote, 'are

hated by those of the son as those who know better' (209). Here, as in a number of other instances, far from taking recourse to the indiscriminate obsession with otherness as such that has become characteristic of post-modern thought, Horkheimer and Adorno were at pains to identify specific motives underlying antisemitism.<sup>27</sup>

*Thesis Five.* In the fifth thesis, Horkheimer and Adorno conceptualized antisemitism as an idiosyncrasy, not in the general sense of an individual trait but in the medical sense of an unusual physical response to a stimulus, essentially like an allergy.<sup>28</sup> The 'emancipation of society from antisemitism' – clearly an allusion to Marx's call for society's emancipation from (its) Jewishness, i.e., those qualities commonly attributed to the Jews that were in fact characteristics of society in general – depended on the ability to reflect critically on the actual causes of this spontaneous negative reaction to Jews (209).

Horkheimer and Adorno argued that this idiosyncrasy was ultimately rooted in the repression of primeval forms of mimesis. By this they meant the sort of spontaneous physical response to danger (not being able to move, the hairs on the back of one's neck standing on end etc.) of which an individual was not fully in command. Originally, the most effective form of protection consisted in trying to become invisible to any potential predator by blending into – i.e., by becoming like – one's immediate environment. Yet the process of civilization had required humankind to develop and internalize such a degree of rational self-control that spontaneous mimesis was now considered anathema. For this very reason, however, it had also become an object of repressed desire.

Consequently, in those who were desperately trying to conform and felt all others should do so too, any indication of deviation from the generally expected levels of sensible self control, any sentiments or forms of behaviour that did not conform entirely to the utilitarian rationality of the existing order, aroused both repulsion and envy, both

the desire to imitate and to stamp them out. Those, in other words, who failed to conform, were seen as taking liberties, as demanding privileges, as undermining the existing order. They were in fact aggressors against all those who were more or less managing to conform, and the latter could not but defend themselves against the transgressors. Consequently, any group whose members already bore the traces of violence directed against them in the past, and who therefore could not 'pass', inevitably attracted new violence. 'The cry of pain of the victim who first called violence by its name, indeed, the mere word that references the victim: Frenchman, negro, Jew, lets them intentionally develop the desperation of the persecuted who have to lash out.... The sheer existence of the other is the outrage' (213).

The emotive energy that political antisemitism harnessed was an idiosyncrasy of this kind. The flipside of the antisemites' hatred of the Jews was their persistent desire to imitate them and delve deeply into the Jews' various alleged vices and depraved traits, which served not only to denounce the Jews but also facilitated the antisemites' titillation by allowing them to engage (alleged) forms of human behaviour that were otherwise taboo. In this sense too, antisemitism offered a licence to celebrate what was otherwise strictly prohibited.

As Horkheimer and Adorno saw it, the Jews, rather than repressing mimesis, had transcended it through their ritual observance, rendering them the ideal foil for the return of the repressed in Christian culture, which, as we saw, depended on the Jews for its self-affirmation anyway. Horkheimer and Adorno emphasized that it had become quite immaterial whether Jews actually still bore the traits associated with them. 'Because they invented the concept of kashrut, they are persecuted as pigs' (216). There is an obvious parallel here to Sartre's reasoning, in the first part of his *Anti-Semite and Jew* (written after the liberation of Majdanek and first published in December 1945) that, 'if the Jew did not exist, the anti-Semite would invent him'.<sup>29</sup>

*Thesis Six.* This affinity becomes all the more pronounced in the sixth and originally final thesis, which is in many ways the most developed. Here Horkheimer and Adorno conceptualized antisemitism as a form of pathic projection, which, they suggested, was the exact opposite of original mimesis. Whereas the latter led the individual to become like their environment, pathic projection recreated the environment wholly in the projecting individual's image.

Horkheimer and Adorno emphasized that all perception of reality was ultimately projection. Following Kant, they argued that all perception is inherently already interpretation, in other words, our perceptions of the reality we encounter are fundamentally shaped by our attempt to make sense of that reality. 'Between the actual object and the indubitable sense datum, between inner and outer, there is a gaping chasm, which the subject must bridge at its own peril. To reflect the thing as it is, the subject must give back to it more than it receives from it' (218). Even so, this is not one-way traffic because the reality of which we seek to make sense also conditions the criteria we apply in interpreting it. 'From the traces the thing leaves behind in its senses the subject recreates its external world, the unity of the thing in its manifold properties and states; and in so doing, it retroactively constitutes its self by learning to impart synthetic unity not only to the external impressions but also to the internal ones, as the latter gradually separate themselves from the former. The identical ego is the most recent constant product of projection' (218–19). Consequently, 'the possibility of reconciliation lies neither in certainty untroubled by thought, nor in a pre-conceptual unity of perception and object, but in reflection upon the antithesis between them. The antithesis transpires within the subject, which has the external world within its own consciousness and yet recognizes it as other. Hence, that reflection, the life of reason, takes place as conscious projection' (219).

The Problem, then, was not projection as such but non-reflective projection. If 'the subject cannot return to the object what it has received from it, it becomes not richer but poorer. It ceases to reflect in both directions: since it no longer reflects the object, it no longer reflects on itself, and thus loses the ability to differentiate.... It runs over and atrophies at the same time. It invests the external world', which is reduced to 'a mere occasion for its delusion ... boundlessly with that which is within' the subject itself. 'The compulsively projecting self ... creates everybody in [its] own image' (219, 220, 222), but it 'can project nothing except its own unhappiness', and its lack of reflection prevents it from identifying the immediate source of that unhappiness even though it in fact resides within the self (222).

Horkheimer and Adorno explicitly sought to underpin their concept of pathic projection with specific psychoanalytic tropes. This attempt seems rather hapless, though, given that it abounds in troubling ways with women who 'adore the unwavering paranoid man' (221), homosexuality as a means of 'assimilating one's conscious emotional life to that of a small girl', 'repressing Sodomites' (222), and 'pent up homosexual aggression' (223).<sup>30</sup> This is not to suggest that repressed homosexuality has no role to play in the conceptualization of antisemitism. Current Muslim antisemitism makes very clear that it does. Even so, the way in which Horkheimer and Adorno try to make sense of this nexus is rather disturbing.

More helpful and topical, perhaps, are their musings about the attractiveness of pathic projection to what they called the 'half-educated', a category they distinguished clearly from the uneducated. The half-educated, they explained, hypostatized their partial knowledge as complete knowledge in a desperate and violent attempt to give meaning to a world that made their existence meaningless, and they railed against intellectual pursuits and experiences from which they were excluded, laying society's

responsibility for their exclusion at the feet not of society but of those who were able to participate. Horkheimer and Adorno went on to complain about the way in which education was increasingly being conceptualized in ever more utilitarian terms, thus becoming antagonistic to emancipation, a complaint that would seem to be more topical than ever and yet, given its apparent timelessness, might also point us to the equally timeless vagaries of cultural pessimism.

Against this backdrop, they also began to touch on a development they would later return to in greater detail in the seventh thesis, namely, the way in which the economic transformation to state capitalism impacted on the psyche of those living in it. As more and more economic and social processes became increasingly automated, they argued, individuals no longer needed to make decisions, negotiate inner turmoil and develop a conscience in order to function efficiently.

Horkheimer and Adorno's discussion of pathic projection, as they themselves emphasized, was largely generic. Taking the thesis in isolation, the question thus remained why pathic projection should be directed specifically against the Jews. Given that this was the sixth thesis, one could make the perfectly reasonable argument that this particular issue had been covered several times already and did not need to be discussed again. Yet Horkheimer and Adorno did return to it, drawing attention once again to the Jews' significance in the sphere of circulation. Under the circumstances they had described, they wrote, it came down to 'chance, steered by the party' on to whom 'the desperate desire for self-preservation projects the responsibility for the terror it experiences'. 'Regardless of what the Jews may actually be like, their image, as something obsolete, bears the traits that totalitarian domination cannot but consider its mortal enemy: happiness without power, reward without work, a homeland without frontiers, religion without myth'. Since these traits were in fact highly desirable but could not be affirmed, there remained

only one way of attaining them: 'even hatred leads to union with the object – in destruction' (229).

*Thesis Seven.* The seventh thesis focused principally on what Horkheimer and Adorno called 'ticket mentality', i.e., the way in which, as they saw it, whole populations now increasingly subscribed to entire ideological package deals without ever individually going through the process of forming judgements and developing the convictions integral to the respective package deal. They begun this thesis with the somewhat counter-intuitive claim that 'there are no longer any antisemites' (230). By this they meant not that antisemitism had disappeared but that it had ceased to be an ideology in its own right and instead had become one plank in the fascist package deal. In other words, there were no longer any antisemites in the sense that those who now subscribed to antisemitism did so automatically because it was part of the package deal they had chosen; their antisemitism was in no way based on any sort of involvement with actual Jews or individual thought processes. 'Alongside the crushing of the trades unions and the crusade against Bolshevism', they wrote, anyone inclined to 'give fascism a chance also subscribes to a reckoning with the Jews' (231).

Yet not only the ticket mentality among fascists, any form of ticket mentality – also among the supporters of progressive causes – was harmful, Horkheimer and Adorno insisted. To their mind, the automation of ideological orientations was part and parcel of the transformation to state capitalism (and the culture industry that emerged with it). As industrial production became serial and dependent on the persistently identical reproduction of one particular stereotype, as it were, so did people's attempts to make sense of the world. Where previously some level of individuation had been necessary for both workers and entrepreneurs to play their respective roles, in the age of universal planning and automation, the process by which individuals had previously developed

a personal conscience and sense of responsibility appeared simply as an obstacle to efficiency and a waste of time. All that was now required was that individuals readily slotted into the appropriate ideological package deal and subscribed to the judgements it implied without actually engaging in any sort of active judging or choice. They likened Freud's notion of the human psyche with its complex interaction between the conscious and the unconscious, between id, ego and superego, to the private enterprises characteristic of liberal capitalism prior to its recent transformation. Both were now becoming redundant. Drawing their idea to its logical consequence, Horkheimer and Adorno arrived at the rather paradoxical conclusion that 'ticket mentality does not become antisemitic merely when the ticket is antisemitic, but any form of ticket mentality is antisemitic' (238). Indeed, the specificity of antisemitism was largely lost in this thesis.

As we saw, it had increasingly dawned on Horkheimer and Adorno that it was quite irrelevant whether actual Jews really displayed any of the characteristics the antisemites attributed to them. As they now noted, antisemitism had shown its potential to be just as successful in areas without Jews as it was in areas with dense Jewish settlement. Indeed, the extreme demonization of the Jews by the Nazis had taken place only after they had in fact already become economically obsolete. Yet, with this they returned to the trope that tied antisemitism to attitudes towards the sphere of circulation, which they again proceeded to generalize. 'The administration of totalitarian states that exterminates obsolete sections of the population', they explained, 'is merely the executioner who carries out economic sentences long since passed' (237).<sup>31</sup>

Evidently, then, the Jews were perfectly interchangeable as a target and the hatred directed towards Jews within certain ideological package deals could easily be redirected towards other groups. This very interchangeability, they concluded, offered indubitable



hope that antisemitism would come to an end. Their reasoning at this point seems rather perfunctory and carries little conviction. If I understand it correctly, their line of argument is twofold. As fully automated functioning crowds out all forms of active experience and all encounters with reality, it will also render inaccessible whatever ostensible compensations the existing order may have to offer to those it subjugates. Consequently, as the ticket mentality comes to encompass all walks of life, the groundlessness of its automated reasoning will become so intense, so palpable that anyone who has not lost the ability to think altogether will see truth reflected *ex negativo* in the enormity of its absurdity.

## PERSPECTIVES

The 'Elements of Antisemitism' is a complex, demanding, intentionally fragmentary and genuinely unfinished text. It is also intensely stimulating and richly rewards repeated reading. I have pointed to a number of tensions and ambivalences in the text. It seems highly likely that some of these were unintentional and resulted from the unfinished character of the text. Other tensions, however, Horkheimer and Adorno would surely have considered inevitable. Only if there were a complete identity between concepts and the phenomena they are designed to reflect, would it be possible to come up with a set of theses genuinely capable of neatly combining all conceivable elements of antisemitism in an entirely coherent fashion. Yet Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of instrumental reason hinged precisely on the insistence that concepts and the reality they sought to account for diverged, and that it was in the recognition of this divergence that the potential for subversion resides. Consequently, it is in some ways quite perverse to want to offer a short, apodictic summary of the core assumptions expressed in

the 'Elements of Antisemitism'. So, bridging the 'gaping chasm ... between the actual object and the indubitable sense datum' at my own peril, I would argue that in 'Elements of Antisemitism', tensions and ambivalences in the text notwithstanding, Horkheimer and Adorno established a number of basic criteria for any critical understanding of antisemitism. Among them are (in no particular order) the following closely interrelated assumptions:

- 1 The critical analysis of antisemitism is an indispensable heuristic device for any meaningful critique of capitalism. It therefore has to focus both on the anti-Jewish thrust and the universal implications of antisemitism and cannot be satisfied with an exploration of one to the detriment of the other. The text of 'Elements of Antisemitism' bears witness to the difficulties and tensions this creates.
- 2 Antisemitism is a product of, not an aberration from, the values prevalent in capitalist societies.
- 3 Antisemitism is not primarily a matter of personal attitudes towards Jews but fundamentally a social (and socially mediated) phenomenon.
- 4 Antisemitism is woven into the deep structure of civilization (in the sense in which Freud used the term) and not, for all its manipulative potential, a random impulse that can be summoned at will.
- 5 Antisemitism in any given context needs to be understood as springing from a confluence of long-term continuities and short-term discontinuities; the precise dynamics of that confluence are specific to the individual context.
- 6 Antisemitism is not simply a reflection of a universal and arbitrary desire to engage in othering but, in any given context, draws on specific anti-Jewish as well as other, more generic negative impulses.
- 7 Antisemitism cannot be subsumed as a form of racism. The findings in the section of the Labor Study that compares antisemitism and racism indicate 'a difference in the texture of prejudice'.<sup>32</sup>
- 8 Antisemitism does not reflect actual Jewish/non-Jewish interaction nor even requires the presence of actual Jews.
- 9 The critical analysis of antisemitism depends fundamentally on the ability to distinguish reflective from pathic projection. Epistemology therefore

has a key role to play in the critical conceptualization of antisemitism.

- 10 Antisemites cannot be convinced of the error of their ways by introducing them to actual Jews. The so-called contact hypothesis, in other words, is a fallacy.

The last two points deserve particular attention. Traditional Marxism, to this day, has no epistemological grounding to speak of and its adherents have generally been content with the self-evidently illogical assumption that what one can see must be real. When Lukács – displaying extraordinary genius in reconstructing Marx’s move beyond Hegel without knowing most of the relevant sources that have since come to light – valiantly sought to provide it with one, he was promptly forced to retract it. While it is true that blatant material immiseration can be spotted easily, the fetishes on which the capitalist order hinges would, by definition, not fulfil their functions if they could be spotted with the naked eye. Without putting too fine a point on it, the notion of a direct reflection of reality in human perception would suggest that anybody who only meets nice Jews could never become an antisemite while anybody who meets only unpleasant Jews would be justified in being one; and it would be quite incapable of explaining what happens to people who meet both nice and unpleasant Jews, let alone how people who never meet Jews can be antisemites.

Ziege has suggested that Horkheimer and Adorno’s concept of pathic projection was inspired, not least, by J.F. Brown’s work on the topic.<sup>33</sup> This is an entirely plausible suggestion that underscores her account of the broadening of the Frankfurt School’s horizons in exile and deepens our understanding of Horkheimer and Adorno’s intellectual development in the United States. Even so, they expressly referenced Kant in their discussion of reflective and pathic projection, which is all the more remarkable, given that Kant is subjected to harsh criticism earlier on in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (and elsewhere in their writings). In short, the epistemological

underpinning of the ‘Elements’ is fundamentally rooted in the legacy of German Idealism, which is surely remarkable for a Marxist project.

Reading the ‘Elements’, or Adorno’s contribution to *The Authoritarian Personality*, many readers are likely to be surprised by how strongly many of Horkheimer and Adorno’s observations still resonate, given that these texts were written some 70 years ago. Even so, as they age, it is inevitable that productive appropriations of the texts that view them as more than simply historical will hinge less on their phenomenological observations and more on their conceptual and epistemological underpinnings. Much recent research on the Frankfurt School’s grappling with antisemitism while in exile has focused especially on the intricate nexus between their philosophical reflections, on the one hand, and the major empirical research projects undertaken under their auspices, on the other. This line of inquiry has been immensely rewarding. Ziege’s endeavour, in particular, to establish long-term continuities and discontinuities between their empirical research projects ranging from the final years of the Weimar Republic to the post-war *Group Experiment* back in Germany, understood as a long line of ‘pilot studies’, has added enormous depth to the debate. Yet this perspective also raises a number of new questions that point in the direction of a more thorough exploration of the epistemology of the Frankfurt School’s grappling with antisemitism.

Horkheimer and Adorno’s model of pathic projection also has important implications for possible anti-antisemitic strategies. As Adorno pointed out very clearly in his contribution to the *The Authoritarian Personality*,

There is no simple gap between experience and stereotypy. Stereotypy ... feeds on deep-lying unconscious sources, the distortions which occur are not to be corrected merely by taking a *real* look. Rather, experience itself is predetermined by stereotypy. The persons whose interviews on minority issues have just been discussed share one decisive trait. Even if brought together with

minority group members as different from the stereotype as possible, they will perceive them through the glasses of stereotypy ... Optimism with regard to the hygienic effects of personal contacts should be discarded. One cannot 'correct' stereotypy by experience; he has to reconstitute the capacity for having experiences in order to prevent the growth of ideas which are malignant in the most literal, clinical sense.<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, Adorno suggested, one needs to think very carefully as to how antisemites could be addressed at all in ways that are not ultimately counter-productive. 'As soon as the existence of a "Jewish problem" is admitted', he wrote, 'anti-Semitism has won its first surreptitious victory'.<sup>35</sup> To the extent that current anti-Zionism is, *de facto*, for the most part antisemitic, these are considerations well worth taking seriously in attempts to combat anti-Zionism and the BDS campaign.<sup>36</sup>

Implicitly, the distinction between reflective and pathic projection also underpins Moishe Postone's 'Anti-Semitism and National Socialism', which has been (and continues to be) the foundational text for some of the most productive critical conceptualizations of antisemitism in the tradition of the Frankfurt School since the late 1970s.<sup>37</sup> Postone characterized antisemitism as a fetish based on the assumption that those aspects of capitalism perceived of as being negative and alienating are not innate to capitalism but extraneous to it, and that they represent a contamination of what would otherwise be a wholly benign form of capitalism, a contamination brought about by the Jews. Postone thus built on Horkheimer and Adorno's discussion of the conventional juxtaposition of productive and exploitative capital and fleshed it out, mapping it on to those between perceptions of use- and commodity-value, and between aspects of capitalism experienced as concrete and abstract. Postone interpreted the Shoah as the ultimate rebellion against the tyranny of abstraction and commodity-value. Unmasked as the personification of this tyranny, the Jews were first dispossessed of anything of use-value – from

their possessions to their hair – and then, having been reduced to 'shadows, ciphers, numbered abstractions', annihilated.<sup>38</sup> One might add that many had their gold teeth removed even after that.

Another ultimately epistemological issue raised by Postone and Brick concerns the locus of critique within Horkheimer and Adorno's reckoning with state capitalism and instrumental reason. 'The disjunction of concept and reality' that forms the (potential) locus of subversion in Horkheimer and Adorno's conceptualization of post-liberal capitalism, Postone and Brick argue, 'hovers mysteriously above its object'. It fails, in other words, to identify a 'self-generating "non-identity" intrinsic' to capitalism's 'forms of social relations that do not constitute a stable, unitary whole'.<sup>39</sup> Closely related is the problematic of individual responsibility for sentiments characterized as flowing from necessary false consciousness or socially pervasive fetishes.

I suspect that these questions could be approached in a rather more differentiated and productive manner by integrating psychoanalytic concepts more fully into the argument. Critical theory's appropriation of psychoanalysis doubtless played a critical role in facilitating its originality yet, as Ziege, among others, has pointed out,<sup>40</sup> this appropriation was patchy and uneven. We have yet to benefit fully from the promise that lay in the integration of Marxism and psychoanalysis. Presumably, psychoanalytic concepts could play a crucial role in explaining how antisemitism, as a projection, represents a form of displacement that springs from the complex web of social relations in which antisemites see themselves embroiled without being causally connected to actual social relations between Jews and non-Jews.

## Notes

- 1 Eva-Maria Ziege, *Antisemitismus und Gesellschaftstheorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2009), 110, 118 and *passim*.

- 2 See Willem van Reijen and Jan Brausen, 'Das Verschwinden der Klassengeschichte in der "Dialektik der Aufklärung". Ein Kommentar zu den Textvarianten der Buchausgabe von 1947 gegenüber der Erstveröffentlichung von 1944', in Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 5 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1987), 453–7.
- 3 Moishe Postone and Barbara Brick, 'Critical Theory and Political Economy', in Seyla Benhabib, Wolfgang Bonß and John McCole (eds.), *On Max Horkheimer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 215–56, here 245–6.
- 4 Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* vol 2: 1938–1944 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004), 84.
- 5 'Nationalsozialismus und Antisemitismus', in *ibid.*, 539–95, here 541.
- 6 Max Horkheimer, 'Die Juden und Europa', in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 8 (1939/40), 115–36, here 115.
- 7 Franz Neumann, copy of letter to Theodor W. Adorno, 14 August 1940, MHA VI 1a 21–3. See also Jack Jacobs, *The Frankfurt School, Jewish Lives, and Antisemitism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 59.
- 8 See Ziege, *Antisemitismus*, 104–8; Postone and Brick, 'Critical Theory', 215–25.
- 9 Ziege, *Antisemitismus*, 107.
- 10 Postone and Brick, 'Critical Theory', 246.
- 11 On the issue of Muslim Antisemitism in contemporary Europe, see Günther Jikeli, *European Muslim Antisemitism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015). For the broader historical and geographical context, see Mark R. Cohen, 'Islam and the Jews: Myth, Counter-Myth, History', in *Jerusalem Quarterly* 33 (1986), 125–37; Jane S. Gerber, 'Anti-Semitism and the Muslim World', in David Berger (ed.), *History and Hate. The Dimensions of Anti-Semitism* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1986), 73–93; Bernard Lewis, 'The Arab World Discovers Antisemitism', in Sander L. Gilman and Steven T. Katz (eds.), *Anti-Semitism in Times of Crisis* (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 343–52; Christoph Nonn, *Antisemitismus* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2008), 105–12; Norman Stillman, 'Anti-Judaism and Antisemitism in the Arab and Islamic World Prior to 1948', in Albert S. Lindemann and Richard S. Levy (eds.), *Antisemitism. A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 212–21.
- 12 Ziege, *Antisemitismus, passim*; Jacobs, *Frankfurt School*, chapter 2.
- 13 Theodor W. Adorno, Gershom Scholem, *Briefwechsel 1939–1969* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015), 21–2.
- 14 Horkheimer, 'Die Juden und Europa', 136.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 129.
- 16 Gerhard Scheit, 'Horkheimer's "The Jews and Europe" Revisited', in Lars Fischer (ed.), *Dialectic of Enlightenment Turns 70: New Perspectives on Critical Theory and Antisemitism* (forthcoming).
- 17 Adorno, at the time, explicitly expressed his agreement with Horkheimer's text (Horkheimer and Adorno, *Briefwechsel*, vol 2: 57–8).
- 18 Jack Jacobs (*Frankfurt School*, 186, note 142) has pointed to the fact that this passage – widely quoted from Rolf Wiggerhaus, *Die Frankfurter Schule* (Munich: dtv, 1988), 347 – is not in fact contained in the letter eventually sent to Laski on 10 March 1941 (Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17 [Frankfurt: Fischer, 1996], 17–18). I am grateful to Rolf Wiggerhaus for clarifying that the passage in fact comes from a draft (email communications 24 November and 5 December 2016) and to Mathias Jehn of the Horkheimer Archive in Frankfurt, who helped identify the draft and sent me a copy (email communications 28 November and 5 December 2016). In the event, Horkheimer and his colleagues obviously decided not to mention their antisemitism project to Laski after all, given that they were already asking him to comment on another research proposal, 'Cultural Aspects of National Socialism'.
- 19 Max Horkheimer, draft letter to Harold Laski, Universitätsbibliothek der Goethe Universität, Frankfurt am Main, Na 1 Nachlass Max Horkheimer, Nr. 31, S. 65r–67r.
- 20 'Elements of Antisemitism' is in fact followed by roughly 50 pages of notes and drafts but it is the final 'finished' section of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.
- 21 For more details on the text's evolution and authorship, see Gunzelin Schmid Noerr's epilogue in Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 5, 423–52.
- 22 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, 'Dialektik der Aufklärung', in Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 5, 16–238, here 23. Subsequent references to this text will be indicated by page numbers in brackets in the main text.
- 23 This would seem to prefigure their critique of the ticket mentality in the subsequently added seventh thesis.
- 24 Edmund Jephcott, in his translation, has suggested that it was not the Jews but the sphere of circulation that had long been the target of hatred. However, given that the form of the relevant verb is plural [*ertrugen*], it can only refer to the Jews (see Rolf Tiedemann (ed.), Theodor Adorno, *Can One Live after Auschwitz?* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003], 397).
- 25 See Lars Fischer, 'Antisemitism', in Matthew Jafferis (ed.), *Ashgate Research Companion to Imperial Germany* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 143–58, here 143–5.

- 26 There are resonances here of the Augustinian paradigm, i.e., the notion that the survival of the Jews was ordained by god so they could serve as a deterrent, demonstrating what lay in store for those who refused to follow Christ.
- 27 See Gerhard Scheit, *Quälbarer Leib* (Freiburg/Breisgau: ça ira, 2011), 28.
- 28 The term idiosyncrasy does not exist in the German language with the more common meaning it has in English. What Horkheimer and Adorno had in mind is evident from, for example, the following entry in *Brockhaus' Konversations-Lexikon* from 1894: '*Idiosynkrasie* (gr.), a peculiar sensitivity of the organism that hinges not on the strength but the kind of the stimulus. Those affected by experience stimuli differently from those who are healthy. They experience smells that the healthy find repulsive – the smell, say, of burnt feathers or a smouldering wick – as pleasant yet, conversely, find pleasant scents unbearable. Idiosyncrasies affect other senses too (e.g., taste). Some people's deviant behaviour towards certain dishes and beverages also belongs into this context; some people, for instance, regularly break out in hives when they eat strawberries, crayfish or the like' (*Brockhaus' Konversations-Lexikon* vol. 9 [Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1894], p. 512).
- 29 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York: Schocken, 1995), 13.
- 30 On this point, see also Ziege, *Antisemitismus*, 121–2.
- 31 For 'executioner', Horkheimer and Adorno used the antiquated term *Nachrichter* (the more common term would have been *Scharfrichter*). Its first syllable reinforced the sense of a temporal gap between the passing of the sentence and its execution (*nach* = after). At the time, it also had the additional connotation of (military) 'messenger'.
- 32 Universitätsbibliothek der Goethe Universität, Frankfurt am Main, Na 1 Nachlass Max Horkheimer, 679 – 'Antisemitism among American Labor' vol. 2, 496. On this issue see also Lars Fischer, 'A difference in the texture of prejudice'. *Historisch-konzeptionelle Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von Antisemitismus, Rassismus und Gemeinschaft* (Graz: Grazer Universitätsverlag, 2016), 31–40.
- 33 Ziege, *Antisemitismus*, 122–3.
- 34 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Prejudice in the Interview Material', in *idem* et al. (eds.), *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper, 1950), 603–53, here 617.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 620.
- 36 For the background here, see Meir Litvak and Esther Webman, 'Israel and Antisemitism', in Albert S. Lindemann and Richard S. Levy (eds.), *Antisemitism. A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 237–49; Nonn, *Antisemitismus*, 110–12; Joel S. Fishman, 'The BDS Message of Anti-Zionism, Anti-Semitism, and Incitement to Discrimination', in *Israel Studies* 18, 3 (2012), 412–25; Ira M. Sheskin and Ethan Felson, 'Is the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement Tainted by Anti-Semitism?', in *Geographical Review* 106, 2 (2016), 270–5; Derek J. Penslar, 'Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism: A Historical Approach', in *idem*, Michael R. Marrus and Janice Gross Stein (eds.), *Contemporary Antisemitism. Canada and the World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 80–95. For an interesting discussion of the attitudes of members of the Frankfurt School towards Israel, see Jacobs, *Frankfurt School*, chapter 3.
- 37 See Fischer, 'A difference in the texture of prejudice', 41–51; Werner Bonefeld, *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy. On Subversion and Negative Reason* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), chapter 9.
- 38 Moishe Postone, 'Anti-Semitism and National Socialism', in Anson Rabinbach and Jack Zipes (eds.), *Germans and Jews Since the Holocaust* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986), 302–14, here 313.
- 39 Postone and Brick, 'Critical Theory', 243, 230.
- 40 Ziege, *Antisemitismus*, 120.

# Race and the Politics of Recognition

Christopher Chen

## **INTRODUCTION: THE RECOGNITION PARADIGM AND ITS CRITICS**

What Canadian political philosopher Charles Taylor has called a ‘politics of recognition’ (1994: 70) continues to shape our understanding of contemporary social movements organized around race, indigeneity, religion, gender, and sexuality. Offering an interpretive framework for understanding political demands for group-differentiated rights, protections, and political representation, the ‘politics of recognition’ is increasingly as contested as it is influential. A theory of both social justice and social harm elaborated by avowed inheritors of Frankfurt School critical theory, this theory long ago gave rise to a portable ‘recognition paradigm’ (Fraser, 2003: 13), in feminist critical theorist Nancy Fraser’s words, that cuts across disciplines. From the US civil rights movement to campaigns for indigenous sovereignty, this paradigm understands these movements as seeking public recognition of identity-based

oppression, historical injustice, and group cultural particularity.

This chapter will provide an overview of key debates in the reception history of contemporary theories of recognition when applied to questions of racial politics. In doing so it argues that those theories were marked as much by a ‘cultural turn’ (Chaney, 1994) in humanities and social science scholarship from the 1970s onward as by the institutionalization of postwar US and Canadian social movements that underwrote that turn. One consequence of those joint theoretical and activist origins is that the emergence of the recognition paradigm in the 1990s has come to frame racial injustice primarily in terms of cultural misrecognition. This move, which has drawn ongoing criticism from across the political spectrum, has fundamentally helped to redefine race as group culture. Subsequent critiques of the recognition paradigm reveal an underlying conceptual tension between antiracist political strategies premised upon the affirmation of racial identity on the one

hand, or upon what could be described as the abolition of the racial order on the other.

Recent scholarship on antiblack racism, settler colonialism, and what critic Jodi Melamed and others have called 'neoliberal multiculturalism' (Melamed, 2006) has mounted powerful critiques of some of the key premises of the politics of recognition. Critics of the recognition paradigm contend that it is not merely a neutral description of contemporary social movements. Instead, they argue, the paradigm also functions as a normative framework that can be both internally and externally imposed upon social movements in order to dismiss anti-systemic demands, legitimize institutional and state authority, and narrow the terrain of political contestation.

These emergent critiques have tended to avoid a generalizable conception of either race or racism (Paul Taylor, 2013). For some black studies scholars, race is too broad a concept to capture the specificity of antiblack racism (Sexton, 2008; Wilderson, 2010). For others, race is inappropriate for understanding indigenous groups who are not racially excluded national minorities but sovereign nations forcibly subjugated by settler states (Simpson, 2014). Against this turn away from race as a comparative concept, this chapter will nevertheless retain a more expansive understanding of racial injustice and oppression as integral components of a European colonial enterprise that invented *both* black *and* indigenous racial categories as part of an evolving system of social classification, coercion, dispossession, and population management.

Afropessimist, Indigenous Studies, and Marxist theorists' subsequent attempts to move beyond recognitive politics reveal an underlying conceptual tension between anti-racist political strategies premised upon the affirmation of racial identity on the one hand, or upon what could be characterized as the abolition of the racial order on the other. This affirmation/abolition bind is subsequently narrated through a Fanonian deformed

dialectic of racial nonrecognition, indigenous refusals of settler state authority, or the racially differentiating effects of maldistribution and state-sanctioned expropriation.

## THE CONCEPT OF RECOGNITION: FROM LIBERAL RIGHTS TO CULTURAL IDENTITIES

For Charles Taylor, one of the most distinctive features of recent social movements in the United States and Canada is their demand for the affirmation of marginalized group identities subject to pervasive misrepresentation and devaluation:

[O]ur identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (1994: 25)

Driven by a need for psychological self-realization that Taylor calls an 'ethics of authenticity' (2008), subjects seeking recognition wish to have deep psychic features of their lived experience affirmed. At the same, third generation Frankfurt School theorist Axel Honneth has emphasized that the lived experience of misrecognition represents a basic form of moral injury (Honneth, 1995). For Taylor, the expression or realization of a sense of authentic selfhood is not a fundamentally isolated process. It is an inevitably dialogical moral ideal, one formed in the context of communal bonds and identity-based social marginalization. Recognition, in Taylor's eyes, names the interplay between psychological self-definition and political demands for institutional and electoral representation. Thus the concept of recognition is, for Taylor, not premised upon models of individual self-interested rational actors that

remain the normative subjects of contemporary liberal political theory.

For Taylor, Honneth, and Fraser, a political theory of recognition offered a conceptual vocabulary to register contemporary social movements' turn away from an older political idiom of class struggle and economic exploitation and toward a concern for identity, difference, and cultural misrepresentation. Grounded in intersubjective theories of identity formation and institutionalized political rights in the work of G.W.F. Hegel, specifically the 'Lord and Bondsman' chapter in the *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and the later *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Taylor's and Honneth's theorization of recognition understand political conflict fundamentally in terms of how individuals and groups are accorded or denied respect, esteem, and civic representation (Thompson, 2006). This initial Hegelian elaboration of a politics of recognition as a dialogical process was balanced against a neo-Kantian intellectual tradition organized around cultivation and protection of individual autonomy.

Fraser's writing, in particular, has maintained a distance from the Hegelian tradition that Taylor and Honneth draw upon, and has subjected the recognition paradigm to significant ongoing reconfiguration. Because the initial framing of recognition largely excluded questions of political economy, Fraser has suggested that attention to relations of recognition must always also involve attention to a variety of economic demands that she broadly labels as 'redistributive' (Fraser, 1995; Fraser and Honneth, 2003). Though the distinction is de-emphasized in later work, Fraser has further distinguished between 'affirmative' and 'transformative' remedies for cultural misrecognition and the maldistribution of material resources:

By affirmative remedies for injustice I mean remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them. By transformative remedies, in contrast, I mean remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely

by restructuring the underlying generative framework. The nub of the contrast is end-state outcomes versus the processes that produce them. It is *not* gradual versus apocalyptic change. (Fraser, 1995: 82)

Fraser associates 'affirmative' measures to rectify misrecognition with mainstream multiculturalism and a politics of identity grounded in the celebration and preservation of group culture, traditions, and heritage. For Fraser, 'transformative' approaches to the problem of misrecognition on the other hand tend to destabilize group boundaries and alter the entire distribution of identities within a social field – a process the theorist characterizes as deconstructive in this 1995 article: 'Whereas affirmative recognition remedies tend to promote existing group differentiations', she argues, 'transformative recognition remedies tend, in the long run, to destabilize them so as to make room for future regroupments' (1995: 84).

For all three theorists, institutionalized patterns of misrecognition or, in Fraser's case, the lack of participatory parity in decision-making processes, come to define the specificity of racial injustice. For both supporters and critics of this theoretical framework, institutionalized 'rules of recognition', in James Tully's trenchant formulation (2000: 472), refer to an overarching deliberative process of negotiated inclusion within culturally diverse democratic societies. Such remedial action goes beyond enforcement of antidiscrimination measures to include group-differentiated positive accommodations for Sikh police officers wishing to wear turbans for example, or for indigenous self-government and power-sharing arrangements. For Taylor, the often unacknowledged ethnocentric character of appeals to common humanity and a homogeneous national culture overwrite the cultural particularity of subordinated populations and call for the acknowledgment of cultural difference as a political corrective.

As a theory of justice deeply informed by the impact and history of multicultural policies, the recognition paradigm has faced



criticism for its rejection of ‘common humanity’ (Rorty, 2000: 8); for its laundering or dissimulation of histories of racial domination through a depoliticized rhetoric of cultural diversity (San Juan Jr., 2002, 2007; Lentin and Tittley, 2011); and for its relative neglect of the role of capitalist market dynamics in both sustaining racist ideology and reproducing racial inequality over time (Bannerji, 2000; Darder and Torres, 2004). Finally, critics of the recognition paradigm have also persistently warned of the disciplinary function of institutional recognition which, like liberal rights discourse (Brown, 1995), could be said to construct manageable political subjects, rather than simply affirming or protecting preexisting ones (Markell, 2003; McNay, 2008). As a result, some theorists of recognition have argued for more sharply distinguishing between the politics of identity and the politics of recognition (Thompson and Yar, 2011).

## RECOGNITION, RACE, AND IDENTITY

The recognition paradigm identifies core features of what has come to be known as contemporary ‘identity politics’ (Alcoff, 2006). Yet the widespread association of theories of political recognition with politicized identities illuminates the ambiguous nature of identity itself as an object of recognition and misrecognition (Gleason, 1983; Bernstein, 2005; Brubaker, 2006; Jenkins 2014). The term ‘identity politics’ emerged from black socialist feminist critiques of the patriarchal character of black nationalism and the white middle-class norms structuring second-wave feminism (Springer, 2005). Today, however, ‘identity politics’ is typically contrasted with a politics of class. As such, it typically doubles as a normative judgment of a range of new social movements organized around racial, sexual, and gender oppression. Todd Gitlin (1996) and Arthur Schlesinger (1998), in particular, have

offered influential declensionist narratives of how identity-based political movements contributed to the fragmentation of the US ‘New Left’ beginning in the 1960s (Gosse, 2007).

The theorists who populate this chapter read the politics of recognition as symptomatic of both the theoretical and historical limits of dominant conceptions of racial justice as form of so-called ‘identity politics’. Taking identity as a basic unit of analysis for contemporary antiracist political movements has often obscured as much as it has brought to light. Doing so often conceals an underlying conceptual tension between political demands for the *assertion* of racial identity, on the one hand, and for the *denaturalization* or *dismantling* of these identities on the other. As Nancy Fraser reminds us, calls to either affirm racial difference or eliminate racial inequality are political ideals, premised upon visions of group differentiation or de-differentiation, that can often come into conflict with each other (Fraser, 1997b).

Critics typically trace the genealogy of the term ‘identity politics’ back to a 1977 statement by the Combahee River Collective, a Boston-based black feminist group (Springer, 2005). The meaning of identity advanced in the Combahee statement is embedded, however, within a simultaneously socialist, feminist, and antiracist politics that can be read as a precursor to later theories of intersectionality (Hancock, 2016). In contemporary scholarship and popular usage, ‘identity politics’ is typically a pejorative term distinguished from an ‘Old Left’ socialist or social democratic labor politics (Gitlin, 1997; Kelley, 1997; Bernstein, 2005). Assessing the historical limits of the affirmation of working class identity as anticapitalist political strategy has led some contemporary Marxist theorists to characterize this older labor movement politics as *itself* structured and constrained by a peculiar logic of identity, however (Postone, 1996; Tamas, 2005, *Endnotes*, 2015). As Moishe Postone has argued in terms that paradoxically echo Marxist critiques of contemporary identity-based social

movements, attempts to define the systemic features of capitalist societies are not reducible to a 'social critique from the standpoint of "labor", ... a critique from a quasi-natural point of view, that of a social ontology' (Postone, 1996: 65).

Like the concept of racial difference (Gates, 1999) with which it is often paired, racial identity invokes a range of sometimes contradictory meanings in scholarly and popular discourse. These range from cultural heritage and epistemic standpoint to systems of biological classification and histories of resistance to racism and racial inequality. Race has come to signify both the existential particularity of lived experience and social boundaries that vary considerably over space and time (Goldberg, 2009; Wimmer, 2013; Wolfe, 2016). Political theorists like Barbara and Karen Fields (2012), along with Robert Miles (Miles and Brown, 2003), have noted how the concept of race is the consequence rather than cause of racism. '*Racism* is first and foremost a social practice, which means that it is an action and a rationale for action, or both at once', the Fields contend:

*Racism* always takes for granted the objective reality of *race*, as just defined, so it is important to register their distinctness. The shorthand transforms racism, something an aggressor *does*, into *race*, something the target is, in a sleight of hand that is easy to miss. (Fields and Fields, 2012: 17)

The Fields have controversially argued for the abandonment of race as an explanatory category for political analysis and embraced what can be characterized as racial eliminativism (Appiah, 1985; Zack, 2002). We need not follow them down that path, however, to note how their work draws attention to the ways characteristics imputed to racialized populations, whether positive or negative, come to justify racism and racial inequality. Despite the conclusions the Fields draw from this latter insight, the slipperiness of race as a political signifier means that populations have invoked racial identity precisely in order to challenge racism and indicate

interpellation by 'something an aggressor does' (Fields and Fields, 2012: 17). Nevertheless, in arguing that racial difference does not explain social phenomena but is itself in need of explanation, the Fields have helped to initiate a crucial Copernican turn from race to racism as the object of analysis for antiracist critique.

This raises the question, however, of whether the concept of racism itself adequately describes the sources of racial domination and structured inequality beyond seemingly arbitrary attitudinal prejudices and false beliefs akin to 'witchcraft' (Fields and Fields, 2012: 193). As the Fields themselves point out, racial categories reveal an ensemble of social processes that racially order and segment populations within emergent capitalist social relations (111–48). In this sense their scholarship pushes up against the methodological limits of the concept of racism as ultimately reducible to a form of ideological mystification 'that disguised class inequality and, by the same stroke, impoverished Americans' public language for addressing inequality' (111). 'Probably a majority of American historians think of slavery in the United States as primarily a system of race relations', Barbara Fields famously points out, 'as though the chief business of slavery were the production of white supremacy rather than the production of cotton, sugar, rice, and tobacco' (Fields, 1990: 95–118). Here defining race and racism as ideological, and black chattel slavery through a language of business, positions racism and racial divisions as an epiphenomenal and highly contingent expression of a more historically durable underlying logic of capitalist exploitation. Configuring the relationship between race and capitalism in this manner echoes the opposition between culture and political economy that fundamentally structures the recognition paradigm (Butler, 1997; Fraser, 1997a). The epiphenomenalist account of race offered by the Fields has been a source of ongoing debate within Marxist theory (Reed, 2002; Wood, 2002) as well as contemporary

scholarship on what Cedric Robinson has called 'racial capitalism' (Robinson, 1983) and the political economy of racial domination (Davis, 1983; James, 1992; Du Bois, 2007; Boyce Davies, 2008; Gore et al., 2009; Boggs, 2011; Gore, 2011; Rodney, 2012; Williams, 2014).

## DEFINING RACE/ETHNICITY

Anthropologist Franz Boas's critique of nineteenth-century scientific racism and turn to group culture (Kuper, 2003; Baker, 2010) has continued to inform contemporary definitional debates over the theoretical status of the concept of race, and the relationship between race and ethnicity (Appiah, 1985; Outlaw, 1992; Gooding-Williams, 1996; Hannaford, 1996; Gracia, 2007; Wimmer, 2013; Chandler, 2014; Omi and Winant, 2015). The language of group culture was offered as an alternative to discredited though nevertheless persistent beliefs in inherent racial differences in intelligence, ability, and civilizational achievement. Philosopher Horace Kallen and Chicago sociologist Robert E. Park were instrumental in subsequently developing influential early-20th century accounts of ethnic assimilation and cultural pluralism that took European immigrants to the United States as a primary point of reference. Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant have argued that the work of Kallen and Park consolidated an 'ethnicity paradigm' (Omi and Winant 2015, 21–52) that, despite being taken up by subsequent midcentury scholars like Gunnar Myrdal as the general framework for understanding US racial politics, ignored the specificity of racial group formation. For Omi and Winant, race is irreducible to these early and mid-20th century theories of ethnicity.

Despite slippages in the popular usage of these terms, contemporary critics have generally distinguished between the ascriptive, imposed character of racial difference and

the comparatively more voluntary forms of cultural assertion and belonging associated with ethnicity (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007; Gracia, 2007). Debates continue over whether race can be considered a subcategory of ethnicity or whether these terms represent fundamentally distinct forms of social categorization and political group formation (Bonilla-Silva, 1999; Banton, 2002; Cornell and Hartmann, 2007; Baker, 2010; Wimmer, 2013; Emirbayer and Desmond, 2015; Omi and Winant, 2015). For Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann, for example, race is an intrinsically hierarchical concept, while ethnicity may or may not be (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). The fundamental distinction between imposed and asserted forms of collective belonging that marks the difference between race and ethnic identity for many theorists is not absolute, however – as racial categories can become ethnicized over time, and ethnic groups can become biologized through shifting theories of racial bloodlines (Kauanui, 2008).

## ORGANIZING DIFFERENCE: RECOGNITION AND MULTICULTURAL STATE POLICY

As the title of Taylor's influential 1992 essay 'The Politics of Recognition' makes clear, the rise of liberal and literary multiculturalism remains a crucial inspiration for theorizing recognition as a key component of racial injustice and its potential remedies in specifically cultural terms. Taylor's essay developed that theory within the context of Canadian multiculturalism as state policy and offered a broad comparative framework for understanding the emergence of multicultural societies across the Global North.

For Taylor, institutions and states need not choose between acknowledging group cultural differences and upholding commitments to difference-blind formal equality. Taylor calls these two primary aims of recognition a

'politics of difference' (1994: 38) and a 'politics of equal dignity' (1994: 38) respectively. Taylor's initial distinction between equal protection and group-differentiated rights immediately provoked debates over whether these rights are fundamentally compatible with liberal principles designed to protect individual autonomy (Taylor, 1994; Benhabib, 2002).

As perhaps one of the most influential theorists of multicultural state policy, Will Kymlicka has pointed out that multicultural state policies are ultimately rooted in 'the increasing recognition of minority rights whether in the form of land claims and treaty rights for indigenous peoples; strengthened language rights and regional autonomy for substate national minorities; and accommodation rights for immigrant-origin ethnic groups':

[T]hese 'multiculturalism policies'...go beyond the protection of the basic civil and political rights guaranteed to all individuals in a liberal-democratic state to also extend some level of public recognition and support for minorities to express their distinct identities and practices. The rise of MCPs therefore goes beyond the broader politics of civil rights and nondiscrimination. 2013: (101)

This combination of political representation and accommodation 'gave organized ethnic groups a seat at the table of public decision making while also giving states a means to shape and discipline those groups to ensure their compliance with overarching state needs for social peace and effective state regulation of economic and political life' (Kymlicka, 2013: 102). For both Kymlicka and Taylor, in short, recognition provides a means by which to harmonize basic individual citizenship rights with demands to protect group sovereignty, cultural autonomy, and political self-determination (Kymlicka, 1996: 2013).

Tracing the origins of US multicultural policy initiatives to educational reform efforts in the 1970s and 1990s, Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield have noted a similar moderation of earlier antiracist political demands through the institutional translation

of race into culture. '[M]ulticulturalism often avoided race', Newfield and Gordon contend, 'It designated cultures. It didn't talk up racism':

It didn't seem very antiracist, and often left the impression that any discussion of cultural diversity would render racism insignificant. It was ambiguous about the inheritance and the ongoing presence of histories of oppression. It had the air of pleading for a clean start. It allowed 'culture's' aura of free play to attribute a creative power to racial groups that lacked political and economic power. (1997: 3)

A small body of secondary literature has also emerged to situate this turn to culture in educational policy within an era of deepening austerity and state withdrawal from public services, and in particular within a history of the institutionalization of earlier civil rights and black power movement demands (Reed, 1999; Roelofs, 2003; Johnson, 2007; Karen Ferguson, 2013; Dawson, 2015; INCITE!, 2017).

For Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley, multicultural state policies across Europe (Gunew, 2010) have similarly reconstituted race as cultural difference. They, too, view culture as 'a site in which the politics of race can be legitimized and laundered' (2011: 24). For Lentin and Titley, limiting the political demands of racially marginalized populations to the preservation and toleration of group cultural difference has blunted the force of antiracist critique:

For anti-racist critiques of racialized structures and patterns of power and privilege; for 'critical multiculturalist' takes on the patrician Eurocentrism of relations of recognition and tolerance; for activists protesting against the depoliticizing and culturalizing of racial injustice and inequality; for feminists, LGBT activists, youth workers and the secular left protesting against the 'micro-colonialism' of essentialized community leaders and structures of patronage: multiculturalism has, at best, provided attenuated pathways for organization and mobilization, provided the ambivalent political capital of 'recognition', and directed sporadic attention to the historical and political-economic conditions of social inequality. More often it has been seen as a

mode of management and control, securing the legitimacy of the status quo through a deflection of questions of power and inequality into the relatively more malleable economy of cultural recognition. (2011: 14–15)

Contra the Fields, however, in light of the failure of multiculturalism to deliver racial justice in Europe and the UK, Lentin and Titley propose that we recover ‘the analytical and oppositional possibilities of race as a political category in the contemporary moment’ (24).

Political theorist Denise Ferreira da Silva has similarly argued that the contemporary catachrestic substitution of culture for race, part of the legacy of Boasian cultural anthropology, offers a form of ‘moral relief’ (Da Silva, 2007: xxxii) that has allowed critics to avoid confronting global histories of racial domination. ‘[W]riting of racial difference as a signifier of cultural difference’, Da Silva contends, ‘hampers our understanding of how the racial operates as a modern political-symbolic weapon’ (133) while at the same time rendering culture ‘the obvious basis for framing demands for global justice and for punishing the global subaltern as well’ (xix). For Da Silva, the transformation of an earlier specifically national antiracist political subject into a subject of cultural difference constitutes a ‘doomed strategy of emancipation’ (xxxiii). While proper subjects of recognition are produced, the turn to culture continues to represent non-Europeans as ethnographic objects entirely governed by external natural laws ‘in a global space and under an epistemological arrangement already mapped by the racial’ (139). ‘[T]he cultural still authorizes (re)writings of the others of Europe’, Da Silva continues, ‘but now as incarcerated subjects of cultural difference’ (xxxv).

## OFFICIAL ANTIRACISMS AND THE US POSTWAR LIBERAL WELFARE STATE

The politics of recognition has often short-changed such oppositional possibilities,

however. A number of contemporary critics have registered how the neoliberal, workfare-warfare state has become increasingly unresponsive to reformation through a liberal politics of recognition (Melamed, 2011; Reddy, 2011; Roderick Ferguson, 2012). For these theorists and their cohort, limited postwar reforms and a series of regimes of ‘official antiracism’ (Melamed, 2006: 2) in the United States have emerged to redirect the anti-systemic demands of 60s-era antiracist movements from liberal ideals of formal equality to a rhetoric of neoliberal cultural development, representation, and uplift (Yúdice, 2003; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). Other scholars have situated the rise of liberal multicultural policy in the United States within an overarching narrative of the institutionalization and depoliticization of 60s-era ethnic nationalist, antiracist, women of color feminist, and queer of color social movements (Roderick Ferguson, 2004, 2012; Melamed, 2011).

Jodi Melamed offers one of the most persuasive accounts of how these developments are best seen in terms of what the critic calls ‘neoliberal multiculturalism’ (Melamed, 2006: 2). For Melamed, ‘neoliberal multiculturalism’ represents the culmination of a decades-long project of domesticating the contentious politics of postwar social movements by displacing antiracist political action onto the terrain of elite electoral and cultural representation. This redirection of the energies of postwar social movements represents a concerted counterinsurgency strategy that, in her view, has abandoned progressive redistributive or transformative economic measures. Representing market freedoms as the key to racial progress and a condition of continued political representation, Melamed argues, has subsequently made the simultaneity of anticapitalist and antiracist politics unthinkable.

Melamed’s analysis of neoliberal multiculturalism explicitly counters this disarticulation of racial and economic injustice. Instead, she rethinks US state formation in relation to

successive regimes of 'official antiracism' in the postwar era that supplied moral justifications for US global hegemony. Building on Omi and Winant's influential thesis of a post-World War II 'racial break' (Winant, 2001) that marked the formal end of explicit *de jure* white supremacist state policy across much of the globe, Melamed's analysis moves through three successive periods of official antiracism: racial liberalism; liberal multiculturalism; and neoliberal multiculturalism.

In Melamed's account, the phase of racial liberalism (mid 1940s–1960s) sought to create full integration of African Americans. The economic success of African Americans would, per the logic of this official antiracism, offer proof of US exceptionalism. It would do so, moreover, while naturalizing equal opportunity within capitalist markets as the horizon of civil rights movement demands in order to consolidate the capitalist state. Liberal multiculturalism (1960s–90s), in contrast, turned to culture in order to aestheticize the legacy of earlier antiracist movements and offer up a weak cultural pluralism as evidence of the perfectibility and exceptionalism of US national identity. As Melamed trenchantly puts it:

Pluralism as the horizon for thinking on race matters restricted permissible antiracism to forms that assented to US nationalism and normal politics and prioritized individual and property rights over collective social goals. It reduced culture to aesthetics and then overvalored aesthetic culture all by itself, apart from social and material forces. Thus liberal multiculturalism's stress on representation and cultural recognition screened off differential power, dematerialized conceptions of race, and marginalized antiracisms that addressed material disparities in racial outcomes. (Melamed, 2011: 34)

Finally, neoliberal multiculturalism (2000s to present) brings the cultural logic of group particularity to bear not only upon state-making practices but upon the protection of property rights and the generalization of market principles as an antiracist political project. 'In neoliberal multiculturalism matters of the economy themselves express what

is meant by freedom from the unfair restraint of racism' (Melamed, 2011: 148), the critic concludes.

Both Melamed and sociologist Roderick Ferguson (2012) have called attention to the significant role that universities in particular have played in simultaneously affirming and regulating racial representation in ways that increasingly conform to market imperatives and that often justify deepening economic inequality within and between racial groups. Unlike some contemporary Marxist theorists, however (Žižek, 1997), Melamed and Ferguson are not interested in returning to an analytically purified conception of class conflict so much as holding open a space for the elaboration of materialist antiracisms, feminisms, and queer politics.

## FANON AND NONRECOGNITION

Contemporary black studies scholars have increasingly challenged the pluralist, coalitional logic at the core of liberal multicultural state and institutional policy. Offering a comprehensive theory of antiblack racism dubbed 'Afropessimism', scholars such as Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton have rejected a liberal multicultural imaginary 'wherein cultural diversity is managed as a depoliticized term of experience' (Sexton, 2008: 247). Both theorists also argue for the structural impossibility of attaining of recognition for black subjects. This cohort returns to the concept of race contra culture as a set of what Wilderson calls ontological positions: whiteness, blackness, and the indigenous 'Savage' (Wilderson, 2010: 23). For Wilderson, Sexton, and other Afropessimist critics, blackness is less as an affirmative ethnocultural identity than a negative social category. On this view, the sacrificial expulsion and subordination of blackness guarantees the coherence of civil society and its subjects. Framing blackness as existential abjection, non-relationality, and non-communicability

has led critic Fred Moten to offer a sympathetic though critical interrogation of Afropessimism's capacity to think the relation between antiblack racism and black subjectivity and political agency (Moten, 2013). For both Wilderson and Sexton, the severity and historical durability of antiblack racism is ultimately grounded, not in colonial domination or capitalist exploitation, but in the psychic pathology of nonblack subjects structured by what Wilderson calls the 'libidinal economy of civil society' (2010: 15). That psychic economy simultaneously conditions a history of nonblack enjoyment of and empathy toward black suffering (Hartman, 1997).

These theorists thus elaborate blackness as a structural category defined primarily through historically durable forms of antiblack racism: gratuitous violence, non-sovereignty, existential abjection, literal and metaphorical fungibility, and what sociologist Orlando Patterson has called the 'social death' (Patterson, 1985) of the slave condition. For Afropessimist theorists, the politics of nonwhite interracial coalition encoded in multicultural ideals fundamentally depend upon a form of permanent structural misrecognition of the singularity of antiblack racism. That misrecognition is enforced through spurious racial analogies that render 'equivalent slavery and other forms of oppression' (Sexton, 2008: 293). Afropessimism's critiques of indigenous studies has occasioned ongoing debates over the historical relationship between black chattel slavery and US settler colonialism (Sexton, 2014; Day, 2015; Coulthard and Simpson, 2016). At the same time, Afropessimism's ontological turn, grounded in a conception of an unchanging and originary libidinal economy of black suffering, has been the target of criticism for its anti-materialist, radically dehistoricized conception of black racialization (Dawson, 2016).

Despite breaking from a prior multicultural logic of coalition, therefore, Afropessimism's ontologization of blackness as a racial position, or perhaps *the* singular racial position,

raises the question of the historicity and internal homogeneity of the category of blackness itself. Considering blackness as a unitary ontological condition of permanent civic nonrecognition faces three broad theoretical challenges. First, the ontological turn raises the question of the relationship between antiblackness and blackness, or between an ascriptive condition and the affirmative heterogeneity of black life (Moten, 2009; Shelby, 2009). Second, accounts of the psychopathological roots of antiblackness have been challenged by scholarship on the changing articulation of black subordination within capitalist social relations (Hall, 1996) from the political economy of black chattel slavery (Oakes, 2016) to the racialization of wagelessness and contemporary surplus populations (Johnson, 2011). This scholarship has often attempted to register the impact of deepening internal economic divisions within black populations on the history of twentieth and twenty-first century black political movements (Reed, 1999; Dawson, 2001; Johnson, 2007; Dawson and Francis, 2015). Finally, treating blackness as an ontological category raises the question of racial unity, and the subsumption of other cross-cutting axes of social differentiation, that has been a persistent object of critique for contemporary black feminist critiques of black nationalism (Collins, 1998; Lubiano, 1998) and theories of intersectionality (Hancock, 2016).

The Afropessimist critique of coalition is premised upon what could be called a politics of structural nonrecognition modeled in the work of Martinican political philosopher Frantz Fanon, who in describing an encounter with a white child offers perhaps one of the most famous scenes of racial misrecognition in contemporary theory (Fanon, 2008b, 89–119). Contrary to Taylor's pastoral view (Charles Taylor, 1994: 65) of the possibility for mutual recognition in Fanon's reading of Hegel, Fanon asserts of the impossibility of mutual recognition under conditions of racial domination. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon seeks to clarify that in the master/

slave dialectic for Hegel ‘there is reciprocity’ (Fanon, 2008b: 195), but in the context of racial slavery the master does not seek recognition from the slave but rather labor:

The master scorns the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work. Likewise, the slave here can in no way be equated with the slave who loses himself in the object and finds the source of his liberation in his work. The black slave wants to like his master. Therefore, he is less independent than the Hegelian slave. For Hegel, the slave turns away from the master and turns toward the object. Here the slave turns toward the master and abandons the object. (195)

For Fanon, the slave is imprisoned in a kind of existential inferiority complex and is either resigned to domination or wishes to take the place of the master. Race skews the intersubjective dynamics of the Hegelian encounter between master and slave in a manner that is not simply reducible to a psychological account of misrecognition. Entombed in a predialectical ‘zone of nonbeing’ (Fanon, 2008b: xii) or ‘crushing objecthood’ (Fanon, 2008a: 82), blackness for Fanon is simultaneously a form of invisibility and hypervisibility that forecloses the possibility of mutual recognition or dialectical sublation (Gordon, 2007; Ciccariello-Maher, 2017).

Fanon’s ‘deformed dialectic’ (Sekyi-Otu, 1997: 61) disdains forms of freedom simply granted by the master rather than obtained through struggle and conflict. This process of producing self-consciousness in struggle interrupts the politics of recognition in which the black subject wants to be recognized not as black but rather as white. Fanon historicizes this desire for recognition as itself preemptively structured by racial interpellation. Through his analysis, Fanon implicates the role of colonial education in particular as producing black subjects who desire recognition as whites (Fanon, 2008b: 191–6). ‘Whereas Fanon’s work is often pigeonholed within recognition studies’, George Ciccariello-Maher observes, ‘his emphasis on the zone of nonbeing shows him

instead to have been a pioneering contributor to a powerfully different approach that might be better understood as “nonrecognition studies”’ (Ciccariello-Maher, 2017: 57).

As a core feature of what we might call a racial politics of nonrecognition, Fanon invokes the principle of ‘sociogeny’ (2008b: xv) in order to situate the subjective features of misrecognition within a matrix of social relations structured by colonial violence. Sociogeny, for Fanon, is a principle of material determination that alerts readers to the fact that the psychology of racial objectification he describes cannot be overcome without a transformation of the colonial and capitalist social conditions that ceaselessly reproduce ‘L’expérience vécue du Noir’ (Fanon, 2008a). It is here that Fanon links the disalienation of the black subject’s internalized images of inferiority to political struggles that might radically transform the social structures that serially reproduce the lived experience of race. The absence of reciprocity that defines the racial encounter thus drives the black subject away from the dialectical possibility of mutual recognition. Instead, the black subject is impelled toward a situation in which a racially disalienated self-certainty merges with political self-assertion. For Fanon, the possibility of individual self-determination will become increasingly inseparable from the dynamics of anticolonial movements of national self-determination in which racial, ethnic, and tribal conflict can sometimes play a counterrevolutionary role. ‘Indeed, if the social struggle does not become a national endeavor’, Nigel Gibson observes of Fanon’s later arguments in the 1961 *Les Damnés de la Terre*, ‘it will inevitably degenerate along the retrograde, geographic, ethnic, and racial lines refashioned or simply created under colonial rule’ (Gibson, 2003: 178).

Fanon’s later work offers an ambivalent reading of the role of culture in anticolonial movements. He warns of the colonized intellectual’s fetishistic retreat into the ‘mummified fragments’ (Fanon, 2005: 160) of static traditions, particularly where those fragments



are separated from the continual transformation of cultural tradition through active political struggles. Instead of a nostalgic politics of culture – exemplified, for Fanon, in the specific version of Negritude imagined by the poet and politician Leopold Senghor, who would support the French Union against the Algerian independence movement – Fanon imagines a culture of politics. Crucially, a Fanonian culture of politics is centered on and continually remade by anticolonial movements in the present. ‘The liberation struggle does not restore to national culture its former values and configurations. This struggle, which aims at a fundamental redistribution of relations between men, cannot leave intact either the form or substance of the people’s culture’ (Fanon, 2005: 178). Here Fanon suggests that dynamics of political contention transform both the racial form and content of culture beyond imposed colonial divisions and visions of returning to precolonial traditions. In the course of decolonization, the very centrality of culture as a terrain of political contestation is relativized:

Sooner or later, the colonized intellectual realizes that the existence of a nation is not proved by culture, but in the people’s struggle against the forces of occupation. No colonialism draws its justification from the fact that the territories it occupies are culturally nonexistent. Colonialism will never be put to shame by exhibiting unknown cultural treasures under its nose. (Fanon, 2005: 159)

## INDIGENEITY AND THE COLONIAL POLITICS OF RECOGNITION

In spite of a recurring opposition between blackness and indigeneity in Afropessimist readings of Fanon (Sexton, 2014), some of the sharpest contemporary criticism of what Glen Coulthard has called a ‘colonial politics of recognition’ (2014: 156) have been formulated by contemporary indigenous studies scholarship that has itself drawn on Fanon’s anticolonial analysis. Coulthard (2014),

Audra Simpson (2014), Joanne Barker (2011), and Patrick Wolfe (2016) all argue against the widespread assumption that dynamics of settler colonial dispossession in places such as the United States, Canada, and Australia can be safely consigned to the past.

From a Marxian perspective, political theorist Robert Nichols has emphasized how theories of primitive accumulation need to be revised in the case of indigenous territorial dispossession because settler colonialism does not inevitably lead to the proletarianization of displaced native populations (Nichols, 2015). Within settler colonial contexts, Patrick Wolfe and others have argued that the dynamics of indigenous dispossession are not structured around the need to create a dispossessed class of wage laborers but instead a genocidal ‘logic of elimination’ (Wolfe, 2006: 388):

[A] logic of elimination can include officially encouraged miscegenation, the breaking-down of native title into alienable individual freeholds, native citizenship, child abduction, religious conversion, resocialization in total institutions such as missions or boarding schools, and a whole range of cognate biocultural assimilations. All these strategies, including frontier homicide, are characteristic of settler colonialism. (388)

Coulthard similarly points out that the axis of political contestation for indigenous populations is not centered on wage labor. It is instead situated on struggles over land, natural resources, and the ecological requirements of capitalist development.

Moreover, as Wolfe has argued, settler colonial ‘invasion is a structure not an event’ (Wolfe, 2006: 388) that signals the persistence and historical evolution of forms of extraeconomic coercion that come to define Marxist accounts of primitive accumulation. For this new generation of theorists of settler colonialism, contemporary settler states have come to replace direct strategies of territorial expropriation, displacement, and forced assimilation with what could be described as governance through juridical recognition. Similarly, political ideals of cultural

autonomy, self-determination, and territorial sovereignty are for these critics better realized through a range of alternative political strategies of refusal (Simpson, 2014), political confrontation, and practices of ‘cultural self-recognition’ (Coulthard, 2014: 23) beyond the reach of settler state regulation, though not necessarily beyond the reach of capital (Eisenberg and Kymlicka, 2011).

Recent books by Barker and Simpson focus on the impossibility of reciprocity that structures Native/settler relations of recognition. The impossibility of mutual recognition is acutely revealed in the construction of Native ancestry rules governing ‘blood-quantum’ as institutionalized criteria for tribal membership. Such rules make blood govern resource and land claims, and encase contested and changing Native lifeworlds in oppressive ‘racialized notions of biological-as-cultural authenticity’ (Barker, 2011: 20). For Barker, a politics of recognition within the United States imposes a normative, depoliticized vision of Native cultural identity, one both evacuated of political contestation and frozen in time. ‘[T]he discursive work of Native legal status and rights in US politics has made Native rights contingent on a particular kind of Native’, Barker observes, ‘a Native in or of an authentic culture and identity’ (Barker, 2011: 223).

Explaining why “Recognition” in either a cognitive or juridical sense is impossible’ (Simpson, 2014: 23), Simpson instead elaborates a strategy of refusing state recognition of Native sovereignty and group culture. Instead, Simpson conceives of structurally antagonistic relations between sovereign indigenous nations and settler states. For Simpson this interruptive strategy of refusal, illuminated by her study of the practices of the Mohawks of Kahnawà:ke, is predicated upon the understanding of the ‘deep impossibility of representation and consent within governance systems that are predicated upon dispossession and disavowal of the political histories that govern the populations now found within state regimes’ (2014: 18).

Finally, for Coulthard, any possibility of indigenous self-determination emerges through ongoing struggles against settler colonialism rather than negotiated representation in state institutions. In Coulthard’s account, current Canadian recognition protocols are the outcome of the anticolonial struggles of the 1970s. Those protocols, however, merely enabled the state to change from an entity that reproduced itself primarily through the apparatus of ‘genocidal exclusion/assimilation’ to one of ‘recognition and accommodation’ (Coulthard, 2014: 6). In Coulthard’s analysis – as well as those of Nichols, Wolfe, Barker, and Simpson – the settler colonial state in critical indigeneity studies cannot function as the facilitator of multiculturalism imagined by Charles Taylor. Instead, the contemporary recognition paradigm, and the Hegelian master/slave dialectic which it utilizes, breaks down in the face of colonial domination in which ‘there is no mutual dependency in terms of a need or desire for recognition’ (Coulthard, 2014: 40):

In these contexts, the ‘master’ – that is, the colonial state and state society – does not require recognition from the previously self-determining communities upon which its territorial, economic, and social infrastructure is constituted. What it needs is land, labor, and resources. Thus, rather than leading to a condition of reciprocity, the dialectic breaks down either with the explicit *non*-recognition of the equal status of the colonized population; or with the strategic ‘domestication’ of the terms of recognition leaving the foundation of the colonial relationship relatively undisturbed. (Coulthard, 2014: 40)

## RECOGNITION, REDISTRIBUTION, AND THE RACE/CLASS PROBLEMATIC

While variously critiqued by theorists of settler-colonialism, Afropessimism, and multiculturalism, the turn to understanding racial injustice in primarily cultural terms nonetheless introduced a sharp division between race and political economy. Seemingly intractable

since the 1960s, that division continues to structure debates over the opposition between 'identity' and class politics. Nancy Fraser herself has articulated a powerful challenge to the recognition paradigm's inability to account for the relation between cultural misrecognition and economic inequality (Fraser, 2000, 2003). For Fraser, any normative theory of justice must attend not only to distorted relations of recognition, but also to the redistribution of material resources and opportunities.

Rather than arguing for either recognition or redistribution, Fraser instead advocates for what she calls a 'perspectival dualism' (2009: 84). Such a view equally attends to each dimension of social inequality while acknowledging the inseparability of axes of cultural, status, and class differentiation. For Fraser, the twin poles of recognition and redistribution are irreducible to one another. Instead, together they map a spectrum of social movement demands centered on economic inequality and exploitation, on the one hand, and what she calls 'parity of participation' on the other (Fraser, 2000: 115).

Fraser's elaboration of a more expansive recognition/redistribution paradigm immediately highlights a contradiction for antiracist movements. The institutional affirmation of group difference, on this view, seem to be at odds with redistributive measures precisely aimed to reduce or eliminate group-differentiated inequality. Because there is no intrinsic or necessary relation between the former and the latter, as Fraser has noted, recognitive politics can come to supplant or be pitted against redistributive demands, and vice-versa. Further, antiracist redistributive demands aimed at eliminating racialized economic inequality confront two interrelated challenges. First, such demands may leave underlying 'generative frameworks' (Fraser, 1995: 82) intact that will simply reestablish that inequality over time. Second, demands for the elimination of racial inequality are theoretically compatible with generalized and even worsening economic inequality. As

a result, some critics have argued that antiracist political demands are fundamentally constrained by a discourse of disparity and strict equality of opportunity that presupposes and naturalizes capitalist exploitation (Reed and Chowkwanyun, 2012).

That contradiction opens onto vexed questions concerning the relationships between culture, the economy, class, and social identity. In a recent exchange with political theorist Michael Dawson, Fraser has offered a materialist reformulation of the culture/class problematic at the heart of the recognition paradigm and to account for how racial differentiation is inscribed in capitalist production and social reproduction. Both thinkers have attempted to address the conceptual blindspot produced by associating racial domination with cultural misrecognition rather than for example the structural relationship between economic exploitation and state-sanctioned violence. For Dawson, that focus has displaced much needed attention to mechanisms of 'racial expropriation' (2016: 145) grounded in 'the crucial role played in capital accumulation by unfree, dependent, and unwaged labor'. Reclaiming the concept of race not as a description of biology or group culture but of the entanglement of capitalist exploitation and racialized expropriation highlight the urgent need for contemporary scholars to more precisely delineate how US racial divisions have come to be embedded within a history of global capitalism (Ngai, 2004; Roediger and Esch, 2014; Beckert and Rockman, 2016; Oakes, 2016). For Dawson and Fraser, antiracist politics is thus keyed not only to a discourse of disparity but to sometimes anti-systemic 'boundary struggles against expropriation' (Dawson, 2016: 148) as a permanent feature of capitalist accumulation:

Expropriation in this sense covers a multitude of sins, most of which correlate strongly with racial oppression. The link is clear in practices widely associated with capitalism's early history but still ongoing, such as territorial conquest, land annexation, enslavement, coerced labor, child labor,

child abduction, and rape. But expropriation also assumes more 'modern' forms – such as prison labor, transnational sex trafficking, corporate land grabs, and foreclosures on predatory debt, which are also linked with racial oppression – and, as we shall see, with contemporary imperialism. Finally, expropriation plays a role in the construction of distinctive, explicitly racialized forms of exploitation – as, for example, when a prior history of enslavement casts its shadow on the wage contract, segmenting labor markets and levying a confiscatory premium on exploited proletarians who carry the mark of 'race' long after their 'emancipation'. In that last case, expropriation combines with exploitation, whereas in the others, it appears to stand alone. But in all these cases, it correlates with racial oppression – and for reasons that are nonaccidental. (Fraser, 2016: 167)

As this passage makes clear, what Fraser calls the non-accidental correlation between expropriation and racial oppression raises the question of the logical or historical necessity of this relationship, and how to periodize shifting racial regimes within capitalist history. Nevertheless, this emergent materialist account of race usefully broadens our understanding of racialization processes beyond wage and wealth differentials to include global histories of racialized unfree labor, disposability, and state violence organized by expulsion from or denial of entry into formal labor markets.

## **CONCLUSION: THE AFFIRMATION/ ABOLITION BIND**

Imagining an antiracist politics beyond recognition and a politics of representation has led many scholars to offer sometimes radically divergent alternatives to conceiving of racial justice – from Afropessimist theorists' characterization of antiblack racism as permanent ontological misrecognition (Wilderson, 2010), to Indigenous Studies scholars reimagining of Native sovereignty as a refusal of the terms of cultural authenticity established by settler states (Barker,

2011; Simpson, 2014). In each case, demands to recognize and affirm devalued racial identities risk simultaneously naturalizing and reinforcing state authority, existing institutional hierarchies of power, and constitutively unequal capitalist social relations.

What could be called an affirmation/abolition bind emerges within the history of contemporary antiracist movements contesting or acquiescing to the terms of political subjectivation imposed through relations of recognition and misrecognition. Response to challenges to the recognition paradigm has led one of its initial theorists, Nancy Fraser, to begin to account for how political economy is itself racially organized through what Michael Dawson has called 'racial expropriation' (Dawson, 2016: 145). Fraser joins a number of other Marxist theorists inside and outside of the black radical tradition interested in elaborating the historical relationship between racial domination and the political economy of colonialism, settler colonialism, slavery, and immigration.

The very category of culture has entered into a crisis that has continued to have profound consequences for how racial injustice is understood and addressed. Definitional debates over imposed and asserted identities, and the ascriptive and affirmative character of race and ethnicity, suggest two distinct varieties of antiracist politics organized around the affirmation of racial difference and the end of racial domination. These two historically interconnected visions of racial liberation can also work at cross-purposes and highlight what could be called an affirmation/abolition bind – a rift registered across much recent criticism of cultural pluralist ideals that structure the recognition paradigm. Despite sometimes contending political priorities, both Indigenous Studies (Coulthard, 2013) and Afropessimist theorists (Wilderson, 2010: 337–41) have each attempted to move beyond the politics of both recognition and redistribution by calling what Fanon, after Aimé Césaire, called 'The only thing in the

world worth starting: the end of the world' (2008b: 76). As Glen Coulthard has recently argued, 'For Indigenous nations to live, capitalism must die. And for capitalism to die, we must actively participate in the construction of Indigenous alternatives to it' (Coulthard, 2013). While Afropessimist and Indigenous Studies scholars imagine this end in radically different terms, it is revealing that these scholars shift the terrain of antiracist struggle from the civic affirmation of racial identity to an eschatological vision of the end of a social order fundamentally premised upon configuring racialized populations as disposable.

Recent calls to recognize racial privilege, positionality, or epistemic exteriority reveal the recognition paradigm's continuing descriptive and diagnostic power. The politics of recognition can for example help to theorize the political fungibility of recent demands to recognize that 'Black Lives Matter' emerging from a 2013 US social movement. In particular, the recognition paradigm alerts us to how the demand has been articulated to a range of heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory movement strategies: from increasing racial representation within police departments to a long term vision of the abolition of the carceral state as a mechanism of racial domination (Gilmore, 2007; Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, 2016). At the same time, critiques of the recognition paradigm as a form of state-sanctioned 'official antiracism' (Melamed, 2006: 2) illuminate the enormous pressures faced by this movement to appoint elite political representatives and scale back anti-systemic demands to inclusion within the same institutions and economic order that some activists wish to dismantle. The recognition paradigm remains a powerful conceptual tool for mapping heterogeneous strategic orientations *within* antiracist political movements, along with new techniques of state and institutional governance that have evolved in response to past movement challenges.

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# Society, Regression, Psychoanalysis, or 'Capitalism Is Responsible for Your Problems with Your Girlfriend': On the Use of Psychoanalysis in the Work of the Frankfurt School

Benjamin Y. Fong and Scott Jenkins

## INTRODUCTION

The possibility of marrying, fusing, or synthesizing Marxist and Freudian problematics was certainly not unheard of before the Frankfurt School pursued it (and, soon after, became associated with that pursuit). In 1923, young Bolshevik philosopher Bernard Bykhovskii pushed Russian psychoanalysts to justify the compatibility of Freud and Marx, a task quickly taken up by M.A. Reisner, Alexander Luria, and A.B. Zalkind.<sup>1</sup> The work of these 'Soviet Freudians', allowed by Lenin and encouraged by Trotsky, unfortunately met heated opposition, and by 1930 'the concept of the unconscious was attacked as though it were an enemy of the state'.<sup>2</sup> Surrealists in France were also finding ways of bringing Marx and Freud together, albeit through a criticism rather

than an affirmation of both. André Breton, for instance, having overcome his doting admiration for Freud, attempted to give psychoanalysis a more materialist grounding in *Les Vases Communicants* (1932).<sup>3</sup> Working both to reform and to apply Freud's ideas after joining the Communist Party in 1928, Wilhelm Reich opened psychoanalysis to social theory through the notion of 'character structure' and employed the theory of sexual repression to explain the unconscious appeal of fascism. Though intolerant of Reich, even attacking him publicly in an editorial of the *Zeitschrift* in 1932, Freud was much more supportive of other analysts who saw the radical political implications of psychoanalysis, including Siegfried Bernfeld and Otto Fenichel. Bernfeld published a number of essays in the 1920s on socialism, Marxism, education, and psychoanalysis,<sup>4</sup> and Fenichel

offered up ‘psychoanalysis as the nucleus of a future dialectical-materialist psychology’.<sup>5</sup>

That being said, the thinkers associated with the *Institut für Sozialforschung* – and here we are thinking in particular of Erich Fromm, Max Horkheimer, Leo Löwenthal, Herbert Marcuse, and Theodor Adorno – rightly deserve their status as natural referent of the term Freud-Marxism. Save for Reich, whose important contributions will be covered below, they did – and to the present day, *have done* – more than anyone to think social and psychic alienation together, to supplement Marxism with penetrating insight into the psychic depths of ideological subjectification, and to critique and historicize Freudianism with an eye toward its ultimate preservation. In what follows, we will first review the different uses to which psychoanalysis has been put in the works of Reich, Fromm, Löwenthal, Marcuse, Horkheimer, and Adorno. Our aim in this section is to provide a concise but comprehensive summary of the contributions of these authors. In the second section, we will look at the reception of this work by two prominent commentators, Jessica Benjamin and Joel Whitebook. In the third and final section, we will then turn to a general assessment of the flaws and deficiencies in the Frankfurt School’s use of psychoanalysis and of the promise that this project still holds for the present.

We offer two points of departure for a reinvestigation of the psychoanalytic component of critical theory: first, we affirm Amy Allen’s claim that ‘psychoanalysis, as the most sophisticated and systematic study of human irrationality developed to date, offers critical theorists the best chance of making sense of the ... forces that attach subordinated subjects to the modes of identity ... that subordinate and wound them’.<sup>6</sup> Marxist social theory depicts an alienating, exploitative, and immiserating society that is all the more horrifying given what it *could be*. At a certain point, appeals to the ‘interests’ of certain parties do not help make sense of the continued viability of capitalist society,

and this is where a sophisticated study of human irrationality seems to us indispensable. Second, psychoanalysis, at its best, is a critical sociology of the family.<sup>7</sup> In a very literal sense, the psyche is, for Freud, nothing but the internalization of early developmental relationships as they are mediated by the kinds of bodies that human beings have. The great accomplishment of psychoanalysis was to have uncovered the ways in which what we call ‘I’ is formed and deformed within the family. Once this family is seen as historically specific and a center of ideological reproduction, psychoanalysis becomes an invaluable tool for understanding subject–object mediation in capitalist society.

## THE USES OF PSYCHOANALYSIS FOR SOCIAL THEORY FROM REICH TO ADORNO

### *Reich, Fromm, and the Early Frankfurt School*

Although Martin Jay’s introduction to the Frankfurt School in *The Dialectical Imagination* makes it seem as if the mixing of Marx and Freud was something of a great surprise in twentieth-century social theory,<sup>8</sup> the disarmingly self-evident nature of the relation of psychoanalysis and Marxist sociology to the early Frankfurt School is clear in several important early texts and statements. Horkheimer’s ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’, as well as his ‘Inaugural Address’, show critical theory conceived as, far from an autonomous form of philosophizing, a mode of mediating different forms of knowledge in both the philosophical and empirical sciences around the questions of the social totality and the possibility of the good society. Marcuse similarly argues that the dissolution of Hegelian philosophy had left reflexive social and human sciences as the legitimate inheritors of German Idealism’s project of self-consciousness and emancipation.<sup>9</sup> For

both, psychoanalysis was one among several sciences of obvious relevance for contributing to an understanding of capitalist society.

Before the relationship between Marxism and psychoanalysis was operationalized in the methods and modes of inquiry of the Frankfurt School, ideological accounts had to be settled between the materialist bases of Marxist epistemology and science and the bourgeois, idealistic character of most psychology. Wilhelm Reich's 1929 article 'Dialectical Materialism and Psychoanalysis' provided a comprehensive précis of the debate as it had developed up to that point, as well as perhaps the strongest statement in favor of psychoanalysis' materialist credentials.<sup>10</sup> Marxists were rightly suspicious that lending too much importance to subjective factors would obscure hard-won insights into the class character of society, and these suspicions were only confirmed by texts like *Civilization and Its Discontents*, which appeared to offer a neo-Hobbesian account of society that presupposed the isolated individual that Marx and other social theorists had unmasked as a product of larger social forces.

That much of the debate throughout the 1920s hinged on the natural-scientific definition of materialism appears in hindsight as an unfortunate consequence of the ideological configuration of the time. While the later formulation of hybrids such as Fromm's 'analytical social psychology' and Reich's 'critical political psychology' and 'sex-pol' depended upon, or were at least cushioned by the legitimation and acceptance engineered by, the earlier natural-scientific argument for compatibility, it is also true that the terms of the earlier debate hampered more productive engagements between psychoanalysis and sociology. The homologies that became central to later syntheses – for instance, the parallel between the postulates that humans are fundamentally governed by unconscious processes (Freud) and social conditions (Marx) – were buried in the early debates. When this debate was finally left behind, a different theoretical as well as methodological apparatus

linking psychoanalysis and social theory matured.

For Erich Fromm, the earliest 'official representative' of psychoanalysis in the Frankfurt School, the study of religion was the training ground for a development of a theory of ideology in which the crucial mediation was provided by psychoanalysis. The opening sentences of his first book, *The Dogma of Christ*, read:

It is one of the essential accomplishments of psychoanalysis that it has done away with the false distinction between social psychology and individual psychology. On the one hand, Freud emphasized that there is no individual psychology of man isolated from his social environment, because an isolated man does not exist. Freud knew no homo psychologicus, no Robinson Crusoe, like the economic man of classical economic theory. On the contrary, one of Freud's most important discoveries was the understanding of the psychological development of the individual's earliest social relations.<sup>11</sup>

Fromm had thus found a counter to bourgeois psychology in Freud, who could explain how social forces were experienced and internalized. *The Dogma of Christ* ultimately concludes that all domination involves the propagation of infantilizing substitute satisfactions, and that with increasing freedom, equality, and maturity, the power of these satisfactions would decrease. Fromm's interpretation of authority relations as holding the masses in a state of dependency subject to libidinal manipulation signaled a clear opposition to the reactionary assumptions of much group psychology and sociology of mass society.

'The Method and Function of an Analytical Social Psychology' (1932) turned the psychoanalytic approach to authority and ideology in Weimar Germany. Perhaps the most consequential aspect of Fromm's approach for later social-psychological research in critical theory was the decisive position accorded to the family as the mediating institution between society and individual:

the family is the essential medium through which the economic situation exerts its formative

influence on the individual's psyche. The task of social psychology is to explain the shared, socially relevant, psychic attitudes and ideologies – and their unconscious roots in particular – in terms of the influence of economic conditions on libido strivings.<sup>12</sup>

'Analytical Social Psychology' was in part a lesson drawn from a lengthy empirical study, begun in 1929 but only published decades later in fragmentary form, on the working and salaried classes in Germany, that paid particular attention to familial experience and attitudes.

While Fromm was preparing the grounds for a productive collaboration of psychoanalysis and social theory, Reich was no less busy developing theories that tightened the relation between society and psyche. His depth-account of character, first elaborated in *Character Analysis* and later deployed in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, remained a key concept and descriptive object for Frankfurt School research. Since character was what made sense of repeated patterns of submission and conformity in the individuals produced by capitalist societies, Reich conceived of it as a kind of 'armor' that won for the subject the ability to tolerate harsh conditions of social existence, but only at the price of a loss of the sensitivity and openness to the world and to others that would make change and transformation possible.<sup>13</sup> The specific modes of defensiveness encountered in the psychoanalytic consulting room were thus, for Reich, connected to the psychic substratum of ideological subjectification (i.e. character).<sup>14</sup>

The research of Fromm and Reich in the early 1930s, and their respective insights into the social mediation of family and character, would converge on the concept of authoritarianism. The study of authoritarianism was the site of emergence for another key concept of Frankfurt School psycho-social research: the *mechanism*. Some of the mechanisms typical of the authoritarian character include identification with the dominating figure, which provides a distorted narcissistic compensation

for objective powerlessness; reversal and projection, which allow for the paranoid structure of right-wing politics and its violent scapegoating; and the sado-masochistic oscillation between violent assertions of the will to power and sacrificial gestures of dissolution. Fromm would later interpret all such mechanisms under the rubric of a more general 'fear of freedom', i.e. as regressive responses to a situation in which the individual is untethered from the traditional containment functions of pre-capitalist social community, and not yet, due to capitalist exploitation, provided the material bases or psychic resources for genuine individuation and autonomy.<sup>15</sup>

After the 1930s, Reich and Fromm both underwent marked transformations. Reich developed his own particular brand of 'orgone' therapeutics, characterized by increasingly grandiose claims and peculiar therapeutic practices. By the end of World War II, Fromm's ideas had also considerably altered: in an epilogue to *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse placed Fromm at the center of a revisionist turn in psychoanalysis that had abandoned the earlier critical perspective. In turning to a more interpersonal theory that made psychoanalysis a promissory note of increased individual autonomy and freedom despite the accelerating irrationality of capitalism, Fromm had, in Marcuse's words, 'resurrected' the creative potentialities of the personality 'in the face of a reality which has all but eliminated the conditions for the personality and its fulfillment', thereby turning psychoanalytic theory into ideology.<sup>16</sup> Fromm's early views, which were built upon the schematism of substitute satisfaction that bound the economic structure of domination to the instinctual drives, was gradually eroded to the position that wrong life can in fact, with the right kind of therapy and ethical exhortation, be lived rightly. It seems, in the end, that Fromm's religious and ethical commitments won out against his critical social theory.

## Löwenthal

Of the thinkers reviewed in this section, Löwenthal is perhaps least associated in the popular imaginary with the Freudo-Marxist moment, yet he is responsible, along with Norbert Guterman, for the most even-handed and cogent application of psychoanalytic concepts that one will find in the collective *oeuvre* of the Frankfurt School. Their 1949 work, *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator*, aims to illuminate the sources of the unconscious appeal of the 'great little man' demagogue whose rhetoric is defined by themes all too familiar to the American public, including the positing of conspiracies; a 'charade of doom'; a hostility toward corrupt government officials, foreigners, and minorities, specifically Jews; and the idealization of an 'endogamic community' of 'simple Americans'.<sup>17</sup> Psychoanalytic concepts appear in discussion of all of these themes, but they are particularly well-used in explaining the unconscious satisfaction involved in the vitriol directed at already marginalized groups, particularly immigrants and refugees. For one, the very instability of the refugee's and the outcast's situation, their lack of a *home*, makes them

symbols of vague unconscious urges, of the repressed contents of the psyche, which, mankind has learned in the course of its history, must be censured and condemned as the price for social and cultural survival. The outcast serves to exorcise the fears as well as the temptations of self-righteous individuals. The hatred for the refugee seems thus a rejection of one's inner potential of freedom.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, at the unconscious level, refugees *deserve* their situation of precarity because their lack of a stable place in society is indicative of their unwillingness to submit to instinctual repression. Labeling them 'parasites' further reinforces their connection to repressed urges: rejecting the parasite, which represents 'that phase in infancy in which the child ... clings to and desires the

mother', allows the follower of the fascist agitator to express 'his subsequent revulsion from this attachment by means of his sadism into which his longing receded after being subjected to serious genital shocks and disappointments'.<sup>19</sup> The natural association of the parasite with filth and disease also elicits a repressed analty: a 'strong believer in the exogenic theory of disease', the agitator relies upon his audience's 'feelings of repulsion to the more obvious manifestations of uncleanness' that they have developed as a result of being coerced as children with 'threats that they will become sick and be punished for their sickness if they violate the rigid hygienic codes'.<sup>20</sup> The 'unclean foreigner' is thus a natural repository for the projection of repressed preoedipal urges and attachments.

In addition to formulating a precise psychoanalytic explanation of xenophobia, *Prophets of Deceit* also addresses the problem of the curious mystique of the agitator, which is attributed to a reactivation of early forms of identification. On the one hand, 'instead of emphasizing the identity of his interests with those of his followers, [the agitator] depicts himself as one of the plain folk, who thinks, lives, and feels like them. In agitation this suggestion of proximity and intimacy takes the place of identification of interests'.<sup>21</sup> In other words, rather than a mature identification with others based upon rational interest, the agitator welcomes an immature identification based upon emotional resonance. On the other hand, the agitator also resorts 'to such traditional American symbols of leadership as the indefatigable businessman and rugged frontiersman' and constructs an image of himself 'as a suffering martyr who, as a reward for his sacrifices, deserves special privileges and unlimited ascendancy over his followers.... One of the plain folk, he is yet far above them; reassuringly close, he is yet infinitely aloof'.<sup>22</sup> What the agitator creates, in other words, is the aura of parental authority and intimacy: close and unassuming, the leader is also powerful and idealized, bearing

all the ambivalence of the relationship to a preoedipal parent.<sup>23</sup>

Löwenthal and Guterman do a great deal more to situate the problem of the appeal of the fascist agitator on psychoanalytic ground – by relating it to ‘the heritage of infantile anxieties’, the projection of ‘disaster on the imaginary enemy’, the ‘gratifying play [of] fantasies arising from repressed destructive impulses’<sup>24</sup> – but their most important lesson is not a psychoanalytic one. For them, the agitator is only able to exploit the unconscious because capitalist subjects suffer from a *malaise* that appears to originate from the depths of the psyche, but is actually a product of modern social developments. The agitator is the worst kind of opportunist in ‘play[ing] upon those disturbing sicknesses of modern life’ that give rise to this malaise, but he is also merely a *symptom* of a ‘world where the individual’s sphere of action is increasingly restricted by anonymous social forces’.<sup>25</sup> In their view, the struggle to attenuate the alienation and immiseration of capitalist society is thus about not merely ‘economic’ justice but also the amelioration of the conditions that make possible fascist agitation.

### **Marcuse**

Whereas Löwenthal and Guterman employed psychoanalysis to make sense of a very particular problem of social theory, Marcuse found radical implications for social theory already at work in psychoanalysis. Two neologisms form the point of departure for his infamous work of 1955, *Eros and Civilization*: the performance principle and surplus-repression. While there are undoubtedly features of physical and human reality that are trans-historical components of any reality principle, the ‘reality’ to which late capitalist subjects accord themselves in the process of ‘maturing’ is an historically specific one defined by competition and alienated labor. To capture this specificity, Marcuse coins the phrase ‘*performance principle*’ in order to

emphasize that under its rule society is stratified according to the competitive economic performances of its members’.<sup>26</sup> The repressive controls over the instincts ‘over and above those indispensable for civilized human association’ demanded by this performance principle are what Marcuse denotes as *surplus-repression*.<sup>27</sup> Dated as both terms have become in certain circles, Marcuse is here only giving specific names to ideas that any responsible social theorist would affirm: that both the ‘reality’ and also the frustrations and anxieties of capitalist subjects are historically specific ones.

Having cut straight to the core of psychoanalytic theory, Marcuse then turns to the central contradiction of capitalist production: that technological advance ‘enhances the scope of material culture, facilitates the procurement of the necessities of life, makes comfort and luxury cheaper, [and] draws ever-larger areas into the orbit of industry – while at the same time sustaining toil and destruction’.<sup>28</sup> Capitalism has always simultaneously made possible and defended itself against a ‘world which could be free’, but for Marcuse, his age was the one in which ‘the discrepancy between potential liberation and actual repression [had] come to maturity’.<sup>29</sup> It was time, he speculated, to start thinking through the possibility of a truly *non-repressive civilization*, one in which our drives do not need to be ‘subordinated to the discipline of work as full-time occupation, to the discipline of monogamic reproduction, [and] to the established system of law and order’.<sup>30</sup> Dealing with the objection that sexuality is fundamentally anti-social for Freud, and thus that freedom from repression would erode ‘lasting interpersonal relations’, Marcuse makes the unfortunate argument that sexuality is ‘self-sublimating’, that it would become socially beneficial all on its own were it not for the excessive repression involved in abiding by the performance principle.<sup>31</sup> All he means to claim here, however, is that a non-repressive society would offer a plethora of sublimated forms for sexuality beyond reproduction and

pseudo-culture. Indeed, in his later work, he would change his terminology and speak instead of a 'lasting *desublimation*' 'manifest in the progressive alleviation and pacification of the struggle for existence, in the growth of refined erotic needs and satisfaction'.<sup>32</sup> This non-repressive desublimation following from an overcoming of the performance principle would allow for a 'free play of human faculties' in which not only the 'receptivity of sensuality' but also the 'spontaneity of reason' would be a 'source of happiness'.<sup>33</sup> In short, we live in a unique moment where happiness and civilization, the drives and reason, pleasure and reality can and *must* be reconciled to an historically unprecedented degree.

Or else! The flip side of Marcuse's supposed 'utopianism' is a dire assessment of what happens if we fail to realize the dialectical possibility inherent in late capitalist society. For one, the revolutionary 'refusal' of repressive sublimation is being channeled into an equally *repressive desublimation*, in which the individual's drives undergo a 'commercial release for business and fun..., replacing mediated by immediate gratification'.<sup>34</sup> Popular culture is, in other words, offering late capitalist subjects the possibility of a domesticated release of instinctual gratification, one that *could* be directed toward political struggle. This 'controlled desublimation', in which 'sexuality turns into a vehicle for the bestsellers of oppression', 'facilitates the acceptance of the misdeeds of this society', and thus works to eliminate the possibility of a non-repressive civilization.<sup>35</sup>

The even more urgent problem inherent in a failure to realize non-repressive civilization lies in a destructiveness that proportions itself to the irrationality of repression. In Marcuse's re-reading of Freudian drive theory (itself derived from the work of Fenichel), Eros and Thanatos spring from 'an originally common root'.<sup>36</sup> The death drive and aggressiveness are only differentiated from Eros and sexuality 'as the result of the trauma of primary frustration'.<sup>37</sup> Marcuse takes this to mean that the frustration involved in the repressive

desublimation and constrained eroticism of late capitalism, one that is enhanced in comparison to how erotic life *could be*, redirects psychic energy toward a powerful destructiveness. This destructiveness is then put to use by instrumental reason toward a compulsive mastery over nature that is demanded by civilization; for this reason, 'destructiveness, in extent and intent, seems to be more directly satisfied in civilization than the libido'.<sup>38</sup> The creation of a non-repressive civilization, so the argument goes, would alleviate the libidinal frustration that is the very source of destructiveness; thus, with 'the gradual elimination of surplus repression', 'an expanding area of destructiveness could be absorbed or neutralized by a strengthened libido'.<sup>39</sup> The urgency of realizing a non-repressive society is thus a question not only of expanding the scope of pleasure but also of snuffing out a planet-threatening destructiveness at its instinctual source.

### **Horkheimer and Adorno**

At the heart of *Eros and Civilization* is a bold historical claim, one that Marcuse shares with his colleagues Horkheimer and Adorno. The claim, often called simply the 'culture industry thesis', is that the forms of media invented and propagated in the first part of the twentieth century (film, radio, television) have annihilated the bourgeois dream of culture and altered the dynamics of the family and of the psyche so as to make the capitalist subject more docile and unthinking.<sup>40</sup> How precisely the culture industry has changed the family structure, and in turn the individual psyche, is the central organizing problem of the shared project of Horkheimer and Adorno, the uncomfortable spur in their sides driving them in different theoretical and methodological directions.

The force of the culture industry thesis can only be appreciated in the historical narrative in which it is couched; thus, to understand the damaging effects of the culture industry,



we must first look at the nature of subject formation before the twentieth century. In the classical bourgeois era, when the aim was to 'tirelessly realize ... the ideal type of *homo oeconomicus*', the 'predominant productive community' of the patricentric family was the norm.<sup>41</sup> In this type of family,

the father's control of his household was doubtless an indispensable condition of progress. The self-control of the individual, the disposition for work and discipline, the ability to hold firmly to certain ideas, consistency in practical life, application of reason, perseverance and pleasure in constructive activity could all be developed, in the circumstances, only under the dictation and guidance of the father whose own education had been won in the school of life.<sup>42</sup>

This is the kind of family that produced the subject of Freud's theories: for this 'old anthropological type',

the ego, the agency of social control within the individual, keeps the drives within the limits set by self-preservation. The areas of friction are large and neuroses, the incidental expenses of such a drive economy, inevitable. Nevertheless, this complex psychical apparatus made possible the relatively free interplay of subjects which constituted the market economy.<sup>43</sup>

In other words, the bourgeois subject was burdened by an excessive guilt and explosively unstable, but at least it was something like an *individual*.<sup>44</sup>

In the age of mass production and the culture industry, by contrast, individuals – in the sense of agents that make decisions based upon 'a painful inner dialogue between conscience, self-preservation, and drives' – no longer exist.<sup>45</sup> In his contribution to *Studies on Authority and the Family* (1936), Horkheimer was content to say that the 'limited family' was increasingly failing to carry out its educational function of producing authority-oriented subjects as a result of bearing a shrunken economic importance, but that the modern family's authority structure can nonetheless 'be strong enough for the father to maintain his position even after its material basis has disappeared'.<sup>46</sup> By the 40s,

however, both he and Adorno were willing to admit that the shell of the bourgeois family had finally caved in, having been penetrated definitively by the culture industry. The new kind of father, socially conditioned for weakness,<sup>47</sup> and mother, icy and brutal instead of warm and comforting,<sup>48</sup> both retain their nominal functions, but they are no longer tasked with producing anything resembling autonomy. With televisions and radios in every home, and movie stars and advertisements bearing the latest sage advice, children are now taught to think within 'the schema of mass culture'. The resulting 'pseudo-individuals' – at different times dubbed new anthropological types, new types of human beings, and authoritarian personalities – think only in stereotypes, want entertainment rather than edification, accept that 'everything is business', and are resigned to agreeing to the world as it is.<sup>49</sup>

The new anthropological type is described psychoanalytically in a variety of ways but *regressed* is probably the best general characterization available: having failed to sublimate primary process energy and to accept the reality principle, the new anthropological type readily pursues unsublimated sexual satisfaction as it is delivered in managed form by the culture industry and thinks in a narrow and paranoid manner reminiscent of the mode of experiencing of preoedipal children. Many interpreters take Horkheimer and Adorno to mean that individuals raised on mass media are lost in fantasied projections like overgrown children,<sup>50</sup> but Adorno in particular emphasizes that the most salient feature of this regression is a *rigidity* with which new anthropological types engage the world, a rigidity represented in a commitment to instrumental rationality and the reality of the status quo. As opposed to old anthropological types, who are rent by the demands of the superego, the id, and reality, and thus able to perceive hesitantly<sup>51</sup> and from different perspectives, new anthropological types are oriented 'straight ahead' and untroubled by a difficult inner dialogue between competing

psychic agencies.<sup>52</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno sometimes describe this rigid unidirectionality as 'ego weakness', and sometimes as 'superego weakness', but the important idea is that a psyche that was previously defined by tension and conflict has been streamlined and flattened.<sup>53</sup> Another way of expressing this same idea in terms closer to Adorno's heart is to say that the psyche is insulated against its own *mimetic* tendencies: oriented straight ahead toward professional tasks and life goals, the new type of human being does not consciously *experience* contradiction and dialectical possibility, and thus cannot engage the capitalist world as it is.

The late capitalist subject does, however, seem to *unconsciously* experience this contradiction, and the result is a blind and manipulable rage. This rage is then processed in 'false projection', which Horkheimer and Adorno describe as the 'reverse of genuine mimesis'.<sup>54</sup> False projection 'displaces the volatile inward into the outer world, branding the intimate friend as foe. Impulses which are not acknowledged by the subject and yet are his, are attributed to the object: the prospective victim'.<sup>55</sup> This rather conventional explanation of anti-Semitism in the fifth chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is immediately followed by a more troubling claim: that 'there are no longer any anti-Semites.... The anti-Semite's conviction, however mendacious it may be, has been absorbed into the preconditioned reflexes of the subjectless exponents of a particular standpoint'.<sup>56</sup> In other words, contemporary anti-Semitism is less a true xenophobia than it is a natural product of mass culture.<sup>57</sup> It is for this reason that Horkheimer and Adorno were prepared readily to equate American consumerism and German fascism: 'The citizens whose lives are split between business and private life, their private life between ostentation and intimacy, their intimacy between the sullen community of marriage and the bitter solace of being entirely alone, at odds with themselves and with everyone, are virtually already Nazis'.<sup>58</sup>

It is this equation that served as the founding conceit of the most well-known of the Frankfurt School's empirical work, *The Authoritarian Personality*, one among many empirical studies carried out in both Germany and the United States that engaged with the composition of the public sphere. Adorno's *The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas' Radio Addresses*, for instance, applied the social-psychological account of authoritarianism developed by Fromm and others to identify and describe the devices of seduction of fascist politics. This study often descends from the usual theoretical heights to the level of practical intervention, a gesture present in much of the Frankfurt School's empirical work. At the end of 'How to Look at Television', written in the 1950s for a mainstream American communications journal, Adorno writes:

The effort here required is of a moral nature itself: knowingly to face psychological mechanisms operating on various levels in order not to become blind and passive victims. We can change this medium of far-reaching potentialities only if we look at it in the same spirit which we hope will one day be expressed by its imagery.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, the empirical studies not only drew their inspiration from the original Frankfurt Institute design of a transdisciplinary dialectical mediation of particular forms of knowledge but were also interventions in the public sphere, combining the most prosaic form of inoculatory enlightenment with the esoteric hopes of 'saving critique'.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps the best examples of this public-sphere oriented 'education to maturity' are the so-called 'Group Experiments', carried out collaboratively after the Institute returned to Germany following the War.<sup>61</sup> These studies, which examine the defensive strategies around confronting the Nazi past through protocol-led group conversations, culminated in Adorno's 'The Meaning of Working Through the Past'.<sup>62</sup> This essay exemplifies the multiple communicational tendencies at work in the best research and productions of the Frankfurt School: it is a

work of applied psychoanalysis that extends Freud's idea of *Durcharbeiten* to an entire society, a work of reflective social theory, and a practical, ideological-critical intervention in the public sphere of the Federal Republic.

### WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE...

The most shocking thing about the reception of the Frankfurt School's use of psychoanalysis is just how paltry it has been. Martin Jay highlighted the 'integration of psychoanalysis' into critical theory in the third chapter of *The Dialectical Imagination*, but the significance he accords it there did not spawn a great deal of interest in this theoretical nexus.<sup>63</sup> Justifying what was in any event already the case, in *Late Marxism* Fredric Jameson questioned the impact of psychoanalysis on the Frankfurt School in claiming that Freud's categories were never 'centrally organizing' as Weber's, Lukács', or Nietzsche's were (a direct contradiction of Horkheimer's assertion that psychoanalysis was 'one of the foundation stones without which our philosophy would not be what it is').<sup>64</sup> Our only guess as to why there has been so little secondary literature here, and thus why Jameson's claim of exaggerated importance would go unchallenged, is that there is a general trepidation or dismissiveness among social theorists about transdisciplinarily engaging the language of psychoanalysis. In this section, we will review the work of Jessica Benjamin and Joel Whitebook (both psychoanalysts with backgrounds in the humanities), who are, almost by default, responsible for the more influential readings of the Frankfurt School's use of psychoanalysis.

In the late seventies, Benjamin formulated a powerful critique of what she dubs the Frankfurt School's 'end of internalization' thesis.

In the present epoch the critical theorists find that authority is directly exercised over individuals rather than internalized – thereby eliminating the

potential for critique or revolt. As a result, the possibility for the formation of a revolutionary subject is foreclosed. In the face of this situation the critical theorists look backward to the form of instinctual control which was the basis for ego development and reason in the past – individual internalization – and argue that only it contained a potential for the formation of a critique of domination. This is the impasse which I refer to as the 'end of internalization'.<sup>65</sup>

Benjamin takes issue with this narrative for many reasons, but for our present purposes, we will highlight two: first, since it is the *father* who is seen as the 'indispensable condition' of instinctual control (as we saw above), the end of internalization thesis represents a 'nostalgic romanticization of paternal authority'.<sup>66</sup> In her view, while Horkheimer had rightly characterized 'obedience as a formal response demanded by a structural role rather than a substantive behavior' in his contribution to *Studies on Authority and the Family*, by the 40s, when he had accepted the demise of the classical bourgeois family, he had idealized old versions of paternal authority and maternal nurturance in order to provide stark relief for the brokenness of the new kinds of fathers and mothers. In so doing, he not only retreated from his more cogent assertion that the authority of the classical bourgeois father lay with economic function rather than moral rectitude, but also callously disregarded the possibility that maternal care encourages autonomy, and thus that 'mutual recognition and nurturant activity ... may guide us in our struggle against instrumental rationality toward a society without the father'.<sup>67</sup>

Second, she takes issue with the idea that the 'impasse is complete'; that, in other words, 'the impact of the mass media, state institutions, professional guidance is so overwhelming that people are now directly manipulated into unthinking conformity'.<sup>68</sup>

This view rests upon an important but questionable methodology and ontological assumption. The assumption is that the active nature of subjectivity

is only brought into being by external pressure, and therefore that it can be extinguished. This assumption breaks with the concept of alienation, which contains the notion that a fundamental need or capacity takes on an objective form which is opposed to, *yet depends on*, the original need or capacity.<sup>69</sup>

On both counts, Benjamin is neither right nor wrong. In the case of the charge of patricentrism, it is true that Horkheimer in particular had an unfortunate tendency to make the simple equation 'father = truth'.<sup>70</sup> That being said, much of 'Authoritarianism and the Family Today', the place where Benjamin notes Horkheimer's theoretical regression, is devoted to a disjunction not between a past familial wholesomeness and a present familial fragmentation but rather between the *reality* of fragmentation and the *fantasy* of wholesomeness. 'The more the family as an essential economic unit loses ground in Western civilization', Horkheimer contends, 'the more society emphasizes its conventional forms'.<sup>71</sup> Thus, the growing child, who receives in reality only 'the abstract idea of arbitrary power' as a father, still 'looks for a stronger, more powerful father' in fantasy (a kind of father which, on Horkheimerian grounds, we have good reason to believe never existed).<sup>72</sup>

In any event, so much of what Horkheimer and Adorno say about the crisis of internalization – the resultant stereotyping, the lack of thinking, the assent to the status quo – has little to do with the father, and to dismiss the whole enterprise as patricentric throws the baby out with the bathwater. To argue, in other words, that the historical problem of the damage done to late capitalist subjects by the imposition of the culture industry on the family is itself a patricentric articulation, is also to say that it is not really a problem; to say, in other words, that the real problem is the problematizers' theoretical lens, which Benjamin recommends should be replaced by one that privileges mutual recognition between subjects. A historical conundrum is tidily avoided with a simple change of

theories, and critical theory thereby returns to traditional theory.

As for the point about direct domination, Benjamin is certainly right that claims about 'ends' and 'completeness' litter the works of Horkheimer and Adorno, but there are two problems with her further contention that this represents a reversal of Marx's problematic of alienation. First, it is not that subjects are delivered 'passively into the grip of external social forces', but rather that the 'active nature' of their subjectivity is manipulated with such psychological sophistication that the possibility of being 'active' in such a way as to undermine the status quo is foreclosed. People act, but they act 'spontaneously according to a "level" determined by indices'; they think, but they think within the 'schema of mass culture'.<sup>73</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno would likely respond to Benjamin's criticisms by saying that the very recognition and nurturance of early life that she so prizes is deftly channeled by a culture industry that 'recognizes' and commends its reliable consumers for their pseudoindividual traits.<sup>74</sup>

Second, it is not clear that either Horkheimer or Adorno ever abandoned the framework of indirect domination. Even in 'Authoritarianism and the Family Today', Horkheimer still asserts the family to be the key site for the production of authoritarianism.<sup>75</sup> Adorno is a more suitable target here, prone as he was toward bold statements, but as Gillian Rose has persuasively argued, the statement that 'consciousness of society is completely reified implies that no critical consciousness or theory is possible'.<sup>76</sup> The thesis of complete reification, like that of an end of internalization, is thus 'unstatable, because if it were true it could not be known'. Adorno presents this impossible thesis 'in order to induce in his reader the development of the latent capacity for non-identity thought – the perspective that the concept is not identical with its object. This is an attempt to prevent the complete reification which is imminent'.<sup>77</sup> In this view, the end of internalization, so long as we understand it,

can only ever be a dangerous diminution of internalization.

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For many years, Joel Whitebook has carried the flag of Freudo-Marxism through various companions and handbooks, and produced what is still the most important work of secondary literature at this intersection, *Perversion and Utopia: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory* (1996). Whitebook's aim there is to 'reinvigorate the psychoanalytic dimension of Critical Theory', but one is immediately struck by just how negatively he portrays the initial encounters of these two domains. In a move that sweepingly dismisses the contradictions of capitalism that the Frankfurt School was trying to take seriously, he describes Marcuse's belief that 'the forces of production have developed to the point where surplus repression constitutes by far the commanding share of renunciation exacted in modern society' as 'utterly naïve'.<sup>78</sup> In fact, Whitebook finds almost nothing salutary in Marcuse's project, criticizing 'its search for an uncontaminated first nature, economism, sloppy argumentation and impracticality'.<sup>79</sup> Marcuse is for him more of a cautionary tale than a base from which to 'reinvigorate the psychoanalytic component of critical theory', given 'not just the banal unworkability of utopia but the profound philosophical flaws in Marcuse's position'.<sup>80</sup>

The real danger here lay in a false equation of material scarcity (*Lebensnot*) and necessity as such (*Ananke*) in Freud: even if we were free of surplus repression, Whitebook argues, we would still be lacking, still be finite, still be subject to a constraining and uncomfortable reality.<sup>81</sup> In arguing for 'a struggle against time' and an historically unprecedented reconciliation of the drives and reason, Marcuse encourages an '*omnipotent denial of reality*', a 'pursuit of "integral satisfaction" that disavows the incomplete and conflictual nature of human existence[, which] brings us into the register of omnipotence and therewith raises

the specter of totalitarianism'.<sup>82</sup> Whitebook is thus quite satisfied that 'the political experiences of the last three decades have chastened the utopian sensibility and produced a new appreciation of human finitude – of difference, particularity, and plurality – as well as a suspicion of grandiose projects and the metanarratives that have traditionally been associated with them'.<sup>83</sup>

Whitebook might be correct that Marcuse's utopianism gets grandiose, especially in the discussions of Orpheus, Narcissus, and temporality as such, but he fails to properly register the fact that *any* political project that questions the legitimacy of present reality can be (and typically *is*) accused of infantile regression. The possibility of a world without necessary and dissatisfying labor has been and *should be* a live one for any advanced capitalist society with developed technological capacities: to dismiss the act of thinking through what this means for human potentialities as 'infantile' is the gesture of a conservative too lazy to refute arguments for socialism rationally. Whitebook's near axiomatic 'respect for liberalism, that sober philosophy that harbors no illusions about human perfectability' makes a real engagement with Marcuse's work almost impossible.<sup>84</sup>

Though not as ideologically charged, Whitebook's assessment of Adorno is similarly bleak: conceiving of ego formation narrowly as a process of '*violent unification or forced synthesis*', Adorno believes the '*principium individuationis is violent as such*', and that the autocratic self formed through this violence in turn 'imposes its rigid unification outwardly onto the diversity of external nature'.<sup>85</sup> Overly reliant on drive theory and id psychology, Whitebook's Adorno 'takes the ego only in its defensive aspect, as the opponent of the drives, and does not sufficiently appreciate its synthetic function'.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, since he 'can only think unity as compulsion', he has nowhere to hang his ideals of autonomy and maturity, and is thus forced endlessly to circle the aporia of subjectivity.<sup>87</sup>

Whitebook believes the ego psychologists, who offer a vision of the ego as mastering without dominating, present a way out of Adorno's theoretical morass.<sup>88</sup> He makes a telling comparison in justifying this move: 'the ego psychologists were compelled to introduce a second dimension, as it were, to correct the instinctual monism of drive theory. Habermas, for similar reasons, introduced the dualistic framework of communicative and instrumental reason to overcome the implicit monism of the early Frankfurt School'.<sup>89</sup> Whitebook's turn to ego psychology could, like Habermas' turn to communicative reason, be seen as a 'solution' to a previous impasse, but it could also be seen as taking the sting out of purposely difficult formulations. To follow Whitebook here, one would have to be convinced, as these authors are not, that Adorno's schizoid alternation between arguing for the preservation and for the ruthless criticism of western subjectivity is a theoretical fault rather than a mimetic presentation of a schizoid reality and a spur to non-identity thinking.

## SHORTCOMINGS AND PROMISES

As should be obvious by now, we find ourselves perplexed as to why precisely the intersection of psychoanalysis and social theory mined by the Frankfurt School should generally be considered obsolete, as it produced a much-needed historicization of psychoanalytic theory; a cogent analysis of fascist agitation; an illumination of the dialectical possibilities, both positive and negative, of late capitalist society; and an historical narrative of capitalist subjectivity that employs psychoanalytic categories to make sense of the demise of the Freudian conception of the psyche. In this final section, we would now like to lay out the general shortcomings of the Frankfurt School's employment of psychoanalysis, as well as hold up what we find most relevant and in need of further development.

As for general deficiencies to be remedied, we will mention four: first, though Jessica Benjamin goes too far in hanging the Frankfurt School with the rope of patricentrism, we agree that far too much is garnered in their work from stereotyped versions of paternal and maternal tendencies. Without misguidedly attempting to undo in theory the reality of the patricentric family, we must be very careful about not reifying gender roles. Recent attempts in psychoanalytic theory to salvage the oedipus theory without the figures of the father and mother, including Benjamin's own theory of the intersubjective 'third', are salutary expressions of very necessary theoretical work.<sup>90</sup> We also agree with Benjamin that there is a lingering nostalgia at work in the formulations of the Frankfurt School. As Robert Hullot-Kentor has recently argued, we ought to think today not about returning to the individual of the liberal era but rather about working through the damaged and regressed subjectivity of the new anthropological type.<sup>91</sup>

Second, the Frankfurt School goes too far, as do psychoanalytic theorists in general, when they unjustifiably transcend the historically specific; when, in other words, they extrapolate from the conditions of the late capitalist subject trans-historical lessons. The 'struggle against time' depicted at the end of *Eros and Civilization* could have been very productively contextualized with something like E.P. Thompson's 'Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism', but Marcuse instead dives headfirst into the kind of philosophical abstraction for which Whitebook takes him to task.<sup>92</sup>

Third, the Frankfurt School was much too reliant on Freud as the beginning and end of psychoanalytic theory: the contributions of Melanie Klein, Anna Freud, Donald Winnicott, Wilfred Bion, Jacques Lacan, and other important psychoanalytic theorists have not been adequately mined for their relevance to social theory. Klein and Lacan are particularly ripe for 'integration': Isaac Balbus and more recently Amy Allen have both started

the project of thinking through the implications of Klein's work for critical theory,<sup>93</sup> and Lacan practically invited comparison in theorizing a 'decline of paternal *imagoes*' that resulted in a new form of subjectivity, what he called the 'subject of science'.<sup>94</sup>

Finally, the gap between the Frankfurt School's theoretical and empirical work was much too wide: though they admirably attempted to translate their philosophy into social scientific terms, much was lost in translation. In *The Authoritarian Personality*, the new anthropological type is opposed to the democratic and autonomous personality, whereas in Horkheimer and Adorno's earlier work on the family, it is opposed to the bourgeois individual. The former thus injects a normative preference into historical analysis in a way that is thoroughly misleading, and that reinforces the incorrect view that the Frankfurt School associated bourgeois individuality with true autonomy.

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The promise we associate with the psychoanalytic project of the Frankfurt School pertains essentially to the hypothesis of the new anthropological type, which is an indispensable starting point for making sense of subjection in late capitalism. What is new and interesting here is not just the idea that subjective experience is objectively determined, the important payoff of Fromm's reconceptualization of the drives and in any event a very old idea; it is rather that late capitalism, the regime of capitalism whose start coincides with the emergence of the culture industry, can be distinguished from capitalism per se by the reformulation of subjectivity in ways that both reduce and enhance alienation. Our alienation from the products we produce, the ways in which we produce them, our species-capacities, and our fellow human beings, produces a basic subjective tension that Marx believes will only be resolved with the overcoming of the contradictions of capitalism. The culture industry partially dispels this tension in

providing outlets for domesticated pleasure, in giving the subject forms of *quick relief* from an existence otherwise dominated by alienated labor. It also *rigidifies* the subject's thinking, and thereby veils objective contradictions. In both ways, the subject is relieved of consciously experiencing an objective alienation, but since alienating conditions are not themselves overcome, the experience of alienation becomes *unconscious*. The new anthropological type fronts fun-loving happiness and adaptable practicality, but underneath this thin veneer the drives seethe, just barely contained. The study of the ways in which these drives find expression – in latching on to fascist agitators, for instance – is the second feature of this project that still holds great promise today. In truth, these two features – the hypothesis of the new anthropological type and the analysis of the social and political fallout of the existence of this type – are of a piece, as the type is formed by conditions that are reinforced by its existence. We only separate them here to mark off two paths of inquiry: one into the conditions that produce subjectivity, the other into the ways in which that subjectivity is then exploited.

Both require some attention after years of disuse. In the case of the former, the invention of the internet and the forms of social media and devices that go along with it undoubtedly require an updating of the culture industry thesis: how, for instance, does using a smartphone differ from watching television? Does it actually provide occasion for more activity, as opposed to the passivity involved in consuming shows, or is that activity a pseudo-activity? Does it reinforce or break down the division between work and play? In ways that generate new dialectical possibilities or not? The replacement of the old forms of news consumption by viral videos and clips from late-night comedy shows spawns a similar line of questions, as do many other developments since the beginning of the culture industry. The changing conditions of the family are particularly important: how do

the stresses of work in the neoliberal world translate in developing psyches? If not care and authority, what *do* parents today represent? These questions are in the social ether today but if the answers are going to continue the historical narrative centered on the new anthropological type, then they must be tackled in reference to the objective contradictions of capitalism as they are experienced by a damaged subject.

As for the second component, fascist rhetoric has, to say the least, entered a new era, and one could imagine a study of Trump's new media assault that pays homage to Adorno's analysis of the speeches of Martin Luther Thomas. The self-reproachful yet thoroughly engrossed way in which *The New York Times* covers his Twitter activity, for instance, speaks to a form of pleasure that we have not begun to understand. Furthermore, the channeling of historically specific rage by fascist rhetoric is only one way in which the drives are manipulated today. The psychopharmaceutical industry was born in response to a need to deal with the unintelligible misery and fragility of late capitalist subjects. Understanding the ways in which drugs organize life today is an urgent problem for a psychoanalytically inflected social theory. More generally, the minefield of irrationality that attends the existence of the new anthropological type can be preyed on in any number of ways: being ever vigilant to its uses and abuses is the best way to stay faithful to the original project of the Frankfurt School.

In all of these lines of inquiry, the Frankfurt School worked toward a truly *transdisciplinary* social science, one that goes beyond the 'interdisciplinarity' of the academic knowledge industry. Their ingenuity was made possible by an unwillingness to 'discipline' their inquiries into fields that speak to the conventions of particular audiences. It is this unwillingness that allowed their work to function as a counterpropaganda in the public sphere, as a kind of *Nacherziehung* [after-education] that undoes the insidious effects of the culture industry in much the same way that

psychoanalysis works on the effect of our personal histories. Like Adorno,

We propose to concentrate on issues of which we are vaguely but uncomfortably aware, even at the expense of our discomfort's mounting, the further and the more systematically our studies proceed. The effort here required is of a moral nature itself: knowingly to face psychological mechanisms operating on various levels in order not to become blind and passive victims. We can change this medium of far-reaching possibilities only if we look at it in the same spirit which we hope will one day be expressed by its imagery.<sup>95</sup>

Finally, the Frankfurt School, as opposed to many psychoanalytic traditions with a political bent, was emphatic about the necessity of social revolution in order to secure the possibility of *Erfahrung*. While psychoanalysis can bring to light the varied ways in which late capitalism forms and exploits psychic subjectivity, it cannot thereby remedy the damage because what is unearthed in analyzing, for instance, a susceptibility to fascist agitation is not a buried and obscure past but rather the unconscious registration of an all-too-apparent present.<sup>96</sup> The essential choice for capitalist society has always been socialism or barbarism; until we achieve the former, psychoanalysis will be consigned to critiquing the latest unpalatable version of the latter.

Late in life, Marcuse made an unfortunately quotable statement: 'Not every problem someone has with his girlfriend is necessarily due to the capitalist mode of production'.<sup>97</sup> He was speaking against the trivialization of the concept of alienation, and his concern seems to have been justified, given the continued expanded use of the term today. But there is a way in which this statement represents a retreat from the radical implications of his and his colleagues' work. The Frankfurt School recognized that capitalism entered a new epoch when an industry devoted to 'pseudo-educating' the general populace through film, radio, and television was born, and that this historical shift had not only profound social, political, and economic implications but also familial and psychic



ones as well. In a very fundamental way, capitalism *is* responsible for the problems in our personal lives: an unreflective narrow-mindedness and a resigned acceptance of fleeting pleasures might be general human tendencies, but they are tendencies that are so encouraged by the culture industry that they have become defining features of subjectivity. The Frankfurt School formulated the uncomfortable thought that thanks to the culture industry, social structure appears at the deepest levels of our psyches, in our pleasures, frustrations, unthinking blunders, and neurotic behaviors. In the tradition of Freud, we hope that the disagreeable is not mistaken for the untrue.

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PART V

# Culture and Aesthetics



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# The Culture Industry

Christian Lotz

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of the culture industry as it is presented in the chapter with the same title in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is the most famous and most widely received and discussed concept in the entire tradition of critical theory and the Frankfurt School. The main reason for the attention that Adorno's and Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry received and still receives can be seen in the authors' strategy to push the concept of ideology, as it can be found in the early Marx, further into the twentieth century. They do this in order to allow readers to extend the critique of ideology to a wider spectrum of cultural, artistic, and entertainment phenomena. In addition, in its uncanny mix of psycho-social and social analysis of consumer entertainment, the book is one of the most important texts written by philosophers that analyses, within broader speculations about history and progress, the wide-ranging consequences of media

practices, such as film, radio, and television, for a mass society and mass audience. Moreover, its beautiful but sharp formulations, as well as its cool and surgical precision expressed in an aphoristic style, makes the text one of the most fascinating documents of the entire history of the Frankfurt School, if not of the entire twentieth century tradition in (European) critical theory. The concept of the 'culture industry' is the magnifying glass of critical theory, and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is its telescope.

The chapter, which in later essays Adorno slightly revised and reformulated, was written at a point in time when Europe faced its darkest horrors and when the main drivers of the enlightenment, such as science, technology, and rationality, turned into the most destructive means of an entire epoch. In addition, the fascist takeover of major areas of the world indicated, as Benjamin has it, the worse failures of the left, most visible in the failure of revolutionary attempts in Europe since the second half of the nineteenth century, which

ended with Hitler in 1933. Finally, new forms of artistic practices, such as photography, film, and radio, turned out to be useful as nasty and murderous tools for fascist propaganda, for the hypnosis of the masses, and for the distribution of the most destructive, anti-Semitic, racist, and genocidal positions created by an authoritarian politics that the world had never seen before. Although this historical context is crucial for getting a sense of the cold distance from which the analyses within the book, which was written during their exile in the United States, are presented by its authors, we would do well to not read the analysis of the culture industry as something that belongs to the past. This is due to the fact that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* emerged in a world that, on the one hand, is still with us, namely, as state and monopoly capitalism, and, on the other hand, returns on the political scene every day somewhere on this globe, namely, as a threatening arrival of authoritarian politics and its accompanying authoritarian population. The reader is asked to understand the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a message in a bottle [*Flaschenpost*] that is addressed to readers who will one day pick up the book and understand that *they* are implicated by what is written in the book, i.e., that the book is written *for us*.

The reception of the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* has had ups and downs since 1947, and it is safe to say that the nature of the reception always depends upon its socio-cultural context. Most standard critiques of the book and its subsection on the culture industry are written from either a post-modern point of view that is bothered by the authors' preference for 'high art', or from the viewpoint of a positivist worldview that can no longer digest philosophical thought, i.e., any thinking without a direct outcome and follow-up assessment. Accordingly, the main charges against Adorno's and Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry are the following: (1) it is elitist<sup>1</sup>, (2) it underestimates the role of the media for democratic education as well as the force of bourgeois

ideals<sup>2</sup>, (3) it remains entirely negative<sup>3</sup>, and (4) it defeats itself because of its performative-contradictory claims based on a critique of reason while using reason.<sup>4</sup> More serious charges are (5) that Adorno and Horkheimer are Eurocentric<sup>5</sup>, (6) that they rely on a concept of history that is obsolete, and (7) that their thinking cannot escape its historical context and belongs to the past. It comes as no surprise, then, that the main *positive* reception of the concept of culture industry focuses both on the important role of mass entertainment and consumer society from the perspective of the communicative and cultural sciences, as well as on the role of the media for consumption and psychology. As such, at least in most cases, this work sets aside the larger background of Adorno's and Horkheimer's writings on the culture industry, such as the Marxist tradition, the analysis of fascist societies and the fascist state, the role of anti-semitism for capitalist societies, and the connection between the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, which he wrote at the same time. Given that much of contemporary critical theory, at least as it is represented in the work of Fraser, Benhabib, Habermas, and Honneth, has given up on the Marxist background of critical theory and in general assumes that we have reached a satisfactory level of democracy in the post-war world, this dismissal should not be surprising. Moreover, mistreatments of core elements of Adorno's and Horkheimer's critical theory are found in main commentaries on Adorno's philosophy and social theory. For example, in the *Cambridge Companion to Adorno* (Huhn, 2004), though it is presented as an authoritative source on Adorno and as a major scholarly companion to Adorno, almost the entire volume dismisses central aspects of Adorno's critical philosophy, such as his class-based concept of society and his lifelong faith in political economy. And while some of the contributors to the Adorno companion mention Marx here and there, in general, they dismiss Adorno's Marxian background and instead deal with Weber and Freud.



Moreover, in distinction to Horkheimer and contemporary critical theorists such as Habermas and Honneth, Adorno never gave up on basic principles of Marx's *Critique of Political Economy*, including the conception of dialectics as outlined in Marx's *Grundrisse*, the concept of social totality, and, mediated by Sohn-Rethel, the principle of exchange and 'real abstraction' that occurs within exchange (Sohn-Rethel, 1978). Rather than understanding society as a sphere of discourses, systems, or layers, Adorno held fast to a concept of capitalist social reality understood as the 'totality of the exchange society'. Accordingly, in this discussion I will develop a re-reading of the culture industry chapter in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as well as reflect on the topics of culture and industry in general through the lens of a broader critical theory of society. Against the reductions of the 'culturalist' understandings of the culture industry, I submit that we should reconnect the concept of culture to the concept of society, to the concept of political economy, as well as to the concept of capital. According to my re-reading, the real 'hinge' that holds these concepts and the culture industry together is Adorno's and Horkheimer's attempt to develop a materialist theory of subjectivity in the culture industry chapter by way of turning Kant's concept of schematism into a social-material concept. What Kant presents in the *Critique of Pure Reason* as a 'mechanism' of reason and the pure imagination to synthesize intuitions with a priori concepts becomes in Adorno and Horkheimer the formulation of the culture industry as a mechanism of (capitalist) society to synthesize and pre-structure social experience with prefabricated ideas. Accordingly, the culture industry is not only a social-material concept, but it is understood by Adorno as the *principle for establishing the unity of society*. The latter aspect is important, especially as this goes along with Adorno's interpretation of the transcendental logic in his lectures after WWII (which are usually not read by readers of Adorno who do not have a philosophical background).

Here, schematization of objecthood does not occur in the mind of the subject; rather, it occurs in social reality and is *produced by the capitalist form of consciousness production*. Beside the fact that it comes closer to a genuine philosophical understanding of the chapter, reading the culture industry chapter from this point of view has the following advantages for a contemporary reading of Adorno and Horkheimer's ideas: (1) it reconnects their work with contemporary analyses of abstraction through the digital world, the electronic and brain industries, and new forms of labor; (2) it offers a counter position to the many, pervading positions found in the wide sense of what is often called 'critical theory', i.e., theorists and philosophers who work in the tradition from Deleuze to Butler; (3) it makes the analyses in Adorno and Horkheimer philosophical again; and (4) it moves Adorno's philosophy closer to a contemporary form of Marxism and Marxist analysis of contemporary capitalism, thereby moving away from the 'official' positions offered in contemporary critical theory, from Habermas to Allen.

## REDISCOVERING THE THEORY BEHIND THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

### *The Culture Industry and Social Totality*

'Kultur' in the German tradition differs from its juxtaposition with civilization, which is how the term is used in the Anglo-American tradition. Culture in the German tradition has a wider and deeper meaning for the understanding of individuals and their flourishing *as* individuals and *as cultivated* individuals. While one line of thinking about culture goes back to the humanist tradition, the other line of thinking about culture goes back to the German tradition in aesthetics and its successor in romanticism.<sup>6</sup>

As to the humanist tradition, though this might seem to be remote, we should not

mistake that the humanist tradition and its focus on 'culture' goes back to Ancient and, in particular, Roman thought, which made its way through the German upper high school system, and until recently remained an important element of what it meant to be an 'educated' and 'cultured' person. For example, culture is used in close connection with philosophy, which is defined as 'cultura animi' [cultivation of the soul] and it has an agricultural sense of 'cultivation'. Culture or cultivation refers to the process of helping something to bring out its utmost essence and telos. A plant can only grow and flourish, and thereby become *free*, if it is held in its own possibilities and if it can develop that which lies in it as a definite possibility. Similarly, an individual can only *become* an individual and in this sense free herself *towards* herself when she grows up in an environment that nourishes and cultivates her own inward possibilities.<sup>7</sup> Though Adorno and Horkheimer do not explicitly speak about culture in this sense, and though they would have distanced themselves from any teleological and quasi-biological determinism (which most prominently is featured in Spengler), they indicate through the object of their critique, namely, the culture *industry*, that true culture and true *Bildung* [character formation] can make one free. Accordingly, culture is not simply a process of suppression, as, for example, in Freud. Indeed, a wider and less conservative meaning of 'Kultur' can be reached if we more broadly understand artistic, creative, and aesthetic activities as truth-oriented (and therefore no longer teleologically determined), which enters the picture through the German tradition in aesthetics as a discipline that, negating the orientation towards the sciences, is related to reason, freedom, and education. Culture, in this tradition, is related to autonomy.

According to this romanticist and aesthetic tradition that Adorno and Horkheimer embrace, culture has a threefold structure of being based on autonomy, spontaneity, and criticism (negative distance), which has its

roots in the idea that aesthetics is an autonomous actualization of reason and judgment.<sup>8</sup> As this tradition has it, aesthetic reason and the aesthetic realm are the *true* realms of human freedom, insofar as – at least if we take Kant for a moment as an authority in this – in theoretical judgments as well as in moral judgments human reason is not really free and autonomous, insofar as reason in these areas of human reality is *bound* by the object and bound to objective truth. However, as Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and the entire romantic aesthetics that followed Schiller holds, aesthetics, art, and creative practices are the 'realm' in which human judgment, reasoning, reflection, and critical engagement can come to a full realization of its own possibilities. Put differently, creativity and the arts are the only way in which humans can really *become* free, spontaneous, and autonomous.<sup>9</sup> Given this, it is immediately clear why Adorno made several attempts to contrast culture with administration rather than with civilization (CI: 123; GS 8: 122). Moreover, it also should be clear why, for Adorno and Horkheimer, true artistic practice is *opposed to capital* and how culture is turned into an industry, since the effect of the industrialization as well as the administered culture is *precisely* to void spontaneity, autonomy, and criticism. Within the culture industry, 'pseudoindividuality reigns' (DoE: 125; GS 3: 177). Sadly, this social structure no longer allows the individual to use her productive imagination and creative capacities independent from the objective world; it no longer allows the individual to 'play' with the world, to lay down her highest ideas in art, to become a flourishing individual, and it no longer permits critical distance from the world as a whole. As a consequence, the total integration of individuals heightens, true future oriented and distanced thinking disappears, and aesthetic reason is diminished, if not destroyed. What is left is a cruel, cold, and brutalizing form of morality as well as an all evasive science that, under its technological veil, fixates and defines what *can* be known.

Society as a given fact 'absorbs the truth content' (CI: 65; GS 3: 303), and appropriated by the positivist (social) sciences, turns into something that has no future and remains what it is forever: 'Imagination is replaced by a mechanically relentless control mechanism which determines whether the latest imago to the distributed really represents an exact, accurate and reliable reflection of the relevant item of reality' (CI: 64; GS 3: 301). Without the free appropriation of new rules and without the critical distance of judgments, society becomes a naturalized and reified thing that appears as something external to social individuals. The culture industry, as Adorno's and Horkheimer's argument can be read, affirms this increasing naturalization.

A third sense of 'culture', in addition to the humanist and aesthetic sense of the term, that Adorno and Horkheimer implicitly have in mind comes into play through twentieth-century philosophy and social theory, particularly through the thought of Simmel and Lukács, and suggests that we read the culture industry chapter through the lens of a theory of capitalist reproduction. According to Lukács's early work, which in turn was influenced by Simmel and Neo-Kantian philosophies, and which was read by all members of the early Frankfurt School, 'culture' can be interpreted through an expanded version of Marx's concept of commodity and commodification. Lukács tried to extend the concept of commodity, and what he saw as its being limited in Marx to the products of labor, by arguing that, once we understand commodity relations as constituted by a larger horizon of meaning, commodification can also be understood as reification, which can then be extended to all kinds of social phenomena, such as the arts, language, law, love, and politics.<sup>10</sup> Reification, he argued, extends Marx's basic ideas beyond the realm of production to include the entirety of social activities and products, i.e., culture. This shift is important for two main reasons: (1) it expands the reach of Marxism and Marxist philosophy beyond the narrow realm of labor and production, and

(2) it can more properly argue that 'culture' is not simply an echo or the superstructure above an economic base, but, instead, is a substantial part of the reproduction of the entire system. Culture, in this sense, becomes central for a critical theory that tries to grasp social reality through the lens of political economy. Though Adorno's and Horkheimer's analysis nicely shows how a specific ideological and psychic structure (for example, desires) are produced as empty wishes by the culture industry, they rarely trace this structure back to the fact that it depends upon the structure of production by media corporations and the structure of distribution and consumption (for this, see Wayne, 2003: 61–86). Adorno and Horkheimer primarily focus on the products themselves.<sup>11</sup>

Seen from this perspective, culture is not simply an arena for beliefs, for mental structures, for ideas, or for the construction of body knowledge about society itself; rather, it becomes functional for the reproduction of the *system itself* as a sort of 'super-ideology' that produces and structures thought in a way that is uncritical, equalized, standardized, and unified. Accordingly, for Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industry is not simply the arena for false beliefs or the formation of a belief system that leads to cognitive distortions, implicit biases, or other forms of cognitive mismatch with reality; instead, the culture industry becomes one, if not *the*, main dimension of society through which capitalist society reproduces itself. Knowledge is here not seen as something external to society or, as a poor reading of Marx has it, as 'superstructure'; rather, knowledge of society and its subjectivity is itself part of its reproduction. This conclusion is very important for understanding the concept of the culture industry, especially given that the majority of the literature still interprets the culture industry as a construction of the knowledge of societal members towards the external reality; the point, however, is to understand the culture industry as a *self*-relation through which societal members gain knowledge of themselves as *societal* members.<sup>12</sup>

## ***The Culture Industry as Social Schematism***

The philosophical dimension of Adorno's and Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry within the horizon of a theory of capitalist social reproduction is closely linked to the self-relation of this society to itself and the self-knowledge that it produces for its own operations. In a central passage that is not often read because it is not contained in the chapter on the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the authors write the following:

The true nature of the schematism which externally coordinates the universal and the particular, the concept and the individual, case, finally turns out, in current science, to be the interest of industrial society. Being is apprehended in terms of manipulation and administration. Everything including the individual human being, not to mention the animal, becomes a repeatable, replaceable process, a mere example of the conceptual models of the system. Conflict between administrative, reifying science, between the public mind and the experience of the individual, is precluded by the prevailing circumstances. The senses are determined by the conceptual apparatus in advance of perception; the citizen sees the world as made a priori of the stuff from which he himself constructs it. Kant intuitively anticipated what Hollywood has consciously put into practice: images are precensored during production by the same standard of understanding which will later determine their reception by viewers. (DoE: 65; GS 3: 102)

Here, the authors put to work one of the most important concepts in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in their analysis of the culture industry and mass entertainment. In Kant's *Critique*, 'schematism' is a mechanism that – independent from the empirical appropriation of the world – makes it possible for the human mind to have a 'stable' and given reality at all. According to Kant, and summarized in a very reductive way, the productive imagination produces a pure synthesis of pure intuitions and the rational categories needed to have a reality at all. Since the categories are at the same time the conditions for the intelligibility of *objects as objects*,

i.e., as objects *for* reason, the schematism allows reason to 'project' in advance a structured world *in which* or *through which* all concrete experiences are possible. In another passage, the authors write:

According to Kant, the homogeneity of the general and the particular is guaranteed by the 'schematism of pure understanding', by which he means the unconscious activity of the intellectual mechanism which structures perception in accordance with the understanding. The intelligibility which subjective judgment discovers in any matter is imprinted on that matter by the intellect as an objective quality *before it enters the ego*. Without such a schematism, in short, without the intellectual element in perception, no impression would conform to the corresponding concept, no category to the particular example; thought, not to speak of the system towards which everything is directed, *would be devoid of unity*. (DoE: 64; GS 3: 100; italics, C.L.)

In this passage I highlighted that the schematism itself functions as an 'unconscious' mechanism in the soul before the ego and its rationality can get hold of it. Two things are important in this regard: (1) even if, out of context, this passage reads like a Freudian translation of the epistemological concept found in Kant, a further careful reading reveals that Adorno and Horkheimer reframe the concept of schematism by giving it a social-material meaning; (2) Adorno and Horkheimer stress the fact that in Kant, schematism is important for establishing the *unity* of the knowledge of reality, and, since in Kant the conditions for the possibility of *knowledge* of things are at the same time the conditions for the possibility of the knowledge of *things*, the unity that they have in mind is the *social-material* unity of society *in its self-knowledge*. The social-material transition that Adorno and Horkheimer prepare here, the idea for which they received from Sohn-Rethel's theory of social abstraction (Sohn-Rethel, 1978), is based on the claim that the culture industry is the real-existing social-material schema that establishes the framework of social knowledge *as such*. 'Knowledge as such' refers here to

knowledge that this society – *as a specifically capitalist society* – can generate under these conditions, and to the possibility of knowing itself *as* such a society in its unity. The culture industry, accordingly, stands for the knowledge that capitalist society needs to have of itself in order to allow for all concrete activities that fall under it. Moreover, with respect to individuals it establishes a pre-perceptive frame in which the world as a whole is projected in advance, which ‘censors’ in advance what can be experienced *in* this world. The culture industry establishes a socially a priori harmony between production and consumption. Put in Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s words:

Even during their leisure time, consumers must orient themselves according to the unity of production. The active contribution which Kantian schematism still expected of subjects – that they should, from the first, relate sensuous multiplicity to fundamental concepts – is denied to the subject by industry. It purveys schematism as its first service to the customer. According to Kantian schematism, a secret mechanism within the psyche preformed immediate data to fit them into the system of pure reason. That secret has now been unraveled. (DoE: 98; GS 3: 145)

It is interesting to note that the ‘dreamless art for the people’ (DoE: 98) comes close to a surprising formulation that Marx uses in regard to capital fetishism in his preparatory manuscripts for *Capital*, written between 1861 and 1863. Marx describes the commodity fetishism, which he analyses in this manuscript as interest and capital fetishism, in an astonishing formula, as ‘fiction without fantasy’ (Marx, 1979: 1450).<sup>13</sup> What this means is that in its schematization of what can be meaningfully experienced under capitalism, the culture industry functions in the same fashion as commodity fetishism in Marx, insofar as commodity fetishism is not a subjective form of knowledge or belief; rather, it is the objective and, hence, unconscious praxis tied to the entire exchange and production praxis of valorized labor and commodities. Indeed, fetishism is an ‘objective

fiction’ for which subjective engagement is no longer needed. Similarly, the culture industry is the projection of societal self-knowledge for which experience – as something that escapes the culture industry – is no longer meaningful.

### ***The Main Characteristics of the Culture Industry***

The culture industry as a societal schematism that projects forward a frame for the unity of experience and understanding, ahead of all concrete activity, is characterized by a few noteworthy concepts of social understanding, which are implicitly opposed to ‘true’ culture as something that is based on *uniqueness, non-instrumentality, autonomy, imagination, exceptionality, happiness, transcendence, utopian impulses, needs, beauty, and complexity*. In contrast, the culture industry prefigures sociality as something that is based on *sameness, repeatability, instrumentality, affirmation, empty wishes, and simplicity*.<sup>14</sup> The most important social concept under which everything becomes possible in a capitalist society is *sameness*:

The schematic nature of this procedure is evident from the fact that the mechanically differentiated products are ultimately all the same. That the difference between the models of Chrysler and General Motors is fundamentally illusory is known by any child, who is fascinated by that very difference. (DoE: 97; GS 3: 144)

Sameness is important because it allows us to see more easily the connection to the question of exchange and the real abstraction that is a part of its form. Among many other things, one aspect that is crucial for the viability of the value form in Marx’s *Capital* is that value be based on an abstraction that establishes a universal *exchangeability* of everything with everything. As the authors put it, ‘[w]hatever might be different is made the same. [...] The identity of everything with everything is bought at the cost that

nothing can at the same time be identical to itself' (DoE: 8; GS 3: 28). The quantitative equation that makes commodities exchangeable requires a qualitative dimension that *makes it possible* for commodities to be equated with each other, which, in turn, permits them to be exchanged. Although we do not need to go into all the details of abstraction, wherein abstract labor and value become the universal form that all activities under capitalist conditions take on in reality, it is important to note that Adorno and Horkheimer do not simply operate with an empty opposition of sameness and difference as the speculative structure of modernity (a la Heidegger); instead, as the quotation above shows, Adorno and Horkheimer claim that the framework of sameness from which the culture industry as self-knowledge of capitalist society is derived includes both how it constitutes the identity of products as well as the meaningful horizon for consumption, necessary for capitalist production insofar as autonomous and spontaneous products no longer 'fit' in a valorized world.

The connection between epistemology and social theory as social ontology is also very clearly indicated in other central writings of Adorno: for example, for Adorno, nonidentity is the key concept for what it means to know something *and* the core of social theory as a theory of social reality. Qualitatively different use values are rendered equivalent through a third moment or mediating relation, namely, abstract human labor. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno writes, 'the reduction of human labor to the abstract universal concept of average working hours, is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification' (Adorno, 1973: 146). Identity thinking and its accompanying epistemology, hence, are not simply a problem for social theorists and earlier philosophy; rather, it constitutes the *reality* of capitalist social organization. Social epistemology is not only a reconstruction of what and how something like (capitalist) society can be known in and as theory, but it is also constituted *within* society, allowing the basic

concepts of such a theory to function as ontological guiding clues for understanding social *reality*. The critique of identity thinking is therefore *identical with* the analysis and the critique of existing society. Overcoming identity thinking, consequently, is not only a theoretical or academic task, it is at the same time a *political* task. To think from the standpoint of redemption means that we philosophize from the standpoint of a world in which capital is no longer the all-encompassing principle of social structuration. Put differently, the exchange principle is *both* a category that constitutes social knowledge *and* a category that constitutes social reality.<sup>15</sup>

In a similar fashion, the main features that Adorno and Horkheimer attribute to the schema of an industrialized culture are *precisely* those that also characterize the value form and, consequently, capital. Speculatively put, the culture industry is the means through which value is known in the everyday life of individuals socialized in modern societies. Accordingly, we misunderstand the thesis about the sameness of the products of the culture industry if we think of the sameness as one of content; on the contrary, the sameness is an argument about the *form* of cultural products.<sup>16</sup>

The question of sameness has more recently been explored in relation to celebrity culture and the role of fame both for cultural products and for commodities as brands. For example, Taylor and Harris write (2008: 135):

Adorno argued that the culture industry relies upon an unhealthy denial of the marginal nature of the supposed differences between what are essentially the same commodities. The illusion of difference is created by the advertising industry's manufacture of superficial distinctions and purported attributes. This aspect of the culture industry's output is equally true in relation to celebrities and brands. Successfully advertised goods mean that inanimate objects become celebrity products.

The authors illustrate their thesis with reference to tv reality shows and music shows such as *American Idol* or *The Apprentice* (whose starring role, not by chance, was

played by the current US president, Donald Trump, bringing together the branding of himself as a celebrity commodity and fame-power). In these and other examples, celebrity and commodity form are tied together by fame and by what the authors call 'abstract desire' (Taylor and Harris 2008: 138) and the 'politics of banality' (149). The audience is included in 'banality tv' (154) as a participating consumer, and the 'judges' sell the musical products and songs as representatives of the music industry. Moreover, as the authors underline, celebrity culture is closely connected to personality-based politics as spectacle: 'both celebrity culture and the closely related personality-based politics, share the exposure of people's private lives as a distraction from more substantive structural issues – political, social and economic questions – emotional affect replaces political effect' (154).<sup>17</sup>

Closely connected to the category of sameness is the concept of *repeatability*, which, though it follows from the abstract sameness of all things that characterize the products of the culture industry, also differs in one important respect, namely, that its sameness is based on the prevention of *newness* that is already inherent in the value form. '[T]he leveling rule of abstraction', as the authors have it, 'makes everything in nature repeatable' (DoE: 9; GS 3: 29). Products of the culture industry cannot fall outside of the schema, need to be repeatable in principle, and therefore cannot reach real autonomy and spontaneity: 'What is new, however, is that the irreconcilable elements of the concepts of culture, art, and amusement, have been subjected equally to the concept of purpose. [...] Its element is repetition' (DoE: 108; GS 3: 157).

From repeatability and *purpose* we can directly derive the concept of *instrumentality*. The culture industry does not permit a meaningful world in which things are produced, or activities are undertaken, for their inner qualities alone; instead, cultural consumption products are received in accordance with a horizon of assessment through

which everything needs to be 'good for something else' and must be useful for the sake of the overall context of production and capital. Instrumentality should be seen here in close proximity with political economy, insofar as under the universal condition of valorized labor and valorized life everything that humans produce and create has, in the end, only one 'use', namely, to function as a use value for the growth of wealth, i.e., for the self-referential increase of capital and growth of a society that is caught in its mechanisms. As one commentator puts it, '[c]ulture is made specifically for the purpose of being sold; production is subordinated to distribution and the promise of art is thereby dissolved' (Gunster, 2000: 48). As a consequence, everything becomes subjected to the value form, and the culture industry presents us with the knowledge of the value form, and of capital in the form of culture and cultural consumption.

The true function of all cultural products for the commodity and value form and its inherent abstraction, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, is to empty out all wishes and desires that might still be contained in a perverted form in the production of cultural products. 'The culture industry does not sublimate, it suppresses' (DoE: 111; GS 3: 161). Having abstract wishes and desires, however, entails that desires, which under different circumstances would transcend the given reality towards happiness, satisfaction and the fulfillment of needs, become subjected to an empty form (which can then be filled with *any* commodity, or can *repeatedly* be filled with the same commodity). Happiness becomes reduced to the repetition of the same. For Adorno and Horkheimer, canned laughter, enforced fun, and the general gag culture are the best examples of empty repetitions. Laughter becomes the 'instrument for cheating happiness' (DoE: 112; GS 3: 162), nothing is taken seriously anymore, and pseudo-individuality and pseudo-authenticity reign. As the authors state, '[t]he culture industry endlessly cheats its consumer out of what it endlessly promises.

The promissory note of pleasure issued by plot and packaging is indefinitely prolonged' (DoE: 111; GS 3: 161).<sup>18</sup>

As a consequence, society is treated by the culture industry as a given and as a fact. Capitalism is carved in stone. The commodity culture frames all meaning for creative and artistic praxis. The culture industry opens up the same positivistic paradigm as the modern sciences, insofar as everything becomes turned into nature and information. Transcendence, once centered in art and theory, withers away. Everything is what it is.  $A=A$  is the law of value, now made known to every consumer. Products of the culture industry 'are nothing but what they are' (CI: 89; GS 3: 329).

In sum, the ultimate horizon that the culture industry establishes is the socially existing knowledge that belongs to value and the commodity form as existing social relations in their abstract reality. It produces the subjective knowledge of what, objectively, belongs to the value and commodity form. The abstraction that the culture industry carries forward is the commodity fetishism elevated to a general and universal knowledge of this society in its really existing social form.

## EXTENSIONS: CULTURE INDUSTRY AS LIFE INDUSTRY

Adorno's and Horkheimer's treatment of the culture industry is still based on what we might call a 'remainder of subjectivism' in their analysis, if we mean by 'subjectivism' remnants of the idealist philosophy of subjectivity. For example, they still speak of the culture industry as a 'filter' (DoE: 99; GS 3: 147) between the consumer and the world, which, in the context of new forms of production and consumption that we have seen emerging in recent decades, should be modified.<sup>19</sup> Put differently, they assume that there is a subjective 'psychic realm' between intellect and reality. Recent developments have

witnessed the attempt by industries to connect to the mind (electronics, networks), or to life (bio) and the brain (neuro), in order to *directly produce* the mind and brain required for the reproduction of capitalist society. The goal is to make the entirety of life adaptable to the demands of growth and capital, whereby the neurosciences and bio-engineering in connection with the electronic industries are pushing the culture industry onto new levels including human organs, our DNA, and the brain.<sup>20</sup> Through new developments in the brain and life sciences, we are now at a point where the culture industry that Adorno and Horkheimer had in mind (film, radio, tv, advertisement, etc.) becomes less important given that the industries that deal with the entire range of human mental activities and capacities are about to modify these activities and capacities through direct technological modifications and production. These technologies include screens, electronic devices, GPS systems, algorithms, chips, self-ordering refrigerators, and Google-powered glasses. Through these network technologies, a global system of devices and a global internet of things has been established. 'Technologies of the soul' (Stiegler, 2014: 12) and 'programming industries' (Stiegler, 2011: 113) replace the traditional media industries (although they still have the same function) and lead to a '*becoming-commodity of consciousness*' (Stiegler, 2011: 63). The schematism, we might say, becomes implanted where Kant had already located it, namely, *in* the human body and within the human mind. Human organs are powered by technologies that are interconnected through networks, deliver data to digital industries, and make predictions on their own. New 'cultural' products are video games, portable televisions, 3D virtual-reality devices, phone apps, and tracking devices that will be implanted in the body, or developments in the neurosciences that make products marketable by directly controlling consumers. For example, neuroscientific research is used for developing



stimulating systems that can direct consumers' desires without their knowledge. Since these new digital systems keep track of virtually everything, and since they do not forget, they become more knowledgeable than their users. For example, a phone app knows more about the user than the user does about herself. Cultural products in digital and network form can be infinitely modified and placed virtually everywhere; in other words, the *entire* time span and the entire spatial world of individuals can now be occupied by these new cultural products. Again, this scenario goes beyond what Adorno and Horkheimer envisaged, insofar as it will at some point eliminate subjectivity altogether. Consumers' desires will be controlled through 'injections' in the body.

A foreshadow can be seen in the fact that screens are virtually *everywhere* and *always* with us; and behind the surface everything can be traced back to the interest of capital (Stiegler, 2011: 7). Similarly, Jonathan Beller has argued that the products of the culture industry 'are today imbricated in perception itself' (Beller, 2006: 1), which is the effect of the further development of the internet as an all pervasive network of cultural production for the sake of value. As a consequence, the human senses are *produced* and reorganized by new technologies of vision and attention building via the 'incorporation of bodies by capital' (Beller, 2006: 13; for more on this point, also see McLuhan, 1994). What began in the nineteenth century as the 'revolutionizing of the means of perception' (Crary, 2001: 13) has expanded to include digital production. Google is the new Hollywood. Seen from this point of view, film theaters, looked at by Adorno with suspicion because of their mass character, seem to be a romantic thing of the past.

Following Adorno and Horkheimer, Stiegler argues that it is 'libidinal energy itself that tends to be destroyed – that energy of which the objects, which are *those of belief*, are now systematically submitted to calculation in every sphere' (Stiegler, 2013: 65).

This sphere, as mentioned above, goes *beyond* the mental sphere. What is experienced as need, however, is now controlled by mental industries, especially since any desire for something outside of consumption has been taken over by a system of need production. It is no longer simply the case that media technologies take over language (through writing, books, machines, computerization, media, standardizations, etc.); they now take over the whole psychic and sensual apparatus of humans: vision, auditory systems, touch, pain, etc. The whole range of the *noein*, in other words, is in the process of being *produced* by these industries. Consequently, what Adorno and Horkheimer fail to see is that the thesis about the schematization of social objects needs to be supported by a theory of social reproduction and the production of subjectivity required for this reproduction. Towards this end, Stiegler has worked out some aspects of what he calls the 'industrialization of memory' through which subjectivities are produced *before* memory can be externalized (for this, see Stiegler, 2010). Memory, i.e., the access that subjects can gain to themselves and their past, can increasingly *only* be exercised through devices, databases, networks, information technology, etc. Put simply, the (network of) devices always already knows more than the individual. Although libraries also 'know' more than their users, they cannot influence the behavior of individuals in a direct manner. In the case of electronic industries, the individual and the knowledge of her preferences, history, biography, past choices, etc. are connected to each other through the new 'media'. The face-recognition camera in the store will make 'choices' for me and control my desires without me knowing it; my phone, knowing my 'preferences', will guide me to a specific painting in the *Chicago Art Institute*. The problem is not, as Plato once bemoaned, that we forget through externalization; rather, our knowledge is *already* externalized before it confronts the subject. 'Manipulation' of

desires and wishes no longer needs the psyche. The content of our desires can now be created directly. This is a new dimension of industrialized culture; it allows the industries and their fully subsumed sciences to short circuit the ‘cultural’ products that Adorno and Horkheimer had in mind. The identity logic of the culture industry can now directly be produced with screens that function on the level of the brain, i.e., as external mind devices. Similarly, the identity logic of value that Adorno and Horkheimer see operating in the logic of industrialized culture now becomes a ‘global mnemotechnical system’ (Stiegler, 2011: 8) that connects (in principle) every *thing* with every other thing on earth. Global consumption time is now addressed as ‘brain time’ (Stiegler, 2014: 2), and the bitter diagnosis is that this leads to a ‘systematic organization of stupidity’ and the ‘liquidation of all trust and all hope’ (Stiegler, 2013: 67).

Although these new analyses à la Beller and Stiegler are based on an analysis of noetic technologies, we should note that their conclusions are similar to Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s insofar as the integration of individuals into the existing system, and their subsumption to value and commodity form, is still the main consequence of these new developments.

## CONCLUSION

Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s reflections on the culture industry were written in ‘dark times’, and, despite all exaggerations, simplifications, and contemporary extensions, we would do well not to forget that the threat of a fascist world, authoritarian politics, meaningless propaganda, and the production of cultural consumption is with us every day, and, furthermore, that its promises are as empty as they were during the first half of the twentieth century. Given recent political, cultural, and technological developments,

one rather wonders whether, just on a higher level of development, we are in the process of moving back to precisely the same social, economic, and political condition that all early critical theorists endured. Marx’s definition of the proletariat as ‘subject without substance’ – the abstract Cartesian ego – can now be applied to all of us. We are emptied out as consumers and rendered abstract knowers. We consume products that no one needs and we know things that have no real content.

## Notes

- 1 This charge can be found in much Anglo-American literature on how Adorno treats jazz music; however, see a defense of Adorno in Thompson, 2010.
- 2 For these charges, see Habermas, 1985: 138, 145, and 154. In this vein, we should not underestimate that Adorno participated very often in television and radio programs after his return to Germany. In addition, especially the public lectures on topics in education [*Erziehung*] and character formation [*Bildung*] highlight the fact that Adorno’s relation to mass media and public enlightenment is not entirely negative. For example, see his lecture on education after Auschwitz in GS 10.2: 674–690.
- 3 Already in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer look for openings, and especially in Adorno’s later writings it becomes clear that he begins to see the deeper ambivalences of mass entertainment; for this, see Kepler’s contribution in Klein et al., 2011: 257–60.
- 4 For this charge, see the overall thesis in Habermas, 1985.
- 5 For this charge, see, in the larger context of recent Frankfurt School theorizing, Allen, 2014.
- 6 Jameson does not see this historical connection in his threefold conception of culture as a social pattern, everyday life, and creative products (for this, see Jameson, 2007: 17). ‘Kultur’ also has a conservative ring to it in what is called ‘Kulturnation’ [nation of culture] and the political importance of German language and the arts for the ‘German identity’. Although Adorno and Horkheimer cannot be tied to this strand of thinking about culture, it nevertheless would be worthwhile to investigate how they still stick to what could be called a Germany-centered appropriation of the philosophical tradition and of world history.

- 7 We should also not mistake that the 'enemy' philosophers of critical theory, at least in Germany, tried to occupy the terrain of culture, too. For example, Adorno was opposed to a famous book, *Der Verlust der Mitte*, by art historian Hans Sedlmayr; and we should not forget that Martin Heidegger, in an important lecture after WWII entitled *Bauen, Wohnen, Denken*, which deals with architecture and building, refers to cultivation as a way of building and bringing out the essential possibilities in an entity, thereby explicitly bringing out its agricultural sense.
- 8 For more on this argument, see Skees, 2011. In this vein, we should note that Kant refers by 'spontaneity' (1) to the capacity of thought to synthesize objects, (2) to the capacity of the productive imagination [*Einbildungskraft*] to apprehend intuitions, as well as (3) to the foundation for the idea of freedom. Again, we can see that we find a subtle Kantian structure in the culture industry chapter.
- 9 This idea also runs through the (lost) German tradition of elevating museums, artists, language, poetry, and theatre to the level of national education.
- 10 I have argued in a recent essay that Lukács's reading of Marx is a 'productive misreading', since Marx's concept of commodity can already be read as a *social form*, i.e., as something that can shape the entirety of social relations and can therefore turn into the 'culture' of capitalism; for this argument, see Lotz, 2017a.
- 11 In recent decades there has been some research done to unveil the concrete mechanisms and political economy of the media industry (for an overview of this, see Cook, 1996: 27–51; for an overview of cultural economy, though to a large extent uncritical and orthodox, see Armin and Thrift, 2004; for a critical position, see Fuchs, 2015).
- 12 As an example of a misreading of the knowledge production in the culture industry, see Keppler's contribution in the most recent handbook on Adorno in Klein et al., 2011. She interprets the culture industry as a construction of the 'awareness of the complexity and the wealth of societal and individual reality' (2011: 261). In contrast, I would argue that, although her position is not entirely wrong, it reproduces the often misunderstood paradigm of 'false consciousness'. The theory that the media system is establishing a 'false consciousness' can also be found in the US-American left, including in Noam Chomsky's theory of 'Manufacturing Consent'. I try to indicate here that Adorno's concept of 'integration' should be located on the meta-level of establishing social unity and synthesis as knowledge of itself as capitalist society, which is not to be confused with how the media system schematizes information about social reality. In this vein, it would be worthwhile to think more about the relation between the culture industry and Althusser's concept of ideology as the establishment of an 'absolute subject'; for this, see Althusser, 2014. For a further attempt to think about the meta-level integration and the schematization of time and temporality, see my own attempt in Lotz, 2016.
- 13 For more on this, see Lotz, 2017b.
- 14 Seel and Keppler reduce the main features of industrially produced cultural products to manipulation and leveling (Seel and Keppler, 2004: 98). I would argue that they underestimate the 'logical' and schematic aspect of what makes cultural objects in a capitalist system possible. As a consequence, concepts that have a Kantian heritage, such as unity, identity, relation, etc., seem to be more adequate. Seel and Keppler argue against Adorno that there is a moment of non-identity in modern mass culture; for this argument, also see the analysis of consumer culture in Illouz, 1997. Illouz argues that the consumption of love as a commodity still contains an authentic promise.
- 15 For an extension of this idea and its relation to money, see Lotz, 2016.
- 16 For more on this point, see Gunster, 2000: 43.
- 17 For a discussion of the production of *non-communication*, see Baudrillard, 1981 and 1998.
- 18 The structure of promise and desire can also be analyzed with Marx's concept of use value, which the culture industry promises but never delivers (for this, see Haug, 1986).
- 19 The same modification would need to be made to Debord's concept of the spectacle and his thesis that 'the spectacle is capital accumulated to the point that it becomes images' (Debord, 2011: 17).
- 20 In this vein, although he had not yet grasped the full development towards what is now called 'cognitive' capitalism (Moulier-Boutang, 2012), Enzensberger already proposed extending the concept of culture industry to what he calls 'consciousness-industry' (Enzensberger, 1962: 7–17).

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# Erziehung: The Critical Theory of Education and Counter-Education

Matthew Charles

The main texts associated with the foundation of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, 1977; Fromm, 2014: 165–201; Horkheimer, 1993; Horkheimer, 2002: 188–243; Marcuse, 2009) develop a distinction between ‘traditional’ and ‘critical’ theory via a conception of research that seeks to transform the established understanding of modern scholarly activity, the relationships between academic disciplines and their associated methodologies, and between academic knowledge and contemporary society. In this sense, critical theory originates as a critique *of theory*, in the sense of the activity of scholarship and research that informs and, with respect to higher education, is considered integral to, modern systems of education.

Central to Max Horkheimer’s (2002a: 190–1) understanding of critical theory is its difference from a traditional conception of theory which, particularly in ‘Anglo-Saxon universities’ from the modern period onwards, conceives of the scholarly production of knowledge according to a model of

the natural sciences that reflects the dominance of industrial production techniques within modern society. In this sense, scholarship is part of humanity’s productive powers (Horkheimer, 2002: 3), for the ‘application of all intellectual and physical means for the mastery of nature’ rests upon the ‘knowledge of man and nature which is stored up in the sciences and in historical experience’ (Horkheimer, 2002: 213, 226). When intellectual production becomes reified as something eternal and natural, however, it leads traditional theory to become unreflective of its own historical and social foundations (Horkheimer, 2002: 194). Horkheimer and others establish the project of the Institute for Social Research as a critical theory that is *materialist* and *dialectical*, in the sense of rejecting the idealist illusion that the cognitive capacities alone are sufficient to grasp, let alone transform, ‘the totality of the real’ (Adorno, 1977: 120, 127–8; cf. Horkheimer, 2002: 242–3; Marcuse, 2009: 100) and of rejecting the empirical facts

of positivistic scientific research as something ‘finished ... indestructible and static’ (Adorno, 1977: 126, 130; cf. Horkheimer, 2002: 199–200).

A number of broad implications for a critical conception of scholarship follow: research must renounce its *systematic* intention (Adorno, 1977: 127, 120), call traditional disciplinary boundaries into question by becoming *inter-* or *transdisciplinary* (Horkheimer, 1993: 1; Adorno, 1977: 130; cf. Osborne, 2011: 15), and foster a *social* mode of practice, in the sense of undertaking ‘permanent collaboration ... in common’ with others (Horkheimer, 1993: 10) and also overcoming the division of labour that detaches academic research from wider society and social life processes (Horkheimer, 2002: 198, 221–4). Renouncing pretensions to disinterestedness, critical theory must speak of what its research means for human and social life beyond the narrow sphere of academic scholarship, concerning itself with human happiness and its realization through the transformation of society (Marcuse, 2009: 100).

These early texts from the 1930s have less to say, however, about the dissemination of such knowledge through the formal activities of teaching and publication and their connection to pedagogical issues of learning and study. In his reflections concerning the ‘transmission of critical theory’, Horkheimer (2002: 241) merely cautions that it is never guaranteed any future ‘community of transmitters’, for this is only assured through an ongoing ‘concern for social transformation ... aroused ever anew by prevailing injustice’. When he does indicate the role of the Institute in supplementing the ‘educational mission’ of the university by fulfilling its teaching responsibilities, there is only the briefest mention given to traditional forms of scholarly dissemination through lectures and seminars (Horkheimer, 1993: 14).

Where these early texts do critically reflect upon education not merely in the sense of the scholarly production of knowledge

but a broader sense of dissemination and socialization, they tend to focus not on formal education or pedagogical techniques but what, from a Freudian-Marxist perspective informed by Erich Fromm, is considered the more significant psycho-social moulding of character that takes place in early childhood within the family. For Fromm (2014: 165–201) and Horkheimer (2002: 47–128), the patriarchal structure of the bourgeois family was crucial to the spirit of capitalist societies to the extent that, regardless of a lack of social standing, the father’s powerful socio-economic authority within the family provided a ‘paternal education’ that accustoms the child to obedience and discretion. This psychological organization of the child into the authority-oriented character placed fundamental limitations on the capacity for critical thought and resistance within formal education, which therefore tends to be disregarded in these early texts. If modern and contemporary education is understood in terms of a fundamental relationship between research *and* teaching, then, much of the first two decades of critical theory therefore cannot be said to provide a critical theory of *education* per se.

## LATE CAPITALISM AND THE EDUCATION INDUSTRY

From the post-war period onward, the first and later second generations of the Frankfurt School became increasingly concerned with diagnosing the transformations within capitalist societies that characterized the new spirit of what they described as late or advanced capitalism and, crucially, the forms of totalitarianism it had given rise to. A number of characteristics are significant in this context: the changed natures of the market following the rise of state and welfare-state forms of capitalism, of labour with the rise of technological automation, and of the family following the decline of the

family wage and the decreasing role of primary socialization. Together, these reflect anxieties regarding economic productivity that, increasingly in the context of theories of 'human capital' and 'the learning society', lead to the unprecedented expansion and development of mass systems of schooling, further and higher education in the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, accompanied by the qualitative transformation and what many perceive as the impoverishment of learning, teaching and scholarship itself.

The modern period of European history, Franz Leopold Neumann (1936: 28) suggests, can be characterized by the defeat of liberalism in terms of the shift from a competitive market economy into a monopolistic one and a liberal state into a mass-democratic one. Neumann's (1942: 324–5) analysis of these conditions for the rise of National Socialism points in particular to how the party was required to organize the renewal of its power through the exertion of state machinery, such that schools and universities became subject to increasing control. This control can also be elaborated more generally through his investigations of the bureaucratizing effects of monopoly capitalism upon social institutions and the insidious way this transforms intellectuals into functionaries of the status quo (Neumann, 1953: 932–4).

The increasing necessity for centralized organization, administration and political mediation to stabilize commodity exchange has seen the reciprocal interlocking of civil society and state within a state-regulated capitalism, Jürgen Habermas (1991) argues, which gives rise to a public sector responsible for the state-subsidized production of 'collective commodities' of the material and immaterial infrastructure upon which the private sector belongs (Habermas, 1976: 55–7). This enables, for example, an increase in relative surplus value by heightening the productivity of labour for capital through the development of the technical forces of production (most obviously, for example, public systems of transport and communication).

As industrial work in general became disconnected from the direct exploitation of natural elements through the interposition of intermediating technical instruments, so the need for natural human qualities such as physical strength diminished and the importance of widespread educational and training processes increased (Offe, 1976: 23). Friedrich Pollock (1957: 71; 205–6) believed automation led to the 'very real danger of technological [mass] unemployment' and so the necessity of increasing the average level of intelligence of future workers by radically improving and changing educational facilities from childhood onward. Such education would need to focus in particular on providing a good knowledge of mathematics and science, as well as more specialized training to overcome a shortage of engineers and technicians, but it would also be necessary, given the greater sense of responsibility required to operate within and identify with automated workplaces, to teach people how 'to get more out of life and to be better citizens' (1957: 206). Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1993: 185–6) argue that although capital follows a path of increasing abstraction towards a dead system of accumulated labour, it cannot pursue this without dirtying its hands with the living. Not even late capitalism, with all the technological forces of automation at its disposal, 'would have any use for individuals whose behaviour is reduced to mere reactions' and so it is increasingly required to turn 'human consciousness and contexts of living into its most important raw material'.

For Fromm, Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, the authoritarianism of 'paternal education' within earlier capitalism was connected, as we have seen, to the father's centrality as the principle wage-earner and his dependence on his son for the continuation of his active role in society, a gender order centred, as Nancy Fraser (1994) points out, on the normative ideal of the family wage. Although the majority of children are compelled, under these conditions, to identify with reality



and so submit to the identity of reason and domination, the child who takes what he or she has been taught more seriously than the father himself rebels against the irrationalism concealed in this domination and attempts to live up to the truths of these ideals, resisting the demand to conform (Horkheimer, 1947: 112–13). As Adorno (2005: 186) later adds, this process of internalization of and painful detachment from the ego-ideal of the father figure – necessary for maturity – must be re-enacted a second time with the figure of the teacher.

In Fromm's analysis, however, the 'development of the state capitalist order entails a structural change in the bourgeois nuclear family', as the male loses the economic and patriarchal authority he had previously possessed (Honneth, 1987: 354; cf. Fromm, 2014: 227–9). This has led to the diminishing significance of primary socialization of the child, away from the narrow continuation of the parents' life and, through increasing secondary socialization, towards 'the broader one of producing successful individuals who can stand up for themselves in the contemporary battle of life' (Horkheimer, 1974: 11). These changes weakened the sharper separation between private and public spheres that had been demarcated by distinct figures of social authority and had enabled the traditional bourgeois family to preserve a time and space within childhood of pre-capitalist processes of cultivation and socialization unmediated by the competitive principles of the market (Horkheimer, 2002: 114–15, 124; Adorno, 2009: 153–4; Adorno, 1993: 25).

With the decline of informal education and the rise of public education, every child becomes enclosed from an early age within a system of institutions that constitute 'the most sensitive instruments of social control' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 149). Key to all these changes, Claus Offe (1973) writes, is the increasing need to increase productivity through the use of bureaucratic workers and civil servants of the welfare state. As an increasing proportion of capital is invested in

fixed infrastructural costs such as technology, the attendant fall of that invested in human labour leads to what Marx characterized as the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, in line with the principle that human labour is productive of the value of commodities. Late capitalism responds to this economic anxiety by attempting, in turn, to increase the productivity of labour. Even where the control of education under National Socialism in the 1930s and 1940s explicitly pursued abhorrent cultural and racial aims, for example, Neumann (1942: 350) points out how in private it emphasized its true aim of promoting education for work: to take 'leadership of all from earliest childhood to the oldest man, not for social purposes ...but from the point of view of productivity'.

As Offe (1984: 95, 99) explains, state power is increasingly required to 'politically regulate who is and who is not a wage-labourer' on the labour market and to transform dispossessed labour power into the commodity form inherent to 'active' wage-labour through education. In particular, 'the teacher expends a kind of labour power which, without itself being a commodity, may have the purpose of educating labour which is a commodity' (Offe, 1973: 110). This is also made possible, Habermas (1976: 55–6) argues, through the 'governmental organization of the educational system, which raises the productivity of human labour through qualification', an example of state investment in 'reflexive labour, that is, labor applied to itself with the aim of increasing the productivity of labor'. This labour is 'not productive in the sense of the direct production of surplus value' but indirectly productive of surplus value to the extent it 'systematically alters conditions under which the surplus value can be appropriated from productive labour' (Habermas, 1976: 56). With the 'systematically managed expansion of the system of continuing education', for example, academic labour shifts from being 'a collective natural commodity' to being 'internalized in the economy cycle' as 'a component of the production process

itself', for 'the state (or private enterprise) now expands capital to purchase the *indirectly productive* labour power of scientists, engineers, teachers, etc. and to transform the products of their labour into cost-cutting commodities' (Habermas, 1976: 56).

As a consequence of these changes, as Adorno and Horkheimer (1997: xv) make clear, although formal education had once been a privilege that rested upon the exploitation and suffering of a social division of labour (since the wealth appropriated from the production of commodities in the factory paid for the private education and the privileged triumphs of culture), in late capitalism it is the melting-down and selling-off of cultural values themselves as commodities – by the culture and, we could now add, education industries – that generates the capital to purchase new factory and office space for expanded exploitation. The tendency to abolish educational privilege through systems of public education, Adorno and Horkheimer (1997: 160) therefore conclude, 'does not open for the masses the spheres from which they were formerly excluded, but, given existing social conditions, contributes directly to the decay of education and the progress of barbaric meaninglessness'.

The inward assimilation of historical culture via the personal and unique cultivation of the individual, which had been the traditional domain of enlightenment cultivation [*Bildung*], now gives way to the technicized modes of sensibility and behaviour exemplified by instrumental reason, including schematized and depersonalized methods of instruction, which increasingly rely on technological aids (Horkheimer, 1974: 13, 143).

From the mid twentieth century onward, this is paralleled by the spread of so-called progressive pedagogical practices that, along with the declining social status and power of the teaching profession, simultaneously weaken the authority figure of the educator (Adorno, 2005: 177–90). Adorno (2005: 188) confesses to being a reactionary towards new ideas in education, in which 'strictness is

being replaced by a toleration and readiness to help' (Horkheimer 1974: 11). Just as the culture industry piously claims to be guided by its consumers while, through its advertising and editing techniques, it secretly drills its required responses into them in such a way it does the listening for the listener, so seemingly progressive elements within the education industry may be similarly said to perform the thinking for the thinker or the learning for the learner. Lacking the enlightenment moment of self-reflection, the process of socialization connected to *Bildung* loses its association with human reason and freedom and takes on a rigidified necessity once attributed to nature itself (Adorno, 1993: 17–18). Since this crisis cannot be entirely explained by the inadequacies of the educational systems and their teaching methods, pedagogical reforms alone are not sufficient and may even exacerbate this crisis (Adorno, 1993: 15).

## MIMETIC AND RATIONAL EDUCATION

As the possibility of broader social and political transformation receded, the writings of the Frankfurt School focused upon preserving those residues of social life that resisted economic subsumption and, especially within the context of the de-nazification of German institutions, came to place increased expectation on the potential for bourgeois educational forms to change the psychological conditions that permitted the worst excesses of fascism to prevail (Adorno, 2005: 192–4).

Horkheimer insists that one specific psychological mechanism is particularly crucial to learning in 'those early and all but unconscious stages of personal development that determine the individual's eventual character': the 'mimetic impulse of the child' in which 'the whole body is an organ of mimetic expression' (1947: 114–15). While it is impossible to conceive of a system of

education that could fully do away with the coercive psychological mechanisms of reward and punishment associated with paternal education (Horkheimer, 2002c: 111), he envisages the possibility of eliminating this coercion from the later stages of education: 'Cultural progress as a whole, as well as individual education, i.e. the phylogenetic and ontogenetic processes of civilization, consist largely in converting mimetic into rational attitudes' (Horkheimer, 1947: 115). This occurs through the transvaluation of these mimetic impulses, phylogenetically, through religion and then critical reasoning and, ontogenetically, through rational education. This transformation of the mimetic impulses into conscious adaptation eventually permits a form of 'domination' over external objects that Horkheimer had earlier associated with the 'mastery of nature' through scientific knowledge.

As Moisio (2005: 267–8) has elaborated, it is in part the distortion of early forms of mimetic adaptation – positively associated in Horkheimer's work with the private sphere of the bourgeois family – that contribute to the distorted presence of instrumental rationality in later education. Because the mimetic impulse is never fully overcome, though, it 'lies in wait, ready to break out as a destructive force' whenever the rational fulfilment of human potentiality – the promise of happiness – is curtailed (Horkheimer, 1947: 116). The antagonistic social dimensions inherent to education therefore connect individual socialization within the family to the more general tensions of cultivation that Freud had explored in *Civilization and its Discontents*, developed in terms of the mastery of nature by Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the enlightened mastery of nature, upon which the progressive and scientific development of civilization depends, originates through a form of mimetic adaptation, an intimate bond of sympathy, similitude or relatedness with things that represents the first

attempts to control and manipulate nature. Enlightenment regresses to myth at the point where enlightened thought ceases to be a means of social emancipation through the mastery of nature and instead becomes a form of domination over the social itself. This occurs in part because enlightened thought forgets or represses its own dialectical entwinement with, and emergence from, nature through the same mimetic impulse it seeks to overcome (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 11). Consequently, enlightened thought must accommodate critical reflection on this element, which Adorno will later develop in terms of non-identity thinking: the 'remembrance of nature in the subject', and so of the reconciliation with nature, by virtue of which it maintains itself *as* enlightened thought (1997: 49, 41).

A 'rational education' would, Horkheimer (1974: 96) writes, permit the possibility of sublimating aggressive tendencies into the more productive outlets of work and knowledge by enabling the capacity for a more critical understanding of wider social causes implicated in individual success or failure. The liberal traits of bourgeois culture which must not only be preserved but extended to all are therefore those that sought to teach each person 'individual self-consciousness, to educate them to the insight that thoughts dwell in everyone, that its dignity imparts itself to all' and that freedom is the freedom to develop one's individual abilities in the context of scientific and technological production, which society needs in its struggle with nature (Horkheimer, 1978: 223, 170, 197–8).

Youth 'must be educated so that it is critical in the face of demagoguery', acquires 'the categories with which to distinguish demagoguery from a truly rational politics' and becomes sensitive enough to any and all persecution that 'something in them should rebel when any individual is not treated as a rational being' (Horkheimer, 1974: 118). Similarly, Neumann (1964: 294–5) is clear that 'if we wish to prevent a demagogue from

using anxiety and apathy' to control society, teachers, students and other 'citizens of the university' must 'suppress our arrogance, inertia, and our revulsion from the alleged dirt of day-to-day politics' and undertake 'responsible educational and political activity' aiming at the humanization of politics and the elimination of anxiety. The concept of freedom involves, Neumann (1964: 203) writes, 'the self-determination of man [*sic*], who must have the possibility of unfolding his potentialities' in terms not just of a negative and juridical freedom from constraint but also a positive and rational freedom stemming from the 'knowledge of external nature, knowledge of human nature, and knowledge of the historical process', as well as the volitional freedom to realize this knowledge. These two concepts of freedom are mutually connected, Neumann (1964: 213–15) insists, since the former is politically necessary for the latter to flourish and since the latter promotes a rational organization of society such that individuals can be politically free. Intellectuals must therefore organize against the bureaucratic tendencies within research activity, defending the principle of academic freedom and struggling for the creation of co-operative communities of research.

In Adorno's (Adorno and Becker, 1999) later writing, this cultivation of intellectual freedom is reconnected with Kant's understanding of enlightenment as the release from self-incurred immaturity [*Unmündigkeit*]. To the extent the education of every individual in political, social and moral awareness fosters the autonomous powers of reflection and self-determination, it is the only foundation of a democratic maturity capable of ensuring the principle of Auschwitz never recurs (Adorno, 2005). The 'only real concrete form of maturity would consist of those few people who are of a mind to do so working with all their energies towards making education an education for protest and for resistance ... for "knocking things down"' (Adorno, 1999: 30–1). This is particularly necessary to supplement the deficiencies of the primary

school system in rural environments, where television programmes and mobile education groups might also be required (Adorno, 2005: 196). This critical theory of education demands 'the self-reflection of thinking ... a thinking against itself' and so 'education toward critical self-reflection', which must include 'critical reflection on pseudo-education [*Halbbildung*], for which culture is essential' (Adorno, 1973: 365; 2005: 193; 1993: 31).

Although Adorno's thought develops the idea of a mimetic remembrance of unreconciled nature further, to the extent this experience remains restricted to aesthetic experience it is largely excluded from Adorno's reflection on rational cultivation through education. In their preoccupation with preserving or retrieving the liberal forms of bourgeois family and of rational education inherited from the enlightenment, Horkheimer, Fromm, Neumann and Adorno therefore have a tendency, despite the sophistication of their thought in many other respects, to undialectically oppose the mimetic and rational elements of education in a linear sequence and so perform their own repression of its mimetic aspect. This at times manifests itself in the (self-avowed) conservatism of their educational attitudes, which can provide a strident criticism of the ongoing deformations of education within capitalism only at the expense of an attendant critique of the liberalism of bourgeois education and consequently of a more dialectical consideration of its disintegration under late capitalism.

### **INTERSUBJECTIVITY: COMMUNICATION AND RECOGNITION**

Subsequent generations of Frankfurt School critical theory, rejecting the Marxist philosophy of history that supposedly 'trapped' Horkheimer, Adorno and others within the

domain of social labour (Honneth, 1993a: xvi, 11–16) and so restricted their vision of social emancipation to the rapidly diminishing action of the proletariat (Honneth, 2007: 65), argued that the idea of universal reconciliation with nature, according to which the first generation often sought to ‘outdo’ a process of expanding reification, must be fundamentally rethought (Honneth, 1979: 46). In particular, the attempt to develop the idea of reconciliation within the framework of the philosophy of consciousness lead Adorno to ‘the surrender of all cognitive competence’ from the domain of science to that of art and artistic production, placing modern art on an equal footing with critical theory in a way that reveals ‘the embarrassment into which critique falls due to the loss of innocence of its consciousness as science’, as Horkheimer had initially conceived it (Habermas, 1984: 384; 1973: 241).

Nonetheless, for Habermas, the first generation’s hoped for resurrection of a dominated nature through the appeal to a non-rational or non-conceptual mimetic capacity usefully suggests the possibility of a ‘relation between persons in which the one accommodates to the other, identifies with the other, empathizes with the other’ and consequently of spheres beyond that of art ‘in which the mimetic capacity gains objective shape’ (Habermas, 1984: 384, 390; cf. Honneth, 1979: 46–57; Benhabib, 1986: 189–90). For Habermas, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* abandoned the more direct path of recognizing, from the ‘inner logics of different complexes of rationality ... a unity of rationality beneath the husk of an everyday practice that has been simultaneously rationalized and reified’ (1984: 382), and so anticipating a domain of the social – mutual understanding as the promise of communication free from domination – that remained ‘foreign to the tradition of critical theory’ (Honneth 1993a, xii). Here, the idea of reconciliation takes up the idea of maturity – autonomy and responsibility within the rational domain of communication – in such a way that it not

only abandons the metaphysical promise of a reconciliation with nature but is predicated upon the continued scientific and technological mastery of nature necessary for human survival (Habermas, 2000a: 195–6).

This theory of communicative action therefore presents one path to take ‘under historical circumstances that prohibit the thought of revolution’ (Habermas, 2000b: 226). Eschewing the attendant theory of crisis that justifies the possibility and necessity of revolution, Habermas’s (1984: 45, 67–9) materialism generalizes Piaget’s concept of a decentration of the egocentric understanding of the world – the stages of cognitive development characterized in terms of structurally described levels of learning – to provide a social evolutionary perspective upon a world-historical process of rationalization of world-views and lifeworlds. For Seyla Benhabib (1986: 210–12), this is the attempt, after Adorno, to conceive the non-identity of the subject not in terms of an aesthetic ideal but a moral and political one. Benhabib (1986: 214–15) adds that this solution signifies ‘self-actualization’ in the Hegelian sense of *Bildung*, as an ‘educational process in which the capacity for reflection and autonomy are developed’ in such a way that the empirical individual is transcended, and a transsubjective subject is implied in ‘the cumulative logic of the historical process’. Axel Honneth (Honneth and Joas, 1988: 154–5) similarly sees historical materialism transformed, under Habermas, into a ‘theory ... of the educational process that has taken place in the course of the human species’ history’, one that Honneth develops in terms of intersubjective recognition.

To the extent that the terrain of action, as a site of social struggle, becomes reconceived by the second generation of Frankfurt School critical theory in terms of communication or recognition, their work returns to the origins of critical theory within the context of a critical theory of *transmission* that had been passed over in favour of a programme of scholarly *research*. Honneth

(2007: 67) understands Habermas's theory of communicative action as recovering 'the categorial means necessary for a revival of Horkheimer's ideas of social critique', promoting transdisciplinarity not only between the disciplines of research but also between teaching and research.

In Habermas's (1971a: 304–12) writing, the distinct educational and cultural implications of Horkheimer's original conception of a critical theory are developed by exposing the cognitive interests that traditional theory had concealed. Habermas (1971b: 100–1, 53–4) comes to understand the changed constellation of late capitalism in terms of the predominance of the technical cognitive interests of the empirical-analytical sciences ('control over objectified processes' (Habermas, 1971a: 309)) without the concomitant practical and emancipatory interests of the historical-hermeneutical sciences, from which the former has estranged itself. What remains significant for Habermas (1971b: 85–7) is not the retreat from science through the attempt to conceive some alternative relationship with nature, since this technical cognitive interest corresponds to, and cannot be separate from, the logic of purposive-rational action of work itself. Rather, what must be countered is the attendant depoliticization of the public sphere, as the interaction of reciprocal relationships between subjects under intersubjectively comprehensible and binding norms, which therefore excludes from public discussion all practical questions concerning scientific and technical control. Understood in this context, what Habermas (1989: 118) proposes with the 'material critique of science and scholarship' is less the rehumanization of nature, in the sense of universal reconciliation, than the rehumanization of scientific scholarship. The idea of the university must ultimately be based on a scholarship of knowledge directed towards public education and communication: to 'transmit, interpret and develop the cultural tradition of society', influencing the 'self-understanding of the general public' through interpretations

provided by the social sciences and humanities (Habermas, 1971b: 4).

In this, Habermas (1991: 1–4, 160) seeks to recover and repoliticize a bourgeois public sphere that had originally evolved from the world of letters, expanded to promote the enlightened values of critical reasoning through the daily presses, but whose social foundations have 'for about a century ... been caught up in a process of decomposition' and so become replaced by the 'pseudo-public or sham-private world of culture consumption'. With the modern transformation of the liberal constitutional into a social-welfare state, publicity becomes extended to all organizations acting in state-related fashion, including media-controlled subsystems of the economy (Habermas, 1991: 231–2). Whereas once 'you had to pay for books, theatre, concert, and museum, but not for the conversation about what you had read, heard, and seen', today 'the conversation itself is administered' and 'formalized' via 'professional dialogues from the podium, panel discussions, and round table shows ... it assumes commodity form even at "conferences" where anyone can "participate"' (1991: 164).

An attendant colonization of public education occurs through the juridification of schooling, whereby norms and contexts for coordinating action based on mutual understanding become remodelled on the basis of legal principles transposed from the private law of the state (Habermas, 1987: 356–8). As a consequence, 'decision-making procedures' that once treated those involved in the pedagogical process as having the mature capacity to 'represent their own interests and to regulate their affairs themselves' become bureaucratically administered on behalf of those subjects as legal rights that penetrate 'deep into the teaching and learning process' (1987: 371–2). This process produces an abstraction from all particular pedagogic needs and interests that ultimately endangers the freedom and initiative of the teacher (Habermas, 1987: 371), while permitting the integration of education into the system

of social labour, in terms of increasing productivity at the expense of cutting its 'ties to the political, public realm' (1984: 371; 1971b, 5–6).

In his critical development of Habermas's position, Honneth (1993a: xvii) seeks to explain social development not according to an evolutionary logic of rationalization but a 'dynamic of social struggle' located within 'social interactions'. A 'communication paradigm conceived not in terms of a theory of language, but in terms of a theory of recognition', Honneth (2007, 71–2) argues, 'can ultimately close the theoretical gap left by Habermas in his further development of Horkheimer's program'. One way in which social relations of recognition have been improved, Honneth (2014, 241–2) claims, is through comprehensive educational reforms. Although the political discourse of modernity frequently addressed the theme of public education, contemporary philosophy has neglected this insight into the intrinsic association between democratic politics and democratic education: that state-administered education is necessary for students to develop the reflective habits required to participate in democratic procedures. Honneth (2015) insists that a reinvigorated programme of democratic education is therefore required, premised on the confidence that it is possible and necessary for state education to guide rational deliberation, infuse democratic values and goals and enable social recognition, promoting the individual self-respect and self-esteem that permits future citizens to act with self-confidence in the public sphere.

As Fraser and Benhabib point out, however, the struggle for recognition must also address the way social institutes constitute 'institutionalized patterns of cultural value' that prevent parity of participation in social life (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 29), and so must concern itself with redistribution as well, since struggles 'for recognition can be addressed by changing our cultural patterns of interpretation, communication, and representation' in ways that 'have distributive

consequences' (Benhabib, 2002: 69–70), particularly with regard to schooling. Fraser (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 81–2) and Benhabib (2008, 2006: 51–8) both focus on the banning of the hijab within public education systems in France and the need to take affirmative steps to ensure the right of minority groups to fully participate without requiring assimilation or exacerbating subordination. Simultaneously, however, 'Schools in democratic society have the special responsibility to prepare the young for citizenship ... the capacity to engage others about how they will live together', Benhabib (2008: 101) argues, and 'any educational system that denies the exposure of children to the most advanced forms of knowledge and inquiry' may, out of 'respect for a minority community's quest to preserve its ways of life', unjustifiably deny the equal right to develop moral and intellectual faculties as a full human being but also limit the social mobility of the young (2002: 123). Although controversies over the hijab generated 'genuine public discourse in the French public sphere', the young women involved were not asked to justify 'their actions with "good reasons in the public sphere"' (Benhabib, 2006: 56–7) and so what Benhabib understands as their attempt to resignify the meaning of wearing the hijab from one of private religious observance to politicized cultural defiance within the public sphere itself was overlooked and a genuine opportunity for social learning passed over.

To the extent that, through intersubjective theories of communicative action and recognition, later generations of the Frankfurt School deepen the theoretical resources for conceptualizing and justifying both the scholarly production of knowledge and the conditions of its communication within the public sphere, their work can be seen as moving beyond the first generation in response to changed socio-economic conditions. This is nonetheless achieved in a way that extends what has been suggested is the sometimes problematically undialectical

distinction between mimetic and rational education and historically generalizes a liberal and uncritical conception of the bourgeois public sphere. Where contemporary critical pedagogy doesn't overlook the Frankfurt School entirely, the predominant influence of the work of Habermas on Anglophone critical theories of education (Ewert, 1991) entails that they tend to repeat these problems.

## COUNTER-EDUCATION

In order to recover and reconstruct the outlines of an alternative trajectory for a critical theory of education, we might retrace the course of intellectual development just described by beginning with Honneth's (1993a: 280–1; 2007: 74–5) criticism of the turn taken by critical theory in developing an account of intersubjectivity directed exclusively at rules of communication to the detriment of analysis of the bodily and physical dimensions of social action, including those involved in labour.

In his early writings, Honneth sought to reconnect the concept of social labour back to a Marxist account of social emancipation by developing a critical understanding of work, in which the workers' subversive efforts to gain control over the work revealed and justified the desire for autonomy over their activity. Honneth (1995b: 16) makes clear that this draws on Marx's early understanding of work not only in relation to economic growth or productivity but also from the position of practical self-development associated with *Bildung*. Here labour involves a formative, socializing and conscious learning process unrecognizable to Habermas (Honneth, 1995a: 44–7), 'in which working subjects become aware of the fact that their capabilities and needs go far beyond the possibilities permitted by the given social structure' and so 'the educational potential of work' might become the practical 'foundation of a theory of social revolution' (1995b: 16, 25).

Although Honneth later develops this position into the more familiar Hegelian critique of the organization of labour on the basis of the need for social integration and recognition already discussed, this early attempt to reconceptualize labour in terms of the production not only of objective products but also subjective learning processes provides a starting point for revising Honneth's interpretation of Walter Benjamin in a way that will connect the latter more closely with the more recent work of Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt. To the extent that their overlapping philosophical and educational concerns may be attributed to their involvement in the student movements of (for Benjamin) the 1910s and (for Kluge and Negt) 1960s, this also explains a certain intellectual distance from the orthodoxy of, respectively, the first and second generations of the Frankfurt School. Benjamin, whose writings on education have been largely overlooked in the Anglophone reception of his work, provides a concept of education that might be conjoined with the writings of Kluge and Negt, whose own body of work remains perhaps the most interesting and, again in the Anglophone sphere at least, most neglected aspect of the Frankfurt School, to develop an alternative critical theory of counter-education.

According to Honneth (1993b: 85), what 'Benjamin in his early years had in mind ... can, for all its metaphysical accentuation, indeed be rationally reconstructed', pointing to a form of experience in which 'reality appears as a field of reference for intersubjective, lived experiences ... tied to an ability peculiar to human species'. Benjamin's mimetic theory of language, Habermas (2000b: 214–16) claims, 'is correct in supposing that the oldest semantic stratum is that of expression ... one form of the animal instincts that is manifested in expressive movements' and so 'the as-yet-uninterrupted connection of the human organism with surrounding nature'. Honneth (2009: 115–16) elaborates this position in relation to that communicative sphere which Benjamin's



'Critique of Violence' identifies as 'forms of social agreement that arise without any use of violence'. This accords with Honneth's (1993: 92) more general attempt to recode Benjamin's idea of 'messianic power' as a 'symbolic restitution' and recognition of the 'moral integrity' of the victims of the past.

Yet Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' also suggests an alternative domain of everyday experience in which a divine force is said to actualize itself in present practice: the sphere of education. For a divine violence, Benjamin (1999a: 250) writes, 'is not only attested to by religious tradition but also found in present-day life in ... educative violence, which in its perfected form stands outside the law'. To the extent that Honneth (2009: 123–5), like Habermas, seeks to rationally redevelop Benjamin's account of language as sphere of action free from coercion or violence, he is forced to reject such a conception of education as a 'terroristic', 'theocratic' and 'pathological' justification of corporal punishment, one that reflects elements of the immature Benjamin's involvement in the German Youth Movement and its programme for anti-bourgeois educational reform.

The educative violence that Benjamin associates with a noncoercive form of divine force is postulated from the existence of an anarchic, law-annihilating human violence (as a disruptive or interruptive expression of pure means without coercive end). Although it remains entirely speculative in the essay, this concept of educative violence could be developed in accordance with a contemporary allusion to the pedagogic gaze of the parent as a form of nonviolent control (Benjamin, 1999a: 284–5):

The growing child must be conscious not just of the vigilance of the paternal eye but of what can ensue when the eye brightens or clouds over. This nonviolent control ... has more influence on the child in essential matters than anything else (more than corporal punishment and above all more than the much-vaunted power of example).

If there are significant resonances with Honneth's concept of recognition here, which

already broadens out Habermas's communicative action beyond the linguistic domain, Benjamin's more Romantic notion of the pedagogic gaze constitutes a psychosomatic medium of mimetic interplay between generations, in which both subject and object are mutually transformed. In Benjamin's 'Programme for a Proletarian Children's Theatre', for example, written as the theoretical foundations for Asja Lacis's practical work educating orphaned street children in the Soviet Union, the bodily gestures of the performing child are observed by the adult audience as a 'secret signal of what is to come ... from another world' (203–6).

This observation is nonetheless predicated on the assertion by the educator of what Benjamin (1999a: 487, translated altered) in *One-Way Street* describes as a form of *mastery*, not of the young but of the relationship between generations:

But who would trust a flogging-master who proclaimed the mastery of children by adults to be the purpose of education? Is not education, above all, the indispensable ordering of the relationship between generations and therefore mastery (if we are to use this term) of that relationship and not of children?

The problematically violent mastery of students as the object of education is exemplified not only in the corporal punishment of authoritarian education, for Benjamin (2016: 196–8), but also in the 'new pedagogy, the fun-loving reformism' of progressive bourgeois schooling, which treats children, like commodity-producing European societies toward the rest of the world, as if primitively eager consumers of its own edifying cultural junk. This is also true of the 'antiproletarian education for proletarians' provided by the bourgeoisie and the 'pseudorevolutionary educational idealism' of certain strands of Marxist education (Benjamin, 1999b: 274).

Benjamin's positive notion of a mastery of the educational medium, *against* the mastery of children, takes us beyond the context of non-coercive forms of communication or

recognition. This might be developed in a more practical and contemporary context via Marcuse's (1999: 106, 82) claims concerning 'the tyranny of public opinion' in which 'violence and suppression are promulgated, practiced, and defended' and 'the people subjected to these governments are educated to sustain such practices as necessary for the preservation of the status quo'. The practice of a passive form of tolerance within a framework determined by the authorities and a society defined by institutionalized inequality ultimately serves the continuation of such oppression. The defence of freedom of speech that tolerates all points of view equally and treats even the most misinformed opinion with the same respect as others results in a '*neutralization* of opposites, a neutralization, however, which takes place on the firm grounds of the structural limitation of tolerance and within a preformed mentality' (Marcuse, 1999: 97). Marcuse (1999: 114–15) also sees abstract tolerance manifested within systems of education that understand the self-actualization of the child only in terms of permissiveness without any conception of a liberating kind of repression often necessary to transform psychic elements that permit self-identity, and so 'encourages non-conformity and letting-go in ways which leave the real engines of repression in the society entirely intact'.

Marcuse (1999: 100) therefore speaks of the necessary 'withdrawal of toleration of speech and assembly from groups and movements which promote aggressive policies, armament, chauvinism, discrimination on the grounds of race and religion, or which oppose the extension of public services' and the need to connect political programmes of education with organization within communities. 'Today, education which counteracts the professional training for effective performance for the Establishment – counter-education', he writes (2001: 159), 'is the indispensable weapon of political radicalization'.

Marcuse's concept of counter-education was significant for the development of

Angela Davis's (1998: 316–17) own attempt to link education and liberation in the context of the political and social struggles of the black community. In her earlier writings, she explores how this moment is exemplified in the emancipation from slavery of the African-American social reformer Frederick Douglass, although Davis (2012: 194–7) is later critical of the way in which this early work relied on an 'implicitly masculinist notion of freedom' from the Kantian, Hegelian and Marxist philosophy she had learnt from the critical theory of Marcuse and Adorno, and which served to exclude women from enjoying the full benefits of freedom.

Her later work (2012: 197) draws more fully on Afro-American and Feminist studies to link the philosophical understanding of freedom with histories of black political struggle and 'new ways of producing knowledge and transforming social relations'. While continuing to demand the elimination of institutional racism that excluded, for example, black students from higher education, Davis (1990: 180–1, 2–4) draws attention, for example, to the way in which sexuality could be used to deny the freedom of working-class black women, to how the academy cannot be the only site of political struggle against racism, sexism and homophobia, nor black women students and teachers the only groups that must be defended from attacks intended to deny their freedom, and how access to higher learning is conditioned by wider economic levels of impoverishment that cannot be addressed through educational solutions alone.

Davis's attentiveness to how the subject of education and their subjective awareness of bodily and material dimensions of 'race', gender, sex, sexuality and class might produce not only new kinds of knowledge but also new social relations resonates with Benjamin's demand to rethink the relation between teaching and research. Benjamin (2011: 205) insists on the creative function of the student body as a 'great transformer' of scholarly methods within the university, to

the extent that teaching is 'capable of adapting to new strata of students in such a way that a rearrangement of the subject matter would give rise to entirely new forms of knowledge'. Indeed, the sterility of academic research is attributed to the failure of its pedagogical task of turning teaching into a fruitful activity (Benjamin, 1999b: 459–61). For certain traditional subjects, then, it has become necessary to entirely re-examine the presumed association between teaching and research upon which academic activity is founded, and instead of looking 'to research to lead a revival in teaching ... strive with a certain intransigence for an – albeit very indirect – improvement in research to emerge from the teaching' (Benjamin, 1999b: 419–20).

One model for such a practice can be found in Benjamin's own experiments with radio broadcasting in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Although radio's civic education programmes largely borrowed the existing forms of scholarly dissemination with minor concession to popularity, radio's potential to address unlimited numbers simultaneously in their own homes required a complete rearrangement of the material in line with the interests and questions of the masses. This interplay 'not only mobilizes knowledge in the direction of the public, but mobilizes the public in the direction of knowledge', transforming the substance of knowledge in a way that impacts on the pursuit of knowledge itself (Benjamin, 2014: 370).

These claims could be contextualized in relation to Negt and Kluge's (1993: 147) call for the production of a proletarian *counter-public* sphere: for 'television, this is a matter of a stronger emphasis on educational programming ... in the case of universities, it is one of developing a public media cartel indigenous to higher education; in the case of the unions, an intensification of the unions' own professional training and adult education programs. Since the public sphere as it currently exists has been constituted as a bourgeois public sphere that excludes the experience of workers, Negt and Kluge

(1993: xlviii, 3, 9) claim that their 'political motive is to uncouple the investigation of the public sphere ... from its naturally rooted context ... in the formal characteristics of communication' and reject the idea it might be 'interpreted' or even 'salvaged' through 'reference to the emphatic concept of a public sphere of the early bourgeoisie', modelled on a republic of scholars.

For Fraser (1990: 57–61), the specific form in which Habermas elaborated the concept of the public sphere required 'some critical interrogation and reconstruction', not only because Habermas idealizes the concept of the public sphere by overlooking the way it has been constituted by significant exclusions, especially along gender, 'race' and class lines, but also because he 'fails to examine other, nonliberal, nonbourgeois competing public spheres'. Kluge and Negt argue that the production of a public sphere 'in whose production process the historical movement of dead and living labour allows itself to be converted into experience' (Kluge and Negt, 2014: 129–30) is only possible within the framework of a 'proletarian public sphere' (Kluge and Negt, 2014: 121, cf. Negt and Kluge, 1993) in which the workers can appropriate such an experience because they have already organized some of it themselves. This proletarian public sphere must develop within the historical fissures – 'the rifts, marginal cases, isolated initiatives' – of the concrete constellations of social forces that make up the bourgeois public sphere (Negt and Kluge, 1993: xliii) and so 'does not stand for the working class but for oppressed relationships, for things and interests, which are not expressed ... a process of igniting solidarity among people who might otherwise have very different ideas' (Krause, 2006: 121).

As Habermas and others have already noted, the 'logic of capital drives it to attempt to appropriate the full productivity of labour' (Negt and Kluge, 1993: 20) by developing certain qualities of labour power through the control of preschool and school socialization. In providing a 'political economy of labour

power', Kluge and Negt (2014: 73) therefore focus on labour capacities as 'autonomously protected reserves of labour power' within the libidinal economy of living bodies; reserves which, unknown to consciousness, contain new forms of self-regulation and direction that constitute 'countercapital' (Kluge and Negt, 2014: 108). Seeking to determine the contradiction between capital and labour anew from the side of living labour rather than, as Marx had done, capital, Kluge and Negt's work therefore provides a powerful inversion of theories of human capital that have sought to transform education in the pursuit of economic productivity.

Negt's (1975: 29, trans. in Zeuner, 2013: 142) attention to learning processes similarly focuses on the educational value of the exemplary for enabling 'learners ... to translate, analytical-scientific information into concrete and intelligible, non-scientific forms of language and thought, which in terms of their political and sociological substance can motivate for social action'. Such orientational or concrete thinking aims at the development of societal competencies by encouraging learners to uncover the relations between 'the interest of the learning subjects and the objective world' (Negt, 2010: 215, trans. in Zeuner, 2013: 146). These societal competencies, which resonate with Honneth's early attempt to theorize the educational dimension of labour, provide an alternative to the vocational skills that education for productivity insists upon, permitting learners to understand existing relations within social life and initiate necessary reframing processes to rethink them.

In contrast to progressive engagement through small seminars, Negt speaks of the pedagogic function of large lectures as situations in which 'public thinking' – the gradual formation of ideas while speaking – can be performed that induces 'unburdened listening' to take place in which learners think for themselves in a condition of anonymity without the pressure 'to not only look intelligent but also to say intelligent things' (Krause, 2006: 124). Negt also teaches using

'combinations ... in order to create friction', bringing texts from antiquity into relation with everyday examples from the present (Krause, 2006: 124); quoting texts in a foreign language and not immediately appending the translation in order, like Pestalozzi, to develop a sense of the otherness or alienness of the world, resisting the impatience of universal comprehensibility that only couples what can be rationally understood with what can be rationally understood so as to teach the important pedagogic principle of learning something with the senses so as to understand it later (Negt and Kluge, 1993: 274).

Kluge and Negt (2014: 106–7) offer an example of a primary school classroom where a teacher moves between children working in different groups, in which a form of self-regulated learning has been authorized that brings about 'invisible forms of order'. They insist that 'it is not self-regulation in itself, but the form in which it has been authorized that brings about order', pointing to the necessity of the teacher's authorization – or pedagogic mastery of the relationship – for the forms of student self-regulation that rests on both their 'own knowledge and their concomitant recognition of what the others are doing'. This order could not have been produced by the 'violent command' or regimentation of a traffic policemen, they also argue, 'because he would know nothing of the rules of right-of-way and waiting that are in play', and would only direct children's interests toward the imitation of adult political organization.

In contradistinction to Kant, the enlightenment is 'not about the emergences from immaturity in and of itself' as 'primarily a solitary subjective labour', a transition that occurs at a single point through the power of autonomous, critical thought and speech. Rather, it is something that only emerges 'collectively and as a side effect of multiple instances of paying and receiving attention' (Kluge and Negt, 2014: 382–4). To the extent this pedagogical relationship involves a 'tender force' of reason, its basis is – in contrast to the Kantian formulation of enlightenment

reason – not merely the autonomy of the public use of reason but collective insubordination, and its role is to violate inertia, throw into confusion, and dislodge individual motives (Kluge and Negt, 2014: 382).

What Adorno and Horkheimer characterized as the culture industry can now be conceived as the ‘preindustrial phase of the consciousness industry’ (Negt and Kluge, 1993: 158n19), including programming, advertising, publicity campaigns, traditional and new media, as well as other contexts of communication and learning, which now seeks direct access to the private sphere of individual perception, cognition and experience in order to pre-organize and valorize the raw material of workers’ consciousness in the interests of capital (Negt and Kluge, 1993: xlv). This also means capital continues to stand in contradiction to living labour in a situation whose instability may still contain a politically explosive potential.

Benjamin (1994: 94–5, 1999b: 272–3) consistently insisted that the great error underlying bourgeois education was the tacit belief that children need us more than we need them; with regard to their educational labour, the same learning subjects might now be seen instead as ‘helpers, avengers, liberators’ (Benjamin, 1999b: 273).

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# Aesthetics and Its Critique: The Frankfurt Aesthetic Paradigm

Johan Hartle

Frankfurt School critical theory is almost as central to the history of modern aesthetics as aesthetics is to Frankfurt School critical theory: one cannot be thought without the other. On the one hand this means that Frankfurt School aestheticians are amongst the most important modern and contemporary aesthetic theorists. Hardly any modern thinker can compete with the influence and importance of the aesthetic theories of especially Adorno and Benjamin – not only in the academic discussion of aesthetics and art theory but also concerning their impact on players in the contemporary art field, including artists, curators, and critics.<sup>1</sup> This situation is more peculiar than it might seem: while many intellectual fashions have temporarily informed and inspired the artistic or curatorial practices of their time, very few major aesthetic philosophies actually have consequence in the daily business of art and manage to nest there beyond the specific moment and to develop sustainable ‘art field credibility’.

On the other hand, this means that within Frankfurt School critical theory aesthetics has played a major role from the very beginning as a central element of the conception of social research in both analysis and style: the performative understanding of theory was crucial for the first generation of critical theory. In this understanding the question of *Darstellung* was of central importance as theory not only needed to be adequately thought and presented but also placed and performed.<sup>2</sup> Summarizing much of what had been thought and written by then, Adorno’s posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, the most developed aesthetic work of the Frankfurt School, suggested this unity of theory with its mode of presentation with its very title.

On a programmatic level, aesthetic research was included in the conception of social research (*Sozialforschung*) from the very beginning. Next to its specific interest in (psychoanalytically informed) social psychology – represented by the trailblazing *Studies in Authority and Family* – Horkheimer’s initial



program for the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research and the idea of an interdisciplinary materialism granted prominent space for the critical analysis of art and culture. From issue one the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* contained the works of literary scholars (like Leo Löwenthal) and musicologists (like Adorno), who presented the sociological (or, materialist) analyses of works of art as a crucial element of the general project of *Sozialforschung*. Advanced by Marcuse's seminal texts on happiness and Horkheimer's essay on mass culture, critical discussions of recent cultural history, of the developments of technological media and visual arts (Walter Benjamin's contributions), of Greek poetry (the contribution of Bowra) and radio music (with Křenek's text) demonstrated the scope of the *Zeitschrift's* discussion. Many of these approaches have either become classical or can be seen as preparatory studies for works that have later become canonical texts of aesthetic theory.

In more than one respect, the *Zeitschrift* is at the center of the constitution of Frankfurt School critical theory as a specific type of discourse.<sup>3</sup> It organized and institutionalized the central discussions of the main protagonists and gave it the most coherent programmatic. It should therefore be the starting place for the reconstruction of the aesthetic paradigm of the Frankfurt School. Particularly in the field of aesthetic and cultural analysis, it helped formulate a materialist methodology that eventually became one of the main paradigms of twentieth century cultural materialism.

This general interest in the broader horizon of culture or, in classical Marxist terms, superstructural phenomena was of course not just a significant aspect of the constitution of the Frankfurt school; it also characterizes the more general development of Western Marxism (Anderson, 1976; Schmidt, 1980: 9f.), with its emphasis on cultural struggles and the historical conditions of subjectivity rather than the persistent hope in economic determinism and historical

teleology. To reflect this shift in Marxist reasoning, Western Marxism has paradigmatically been described as 'dialectic of defeat' (Jacoby, 1981), a theoretical paradigm that had to confront the sphere of culture and 'collective consciousness' to understand the political challenges after the failure of the revolutionary moment of 1918/1919.

In other words, the analysis of ideology and the structure of subjectivity was identified as the new specific task of Western Marxism in reactionary times that left no space for hope concerning the general course of history, along with the need to explore the subjective conditions of political struggle more deeply.<sup>4</sup> Culture, art, and aesthetics were irreducible elements of this ideology-critical analysis. Given the specific understanding of ideology within the discussions of the Frankfurt School (about which more will be said), it is obvious that such analysis of aesthetics as a fundamental element of ideology was always both *in solidarity with* and *critical of* aesthetics, that it treated aesthetics as an element of possible social transformation and of bourgeois self-legitimation.<sup>5</sup>

## POLITICS OF FORM IN TIMES OF FRAGMENTATION

The analysis of cultural, or more specifically, of artistic developments that characterized the approach of the Frankfurt school was inspired by Georg Lukács, the major author of Western Marxism (Merleau Ponty, 1973: 31–58), and particularly by his historico-philosophical analysis of literature. Although Lukács has neither been a member of the inner circle of the Frankfurt Institute, nor even an author of the *Zeitschrift*, his importance for the Institute's discussions can hardly be overstated. It is therefore worthwhile to spend some time on his thought. Lukács's 1916 essay *Theory of the Novel* is a particular historical milestone in the history of leftist cultural criticism; it came, in the words of

Fredric Jameson, 'like a thunderclap in the dialectical awakening of a whole generation of central European intellectuals (very much including Benjamin and Adorno)' (Jameson, 2015: 4). Lukács's starting point was, of course, the Hegelian claim that art reflects the general state of culture in the historical moment and finds its truth precisely in its historicity. From here, Lukács took the Hegelian conception of the historicity of art a step further and applied it to modern (and early modern) literature. Against this background Lukács developed a conception of aesthetic form that would inherit the promise of the classical paradigm of art (as Hegel termed the art of the Greek period, when the aesthetic *ideal* was realized) and that of the ancient Greek epos specifically, in its potential to express the 'extensive totality' and the 'immanence of meaning'. Modern times were, Lukács argued, characterized by a radical rift between the objective world and the individual, a world of 'transcendental homelessness'.

In this light, Lukács emphasizes that 'the novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality' (Lukács, 1971a: 56). Novels specifically, so Lukács argues, still implicitly worked with the promise of an integrated totality of meaning, with the promise of a world that remains inherently meaningful to the individuals, just as the Greek world would have been according to the German idealist prejudice. They would, however, only maintain this promise formally. While their narratives reflected the reality of a world torn apart, an alienated world, the world of aesthetic form would keep an inherently utopian promise. Art reconstructs the unity of a fragmented world, which is, following the Marxian conception of fetishism, *socially necessary semblance*. Through form (for Lukács specifically the totality of the narrative), art resists the dominant historical tendency and defends the possibility

of the horizon of utopia. Lukács's specific historico-philosophical interpretation of the novel did not only (and in the end, not even so much) inspire further interpretations of major literary narratives. The controversies over the concept of totality characterize much of the further development of the Frankfurt School (see Jay, 1984).

In Lukács's decisively Marxist *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), one finds similar, if rare, explicit remarks on the potential of art and literature to mediate the apparently isolated and abstract realities of the individuals in great literary form. In continuity with the earlier arguments, *History and Class Consciousness* presents the 'principle of art' as a principle, 'whereby man having been destroyed, fragmented and divided between different partial systems is made whole again in thought' (Lukács, 1971b: 139).

The Lukács of 1923 addresses aesthetic concerns far less expressly. Nonetheless, his analysis of commodity fetishism is of equal paradigmatic importance for the aesthetic reflections of Benjamin, Marcuse, and Adorno. Reformulating, in explicitly Marxist terms, Georg Simmel's idea that in modern society money has to be seen as a psychological, and 'even as an aesthetic fact' (Simmel, 2004: 55), Lukács formulated the framework for Marxist cultural critique for generations to come. His holistic perspective on the unity of modern capitalist societies is summed up in the claim that there is 'no problem that does not ultimately lead back to that question [of the commodity form, JFH] and there is no solution that could not be found in the solution to the riddle to the commodity structure' (Lukács, 1971b: 83). In opposition to the overarching logics of reification – the naturalization of social forms due to their atomistic appearance – art is presented as an exercise in mediation, as an attempt to come to terms with social connectivity and historical continuity.

Against the background of such a holistic analysis of the social process, the political relevance of art gained particular relevance.

Lukács's idea was that the historico-political significance of a work was to be found in its formal organization, that, in other words, the political analysis of art could accept the relative autonomy of art without reducing it to historical content. Such an understanding that the formal organization of an artwork could possibly contain a political signature that would – in Lukács's case, by means of aesthetic semblance – reach beyond the contradictions of the historical moment, marked a trailblazing moment for the further development of Western Marxist aesthetics in general, and Frankfurt School aesthetics in particular. This meant that aesthetics would not only be deeply characterized by the general course of history (and thus be part of an extended field of politics) but that it would also have its own specific political logic, one that gestured beyond the dominant developments on the forefront of progress. Aesthetics could therefore appear as a realm of anticipation and unevenness (*Vorschein* und *Ungleichzeitigkeit* in Ernst Bloch's [1974] terms) and a source of non-identity that disclosed hidden emancipatory promises and potentials even and particularly in times of political hopelessness.

Such a reading of political aesthetics was in tension with classical Marxism. The emphasis on the relative autonomy of aesthetic form and the potential of bourgeois art to anticipate a utopian horizon could not easily be reconciled with strict understandings of base-superstructure determinism or with the ideological conditions of working class politics. Indeed, Lukács's early (1916) version of such a politics of form was written at a time when he had not yet made the philosophical step towards Marxism and it was a position he later criticized as a merely 'romantic anti-capitalism' (Lukács, 1971b: x). In his later writings on realism he argued for a strictly Marxian version of aesthetics, which also leveled some of the unevenness between (relatively autonomous) *form* and (historical) *content* that was so central to his *Theory of the Novel*.

Unlike in Lukács's own intellectual development (on which Adorno commented very polemically, see his 'Reconciliation under Duress' [Adorno, 1977]), the tensions between dominant historical tendency and its aesthetic surplus remained influential for the aesthetic models of the Frankfurt School, especially in the articulation of the anti-capitalist potential of the aesthetic. At a deeper level, such disagreement was of a historico-philosophical nature, which had much to do with Lukács's understanding of Hegelian Marxism and the anti-teleological version of history in the theoretical approaches of the Frankfurt School. While Lukács – both aesthetically and politically – hoped to be able to leave his own 'despair' of the 1916 text (Lukács, 1971b: xi) behind, the Frankfurt scholars could never follow his optimism in progress, historical tendency, and a general course of history. In a number of ways, however, the theoretical grounds for formulating such positions were no less Marxist than Lukács's own.

### **HISTORICITY OF EXPERIENCE, REDEPTIVE CRITIQUE, AND POLITICAL STRATEGY**

Although never a member of the Frankfurt Institute's inner circle, some of Benjamin's most important aesthetic texts emerge in direct proximity to the *Zeitschrift*; they were either published in it (like the *Kunstwerk-essay*), were prepared as essays to be published there (like the *Arcades Project*, with its exposé being discussed in the correspondence with Adorno), or were in conversation with the texts published in the *Zeitschrift*. His discussions with Adorno can be said to be amongst the most important places and manifestations of the development of Benjamin's later aesthetic thought. The aesthetic texts of the 1930s, of his 'Marxist period' (see Miller, 2014: 35), can therefore be seen as playing a direct part in the intellectual formation of Frankfurt School aesthetics.

In light of the most polemical critiques of aesthetic ideologies (Jameson, 1981: 64; Bennett, 1990: 146), Walter Benjamin's historicizing approach to the aesthetic question also seems to be most explicitly historical materialist. Benjamin's highly differentiated aesthetics circles less around a normative conception of aesthetic form or semblance and more around the historicization of forms of aesthetic experience themselves. Inspired by – and in some ways anticipating – the discourse of the historical avant-gardes, aesthetically idealist categories like aesthetic semblance or organic totality no longer speak for themselves. Even in his own writing style the modernist idea of montage and fragmentation mark a paradigmatic shift in aesthetic reasoning.

At first sight, Benjamin's aesthetics is characterized by many different approaches to a great number of aesthetic practices, diverse forms of experience, and various techniques of representation. His evaluation of historically specific shapes and shades of the aesthetic often remains ambiguous. It remains difficult to identify any one systematic (or normative) aesthetic position that one could identify as Benjamin's own – a situation that has allowed for a multiplicity of interpretations of his aesthetic thought. The three initial observations (the deeply historical nature of his analyses, the fragmented character of his own aesthetic writings, and the situative, historically specific evaluation of the use of aesthetic practices) prove useful, however, to identify the nature of Benjamin's aesthetic thought. Benjamin's archeological approach to the history of experience, his paradigmatic conception of allegory (which contains much of his understanding of modernism), and his strategic interpretation of aesthetic intervention appear to be the most fundamental of his aesthetic approaches that also keep reappearing throughout his texts. This historicopolitical dimension of Benjamin's aesthetics strongly inherits the Hegelian understanding of the historicity of aesthetic truth – albeit in materialist terms. Mimetic faculty,

storytelling, auratic experience, and phantasmagoria are, in this sense, not necessarily features of the nature of the aesthetic as such (a question of minor importance for a deeply historical thinker like Benjamin), but rather symptoms and signatures of their respective historical context.

As the above suggests, Benjamin's aesthetics is conceptualized in terms of a fundamentally historical understanding of *aisthesis* (perception, experience). The concrete shape of life of a historical situation (the Hegelian *Idee*) becomes concrete in the structure of experience, as much ideologically as materially and practically constituted and thus historically specific. What Adorno, in his famous letter to Benjamin from September 1936, critically described as an 'anthropological materialism', for which the 'human body represents the measure of all concreteness' (Adorno and Benjamin, 2004: 146), is an adequate description, certainly if one considers Benjamin's understanding of the extended body of a social collective, which he found in material culture (cities, architecture, but also in machinery and technical media).

In this sense Benjamin's own version of historical materialism is in line with the considerations that the young Marx had sketched in his Paris Manuscripts, in which he considered the 'forming of the five senses' as the 'labour of the entire history of the world down to the present' (Marx, 1975: 302). Marx, too, saw the aesthetic as a historical construction site for subjectivities organized through material practices and expressed in the structure of the perceptive apparatus. Communist subjectivity, so Marx argued, would also have to deal with the aesthetic formation [*Bildung*] of a new collective sensuality (forming a 'human sense', liberating 'the human nature of the senses'). As we will see later, similar considerations will guide Benjamin in formulating his own communist media aesthetics. In addition to this debt to Marx, Benjamin owed the understanding of the materialized history of perception to the Vienna School of Art History, to Riegl

and Wickhoff specifically, 'who were', as Benjamin writes, 'the first to think of using such art to draw conclusions about the organization of perception at the time the art was produced' (Benjamin, 2008: 23).

To understand such an account of anthropological materialism, however, one must not forget that the historical constitution of perception and the organization of the faculties of experience also involve the production of ideology, the possibility of the supra-sensuous, and the structural necessity of superstition, which Marx, in *Capital*, identified in the structure of commodity fetishism. In commodity fetishism, Benjamin identifies two major approaches that will guide his analyses of the conditions of experience under high capitalism (as in the *Arcades Project* and the texts on Baudelaire): allegorical form and phantasmagoria.

Influenced by Lukács's seminal analysis of reification, Benjamin develops his own terminology. As Marx argued in his fetishism chapter, and as Lukács lucidly presented to his contemporaries, commodities, as objects of exchange, necessarily appeared as bearers of a second, social reality (all the social relations that were inscribed into value), realities that were given a thing-like (reified, *verdinglichte*) reality by the commodity itself. Inspired by the conceptualization of the commodity form, Benjamin's interpretation of allegory, initially presented in his *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, is further developed in the essay on Baudelaire ('On some Motifs in Baudelaire') in the *Zeitschrift* in the 1939/1940 issue. According to Benjamin's conception, allegory identifies the condition of experience under capitalism, rather than the ontological condition of language as such. In classical understanding, allegories (as terminologically opposed to symbolic representation) were arbitrary forms of representation in which the relationship between signifier and signified was not intrinsic or organic but interchangeable. As Benjamin writes: 'Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else' (Benjamin, 1998: 175). The literature of Baudelaire is seen as a

cultural reflection of the general development of experience under conditions of expanding commodification.

Such an historical account of aesthetic experience and representation is not merely a call for historical relativism. It rather allows Benjamin to unveil forgotten and unrealized potentials of human subjectivity. With strong suggestions of isomorphism, Benjamin's history of human experience focuses on the both ontogenetic and phylogenetic changes of the human capacities of perception and representation, sometimes referring to human prehistory, sometimes mobilizing childhood memories. Aesthetic analyses, analyses of historically specific *aesthetic* constellations, are thus nothing less than historical studies in the historical constitution of subjectivity.

Benjamin's account of the history of the species [*Urgeschichte*] and the early development of the individual (childhood) partly converge in accentuating the uneven layers of the historical process and in outlining an unresolved history of the present. Benjamin's archaeological perspective on buried layers of experience that previous generations – or children – might have had access to, is as much melancholic as it is hopeful. If, in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', he argues for a redemption of the past (Benjamin, 2007: 254), such redemption also aims for the uncovering of lost and buried human capacities, of the subjective potential of the forgotten victims of the past with whom – *ex post* – to reconcile. Redeeming the past, however, would not only imply the actualization of buried capacities of experiencing and representing other layers of realities: it would also mean awakening from the dreams of the past to realize them.

In this light, it is highly characteristic that Benjamin's unfinished opus magnum, *The Arcades Project*, focuses on the material history of a system of myths (dreams, hopes, projections) that characterizes the foundational period of modern capitalism.

The central concept for grasping the historical nature of experience in a society within

which dream-like realities become effective, is the concept of phantasmagoria. In a phantasmagoria (as the magic lantern, developed in seventeenth century, was sometimes called), a projected image appeared as almost real; quite similar to modern projectors, it gave a transparent image concrete visibility through the use of light beams. For Benjamin, such phantasmagoric reality, as well as the reality of dreams, not only anticipated the development of modern technological imagery (as in cinematography): the aesthetic significance of the bourgeois phantasmagoria for Benjamin consisted in its surplus or anticipation of a utopian future, of unrealized dreams. Importantly, this text also chooses a specific form of aesthetic representation [*Darstellung*] by working with fragments, quotes, a complex system of intertextual links, and a great number of images that are discussed or alluded to (and included in the posthumously published print versions).

If commodity fetishism, in Benjamin's interpretation (Tiedemann, 1982: 26 ff.), was characterized by the reified presence of a second, social layer of reality that was implicitly communicated by commodities, the various ways in which social semblance and ghostly realities brought themselves to the fore in visual culture were central to Benjamin's analyses. Phantasmagoric imagery can, in this light, be interpreted as the 'sensuous manifestation of the idea' in modern times, in which ideas were produced by the logics of commodity production, dream-like expressions of a society's collective unconscious (Cohen, 1993).

The dreams of the high bourgeois past of nineteenth century, of its architecture, streetscapes, imagery and poetry, were to be disclosed, unfolded (as did the surrealists by their appropriations of urban Paris), and realized. Benjamin's conception of phantasmagoria, the reconstruction of the collective dreams that manifested themselves in material culture, was not just an analysis of a contingent moment of historical experience, but also a form of redemptive critique, an attempt to realize the secret dreams of high capitalism.

The first condition, however, for realizing a dream, as Benjamin suggests in his considerations on surrealism, was to wake up. It is specifically this motif that structures his identification with modernist aesthetics from surrealism to film and contemporary photography, especially in the most influential of all of Benjamin's texts, his *Kunstwerk*-essay (*The Artwork in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility*), first published in the *Zeitschrift* in 1936. Mobilizing art against the technological slumber, against the fact that technological progress largely remains unprocessed and expresses the most violent potentials both on an economic and on a psychological level, Benjamin positions aesthetic forces as adapting to the technological conditions of modern culture. The aesthetic (or, more strongly put, strategic) importance of shock is to be seen in this light. Shock experience, the confronting experience of speed and proximity, pierces the veil of aesthetic autonomy. It dissolves the aura, the 'air of sacredness around the image' (Miller, 2014: 42), and turns it into an object of everyday practice. At the same time, it helps to process the daily experience of urban and industrial modernity (Simmel, 1950).

In the essay (and in the key texts that surround it)<sup>6</sup> Benjamin combined a modernist paradigm of art with proletarian aesthetics and anti-fascist strategy. The Artwork-essay does not only historico-philosophically interpret, document, and reconstruct the situation of art and experience, but also takes an explicitly strategic stance. His identification with soberly modernist engineer aesthetics and avant-garde techniques of montage attempts to break the mythical spell that characterized the tradition of autonomous art. However, his text is also a very subtle discussion of contemporary film theory (Arnheim, Kracauer, Balász, etc.), which Benjamin had studied attentively.<sup>7</sup> Here, too, as much as in the analysis of the modern phantasmagoria, modern optical media (film, photography) were discussed as condensations of a general perceptive paradigm of the historical

moment. In this way, Benjamin's aesthetic theory is always also a theory of modern media technology.

In the apocalyptic moment, the advent of European fascism (especially in Italy, Germany, and Spain) – the background against which Benjamin is writing – film and photography identify a moment of rupture, shock, and confrontation with the experiential horizon of the urban proletariat (speed and spatial density: an intensified sensorium). In this way, the potentials of modern optical media identify Benjamin's aesthetic-political preferences and his hope in the potential of contemporary media technology.

Media technology, however, are also a placeholder for the technical productive forces in general. In this way, Benjamin's argument prepares for communist revolution on the level of aesthetic experience: modernist art is expected to do nothing less than to contribute to the capacity of taking control of the technical means of production. If it is to be appropriated politically and juridically (by the proletariat seizing the means of production), technology also needs to be mastered symbolically. Thus, modernist art turns into a training ground for the revolution to come. It confronts the destructive logics of unceasing (imperialist) expansion embodied in unprocessed technological development. And whilst aestheticizing the violent logics of technological development and economic expansion is the cultural logic of fascism, communism's answer is the politicization of modern technologically mediated experience, i.e. the symbolic appropriation of the technological means of production.<sup>8</sup>

## IMMANENT CRITIQUE AND SUBLIMATION

If Benjamin's historical political approach to human perception and experience is the first line of thought characterizing the Frankfurt School's approach to the aesthetics of

politics or the politics of form, the second line of thought is the immanent critique of the bourgeois legacy. A general ideology critical approach to the bourgeois legacy of aesthetic thinking is paradigmatically formulated in Herbert Marcuse's text 'The Affirmative Character of Culture', 'a landmark essay in Marcuse's oeuvre' (Miller, 2014: 119) originally published in the *Zeitschrift* in 1937. Although Marcuse strongly argues for the normative potential of the German classic tradition (Goethe, Schiller), for the indirectly social promise of the organic work of art (containing the image of a reconciled society) his text contains an argument that will later become central for the discussion of the historical avant-gardes (Bürger, 1984, see also the final section).

Marcuse's emphasis, already evident in his aesthetic texts published in the *Zeitschrift* ('On Hedonism', 1938, being the second), is on the possibility of a materially concrete form of collective and objective happiness. In more or less direct ways, his discussion of aesthetics focuses on this issue from day one.

Regardless of the importance of these two texts, Marcuse's theoretical contributions to the *Zeitschrift* (1932–41) were not primarily about aesthetics. His texts famously deal with the decline of liberalism, the conservative ontology of his time and the contemporary relevance of Hegel's dialectics. His text on the affirmative character of culture might nonetheless be the most influential of Marcuse's texts for the further development of Frankfurt School critical theory. It also anticipates Marcuse's deepened interest not only in art and aesthetics, but also in the emancipatory potential of *the aesthetic*, which his later writings strongly emphasize, discussing aesthetics as a radical source for social transformation that reaches beyond the immanence of integrated consumer capitalism. Although Marcuse's evaluation of the value of aesthetic semblance and sublimation slightly changes with changing historical circumstances, in all of these texts Marcuse discusses the potential of art and aesthetics to

transgress the autonomous realm of aesthetic semblance and to transform real life forms in the perspective of the critique of alienation and of objective happiness.

In the specific context of the essay 'The Affirmative Character of Culture' Marcuse discusses the reduction of culture (the good, the true, and the beautiful) to a merely compensational ideology. The classical tradition's conceptualizations of aesthetic form and beauty are interpreted as a virtual harmonization of social antagonisms. Because of their inner, formal organization, artworks contain the promise of a non-alienated world. By virtue of its own semblance character, however, the work indirectly keeps its own utopian promise at arm's length.

Referring back to ancient understandings of culture (2009: 67), which were separated from the necessity of labor 'by an abyss', culture appears as a sphere of fulfilled individual happiness and enjoyment for the few. This legacy, so Marcuse argues, continues in bourgeois culture. Furthermore, the claim to the universal relevance of culture is fully developed in the aesthetics of the bourgeois age. Universalization, however, is achieved by paying the price of social concreteness. Culture withdraws into the realm of abstract freedom, freedom detached from the equal access to culture and its inherent promise to happiness: 'To the need of the isolated individual it responds with general humanity, to bodily misery with the beauty of the soul, to external bondage with internal freedom, to brutal egoism with the duty of the realm of virtue' (2009: 72). Again, aesthetics moves into the realm of semblance.

The bourgeois conception of aesthetic semblance at the same time enacts a form of ideological repression as 'the real gratification of individuals cannot be contained by an idealist dynamic which either continually postpones gratification or transmutes it into striving for the unattained' (2009: 74). It is such aesthetics, such an affirmative conception of culture, that easily falls prey to the anti-liberal tendencies of authoritarian

society, against which the text is written. Not unlike Benjamin's efforts to formulate a politics of perception that would be capable of countering the fascist threat, Marcuse's essay contains his own anti-fascist politics of aesthetics. Contemporary authoritarianism is identified in the essay as the attempt to establish stabilized forms of collectivity ('race, folk, blood and soil', 2009: 93) and to replace 'idealist inwardness' with 'heroic outwardness' (ibid.). By doing so, post-bourgeois culture casts off the 'progressive elements contained in the earlier stages of culture' (ibid.). While classical bourgeois idealism reduces culture to a realm of semblance, individual pleasure, and consolation, and thus remains affirmative in light of a possible transformation of society, authoritarian culture replaces this realm of semblance with explicit and unambiguous significations of collectivity. Marcuse interprets the historical counterparts of bourgeois humanist culture and post-bourgeois totalitarianism as two sides of the same coin, each neutralizing, in their own way, the radical and transcending potential of collective happiness. Beauty, he writes, 'contains a dangerous violence that threatens the given form of existence' (2009: 85).

In light of the political strategies of the day, the political substance of Marcuse's aesthetic politics, to navigate between bourgeois humanism and authoritarian anti-humanism, maintains some historical relevance. What makes Marcuse's seminal article particularly paradigmatic, however – and not only for the development of his own thought but also for a central line of argument in the whole development of Frankfurt school aesthetics – is his *critical strategy*. Bourgeois culture's inherent promise of beauty and happiness, and authoritarianism's false negation of its idealism, are not regarded as 'mere ideology' but rather as a symptom of historical alienation and as reflections of non-alienated conditions of social life. Ideology is thus not confronted and rejected head-on but rather recognized as a bearer of 'objective content' (2009: 73),



which can help to diagnose the social constellation it is part of and provide sources for normative critique. Marcuse's critique of the affirmative character of culture is, in this sense, a model case for the immanent critique of aesthetics, aiming at the sublation [*Aufhebung*] of aesthetics' inherent promise without destroying it. Clearly, the critique of the affirmative character of culture in both of its neutralized forms (bourgeois humanist and authoritarian) also aims to restore the potential of art and culture for social transformation: the critical character of art.

According to Marcuse, the inherent promise of the classical aesthetic tradition finds its proper place only in the emancipatory perspective of materialist philosophy: 'materialist philosophy takes seriously the concern for happiness and fights for its realization in history' (ibid.). It is Marcuse's emphasis on the material conditions for happiness and the challenge of making these conditions sustainable and universal that will also inform Marcuse's later writings on aesthetics. Since Marcuse located this potential at the center of the historical discourse on aesthetics, he was convinced throughout his life that 'every authentic work of art would be revolutionary' (1977: xi) – at least by virtue of its authentic inheritance of the promise to objective happiness and by maintaining the beautiful 'image of liberation' (1977: 6).

It is in his later writings that the critique of society employs a more explicitly psychoanalytical terminology. The rhetorical shift from sublation [*Aufhebung*] to sublimation and the more explicit discussion of psychoanalytical terminology does, however, also imply a shift in the aesthetic and the political perspective. In *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Marcuse mobilizes his interest in the utopian potentials of classical Weimar aesthetics against a different enemy: the material conditions of happiness are now being discussed against the background of technologically perfected late capitalist consumerism. Art is now meant to mobilize a critical potential, as Marcuse

will call it in *One-Dimensional Man*, against 'repressive desublimation' (Marcuse, 2007: 75), the apparent satisfaction of needs under conditions of broadened commodification.

Much could be said about the ways in which Marcuse rephrases Lukács's original critique of reification in terms of a critique of modern technology and one-dimensional (means–end) rationality (Feenberg, 2014). One-dimensional society is fundamentally a reified society that reduces conscious activity to the fulfilment of particularistic ends, ends that are mutually antagonistic and oppositional. The lack of theoretical comprehension, of reified consciousness, affects the human psyche. Marcuse's employment of psychoanalysis continues on this path. It is explicitly intended to 'break the reification in which human relations are petrified' (Marcuse, 1966: 254). Not only, however, does psychoanalysis embed psychological traits in context and narrative, it also helps Marcuse to articulate the material grounds of happiness in new terms.

In the discussion of the possibility of sustainable collective happiness, it is Schiller's conception of aesthetic education that helps solve the problem of the Freudian tensions of *Civilization and its Discontent*. The aesthetic configuration of social life allows for solving tensions between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, between instrumental rationality and sensuous pleasure. Just as Schiller suggested a playful mediation between rationality and the senses to overcome the threat of rigorist terror (of the barbarians) on the one hand and uncultured rudeness (of the savages) on the other, Marcuse, too, aims to mediate the repression and the direct, uncultured articulation of libidinous energies. In this way, aesthetic education is discussed in close analogy with sublimation and with *Eros*, both distinguished from sheer and blunt sexuality, with Marcuse clearly taking a stand for the liberation of sensuousness. Freedom, he writes, 'would have to be sought in the liberation of sensuousness rather than reason, and in the

limitation of the “higher” faculties in favor of the “lower” (Marcuse, 1966: 190). Even in his late work Marcuse defends such aestheticization as the ‘truth content’ of classical, affirmative, idealist culture.<sup>9</sup>

The radical and activist tone of Marcuse’s aesthetics remains throughout his work, and can nowhere be found as pure and simple as in his last book publication: *The Aesthetic Dimension* of 1977, in which Marcuse presents the ‘encounter with the fictitious world’ as ‘counter-societal experience’ (1977: 44). Through semblance and aesthetic sublimation an alternative reality keeps re-introducing itself to one-dimensional society. The realization of the inherent promise of aesthetics, Marcuse continued to emphasize in 1977, was in the hands of ‘political struggle’ (1977: 58). But the sources for ‘great refusal’ (Marcuse, 2007: 261) were fundamentally aesthetic, particularly when more classical (proletarian) sources of political revolt were nowhere to be seen (cf. Kellner, 1984: 280). Marcuse’s radical politics was a politics of form as well.

## ANTINOMIES OF FETISHISM AND AUTONOMY

A third point of entry to the tradition of the Frankfurt School and its most developed aesthetic theory is the work of Theodor W. Adorno, which discusses and, in some ways, integrates central arguments of Benjamin and Marcuse. Adorno’s aesthetics culminates in his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*. Adorno’s theory is prepared, however, in the early essays which Adorno publishes in the *Zeitschrift*. Here, as in his later writings, key motifs of Adorno’s aesthetic writings are the historical separation of advanced from popular art forms and the dialectics of autonomy, oftentimes discussed in terms of aesthetic fetishism. Also, the critique of culture industry, further developed in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, have been

substantively prepared by the texts published in the *Zeitschrift* (especially the studies ‘On Popular Music’). A major part of Adorno’s analyses (above all his 1937 text ‘On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening’, in which Adorno critically responds to Benjamin’s positive assessment of the destruction of aura, aesthetic autonomy, and traditional art) focus on these two issues, which will structure his work all the way through to his aesthetic theory. They are in some ways derived from the analysis of the commodity form, which, in Adorno’s understanding, determines the ontology of the modern work of art (Martin, 2007: 15f.).

The aesthetic relevance of the commodity is, however, ambiguous. As Adorno emphasizes very strongly throughout his work, the development of music as a free art form (as with any other art form) has been historically contingent on the development of its market character. Having developed autonomy by becoming independent from church and court, however, opened the gates for new forms of heteronomy and new social tensions to be mediated by the (musical) work of art.

It is this discussion that enters Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* in terms of the double character of the artwork (alluding to the double character of the commodity in Marx’s *Capital*) as being ‘autonomous’ and ‘*fait social*’. Already in the 1932 text for the *Zeitschrift*, ‘On the Social Situation of Music’, Adorno argues emphatically: ‘The role of music in the social process is exclusively that of a commodity; its value is that determined by the market’ (2002: 391); he continues, ‘The same force of reification which constituted music as art has today taken music from man and left him with only an illusion [Schein] thereof’ (392). Following Lukács’s holistic suggestion that social totality, inherently structured by the logics of the commodity, has fully been realized in modern capitalism, Adorno discusses the question of music in light of the ambiguities of the commodity form and formulates the problem of aesthetic autonomy explicitly in these terms.

But the affinities and tensions between artwork and commodity reach further than this. Adorno regards the artwork as the place of mediation between (abstract) form and materiality, rational composition and mimetic particularity (echoing the tension between exchange value and use value). Given this parallel with the double character of the commodity, it is no coincidence that two of the key dialectical terms of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, *mimesis* and *ratio*, articulate the struggle between the systematic rationality of aesthetic construction (following laws of form and general principles) on the one hand and the attentiveness for the specificity of the material on the other. Here, too, Adorno's conceptualization of the modern artwork echoes the inner tensions of the commodity form. As a result of this process of mediation, the artwork is also potentially a place of resistance against direct utility and thus interrupts the continuity of the commodity process by maintaining its inner legitimacy. Especially as a place of encounter between rationality and materiality (or, classically, 'understanding' and 'imagination', 'sensual drive' and 'formal drive' etc.), Adorno argues in line with the classical aesthetic tradition: the artwork remains as the place of beauty and semblance, as an autonomous object.

But Adorno's dialectics does not stop here: even this potential resistance against (commodified) utilization is itself articulated in terms of fetishization. Adorno writes: 'Artworks that do not insist fetishistically on their coherence, as if they were the absolute that they are unable to be, are worthless from the start; but the survival of art becomes precarious as soon as it becomes conscious of its fetishism' (1997: 228). Following the general argument of the historical emergence of autonomous art through the development of the (art) market, Adorno suggests that it is precisely the ignorance of the social conditions of art production that allows for a radically aesthetic perspective.

As usual, Adorno's argument is antinomical in character as it introduces two

contradicting propositions: on the one hand, the necessary illusion of aesthetic autonomy is built upon the ignorance of the specific social conditions of the artwork. On the other hand, such fetishistic illusion remains necessary especially to insist that aesthetic contents and potentials can reach beyond the immanence of reified society. Or, in the terms of the 1938 essay: 'The more inexorably the principle of exchange value destroys use values for human beings, the more deeply does exchange value disguise itself as the object of enjoyment' (1991: 39). Under conditions of instrumental reason and enforced utility, the reduction of the aesthetic object to its fetish character, the artwork as an 'absolute commodity' (1997: 21)<sup>10</sup> remains as a placeholder for the objects 'no longer distorted by exchange' (1997: 227). Adorno presents, in other words, fetishism in conflict with itself.

Such diagnosis is, to some extent, congruent with the dynamics that Marcuse also introduces in his 1937 article 'The Affirmative Character of Culture'. Separated from direct social utility, reduced to the realm of semblance, art's inherent promise of happiness is at all times threatened with becoming fetishistic, ideological, or, in Marcuse's terms, merely affirmative. But Adorno is, already in the 1930s, far less optimistic concerning the potential for sublating art into social practice than Marcuse, and less willing to subscribe to the autonomy-critical program of the historical avant-gardes than Benjamin.

Amongst the most threatening developments of contemporary authoritarian societies and socially integrated capitalism, Adorno identifies certain versions of popular culture that reduce cultural production to stultifying versions of easy consumption. Biographically, this threat is becoming particularly concrete in Californian exile. Living in close proximity to Hollywood, Adorno is confronted with the emergence of a type of cultural production that strategically produces forms of (deceptively) easy enjoyment. Adorno's conception of popular music and, to a large extent, the concept of the culture

industry are attempts to identify such conditions of marketable cultural production.

Easy and popular enjoyment, cultural goods produced for the market, falsely suggest an accessibility of happiness and pleasure in a world that structurally undermines its very possibility; a world within which the social antagonism makes a life beyond scarcity and the compulsion to work for the major part of the population impossible. Such cultural goods are reduced to their affirmative character and thus betray the aesthetic idea of real happiness. Adorno thus identifies a fundamental rupture in the history of aesthetic enjoyment: 'After *The Magic Flute*', Adorno famously argues regarding the history of music, 'it was never again possible to force serious and light music together' (1991: 32).

In Adorno's aesthetic program – and his aesthetic models are never just reconstructions of the logics of aesthetic production and experience but also always strategic interventions in contemporary cultural production – advanced art needs to include the ambiguity of enjoyment and happiness. The aesthetic *promesse du bonheur* presents itself in its negativity, by way of its impossibility. He formulates: 'Art records negatively just that possibility of happiness which the only partially positive anticipation of happiness ruinously confronts today. All "light" and pleasant art has become illusory and mendacious' (1991: 33). Adorno's aesthetic justification of dissonance and post-tonal composition, or later, the central aesthetic importance of the color black (1997: 39), is strongly inspired by this argument.

To protect the capacity of autonomous art to indicate the potential of happiness, art has to abstain from the illusion of easy enjoyment. For this it has to pay the price of becoming esoteric. The separation of autonomous culture and popular culture is regarded as historically irreversible. It does, however, condition both extremes of the spectrum: just as much as the promise of culture as a collectively lived form of social practice is withheld from autonomous culture, so the

promise of transgressive and unrestricted happiness remains unavailable to the products of culture industry.

This historical rift between the two extremes of culture (autonomous culture and culture industry) ultimately contains Adorno's verdict on the avant-gardes. Although Adorno defends the idea of aesthetic autonomy and insists on the historical legitimacy of aesthetic semblance, his dialectics also presents overly simple interpretations of a modernist aesthetics of autonomy. Modern art, by the force of its own concept, also contains the struggle against its own illusoriness or semblance character; in this sense, too, Adorno conceives it as antinomical by essence. What Adorno coins as the failure of culture (and specifically philosophy) (1973: 3) in not having become practically relevant in reorganizing social life, is, metaphorically speaking, inscribed into the conscience of modern art. Or, as he writes in *Aesthetic Theory*, 'The dialectic of modern art is largely that it wants to shake off its illusoriness like an animal trying to shake off its antlers' (1977: 102). Art's attempt to become effectively real, without reducing itself to culture industry and without sacrificing its potential to insist upon the unrealized potential of happiness, is doomed to fail. Autonomous art remains, in the end, in conflict with itself, no less antinomical than activist forms of avant-gardism or even the products of culture industry.

It is important to be aware of the fact that Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is, in its very structure, an attempt to critically react to what he characterizes as 'identity philosophy' by maintaining the 'primacy of the object' (1977: 109, 145, 169, 259, 322f.; cf. Sonderegger, 2011: 414). His theory attempts to become aesthetic itself. It attempts to stay ostentatiously close to empirical, historical, and, most of all, *aesthetic* material. Furthermore, Adorno's writing style mobilizes figures of aesthetic presentation in order to intensify the plausibility of his arguments. Finally, it is also aesthetic theory *in actu* rather than a fulfilled system of aesthetics.

This attempt to emphasize the material and materiality of theory is yet another, partly performative and stylistic, attempt to resist the predominant logic of the commodity form. If the commodity form installs a universal logic of quantification that makes qualitatively different things quantitatively commensurable (in terms of exchange value), Adorno understands aesthetics (both theory and practice) as a place of resistance against commensurability. By the very structure of theory, aesthetics becomes yet another place for mobilizing the qualitative against premature systematization.

## LEGACIES AND CONTINUITIES

In response to the Lukácsian ambition of formulating an aesthetic theory that could confront progressive reification, three main aspects of the Frankfurt School's conceptualization and critique of aesthetics remain: a historico-political theory of *aesthesis*, which allows for specific strategic interventions in the realm of aesthetic discourse (Benjamin); the immanent critique of the classical aesthetic paradigm with its inherent idea of aesthetic sublimation and political sublation (Marcuse); and the dialectical discussion of aesthetic semblance in light of a critique of commodity fetishism (Adorno). All three approaches formulate a politics of form in a situation in which the general course of history – a history of ever-growing commodification – was no longer trusted and in which emancipatory politics are needed to mobilize deviant potentials of social practice. Four main aesthetic-political strategies of such kind come to the fore: the redemption of forgotten layers of the past (1), the immanent critique of the bourgeois legacy (2), the representation of those social forces, who might still be capable of preventing the worst (3), and the unfolding of the inner contradictions of the commodity form (4).

The reach and impact of these aesthetic models is hard to measure. Particularly in

the Anglo-Saxon world, much work has been done towards the reception of Frankfurt School aesthetics by Susan Buck-Morss, Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton, Andreas Huyssen, and Peter Osborne. Under contemporary conditions, no serious scholar of continental aesthetics could afford not to process its major claims in one way or another, even though its manifest and explicit politic layer has often had to be downplayed, ignored, or rejected. At the same time, the official development of second generation Frankfurt School critical theory, mainly determined by the institutional political impact of Jürgen Habermas, marginalized aesthetic perspectives in the trajectory of social research. Much of what Frankfurt School aesthetics had epitomized then continued in other theoretical traditions, predominantly poststructuralism.

If not at the institutional center of critical theory in the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research and the Goethe University, the key systematic impulses of the original aesthetic programs nevertheless found their way into the theoretical efforts of second generation critical theorists who formulated their own aesthetic politics.

A key impulse of the first major book collaboration between Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1993) was a direct critique of the lack of cultural theory and aesthetic experience in Habermas's theory of the public sphere. In opposition to the bourgeois public sphere was the proletarian public sphere as a *Produktionsöffentlichkeit*, a public sphere of production. What is interesting in light of the ongoing interest of Negt and Kluge in the historical formation of human experience, are a number of impulses, strongly reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's original aesthetic project. Already, *Public Sphere and Experience* includes the experiential horizon of social production in daily political culture – much like Benjamin attempted with his passionate plea for modern media technology. Their second collaborative book project, *History and Obstinacy* (Negt and Kluge, 2014), also includes extensive discussions of the young Marx's accounts of the

history of sense perception and the aesthetic formation of a human sense. Finally, the fragmentary form, a surrealist montage of texts and images ranging from cosmic history to the history of working class struggles, from planetary and human *Urgeschichte* to childhood, echoes Benjamin's writings, which similarly suggest an isomorphic relation between these various layers. In more systematic terms, the concept of 'self-regulation' (Negt and Kluge, 2014: 106–13; see Martin, 2015) suggests comparable logics of subtle physical and quasi-physical forces (within history as much as the individual), the acceptance of which would allow for various perspectives of emancipation (Negt and Kluge, 1981: 55).

In their own self-understanding, the theoretical contribution of Negt and Kluge to the tradition of the Frankfurt School could predominantly be understood in terms of political theory. One must not forget that Alexander Kluge is amongst the most prolific, influential, and multifaceted filmmakers and authors (and TV-producers) of recent German history, whose work can also be seen as a continuation of Frankfurt School aesthetics (if not cultural politics) *in praxi*.

Marcuse's aesthetic theory might appear as the least influential paradigm of early Frankfurt School aesthetics. Indeed, both the radical posture of an aesthetically motivated 'great refusal' and the strong affinities to Weimar classicism have seen better days. It is the argument of Herbert Marcuse's early essay on affirmative culture, however, that is echoed and further developed in Peter Bürger's path-breaking contribution to the conceptualization of the avant-garde (Bürger, 1984), the influence of which can hardly be overestimated.<sup>11</sup> Bürger's book is indeed an attempt to mediate Walter Benjamin's radical critique of bourgeois autonomous aesthetics and Adorno's affirmative reading of the idea of autonomy in light of the advent of culture industry. Bürger's conceptualization of the historical avant-garde reads like a paraphrasing of Marcuse's critique of affirmative culture. Bürger presents the main impulse of the historical avant-gardes

as a critique of the bourgeois separation of art and life. Avant-gardist artistic politics thus means, for Bürger, to sublimate the inherent promise of autonomous art in real life praxis. What is striking in Bürger's account of the historical avant-gardes is not only the structure of his argument, which is strongly reminiscent of Marcuse – formulating an immanent critique of the semblance of beauty from the perspective of a radically changed life practice – but also the evaluation of the neo-avant-gardes as repeating Marcuse's own position. Regarding the neo-avant-gardes as de-sublimated practices under changed social conditions (as art forms that have institutionally been integrated), Bürger, like Marcuse, explicitly rejects these developments as instances of social integration.

It is important to note that this particular argument provoked the most (and the most influential) criticism of Bürger's account.<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that Marcuse's critique of one-dimensional society inspired the work of a conceptual artist like Dan Graham and thus became the source of neo-avant-gardist art itself.<sup>13</sup>

After the successful *Abwicklung* clearing of academic Marxism in German universities, the continued success of Adorno's aesthetic writings is not without irony. Few Adorno scholars accept the categorical role of the commodity form for understanding the ontology of the modern artwork, and few would insist on modern art's capacity to break the spell of a commodified society. The dialectic of aesthetic semblance, however, remains central for contemporary academic debates. Without reflecting the historical ontology of the work of art – its contingency on socio-economic and institutional conditions – Adorno's aesthetic theory appears like an ontological theory of aesthetic experience, aesthetic representation, or aesthetic semblance. Disconnecting Adorno further from Benjamin's efforts to historicize aesthetic experience, aesthetics is presented as a philosophical discipline in its own right, rather than a theory of art under the historical conditions

of late capitalism; it is presented as a *theory of form* rather than a *politics of form*.

Among the second and third generation Frankfurt scholars, Albrecht Wellmer has formulated the clearest version of aesthetic dialectics in his 1984 text, 'Truth, Semblance and Reconciliation'. In line with Habermas's project of a communicative turn of critical theory, Wellmer reformulated Adorno's insistence on the utopian implication of aesthetic semblance as an image of successful communication. Wherever aesthetic semblance alludes to a form of successful signification – and Adorno's negative anticipation of fulfilled happiness is one example – it also implicitly anticipates a form of successful intersubjectivity. Such aesthetic semblance remains dialectical in one respect: wherever the materiality of aesthetic signification is aesthetically emphasized, its realization in intersubjectively shared systems of communication is undermined. Aesthetic experience is thus dialectically bound to intersubjectivity, into which it also introduces a sting of negativity. Wellmer left it to his own successors to develop such a theory of aesthetic experience in dialogue with Derrida's deconstruction,<sup>14</sup> thus completing the separation of aesthetics from social philosophy.<sup>15</sup>

This gesture of depoliticization, now happening to the critique of aesthetic ideology, characterizes much of the development from first generation critical theory to second (and onwards). Somewhere between the contradictory logics of academic theory on the one hand, and artistic practice on the other, much of this original critical impulse has persisted. It can thus still be received, processed, and realized by future aesthetic-political activists, for whom critical theory (unlike traditional theory) was originally written.

## Notes

1 In the art sociological research collected in *Das Kunstfeld* the authors prove the massive popularity of Benjamin (being by far the most popular theorist

of all) but also Adorno, ranked at 8 (Münder and Wuggenig, 2012: 303) more popular than even Deleuze, Butler, or Rancière. See also Hartle (2015) and the exhibition and catalogue of the Frankfurt Kunstverein, fully dedicated to Adorno, in Müller and Schaffhausen (2003). For the artistic impact see also Miller (2014: 4).

- 2 See for instance García Düttmann (2007); about Adorno's and Horkheimer's idea of developing critical theory as conceptual gesture see Schmid-Noerr (1997: 51–88).
- 3 For the importance of the *Zeitschrift* see Schmidt (1980); for the role of Leo Löwenthal as its central coordinator see Schneider (2014: XIV ff., 8 ff.).
- 4 The following threefold structure is partly inspired by the book of Tyrus Miller (2014). To some extent I follow his structure and emphasis of the contemporary legacy of the Frankfurt School's aesthetics. Unlike my text, his book is a contribution to intellectual history and abstains from further-reaching systematic or (theoretico-)political claims.
- 5 Strongly inspired by the Frankfurt tradition, although (of course) not without ironical distance, this twofold approach to the aesthetic ideology is developed by Terry Eagleton (1990).
- 6 The central essays to think of are 'The Little History of Photography', 'Eduard Fuchs, the Collector and the Historian', the review 'Theories of German Fascism', and 'The Author as Producer'.
- 7 In his archive one can see Benjamin's excerpts to these texts.
- 8 This argument against war is formulated in parallel with Rosa Luxemburg's argument in *The Accumulation of Capital*, as Ansgar Hillach has pointed out (1979: 102).
- 9 There are interesting shifts in Marcuse's evaluation of popular and counter-culture between the 60s and 70s. Particularly in the 70s, Marcuse returns to the idea of aesthetic sublimation and rejects the popular and counter-cultural versions of de-sublimation. See Kellner (1984: 352).
- 10 About this concept see Stewart Martin's excellent text (2007). Martin very pointedly discusses the antinomies of the commodity form as the very core of Adorno's ontology of the modern artwork.
- 11 A large part of the discussion of the Neo-Avant-Garde in *October*, arguably the most influential journal of contemporary art criticism of the last 40 years, is an attempt to come to terms with Bürger's criticism. See specifically the introductory formulations to Buchloh's compilation (mind the title!) *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry* (Buchloh, 2000: xxiv ff.).
- 12 See Buchloh (1984); Foster (1996); Bürger (2010).
- 13 See Alberro (1994: 8); Miller (2014: 118).

- 14 The nuances of the difference between Wellmer and Menke are discussed in a footnote of Wellmer (1993: 199).
- 15 As for my own attempt to formulate a politics of form in the aftermath of Adorno without relying on the critical analysis of the commodity form, see Hartle (2006).

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# Rather No Art than Socialist Realism: Adorno, Beckett, and Brecht

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After Samuel Beckett told Adorno in a conversation in 1967 that Bertolt Brecht had planned on writing an 'Anti-Godot', Adorno jotted down in his notebook, 'My God, what a piece of crap that would have been' (Tiedemann, 1994: 24). This note is not just a disrespectful remark, but points toward a substantive problem that constantly occupied Adorno and fundamentally determined his relationship to Beckett and Brecht: how can art, in a late capitalist world and after the failure of revolutionary hopes, still exist as a site for social truth? After 1945, writes Rolf Tiedemann, art seemed to recant everything 'which she once stood for. Adorno was concerned with nothing more persistently than whether works of art can still come into being at all after the catastrophes that had taken place' (Tiedemann, 1994: 18). The question concerning the possibility of art after Auschwitz is also the background to the controversy between committed and autonomous literature discussed by Adorno. If an absolutized autonomy of art is immoral

because of its distance to social practice, then an immediate social commitment ultimately affirms the condition it criticizes. Only between commitment and autonomy – the two 'positions on objectivity', according to Adorno (1962: 177) – does the life of the artwork unfold. Neither of the two positions should be hypostasized; not just theater, but every form of art has struggled with this demand. This tension has decisively influenced Adorno's view of Beckett's and Brecht's work.

Both poets reflected in their own way on the problems of bourgeois theater in the twentieth century. They thereby artistically drew the consequences of their reflections by dissolving the traditional canon of forms. For Adorno, Beckett's oeuvre is almost paradigmatic of an advanced art, since without peering directly at the social effect, Beckett immerses himself in problems of form, and is thus able to simultaneously lend his works the moment of commitment. Yet Brecht's work, according to Adorno's judgment, fails

precisely where it commits to immediately transforming social practice, neglecting the autonomy of artistic form. Adorno often emphasizes this aspect of Brecht so strongly that Beckett and Brecht become antipodes – a relationship that threatens to conceal the contradictions in Brecht's own work, of which Adorno is quite aware. Adorno certainly sees that Brecht converges with Beckett's intention where commitment affects the artistic form, but he gives this moment much less attention than Brecht's didactic claim and political commitment.

Against the backdrop of Adorno's criticism of commitment, as shown in his essay 'Commitment' of 1962 (section 1), and his concept of autonomous art as unconscious writing of history (section 2), this chapter presents and explains the prominent role that Beckett plays for Adorno (section 3) as well as the criticism of Brecht (section 4). It will be shown, however, that Adorno also perceived elements in Brecht's work that lead to a disruption of artistic form. In addition, how both poets reflected in different ways on the decay of traditional theatrical forms will be made clear. Finally, the precarious position of art between autonomy and commitment will be presented with regard to Adorno's relationship to Beckett and Brecht (section 5).

## ADORNO'S CRITIQUE OF COMMITMENT

Commitment, as Adorno specifies in *Aesthetic Theory*, does not simply seek to improve, but 'aims at the transformation of the preconditions of situations' (Adorno, 1970: 334). This should not, however, be taken too literally. This remark resonates with what Adorno expanded upon in his 'Commitment' essay: even though successful works of art always have the moment of commitment, that is to say, they are grounded by a will to change, this will should nevertheless not be interpreted in

terms of direct political agitation. As soon as this becomes the intention of a work of art, it becomes entangled in the same social injustice against which it is committed. In times when commitment merges with a thoroughly false reality, artistic expression becomes a fraud for not being able to historically develop any social effectiveness; it turns into a substitute for satisfying desires for change, and as a result distracts from the actual social condition.

The lack of distance to a false social practice makes commitment for Adorno as false as the political instrumentalization of art – whether as enlightenment or agitation (cf. Lüdke, 1981: 26). This applies in particular to what Adorno calls 'social' or 'socialist realism', the doctrinal art of the Soviet Union since the thirties. Adorno sees the problem as the inadequate distance from reality, the emphasis on subject matter and the raw empiricism into which works of art are integrated without distinction or criticism, thereby supporting the social status quo. 'The relation of social praxis and art', Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory*,

always variable, may well have changed radically once again over the last forty or fifty years. During World War I and prior to Stalin, artistic and politically advanced thought went in tandem; whoever came of age in those years took art to be what it in no way historically had been: a priori politically on the left. Since then the Zhdanovs and Ulbrichts have not only enchained the force of artistic production with the dictate of socialist realism but actually broken it. (Adorno, 1970: 343 et sq.)

That explains the rising allergy of advanced art against everything not artistically formed and empirical. If social criticism is not elevated to form, disregarding social content, then the critical-reflexive moment of art is lost. To this extent: 'Rather no art than socialist realism' (Adorno, 1970: 73).

Art, no different than philosophy, is 'obliged ruthlessly to criticize itself' – 'because the moment to realize it was missed' and 'practice indefinitely delayed' (Adorno, 1966: 3). This means that traditional forms and materials

should no longer be used without question, and calls for the departure from a practice that is 'no longer the forum for appeals against self-satisfied speculation' but 'mostly the pretext used by executive authorities to choke, as vain, whatever critical thoughts the practical change would require' (Adorno, 1966: 3). This idea, formulated by Adorno in the Introduction to *Negative Dialectics*, illustrates why artworks can succeed in denouncing the essential violence of the practical only through its autonomous formal law:

The critique exercised a priori by art is that of action as a cryptogram of domination. According to its sheer form, praxis tends toward that which, in terms of its own logic, it should abolish; violence is immanent to it and is maintained in its sublimations, whereas artworks, even the most aggressive, stand for nonviolence. (Adorno, 1970: 328)

For Adorno, artistic autonomy thus remains historically irrevocable: 'All efforts to restore art by giving it a social function – of which art is itself uncertain and by which it expresses its own uncertainty – are doomed' (Adorno, 1970: 1).

To be sure, Adorno does not equate autonomy with a rejection of any social content. Art would then be both uncritical and lifeless – a wallpaper pattern, as Adorno occasionally remarked. Yet the site of social mediation in the work is not primarily the content of an artwork but its form: 'form – the social nexus of everything particular – represents the social relation in the artwork' (Adorno, 1970: 345). Only through composition and artistic technique can one encounter the social essence. In other words, how people suffer in society speaks in works of art through problems of form, not political positions (Adorno, 1962: 187). Here lies one of the main reasons for the success of Beckett's works and the failure of Brecht for Adorno, as will be shown.

To Adorno, the autonomous work of art counts as the only possible expression of the present state of the world and thus the 'only legitimate art form' (Bürger, 1974: 88 trans. mod). It opposes the 'monstrosity'

[*Unwesen*] of what exists simply by being an unconscious writing of the history of essential social laws. Adorno often modifies this definition, for example, when he calls works of art 'historico-philosophical sundials' [*geschichtsphilosophische Sonnenuhren*] (Adorno, 1957: 46; 1961: 269). In this way, autonomous works necessarily contain the moment of commitment, while those directly engaged with society remain 'socially mute' (Adorno, 1970: 314).

## THE WORK OF ART AS AUTONOMOUS AND FAIT SOCIAL

Even before the sixties, Adorno developed the motif of the work of art as an unconscious writing of history that reflects society in immanent problems of form. In his essay from 1932, 'On the Social Situation of Music', he writes that music will be better the more it progresses with the immanent unfolding of its problems, the purer it stays in its formal language, and the less it allows itself to be limited by the empirical consciousness mutilated by class domination (Adorno, 1932: 393). This idea crucially determines Adorno's attitude to Beckett and Brecht; it's taken up more and more in his later writings on art yet in varied ways, and thus will be looked at in more detail below.

For a work of art to be determined as an *unconscious* writing of history, there must be a common law of motion of art and society. 'Works of art that react against empirical reality', Adorno writes in 'Commitment',

obey the forces of that reality, which reject intellectual creations and throw them back on themselves. There is no material content, no formal category of artistic creation, however mysteriously transmitted and itself unaware of the process, which did not originate in the empirical reality from which it breaks free. Even the avant-garde abstraction [...] is a reflex response to the abstraction of the law which objectively dominates society. (Adorno, 1962: 190)

This determination is also addressed a little more precisely in *Aesthetic Theory*, which says the following about the relationship between art and society:

Art negates the categorial determinations stamped on the empirical world and yet harbors what is empirically existing in its own substance. If art opposes the empirical through the element of form – and the mediation of form and content is not to be grasped without their differentiation – the mediation is to be sought in the recognition of aesthetic form as sedimented content. (Adorno, 1970: 6)

Adorno thus takes constituents of a work of art – the materials, procedures, in short, the aesthetic productive forces – as spiritual sediments of social relations (cf. Schmid Noerr, 1996: 46). In other words, it's still possible to read off them how they have historically emerged. Even though no unbroken accord between artistic labor and social production can be demonstrated, autonomous works as products of social labor communicate in various ways with empirical reality. They have their 'model in social production' (Adorno, 1970: 321 trans. mod). This communication ranges from the procedures, methods, and ways in which the elements of a work of art are joined into a whole to the artistic rationality that prevails within it. Adorno must therefore presuppose the idea of form as sedimented content in order to make plausible why autonomous works of art have binding force at all and why unsolved social antagonisms can return as problems of form (Adorno, 1970: 7).

By concentrating on formal problems, the social essence reveals itself. This is made possible because in the work of art, empirical elements are 'divested of their facticity' (Adorno, 1970: 321). That is to say, works of art do not simply imitate empirical or factual events and reproduce them, but rather follow their own logic. They alienate the factual from the familiar, self-evident context in which it stands. Because of this, works of art both unveil the social essence and show something completely different. For Adorno,

the essential can only be encountered when the 'spell' imposing social relations on all individuals is removed. To this extent, it is understandable when Adorno designates autonomous works of art as 'afterimages of empirical life insofar as they help the latter to what is denied them outside their own sphere' (Adorno, 1970: 5). The liberation of form thus holds enciphered within it the liberation of society (345). In this way, art takes a critical stand, and this is one reason for Adorno's insistence that autonomous art's commitment cannot be read from specific content or materials, but solely through its counterpoint to society: 'By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as "socially useful", it criticizes society by merely existing, for which puritans of all stripes condemn it [...] Art's asociality is the determinate negation of a determinate society' (308).

This assumption, however, implies that the social content of autonomous works, insofar as they follow purely aesthetic laws of motion, can only be extrapolated by interpretation. For Adorno, the substantiality of autonomous art depends on the extent to which it is capable of embodying social content in its form and the degree to which this content is legible. Then the element of 'partisanship' (Adorno, 1970: 316) is kept alive:

The double character of art – something that severs itself from empirical reality and thereby from society's functional context and yet is at the same time part of empirical reality and society's functional context – is directly apparent in the aesthetic phenomena, which are both aesthetic and *faits sociaux*. They require a double observation that is no more to be posited as an unalloyed whole than aesthetic autonomy and art can be conflated as something strictly social. (Adorno, 1970: 342)

Beckett's and Brecht's works also have this double character – both oeuvres, each in their own way, live off the tension between autonomy and commitment. Therefore, Beckett's art should not be reduced to *l'art pour l'art* that wants to be nothing but an 'idle pastime'

(Adorno, 1962: 177) – Beckett's oeuvre gives a frightful answer to this (Adorno, 1970: 33). Neither is Brecht merely a 'tendency poet' whose works 'assimilate themselves to brute existence' (Adorno, 1962: 177 trans. mod).

## ENDGAME: SAMUEL BECKETT

Adorno connected with Beckett on far more than a few personal encounters. Adorno's 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*' is, however, his only text on Beckett – a planned work on *The Unnamable* remains unwritten, and inferences about the content can only be drawn today from Adorno's notes. Nevertheless, Beckett is always present in Adorno's writings. 'Whenever Adorno mentioned contemporary art in his philosophy during the fifties and sixties', writes Tiedemann, 'Beckett's poetry was always listed. It is hardly an exaggeration to assume an implicit confrontation with Beckett's oeuvre behind each page of *Aesthetic Theory*, whose dedication was intended for the author of *Endgame*' (Tiedemann, 1994: 18). Even in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno's magnum opus of 1966, Beckett is ubiquitous; the motifs from Adorno's 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*' are expressed in extremely condensed form in the chapter 'Meditations on Metaphysics'. Explicit references to Beckett are also not lacking. Beckett's presence in Adorno's works is due to the fact that both share a certain historical experience. 'In the pale-gray light of *Endgame*', as Gunzelin Schmid Noerr writes, Adorno recognized 'his own view of culture after Auschwitz as a "rubbish heap" that has made even reflection on one's own damaged state useless' (Schmid Noerr, 1996: 40). With 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', however, Adorno wanted to bring awareness to this lack of self-reflection in the face of horror, especially in light of the predominant reception of *Endgame* by the bourgeois public, for whom the displeasure at

earthly existence and the resignation of subjectivity seemed 'indeed impressive, but not enough for a full evening' (Schmid Noerr, 1996: 20).

For Adorno, understanding *Endgame* means above all understanding its unintelligibility, 'concretely reconstructing the meaning of the fact that it has no meaning' (Adorno, 1961: 243). Although other interpretations are possible and have been widely presented, Adorno is primarily concerned with tracing the social content of Beckett's poetry. This poetry is able to give artistic expression to the experience that no single overarching sense of meaning or social totality can be maintained in light of the catastrophic course of history. Beckett's means of art are advanced insofar as they articulate the social experience of the loss of meaning in aesthetic individuation, not as a universal statement, but rather tangibly in the organization of the artistic material (Schmid Noerr, 1996: 47). In *Endgame*, artistic form and the content of social experience converge almost paradigmatically. Beckett, like no other, *artistically* drew the consequences from the historical situation without lapsing into ideological demonstrations (only Paul Celan is mentioned by Adorno occasionally in this regard). This is certainly one of the main reasons why he is so important to Adorno. Although 'the catastrophe' in *Endgame* as well as in Beckett's other works is presupposed, it is not pronounced. The unspeakable has become so *a priori*, writes Adorno, that it must be kept nebulous. The violence, however, is mirrored in the fear of mentioning it (Adorno, 1961: 245). Letting in nothing but his own experience, Beckett achieves precisely what Adorno calls the 'unconscious writing of history' for his epoch.

'Artists of lower status', writes Tiedemann, still want to distill meaning from meaninglessness; Beckett instead formally draws the consequences. According to Tiedemann, the determinate negation of content becomes the formal principle in *Endgame*. Beckett puts traditional aesthetic categories on trial,

especially the work of art as a coherent context of meaning (Tiedemann, 1994: 18). Both the traditional idea of aesthetic substance as a unity of what appears and what's intended, as well as the meaning and the dialogical sequence of spoken words and sentences, which have traditionally determined drama, become an illusion 'the less events can be presumed to be inherently meaningful', as Adorno writes in 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*' (Adorno, 1961: 242).

*Endgame* completes the disintegration of dramatic form through reducing individual experience to merely subjective meaning up to silencing it altogether:

Through its own organized meaninglessness, dramatic action must model itself on what has transpired with the truth content of drama in general. Nor does this kind of construction of the meaningless stop at the linguistic molecules; if they, and the connections between them, were rationally meaningful, they would necessarily be synthesized into the overall coherence of meaning that the drama as a whole negates. (Adorno, 1961: 242 et sq.)

No new form follows from Beckett's criticism of dramatic form, only parody. This illustrates Beckett's advanced consciousness of form, for he takes into account the progress of artistic control over materials with the determinate negation of previous forms of art (Schmid Noerr, 1996: 48). 'In its emphatic sense', writes Adorno, 'parody means the use of forms in the era of their impossibility. It demonstrates this impossibility and by doing so alters the forms. The three Aristotelian unities are preserved, but drama itself has to fight for its life' (Adorno, 1961: 259). Beckett does not dissolve the traditionally closed world of drama – the unity of plot, place, and time. Rather, he shows its absurdity in a historical situation that no longer allows for coherence.

In this respect, *Endgame* proves indeed to be an examination of the dramaturgical corpse. The announcement 'that there are no more pain killers' (Adorno, 1961: 260) functions as a substitute for the catastrophe. Teichoscopy allows a glimpse to the outside,

but presents nothing moving, only 'gray'. Even the category of hero is destroyed in *Endgame* by parody. The name 'Hamm', Adorno writes, abbreviates Shakespeare's hero, Hamlet, 'the name of the now liquidated dramatic subject, that of the first dramatic subject' (Adorno, 1961: 267) – even Beckett himself couldn't talk Adorno out of this interpretation (Tiedemann, 1994: 19). What emerges from Adorno's interpretation is the impotence of the subject after its historical end in the extermination camps of the Nazis; the individual, as Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*, was reduced to a specimen and even the last and poorest possession left to him was expropriated: death (Adorno, 1966: 362). 'The grimacing clowns, childish and bloody, into which Beckett's subject is decomposed, are that subject's historical truth' (Adorno, 1970: 339) – namely, that the subject regresses to a mere 'whatchamacallit' [*Diesda*] (Adorno, 1961: 246), to rubbish, 'organic garbage' (Adorno, 1961: 266). The anti-heroes of *Endgame* no longer act from freedom; they only know the impotence of decisions that have no consequences. The ration of reality and characters in *Endgame*, according to Adorno, is identical with what historically remains of the subject:

and what is left of the subject is its most abstract characteristic: merely existing, and thereby already committing an outrage. 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. (Adorno, 1961: 251)

This mutilation extends from their bodies, which consist only of torsos and no longer function properly, to the fact that Nell and Nagg live in waste bins, up to their names, which are merely abbreviations. For Adorno, Beckett's 'final history of the subject', recapitulates as farce what men once wanted to be; 'a vision of which they were deprived as much by the course of society as by the new cosmology, and which they nevertheless cannot let go of' (Adorno, 1961: 271).

CLOV (*absorbed*): Mmm.  
 HAMM: Do you know what it is?  
 CLOV (*as before*): Mmm.  
 HAMM: I was never there. (Beckett, 1958: 128; cited in Adorno, 1961: 273)

'The subject', Adorno scribbled on Beckett's *Unnamable*, 'does not yet exist, it would be utopia' (Tiedemann, 1994: 48). In this respect, *Endgame* also has no logical context of action – for that's inconceivable without a subject as a bearer. It follows, however, its own 'staggering logic' (Adorno, 1961: 265 trans. mod). The individually presented situations are emancipated from any overarching context and from the dramatic nature of the characters; they are instead placed in an autonomous context, although their model comes from empirical situations. However, their associative sequence synthesizes them into a form in their own right, where 'one sentence draws after it the next sentence or the reply, just as in music a theme motivates its continuation or its contrast' (Adorno, 1970: 338). Deprived of any instrumental and psychological context, the situations depicted can spontaneously assume a specific and compelling expression, 'that of horror' (Adorno, 1961: 253). In his notes for 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', Adorno remarks that, in empirical existence, there are innumerable situations which assume an expression of their own when detached from their pragmatic context: 'An old man takes a nap and pulls a handkerchief over his eyes. Completely harmless in natural life: the horror that emanates from it when isolated in a tableau vivant' (Adorno, 1994: 159).

Along with sense, the possibility of meaning, and the acting subject, the meaning of language disappears too. Beckett, writes Adorno, transforms language into an instrument of its own absurdity:

The objective decay of language, that bilge of self-alienation, at once stereotyped and defective, which human beings' words and sentences have swollen up into within their own mouths, penetrates the aesthetic arcanum. The second language of those who have fallen silent, an agglomeration

of insolent phrases, pseudo-logical connections, and words galvanized into trademarks, the desolate echo of the world of the advertisement, is revamped to become the language of a literary work that negates language. (Adorno, 1961: 262)

Linguistically, too, logic staggers:

HAMM: Open the window.  
 CLOV: What for?  
 HAMM: I want to hear the sea.  
 CLOV: You wouldn't hear it.  
 HAMM: Even if you opened the window?  
 CLOV: No.  
 HAMM: Then it's not worthwhile opening it?  
 CLOV: No.  
 HAMM  
 (*violently*): Then open it! (*Clov gets up on the ladder, opens the window. Pause.*) Have you opened it?  
 CLOV: Yes. (Beckett, 1958: 123 et sq.; cited in Adorno, 1961: 265)

The senselessness of an action, Adorno points out, becomes the reason for doing it. In order to convict discursive language of its own absurdity, Beckett's absurd logic negates the meaningfulness of the fact that language has been historically nothing else but an instrument of domination (Adorno, 1961: 265).

In his worldless works, Beckett is realistic insofar as he expresses the truth about the world. In a television discussion on Beckett with Walter Boehlich, Martin Esslin, Hans-Geert Falkenberg, and Ernst Fischer, Adorno opposes the thesis presented by Georg Lukács of the 'worldlessness of representation' in avant-garde art, at whose peak Lukács places Beckett's *Molloy*. When the distortion of human personality is driven too far or universalized, so that people no longer recognize themselves in it, art loses touch with reality; Lukács criticizes this tendency in *Realism in our Time* (Lukács, 1964: 31 et sqq.). For Adorno, however, Beckett is just being realistic, showing what the world makes out of people – and thus he follows in the radical legacy of the avant-garde and naturalism: 'a disenchanted world, the illusionless, "*comment c'est*"' (Adorno, 1994: 177), as Adorno writes in his notes on *The Unnamable*. Take Émile Zola, for example, who uses literary



means to depict his epoch in all its ugliness and brutality, analytically presenting people's dependence on social laws with the truthfulness of sober and expressionless photography. In the *Rougon-Macquart* series, Zola meticulously illustrates the physiology of human life on the margins of society, right up to the 'revolt of the nervous system stretched to the breaking point' (Zola, 1867: 2). Zola, like a doctor in the dissecting room, uses language as a diagnostic tool for the purpose of positivist precision. 'Naturalism', Adorno calls it, 'is still illusionistic in its form, as though saturated with the toxin of meaning [...] Beckett gets rid of that, and precisely in so doing distances himself from the photographic-realist façade' (Adorno, 1994: 177). Beckett too 'so to speak, photographed the society in which everything has a function from the bad side' (Tiedemann, 1994: 91). He had the gaze of a doctor on the living from the dissection room (Adorno, 1994: 177). Indeed, when the gaze is not merely directed to the surface, what's portrayed is the social essence, revealing itself as a 'monstrosity' [*Unwesen*]. Beckett completely strips the last remnants of illusion and meaning away from the physiology of human life: what remains are reminders of bare, natural conditions – food, drink, disease, physical harm. With Beckett, as Adorno commented in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* from 1958/59, only naked nature remains, to which humans have descended in the course of the historical 'mutilation process' (Adorno, 2009: 128).

That is why Adorno recognizes 'real commitment' in Beckett's works (Tiedemann, 1994: 21). Accordingly, Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory*: 'Greece's new tyrants knew why they banned Beckett's plays, in which there is not a single political word' (Adorno, 1970: 319). As Adorno expressed in the television conversation mentioned above, resistance stirs against advanced art because people understand very well when they are being attacked. 'Beckett's things' have such indescribable force because they confront the defining historical and social contents of the time, and not merely surface phenomena (Adorno et al., 1994: 87). As a

result, they inspire a moment of hope. But Beckett's absurd theater shows the age as it is, and thereby denies all hope:

HAMM: Did your seeds come up?

CLOV: No.

HAMM: Did you scratch round them to see if they had sprouted?

CLOV: They haven't sprouted.

HAMM: Perhaps it's still too early.

CLOV: If they were going to sprout they would have sprouted. (*Violently.*) They'll never sprout! (Beckett, 1958: 98; cited in Adorno, 1961: 245)

At the same time, however, it appeals to readers and viewers to grasp the world as changeable. Beckett knew, as Walter Boehlich said in conversation with Adorno, that there is no hope, but also that he could neither live nor write without it (Adorno et al., 1994: 107). Adorno writes,

Excretions become the substance of a life that is death. But the imageless image of death is an image of indifference, that is, a state prior to differentiation. In that image the distinction between absolute domination, hell [...] and the messianic state in which everything would be in its right place, disappears. (Adorno 1961: 274 trans. mod)

The possibility of truth is kept open when the counterimage arises from the stiffness of death. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno writes:

Beckett has given us the only fitting reaction to the situation of the concentration camps – a situation he never calls by name, as if it were subject to an image ban. What is, he says, is like a concentration camp. At one time he speaks of a lifelong death penalty. The only dawning hope is that there will be nothing any more. This, too, he rejects. From the fissure of inconsistency that comes about in this fashion, the image world of nothingness as something emerges to stabilize his poetry. (Adorno, 1965: 380 et sq.)

Adorno's thinking also holds the 'fissure of inconsistency' open – and in that way, he's close to Beckett. For the sake of hope, Adorno philosophizes in a deliberately aporetic way in order to maintain precisely this contradiction between the meaningless of reality and the perspective of reconciliation (Schmid Noerr, 1996: 53).

CLOV: I love order. It's my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the last dust. (Beckett, 1958: 120; cited in Adorno, 1961: 274)

## DIDACTIC POETRY: BERTOLT BRECHT

The relationship between Adorno and Brecht is certainly marked by mutual antipathy. In Brecht's *Journals*, there is no lack of disrespectful remarks about the members of the Institute for Social Research – 'formerly frankfurt, now hollywood' (Brecht, 1973: 510) – with whom he sometimes met in Californian exile for discussions concerning art and society. And for Adorno, as his letters show, Brecht was a 'wild man' (cf. Wiggershaus, 1986: 192) with a 'dull nature' (Adorno and Kracauer, 2008: 259) and harmful influence on Walter Benjamin, whom he encouraged 'to believe in the proletariat as if it were the blind world-spirit' and was on the verge of turning into a '*Wandervogel* gone mad' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2003: 131 et sq.; cited in Muller-Doohm, 2003: 219). Brecht's proximity to party communism, as shown in the doctrine of the learning-play [*Lehrstücke*], was another reason for Adorno's distance (Scheit, 2011: 5).

Nevertheless, Brecht, one of the 'greatest formal artists of the 20th century' (Burdorf, 2001: 1), was not merely a 'sparring partner' for Adorno to test his own philosophical work (Klein et al., 2011: 381). Peter Bürger draws attention to the fact that the reasons for the rejection can be derived from Adorno's concept of art itself, especially the motif of the artwork as an *unconscious* writing of history. Brecht, on the other hand, forms the connection between art and society with 'the highest possible degree of consciousness'. In this respect, Bürger is right to assert that there's no place for a writer like Brecht in Adorno's aesthetic theory, and thus he can't be adequately recognized by Adorno

(Bürger, 1974: 87). However, works such as *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* can also be interpreted with regard to Adorno's aesthetic of autonomy or rather the theory of the artwork as an unconscious writing of history. According to Burkhardt Lindner, the radicality of the play lies in its 'poetic addition', the autonomy of which goes beyond action and can't be assimilated. This supplement is the violence that underlies all culture (Lindner, 2001: 273). This violence drives the text forward and subverts it, insofar as the play is a parable on the failure of culture, which Adorno certainly perceived as well (Lindner, 2001: 276). In *Negative Dialectics*, for example, the reference to a speech by Mauler in *Saint Joan* is quite clear; Adorno, considering the repression of violence underlying all culture, writes: '[Culture] abhors stench because it stinks – because, as Brecht put it in a magnificent line, its mansion is built of dogshit' (Adorno, 1966: 366).

Despite this reference to Brecht, especially at a central point in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno did not at any point examine in detail how Brecht too exposes the traditional idea of drama and the notion of meaningfulness as illusory. Neither did Adorno perceive how Brecht reflects this insight through the disruption of artistic form. In his writings, he only rudimentarily deals with Brecht's work in differentiated ways. Otherwise, he treats him in terms of committed literature. However, this attitude towards Brecht is also understandable in light of the fact that in the 1960s, Adorno wanted to intervene in discussions about art and politics that threatened to turn in favor of a decidedly political art. It's clear from his correspondence with Walter Benjamin that he also counts Brecht in the unified front against *l'art pour l'art*, to which Adorno would like to oppose his own position (Adorno and Benjamin, 1994: 65). In Adorno's essay 'Commitment', Brecht's desire to educate people towards an attitude is related to Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of committed literature. Adorno thus ascribes little importance to the breaks in Brecht's

development, even though when confronting the National Socialist horror, he deviated from the attitude of his learning-plays and the aesthetics of the earlier 'epic theater' (Scheit, 2011: 4). This aesthetic is pointless when faced with the formation of a German national community. Brecht did not, however, give any theoretical account for this break (cf. Scheit, 2011: 6).

Adorno's critique begins where Brecht instrumentalizes his art for a political purpose, thus spoiling it. By placing doctrine over form and universal statements over individual experience, the plays become abstract, and neglect the reality they wish to change. The lyrical voice, writes Adorno, 'had to swallow chalk', when Brecht, in despair over the violence of social relations, adopts a practice he has every reason to fear: 'Even Brecht's best work was infected by the deceptions of his commitment' (Adorno, 1962: 187). Brecht, however, in the context of the expressionism debate conducted in the Moscow journal *Das Wort* during 1937–8, warned against falling into the monstrosity of a naked 'contentism', as he liked to call it. Yet Adorno still sees Brecht, because of his obligation to unadorned truth and the ideal of simplicity, falling into a realism that misses the essence of reality. Due to its processuality, this essence cannot be depicted as an immediate fact by 'dragging it straight out of its camouflage' but rather only through citing it 'imageless and blind, in a single crippled life' (Adorno, 1962: 183). Brecht's 'picture-book technique' wants to make this essence theatrically appear, and thereby misses it (Adorno, 1962: 186). For Adorno, Brecht falls behind an already attained artistic level when he does not follow an autonomous artistic development, but rather uses forms for the sake of a political purpose, and thus adapts them to this goal. What's often referred to as Brecht's avant-gardism, along with the reception of artistic forms already handed down, runs the risk of becoming regressive.

With his conception of 'epic theater', Brecht wanted to denounce the art of

bourgeois society, which he detested. To the question, 'Is drama dead?' he replied: 'If you ask a hundred and twenty-year-old, if life at all makes sense, then he will tell you, especially when he has lived badly: little' (Brecht, 1967: 104). At the same time, he did not want to abolish theater at all, but to innovate it. Adorno's observation that Brecht was more interested in the theater than in changing the world definitely has its kernel of truth here (Adorno, 1969: 275). Brecht abandons the classical conception of Aristotelian drama. Instead of empathy and illusion, he sets on training the argumentative intellect in the theater, presenting unadorned the phenomenon of alienation in capitalist society. Ultimately, he sees this presentation as the aim of theater.

Adorno criticizes Brecht for wanting to expose the fiction of appealing to humanistic values such as the good, truth, and beauty, and wanting to represent the opposition between individual and society in a way that eliminates dramatic character and subjective mediation. When people are depicted directly as agents of social processes and functions, then the objectivity that the plays want to distill is falsified (Adorno, 1962: 185). On the one hand, the abstractness of what's expressed is directed at the individual. From this perspective, Brecht seems to follow Nietzsche's pitiless imperative: 'if something is falling, one should also give it a push' to act (Nietzsche, 1883: 168). And unlike Beckett, who develops the universal out of individual experience and reflectivity, Brecht's demand for education toward a universal attitude is doomed to fail since society does not have an overarching subject that could guarantee it. On the other hand, Brecht also misses the social essence. In *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, as Adorno writes, Brecht is not able to reveal the essential processes of capitalist society which the play wants to show. The more he concerns himself with immediate facts of reality, the less he is able to show this essence: 'Mere episodes in the sphere of circulation, in which competitors maul each other, are

recounted instead of the appropriation of surplus-value in the sphere of production, compared with which the brawls of cattle dealers over their shares of the booty are epiphenomena incapable of provoking any great crisis' (Adorno, 1962: 183). Furthermore, in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, the true horror of fascism is conjured away, since it's presented as the accidental undertaking of a band of gangsters, like a misfortune. Because of his political commitment, Brecht cannot show that fascism is rooted in social relations themselves – and this also degrades his own doctrine (cf. Adorno, 1962: 184).

There's a gap between Brecht's claims and the aesthetic form, making him incapable of fulfilling his own norm: 'The political falsehood stains the aesthetic form' (Adorno, 1962: 186). This is because the demand for realism can only refer to the fundamental experience of reality to which the author adds his construction, as Adorno argues in his text on Lukács, 'Extorted Reconciliation'. Realistic observation and formal laws of aesthetics must be connected. On the one hand, this lack of connection shows itself to Adorno in Brecht's unambiguity and ideal of simplicity, his 'infantile simplification' (Adorno, 1958: 222), which falls short of the 'truth [that] involves innumerable mediations' (Adorno, 1962: 186). This is evident from the abstract and unsound character of the plays. On the other hand, the plays are dramatically unmotivated and, in terms of social conditions, misconstructions, since Brecht withdrew both the aesthetic design and the moment of 'imagery' (Adorno, 1962: 183 trans. mod). Adorno's criticism can be summed up in the following: Brecht artistically portrays the abstract essence of reality in a merely superficial way, without actually being able to express what he intended. His technique of reduction would be legitimate only in autonomous art, for example in Beckett, who brought people to their abstract substratum in order to show social suffering, something Brecht also wanted to express (cf. Adorno, 1962: 185). Adorno thus refers to Brecht's didactic poetry as a 'manipulative technique' (Adorno, 1970:

329), coercing what's artistically expressed until it bends into shape. In contrast, the ambiguity of autonomous artworks can inflame both thought and insight, and thus does justice to what's expressed.

At the same time, however, Adorno notes that Brecht's artistic force goes beyond the official credo of his theses. Such force accrued to him, paradoxically, only through political commitment: 'It is futile to try to separate the beauties, real or imaginary, of his works from their political intentions' (Adorno, 1962: 186). This is futile because the primacy of doctrine over form becomes its own moment, and as a result opposes the illusory character of form, which it has always based on its claim to present aesthetic meaning: 'The correction of form by external conditions, with the elimination of ornament in the service of function, only increases its autonomy' (Adorno, 1962: 185). With such remarks, Adorno traces a more universal political significance in Brecht's work than that which Brecht himself claimed to be pursuing (Scheit, 2011: 1). Yet Adorno leaves this brief remark behind and concentrates on the critique of Brecht's didactic intentions.

In *Aesthetic Theory*, by contrast, Adorno pursues the contradictions in Brecht's work, and views them with regard to the disintegration of form, something that Beckett's plays also reflect. A different concept of commitment emerges from this perspective, one close to Beckett as well. Just like the correction of form by external conditions increases its autonomy, Adorno claims in *Aesthetic Theory* that because of Brecht,

the artwork gained self-consciousness of itself as an element of political praxis and thus acquired a force opposed to its ideological blindness. Brecht's cult of practicality became an aesthetic constituent of his works and it is not to be eliminated from what in his work stands at a remove from the realm of causal contexts, namely their truth content. (Adorno, 1970: 329)

This doesn't concern the doctrine Brecht represents – all the theses could be more

succinctly understood through theory, Adorno admits – but the translation of his insights into aesthetics, his ‘transport through the aesthetic monad’ (Adorno, 1970: 169 trans. mod). Through Brecht’s vehemence, these insights can become more than they pretend to be.

In his plays, theses took on an entirely different function from the one their content intended. They became constitutive; they made the drama anti-illusory and contributed to the collapse of the unitary nexus of meaning. It is this, not commitment, that defines their quality, yet their quality is inseparable from the commitment in that it becomes their mimetic element. Brecht’s commitment does for the work what it gravitates toward on its own: It undermines it. (Adorno, 1970: 335)

Adorno suggests this undermining in *Aesthetic Theory* but doesn’t really carry it out (cf. Scheit, 2011). He confines himself to the statement that the ‘plight of form’ manifests in the difficulty of the conclusion, a problem which came to a head in Brecht: ‘Once having shaken itself free of convention, no artwork was able to end convincingly, and the continued use of traditional endings only simulate the temporal convergence of the particular elements with the concluding instant as a totality of form’ (Adorno, 1970: 201). Yet Adorno refrains from analyzing the conclusion of even a single play by Brecht. According to Scheit, the ‘frightening chaos’ at the end of *Mahagonny* or the ‘sententious conclusion’ of *The Good Person of Szechwan* would offer good cases for in-depth investigations (Scheit, 2011: 2). Even *Saint Joan* presents a merely apparent solution, an aesthetically suspended conclusion that expresses the impotence of commitment:

In the impossibility of playing the old game to the end with force as if it were the last time and just as little in playing it as a final game, the will to break the course of the world is preserved. That is why art is frightened by its impotence. In the words of Joan: ‘The noise of the factories has started again, you can hear it. / Another chance to stop it / has been wasted’. (Lindner, 2001: 285; Brecht, 1932: 119)

In an open letter to Ralf Hochhuth in 1967, there is once again a comment by Adorno

regarding Brecht’s undermining of form. It reads:

Brecht had the right instinct in *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*, when he exhibited its character in the populace and not in the rulers. In return, he had to give up the traditional pathos of tragedy and make use of episodic form, perhaps at the expense of what is genuinely dramatic, a consequence of the phoniness that has taken over the subject, its social semblance. (Adorno, 1967: 243)

By displacing the political drama from its subjects to its objects, however, Brecht did not go far enough. Beckett’s ‘human stumps’ are more realistic in terms of showing just how far human beings have been made into objects of society (Adorno, 1967: 243).

## ART BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND COMMITMENT

In a discussion where Brecht was also present, Adorno stated that only cultural moments that reject the principle of utility have the intention of pointing beyond what exists, and only the art which refuses practice has a moment of transcendence, in the sense of a classless society (Horkheimer, 1985: 578). Afterwards, Brecht noted in his work journal: ‘i’m listening to SCHÖNBERG’S “theme with 7 variations” on the radio when the bell rings. a bloodless young-old woman stands in front of the door: “can I ask you for a busfare?” I quickly give her 10 cents and continue listening to the romantic work with its pre-established harmony’ (Brecht, 1973: 695). This episode contains, *in nuce*, the controversy about committed and autonomous artworks: it points to the danger of autonomous art having no social consequences. Adorno himself also saw this danger. Autonomous works have a tendency to become ideological through their rejection of manifest social content. Here Adorno encounters a moral conflict: art should be alienated from the real world and its

interactions, yet because of this, it leaves the world as it is. According to his *Lectures on Aesthetics* from 1958/59, the moral claim to change the world comes into conflict with the specific aesthetics of the intolerability of empiricism. The more adequate the artistic experience, the stronger the context of delusion. There are periods in which art acts as a substitute for other things; for instance, there are situations 'in which radical art can become an alibi for the avoidance of intervening practice' (Adorno, 2009: 195; cf. Adorno, 1970: 116). The criticism of commitment thus becomes wrong as soon as the wish to keep culture pure of society comes to the fore. This attitude ultimately consists in everything remaining as it was, nothing changing at all (Adorno, 1970: 335 et sq.).

For Adorno, art always needs the perspective of real change that the concept of commitment covers. Yet even if he regards autonomous art as the only advanced art, hoping that the shock emanating from it spreads into practice, the controversy about committed and autonomous art remains undecided. In the 'Commitment' essay, Adorno describes this controversy as 'urgent, so far as anything that merely concerns the life of the mind can be today, as opposed to sheer human survival' (Adorno, 1962: 177). It is urgent, because autonomous and committed works rightly criticize each other: 'A work of art that is committed strips the magic from a work of art that is content to be a fetish, an idle pastime for those who would like to sleep through the deluge that threatens them' (Adorno, 1962: 177) – here, the truth of Brecht is settled. 'For autonomous works of art, however, such considerations, and the conception of art which underlies them, are themselves the spiritual catastrophe of which the committed keep warning. Once the life of the mind renounces the duty and liberty of its own pure objectification, it has abdicated' (Adorno, 1962: 177). Without this controversy, art would be negated.

Committed art, necessarily detached as art from reality, cancels the distance between the two. 'Art for art's sake' denies by its absolute claims that ineradicable connection with reality which is the

polemical *a priori* of the attempt to make art autonomous from the real. Between these two poles the tension in which art has lived in every age till now is dissolved. (Adorno, 1962: 178)

In this respect, autonomous and committed works of art cannot be neatly separated, but rather remain often ambiguous. This is true both for Beckett, in which 'rudiments of meaning' always remain, and for Brecht, whose work cannot always be reduced to simplicity and didactic gestures. In the rejection of the status quo, therefore, committed and autonomous art converge.

CLOV: Do you believe in the life to come?

HAMM: Mine was always that. (*Exit Clov.*) Got him that time! (Beckett, 1958: 116; cited in Adorno, 1961: 274)

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# Adorno's Brecht: The Other Origin of Negative Dialectics

Matthias Rothe

## ADORNO AND BRECHT: MOVING BEYOND AVERSION

Theodor W. Adorno and Bertolt Brecht: this is how the story commonly goes. The former is repulsed by the unconcerned activism and the vulgar Marxism of the latter; the latter is rejecting the former along with the other Frankfurt School theorists for their 'stilted, abstract language, their elitism, ... their wrong-headedness' (Lyon, 1980: 260).<sup>1</sup> Gene Ray then sums up their relation to one another: 'Bertolt Brecht and Theodor W. Adorno stand for opposing modes and stances within an artistic modernism oriented toward radical social transformation' (2010: 1). He closely follows Susan Buck-Morss, who observed before him: 'Brecht opted for the proletariat, claiming that the artist had to ally himself with the worker's cause ... Adorno insisted that the criterion for art could not be its political effect on the audience' (1977: 34). Adorno's 1962 essay 'Commitment' usually figures as *the* document of their adversity.<sup>2</sup>

This perspective is shaped first and foremost by politics. In 1967, when students took their unease to the streets, ridiculing Adorno's reticence to endorse political action, the German journal *Merkur* published an article by Helmut Heissenbüttel on Adorno's role as editor of Walter Benjamin. Heissenbüttel accused Adorno of having erased all traces of Brecht's materialism and activist politics from Benjamin's writings. Hannah Arendt, Gershom Scholem and many others participated in the controversy. Adorno and Brecht were viewed exclusively through their friendship with Walter Benjamin and through the lens of Adorno and Benjamin's correspondence. Benjamin, conceding fault as well as defending his position when Adorno criticized his closeness to Brecht's materialism, seemed to have been caught between the two and so made their relationship appear fundamentally antagonistic.

Buck-Morss' book *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (1977), setting the tone for decades to come in North America, is highly critical



of this reading. She thoroughly theorizes Adorno's correspondence with Benjamin, reclaiming for intellectual history what the German debate perceived only as politics. Yet in doing so, she also reproduces and even deepens the constellation of adversity; in fact, she inscribes it into the very origin of negative dialectics (hence the book's title). What the correspondence suggests to her, is a precise time of inception for Adorno's philosophical stance that coincides with the beginning of his friendship to Benjamin: their conversations in Frankfurt and Königstein in 1928 and 1929. These encounters marked nothing less than Adorno's 'conversion' (Buck-Morss, 1977: 23), she writes.<sup>3</sup> Adorno's letters, accordingly, seek to ensure Benjamin's faithfulness with regard to this origin.<sup>4</sup> Buck-Morss names Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, Edmund Husserl, Georg Lukács and Arnold Schönberg as influences preparing or following this conversion, yet throughout presupposes Brecht as a hostile factor.

These letters, however, need historicization. Far more than speaking of Adorno's rejection of Brecht, they tell the story of diaspora and political isolation. In such contexts, origins come into existence retroactively. Made the basis for an intellectual history at large, Adorno's own relationship with Brecht falls out of sight. They were part of the same intellectual circles between 1929 and 1932 and particularly close during their exile in Los Angeles.<sup>5</sup> More importantly, the scope and frequency of Adorno's engagement with Brecht is widely ignored. The lens of his correspondence with Benjamin brings only a fraction of it into view. Adorno discussed Brecht's work continuously between 1928 and 1969, in many academic lectures, in public talks, in journal articles and in *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory* (which he considered to be his magna opera).<sup>6</sup> Brecht's 'appearances' in the *Aesthetic Theory* alone, as Karla Schulz notes (1998: 314), rival those of Adorno's acknowledged favourites Franz Kafka, Arnold Schönberg and Samuel Beckett.<sup>7</sup>

This chapter foregrounds some of these discussions, but also Adorno's conceptual engagement with Brecht at places where it is less obvious, and thereby also reassess the Adorno, Benjamin, Brecht triangle. As Burkhardt Lindner remarked – without following up on this insight – an adversarial topology 'is not the only one possible' (1971: 34). The beginning of their relationship, I maintain, was marked by intellectual communion, as Adorno's early reviews of Brecht's works suggest. While both Benjamin and Brecht went in directions that Adorno could not endorse, Benjamin was far more receptive to Adorno's criticism, not least because they shared a philosophical perspective. There are no existing letters between Adorno and Brecht, but Adorno's interventions in Benjamin's work can be seen as also addressing Brecht. While Adorno hoped to rescue Benjamin, or, in his own words, defend him against himself (2015: 455), Brecht, more out of reach, became an opponent. Yet with dialectical contradiction at work, I claim, Adorno was determined, backhandedly, more by such opposition than by approaches in resonance with his own.<sup>8</sup>

## BRECHT AS MODEL

### *The Mahagonny Moment*

Two years after Weimar's hyperinflation, in a society still steeped in misery, Bertolt Brecht and his collaborators turned to a new dramatic subject: the economy, and financial speculation in particular. In the years to come, they produced a great number of dramatic texts meant not only to faithfully record the economic situation at hand, but also to expose its causes. Some remained fragments, such as *Jae Fleischhacker in Chikago* (1925–9) or *The Breadshop* (1926–8), others became defining for Weimar culture, for example *Threepenny Opera* (1928) or *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*

(1930). These plays tell the story of Brecht's struggle with representation, while also providing a genealogy of Brecht's theatre. It was common practice for Brecht to reflect on questions of form in his journal, public discussions and essays, and, throughout his life, in his poems. One of these poems, part of the *Jae Fleischhacker* project, is entitled *This Babylonian Confusion* (Brecht, 1976: 124–5). Written in 1926, Brecht used it to work through problems he had encountered in trying to adapt – with *Jae Fleischhacker* – Frank Norris' 1903 realist novel *The Pit* for the stage. The novel tells the story of cornering the wheat market through the lens of a speculator's private affairs. Brecht's poem not only discusses Norris' realism, but also performs the course of action that his theatre took in the late 1920s in order to fulfil its self-appointed task: staging the irrationality of capitalism.<sup>9</sup> It reads as Brecht's aesthetic programme:

...  
 The other day I wanted  
 To tell you cunningly  
 The story of a wheat speculator in the city of  
 Chicago. In the middle of what I was saying  
 My voice suddenly failed me  
 For I had  
 Grown aware all at once what an effort  
 It would cost me to tell  
 That story to the not yet born  
 But who will be born and will live  
 In ages quite different from ours  
 And, lucky devils, will simply not be able to grasp  
 What a wheat speculator is  
 Of the kind we know.  
 So I began to explain it to them. And mentally  
 I heard myself speaking for seven years  
 But I met with  
 Nothing but a silent shaking of heads from  
 All my unborn listeners.  
 Then I knew that I was  
 Telling them about something  
 That a human being cannot understand  
 ...

If 'cunning' narration refers to traditional, realistic storytelling – linear progression, going through twists and turns to arrive at a happy end – then this strategy fails in the

poem. Its story is disrupted in favour of commentaries providing explanations on everything taken for granted in a narrative that follows the rules of representational realism: What is speculation? What is profit? How are prices determined? What are the consequences? And so on. The lyrical 'I' hears himself speaking for seven years. The explaining never ends, because its subject is society's functioning, and this totality only comes into view to the degree that the cunning narration disintegrates. This does not mean that the text remains fragmentary. It is kept together by a metanarrative: the story of the failure of storytelling, which is itself told cunningly ('the other day I wanted', 'suddenly', 'I had grown aware'). More importantly, this story has a happy ending. The lyrical 'I' comes to own the perspective of its imaginary audience.<sup>10</sup> And it is this perspective that turns out to have been the cause for the disruption of the storytelling all along when the original addressee is revealed as liberated humanity.

Theodor W. Adorno might not have known Brecht's poem, but his *Minima Moralia* (1951) famously ends on a note that calls upon philosophy to practice what the poem achieves:

The only philosophy which can responsibly be practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption ... all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange [*verfremdet*] the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices ... as it will appear in the messianic light. (Adorno, 2005: 247)<sup>11</sup>

After all, he saw the poem's aesthetic procedure at work in Brecht and Weill's *Threepenny Opera* and *Mahagonny*. In particular his first review,<sup>12</sup> comparing *Mahagonny* to the novels of his favourite author Franz Kafka, anticipated the *Minima Moralia* entry verbatim:

The city of Mahagonny is a representation of the social world ... projected from the bird's eye view of

an already liberated society ... Just as in Kafka's novels the commonplace bourgeois world appears absurd and displaced in that it is viewed from the hidden perspective of redemption. (Adorno, 1994: 588)

To be more precise, his review reads as if he had set himself the task to trace the play's realization of the programme laid out in *This Babylonian Confusion*. *Mahagonny* tells the story of Jim Mahoney, who arrives in the city of Mahagonny, which was founded to provide a home for the dissatisfied of all continents. Everything is permitted in Mahagonny, except to be without money. The story, Adorno emphasizes, is told against the backdrop of an emphatic notion of humanity – a life in bliss and freedom – which, as in the poem, is not spelled out. Present circumstances are 'projected onto the untouched white surface of things as they should be' (Adorno, 1994: 588). The story has to measure up against this tacit norm; accordingly, it disintegrates while bringing a totality into view: 'capitalism' or 'the anarchy of commodity production', in Adorno's words (589). The lyrical 'I' of *Mahagonny* is a child, 'an oblique infantile perspective', Adorno remarks (589). The story comes across as 'a fairy tale' and the lack of explanation – over-compensated for in *This Babylonian Confusion* by seven years of speaking – translates in *Mahagonny* into cuts, jumps and absurdities, generating 'crass horror', something that Marxist analysis cannot hope to achieve in the same way, Adorno holds.

Such observations also disclose why Brecht's work was of such interest to Adorno, and why his response to Brecht's work was so enthusiastic in the late 1920s. *Threepenny Opera* and, in particular, *Mahagonny* spoke, on the one hand, to Adorno's encounter with Lukács' Marxism in 1928.<sup>13</sup> The two works visualize, so to speak, the main concern of Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*, which Adorno came to share: commodification or the unfettered mediation of all social relations by exchange value. *Mahagonny*, Adorno asserts elsewhere with a view to

its depiction of love, forces 'the reification of interpersonal relationships' into striking pictures (Adorno, 1994: 589). On the other hand, *Mahagonny* seems to have offered itself to Adorno as a contemporary successor to Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* [mourning play], which he also discovered in 1928. He adopts Benjamin's model of the artwork's form as revelator of societal contradiction and, passing through the aesthetic construction's inherent tensions, conflicts and contradictions, understands *Mahagonny* as performing a genuinely immanent critique, aiming at the disclosure of an era's constitution.<sup>14</sup> The review works through core themes of Benjamin's *Trauerspiel*. Adorno prominently discusses the figure of the sovereign (the founders of *Mahagonny*), emphasizing, like Benjamin, the intimate connection between violence and law. Jim Mahoney becomes an equivalent to the *Trauerspiel*'s figure of the schemer as he manipulates the city's course. Like Benjamin's Baroque drama, *Mahagonny* knows no hero and is not a tragedy (Adorno, 1994: 590). Most importantly, Adorno turns his attention recurrently to *Mahagonny*'s fragmented form, an aspect that is also key in Benjamin's analysis.

Yet Adorno, through his reading of Brecht, does not simply update the *Trauerspiel*. He turns all of Benjamin's stories into stories of becoming: 'the power of what is coming', he writes, 'shows itself ... in the construction of the present' [transl. changed] (Adorno, 1994: 588). 'Construction' can be read as 'in process', as happening in front of the observers' eyes. The schemer and the sovereign, far from being custodians of a world in continuous decomposition, reappear as characters driving all development. *Mahagonny*'s focus is on the founding of sovereignty and Jim Mahoney drives society's latent anarchy to the fore, both uncovering and realizing it (589). *Mahagonny*'s story, which comes to life through 'a child's eye', emerges in a fragmented and distorted form. '(T)he debris ... is constructively clipped together' (591) by

montage as it runs up against ideas of bliss and freedom. In this way, the present circumstances reveal their own falseness against 'the untouched white surface of things as they should be'. And although *Mahagonny* 'does not present ... a positive standard', Adorno asserts, the idea of a classless society 'shimmers through ... as unclear as a movie projection over which another has been superimposed' (588).<sup>15</sup> In other words: as the verso of the false.

It is in this crucial point – the conception of aesthetic truth – that Adorno sides with Brecht or employs Brecht against Benjamin. Transcendence in *Mahagonny* is the effect of a negative, thin as air, whereas in Benjamin's mourning play it is part of the tension that creates the genre's form and the era's condition: a transcendence confined to immanence. Benjamin's mourning play shows the true state of things: 'the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape (1998: 166).<sup>16</sup> *Mahagonny*, by contrast, shows 'the grimace of reality' (1994: 589). The state of things is the false one: the commodity mediated totality. The artwork's critical thrust in Adorno's interpretation is negative. *Mahagonny* makes the present negatable [*negierbar*]. Adorno reconfigures all of Benjamin's concepts for the space defined by Brecht's aesthetic procedure, thereby moving towards a negative aesthetics, negativity through immanence.

Ultimately, his interest was in this procedure and not in the epic theatre, still a new concept at the time. 'Simply referring to epic theatre doesn't tell us much about *Mahagonny*', Adorno writes. Instead, he associates Brecht's work with surrealism: '*Mahagonny* is the first surrealist opera' (591).<sup>17</sup> Theatre proper disappears in a two-fold abstraction. Surrealism, unlike epic theatre, is not confined to a specific medium. It is a cultural movement encompassing many forms of artistic expressions and, in the form of surrealism, *Mahagonny* becomes a 'fractured and intellectual procedure ... sorely needed' (GS 19: 363).

### ***The Actuality of Philosophy: 'This Fractured and Intellectual Procedure'***

Adorno's inaugural lecture 'The Actuality of Philosophy' dates from the same time as his reviews of *Threepenny Opera* and *Mahagonny*. Susan Buck-Morss argues that it not only assembles all the themes of his later philosophy, but also bears the imprint of Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* throughout (1977: 23). It has often been noted, for example, that Adorno's 'constellation' in 'The Actuality of Philosophy' is modelled after Benjamin's 'configuration' in the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' to his *Trauerspiel* book (see Müller-Doohm, 2006: 91; Snow, 1977: 115). However, Adorno debates using the term constellation in the course of his lecture, but finally settles on a concept from Brecht's theatre: *Versuchsanordnung* [experimental setting], a 'less astrological and more scientific and up-to-date word' (GS 20: 572).<sup>18</sup>

How did Brecht come into play here? The 'official' occasion was perhaps a collaboration between Adorno, Brecht and Benjamin. Around 1930, Brecht and Benjamin were planning 'to smash Heidegger' (Wizisla, 2004: 77–8). They recruited Adorno for a critique of *Sein und Zeit* [*Being and Time*] to be published in their journal, *Krise und Kritik*. The journal project fell through, yet the collaboration materialized, albeit in a different form.<sup>19</sup> Adorno's 'The Actuality of Philosophy' and Benjamin's 'What is Epic Theatre?', both written at the same time (early 1931), take a strong anti-Heidegger stance.<sup>20</sup> An understanding of Brecht's work as a method offered an ideal antidote to Heidegger's ontological understanding of alienation [*Entfremdung*]: the question of being could be replaced by the question of society. Heidegger's assertion that an unalienated state could be accessed directly and through an individual's affective and subjective anticipation of death could be challenged by the idea that any critique would have to pass through the exposure of the prevailing

representational systems (science, arts, political discourse and so on). Most importantly, Brecht's exploration of societal totality suggests the possibility of politics.

Not surprisingly then, the similarities between Adorno's lecture and Benjamin's essay (originally written for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, but not published at the time) are striking: Benjamin turns Brecht against the aesthetic programme of naturalism and Adorno turns him against the sciences' assertion of generating truth. Both centrally employ the term *Versuchsanordnung* for these tasks.

'The naturalistic stage', Benjamin writes, 'is entirely illusionistic. Its own awareness that it is theatre cannot fertilize it ... it must repress this awareness so as to pursue undistracted its aim of portraying the real' (1998a: 4). Epic theatre then, because it 'derives a lively and productive consciousness from the fact that it is theatre', can break naturalistic action down into its elements and rearrange them 'as though it were setting up an experiment [*Versuchsanordnung*]' (1998a: 4). The spectator is thereby defamiliarized. Philosophy's assignment, Adorno holds, is likewise the creation of distance or defamiliarization. Its starting point is the questions and answers commonly provided by the sciences. Philosophy has to make scientific findings lose their meaning and break them down into parts to be reorganized: 'Philosophy must thus arrange those elements that it receives from the sciences ... by changing experimental settings [*Versuchsanordnungen*]' (GS 20: 572).

The *Versuchsanordnung* of epic theatre, Benjamin claims, is concerned with 'uncovering conditions'. The audience can recognize the 'devastations of our social order' (1998a: 4). Adorno's *Versuchsanordnung* permits the identification of possible causes of social devastation: once the logic of the sciences has lost its authority, entirely different questions arise: why is it possible to ask the questions that the sciences ask in the first place? What can become the subject of such questioning? Philosophy 'plays' with the elements 'until they form a figure that

is readable as an answer, while at the same time the question disappears' (GS 20: 572). Such an answer is, for example, the emergence of 'the historical figure of commodity' (575). Or, in Foucauldian terms, the sciences' regime of truth becomes apparent. Yet in this all-decisive point – the conception of truth – Adorno again parts company with Benjamin and goes with Brecht. For Benjamin, the idea of a thinking that intervenes [*eingreifendes Denken*], thinking that compels the audience to take an 'actionable' political position, became central around 1930.<sup>21</sup> To that effect, epic theatre, he claims, makes the spectators discover the truth about bourgeois society (it 'reveals' and 'uncovers'). Defamiliarization, in his essay, relies on the deliberate employment of theatrical means. They become tools for truth production. Adorno, by contrast, insists on methodological distance. The 'figure' that offers an answer by displaying the state of commodification, he maintained, is only 'constructed' by the question (575). Adorno's defamiliarization targets its subject in its entirety, for example, the totality of the scientific world. It creates a polemical (hostile) distance to all that exists through the perspective of a (big) question. The question thus – modelled after Heidegger's question of being – obtains a function comparable to the emphatic notion of humanity in *Mahagonny*. And as in *Mahagonny* the story disintegrates, the logic of science loses its grasp in 'The Actuality of Philosophy'. The figure constructed from the resulting fragments does not uncover truth, but, as in *Mahagonny*, truth can 'shimmer through'. In other words, what becomes an experience is the mere possibility of transcendence; truth exists as the reverse of the false (truth cannot reside in the false).<sup>22</sup> The proximity of Adorno's lecture to *Mahagonny* is palpable throughout and the theme of commodification runs as a common thread through them. Already at the beginning, Adorno turns what he saw as Brecht and Weill's surrealism into an assignment for philosophical inquiry: 'only polemically does reality present itself ... as total reality,

whereas it allows for hope only in traces and debris' (555).<sup>23</sup> Brecht's early work, practising an immanent *and* negative critique in artistic form, evidently provided a model for 'The Actuality of Philosophy'. Benjamin relies on a different Brecht: the Brecht of the learning play.

## REFUNCTIONING AND SUBLATING BRECHT

Around 1930, Brecht and his collaborators created a type of theatre that did away with the separation between audience and stage: the *Lehrstück*, or learning play.<sup>24</sup> The first two of these plays, *Lindbergh's Flight* and *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent* share a passage, or rather a poem, that frames them and, I would like to suggest, can be read, along the lines of *This Babylonian Confusion*, as an aesthetic programme again. Like in *This Babylonian Confusion*, in the Lindbergh poem too the present comes into view from the perspective of the future and is turned into the past:

At the time, when humanity  
Began to know itself  
We fashioned carriages  
Of iron, wood and glass  
(...)  
Ages long all things fell in downward direction  
(...)  
Only we, we have found the secret.  
Near the end of the second Millennium as we  
reckon time  
Our artless invention took wing  
Pointing out the possible  
Without letting us forget:  
(...)  
The yet-to-be-attained.  
(Brecht, 1997: 23)

The difference between the Lindbergh passage and the 1926 poem *This Babylonian Confusion* is nevertheless significant. The perspective of the future in *This Babylonian Confusion* is tentative and generated out of the present. As Adorno observed in *Mahagonny*,

it is 'the precise projection of present-day circumstances onto the untouched white surface of things as they should be' (Adorno, 1994: 588). In *Lindbergh's Flight*, by contrast, the future is projected back onto the present, which becomes a distant point on the linear timeline of progress. The future generation has taken the floor; they look back from 'near the end of the second Millennium'. Lindbergh's 1927 flight in the play is ritually repeated. The play's story is a progress report. The dialectical figure at work here is not determinate negation, made possible by 'the bird's eye view of a truly liberated society', but negation of negation. The present turned past is to be evaluated according to its contribution to the state of liberation supposedly achieved. Whereas in *Mahagonny* or *This Babylonian Confusion* the audience or reader is distanced as the 'cunning story' falls to pieces, Lindbergh's flight succeeds and distance is collapsed, not only in interpretation, but also de facto as the audience is encouraged to act the story out.

Adorno responded twice to Brecht's post-1930 programme: In *Dissonances* (1956), he associates *Lindbergh's Flight* with the repressiveness of popular sing-alongs, commenting:<sup>25</sup>

The affirmation of activity as such is dubious. It transfers to the realm of art a drilled-in work ethics of incessant, relentless effort, completely failing to recognize that art ... is in its essence antithetical to the business of self-preservation. (GS 14: 81)

A few years later, in his lectures on *Aesthetic Theory* (1959), Adorno is more forgiving:

And after having criticized the position of blind activity so sharply, I would like to also stress, for the sake of justice, its moment of truth: namely that its relation to the artwork is not that of passive acceptance ... insofar as artistic experience consists of a certain form of 'doing', namely an active following along [*Mitvollzug*]. (Adorno, 2009: 189)

Neither his aggressive attack nor his hesitant appreciation tells the entire story. First, although there are many testimonies to

Adorno's post-1933 hostility to epic theatre, I hold that while he turned against the theatre proper and its 'practicism', he largely preserved Brecht's programme. More precisely, Adorno accepted but refunctioned the (new) terminology of epic theatre, applying Brecht's own strategy – refunctioning<sup>26</sup> – to Brecht himself.<sup>27</sup> Brecht coined the term in the late 1920s in the context of his attempt to make use of existing art forms and institutions, such as the opera, for pedagogical purposes. Art's culinary objectives would thus be backhandedly subverted or replaced. Along these lines, Adorno refunctioned Brecht's post-1933 aesthetic programme for a continuation of the *Mahagonny* project: immanent and negative critique. Kafka's novels provided the frame for this.

Second, 'the moment of truth' that Adorno discerned in Brecht's call for action does not mark a change of mind, but, as I will show, points to an even more radical coping strategy: sublation [*Aufhebung*]. From the perspective of Adorno's emerging magnum opus, *Aesthetic Theory*, sublation simultaneously achieved the preservation and destruction of Brecht's aesthetic programme and Brecht's epic theatre finally received Adorno's recognition: it was historicized.

### ***The Kafka Battle: Refunctioning Brecht***

In *Mahagonny*, Adorno recognized, 'just as in Kafka's novels ... the bourgeois world appears absurd' (Adorno, 1994: 388, 114). Elsewhere he noted: 'The absurdity of class privilege is demonstrated (very much like it is in Kafka)' (289). However, when in 1934 Benjamin applies Brecht's terminology to an analysis of Kafka's work, Adorno objects strongly: 'the only thing about the work that strikes me as alien to the material is the adoption of categories drawn from epic theatre' (Adorno and Benjamin, 1999: 70). He criticizes the employment of the term *Versuchsanordnung* – central to his own

thinking only three years earlier – and argues that 'the very form of Kafka's art stands in the most extreme antithesis to the form of theatrical art' (1999: 70). Surprisingly, Adorno's own substantial essay on Kafka – written over a period of 11 years, from 1942 to 1953 – not only uses *Versuchsanordnung* again, but also a large number of other epic theatre terms: distancing and *Verfremdung*; *Gestus*; epic and the episodic. Furthermore, a scene reminiscent of Brecht's 'Street scene, a basic model for epic theatre', is key to his interpretation (Brecht, 2014a: 176).<sup>28</sup> This can be read, I hold, as an attempt to replace Brecht with Kafka and make him redundant.<sup>29</sup> Yet by reading Kafka through Brecht's terminology – for which there was no obvious need, especially given that Brecht's theatre had become the 'antithesis' of Kafka's novels – Adorno in the end preserved and reclaimed Brecht for the project of a negative critique against what he must have seen as the positivity of the *Lehrstück* aesthetic.

With the learning play, Adorno remarks in *Aesthetic Theory*, Brecht reacted to the ineffectiveness of his theatre, wanting to enforce the political impact that his plays could not achieve (1997a: 361). *Lindbergh's Flight* encourages the audience to repeat the ocean flight by speaking and singing the play's lines. The power of the collective that resides in technology and in an enthusiastic global audience is supposed to materialize on stage. Participants should experience the future in the present, a future that appeared to be blocked by the way humankind's productive forces are put to work in capitalism.<sup>30</sup>

In his Kafka-essay, Adorno formulates a pointed rejection of this conception: 'To believe in progress is to believe that there has not yet been any' (Adorno, 1997: 256). Accordingly, he seeks to disrupt the chain of effects envisioned by Brecht's work: the move from political insight, enabled by the play, to action. In his interpretation of Kafka, the recipient is arrested by the encounter with the artwork. Art, again, can become an 'antithesis ... to the business

of self-preservation' (GS 14: 81). It does not induce 'physical' activity. How then do core themes of epic theatre play out under such premises? In the following, I focus on three instances of Adorno's refunctioning of Brecht's theatre: *Gestus*, narrative mode and art's 'real-life models'.

*Gestus* in Brecht, as Benjamin points out in 'What is Epic Theatre?' (1998a [1931]),<sup>31</sup> fragments the cunning narration of representational realism, the stories of individual failings and triumphs, by foregrounding the social and universal [*allgemeine*] dimension of individual behaviour. *Gestus* can be understood as the undoing of expression. Expressions absorb all social circumstances. These disappear in favour of those apparently natural individual emotions on which traditional realism draws. Such expressions are the point of departure of *Gestus*. *Gestus* performs externalization. In other words, through *Gestus* the societal circumstances that produce expressions become visible again and change conceivable: 'the human being is the object of investigation', Brecht writes in 1930, 'human beings both changeable and able to change things' [transl. changed] (Brecht, 2014: 65). Thus in *Gestus*, an understanding of the formative power of social forces coincides with the recognition of revolutionary potential – ultimately the emphasis of many of Brecht's post-1931 works. Social relations, by definition, stand in for the possibility of progress.

In his discussion of Kafka, Adorno reverses this direction. Kafka becomes like Brecht, a critic of capitalism. 'Kafka unmasks monopoly capitalism' [transl. changed] (1997: 256). His *Gestus* also disrupts: 'Form which is constituted through time as the unity of inner meaning is not possible for him', (264) and Adorno – as if reminding Brecht of what he used to practice – sees such disruption as targeting 'the second Babylonian confusion' (248). Hence, as in *This Babylonian Confusion*, the problem is a need to rupture language or narration, 'the configuration of which should

be truth', and so reveal its untruth (248). Kafka's *Gestus* also does this by bringing to bear upon that language 'a universal (*ein Allgemeines*) which has been repressed by sound common sense' (248). Yet whereas in Brecht this universal is human relations on which a better future can be built, Adorno observes that Kafka's force 'is one of demolition [*Abbau*] ... The flight through man and beyond into the non-human – that is Kafka's epic course' (251). The terminal point is 'the bare material existence' (251), which paralyzes every activity: 'The social origin of the individual ultimately reveals itself as the power to annihilate him' (252). It is only through the systematic work of demolition, not though building, that Kafka drafts the image of a better society: 'the wounds with which society brands the individual are seen as ciphers of the social untruth, as the negative of truth' (251).

The narrative mode that brings the *Gestus* (the universal within the individual) to the fore, in Brecht's as well as in Adorno's reading of Kafka, is one of representation. As Brecht puts it, the presentation has to be ostentatious, the showing must be shown and what is presented is thus 'something prepared' (BFA 15: 166). *Lindbergh's Flight* is set up as report; the instructions Brecht gives elsewhere to his actors turn those actors into reporters of how human beings proceed:

This is the exercise: before you show how  
Someone commits betrayal, or is seized by  
jealousy  
Or concludes a deal you look  
at the audience as if to say:  
Now pay attention ... this is how he does it. (BFA  
15: 166)

Those who report are in a sovereign position: their material or their past is at their command and they help the audience understand the possibility for change. In Adorno's Kafka interpretation, no space is opened for sovereign command. Kafka's recipients are not activated or empowered, rather, the universal



exerts authority over them: re-presentation turns into re-cognition: 'The permanent déjà vu' (1997: 251). The recipients take notice of the mode of reporting itself; they become aware *that* the presented has already been 'prepared'. There is activity nevertheless: the activity of interpretation [*Deutung*] (255) by which they can hope to liberate themselves from such re-cognition:<sup>32</sup>

where have I seen that before?'; the déjà vu is declared permanent. Through the power with which Kafka commands interpretation [*Deutung*], he establishes [transl. changed] aesthetic distance ... His texts are designed not to sustain a constant distance ... but rather to agitate his [the reader's, M.R.] feelings to a point where he fears that the narrative will shoot towards him like a locomotive ... Such aggressive physical proximity undermines the reader's habit of identifying himself with the figures in the novel. (245)

What *Lehrstück* and *Schaustück* only achieve separately<sup>33</sup> – absorption of the audience on the one hand and distancing on the other – happens in Adorno's reading of Kafka in one go: aggressive closeness is the effect. This interplay holds readers back instead of activating them. It fixates their attention on the actual artwork, on which Brecht, according to Adorno, turned his back too quickly in favour of politics. For Brecht the problem does not seem to be interpretation, but a lack of a determination to act.

Which insight can be gained by *Deutung*? That action has already failed. What seemed a promising intervention reproduces what it had hoped to overcome. The effects of social integration become palpable: 'Power must acknowledge itself as that which it is', Adorno remarks (269).

Finally, Brecht discusses the various functions of epic theatre by means of a 'natural' setting: a car crash. Adorno too resorts to a traffic accident for the sake of illustration. Brecht's street scene shows the witnesses of a crash involved in the reconstruction of the event. Their report is geared towards a useful account allowing for a further or a different course of action:

One essential element of the street scene must also be present in the theatre scene, if this is to qualify as *epic*: the demonstration should have a socially practical relevance. Whether our street demonstrator is out to show that one attitude on the part of driver or pedestrian makes an accident inevitable where another would not, or whether he is demonstrating with a view to clarifying the question of guilt, his demonstration has a practical purpose. (Brecht, 2014a: 177–8, emphasis in the original)

Adorno's street scene reads as follows:

[U]ncounted witnesses come forward, proclaiming themselves acquaintances, as though the entire community had gathered to observe the moment when the powerful bus smashed into the flimsy taxicab. The permanent déjà vu is the déjà vu of all. (1997: 251)

Whereas Brecht's scenario envisions the future avoidance of catastrophe, in Adorno's street scene the catastrophe seemed to have been anticipated – as if the entire community had assembled to witness an accident to come. Nothing could have been avoided or been done better in the future. Brecht's epic theatre ultimately envisions collective action to remedy social wrongs. Collectivism is clearly also in Adorno's purview: 'Perhaps the hidden aim of his art as a whole is the manageability, technification, collectivization of the déjà vu' (251). Yet in Adorno's street scene, the collective forms itself through an awareness that action is impossible. Adorno's reimagining of Brecht within a Kafkaesque frame foreclosed an (unmediated) turn towards politics.

To the point: Brecht for Adorno is at once object of critique and source of ideas. By virtue of Brecht's own concepts, Adorno develops a politico-aesthetic refutation of Brecht's position: progress and useful actions are turned into stasis and vain attempts. But this refutation is, at the same time, comparable to his treatment of Benjamin, a defence of Brecht against himself. Deliberate or not, Adorno 'repatriates' Brecht's concepts and restores what he must have seen as their original intention.

## ***Aesthetic Experience and the Sublation of Brecht***

The recipient imagined in Adorno's Kafka-essay is simultaneously distanced from and absorbed by the work of art. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* theorizes these moments, makes them defining for any aesthetic experience, and Brecht's concepts return in full force within that contemplative realm that constitutes the aesthetic experience. In this work, Adorno concedes Brecht's influence. 'Concession' is not used loosely here, but precisely names his speech act. Adorno's 1959/1960 lectures on aesthetic theory propose Brecht's *Verfremdung* as an aesthetic category that captures the task of any art form:

The world's alienation can be rendered by a work of art only – and I think Brecht recognized something very important here, at least as a theorist – by not presenting the familiar ... as the familiar. Art's task is indeed the *Verfremdung* of the familiar, putting it into a perspective ... which is the perspective of its essence. (Adorno, 2009: 127)

In addition to *Verfremdung*, the assertion that the familiar has to be put into a perspective that permits recognition of the subject's real state of being is a central element of Brecht's aesthetic. De-familiarization, Adorno specifies in *Aesthetic Theory*, generates a distance typical for genuine aesthetic experience, which:

affects the subjective comportment, in that it severs primitive identifications and puts the recipient qua empirical psychological person out of action ... Subjectively, art requires self-exteriorization; this is what was meant by Brecht's critique of empathic aesthetics. (Adorno, 1997a: 243)

In this context, Adorno repeatedly, like Brecht famously before him, employs the term 'culinary' for art that does not aim at distancing its recipients, as well as for aesthetic theory that does not foreground the distance effect.<sup>34</sup> Distance then comes with a demand to decipher, now rephrased 'as a certain form of "doing" which is an active

following along' (2009: 189). Again, Adorno grants Brecht a fundamental insight: recognition of the recipient's activity. This was, after all, already the moment of truth his lectures on aesthetics had identified in the *Lehrstück* programme: the roles of spectators and actors intersect, a continuous and close interplay of thinking and acting generates truth. 'Brecht's postulate of a thinking comportment', Adorno remarks in *Aesthetic Theory*, 'converges, *strangely enough*, with the objective discernment that autonomous artworks presuppose in the viewer, listener, or reader as being adequate to them' (1997a: 242; italics added). It must have appeared 'strange' to Adorno that his understanding of aesthetic experience, so deeply rooted in individual contemplation, overlapped with Brecht's focus on collective practice. He must have felt haunted and perhaps because of that he quickly qualified his observation: 'His didactic style, however, is intolerant of the ambiguity in which thought originates: It is authoritarian' (242).

This distinction, however, misses the point. Adorno glosses over the fact that equivocation, as much as unambiguity, is not the subject of 'thinking comportment', but its effect – the result of actively following along [*Mitvollzug*]. In order to yield such effects, 'authoritarian' demands have to be met. Important works of art 'presuppose' (242) something from the recipients. Not each artwork can, like Kafka's novels, sustain their attention by staging a *déjà vu* in permanence. Thus it is no coincidence that another of Brecht's terms, of *Lehrstück* provenance, found its way into Adorno's discussion: discipline. The recipient, who 'refuses to obey their [the artworks, M.R.] discipline ... is alien to art' (Adorno, 1997a: 355). Or, elsewhere, 'Whoever refuses to reenact the work under the discipline it imposes falls under the empty gaze cast by a painting or poem' (120).<sup>35</sup>

What then became of the original target of his intervention – art's supposed capacity to incite political action – the moment in Brecht's aesthetic to which Adorno objected

most? 'The aesthetic shudder pulls the subject back to itself' [transl. changed] (1997a: 269). Elsewhere Adorno describes: 'this shock is the moment in which recipients forget themselves and disappear into the work ... [T]he possibility of truth, embodied in the aesthetic image, becomes tangible' (1997a: 244). Has art's incitement simply changed direction? Not pushing the subject from truth or insight to collective action anymore, but commencing from the action's cancellation and pushing it toward truth? (In both cases, subjects 'disappear' and 'forget themselves', it could be argued).

Once Adorno generalized his insights from the Kafka-essay, Brecht's entire programme found itself interiorized, seemingly to Adorno's surprise. What remains of Brecht himself is history: he was the playwright and the poet who came closest to the idea of avant-garde (GS 20: 553); he was part of that aesthetic undercurrent running 'from Sturm und Drang and the young Goethe to Büchner and to some of Hauptmann's works up to Wedekind and expressionism' (GS 11: 79). Beckett has inherited his position and Brecht's claim to politics has long been compensated. It sounds almost like praise when Adorno asserts: 'Brecht's cult of practicality became an aesthetic constituent of his works' (1997a: 242–3).

## BY WAY OF CONCLUSION: AFFINITIES

These are the premises that both Brecht and Adorno made the baseline of their thinking and acting: art does the work of critique; it is political through its form; it ages quickly. The work of art has, as Adorno put it, a temporal nucleus. Accordingly, Brecht continuously revised his plays, correcting them on the spot according to the material demands on site, rewriting them according to varying political circumstances. His work is perhaps best described as constitutively unfinished, even his so-called masterworks were

provisional accomplishments. They are set up to fail.<sup>36</sup> Whereas Brecht sought to incorporate the flow of time in his theatrical praxis, Adorno sought to do justice to time by making aesthetic categories contingent on an artwork's ever-changing form: his aesthetic categories are meant to fail too, namely in view of the individual works and any understanding of art has to take this failure as its point of departure. And precisely because Brecht surrendered so radically to time without giving up on form, his work had to become exemplary for Adorno. Yet theatre, more than any other art form, also exposes itself as it intervenes on site. It becomes vulnerable to abuse or blindly reproduces what it acts against.<sup>37</sup> Theatre is practice in a radical sense and remains practice even when it rationalizes its proceedings and develops its own aesthetic concepts as it goes along. It seems to be not least this conflict – a deep mistrust of mere practice on the one hand and an appreciation of art that is 'timely' on the other – that drives Adorno's engagement with Brecht.<sup>38</sup> Adorno's reviews of *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* and *Threepenny Opera* say nothing about the staging. The *Aesthetic Theory* discusses novels, poems, compositions and paintings. Adorno talks about readers, listeners and beholders, but neither about the stage nor the spectator.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, Adorno does not ignore Brecht's theatre; ultimately, his aesthetic categories become its shelter.<sup>40</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Brecht, planning a satire on the ineffectivity and corruption of intellectuals, the so-called Tui-novel, wrote in his work journal on 10 October 1943 'Adorno here. This Frankfurt Institute is a true treasure chest for the "Tui-novel"' (BFA 17: 177), see Erdmut Wizisla (2011: 206) for a discussion of the Tui-novel concept.
- 2 Since the 2000s, this narrative has become increasingly subjected to scrutiny. Sean Carney, for example, calls Adorno's negative dialectic 'a useful supplement of Brecht's dialectics' (2005: 157). Ulrich Plass (2010) juxtaposes Brecht's

- Hollywood Elegien* and Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, arguing persuasively that both employ similar representational strategies. Astrid Oesmann (2005) explores 'mimesis' and 'natural history' [*Naturgeschichte*] as the common ground of Adorno's, Benjamin's and Brecht's theorizing, and speaks of a 'surprisingly broad kinship' between Adorno and Brecht (2005: 8).
- 3 Buck-Morss insists that 'from 1928 on virtually everything that Adorno wrote bore the imprint of Benjamin's language' (1977: 21).
  - 4 The letters' language is persuasive: Adorno admits his great unease with Brecht's role in Benjamin's intellectual life and appeals to Benjamin recurrently to remain faithful to the 'motifs of our philosophical friendship' (Adorno and Benjamin, 1999: 108).
  - 5 Adorno reported more than once to his parents: '(t)he only people who we see quite often are the Brechts, with whom we get along especially well' (Adorno, 2003: 126).
  - 6 Although some discussions of Brecht are brief, they often drive Adorno's argument. Others are lengthy: in a letter to Slatan Dudow, Adorno analyses the relation between epic theatre and film (1937); in a lecture on *Aesthetic Theory* he focuses on Brecht's concept of *Verfremdung* (1959); his lectures on *Moral Philosophy* (2010a: 2012) discuss *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* and *The Good Person of Szechuan* and a talk for Radio Bremen offers an elaborate reflection on Brecht's *On Five Difficulties When Writing the Truth* (GS 17: 253).
  - 7 Adorno used Brecht in yet another way: he let Brecht speak for him. He began arguments with 'as Brecht used to say', some of his articles were prefaced by a Brecht quotation and he dedicated *Negative Dialectic* to Max Horkheimer with a line from Brecht's poem *The Lovers* (which first appeared in *Mahagonny*). Brecht's work was also simply enjoyable reading for Theodor and Gretel Adorno. Gretel Adorno once asked Benjamin to please send Brecht's latest pornographic poems (1999: 274).
  - 8 It should be noted that Adorno continually discussed Brecht against the backdrop of Kant's and Hegel's aesthetic, whose basic premises he shared. He was also attracted to Brecht's theatre because it offered him material for Kant's and Hegel's remediation. Kant's understanding of art as procuring disinterested delight, for example, informed Adorno's turn against Brecht's 'utilitarianism'. The distance between recipient and artwork implied in such an understanding is reconceived by Adorno as Brecht's distance. Hegel's focus on artistic form and his concept of the artwork as an immanently mediating 'construct' is at the heart of his early praise and later criticism of Brecht. These aspects cannot be addressed within the scope of this paper.
  - 9 A discussion of this poem along similar lines, but in a different context, can be found in Matthias Rothe (2016).
  - 10 In his *Introduction to Dialectics* (1958), Adorno formulated such a point of view as follows: 'you could almost say that something like a human being does not yet exist. When applying the concept "human being" to an existing individual', Adorno continued, 'one immediately recognizes the difference. Namely that the individual in an emphatic sense ... does not yet live up to the concept human being' (Adorno, 2010: 103). All translations by the author unless otherwise noted.
  - 11 Adorno's emphasis on the necessity of the construction of perspectives is reminiscent of Brecht's critique of realism in 'The Threepenny Trial' (1931), which Adorno quotes elsewhere (GS 11: 147): 'A simple "representation of reality" says less about reality than ever before ... so, there is in fact "something to build up", something "artificial", "contrived"' (Brecht, 2004: 117).
  - 12 Adorno's reviews of *Mahagonny* and *Threepenny* were unreservedly enthusiastic. He wrote five reviews in total. In the last review, published in 1932, Adorno observed that *Mahagonny* not only maintained its pertinence, but – 'despite the general hunger for being au courant' – had gotten better with Brecht's revisions (GS 19: 363). Discussing *Mahagonny* and the *Threepenny Opera* at some length for the journal of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research in 1932, he called Brecht and Weill's work 'admirable' and the music 'today the only music of genuine social-polemic impact' (Adorno, 2002: 407). The Schönberg school, of which Adorno had been a member, only came in second. He ended up recommending Brecht and Weill's 'fractured and intellectual procedure aesthetic' methods as a model for all contemporary art (Adorno, GS 19: 363), and illustrating how serious he was about using *Mahagonny* as a model, Adorno began to compose his own opera in *Mahagonny* style in 1932, *The Treasures of Indian Joe* (Schultz, 1998).
  - 13 After Adorno saw *Mahagonny*, he repeatedly called *Threepenny Opera* an accessory to *Mahagonny*. His review of *Threepenny Opera* (1929) ended as his first *Mahagonny* review began – with an emphasis on its redemptive perspective: 'The successful interpretation of what is past, becomes ... a signal for the future, which is visible because the old can now be interpreted' (Adorno, 1990: 133).

- 14 Aesthetic form and its relation to society had been Adorno's obsession since his earliest concert reviews in 1921. At that time, he still conceived of form as convention, a given constraint that the artist needed to manipulate. In the mid 1920s, Adorno began to speak of the construction of form, reducing such rhetorical conventions to the material of departure. Again informed by Lukács' *Theory of the Novel* and German idealism, Adorno understood construction as a process of mediation between particular social 'content' and existing conventions or forms. Constructing or generating forms came to parallel society's mediation between the particular and the general, for example between individual inclinations and interests and societal institutions (Buck-Morss, 1977: 44–5). I thank Richard Leppert for helping me through Adorno's music reviews; see also Richard Leppert's detailed comments on Adorno's writing on music in Adorno (2002).
- 15 Adorno recurrently employs technical terms from film for his analysis: projection, screen, montage and so on. In a letter to Slatan Dudow from 1937, he also claims that epic theatre borrowed a lot of its techniques from film (Adorno, 2003a: 534–5).
- 16 Benjamin's project should be understood in the frame of his attempt to rethink Kant's 'impoverished' concept of experience. He understands the *Trauerspiel* as a specific form of experience and employs Kant's vocabulary throughout, speaking of allegorical intuitions and concepts, identifying antinomies and so on. Within the project of a Kantian critique, a true state of affairs can be revealed, but it cannot be exposed as the false state. Benjamin's famous 'The false appearance of totality is extinguished' (Benjamin, 1998: 176) privileges experience against metaphysics.
- 17 See also Adorno's talk on Wedekind from 1932. Brecht and the surrealist Wedekind, he stated, 'let the underworld of mere material speak' (Adorno, 1992: 278).
- 18 In a letter to Benjamin from 1934, Adorno defined *Versuchsanordnung* as one of the 'categories drawn from epic theatre' (Adorno and Benjamin, 1999: 70). Benjamin introduced the term 'configuration' with astrological metaphors: 'Ideas are to objects as constellations are to the stars' (1998: 34).
- 19 In January 1931, Adorno wrote to Siegfried Kracauer: 'I originally thought to publish the critique of Heidegger in *Ihring*, Brecht and Benjamin's journal *Krise und Kritik*, yet after Benjamin and Brecht have distanced themselves from the project, I have my doubts' (Adorno and Kracauer, 2008: 258).
- 20 Benjamin's essay employs the language of life philosophy: epic theatre accomplishes 'the damming of the stream of real life'; 'Epic theatre makes life spurt up high from the bed of time and, for an instant, hover iridescent in empty space. Then it puts it back to bed' (Benjamin, 1998a: 13). It is through incessant disruption, 'when its [life's, M.R.] flow comes to a standstill' (13), that social conditions are revealed. Any attempt at realignment with life would have to pass through political action. Adorno opened 'The Actuality of Philosophy' with Heidegger. Heidegger exemplified for him the crisis of German Idealism and he returned to Heidegger via Husserl's phenomenology to discuss his failure at length (more than four printed pages).
- 21 Wizisla (2004: 139) shows that Brecht's famous concept of '*eingreifendes Denken*' developed in the context of Brecht and Benjamin's discussion of their journal project.
- 22 Adorno develops, not least through his engagement with Brecht, a radically negative conception of truth. Owen Hulatt (2011: 76) summarizes it as follows: 'Adorno identifies the true as nothing over and above the negation of the pre-given ... this is not to deny that this negation will be informative – the negation of the pre-given (be it sensory, philosophical or cultural) will result in the pre-given being unpacked, and display the full complexities of those grounds which gave rise to its falsity'.
- 23 Adorno's 1962 'Commitment' essay calls Brecht's *Mahagonny* procedure 'polemical *Verfremdung*' (GS 11: 426). Brecht did not use the term before 1936. 'The Actuality of Philosophy' then adopts only the first part of the phrase (polemical) and *Minima Moralia* finally makes the second its own: 'Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange [*verfremdet*] the world' (Adorno, 2005: 247). Adorno's debt to Brecht appears in these appropriations in miniature, so to speak.
- 24 Brecht's play fragment *Fatzer* (1926–9) is widely seen as a decisive moment in the development of the *Lehrstück*. Brecht's struggle with the material of *Fatzer* led him, on the one hand, to demand the story's completion from the audience. On the other hand, he came to own the story's 'incompleteness', writing and rewriting it. Both moments, the audience's involvement and the story's continuous revision, become defining features of the learning play.
- 25 Adorno took issue in particular with a slogan projected on stage during the performance: 'Doing is better than feeling'.
- 26 *Umfunktionieren* is commonly translated as 'repurposing'. I have decided to stay closer to the German in order to preserve the idea of a technical or mechanical procedure.
- 27 Adorno employed the idea of refunctioning in many other contexts as well. In an essay on music

- pedagogy, for example, he demanded 'to make reification apparent in its consequences and to dialectically liberate from it the elements of a good rationality, which might help to refunction reification one day' (GS 18: 809); see also Plass (2010: 69).
- 28 It is very likely that Adorno knew this text, given that they saw each other frequently and also discussed theatre while living in Los Angeles (Wizisla, 2011: 206).
  - 29 There are other indications of Adorno's intention to 'replace' Brecht: he discussed the genealogy of Kafka's critical programme, focusing on two aspects that are widely recognized as seminal to Brecht's aesthetic – expressionism and detective novels.
  - 30 Brecht subscribed to what Dirk Braunstein called, with Adorno, 'the metaphysics of productive forces'. Capitalism's main contradiction is located in the antagonism of productive forces and productive relations; the latter are seen as inhibiting the former, which are perceived as the bringer of progress (Braunstein, 2011: 382–3).
  - 31 Nikolaus Müller-Schöll (2002: 139–84) convincingly argues that Benjamin's concept of *Gestus* retroactively shaped Brecht's own use of *Gestus*, which Brecht had employed only loosely until then.
  - 32 *Deutung* is insufficiently translated as 'interpretation'; it implies a greater distance to the material and already resonates with a *Gestus* of showing. I am indebted to Ulrich Plass for this insight.
  - 33 *Schaustück* refers to Brecht's more traditional plays of the late 1930s. It is worth noting that Brecht was dissatisfied with them. He wrote in his journal that it will be necessary to reconnect them to the highest standard of epic theatre once achieved in the late 1920s by *Fatzer* and *The Breadshop* (BFA 6: 433).
  - 34 'Aesthetics that does not move within the perspective of truth fails its task; usually it is culinary' (1997a: 242).
  - 35 Adorno seems to defend himself against a 'dangerous proximity' to Brecht: 'If the discipline exerted or buttressed by artworks becomes their own lawfulness, they forfeit their crudely authoritarian character vis-a-vis human beings' (Adorno, 1997a: 202). It can be objected that what appears as the works' proper laws as well as the corresponding habits of reception are the outcome of a cultural apparatus that subjects individuals to a far more extensive training.
  - 36 In a poem from 1929, *On the construction of long-lasting works*, Brecht wrote: 'Those destined to be accomplished / Display gaps / The long lasting / Continuously collapse / Those planned big / Are incomplete' (BFA 14: 35).
  - 37 'Much of Brechtian epic theatre', Adorno claimed, was refunctioned 'for the collectivism of the Hitler dictatorship' (1975: 250). In the addendum to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer insisted: 'epic theatre is the response to the art of the masses, mass art's switching consciousness of itself'; the procedure of montage praised in *Mahagonny*, despite all disruptions, comes to resemble the filmic technique of non-resistance' (GS 3: 312).
  - 38 Adorno wholeheartedly dismissed works that, 'subservient to the idol of security, hollow out their temporal nucleus and, inwardly vacuous, fall victim to time: the curse of neoclassicism' (Adorno, 1997a: 177). Instead demanded 'that artworks immolate themselves through their temporal nucleus, devote their own life to the instant of the appearance of truth, and tracelessly vanish' (177).
  - 39 For example when reflecting on aesthetic experience, Adorno spoke of 'the objective discernment that autonomous artworks presuppose in the viewer (*Betrachter*), listener, or reader' (1997a: 359).
  - 40 Beckett's work has a decisive advantage over Brecht: nothing changes from text to stage. Beckett's stage directions are binding.

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# Critical Theory and Literary Theory

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The ways in which critical theory has influenced literary studies are numerous and complex. Cultural studies, sociological approaches, various political or philosophical criticisms, various formalisms or modes of attention to history, genre, and so on frequently make use of the work of the Frankfurt School and of the theorists more or less coherently grouped under the different generations of critical theorists. But at the heart of critical theory and its development lies a particular theory of literature, and a particular method of literary criticism that is too often forgotten when we bring the work of critical theorists to literary studies. There are a number of ways in which critical theory may be applied to the study of literature, but critical theory also contains a detailed method for literary studies, one that is aimed at studying literature as medium on its own terms. This method for literary criticism is in turn bound up with a critical theory of literature. This chapter will aim to reconstruct the method for literary criticism and the

fundamental definitions that guide its theory of literature that emerge out of critical theory. In order to do so, it will focus largely on the first generation of critical theorists in the context of whose work this specific theory of literature and critical methodology was developed.

The chapter will also seek to illustrate that the development of a literary critical method and specific theory of literature was not simply one facet of the work of a few member of the Frankfurt School who had a more or less consistent interest in literature. Rather, we will see that the way in which T.W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin thought about literature, and the kind of critical praxis to which their engagement with literature gave rise, in turn shaped critical theory itself along with the ways in which its members thought about concepts such as history, form, or (self-) consciousness. In order to survey some of the methodological foundations of a critical theory of literature, which, for reasons of space, will constitute the focus of what follows in

order to hopefully aid further, more detailed study, this chapter will focus on some of the central categories of literary criticism that occupy a crucial role in critical theory: interpretation, form, medium, the status of reader and author, and the relation between the literary work and external, material history. The aim will be to clarify some of our fundamental literary critical commitments that may guide what we do when we bring critical theory to a literary text. The chapter will explore the question of what kind of literary criticism we practice when we seek to do it from the standpoint of critical theory.

While critical theory more widely conceived has had a great international impact on academic practice and debate, its literary critical core arguably is lagging behind. To be sure, dozens and dozens of articles and books of literary criticism have drawn upon concepts and ideas borrowed from critical theory. But even for second and third generation Frankfurt School critics the particular attention to literary critical method and the significance of the literary work that, as we shall see, was so central to the work of the founding members of the Frankfurt School, is no longer visible. What we see frequently in literary criticism is the application to literary texts of concepts and ideas that are borrowed from the canon of critical theory. What we encounter far less frequently, however, are literary critical projects that bring critical theory to a literary text not only on a conceptual level but also with a rigorously developed account of what a critical theory of literature might mean for our method of literary criticism and for our understanding of what literature is and does. As we shall see, this is no trivial matter. The work of both Adorno and Benjamin centrally involves a methodological opposition to the practice of simply bringing a philosophical concept to a text in order to generate a new 'reading'. Both theorists develop specific ways of treating literature and of understanding the relation between critic and literary work, and revisiting these orientations may help us avoid generating a

criticism that may on the surface be committed to the ideas and politics of critical theory but that may bring them to literary texts without any regard for the method for literary criticism that critical theory produced, thus ultimately undercutting the foundations of its own efforts. Critical theory's attention to literature, thus, is not merely a matter of bringing established concepts to literary texts. It is a matter of devising a particular method that treats literature on its own terms, a method that, in other words, is specifically formulated for the task at hand. A literary criticism based on critical theory must therefore also contain and be guided by a consideration of the relation between object and method and of the historical specificity of this relation.

A final introductory note: while the concluding section will briefly turn to the work of Leo Löwenthal, much of this chapter will be dedicated to the work of two main figures: Adorno and Benjamin. This may strike readers who are familiar with the history of critical theory and the Frankfurt School as somewhat strange. After all, Benjamin is often not counted among the core members of the Frankfurt School. But the nature or scale of his direct involvement, I would argue, is less significant for our effort to understand the relation between critical theory and literary theory than is Benjamin's intellectual influence. In particular, when it comes to understanding critical theory's relationship to literature, its development of a particular kind of literary theory and of a specific method of literary criticism, Benjamin's significance cannot be overstated. In fact, even our attempts to understand Adorno's thought on literature and literary criticism would remain incomplete if we bracketed Benjamin's influence on Adorno's thought and work. Even more widely conceived, however, since, as we shall see, the ways in which critical theorists thought about literature shaped the development of critical theory as a whole, we can also see from this perspective that we must consider the impact of Benjamin's literary criticism on the work

of critical theorists and on the development of critical theory itself. This is not to disregard the substantive and numerous disagreements between Benjamin and Adorno and other key members of the Frankfurt School. It is, rather, to focus on the important influences and commonalities without which our picture of a critical theory of literature and literary criticism remains incomplete.

## BENJAMIN AS LITERARY CRITIC

Anglophone academics have occasionally explored Benjamin's role as a literary critic, though by no means as frequently as Benjamin has shown up in academic production as a philosopher or critic of modernist aesthetics, or in the study of culture and media (film photography, and so on). The question that prompts one of the few more recent engagements with his literary criticism, the question that Svend Eric Larsen selects as the title of his essay to which I shall return below, is: is Benjamin a literary critic? That is a strange question to ask, it might seem, because, next to Adorno and Löwenthal, Benjamin is the critic whose work most consistently engages in the study of literature. After all, the core of Benjamin's work is aimed at the study of literature, and it was in the field of literary criticism that he sought to establish himself principally. Michael W. Jennings observes that Benjamin's rapid canonization in the academy following the publication of his selected works was not quite a fulfillment of 'Benjamin's expressed desire to be considered "the premier critic of German literature"', not only because his canonization was followed by a 'swift denunciation', but in particular, Jennings argues, because this denunciation focused largely on aspects of Benjamin's work that had little direct relation to literary criticism: 'Benjamin's mysticism ... his Marxism ... his Hegelianism' and so on (1983: 545). What Jennings stresses already in 1983 as an

important project – evaluating Benjamin's contribution to literary criticism that has thus far not been adequately mapped – remains an insufficiently developed project; only a few critical projects, in the Anglophone academy in particular, have been dedicated to this task. It is possible to suggest, therefore, that the persistence of the question of whether Benjamin was indeed a literary critic has to do with the fact that a disproportionately small amount of time has been spent on the examination of the methodological foundations of Benjamin's literary criticism compared to the widespread interest in Benjamin's work on the philosophy of history or cultural theory more widely conceived, including his work on urban modernity, photography, or film. Larsen, too, suggests that Benjamin's prominence in the Anglophone academy is largely based on the interest in his work that outlines a cultural history of modernity or that is dedicated to broader aesthetic and historical questions. It is also true, as Larsen contends, that his interest in literature itself does not make Benjamin a literary critic (1998: 135–6). But what this does suggest is that, in order to understand both Benjamin's own relation to literary criticism as well as his contribution to this field, we must examine his considerations of literary criticism as a method that are, as we shall see, based upon the development of a specific theory of literature.

In his classic essay on Benjamin's early literary criticism, René Wellek, too, begins by foregrounding the phenomenon of Benjamin's critical reception as a literary critic who is largely not regarded as such. Benjamin, Wellek argues, is largely treated as a philosopher or, at best, as a '*Kulturphilosoph*', which in turn means that it is his later work, as opposed to his earlier work that contains a central focus on literary criticism and is the subject of critics' main interest. Even Hannah Arendt, who describes Benjamin as 'the only true critic of German literature', Wellek notes, poignantly drops this interest in Benjamin as a literary critic and instead proceeds to focus her work on

his aesthetic philosophy (Wellek, 1971: 124). But to ignore this aspect of Benjamin's work, Wellek cautions, 'is to falsify the image of Benjamin', for it 'obscures any attempt to locate him properly in intellectual history' (1971: 124). Therefore, to appreciate Benjamin's work fully is to consider his methodological engagement with literary criticism and theory, an engagement that underpins the development of his thought and critical system more largely conceived. And, in turn, to understand Benjamin's literary critical methodology is also to understand some of the crucial influences and logical foundations that underwrote the development of critical theory itself. A way into understanding Benjamin's critical method, which is at the same time a way into understanding the role of literary criticism and literary theory for the development of critical theory more broadly conceived, is to focus on one of critical theory's foundations: immanent criticism. As we shall see, immanent criticism finds one of its most clear applications in literary criticism. In turn, immanent criticism is a crucial building block of the method of literary study that is developed out of the work of the Frankfurt School.

## IMMANENT CRITICISM AND LITERARY INTERPRETATION

The origins of the immanent criticism are articulated by Max Horkheimer who, as David Held outlines in profoundly helpful detail, associates immanent criticism intimately with the project of critical theory and with the core of critical theory's method. Quoting Horkheimer, Held writes:

Critical theory aims to assess 'the breach between ideas and reality'. The method of procedure is immanent criticism. Immanent criticism confronts 'the existent, in its historical context, with the claim of its conceptual principles, in order to criticize the relation between the two and thus transcend them'. (1980: 183)

'Critique proceeds, so to speak, "from within"', Held stresses, which means, in other words, that critique,

hopes to avoid, thereby, the charge that its concepts impose irrelevant criteria of evaluation on the object. As a result, a new understanding of the object is generated – a new comprehension of contradictions and possibilities. Thus, the original image of the object is transcended and the object itself is brought partly into flux. (1980: 184)

Already in this very basic formulation, we can see some of the foundational ideas that inform a method for literary criticism. From the beginning, critical theory approaches literature via the principle of immanent critique, which is to say that the basic critical treatment of the literary work 'proceeds from within'. The aim to keep the object in flux, to examine it as always bound up with specific historical developments to which it in turn contributes, is paired with the desire to avoid simply bringing a new interpretive lens to a literary work from the outside. Instead of imposing external concepts onto the text in order to generate new readings, any literary criticism based upon critical theory begins by approaching the text on its own terms, from within.

We can begin to see what this implies more concretely by turning to one of Adorno's numerous engagements with the work of Thomas Mann, an essay that exemplifies this basic methodological commitment in part via Adorno's dissatisfaction with some of the dominant contemporary critical approaches to Mann's work. 'In order to understand Thomas Mann', Adorno suggests, we need to pay 'attention to the things that are not in the guidebooks' and that aren't covered in the 'stream of dissertations' that focus on 'the influence of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche' or on academic seminar discussions of 'the problem of death' in Mann (1992: 13). Instead, Adorno suggests,

it is better to look three times at what has been written than to look over and over again at what has been symbolized. Pointing out how much the

writer deviated from the self-portrait his prose suggests is intended to help do that. For there is no doubt that the prose does suggest this. (1992: 13)

What we see here is an attempt to avoid forced readings of a text that are constructed by imposing external concepts upon the text. Instead, Adorno suggests, we ought to treat Mann's work from within, which means to focus on Mann's prose, on the ways in which Mann's texts themselves can be read as formally specific mediations of external reality. One of the basic operations of an immanent criticism of literature, in other words, is a focus on form. This focus on form is visible in Adorno's work more generally. One of the guiding logical principles of his *Aesthetic Theory*, for instance, is a focus on form. Throughout *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno (1997) returns time and again to the suggestion that history enters the work of art not on the level of content but only on the level of form, and we see this fundamental commitment also in his literary critical method, exemplified in his defense of the formal richness of Mann's work that an immanent criticism of literature seeks to treat from within. Literary critical debate in the twenty-first century has frequently returned to the tension between different modes of reading and mis-reading. We have seen a renewed interest in strategies for and ways of reading, including questions of what we should read, how closely we should read, or how aspects of the 'big data' turn may affect reading practices and our approaches to the literary text and literary archives. And since a number of these debates also include hotly contested propositions or approaches (among the most infamous and widely discussed of which are 'surface reading' or the more recent debates about 'post-criticism'), there is no doubt much at stake in reminding ourselves that immanent criticism allows us to reframe precisely this old tension between text and method in ways that refuse simple binary oppositions such as that between author and reader, closeness and distance, depth or surface.

## FORM AND CONTENT

The attention to literary form, then, is of central importance to an immanent criticism of literature. More generally, Held argues, 'The meaning of Adorno's thought cannot be fully comprehended if one concentrates simply on content at the expense of form' (1990: 210). Adorno's own writing also follows this dialectical logic of form and content, and, as Held reminds us, 'enact[s] his concern with the development of repressive systems of thought and organization' (1990: 210). Adorno's desire for social and cultural theory to reveal the substance of repressive systems, and, as Adorno puts it so frequently, suffering more generally, is therefore not merely a matter of reading the content of objects but rather of investigating the formal mediation of such external forces in and through the text. 'The non-identical, if it is to be revealed', as Held summarizes Adorno's basic insistence with regard to this method, 'must ... be made apparent in the form and the content of a work' (1990: 211). We must therefore conclude, Held argues, that for Adorno 'there is more involved in the reading of a text ... than the gleaning of information' (1990: 211). This is what we can understand as one of the foundational commitments of an immanent criticism of literature: the commitment to reading for form. And indeed, as Fredric Jameson reminds us, it is important to note the continuity here in Adorno's thought in general, since his broader philosophical engagement with (self-)consciousness and the relation between subject and object that guides works like *Negative Dialectics* informs and is in turn informed by his examination of literature. After all, Jameson suggests, Adorno's writings on the question of the relation between subject and object are recast, in the context of his writings on literature and aesthetics, as the relation between form and content (1974: 39).

For Benjamin, too, critical engagements with literature begin by examining the dialectic of form and content. Of course, Adorno

is famously more committed to the centrality of form than was Benjamin – form often remains the main if not sole plane of examination for Adorno, while Benjamin's criticism is largely aimed at the dialectical connection of form and content. But, as suggested above, in order to understand Benjamin's methodological investment in the dialectic of form and content more generally, we must trace the roots of his method to his literary critical writings and thus to some of his earliest work. The critical analysis of art and art criticism that guides his doctoral dissertation examining the concept of *Kunstkritik* (art criticism or critique of art) in German Romanticism establishes Benjamin's concern with method, and his subsequent early work, most notably his examination of the origins of the German *Trauerspiel* (tragic drama), lays the foundations of his attention to the specific ways in which literature and literary forms emerge historically and in turn respond to history (the latter famously being conceived as an ongoing, discontinuous process). And while we can no doubt trace many disagreements between Adorno and Benjamin when it comes to their account of the status of literature and the function and possibility of particular literary forms and genres, what matters for our purposes here are the basic commonalities with regard to method that join their approaches. Central to their examinations of literature, for instance, is the category of medium. This includes a grounding focus on literature as an artistic medium that establishes one of the points of departure that makes possible an immanent criticism of literature that truly treats the literary work on its own terms. A constant in the work of Adorno and Benjamin, therefore, is the concern with the historically specific relations and differences between different artistic media, which underlies both their accounts of the historically specific possibilities and limitations of different artistic media and their particular critical engagement with literature. Very prominent here, for instance, are the various examinations of the historically specific

relation between literature and other, newer or more recent media that we find in the work of both Adorno and Benjamin.

For Adorno, for instance, any consideration of the novel would have to begin by launching an inquiry into its historical status. In Adorno's discussion of the 'contemporary novel' (contemporary with his time, that is), he begins by assessing the changed historical status and function of the novel. 'Just as painting lost many of its traditional tasks to photography', Adorno writes, 'the novel has lost them to reportage and the media of the culture industry, especially film' (1991a: 31). 'This would imply', Adorno continues, 'that the novel should concentrate on what reportage will not handle. In contrast to painting, however, language imposes limits on the novel's emancipation from the object and forces the novel to present the semblance of a report' (1991a: 31). Adorno consequently focuses on the novel form's particular historical labor, in this case the novel's 'rebellion against realism' and against 'discursive language' that Adorno finds most prominently exemplified in the work of James Joyce. Thus, when Adorno examines the novel and its more well known aspects – its engagement with alienation in the modernist novel, for instance – this examination is always carried out primarily not on a topical level or the level of content but on the level of both form (novelistic language) and medium (the novel's historically specific function as an artistic medium is in part determined intermedially, that is, by its awareness of its own medial possibilities and limitations). Adorno's examination of the modernist novel is also always an inquiry into the status of the medium of literature and its particular forms and genres. Adorno here also considers the rise of popular literature, which he associates with a crisis of the novel. The novel's uneasy relation to reporting, for instance, also raises the question of the status of popular forms of reporting in writing: 'the cheap biographical literature one finds everywhere is a byproduct of the disintegration of the novel form itself' (1991a: 32).

## FORM AND MEDIUM

If Adorno does address himself to topics, ideas, or individual concepts, such as alienation, this happens primarily on the level of form, with a parallel consideration of the question of medium. Adorno considers alienation largely insofar as it functions as 'an aesthetic device', for instance, an examination that is at every point committed to tracing the relation between form and history. Alienation, for Adorno, is bound up with anti-realism in the modernist novel, which, as the novel's 'true metaphysical dimension, is called forth by its true subject matter, a society in which human beings have been torn from one another and from themselves. What is reflected in aesthetic transcendence is the disenchantment of the world' (1991a: 32). As a consequence, Adorno argues, exemplifying the ways in which his literary critical method is at every step connected to a reflection on the ontology and function of literature itself, the status of the novel and the novel's future survival is bound up with a necessary reflection on its historical lineage and its present historical position. Both considerations must involve a reflection on the question of form and medium: '*If the novel wants to remain true to its realistic heritage and tell how things really are, it must abandon a realism that only aids the façade in its work of camouflage by reproducing it*' (1991a: 32).

Adorno's inquiry into the politics of the novel begins with a reflection on the question of form and medium, which in a sense also includes an examination of literariness insofar as Adorno's work is committed to examining what makes a novel a novel and what possibilities for the novel we may subsequently trace in the context of a particular historical moment. The political advantage of literature over image-based narrative media such as film, which, Adorno suggests at the outset of this essay, has many advantages over the novel, lies precisely in the novel's medial specificity and its formal advantages.

However, with regard to the politics of the novel, Adorno does not confine his treatment of literature fully to the realm of form but, in the final instance, emphasizes the relation between form and the possibility of transcending the limits of the existing, of the contradictions of external, material reality in the present: 'it is a tendency inherent in form that demands the abolition of aesthetic distance in the contemporary novel and its capitulation thereby to the superior power of reality – a reality that cannot be transfigured in an image but only altered concretely, in reality' (1991a: 36). The latter call is the final political step, the notion that the novel may not be able to change reality but that it may aid in shaping the preconditions for the transcendence of the existing, in part because the novel itself carries out a version of the method that guides Adorno's critical treatment of it: literature, too, carries out the work of immanent criticism and is aimed at a critique of the existing from within that is ultimately aimed at transcendence.

We might thus assume that there exists a fairly large distance between Adorno and Benjamin when it comes to the question of medium. After all, Benjamin famously sees in some of the media that Adorno associates with the crisis of true art, a range of positive political and aesthetic possibilities. And yet, when we turn once more to the underlying methodological foundations of their examinations and disregard some of the more well-known surface tensions, we see important moments of congruency. In *Dead Time*, Elissa Marder traces Benjamin's account of the development of artistic media in relation to the material history of modernity. For Benjamin, Marder argues, the experience of modernity is specifically characterized by a problem of an 'overwhelming increase in external stimuli that prevent the impact of particular experiences from becoming assimilated, processed, and remembered' (2001: 2). Yet, Marder suggests, according to Benjamin this inability to experience all of modernity also gives rise to a multi-faceted

cultural response. The first side of this cultural response is the development of cultural media, 'that are specifically designed to grasp particular experiences in their immediacy' (2001: 2). Examples of such media include television and film. Precisely in this context, Marder shows, the specificity of literature as a medium becomes crucially important for Benjamin:

Benjamin argues ... the more particular experiences are recorded as *unmediated* impressions, the less they contribute to an enduring sense of experience.... Therefore, if 'unmediated' communication cannot transmit the meaning of an experience, it makes sense that Benjamin turns to a highly 'mediated' form of experience – poetry – in order to articulate the specific ways in which this change in experience makes itself felt. (2001: 3)

As opposed to television and film, literature refuses the relation of immediacy and insists upon itself as the medium of mediation. What literature does, therefore, is for Benjamin, as for Adorno, a matter of a formal, medially specific dialectical relation to, and immanent critique of, the logic of material reality. For Benjamin, it is lyric poetry that offers a possibility for working through and critically examining modernity's historically specific 'atrophy of experience' and its 'temporal disorders' (2001: 3). When we ask, therefore, what precisely is the kind of literary criticism that Adorno and Benjamin practice, we can see that they share fundamental methodological commitments that are more substantial than their surface disagreements, for these basic methodological commitments lend a larger cohesion to what we may call a particular kind of literary criticism and literary theory that emerges out of the Frankfurt School and out of critical theory. These fundamental similarities that may prove more helpful than the negotiation of surface disagreements may also caution us not to dislocate individual arguments and concepts from their methodological foundations, in particular if we are invested in producing a kind of literary criticism that is indebted to critical theory and that is a

logical continuation of the foundations of this approach.

After all, Adorno himself warns us time and again that we should not simply bring concepts and sociological or political ideas lifted from a particular tradition to the literary text in order to produce readings via such 'lenses'. Any examination of the relationship between lyric poetry and society, for instance, as Adorno strongly stresses, must not result in what he calls the 'abuse' of lyric works by 'being made objects with which to demonstrate sociological theses' (1991b: 38). The focus on form and medium in history is a safeguard against these illegitimate forms of literary criticism – and they are illegitimate in part because they are not a truly literary criticism of literature. After all, such an approach would reduce a literary text, here a lyric poem, to the status of sociological evidence, a reduction that to Adorno is tantamount to abuse. Instead, Adorno suggests, when we ask questions about the relation between lyric poetry and society, we must begin by asking, 'how the social element in [the lyric poems] is shown to reveal something essential about the basis of their quality' (1991b: 38). This can be clarified by considering a basic question that may seem to be legitimate in literary criticism but that Adorno refuses: the question of how a given text may give us insights about social structures or problems via its representation of a character's experience of these historical conditions. 'The substance of a poem is not merely an expression of individual impulses and experiences', Adorno maintains, echoing his argument regarding the limits of reporting and realism in the modernist novel outlined above. Impulses and experience 'become a matter of art only when they come to participate in something universal by virtue of the specificity they acquire by being given aesthetic form' (1991b: 38). We return here to the centrality of form with respect to the historical specificity of social issues that must be conceived as universal, mediated matters as opposed to matters of individual,



immediate experience. 'The universality of the lyric's substance, however, is social in nature', Adorno argues, concluding: 'only one who hears the voice of humankind in the poem's solitude can understand what the poem is saying' (1991b: 39). The next step for Adorno is to turn to the medial specificity of literature that must determine its critical interrogation: 'reflection on the work of art is ... obligated to inquire concretely into its social content and not content itself with a vague feeling of something universal and inclusive. This kind of specification through thought is not some external reflection alien to art; on the contrary, all linguistic works of art demand it' (1991b: 39). What we see here is another substantive methodological commonality between Adorno and Benjamin, namely the notion that the need for critical interrogation is dialectically bound up with the literary artwork and that this is a foundational aspect of what literature is and what it is able to do.

We shall return to the latter point in more detail below. For now, it is helpful to linger for a moment on the matter of immediacy, which both Adorno and Benjamin consider a crucial problem for both reader and critic and for the work of artistic media. In Adorno and Benjamin the problem of immediacy with regard to artistic media (which, it may be useful to repeat once more, is one of the ways in which literature is able to distinguish itself – as the medium of mediation) is also always bound up with the discussion of immediacy and mediation with regard to the relation between subject and object. That is, the problem of immediacy and mediation in the relation of subject and object also becomes a crucial plane upon which both Benjamin and Adorno explore the question of artistic medium. As Larsen suggests, if we consider this matter, then we are able to appreciate that in Benjamin '*distance* becomes a problem for method as well as for experience' (1998: 139). 'Instantaneous experience must be grasped both from within and without at the same time', Larsen continues, 'for if the

experiencing agent and the interpreting agent are separate, the instant to be interpreted escapes' (1998: 139). This is one account of why the position of the narrator occupies such an important position in the work of both Adorno and Benjamin since, Larsen argues, it is via the narrator that we get a sense of mediation in its purest form in literature. It is one example of how literature refuses immediacy in favor of a mediated, critically examined relation to the object, and it is also in this sense that we must understand the literary critical method with which this logical system is bound up, since the relation to the text is one of mediation that surpasses the contradiction between immediacy and distance. This becomes clear when we examine the position of the reader and of the role of the author in interpretation in Benjamin.

### **BEYOND INTENTION AND EXPERIENCE: LITERATURE, HISTORY, AND MEDIATION**

Like Adorno, Benjamin is profoundly suspicious of the category of experience, in particular with regard to experience as a possible literary critical category (of both narration and reading). This suspicion guides the ways in which Benjamin examines one of the fundamental relationships that informs literary critical practice: the relation between author and reader. Against the Romantic tradition, and, as we saw above, in agreement with Adorno, Benjamin strongly rejects biographical approaches to literature that aim to trace authorial self-expression in the work and that principally define literature as self-expression. Like Adorno, Benjamin also discounts any notion of readerly (immediate) experience as a valid ground for a criticism of literature. Wellek summarizes Benjamin's opposition to this account of literature and its associated critical method as follows: 'a work cannot be derived from life.... Nor does Erlebnis define a work of art. Benjamin

argues even that this concept is “devised by Philistines to make poetry harmless, to rob it of its relation to truth” (1971: 128). But Benjamin goes even further, Wellek argues:

Benjamin rejects with equal emphasis any approach through the reader or his psychology. He dismisses ‘empathy’ or substitution as a mere cloak for what one must assume to be idle curiosity.... In dramatic theory he disagrees with the whole problem of katharsis. Most radically Benjamin formulates: ‘In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful. Not only is any reference to a specific public or its representatives misleading, but even the concept of an “ideal” receiver is detrimental in the theoretical consideration of art since all it assumes is the existence and nature of man as such. Art, in the same way, assumes man’s physical and spiritual existence but in none of its works is it concerned with his response. No poem is intended for the reader. (1971: 129)

Both author and reader matter for Benjamin principally historically, not on the level of intentionality, self expression, or experience, but rather in ways that replace mediation with the pure immediacy to which categories such as readerly experience are connected. And this is also a matter of formulating a literary critical method that treats literature on its own terms and takes seriously literature’s commitment to mediation and the problematization of immediacy, in particular in the context of capitalist modernity. Benjamin’s early work on Romanticism breaks with Romantic notions of literature and criticism in crucial moments and puts history and immanent critique in the place of Romanticism’s fundamental assumptions, thus giving us a changed version of what Romanticism first developed: a true theory of literature and an associated account of literary criticism. These are important coordinates for understanding Benjamin’s intellectual development and the significance of literary criticism and literary theory for the development of critical theory insofar as the literary shapes Benjamin’s thought and exerts an important influence on Adorno as well as on the development of critical theory proper.

Nevertheless, it must be noted that Benjamin’s conception of history is quite different from the more ‘traditional’ dialectical notion of history that we find in, say, Adorno or Horkheimer. And, indeed, his conception of history has been the object of the most infamous attacks on Benjamin’s work, as Larsen suggests, ‘both by his contemporaries such as Bertolt Brecht and ... Adorno, and later by, for example, Jürgen Habermas, Peter Bürger, and Hans-Robert Jauss’ (1998: 145). But for the sake of his literary critical method, it is important to foreground, and defend, Benjamin’s emphasis on the present as history, which becomes of central importance for the ways in which Benjamin thinks about reading and interpreting literature – and for a literary work’s continued life, which, as we shall see, depends upon critical readings. As Larsen suggests, the conception of history that we encounter in Benjamin’s later writings (say, on the concept of history) find their origin in his examination of German tragic drama. In the latter, Benjamin focuses mainly on the role of the now, of present-time for our conception of history, and his treatment of the significance of the instant and of the moving present for historical process in the more well-known later writings on history and futurity is anticipated in his examination of the instant as literary motif in his early literary critical writings. It is the focus on the ‘here-and-now of the historical subject’, as Larsen summarizes it, which is of central interest for Benjamin. Most significantly, Larsen argues, the ‘instant is perfectly matched by a literary form: the allegory’: ‘as the literary form of the “actual instant” the allegory is opposed to the symbol, intimately related to the “mystical now” which is identical with the “homogeneous time” mentioned in the theses’ (1998: 148). This matters in particular when we consider the political function of literature and indeed of literary criticism as defined in Benjamin’s work. For Benjamin, as Gabriele Guerra shows, any examination of literary history, and indeed the practice of literary criticism in general, is bound up with

an emphasis on the oppositional character of the literary work – an opposition against the work's and the author's own time and to the dominant forces of ongoing history [*laufende Geschichte*] (Guerra, 2015: 246–7). The latter formulation indicates the degree to which history is often understood here as history in the making, as a matter of a historicized examination of the present as history, and it is to this process, Benjamin argues, that true literature addresses itself with great political and epistemological urgency. It is also ideally this process, the process of making history in the present and shaping that which is to come, in which literature may actively participate.

As Held reminds us, 'immanent criticism derives a certain positive character by pointing to the limits and, therefore, the closed-off possibilities, immanent in the existing order' (1990: 185–6). Benjamin's insistence on the oppositional character of literary work is very much in keeping with this formulation of immanent criticism, for we may understand literature's oppositional character in precisely this way, as one manifestation of an immanent criticism of the existing, and it is also in this way that we can understand Benjamin's focus on the present as in keeping with the foundations of critical theory. What we can further see here is the dialectical relationship between literary critical and philosophical method, between reading literature and reading history. In Benjamin's conception of history, as Garloff argues, we can trace the ways in which Benjamin's work in general is informed by a literary critical logic. That is, when Benjamin seeks to trace the 'pre-history of the modern', he does so by making the history of the nineteenth century the object of a literary critical reading (Garland, 2003: 16). Benjamin 'reads history like a text' in a manner that reads historical reality as a matter of hermeneutics by 'establishing a medial continuum between that which existed and the present of reader and critic' (2003: 16). One clearly sees here traces of Romanticism's continued influence on Benjamin, as Garloff stresses, inasmuch

as the historical world is conceived as a readable text, as a "world-text" that constitutes a reality *sui generis*, which gestures toward that which existed in a non-referential, symbolic mode' (2003: 16). What becomes apparent in Benjamin's literary critical examination of history is a core conviction that guides his literary critical method that Garloff describes as an 'anti-empathy-hermeneutics' with which Benjamin seeks to dislocate the 'fiction of a continuum of individual experience, poetic expression, and hermeneutic understanding' (2003: 17).

It is here that we can see in more detail what Benjamin puts in place of readings and forms of literary criticism that are addressed to matters of immediacy or experience. And we can also note a remarkable insistence upon the critical and indeed political stakes of immanent critical readings of literature, not only for criticism itself but also for the continued life of the literary work. Quoting Benjamin, Weliek traces the outlines of this aspect of Benjamin's method and its connection to Benjamin's larger philosophical system as follows:

Criticism searches for the truth content of a work of art ... or, phrased differently, it 'looks for the sisters of a work of art which must be found in the realm of philosophy'. Works of art have a deep affinity with the ideal of a philosophical problem. All beauty is related to truth. But Benjamin insists that this relationship must not be thought of as truth being somehow concealed within a work of art. Benjamin expressly disapproves of the Hegelian 'sensual semblance of the Idea'. Beauty is not a cloak, not a wrapper, not appearance but essence [*Wesen*]. Criticism must respect the veil: it must not attempt to lift it. The critic can only define an analogon of a work of art. The sublime power of truth appears precisely in the inexpressive, a truth which is discovered in the nature of language. (Weliek, 1971: 127)

The job of the critic is not to uncover hidden meanings. Instead, the work of the literary critic as outlined by Benjamin is bound up with Benjamin's insistence on the *Fortleben*, the continued life, that is, of the literary work. Benjamin insists upon a literary

critical praxis and method that is formulated in relation to the object with which it engages and that indeed carries on the work of the object itself. That is, as Garloff suggests, literary criticism is for Benjamin not simply a matter of diagnosing philosophical ideas or concepts, nor is it a matter of judging the literary work's quality or of grasping, understanding, or interpreting authorial intention. Rather, Benjamin conceives of 'critique as the medium of the fulfillment and the potentiating continued life of its object' (2003: 6–7). A literary work in this sense, Garloff continues, is not simply understood by Benjamin as the carrier of meaning or a vessel for ideas that it seeks to communicate. Rather, in keeping with the core logic of critical theory and immanent criticism, a work is understood as the carrier of symbolic meaning that is supplemented by criticism rather than philologically reconstructed by criticism.

Criticism, in other words, is for Benjamin a creative and also a potentiating act, a force which becomes the motor of the potential for meaning, relevance, and thought that the work carries only as abstract, not yet activated potential. As Garloff suggests, Benjamin's method addresses itself to the 'non-intentional layers of aesthetic constructs', to the 'poetic forms of works', in order to unlock their historical content (2003: 14). Form here also becomes a way for Benjamin to distance himself from 'the fiction of "hermeneutic continuity" that grounds understanding' (2003: 15). His focus on form privileges symbolic meaning over intention, which, as Garloff argues, can be understood as a literary criticism committed to representation rather than explanation and interpretation. The latter in particular is an important and possibly all too often ignored aspect of Benjaminian literary criticism, which is not only a specific articulation of a method but also a clear account of the work of the critic: a critic does not explain or interpret the work; rather, she represents it (Garloff, 2003: 15). And it is via this latter operation that we can

understand what Benjamin has in mind when he insists on understanding literary criticism as an active, creative procedure that activates and potentiates symbolic meaning that the work carries abstractly. As in Adorno, the literary artwork needs the literary critic for its continued existence and to live its life fully and continuously.

## **CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONTEMPORARY LITERARY CRITICISM**

Literary criticism in the twenty-first century has seen a renewed investment in the fundamental questions of the discipline, in particular since literary criticism and theory, once again, finds itself in a moment of deep crisis. The question of what literary criticism might look like in the twenty-first century often involves questioning basic assumptions about reading, interpretation, the status of the work of art, and the kind of work that criticism ought to be carrying out. The desire to probe the foundations of the discipline is so strong that in 2016, many critics have begun to discuss the possibility of a 'post-critical era'. In such a climate, we are well served to remind ourselves of the literary critical method based upon critical theory. The account of the relation between the literary work and the work of critic, for instance, is as remarkable as it is relevant in a time in which literary criticism struggles to conceive of a stable ground upon which it may stand. Those persuaded by the logic of critical theory and the literary theory emerging out of the Frankfurt School may wish to revisit the fundamental methodological commitments of this practice in order to find hope in what elsewhere seem to be dark times for literary criticism. To be sure, declarations of crises in literary criticism and indeed crises of literature more generally are not new, and we encounter them with some regularity throughout history. The most recent version of such crises, however, may

lack the positive aspects of previous moments of crisis, which re-shaped and renewed the literary critical landscape much like forest fires restore important nutrients to the soil and make it possible for new, more energetic life to grow and flourish. What we see in recent critical discourse all too frequently, however, is that frenzied attempts to determine what literary criticism may look like in the twenty-first century and how we may define its continued significance and function leave the larger capitalist re-shaping of the university system and of the cultural field unchallenged. The humanities are widely defunded, and scholars of literature are pressed to defend their work and projects within increasingly market-oriented, instrumentalized parameters. In the context, it is not surprising that big-data approaches have become increasingly popular, since they produce broad, empirically grounded 'readings' of literary archives that also stand the chance of attracting substantial sums of external funding while training 'student researchers' in skills that are recognized by the contemporary economy. In such a situation, returning to critical theory's famous critique of the instrumentalization of thought, culture, and critique may yield analyses and strategies that can allow us to formulate true futures for literary criticism that do not simply replicate pragmatic market utilitarianism.

Michael W. Jennings suggests that the special status of Benjamin as a literary critic lies in his engagement with critical theory, however fraught with disagreements and tensions:

The conviction that the work of art must be accorded a privileged status due to its function as the residence of truth in the world lends to Benjamin's career a purpose and tenor we do not ordinarily associate with that of a literary critic. This juxtaposition of epistemological and literary critical interests has led Anglo-American readers in particular to misunderstand the character of Benjamin's work; he is neither precisely a philosopher, nor exactly a literary essayist.... Each of his literary essays describes a philosophy of its object. His career might be said to represent the protracted attempt to articulate the manner in which

literature in general and specific works in particular hold within them the key to man's understanding of the world and the absolute, and to describe a literary critical method adequate to the recognition and revelation of that truth. (1983: 549)

This, in itself always dialectical, approach to literature allows Benjamin to foreground the important oppositional function of literature in the context of a general immanent criticism of the existing that creates the preconditions for its transcendence. And it is here that we can point toward another important methodological commonality between Benjamin and Adorno, one which fuses an immanent criticism of literature with a theory of the literary work's important function. The literary work here is understood as a practical implementation of immanent criticism, a notion of praxis that, as we have seen, emerges out of the dialectical relation between the work of literature and the work of the critic. 'The social interpretation of lyric poetry as of all works of art', Adorno writes, 'may not focus directly on the so-called social perspective or the social interests of the works or their authors' (1991b: 38). 'Instead', he continues, 'it must discover how the entirety of a society, conceived as an internally contradictory unit, is manifested in the work of art, in what way the work of art remains subject to society and in what way it transcends it. In philosophical terms, the approach must be an immanent one' (1991b: 38–9). Thus, as for Benjamin, the oppositional character of the literary work is a matter of both its immanent engagement with the limits of the existing and its refusal of pure immediacy: 'the work's distance from mere existence becomes a measure of what is false and bad in the latter. In its protest the poem expresses the dream of a world in which things would be different' (1991b: 39–40). The lyric's opposition therefore lies in its formal resistance to 'the reification of the world' (1991b: 40).

We may conclude by once again foregrounding the centrality of the category of form and of the focus on immanent criticism, the specificity of media, and the oppositional,

historically and medially specific character of the literary artwork by turning to the limits of precisely this methodological approach which are helpfully probed and ultimately reaffirmed in the work of Leo Löwenthal. In a retrospective essay in which he evaluates his own contribution to literary criticism, Löwenthal lays out for us why his work may be important for the sociological study of literature but why we may not be able to speak of it as committed to developing or advancing a method for or particular kind of literary criticism like Adorno and Benjamin. Looking back over his early writings, Löwenthal writes:

while I in no way feel ashamed of these documents of my youth, I am conscious of their weaknesses. If I were to write them over again, I would certainly be less sure of some of the direct connections I drew between literature and writers on the one hand, and the social infrastructure on the other. (1987: 3)

But unlike Adorno and Benjamin, whose work is driven by the recognition of the lack of attention to the precise ways in which literature may be brought into relation with social and material reality, a recognition that ultimately underwrites the development of a specific method formulated in keeping with the logic of critical theory, Löwenthal remains far less interested in that which lies between the two areas in which he is interested and that he wishes to bring into relation: literature and society. Accordingly, he observes: ‘the writings of my contemporaries have often amazed me because some ... are so concerned with “mediation” that the connections between social being and social consciousness became almost obscured’ (1987: 3). Yet, what Löwenthal discusses as excessive obscurity or ‘unnecessarily complicated and esoteric language’ is, as we have seen, the very commitment that allowed Adorno and Benjamin to formulate a theory of literature and literary criticism in relation to critical theory. Moreover, it is also what makes the relation between literary criticism and critical theory in their work a dialectical one insofar

as their examination of precisely that which lies between, of the forces and forms of mediation, allows them to further develop critical theory as an overarching system of thought and critique. To Löwenthal by contrast, critical theory means, as he stresses, ‘a perspective’ and this is, of course, fundamentally different than what it means for Adorno and Benjamin: a method. However, this suggestion should not be taken to mean that this is simply a failure or shortcoming in Löwenthal’s work. After all, he is very much aware of the shortcomings of his approach to literature. He defends his approach, however, on the grounds of political and historical necessity. Still, he concedes that his work, at times ‘behavioristic, that is, unhistorical’, did not change the fact that ‘sociology of literature in the sense of an analysis of art remains suspect’ (1987: 4). ‘I sense today in Europe an inclination to perceive a work of art merely as a manifestation of ideology’, he continues,

which strips it of its specific integrity, that is, its historically conditioned but also rationally creative cognitive role. To put it in a more provocative form: Marxist literary criticism is not only totally adequate but indispensable in the analysis of mass culture. However, it must be applied with utter caution to art itself and must, as a critique of social illusions, limit itself to the residues which are unequivocally ideological in nature. (1987: 4–5)

Löwenthal himself therefore foregrounds the shortcoming of some of this work and thereby reaffirms precisely some of the fundamental commitments that inform the method that Adorno and Benjamin develop in more detail elsewhere. It is, to put it bluntly, a ‘do as I say, not as I do’ type of moment in Löwenthal’s essay that is as charmingly honest as it is logically illuminating.

## CONCLUSION

By way of closing this chapter, it is worth foregrounding Löwenthal’s account of a sociology of art that, he stresses, must be set

apart from a sociology of mass culture, although the latter is the main focus of his work. In this distinction between mass culture and art and in the insistence on the importance of the latter, we can see not only a set of principles that connect Löwenthal's method back to that elaborated in much more detail by Adorno and Benjamin, but it also serves as a reminder of some of the fundamental aspects of a literary theory and a literary criticism that is developed in concert with critical theory.

'Adorno once said: "Works of art ... have their greatness only insofar as they let speak what ideology conceals. They transcend, whether they want to or not, false consciousness"' (Löwenthal, 1987: 5). The consequence of this suggestion, Löwenthal argues, is important. It means that, crucially, 'literature is not ideology'. All too often, critical theory is taken to be similar to if not congruent with ideology critique, in part because the latter has become one of the stock operations of left-leaning literary criticism. But, Löwenthal argues, this is not what a literary critical approach based on critical theory would pursue: 'we are not engaged in research on ideology; rather, we have to focus our attention on the special truth ... which the literary work imparts' (1987: 5).

What this means, Löwenthal suggests, is not only that this critical method assumes that literature makes legible that which ideology confines to unreadability but also that we must examine literature's particular role as artistic medium in this context. What a literary critical approach based on critical theory does with literature is, therefore, dialectically connected to what it believes literature is and does – it departs from a specific theory of literature, one that is connected to a philosophical focus on epistemology and politics. 'Literature', Löwenthal continues, 'is the only dependable source for human consciousness and self-consciousness, for the individual's relationship to the world as experience' (1987: 5). As a consequence, Löwenthal, like Adorno and Benjamin,

rejects any sociological criticism of literature that simply mines the literary work for sociological evidence. 'Literature is no mere quarry', Löwenthal writes. He continues, 'I reject all attempts to regard literature as a tool to learn data and facts about institutions such as the economy, the state, and the legal system. Social scientists and social historians should be forbidden from regarding literature as a source for raw materials' (1987: 6). To do so, Löwenthal argues, would be to miss literature's true ontology and function: 'literature teaches us to understand the success or failure of socialization of individuals in concrete historical moments and situations' (1987: 6). This suggestion surely has continued relevance today, if only as a note of caution, since so many of our current literary critical approaches are in some form indebted to a sociological critique of literature. In his words of caution, we also find a reminder that although critical theory is aimed at a critique of society and culture it must not simply be conflated with overly sociological approaches to culture and art. Rather, the core of the method and of its literary criticism is to treat art and literature on their own terms, developing a clear theory of literature from which a criticism departs that is aimed at analyzing first and foremost matters of form, medium, and history.

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# Cinema – Spectacle – Modernity

Johannes von Moltke

## THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

‘Every visit to the cinema leaves me, against all my vigilance, stupider and worse’. This sentence, which occurs halfway through the fifth aphorism of Theodor W. Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* (2005: 25), would appear to sum up a received notion about critical theory’s engagement with cinema, mass media, and spectacle. According to this line of thinking, spelled out most explicitly in the chapter on the ‘Culture Industry’ in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, cinema degrades even the most critical subject. More radically and perniciously, the culture industry produces and reproduces the modern subject in the first place. Fusing a non-determinist Marxism with Freudian categories, critical theory lends significant weight to cultural processes of subject-formation. Under the conditions of industrial modernity and especially in the wake of Fascism and the Holocaust, these processes tend increasingly toward conformism and integration from above: the culture

industry systematically subjects its consumers to the imperatives of sameness, the logic of identity and exchange. As this industry’s ‘central sector’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 100), film breaks down the vigilance of no less a critical subject than Adorno himself.

Although there are indications that Adorno was also attuned to the pleasurable aspects of this breakdown, as I will suggest in the final section below, the cinema epitomizes for him and Horkheimer a mass cultural form that turns individuals into unwitting consumers not only of the goods advertised through product placement and conspicuous consumption on the screen, but of the capitalist system that keeps them in check. As the cultural manifestation of organized monopoly capitalism, the culture industry subsumes cinema along with magazines, jazz, radio, and television under the commodity form, thereby transferring ‘the profit motive naked onto cultural forms’ (Adorno, 1975: 13). Favoring various kinds of ‘pseudo-realism’

as their representational mode, cinema and television feed into the systematic, totalizing reach of the culture industry to satisfy the false needs of spectator-consumers that this industry generates in the first place; in this manner, it 'endlessly cheats the consumers out of what it endlessly promises' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 111). As Adorno and Horkheimer put it in the chapter title, the culture industry peddles 'enlightenment as mass deception'. Harnessing all aspects of style, technique, and aesthetics to technology, profit, and an authoritarian notion of culture, the top-down system of the culture industry reinforces social hierarchies even as it levels all aesthetic differences – pseudo-differentiations between A- and B-pictures, Chrysler and General Motors, daytime soaps and 'quality' television notwithstanding.

Cinema, for Adorno and Horkheimer, consequently epitomizes modern media's proximity to propaganda, a term whose meaning in the original German usage oscillates between advertising and political manipulation. This ambivalence is precisely the authors' point: as a manifestation of highly developed capitalism, the culture industry marks the point at which sound business policy and political machination converge. Like advertising, industrial culture is entirely beholden to the commodity form; like propaganda, it constitutes an ideological machine that transforms autonomous subjects into a mass of consumers rid of the freedom and the capability of forming independent judgments: 'the customer is not king, as the culture industry would like to have us believe, not its subject but its object' (Adorno, 1975: 12). Where 'to be entertained means to be in agreement', the authors argue, conformity replaces consciousness (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 115). Spectators become interchangeable consumers who 'must need no thoughts of [their] own' (109) but must ensure the seamless functioning of the machine through unquestioning consumption of its products. In the negative dialectic that binds together the manifestations of culture under conditions

of modernity, the culture industry is the opposing pole to notions of authentic folk art or popular culture – notions that resonate with a positivity as false and misleading as the negativity of a 'pornographic and prudish' industrial culture (111). In the face of this dialectic, according to Horkheimer and to Adorno especially, only a rigorous notion of autonomous art could resist cooptation by the system by virtue of its resolute negativity. 'Ascetic and shameless' (111), such art recognizes the broken world and dares to offer reconciliation only in the most attenuated overtones generated by its demanding form, whereas the culture industry traps its consumers in stimulus-response patterns, offering escapist fare the better to keep them yoked to the factory bench. And yet, even the concept of autonomous art cannot be considered normative or absolute, since it remains tethered to the dialectic beyond which it would gesture. As Adorno famously formulates it, in a 1936 letter to Walter Benjamin in which he commented on the latter's drafts of the 'Artwork' essay: both high and low, both autonomous art and the forms of mass culture to which Benjamin would ascribe revolutionary potential, 'bear the stigmata of capitalism.... Both are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up' (Adorno et al., 2007: 123).

Adorno and Horkheimer's influential account of the culture industry is inexorably totalizing: as any reader of 'Enlightenment as Mass Deception' can attest, the text is relentless in shoring up the image of a fully administered, closed cultural system, from which there can be no escape and whose only logical culmination is in fascism. Both *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Minima Moralia* were originally written in Californian exile from the Nazis. Against this backdrop, the bleakness of Adorno and Horkheimer's view of mass media is of course historically contingent; but it is also in keeping with their overall diagnosis of enlightenment as generating its own antitheses – a dialectic that they trace back to the age of myth and forward

into the mythologizing tendencies of bourgeois enlightenment. Consequently, they detect this dialectic even in the most remote corners of the culture industry. Adorno and Horkheimer see even the seemingly harmless laughter generated by cartoons as a regressive response to the sadism with which animated figures treat each other, are flattened, pummeled, run over. Or as Walter Benjamin would put it elsewhere, Disney films from a certain point onwards revealed the ‘cozy acceptance of bestiality and violence as inevitable concomitants of existence’ under modernity (Benjamin, 2008: 130, n30). In the frantic pursuits of cartoon characters, then, Adorno and Horkheimer see the incipient pogrom (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 110), in the invention of radio they already hear the Führer’s voice (129). As the authors put it in a distant echo of Siegfried Kracauer’s contemporaneous argument in *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), ‘in Germany, even the most carefree films of democracy were overhung already by the graveyard stillness of dictatorship’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 99). In the dialectic of enlightenment, even fun ‘is a medicinal bath (*Stahlbad*) which the entertainment industry never ceases to prescribe’ (112). The enlightenment ideals of reason and emancipation yield a rationalized cultural system that ensures complete social control.

In the decades since its inception (first as a set of mimeographed ‘philosophical fragments’ completed in 1944, then as a book published in 1947, and only much later as one of the iconic texts of critical theory),<sup>1</sup> *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has often been reduced to readily repeatable soundbytes: enlightenment as unmitigated disaster leading to fascism, cinema as mass manipulation, audiences as dupes of the culture industry’s spectacle. These are strong claims that gave critical theory an edge of combative ideology critique in the cultural arena during the 1960s, when *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was taken up by the student movements. At the same time, critical theorists would have been

the first to balk at the reduction of complex arguments to bald theses about mass media manipulation; such reductionist accounts could render those arguments all but indistinguishable from a ‘hypodermic needle’ model of mass communication – anathema to the dialectical approach elaborated by Adorno and Horkheimer, who originally had intended to follow up on the ‘philosophical fragments’ with additional material. Of the section on the culture industry, in particular, they noted in 1944 that it remained more fragmentary than the other parts; they had already completed significant work on ‘the positive aspects of mass culture’, suggesting a far more nuanced concept of the latter than the one condensed in received images of Adorno in particular as a mandarin thinker with only disdain for mass culture and the media (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 254, n. xix). By the turn of the twenty-first century, the editors of a volume devoted to ‘rethinking the Frankfurt School’ could consequently observe that ‘reconsiderations of Adorno have proceeded at such a pace that a renovated, re-published and poststructuralist-friendly Adorno (as opposed to the cranky modernist of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) has become the leading figure of the second-generation Frankfurt School’ (Nealon and Irr, 2002: 2).

The image of the ‘cranky modernist’, however, did have its own efficacy in the reception history of critical theory, and the somewhat one-dimensional notion of the culture industry as pure manipulation came in for revision even by some of the Frankfurt School’s most well-meaning critics. The rise of British Cultural Studies from the 1960s on, for example, and its further elaboration in North America in particular, more or less directly implicated the thesis of enlightenment as ‘mass deception’ in its own challenge to the ‘hypodermic needle’ model of cultural communication. Given the distinct contexts out of which the two schools of thought emerged, it would be wrong to think of Cultural Studies as a direct ‘reply’ to the cultural theories of the Frankfurt School. Nonetheless, the rise

of cultural studies was predicated in certain ways upon the work of the latter – if only by negation and in a ‘particularly difficult’ relationship of ‘skeptical distance’ (Nealon and Irr, 2002: 3). Though many practitioners of cultural studies from Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall onwards shared the materialist and even Marxist bent of the Frankfurt School, and although the two intellectual traditions overlapped in a number of other significant ways as well (cf. Kellner, 2015), the British Marxists and subsequent critics did not adopt the Frankfurt School’s totalizing dialectics, whether Hegelian or negative.<sup>2</sup> Nor did they share critical theory’s totalizing dismissal of the working class as hopelessly coopted by the system. Responding to post-Fordist developments in capitalism, the more socio-logically oriented studies of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies implicitly also displaced the Frankfurt School’s model of the culture industry. In its place, Cultural Studies developed more differentiated notions of cultural encoding and decoding on the part of audiences that were increasingly conceptualized as active (Fiske, 1989; Hall, 1993).<sup>3</sup>

As I have already begun to suggest, however, such critiques of Adorno and Horkheimer’s model of culture did not come only from the outside, as it were, but were formulated within the context of critical theory itself. On cinema and modernity, on the spectacle of the culture industry, critical theorists did not speak with one voice – particularly if one includes here two of the most articulate contributors who were never *de facto* members of the Institute for Social Research, but who are today generally considered key figures in this intellectual tradition: Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer.<sup>4</sup> From their influential writings emerge related but different conceptualizations of cinema, spectacle, and modernity that crystallize around the configuration of media and a complex notion, yet to be defined, of experience. Taking these contributions into account – which have been gaining increasing attention ever since the rediscovery of Benjamin’s writings during the 1980s and 90s,

and more recently with the revaluation of the full breadth of Kracauer’s work – we can then also return to Adorno to reconsider various nuances in his assessment of technological media that the more well-known theorization of the culture industry and its reception have tended to occlude. Here, too, recent scholarship has opened significant revisionist avenues.

## **EXPERIENCE AND TECHNOLOGICAL REPRODUCIBILITY: WALTER BENJAMIN**

‘One of the oldest motifs of Critical Theory’, notes Detlev Claussen, is ‘the experience of the loss of experience’ (2008: 7; cf. also Jay, 2005). It is a motif central not only to Adorno’s aesthetic and cultural theory, but also to the work of Walter Benjamin in particular. In essays such as ‘The Storyteller’ (Benjamin, 2006b), ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility’ (Benjamin, 2008), and ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ (Benjamin, 2006a), as well as in his unfinished work on the Arcades project, Benjamin considers it axiomatic that under conditions of modernity, ‘experience has fallen in value’ (Benjamin, 2006b: 143). In this regard, Benjamin’s writings contribute, in Miriam Hansen’s words, to a ‘theory of experience in the age of its declining communicability’ (Hansen, 1987: 186).

What exactly did it mean for experience to be on the decline, and what were the impediments to its communication? Has not the concept of experience in fact become increasingly ubiquitous, the quintessential object of our mobile, urban, and cosmopolitan modernity, in which we chase after ever new thrills and sensations that we collect in order to assure ourselves of having truly lived (Greif, 2016)? In order to understand how Benjamin and the Frankfurt School arrive at the diagnosis of an ‘increasing atrophy of experience’ (Benjamin, 2006a: 316), and

in order to understand the specificity of this diagnosis in its relation to cinema and other media of modernity, we need to distinguish with Benjamin between two different notions of experience. This distinction is facilitated in the German language by the fact that it has two different words to designate *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* as fundamentally different kinds of experience. Benjamin associates the former with fleeting, momentary impressions, with the impact of a shock or thrill. These short bursts of affect, which arguably define our contemporary, commonplace concept of experience (cf. Greif, 2016), lack what is central, by contrast, to the emphatic notion of experience as *Erfahrung*: a longitudinal temporal aspect that ‘accompanies one to the far reaches of time, that fills and articulates time’ (Benjamin, 2006a: 331). As *Erfahrung*, experience becomes a temporal medium in which memory and history are woven together. ‘Where there is experience in [this] strict sense of the word’, writes Benjamin, ‘certain contents of the individual past combine in the memory with material from the collective past’ (Benjamin, 2006a: 316).

This emphasis on the historical dimension of experience consequently also entails an insistence on its more-than-individual quality as a site (or, again, a medium)<sup>5</sup> for the dialectical encounter between subject and object. Experience in this sense is not simply a subjective capacity to register sense data as if on a blank slate, for ‘[t]he relation to experience ... is a relation to all of history; merely individual experience, in which consciousness begins with what is nearest to it, is itself mediated by the all-encompassing experience of historical humanity’ (Adorno, 1984: 158). As Miriam Hansen, one of the most important commentators on media and experience in the Frankfurt School, put it: experience as *Erfahrung* is ‘that which mediates individual perception with social meaning, conscious with unconscious processes, loss of self with self-reflexivity’; with Benjamin and Adorno, she consequently defines experience ‘as the capacity to see connections and relations (*Zusammenhang*); ...

as the matrix of conflicting temporalities, of memory and hope, including the historical loss of these dimensions’ (Hansen, 2004: 12–13). Benjamin himself formulates this dialectic in countless and varied discussions of experience in relation to color, childhood, language, writing, storytelling, and more (cf. Jay, 2005: chapter 8). In these discussions, the emphatic notion of *Erfahrung* tends to imply ‘a point of indifference between subject and object, an equiprimordiality prior to their differentiation’ (Jay, 1998: 51) or, as Jürgen Habermas put it in an early appraisal of Benjamin: in experience (*Erfahrung*), the object metamorphizes ‘into a counterpart. Thereby a whole field of surprising correspondences between animate and inanimate nature is opened up, wherein even things encounter us in the structures of frail intersubjectivity’ (Habermas, 1979: 45–6).

These two qualities of experience – its temporal reach into memory and history, and its dialectical mobilization of subject–object relations – come under threat in modernity, according to critical theory. Whether through the loss of orality or the loss of aura, modernization shifts the balance away from narrative *Zusammenhang* and toward mere information, and consequently from *Erfahrung* to *Erlebnis*. Technological media – and cinema, in particular – are integral to this process. But unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, who consider the culture industry symptomatic at best (and instrumental at worst) in the creeping reification wrought by capitalist modernity, and who hold out hope only for the most demanding forms of autonomous art, Benjamin locates responses to the loss of experience *within* modern media culture as well.<sup>6</sup> While the author of the ‘Artwork’ essay is keenly aware of Fascism’s power to aestheticize politics through spectacle, he attributes ‘social significance’ to film, which – in a far cry from Adorno and Horkheimer – he deems ‘the artwork most capable of improvement’ (Benjamin, 2008: 109). Alienation and reification provide the context for Benjamin’s media theory as much as for *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, to be sure; but Benjamin

(and Kracauer, too, as we shall see) allows for the fact that as an apparatus, the cinema makes possible 'a highly productive use of the human being's self-alienation'. For Benjamin, who insists at every turn on the historicity of the senses, the rise of photography and film in modernity index a profound shift in the human sensorium and consequently to aesthetics conceived as a matter of sense perception (*aesthesis*). In this context, cinema becomes a training ground on which to adjust to the progressive loss of 'aura' in modernity, to familiarize ourselves with the increasing penetration of the human world by technology or 'second nature', and to practice new modes of seeing. Famously considered by Benjamin the purveyor of our 'optical unconscious' (Benjamin, 2008: 117), film serves 'to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding daily' (108). Viewed from this perspective, the loss of aura – of which cinema is both the engine and the index – is but a facet of modernity's 'disenchantment of the world' (Max Weber). The concomitant loss of experience, then, would not be cause for lament but would be welcomed as productive and progressive.

Miriam Hansen has noted the 'belated' character of Benjamin's 'Artwork' essay, which she locates in the fact that Benjamin still invests the cinema with avant-gardist hopes at a period when for other critical theorists the advances of capitalism and fascism alike have squashed any residual cause for optimism (Hansen, 1987: 182). Against the bleaker diagnoses of the 1940s, Benjamin allies himself with both Dada and Brecht in embracing the cinema's destruction of aura and its political, mass-oriented functions. This position brings him into explicit conflict with Adorno who, in the above-mentioned important exchange of letters about the 'Artwork' essay, accuses Benjamin of romanticizing Chaplin, the proletariat, and popular culture more generally (Adorno et al., 1977: 110–41). Demanding 'more dialectics' (124), Adorno chides Benjamin for

investing Mickey Mouse, the cinema, and the laughing audience with excessive emancipatory potential at the expense of high art and aesthetic autonomy. At stake in this correspondence is again the question whether to embrace or lament the profound cultural shift that becomes particularly palpable in the cinema – and whether to welcome the latter as a medium of shocks and thrills (*Erlebnis*) or to hold it responsible, *pars pro toto*, for the loss of experience (*Erfahrung*) in modernity.

In the correspondence, Benjamin does concede several of Adorno's points. Indeed, as Hansen has shown, Benjamin harbors considerably greater ambivalence on this issue than the combative, Brecht-inspired stance of the 'Artwork' essay would lead us to believe (Hansen, 1987). While he clearly welcomes the politicization of the aesthetic with Brecht, in several other writings Benjamin simultaneously invests hope in a re-auratization of modernity. Hansen traces this hope in the way Benjamin develops notions of innervation, play, mimesis, and physiognomy (Hansen, 1987; Hansen, 2012: 130–204). These concepts are as central to Benjamin's media theory as the vaunted loss of aura, and they combine to suggest the possibility not only of losing but also of regaining an emphatic form of *Erfahrung* at the movies. 'Although film as a medium enhances the historical demolition of the aura', Hansen writes, 'its particular form of indexical mediation enables it to lend a physiognomic expression to objects, to make second nature return the look, similar to auratic experience in the first' (1987: 209–10). In this more nuanced view of Benjamin's work on cinema, the latter holds out the promise 'that it might give the technologically altered sensorium access to a contemporary, materially based, and collective form of reflexivity that would not have to surrender the mimetic and temporal dimensions of experience' (2012: 161). In other words, Benjamin theorizes cinema not only as the *locus classicus* for the destruction of aura but also as a site for the reconfiguration of experience in modernity. At stake, then, is the question

of whether cinema can also be a medium *of* experience rather than simply the medium of its destruction: can we expect from the cinema, in other words, the re-integration of fragmentary *Erlebnisse* (including, notably, the shocks and thrills produced by cinema's own techniques of cinematography and montage) into a coherent, enduring form of *Erfahrung* – whether aesthetic or political, social or individual? And can the cinema help to dissolve the rigid opposition of subject and object? Can it become, in other words, a site where 'even things encounter us in the structures of frail intersubjectivity' (Habermas, 1979)?

To the degree that Benjamin's essays and letters begin to suggest affirmative answers to these central questions, his writings on media arguably communicate as closely with the writings of Siegfried Kracauer as with those of Adorno, the importance of the correspondence with the latter notwithstanding. For it is Kracauer who will eventually formulate a full-fledged theory of film that culminates explicitly in a strong notion of experience – reformulated in relation to the representation of reality – as the medium's defining term. In another significant departure from the culture industry paradigm, according to which modern media function precisely to 'strip away' experience (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 135), Kracauer will argue that cinema 'incorporate[s] aspects of physical reality with a view to making us experience them' (1997: 40). Rather than a mere symptom of modernity and an instrument of late capitalism, cinema appears to Kracauer as the antidote to a prevailing sense of abstraction. Cinematic spectatorship becomes a site for experience regained.

## CINEMA AND EXPERIENCE: SIEGFRIED KRACAUER

This is the position that emerges, in any event, from Kracauer's late work (though it was decades in the making, *Theory of Film*

was completed in 1960, only six years before his death). Though there are strong lines of continuity in Kracauer's thinking,<sup>7</sup> these develop over a lifetime of crossing disciplinary and national borders, from his early training as an architect in Germany to his work as an émigré scholar in the United States. He does occasionally try to avoid being pigeonholed as a film critic and theorist, to be sure; but thinking about the medium remains central to his work from his copious film reviews in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* during the 1920s through his final, posthumous publication, which draws extensively on his own insights about film as a template for thinking about (the writing of) history. Kracauer is the only one among the first generation of critical theorists, in other words, who can claim any significant expertise in matters of cinema. One of the leading film critics of the Weimar Republic, he goes on in American exile to write two of the most influential books in the history of so-called classical film theory: *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947) and the above-mentioned *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960).

Kracauer's work on these books is preceded by a decade-long career in film and cultural criticism at the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, as well as by his eight years in French exile, during which he continues watching, thinking about, and working on film – as well as on the related questions of spectacle and propaganda. Kracauer scholarship has grappled with the continuities and ruptures that characterize this work, tending to separate out the materialist, occasionally even Marxist-influenced writings of the late 1920s and early 1930s (see e.g. Mulder, 1985) from the far more muted politics of the texts written in the United States during the Cold War (see e.g. von Moltke, 2015). And in several respects it does indeed remain difficult to reconcile the dialectical concepts of abstractness and rationalization in landmark essays such as 'The Mass Ornament' (1996a) and

'Photography' (1996b) with the flat-out critique of ornamentation in the *Caligari* book or of abstraction and the scientific world view at the end of *Theory of Film*. Whereas the earlier work was guided by a desire to push through the surface expressions of popular culture by means of a socially committed ideology critique, the two film books would appear to develop comparatively undialectical, normative frameworks to criticize Weimar cinema as proto-fascist, and to extol neorealist cinema as redemptive, respectively.

And yet, underlying these apparent discontinuities and reversals is an abiding sense of the promise of cinema – coupled, to be sure, with an acute sensitivity for illiberal, if not totalitarian, abuses of the medium. One way to grasp these continuities is to note the persistent concern with alienation in the cinema. In his earliest film reviews, Kracauer spells out the power of cinema to estrange our perception of reality; photographic media as well as early cinematic forms such as slapstick or the kinetic chase scene, he insists here, are alienating in both senses of the word – taking spectators away from their lived reality, but thereby also laying bare that reality in its ideological construction. This is the upshot of the 1927 essay on photography, which concludes with the suggestion that film has a unique power to 'stir up the elements of nature' (Kracauer, 1996b: 62). With the advent of photographic media, in other words, the world presents itself for the first time in history 'in its independence from human beings'. A similar argument underpins the famous essay on 'The Mass Ornament', which formulates a dialectical theory of spectacle and mass culture in terms of rationalization and abstraction (Kracauer, 1996a): the epitome of the rational, objectifying organization of humans – whether workers on the factory floor, gymnasts in the sports stadium, or the Tiller Girls on the vaudeville stage – the mass ornament yields an abstract, geometrical pattern. As such it both alienates us from outmoded notions of individuality and interiority and intimates a different, enlightened

order, in which the rational organization of society would become, in Kracauer's terms, humane and concrete. Hence Kracauer's conclusion that 'the *aesthetic* pleasure gained from ornamental movements is *legitimate*' (79; emphasis in original): in the geometrical abstractions of their forms, spectacle and popular culture allow insight into the process of rationalization, which has enthroned abstract *ratio* in place of the rational telos of enlightenment: *Vernunft*. The solution, then, cannot be to turn back the clock to pre-enlightened notions of organic tradition, myth, ritual, or what Benjamin termed aura; like Adorno and Horkheimer, whose argument 'The Mass Ornament' anticipates by two decades, Kracauer sees the dialectic of enlightenment to lead inextricably *through* the mass ornament. Unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, however, he considers the abstraction, reification, and alienation of popular culture to be 'legitimate' in that they point the way forward. Capitalism's 'core defect', Kracauer consequently claims, is that 'it rationalizes not too much but rather *too little*' (1996a: 81; emphasis in the original).

This position is formulated during the 1920s and prior to the rise of Hitler, to be sure. Kracauer would become more skeptical about the emancipatory potential of the ornament in his writings during the 1930s and 40s. The two key texts here are a long essay entitled 'Totalitarian Propaganda' that he writes in Paris during the 1930s for the Institute for Social Research (which, however, declined to publish it in its journal<sup>8</sup>) and *From Caligari to Hitler*, the 'psychological history of the German film' written in New York. The two texts are linked: the propaganda analysis provides the backdrop for Kracauer's analyses of 'wartime communications' in New York, which in turn feeds into his re-viewing of Weimar cinema as 'premonition' of Hitler. Here, the dialectical promise of the ornament yields to an alarmed assessment of cinema's power to yoke ornamentation to mass deception and tyranny. Once he studies Nazi propaganda films, including Leni Riefenstahl's



infamous *Triumph of the Will*, Kracauer also re-evaluates the films of the Weimar era, now detecting in them anticipatory versions of the paralysis and terror that he finds in totalitarian propaganda. Here, too, alienation has become total.

And yet, by the time the world emerges from Fascism (albeit into the Cold War) and Kracauer completes *Theory of Film*, cinema's powers of alienation have regained some of their capacity to help point (popular) culture out of the entanglement of enlightenment's dialectic. Even though *Theory of Film* is written from a completely changed geopolitical vantage point and with knowledge of the Holocaust, the book insists, like the earlier essays, on the productive aspect of cinema conceived as a 'product of complete alienation' (Kracauer, 1997: 15). The difference is that *Theory of Film* now links alienation to a renewed valorization of experience after its virtual erasure by war, genocide, and the atom bomb – if not the culture industry. Cinema, in Kracauer's theoretical *summa*, provides a site for working through alienation and regaining – if not 'redeeming' – experience in an increasingly abstract, cold war world. Inspired by Italian neorealist films such as Rossellini's *Paisà*, Kracauer sees film as a conduit for reconnecting with reality. 'We literally redeem [the] world from its dormant state', Kracauer writes, 'by endeavoring to experience it through the cinema' (1997: 300).

## **TOWARD A CRITICAL MEDIA THEORY: THEODOR W. ADORNO REVISITED**

Given the distance that apparently separates Kracauer and Adorno on the issue of cinema, spectacle, and popular culture (with Benjamin situated somewhere in between), it comes as something of a surprise that, late in his career, Adorno does appear to concede aspects of Kracauer's argument in an article entitled 'Transparencies on Film' (Adorno,

1981/82). Occasioned by an encounter with the early works of what would become known as the New German Cinema, the article happens to appear in *Die Zeit* just a week before Kracauer's death in late November of 1966; its debt to the older critic is explicit, as Adorno attributes to Kracauer 'the most plausible theory of film technique' (200). In doing so, he alights on the importance of experience at the heart of cinema. Whereas the (co)author of 'Enlightenment as Mass Deception' had considered cinema 'the central sector of the culture industry' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 100), inimical to experience and diametrically opposed to any substantive notion of the aesthetic, he now argues for an aesthetics of film based precisely 'on a subjective mode of experience which film resembles and which constitutes its artistic character' (Adorno, 1981/82: 201). Adorno's own elaboration of this defining characteristic bears a striking resemblance to Benjamin's definition of the 'aura' that has supposedly withered, along with experience, under conditions of modernity: 'A person who, after a year in the city, spends a few weeks in the mountains abstaining from all work, may unexpectedly experience colorful images of landscapes consolingly coming over him or her in dreams or daydreams. These images do not merge into one another in a continuous flow, but are rather set off against each other in the course of their appearance, much like the magic lantern slides of our childhood. [...] Such movement of interior images may be to film what the visible world is to painting or the acoustic world to music. As the objectifying recreation of this type of experience, film may become art' (Adorno, 1981/82: 201).

Adorno's concession that, rather than annihilating experience, film may in some respects be its medium opens up possibilities of reading his mandarin aesthetic theory against the grain, as a theory of cinema and the media as well. A number of critics have begun to do just that in recent years, noting the breadth of Adorno's engagement

with audiovisual media and technological reproducibility well beyond the canonical treatment they receive in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Minima Moralia*. This has to do partly with the recovery of certain biographical aspects of Adorno's work: both Thomas Wheatland and David Jenneman have usefully located Adorno in the specificities of American exile, and the latter in particular has rightly insisted that 'during this period, Adorno immersed himself fully in American culture', and in America's 'myriad forms of entertainment and communication' (Jenneman, 2007: xv/xvii; cf. Wheatland, 2009). Reconstructing Adorno's extensive work on radio and his involvement in a social scientific film experiment, Jenneman is able to show that 'Adorno's relationship with Hollywood and the filmmaking community was much closer and more complicated than has previously been acknowledged' (xxxiii).

Amy Villarejo, in turn, has followed through on this observation with a detailed re-reading of one of Adorno's other texts on mass media, the 1954 essay 'How to Look at Television', first published in the *Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television* (today *Film Quarterly*; Adorno, 1954). Turning to Adorno with the intention of 'thinking about what critical theory and queer theory have to say to one another on the terrain of culture' (Villarejo, 2013: 49), she discovers a surprisingly careful reader of mass cultural texts – one who 'acknowledge[s] the gendered nature of the programming that he analyzes', who tends to perform 'extremely careful textual analyses', and who reads television with a 'very accurate sense of audience' (36). Attributing to some of Adorno's observations a 'proto-feminist inclination' (51), Villarejo is able to tease out a differentiated reading of television and its 'pseudorealist' bent. This is particularly evident in Adorno's treatment of identification not simply as a question of positive or negative representations of identity, but as a matter of programming, seriality, and ultimately the apparatus of television itself, which facilitates a form of 'psychoanalysis

in reverse'. Villarejo finds the essay's analysis of stereotyping to be similarly nuanced. Where 'Enlightenment as Mass Deception' had hammered home the role of stereotyping in spreading the culture industry's pervasive ooze of sameness and standardization (see e.g. Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 119), Villarejo shows Adorno here to be arguing that stereotypes can also 'become vehicles for social participation, exchange, and recognition, even if they retreat into the abstractions he criticizes' (63). A TV show from the 1950s such as *Our Miss Brooks* can activate those stereotypes and put them into circulation in a chain of queer significations and mechanisms that includes not only stereotypes, but also banter, innuendo, double entendre, and slang (64). This is a deliberately revisionist account of the mandarin critical theorist who ostensibly dismisses television, mass media, and the culture industry from his perch atop modernist high culture. Instead, Villarejo finds in 'How to Look at Television' a complex model of the medium that 'refutes a commonly held sense of Adorno's writings as presuming a monolithic mass duped by a centralized, rationalized culture industry' (64).

Perhaps the most sustained and thought-provoking re-reading of Adorno's media theory, however, comes from Miriam Hansen. In her posthumously published work on the place of cinema and experience in the works of Adorno, Benjamin, and Kracauer, Hansen joins the emerging argument that Adorno's 'engagement with film ... was more comprehensive and complex than commonly assumed' (Hansen, 2012: 208). In order to trace that engagement, Hansen turns not only to the canonical texts on film, the culture industry, and television, but also to Adorno's life-long concern with other technologically based media such as radio and the gramophone, and to his treatise on film music, co-authored with Hanns Eisler, *Composing for the Films*, which was published in the same year as Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler* (Adorno and Eisler, 1947). In addition, she usefully notes that a text such as

‘Transparencies on Film’, which she considers Adorno’s ‘most extensive statement on the question of film aesthetics’ (1981/82: 210; see also Hansen 1981/82), must itself be read in the context of the aesthetic theory Adorno was elaborating at the same time (though it would only be published posthumously in 1970; see Adorno, 1997). In rereading these different aspects of Adorno’s work together as part of an avowedly ‘recuperative project’ (Hansen, 2012: 250), Hansen concludes that Adorno ‘could have thought – and occasionally did think – that film had a privileged role to play in discussions on modern art’ (211).

A central insight to emerge from Hansen’s new constellation of Adorno’s texts concerns the relation between technique and technology in technological media. By their very definition, the latter would appear to prioritize the technology at the expense of inner-aesthetic technique, whose autonomy from extrinsic forces (such as technological reproduction, indexicality, or the demands of ‘pseudorealism’) Adorno considered a prerequisite for authentic art. In the normative terms of Adorno’s aesthetic theory, technique – the ‘conscious free control over the aesthetic means’ (Adorno, 1997: 213) – trumps technology. Now, although the yoke of the culture industry would appear to offer dim prospects for the ‘conscious free control’ of anything other than profit, Hansen is able to show that Adorno’s writings do allow for various degrees of autonomy and for the assertion of ‘the aesthetic means’ even under conditions of technological reproducibility. Examples include the treatment of film music as a counterpoint to cinematic narrative (*Composing for the Films*), the ‘radical naturalism’ of cinema (*Minima Moralia*), and the ‘associative stream of images’ favored by the Young German Filmmakers and various New Waves in the 1960s (‘Transparencies on Film’). In working out the apparent contradiction between a technological a priori and the assertion of autonomous technique, Adorno thus moves the discussion of film out of the confines of the culture industry and its

ideology critique, and – like Benjamin and Kracauer before him – into the realm of aesthetics. He now allows for the possibility that ‘while film, by its immanent logic, tries to rid itself of its artistic character – almost as if the latter violated its aesthetic principle – in this rebellion it is still art and expands the notion of art’ (Adorno, ‘Die Kunst und die Künste’, cited in Hansen, 2012: 221).

Hansen explicitly guards against the idea that this ‘recuperative’ reading of Adorno amounts to a full-fledged theory of film on par with the far more coherent projects of Benjamin and particularly Kracauer. To the degree that Adorno contributes to a critical theory of cinema, he does so on explicitly aesthetic grounds, with a view to ‘expanding the notion of art’. While this is certainly in keeping with the tendency of classical film theory – Benjamin had famously argued that ‘the invention of photography [and consequently of cinema] had ... transformed the entire character of art’ (Benjamin, 2008: 28) – the question of film as art also represents a step back from the culture industry chapter, which had opened up perspectives, however bleak, on the cultural and socially embedded study of film and media. As the discipline of film studies leaves behind a prolonged phase of institutionalization, in which it focused primarily on questions of art and the logic of the film ‘text’, critical theory may yet take on renewed relevance – reconceptualized as a contribution not simply to film aesthetics, but to a broader theory of media. As our media landscape undergoes rapid and profound technological shifts and the long century of cinema draws to a close, Walter Benjamin, in particular, has been re-read from this perspective (cf. Kang, 2014; Somaini, 2016); this is also the perspective Dudley Andrew has in mind when, in an authoritative overview of the ‘core and flow of film studies’, he notes that critical theory warrants renewed attention (Andrew, 2009). Pointing out the belated impact of critical theory on (Anglo-American) film studies as a discipline, Andrew suggests that the former may now

help to put the latter into perspective. 'Critical theory put film in its place, so to speak, and interrogated film from that place. Perhaps its impact could only be felt when American film studies began to realize that media was integral to a discipline no longer bounded by dates or by specific technologies' (909). In their focus on the relation between media and the senses, on the experiential dimension of film, and on the technological *a priori*s of modernity, Adorno, Benjamin, and Kracauer were media theorists *avant la lettre*.

## Notes

- 1 On the history of this book and its argument, see Schmidt, 1998, as well as the editorial matter in Horkheimer, 1987, 423–59.
- 2 Leaving this theoretical shift for readers to trace, Simon During's influential *Cultural Studies Reader* gives Adorno and Horkheimer's 'Culture Industry' chapter pride of place in introducing the first section of the anthology – which concludes with Stuart Hall's reflections on 'Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies'. See also Nealon and Irr, 2002: 3.
- 3 This is to say nothing of other, more recent developments in media theory, where anti-hermeneutic approaches in the wake of Friedrich Kittler have been premised explicitly on a wholesale rejection of the Frankfurt School (cf. *Grey Room*, 2007; Kittler, 2010; Siegert, 2015).
- 4 Both have recently been the subject of important and substantial biographies that carefully chart their relations with the Frankfurt School. See Eiland and Jennings, 2014 and Später, 2016.
- 5 On Benjamin's idiosyncratic notion of 'medium', see Somaini, 2016.
- 6 'If one considers the dangerous tensions which technology and its consequences have engendered in the masses at large – tendencies which at critical stages take on a psychotic character – one also has to recognize that this same technologization has created the possibility of psychic immunization against such mass psychoses'. (2008: 118).
- 7 Kracauer himself asserts as much in his claim, included in the posthumous *History*, that he harbored a lifelong interest in minutiae, in 'the rehabilitation of objectives and modes of being which still lack a name and hence are overlooked or misjudged' (Kracauer, 1969: 4); for a differently angled assertion about the continuity of Kracauer's particular commitment to notions of humanism and enlightenment, see von Moltke, 2015.
- 8 Although the typescript that Kracauer sent to Adorno and Horkheimer in New York is considered lost, the editors of Kracauer's collected works were able to painstakingly reconstruct a complete version of the text from a surviving manuscript and Kracauer's systematic bibliographical work. See Kracauer, 2012.

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# On Music and Dissonance: *Hinge*

Murray Dineen

And now let us turn to a matter decisive for the deepest understanding of National-Socialist theories of race. During the many thousands of years it took for the system of humanity [*menschliche Ordnung*] to arise, all the various positions described herein – which, taken as a whole, make up what we call a world perspective [*Weltanschauung*] – are harmonized in the individual races. The racial inheritance [*Erbgut*] thus harmonized produces – against racial distinctions – certain unfolding developmental tendencies and boundaries, and these are of a completely determinate nature. Every race has its own task in this regard, but the exercise of determining such distinctions is of no concern to us here. We know one thing, however: the system of humanity is holy. Those groups of men who believe they can contradict such a system will become estranged from what we call ‘life’. They will vegetate. They will become the products of certain developments. *Rasse und Musik*.<sup>1</sup>

There is music to Adorno’s prose, a blend of sonority with allusion that connotes music behind the words.<sup>2</sup> Built in hinge-like fashion, it emerges in the form of contrasting pairs – *copula* – in expressions such as the following, taken from *Minima Moralia*:

‘*Wahr sind nur die Gedanken, die sich selber nicht verstehen.*’ (1996b: 216). Fortuitous translation sometimes accentuates this musical quality, capturing the conjoining of sound and meaning, the contrast between *thought* and *understanding*: ‘*True thoughts are those alone which do not understand themselves*’ (Adorno, 1974: 192). Liberal translation brings out the rhythmic balance (as dactyls in dimeter): *True thoughts alone/ Do not understand themselves*. As does paraphrase with sonorous alliteration: *The criterion for truth is the capacity for self-misunderstanding*. Although it is seldom entirely consonant or harmonious, there is music to Adorno’s prose.

Schoenberg produced good ‘musical prose’, as he called it (meaning actual musical notes arranged in a fashion similar to prose).<sup>3</sup> Paired contrast of harmony and melody is the central paradigm by which he described Western European classical music.<sup>4</sup> Balanced pairing is ubiquitous in that repertoire. In truth it is a grand homogenizing vehicle,

harmonizing in both figural and literal sense the diverse idioms in the language of what is called 'classical music'. Adorno fell heir to the tradition of formal pairing in his composition studies with Alban Berg (Schoenberg's student) in Vienna in 1925.

There are limits, however, to Adorno's use of Schoenbergian paradigms. Schoenberg's musical aesthetic was idealist, calling for a consonant and unitary perspective.<sup>5</sup> Adorno's musical prose does not depend upon consonance but on dissonance of idea – the dissonance struck between 'truth' and 'lack of understanding' in the quotation above. The effect is to produce a balance built upon imbalance, equilibrium based on disequilibrium, sonorous consonance betrayed by conceptual dissonance.

I shall use the term *hinge*, after Adorno's use of the German *Scharnier*, to describe these dissonant pairs in Adorno's writings.<sup>6</sup> In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno describes the negative dialectics of non-identity as a hinge. Negation determines the non-conceptual in the concept through a form of reflection that changes direction as if swinging around an axis: 'To change this direction of conceptuality, to give it a turn toward nonidentity, is the hinge [*Scharnier*] of negative dialectics'<sup>7</sup> (1973b: 12).

The hinge takes on material form in the paired disequilibrium found in much of Adorno's prose. Adorno brings forth a concept ('truth') and then swings around immediately so as to confront it with its conceptual converse ('lack of understanding'). The two form a pair superficially like that of Schoenberg's paradigm. But with a moment's reflection we see that the two do not fit together – cannot be made to fit together – except as paired incommensurates. As incommensurates they cannot be led to a cadence, their contrasting characteristics cannot be erased, folded limply into stasis. Their contradiction is too fundamental to be resolved into unity, except by negation.<sup>8</sup>

Consider the renowned first sentence of the *Introduction* to Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*:

'Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed' (1973b, 3). The comma marks a hinge; it sets up the antipathy between the adjective *obsolete* and the verb construction *to live on*. Philosophy was once obsolete, [*hinge*] so philosophy lives on by obsolescence. Once the subject matter of eternal truth, philosophy now lives on freed from the claims to eternal truth that rendered it obsolete. There is a slapstick – Chaplinesque – quality to Adorno's prose: heading off in one direction it meets square in the face with its walking stick aimed forcefully in the opposite direction.<sup>9</sup> In the remainder of this chapter I shall rely upon 'hinge' as a theoretical framework. To avoid the pedantic use of *hinge* in quotations, I shall prefer instead a diagonal enclosed in parentheses as follows: [/].

The roots of the hinged construction are beyond consideration in this chapter. Let it suffice to say they lie in the contradictions of the bourgeois consciousness and in the transfiguration of labor as producer of capitalist wealth, value as more value, as Marx discerned it after Hegel. Thus Marcuse cites several constructions from Hegel's *Jenenser Realphilosophie*:

Mechanization, the very means that should liberate man from toil, makes him a slave of his labour. 'The more he subjugates his labor, [/] the more powerless he himself becomes....The more mechanized labour becomes, [/] the less value it has, and the more the individual must toil'. (1960: 78–9)<sup>10</sup>

In Adorno's hands, the construction becomes often biting in tone, but the fundamental antagonistic relation of mechanization (and capital) to labor is preserved.

So too the full extent of the construction and its various forms lies beyond discussion here, except to note that it appears to have been cultivated by Adorno as he wrote for publication.<sup>11</sup> The sketch published as *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music* (1998a) rarely offer hinges. The following is a notable exception: 'With regard to construction it will be decisive to identify the moment



of negativity in the perfection of the middle works, [/] a moment which took the music beyond this perfection' (1998a: 99). As the sketch nears completion, Adorno turns to the hinged construction:

Art-works of the highest rank are distinguished from others not through their success – for in what have they succeeded? – [/] but through the manner of their failure. For the problems within them ... are so posed that the attempt to solve them must fail, [/] whereas the failure of lesser works is accidental, a matter of mere subjective incapacity. A work of art is great [/] when it registers a failed attempt to reconcile objective antinomies. That is its truth and its 'success': [/] to have come up against its own limit. In these terms, any work of art which succeeds through not reaching this limit [/] is a failure. (1998a: 100)

This leads to a final grand statement – both in concept and expression – of the hinged idea *success* [/] *as failure*:

This theory states the formal law which determines the transition from the 'classical' to the late Beethoven, in such a way that the failure *objectively* implicated by the former is disclosed by the latter, raised to self-awareness, cleansed of the appearance of success [/] and lifted, for just this reason, to the level of philosophical succeeding. (1998a: 100, emphasis added)

The presence of hinged construction attests to the degree of musical fluidity with which Adorno can express his ideas. Detecting hinged constructions, we know that Adorno is in full voice.

In Adorno's German, the hinge often takes the form of the *je...desto...* construction, often translated as *the more...the less...* The following is taken from the Schoenberg essay in *Prisms*:

The more [Schoenberg's music] gives its listeners, [/] the less it offers them. It requires the listener spontaneously to compose its inner movement and demands of him not mere contemplation but praxis. (1967: 149–50)

There are in fact two hinges at work here, one per sentence. Consider the terms *more* and *less*: Schoenberg's music gives more [/]

and in doing so gives less. Consider *contemplation* and *praxis*: Schoenberg's music requires of its listener less contemplation; [/] it requires more work, ultimately requires *praxis*, contemplation's antipode.

The hinge in both these instances is the unstated concept of *work* – or with greater precision, *labor* (in the sense noted above with reference to Marcuse). The more the worker labors in the growth of capital, the less their labor is valued. The worker cannot go to a concert – certainly a concert of Schoenberg's music (indeed any concert associated with the accumulation of capital) – without being forced to work, and the more they work to gain understanding the more Schoenberg's music gains currency – cultural capital. The worker in the guise of listener is forced by Schoenberg 'to compose' the form of the work, to compose its 'inner movement', so difficult to discern in Schoenberg's dissonant oeuvre. This is not leisure. Instead, Schoenberg's music confronts the ossified notion of leisure in capitalism by means of hinged negation. Schoenberg's music turns the contemplative search for musical truths into labor.<sup>12</sup>

As noted, Schoenberg's tonal frame of reference – balanced musical contrast ending in a unitary expression of tonality – cannot be stretched to encompass Adorno's prose. If it could, then the two contrasting elements poised around a hinge would collapse into banal synthesis. Adorno's dissonant expression would become a limpid consonance worthy of a Hallmark greeting card: 'True thoughts alone, lead to understanding'. Instead, by its hinged, reflexive examination of 'truth', Adorno's proposition provokes a conceptual 180-degree turn: an immanent contradiction emerges as truth – truth juxtaposed negatively against understanding. In Adorno's hinged world, truth undercuts itself through understanding.

Hitherto, philosophy sought to close the door on questions of truth and understanding. Finding it shut, Adorno wrests it open. Again and again, the hinged door slams – shut,

open, shut, open. Adorno's negative dialectics operates as if produced by a wind in the night at a remove just far enough to disturb our sleep but obviate doing anything about it.

## SCHOENBERG'S HINGED MUSIC

Schoenberg saw his music as perfectly synthetic. On the one hand, he contrived a historical synthesis by casting himself as the inheritor of Bach, Brahms, and Wagner. On the other, he saw his music as eternally German, embodying a national identity.<sup>13</sup> His synthetic music embodied universal ahistorical musical ideas [*Gedanken*] in absolute musical shapes [*Gestalten*] unprejudiced by relationship to material matter or form.<sup>14</sup>

Adorno was perennially suspicious of such 'hapless generalizations'. Like Beethoven's late works as noted above, Schoenberg's music rendered an immanent historical verdict: the only possible musical synthesis was [/] that such a synthesis was no longer possible. All truly synthetic musical works took the impossibility of synthesis as their subject: such a work was necessarily 'a failed attempt to reconcile objective antinomies' (1998a: 100).

Looking to establish a new means for presenting musical materials as expressive content, Schoenberg contrived 'atonal' and 'twelve-tone' compositional styles. Both styles, however, express the impossibility of a synthetic musical content.

In Schoenberg's so-called 'atonal' works, from about 1911 to 1919, opp. 11 and 19 notably, the composer attempted to breathe life into musical creation by means of a drastic autonomy in musical form. With the piano pieces op. 11 and op. 19 in particular (alongside the Second String Quartet), Schoenberg undertook a fundamental rethinking of musical harmony and tonality.

By their brevity and compression, the Six Small Piano Pieces, op. 19, are exemplary in this regard. For the layperson and expert

alike, there are no readily discernible tonal patterns. Schoenberg makes only the slightest reference to the internal dynamics of 'classical' or 'traditional' tonality and form. It is possible to argue that these are replaced by new tonal dynamics. But to do so is to miss the point: these pieces express the impossibility of musical form [/] by formal means. They bristle, argue, hover – but go nowhere. The fourth piece is most representative, for it comprises a mere thirteen measures of music. Its most salient features are the three sweeping gestures from high to low that move across the keyboard. But precisely what tonal gravity drives this descent lies beyond rational comprehension. For the expert and the average listener alike, it is possible to detect something going on, but impossible to say what that is by means of tonal syntax and grammar.

The opus 19 pieces are rooms without windows or doors, without entrance or egress. In truth, they belong to the long tradition of musical miniatures for the piano, with precedents in, for example, Chopin's Preludes, and Schubert's *Moments Musicaux*. But unlike those keyboard miniatures, tonal musical form is gone. In celebrating op. 19, we celebrate the persistence of a long tradition of expressive keyboard miniatures, [/] alongside the destruction of its expressive tonal foundation.

Schoenberg believed otherwise. He sought to continue the expressive tradition of Brahms and Wagner, thus assuring the continued superiority of German music for the foreseeable future. But as musical rooms without entrance, his music allowed no verification of content – stylistic tradition or national orientation. Thus Schoenberg's claims were at once both without basis [/] and irrefutable. Branded as *entartete Kunst* by the Nazis, Schoenberg's claims were overturned immanently: without rational access to musical content, there was nothing preventing the Nazi aestheticians from branding the works anti-German, and denying vociferously any comparison to Brahms or Wagner.

Pared beyond the minimum, the historical content of these works becomes a verdict of unprecedented breadth: the issue of the eradication of content encompasses the total history of music [/] by denying it. As Adorno puts it in *Perspectives of New Music*, these works require a new philosophy, a philosophy of new: 'Today a philosophy of music is possible only as a philosophy of new music' (2006: 13). Anti-historical in this sense, these works become by default the music of the 'present'; they are 'new music' since they cannot reside in the past they deny. Being thus by default a music of the present (since there is nothing authentic but the present), they negate the authentic category so fundamental to 'classical music', the category of historical timelessness – of ageless musical truth.

In terms of the traditional criteria of authenticity (which we shall turn to at greater length in a moment), Schoenberg's atonal works are inauthentic. But in hinge-like fashion, they derive a new authentic historical identity as anti-historical music, as authentically inauthentic. Their new authenticity is achieved through negation. The situation is thus: present day music can be written [/] only by denying the historical criteria for a musical present.

Schoenberg's music is eternally German but only through the immanent negation of Schoenberg's clearly moribund *Völkisch* myth of German national identity. Ironically, the rise of nationalist German fascism confirmed the new German identity of these works [/] by attempting to destroy them.

Seeking traditional forms of authenticity in Schoenberg's atonal works, his listeners are forced to look outside the works for historical justification, precisely the thing these works – by being only and exclusively new music – deny. In seeking historical justification thus, his listeners come to a sublime understanding of the immanent historical truth of these incomprehensible works [/] by misunderstanding them.<sup>15</sup> To return to the maxim at the beginning of this chapter, Schoenberg's listeners demonstrate a comprehensive

understanding of how truth can be affirmed through misunderstanding. With uncompromising instinct, they know how the search for free and spontaneous contemplation of music can be turned into the labor of negation. The antinomy immanent here calls to mind that most horrible phrase '*arbeit macht freie*'.

In the twelve-tone works that appear around 1923, Schoenberg attempted to restore the equilibrium of form and content of diatonic tonal music, again by appeal to extreme means. Schoenberg sought to recreate tonal formal tensions between chromatic pitches by ordering them as a tone row.<sup>16</sup> In any tone row, all twelve chromatic pitches must be sounded before any given pitch can be repeated. The order in which each of the twelve chromatic pitches sounds will differ from row to row, however.<sup>17</sup> Each row is understood as part of a row 'matrix', this comprising an original or 'prime' row, with forms related to prime by transposition, inversion, retrogression, and all combinations thereof.

Schoenberg held that a twelve-tone row had an expressive internal kinetics, like that of seven-pitch diatonic tonality. But this is impossible on two accounts. On the one hand, the sheer number of tone rows and their serial variations available to the composer (twelve factorial) creates an expanded [*erweitert*] tonality well beyond the comprehension of the listener. On the other, all the compositional potential of the tone row is contained within the row itself and its forms, and not within a compositional inspiration [*Einfall*] particular to a single work. Any given row can be used in countless works. Once the row is settled on, the composer has nothing more to develop in the way of tonal materials. Their sole task is to place the predetermined pitch successions of the row in such a way as to create a seemingly unique musical object.

For Adorno, the twelve-tone procedure rendered its own historical verdict. By serial abstraction, it obscured any historical record such as that found in the developing material of classical music. In classical tonality the

number and kind of tonalities was determined historically by evolving material constraints (such as tuning and temperament) and by the growth of a bourgeois audience capable of a requisite musical sophistication. By means of its pitch materials (melody, harmony, timbre, and even rhythm) each diatonic work located itself in terms of a historical continuum of developing tonality: thus the difference between Bach and Brahms is evident in the way each composer interprets an evolving musical grammar and syntax according to the materials available and the capacities of their audience.

As noted, however, the formal potential of the twelve-tone row was as good as infinite to the contemporary music listener and thus materially abstract. If a twelve-tone work was subject to historical-material developments, its history was unavailable to its audience. As Adorno put it, such developments were settled on the composer's worktable long before the work met its audience.<sup>18</sup> In summary, the twelve-tone work does not present to the listener an evolving historical relationship linked to concrete musical materials. Instead, the individual work is merely an articulation of an abstract row idea, timelessly absolute in its ontology.

Thus in his twelve-tone music Schoenberg arrived ironically at much the same windowless rooms as he produced in his atonal works. Twelve-tone tonality is present historically in all works in the same way, past, present, and future. Being thus completely abstract, the twelve-tone technique is ahistorical – it destroys material history – much as did the atonal pieces of op 19.<sup>19</sup>

In lieu of contemplating twelve-tone music in the disinterested fashion he preferred, Schoenberg's listeners (those who bothered to listen intently) set to work deciphering the twelve-tone row and its forms, much to the composer's ire. This results in superficial listening, called 'row fetish', where the expert listener counts the row pitches. Ironically, Schoenberg's expert listeners went after the abstract twelve-tone idea, thus abandoning

the individual expressive idea Schoenberg sought to revive after classical music.<sup>20</sup>

Along these abstract lines, Schoenberg's atonal and twelve-tone works are inauthentic art. Contrived in the composer's mind as authentic, they negate authenticity by the very nature of their material, which is indecipherable and lies remote from historical-material relation. Whatever subjective residue lies in the composer's conception of the work is estranged by the opacity of atonality or by the abstraction of the twelve-tone idea. Despite his descriptions thereof, it is as if Schoenberg conceived atonality and the twelve-tone method unwittingly out of the estrangement and abstraction of his own situation. Schoenberg, attempting to immerse himself in the waters of authentic German *Völkisch* nationalism, situated himself on an island just downstream from Robinson Crusoe.

## AUTHENTICALLY INAUTHENTIC

Taking into account Adorno's hinged perspective, we turn now to the term *authentic* [*authentisch* or more often *eigentlich*] and its antonym *inauthentic* [*nicht authentisch* or *uneigentlich*] as they might apply to Adorno's music criticism. At the heart of bourgeois musical aesthetics lies an ideal notion of authenticity, that a work of music is the concrete and particular realization of abstract and eternal musical verities.

Lydia Goehr has described the museum-like institutions this produced, notably the *Werktreue* concept. Therein she describes the mindset of musical romanticism: 'Composers enjoyed describing themselves and each other as divinely inspired creators – even as God like – whose sole task was to objectify in music something unique and personal and to express something transcendent. Bizet described Beethoven not as human, but as a God' (1992: 208). From this perspective, an authentic composer, such as Beethoven, has both a special insight into eternal musical

truths and the capacity to realize such truths in characteristically individual forms. Schoenberg is an exceptionally forceful exponent of such authenticity, the details of which are worked out in the essay collection *Style and Idea*, in particular the essay 'New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea'.

I myself consider the totality of a piece as the *idea*: the idea which its composer wanted to present.... *An idea can never perish*.... One thinks only for the sake of one's idea.... An idea is born; it must be moulded, formulated, developed, carried through and pursued to its very end. Because there is only 'l'art pour l'art', art for the sake of art alone. (1975: 122–4, emphasis in original)

In the context of musical modernism, the traditional concept of *authentic* – the notion of a pure musical verity – carries with it the antonym *inauthentic*. To a modern musical sensibility – either reactionary (Schenker, Pfitzner) or progressive (Busoni, Ives) – life has lost its state of grace. Without grace, music is an inauthentic expression of humanity. Schoenberg, in this regard, is not a modern – neither reactionary, nor progressive. He firmly believes in the possibility of a modern authentic grace, the possibility of a concord between an eternal musical idea and its concrete representation as singular musical *Gedanke*.

Nor is Adorno strictly a musical modern. The very notions of an authentic musical state of grace and its demise would be highly suspect to him. Instead the contradictions immanent in a concept of musical grace will emerge as a negating concord – a second authenticity. If there is a singular musical *Gedanke* to Adorno's aesthetic, it is the idea that musical authenticity is possible only as the negation of musical authenticity. Thus he can say of Mahler:

[I]t is only in the moment of inauthenticity [*des Uneigentlichen*] that the lie of authenticity unmask[s], and Mahler has his truth [*Wahrheit*].... From inauthenticity the irreplaceable essence is distilled – a meaning that would remain absent if the particular were to be entirely and genuinely identical with itself. Objectively Mahler's music

knows, and expresses the knowledge, that unity is attained not in spite of disjunction, but only through it. (1992: 32–3, translation altered)

The basis for this is a fundamental ontological insight, derived of Heidegger's reflections on death, of which only a glimpse is to be had from the following:

For the ontologist, whole-being cannot be the unity of the whole content of real life but, qualitatively, must be a third thing; and thus unity will not be sought in life as something harmonious, articulated, and continuous in itself, but will be sought at that point which delimits life and annihilates it, along with its wholeness. (1973a, 146)

From this perspective, music criticism involves three states. The first is the bourgeois state of authenticity exemplified by Schoenberg. The listener is presented with an authentic object for leisured contemplation. The second is a state of negation produced when bourgeois musical idealism meets the realities of class difference arising under the aegis of developing capitalism. Such a state is made readily apparent to the average listener the moment a work of Schoenberg is played. The third is a state of critical recognition. It prizes bourgeois music as a vehicle for the understanding that bourgeois truths do not understand themselves: '*True thoughts [being] those alone which do not understand themselves*'.

Adorno's first task is to reveal the negation implicit in the traditional concept of musical authenticity, and thereby to reveal such authenticity as inauthentic. He does so, for example, by questioning the fundamental nature of musical reception: given that the composer does their work authentically, then there should be nothing left for the bourgeois listener to do but listen. As Adorno notes in Schoenberg's case, however, the listener must 'work for their leisure'. Since it involves the collaboration of the listener, this renders the work of the composer as inauthentic, as fragmentary and thus false.

Through negation, Adorno produces a second state, an ironic critical perspective,

a critique of the falsehood implicit in bourgeois authenticity: 'You came here to be entertained, but, hah! Herr Schoenberg put you to work!' Were Adorno to stop here, he might be called merely a good ironist, seated comfortably on the balcony of Lukács' Grand Hotel Abyss, mocking the straights.

But there is a *telos* to Adorno's music criticism, a truly critical approach to music. Music is not merely ironic; it is a symptom of the broad malaise of labor and leisure in modern capitalism, the symptoms of which are not readily available even to the most technically advanced bourgeois mind. By means of music, the parlous state of truth in modern capitalism can be understood by critical thought, albeit negatively.

In essence, Adorno's ultimate task is the constitution of a third, critical state of musical analysis, coming after bourgeois authenticity and its negation. His aim is to describe a new musical authenticity, a fully critical vision of music under capitalism in all its variety, with which to replace the naïve authenticity of bourgeois musical aesthetics. Such a vision would become the point of departure for praxis – an authentically critical musical situation (and thus an exit from Lukács' famous balcony).

Recall our initial hinged quotation: 'True thoughts alone [/] do not understand themselves'. The definition of *authenticity* with which Adorno closes his *Philosophy of New Music* is written in much the same key: 'Perhaps that art alone would be authentic that would be [/] liberated from the idea of authenticity itself, of being thus and not otherwise' (2006: 158). In essence, every authentic construction in music will produce its own reversal. Every authentic construction will become thus inauthentic – 'liberated from the idea of authenticity'. Expressed in terms of antonyms, every authentic work will become liberated from itself by first becoming inauthentic.<sup>21</sup>

From this perspective, Schoenberg's music is an authentic representation of its time. It is not authentic in the composer's naïve

bourgeois terms. Instead, its authenticity is produced in spite of and by that selfsame naïve conception. It negates Schoenberg's idealist and timeless naïvety. *True thoughts are those alone which do not understand themselves*: the truth of Schoenberg's music lies in its revolutionary capacity to not understand itself.

This concept of a dialectically transformed authenticity, an authentic inauthenticity, is key to the theoretical framework adopted here, but it owes a debt to Max Paddison's chapter 'Authenticity and Failure in Adorno's Aesthetics of Music', in the *Cambridge Companion to Adorno* (2004). In the context of Adorno's music criticism, Paddison arrives at a revision of *authentic* as *inauthentic*, as authenticity reestablished after negation.

For Paddison, the pre-modern authentic is based upon the idea of a real and original musical work, a unique entity along Adorno's lines of 'being thus and not otherwise'. The principal condition for 'being thus and not otherwise' is autonomy in intent and in practice: the authentic artwork exists in-and-of-itself.<sup>22</sup> Being absolutely self-contained (*l'art pour l'art* as Schoenberg states), it is thus authoritative. Beethoven is an authentic and authoritative composer producing works that cannot be otherwise, a blend of *urtext* and genius. In this regard, he and others like him are held by bourgeois musicology to be fundamentally timeless, noumenal, directly in touch with truth.

To this definition, Paddison adds the caveat *failure*, and his definition of *authentic* begins a slow pirouette toward the *inauthentic* as if around a hinge. The inauthentic is produced by contrivance and fakery, and by external determinants, not by an original creative impulse. Thus it is a counterfeit, and lacking unique identity, it is capable of mass reproduction (2004: 201).

The consistency of artworks is the aspect that enables them to share in the truth, [/] but it also implicates them in falsehood (Adorno, 1976: 242, cited in Paddison, 2004: 211).

And:

At this level the consistency of the work and its integrated totality, its truth and authenticity, put forward initially as universal principles, are seen as false, as illusory, as *inauthentic*. (2004: 211)

Paddison reckons this new, second stage, inauthentic paradigm as ‘after Auschwitz’. Thus it is by nature reflective, measuring everything by that most horrific watermark, the high tide of Nazi fascism.

His second stage, however, contains within it a new credential. After Auschwitz, truly authentic musical works bear both the responsibility for and the scars of past terrors. Thus they are historic, conditioned by the past. Being historic in this reflective sense, their inauthenticity would compromise the fundamentally non-historical nature of the bourgeois musical authentic. (As Adorno puts it, in *The Jargon of Authenticity*: ‘Yet history does intrude on every word and withholds each word from the recovery of some alleged original meaning, that meaning which the jargon is always trying to track down’ [1973a: 8].) Thus authenticity surrenders all claims to rising above the whiles of history: ‘After Auschwitz, the authentic works are the failures ... “the authentic artists of the present are those in whose works there shudders the aftershock of the most extreme terror”’ (Paddison, 2004: 199, citing Adorno, 1998b: 48). To reiterate, this is a reflexive hinge: after Auschwitz, any truly authentic artwork [/] must fail to be authentic in the old way. Branded by Auschwitz, no work thereafter is authentically unique. All works are but variations upon extreme terror, a music in which the same shockwaves still reverberate. As our epigraph suggests, National Socialism sought to reduce the effects of these shockwaves by racial ‘harmonization’ and the evolutionary elimination of dissonant elements.

Paddison puts this in broad perspective. In customary usage in bourgeois music criticism, *authentic* implies both a singular purity and a correspondence. The authentic artwork must correspond to a true and unique identity,

thus be true to itself (reflexive), while being true to a pure and immutable musical idea (and thus be refractive). To the bourgeois musicological mind, the inauthentic work, on the other hand, will distort its relation to self, through mass reproduction for instance, or distort its origins, by appeal to the extra-musical. The inauthentic work will serve a false master – as mere ‘style’ without direct relation to idea (in Schoenberg’s sense) or as a commercial success, a ‘sell out’, a sop to convention. The measure of authenticity in a musical work is thus solely an internal, purely musical thing (*l’art pour l’art*), a unique correspondence refracting some eternal musical idea. Thus any material – harmony, rhythm, tonality – will be suitable for art, as long as an authentic correspondence to some ultimate and ideal true identity (‘being for itself’) is observed.

Adorno, however, holds that a composer is not free to choose the material of a work without some regard to historical appropriateness. Instead the work will refract the material condition of the world in its content and materials. Paddison puts it thus: ‘Adorno’s position was that the composer’s choice was severely limited by the historical stage reached by the material and ... not all possibilities were actually made available. Indeed, he insisted that the material itself made historical demands on the composer to which the composer had no choice but to respond’ (2004: 205).

Both the work and the process of selection will show the nature and limitations of the composer’s consciousness. Even the most technically progressive composer – Schoenberg being Adorno’s example – will sport a regressive consciousness, should they choose to ignore material history.

This puts the onus on the critical listener to discern the hinged authenticity of the musical material. As Paddison puts it:

Authenticity for Adorno is therefore also associated with a modernist, fractured relationship between the individual and the social, the internal structure of the artwork and the external conditions with which it functions, a relationship which

imputes a high degree of self-consciousness and self-reflexivity to the work of art at a structural, technical level. (2004: 199)

He places this under the rubric ‘ideological’: ‘The ideological moment of all art can also be seen as “authentic”, in that it acts as a critical commentary on the real material relations of society, whether it wishes it or not’ (2004: 211). At the heart of his reading is a dual state – authentic, and ideological:

What this reading attempts to clarify is a complex problem in Adorno’s aesthetics: that the autonomous, individual work of art can be simultaneously ideological (i.e. a manifestation of false consciousness, illusion, self-deception) and authentic (in the sense of being a form of critical cognition, of critical reflection). Adorno formulates the problem thus:

The fact that society ‘appears’ in works of art both in an ideological and a critical manner is apt to lead to historico-philosophical mystification. Speculative thought is easily duped into thinking there is a pre-established harmony between society and works of art, courtesy of world spirit. Their true relationship is different, however. (2004: 215–16, citing Adorno, 1984: 335)

The reversal of authentic as inauthentic is more than ideology, however. It has a fundamental ontic quality, one with direct implications for Adorno’s music reception. The material nature of every musical work, certainly in late capitalism, is founded on a hinge-like reversal that brings together authenticity and its opposite in a synthetic antagonism, so as to produce a third state, that of authentic inauthenticity.

The authenticity of a musical work as a bourgeois absolute, in-and-of-itself, is joined in hinge-like fashion with its inauthentic antipode, the work’s material nature as shaped by external, historical factors. The combination of the two creates a hinged synthesis, a negative dialectic. We might express it thus:

Authentic works of music appear as absolute and thus self-contained shapes [*Gestalten*] that realize eternal musical verities [*Gedanken*]. [I] But in doing so, they express their precise historical moment by suppressing their history and material basis.

Or with a greater simplicity:

The only truly authentic work of music is based upon the traditional concept of musical authenticity [I] framed by the material inauthenticity of modern musical history.

‘After Auschwitz’, or simply in the climate of material modernism, to produce an artistic thing in-and-of-itself, as Schoenberg thought to do, would be inauthentic. To produce, however, a modernist artwork that fails necessarily ‘after Auschwitz’ would be an antinomic success – *authentically inauthentic*. According to Adorno, this is what Schoenberg did, in spite of his best intentions. Responding to the need for fresh musical works shaped by the material necessities of music in late capitalism, Schoenberg produced rationally authentic atonal and twelve-tone works, [I] whose authenticity could not be rationally deciphered with reference to historical material terms. Schoenberg’s works are truths known by estrangement from themselves. Adorno sets the mark thus, in the broadest terms possible (not simply for music):

As the thinker immerses himself in what faces him to begin with, in the concept, and as he perceives its immanently antinomial character, he clings to the idea of something beyond contradiction. Antithesis of thought to whatever is heterogeneous to thought is reproduced in thought itself, as its immanent contradiction. (1973b: 146)

## LATE BEETHOVEN

The essays ‘*Missa Solemnis*, Alienated Masterpiece’ and ‘Late Style in Beethoven’ are perhaps the most opaque of Adorno’s writings on music.<sup>23</sup> Our aim here is to apply the theoretical framework proposed in this chapter – Adorno’s hinge-like constructions linked to the tri-partite scheme of authenticity – to their elucidation. In essence, Adorno argues that late Beethoven derives a critical authenticity from the renunciation of bourgeois musical subjectivity. This is done in



hinge-like fashion: using all the compositional means available to him as the master of subjective expression in music, [/] Beethoven renounces musical subjectivity.

To understand the late period, we must revise the customary appreciation accorded Beethoven's middle-period music. The middle-period works are received customarily as the exemplars of authentic classical music. They were understood as such in their day, and continue to be so. The late-period renunciation of subjectivity in Beethoven would appear contradictory, then. To the bourgeois mind, middle-period Beethoven is the very apex of the rising individual musical subject. His accomplishment is a classical *Parnassus* achieved by way of Bach, Haydn, and Mozart. The middle-period works elicit the rubrics of 'absolute', 'Romantic', and 'psychological'. Referred to as 'heroic', they connote a singular and thus subjective courage in the face of adversity. Beethoven's middle-period symphonies in particular affirm the capacity to express the absolute self as Romantic subject matter.

The middle-period works, however, support a class that distinguishes itself by myths of absolute disinterest and the subjectivity of superior intelligence, and which claims as its just rewards the accumulation of capital at the expense of the laboring class. Middle-period Beethoven is inauthentic in this regard. It is neither absolute nor authentically subjective. Instead, it expresses middle-class subjectivity. It serves as a vehicle for class division and the reinforcement of the bourgeoisie. Seen in this light, it is music applied to the goal of class division. And as applied music, it negates those absolute pretensions it would pretend to espouse.

Adorno saw this uncritical perspective as dependent upon a spurious conception of totality, the 'affirmative element' in the middle period. The unqualified affirmation of Beethoven's oeuvre negates the historical material fact: middle-period Beethoven is bourgeois music through and through. Drawing on Rose Rosengard Subotnik's

work (1991), I noted Adorno's suspicions in this regard:

Classicism is a deception. Adorno calls it the 'self-deception of totality'.... Only the works of the late style are truly objective: 'Beethoven's last works are *the* objective answer'. Beethoven's middle-period work is a manufactured falsehood.... For Adorno the late style responds to a suspicion sown by mediation: 'To the musical experience of the late Beethoven the unity of subjectivity and objectivity, the roundedness of the successful symphony, the totality arising from the motion of all particulars, in short, that which gives the works of his middle period their authenticity, must have become suspect'. As Adorno puts it: 'He saw through the classic as classicism. He rebelled against the affirmative element, the uncritical approbation of Being, inherent in the idea of the classical symphony.... He must have felt the untruth in the highest aspirations of classicist music: that the quintessence ... is positivity itself'. (Dineen, 2011: 65–6)

From Adorno's perspective, Beethoven's middle period is inauthentic, a contrived representation of synthetic unity. In the late works, however, Beethoven defines his subjective musical will [/] as the power to destroy this inauthentic musical subjectivity.

The opaque quality of the late works responds to the inauthenticity of the middle-period style. Lengthy sonata forms, expressive melodies, expanded tonalities – the late quartets and sonatas carry forth the innovations that lend the middle period its veneer of radical subjectivity. But the late works – the *Missa Solemnis* in particular – take up this radical content in such a manner as to show the middle period's conventional foundations, as conventionally bourgeois.<sup>24</sup>

In its current, uncritical state, musicological criticism misses the real issue by referring to the late style works as enigmatic. From a material class perspective their meaning as works of material musical criticism could not be clearer. They fight against the pigeonhole the bourgeois critic would place them in – as middle-period heroism transformed into bathos. The enigma here lies not with the music but rather resides in the limitations of the critic's mind, given as it is to flights

of fancy fed by an aesthetic of immaculate conception.

Adorno picks up the notion of *understanding* in terms of truth and understanding. Writing about the industry of traditional Beethoven criticism, he says:

After all that has been written above, it might appear that the *Missa* characterized in all its uniqueness, could now be understood. But the dark quality of the work, perceived as such, does not brighten without further analysis. *To understand that one does not understand is the first step toward understanding but is not understanding itself.* (2002: 579)

That is to say, most critics stop after declaring the enigma of the late works. To gain true understanding, they should not fault the work but examine the enigma of their own criticism.

Against the forces of classicization, late Beethoven pushes back by exploding musical subjectivity, shattering it into 'shards' as Adorno puts it. Thus Beethoven 'alienates' music from bourgeois thought. In doing so, the late works, notably the *Missa Solemnis* (called an 'alienated masterpiece' by Adorno), create authenticity afresh, but in the form of a critique of the inauthenticity fundamental to bourgeois music making. The authentic critique of subjectivity therein is an enigma to the bourgeois mind, a cul-de-sac from which there is no egress by means of bourgeois consciousness. (This included Beethoven's consciousness. Despite renouncing subjectivity through all the musical means available, Beethoven, as bourgeois subjectivity's greatest exponent, could not pass the threshold of conscious renunciation.)

Certain ideas presented in the '*Missa*' and 'Late Style' essays are familiar to us, such as the notion of extraordinary musical labor, of effort expended on the part of the listener. In light of late Beethoven, we can see these ideas as elements in the renunciation of an inauthentic subjectivity. Thus Adorno refers to the critic Kretzschmar's 'chief difficulty' with the *Missa* 'with reference to the large

number of short musical images which require the listener to organize them into a unity'. As Adorno put it, Kretzschmar was 'at least' onto something: 'Kretzschmar has at least named one of the alienating symptoms which the *Missa* exhibits' (2002: 571). The *Missa* moves in a direction that will lead to Schoenberg's twelve-tone music, toward making the listener's labor a fundamental part of the musical commodity. Thereby, bourgeois listeners are alienated from the musical work (or challenged to surrender their bourgeois subjectivity).

At the heart of our attempt to elucidate Adorno's late-style essays lie three essential ideas framed in three enigmatic quotations. While not rife with hinged constructions, the very thoughts themselves are of a hinge-like quality.

Adorno prefaces the first of these passages with the following: 'The human idea asserts itself ... only by virtue of convulsive, mythic denial [/] of the mythical abyss' (2002: 577). For Adorno, the late style denies the abyss created by bourgeois subjectivity, an abyss carried out to mythical proportions (the grand heroism of the symphonies) so as to obscure its falsehoods. The inauthenticity of such an abyss as false heroism cannot be denied by simple, rational argument. In order to destroy the bourgeois myths of music, Beethoven must create an opposing vehicle of comparable mythical proportion while using bourgeois technical means. This presupposes an 'indifference' in technique – as if the bourgeois techniques of musical composition were to be stripped of their class purposes, while retaining their technical basis. Adorno establishes a notion of grand mythic proportion in classical music, the approach to an infinite nothingness through extreme compression.

In its aesthetic form the work asks what and how one may sing of the absolute without deceit, and because of this, there occurs that compression which alienates it [the work] and causes it to approach incomprehensibility. This is so perhaps because the question which it asks itself refuses

even musically the valid answer. The subject then remains exiled in its finiteness. The objective cosmos can no longer be imagined as an obligatory construct. Thus the *Missa* balances on point of indifference which approaches nothingness. (2002: 578)

Here Adorno refers to an 'absolute' forced into exile by the finite nature of bourgeois objectivity. If there was an authentic absolute in music, it has been exiled, sequestered, pushed to one side by false representation. The absolute, like truth, cannot be known except as that which one cannot know, given the limitations of one's class consciousness. As a good bourgeois, one cannot pretend simply to 'sing about' such an absolute without raising charges of deceit. By simply singing – addressing the absolute in contrived bourgeois terms – one would attempt to mask its incomprehensibility, and thus fail the untruth in the work's truth.

To such false bourgeois representations of the absolute, the *Missa* is 'indifferent', says Adorno. The *Missa* acknowledges such representations, but treats them as spurious, as flawed, not worth countenancing except by distancing oneself from them.

The subject of the *Missa*, then, is the mythical failure of bourgeois musical thought. The latter is worthy only of indifference, of getting over it, *ita missa est*. As Adorno says: 'Unity transcends into the fragmentary.... The gap between both becomes obvious and makes the impossibility of aesthetic harmony into the aesthetic content of the work; makes failure of aesthetic harmony [/] in a highest sense a means of success' (2002: 581).

To know true freedom, the musical subject gives up its autonomy in favor of 'heteronomy', as Adorno calls it. Only by freely alienating itself from subjectivity – by 'pseudo morphosis' with alienation and alienated forms – will the autonomous subject succeed:

The autonomous subject, that subject which otherwise cannot know itself capable of objectivity, secedes from freedom to heteronomy. Pseudo morphosis to an alienated form, at one with the expression of alienation itself, is supposed to

accomplish what otherwise would be incapable of accomplishment. (2002: 581)

The late works are archaic in a fundamental sense (and not merely by allusion to archaic forms such as fugue, addressed by conventional musicology). They take the middle period in its entirety as their horizon, as the archaic point of reference. And they pose the question: is all bourgeois music archaic, and if so, is music making still possible? Style in late Beethoven (and late Bach as well as Schoenberg) is not forward looking, not concerned with the present, but retrospective. The question is not 'What is possible?' but rather 'What is *still* possible?':

The aesthetically fragile in the *Missa Solemnis*, the denial of conspicuous organization in favor of an almost cuttingly strict question as to what is at all still possible, corresponds in deceptively closed surface to the open fractures which the last quartets demonstrate. The tendency to an archaization which here is still tempered, is shared by the *Missa* with the last style of almost all great composers from Bach to Schoenberg. They have all, as exponents of the bourgeois spirit, reached the limits of that spirit without, however, in the bourgeois world ever being able to climb beyond it on their own. (2002: 581–2)

This critique of the late works runs completely counter to customary musicological thought. Whereas Adorno depends upon historical material frameworks, musicologists customarily address Beethoven's late-style works in terms of subjectivity expressed as 'biography and fate'. As Adorno puts it:

The usual view explains this with the argument that [late works] are products of an uninhibited subjectivity, or, better yet, 'personality', which breaks through the envelope of form to better express itself, transforming harmony into the dissonance of its suffering, and disdaining sensual charms with the sovereign self-assurance of the spirit liberated. In this way, late works are relegated to the outer reaches of art, in the vicinity of document. In fact, studies of the very late Beethoven seldom fail to make reference to biography and fate. It is as if, confronted with the dignity of human death, the theory of art were to divest itself of its rights and abdicate in favor of reality. (2002: 564)

Appeals to biography and fate are extraneous to the actual work of music criticism. Authentic criticism should address the material of the artwork – the historically determined material quality of the artwork, its determinate form. Authentic criticism, however, is displaced by evocations of subjective spirit and suffering.<sup>25</sup>

A similar thread is spun in Adorno's description of Bach's angry devotees and their musico-critical jurisprudence, in the essay 'Bach Defended against His Devotees', in *Prisms* (1967). In the process of defending Bach's music against 'inauthentic' performance, Bach's actual music is set to one side. It is sequestered, as Adorno put it above, in the 'vicinity of the document', the *Gesamtausgabe* or grand critical edition which sits like a volume of trial precedents on a lawyer's bookshelf. For his devotees, Bach's music exists solely as a point of reference. Like a set of laws, it is referred to only when broken. It serves solely as a means to determine performance infractions, as leisure turned again into work, the labor of jurisprudence. For the devotee of late-style Beethoven, as described by Adorno, the actual music is likewise set to one side by musicologists. It exists solely as a yardstick to measure reconciliation to impending death – Beethoven's death.

The 'usual view' of *late style* in Beethoven is *ad hominem*: the meaning of the music is determined by the subjective person of the composer. Beethoven was entering the final phase of his life, *ergo* the arcane style of his late works. But if biography were the substance of music criticism, then, as Adorno tells us, 'every notebook of Beethoven's would possess greater significance than the Quartet in C-sharp Minor' (2002: 564).

Rather than reflecting biography and death, the late works and their vaunted style are refractory, bending light away from the subjectivity of the composer. Adorno expresses this as follows, in his customary hinged style:

The power of subjectivity in the late works of art is [/] the irascible gesture with which [subjectivity]

takes leave of the works themselves. It breaks their bonds, not in order to express itself, but in order, expressionless, to cast off the appearance of art. (2002: 566)

The late works do not express bourgeois subjectivity. They are instead the detritus pushed aside by a new heteronomous subjectivity that achieves wholeness by failure. As noted, Adorno called them 'splinters', remnants that express the impossibility of subjectivity under the regimes of capitalism: works are ' – no longer, at this point, an expression of the solitary I, but of the mythical nature of the created being and its fall' (2002: 566).

In summary, Beethoven carried on composing in his late style with all the power and facility of the middle period. In doing so, however, he showed that power and facility for what it had become, a mythical falsehood. Only a technically accomplished bourgeois composer like Beethoven could envision the contradictions of musical subjectivity in bourgeois nineteenth-century Vienna so as to arrive at an authentic material critique of musical subjectivity. In this regard, Beethoven resembles Schoenberg, who, in *Style and Idea*, recounts the following: 'In the army, a superior officer once said to me: "So you are this notorious Schoenberg, then". "Beg to report, sir, yes", I replied. "Nobody wanted to be, someone had to be, so I let it be me"' (1975: 104).

## CONCLUSION

Surely in Adorno's thought, there existed some musical Arcadia, above the tides of negative dialectics. Given a lack of evidence in Adorno's writings, let us posit such a world as a thought experiment. In our Arcadia, veracity is ever dependent upon the awareness of dialectics: every truth is maintained in terms of its provisional opposite in a continual process, as transient intransigence. In this Arcadia, the wind blows freely through the windows and doors of every musical work.

Adorno's world, however, was no Arcadia, but a world filled with fascist terrorism. We often forget how this extended to music.<sup>26</sup> We are tempted to envision the musical object of terrorism to be as forceful and violent as the state itself, thus aggressively loud, assaulting the ears much as police truncheons assault protestors, along the lines of Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*. As our epigraph suggests, however, the music of the Nazi state was designed not to confront dissent directly, but instead through harmonization. It was to assert a grand racial homogeneity – *Volk* – in response to the fractious Weimar republic. In this regard, its singular adherence to one aesthetic was authentically contrived, as authentically *Völkisch*, as a veracity rooted in the falsehood of a true German people. Musical fascism depended for its force more upon threats to its purity – upon the specter of racial impurity – than on purity itself. But it kept these largely quiet, the specter lurking in the dark, a threat to be drawn out from time to time as a warning. In public, fascism preferred a homogeneous face.

In this way, Nazi Germany lacked any vehicle for discerning immanent negation. Under its oppressive harmony, authenticity could be neither questioned nor verified. The creation of a *Völkisch* culture extended not only to production but also to its laudatory and uncritical reception. Thus, in *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Adorno could speak of 'authentic's talk' and a 'cult of authenticity' (referencing Heidegger) and link it to fascism:

Prior to any consideration of particular content, this language [the jargon of authenticity] moulds thought. As a consequence, that thought accommodates itself to the goal of subordination even where it aspires to resist that goal. The authority of the absolute is overthrown by absolutized authority. Fascism was not simply a conspiracy.... Language provides it with a refuge. Within this refuge a smouldering evil expresses itself as though it were salvation. (1973a: 5)

Surely this was what Adorno bore in mind when speaking of a culture industry, meaning thus an industry of both production and

reception – the two united under the rubrics of *folk* and *race*. Given that Nazi music criticism could not countenance the possibility of an inauthentic aesthetic, there could be no third authentic stage based on an objective assessment of music as cultural-industrial ideology. Such criticism was not allowed in any official Nazi organ.

Musical rooms in Nazi Germany were thus designed without doors or windows, without entrance or egress. And without hinges. Their contents lay firmly sealed behind a façade. A critical musical content was thus rendered inconceivable, either by a grand homogenizing vehicle that silenced criticism from without, or by windows, doors, and walls so thick and immovable that no plaintive cries could penetrate to the mercy of the outside world.

## Notes

- 1 Waldmann, 1939: 18. Translation is this author's.
- 2 'Every poem is music – a determined, persuasive, reliable, enthusiastic, and crafted music', Oliver, 1998: ix.
- 3 Schoenberg's model was Brahms. See the essay 'Brahms the Progressive', in Schoenberg, 1975.
- 4 See Schoenberg, 1967. Schoenberg's principal model is the first eight measures of Beethoven's F Minor Piano Sonata, op. 2, no. 1, which he called the 'sentence form'. But compare the balanced pairing in the familiar 'Frère Jacques, Frère Jacques', followed by 'Dormez-vous, Dormez-vous?', or 'Three blind mice, three blind mice', are paired with 'See how they run, see how they run'.
- 5 Schoenberg's idealism is a constant in all his speculative essays, especially those collected in *Style and Idea* (Schoenberg, 1975, see for example p.132). The late Patricia Carpenter wrote at length in this regard. See her edition of Schoenberg's *Gedanke Manuscript*, with Severine Neff and Charlotte Cross, as Schoenberg, 2006. And see Carpenter, 1984, on Schoenberg and Kant.
- 6 This usage of *hinge* was raised at an Adorno seminar held during the annual meeting of the American Comparative Linguistics Association at Providence, Rhode Island in 2012. I am indebted to Gerhard Richter, among other participants, for helping to sharpen the idea in the seminar's colloquy.
- 7 'Diese Richtung der Begrifflichkeit zu ändern, sie dem Nichtidentischen zuzukehren, ist das Scharnier negativer Dialektik'. Adorno, 1975: 24.

- 8 In this sense, Adorno's musical prose might be called *dissonant*.
- 9 See Adorno, 1996a, and 2002: 51, on Chaplin.
- 10 Citing Hegel, *Jenenser Realphilosophie*, I: 237.
- 11 Compare, for example, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* (2008) and *Negative Dialectics* (1973b). The former is largely devoid of hinge, while the idiom fills the latter with dissonant music.
- 12 Compare Hardt and Negri (2000): 217, on 'increasingly immaterial forms of affective and intellectual labor power...'
- 13 See Schoenberg, 1975: 173.
- 14 On Schoenberg's relation to politics, see Dineen, 2009.
- 15 See the reference to the 'sublime understanding' of Mahler's jackass in Adorno, 1990: 149, and see Dineen, 2011: 9.
- 16 See the two essays entitled 'Composition with Twelve Tones', in Schoenberg, 1975: 214–49.
- 17 And the pitches of the row can be played individually as a melody, or (in imitation of harmony) they can be combined to sound at the same time.
- 18 See the chapter 'Technique' in Dineen, 2011: 73–101.
- 19 For this reason, Schoenberg introduced antiquated forms such as the gigue and the 'sentence form' into his twelve-tone works. See Spinner, 1960.
- 20 See Schoenberg's riposte to Richard Hill in *Style and Idea* (1975: 213–14).
- 21 The potential this has for redeeming Adorno's oft-disparaged remarks on popular music cannot be explored here, but see Dineen, 2011: 34–49. Compare Adorno, 2002: 71: 'The differences in the reception of 'classical' music and light music no longer have any real significance'.
- 22 Hanslick, 1986 and Clive Bell, 1916 are often taken as a point of reference for this position.
- 23 Both are reproduced in Adorno, 2002. Compare Said, 2006.
- 24 See Said, 2007: 245: 'Beethoven, who stands for the newly triumphant bourgeoisie'.
- 25 Compare Sullivan, 1960.
- 26 See Evans, 2005: 187–218.

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# Art, Technology, and Repetition

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## INTRODUCTION

The Frankfurt School's contribution to debates in the politics of cultural production and reception are widely acknowledged as among the most significant in Western Marxist critical theory, often standing in for, if not eclipsing, the whole of their project, especially in the sphere of Anglophone scholarship. This fascination often pivots around issues of art and technology, as the recent edited collection of Walter Benjamin's radio programmes attests.

Deemed particularly indispensable are Theodor W. Adorno's, as well as Adorno and Max Horkheimer's, writings on the 'culture industry'; Adorno's texts on music; and his posthumous *Aesthetic Theory*. The list would also include numerous Walter Benjamin publications, prominently 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', 'Little History of Photography', 'The Author as Producer', and his writings on Baudelaire, the commodity, and urban modernity in

shorter essays and in the extensive research notes for the *Arcades* project. These authors, albeit the best known and most analysed, do not comprise the whole range of critical writing on art and culture by theorists who were associated with the Frankfurt School /Institute for Social Research [Institut für Sozialforschung]. There is Siegfried Kracauer, who focused on film, as well as on Weimar-era popular culture more broadly, and the relation of its characteristic forms and subjectivities to industrialization and inflation, as in the collection of essays titled *The Mass Ornament*. There are also Herbert Marcuse's contributions in *Eros and Civilization* and *The Aesthetic Dimension*. Significant interlocutors included figures such as Karl Korsch, Ernst Jünger, and Alfred Sohn-Rethel, as well as Martin Heidegger – a thinker principally opposed by the majority of the Frankfurt School writers, but whose traces can be found in the thought of Herbert Marcuse, an erstwhile student.



The salient motif that runs through all these writings is an inquiry into the position of art in capitalist social relations. The inquiry takes the shape of a non-dogmatic assessment responsive to social, technical, and historical currents that impact on the ‘aesthetic forces’ and ‘aesthetic relations of production’, in Adorno’s terms. Art is viewed both as exceptional to the prevalent forms of social and economic production, exploitation, and domination in capitalist modernity, and as fully integrated into them, thus tracing a founding contradiction for art as a social form in this historical epoch. Art can be the source of emancipatory drives, albeit ones always exposed to capture by reactionary interests located in the market (Adorno and Horkheimer) or on the spectrum of Fascist politics (Benjamin). The terms of these arguments are elaborated in a complex dialogue with precursors in Western philosophy and philosophical aesthetics such as Kant and Hegel (as well as authors such as Nietzsche and Simmel for Benjamin in particular) but they unfold chiefly within a Marxist problematic, both in terms of categories and the political outlook, and through a dialectical approach carried out both at the level of concept and method.

The three structuring topics of this chapter will be the relationship between art and technology in the work of the Frankfurt School, including the notion of art as itself a type of technology; repetition as a dynamic in the field of art, and as a cultural logic more broadly, with reference to associated notions such as aura, singularity, and reproduction; and the currency of central categories of the critique of political economy, such as use value and exchange value, for the field of artistic production in capitalist society.

## REPETITION AND REPRODUCTION

The set of questions assembled under the category of ‘repetition’ in the research and

publications of the writers associated with the Frankfurt School encompasses subjectivity, fetishism, authenticity, modernity, the commodity, myth, transgression, and innovation. Repetition is viewed as a cultural logic that acts as a bellwether for how the productive forces of monopoly capitalism (the term most often used by Theodor W. Adorno to refer to the historical period elsewhere designated as ‘industrial’, ‘Fordist’, or even ‘late’ capitalism) are reflected, refracted, and stalled in the space of cultural production. For Adorno in particular, the main arena of application for the theme of repetition was the analysis of music, including *Philosophy of New Music*, the notes published as *Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction*, the essays on jazz, and ‘On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening’. These texts deploy arguments around repetition to alternately defend and dismantle hierarchies of ideas around ‘serious’ and ‘light’ music, the commercial and the avant-garde. The essays on jazz in particular have been noted for their rhetorical bravado, with one critic recently noting that this ‘writing is polemical, and not remotely dialectical’ (Ross, 2014). In these texts, Adorno develops a set of preoccupations around repetition as regression, often by juxtaposing what he sees as two strains of innovation in modernist composition represented by Schoenberg and Stravinsky. These two composers are placed in dialectical relation, embodying polarized tendencies in the single context of Western modern music. Schoenberg represents an experimental tendency associated with development, singularity, and appeals to difficulty in listening that evoke a strong subjective response, whereas Stravinsky is an archaizing modernist, dallying with myth and folklore, whose music has the opposite effect of drawing audiences into a fascinated acquiescence to a dramatic but essentially static and unchangeable present. Schoenberg is an exponent of serialism, in which repetition is a technique used to

foster an appreciation of the non-identity of identity – an important concept for Adorno that will be taken up later in the mapping of debates around mimesis and ‘non-similarity’. There is also a historical thesis related to this assessment as, for Adorno, Schoenberg’s progressivism is embodied in the necessity of the twelve-tone technique coming out of previous technical developments in what he calls ‘serious’ (rather than what he sees as the empty marketing term ‘classical’) music, a technique which is adequate to its time. Stravinsky, conversely, by using modern techniques to refashion motifs from popular, folk, dance, as well as modern classical music, anticipates later critical theory diagnoses of the conservatism of postmodernism, inasmuch as his work is deemed to be giving in to mass taste rather than trying to push it further. It thus offers a superficial patina of transgression, dwelling on erotic display, ritualistic violence, and timeless human passions in a work like *The Firebird* ballet. However, the themes are mirrored in the music itself, whose repetitions and permutations negate temporality and development and, for Adorno, end up affirming reactionary patterns in contemporary culture.

Reaction is here understood as an unwitting reproduction of the economic forces consolidating capitalist homogeneity and social brutality at the level of that which is ostensibly supposed to transcend it: culture (and this transcendence he will identify as a crucial part of the ideology it is poised against). Repetition is the main vehicle which embeds reaction in the structure of modern music, habituating listeners to a kind of mythic pseudo-individualization through its address to the real, the everyday, and even the timeless. Moreover, it carries with it a kind of frenetic ‘pseudo-activity’ that Adorno links to the neurotic reflex of repetition compulsion in Freud. Thus, musical restlessness is for Adorno a sign of impotence (in his writing on jazz, which Adorno will blatantly associate with ‘castration’), passivity, and

indeed catatonia: ‘In certain schizophrenics the autonomisation [*Verselbstaendigung*] of the motor apparatus after the collapse of the “I” leads to the unending repetition of gestures and words: one already sees something of this in one overcome by shock. Thus Stravinsky’s shock-music stands under a repetition compulsion, and the compulsion only causes further damage to that which is repeated’ (Adorno, 2006: 178). This de-subjectivation is encountered on a mass scale with the hegemonic popularity of jazz, perhaps the most well-known target of Adorno’s denunciation under the colourful pen name of ‘Hector Rottweiler’, though the limitations of his sample are generally less known, confined as it mostly was to swing and big band standards. Jazz is defined as the sonic equivalent of a fully administered society – it has no history, no variation, no internal logic except that of profit and domination, the mechanical reproduction of a regressive moment and the leisure-time extension of assembly-line rhythms. Its improvisations are shallow, relying on a steady metronomic backbeat, its authenticity spurious, with the traces of African-American grassroots culture subsumed by meretricious white commercialism. Jazz as a stage of expression for modernist individuality and archaic collectivity is equally simulated and emptied out, in Adorno’s view. The syncopated rigidity of technique, however virtuoso, ensures jazz’s ‘perennial sameness’ and encapsulates, for Adorno, the whole problematic of repetition as the cultural logic of stasis and regression under an ever-renewed commodity aesthetic. These are the rudiments of the thesis that will subsequently be elaborated in the ‘Culture Industry as Mass Deception’ chapter of Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, with its verdict of the totalitarian nature of mass-produced or industrialized culture as secured by the ‘element of repetition’, which is the consolidation of the rule of identity over non-identity and the engine of enlightenment’s reversion to myth:

But the more the illusion of magic vanishes, the more implacably repetition, in the guise of regularity, imprisons human beings in the cycle now objectified in the laws of nature, to which they believe they owe their security as free subjects. The principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, which enlightenment upholds against mythical imagination, is that of myth itself. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 8)

Repetition plays a rather more complex and productive role in the project of Walter Benjamin, whose writing covers a range of approaches to repetition as a critical idiom, from the studies on Baudelaire and the Parisian arcades as the fulcrum of modernity to the texts on film and photography. Concepts such as phantasmagoria, the ever-same of fashion, and a partial use of eternal recurrence are arguably more heuristic variations of Adorno's suspicion of repetition as central to the logic of commodity fetishism – the ever-new as eternally the same. On the other hand, notions such as 'expertise' (the rational empowerment of workers rather than evidence of technocracy) and the significance of technological reproducibility for the possibility of proletarian (and anti-fascist) aesthetic experience are evidence that for Benjamin repetition came in a variety of forms and served a number of diverse purposes. Repetition in the emancipatory register was closely linked with reproduction for Benjamin. Repetition is a structural and technical aspect of reproduction, which has far-reaching social effects in a system premised on mass production, consumption, and distribution of (cultural) commodities. Reproduction has, at least tendentially, a de-mystifying effect which is, again, at least tendentially (and Benjamin would waver in the strength of his commitment to this tendency) in the service of progressive goals. 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' testifies to this, although several of its premises are already present in the earlier 'Little History of Photography', and it has often been framed as the outpost of a later and more affirmative Cultural Studies approach to mass culture as

a contrasting current of what is portrayed as the Frankfurt School's 'cultural pessimism'. The justice of such a framing will be discussed in the next section, along with a more in-depth outline of the arguments of both 'Work of Art' and 'Little History'. For present purposes, it can be noted that reproducibility is key to Benjamin's analysis of contemporary, technologically based artwork on the basis of its embeddedness in systems of mass distribution, but also to his analysis of how reproduction affects the ontology of the artwork itself. On the one hand, reproductive technologies such as printing, recording, and photography bring the artwork into proximity with the viewer; no longer unique in time and space like the temple relic or the painting in a museum, it 'meets the viewer halfway'. It is indeed the prerogative of the mass public, especially the proletariat, to want to encounter cultural objects at as close a range as possible, on their own terms. On the other hand, the apotheosis of this drive for proximity and proliferation as the dynamic of culture in modernity is the film, the mass medium par excellence, for which reproduction is intrinsic: like photography, film is not just a reproduction system but a medium which is inherently reproducible (there is no such thing as a unique print; the economics of film production mean that many copies have to be produced and shown in many places; finally, film is constructed of many identical stills on a film reel which have to be shown in sequence to produce the illusion of movement). It thus entails the most direct emancipation of the work of art from the cultic value specific to the aura (uniqueness of existence in time and place). Uniqueness and irreproducibility as the hallmark of the aura – which can describe natural objects as much as devised ones – have generated much exploration in later projects of critical aesthetics, with art theorists in the 1970s and 80s such as Craig Owens and Douglas Crimp, as well as a number of critically inclined artists, picking up on Benjamin's political arguments in favour of reproducibility in order to dismiss

the relevance of painting and sculpture in favour of more ephemeral and technologically mediated forms such as installation, photography and film. More recently, Fredric Jameson has written on the 'aesthetics of singularity' to discuss how much contemporary art tends towards a horizon of 'eventalization', repeating the priority of time over space that financialized globalization has inscribed on an epochal scale over the neoliberal era. A correspondence is projected here between the unique occurrence in time of event-based contemporary art and the uniqueness of the tailored financial instrument.

Even from this short precis, the difference between Adorno and Benjamin's views on repetition becomes apparent. For Adorno, repetition almost always stands for stasis and reaction, and the analogous term for his use of repetition is 'regression'. In Benjamin's more sanguine view, repetition is more ambiguous, and the accompanying category is 'reproduction', which, especially when it comes to the role of political aesthetics, is on the side of progress, or, more accurately, helps to redefine progress so that it addresses social as well as technological development. The differences come to the fore in a correspondence conducted between the two in 1937 concerning the prospect of the publication of 'The Work of Art' essay in the journal of the Institute for Social Research, which was at the time based in New York in exile from Nazi Germany, while Benjamin was in his own exile in Paris. Published in the *Aesthetics and Politics* anthology, as well as in volumes of selected correspondence, the letters see Adorno taking issue with several points relating to the shared interest in the dialectics of reproduction and repetition. For Benjamin, repetition, replication, and reproduction were all aspects of the socialization of art that heralded the demise of aura, and brought it into the sphere of mass politics as radical culture. A point of ambiguity picked up by Adorno here was that Benjamin's argument that mass reproduction did away with the cult value of art was vitiated somewhat by

the cult value of the commodity, a shift which was plain to see in Hollywood cinema with its glamour, glitz, and fabricated icons. In this light, Benjamin had himself touched on the notion of capitalism as a 'dreamless cult' in the early essay 'Capitalism as Religion'. In summary, the cultural and aesthetic phenomena that Benjamin would endorse as dialectical negations of their analogues in capitalist social relations of production are deemed by Adorno to be neither dialectical or negative enough; for him they are simply extensions of those industrial analogues and their forms of structural violence. This will be picked up from another angle in the following section's discussion of technology. It will be important to note here, however, that Benjamin had another critique of repetition that relied on a less sanguine take on reproduction, one which he shared with his close interlocutor Brecht and which Siegfried Kracauer would also espouse, in a different key. This can be framed shortly as scepticism towards the claim of photography (and, by implication, film) to represent reality – a representation which Benjamin saw rather as the *reification* of reality, as the critique of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) found in 'The Author as Producer' and 'Little History' evidences. Here we see an artistic technique that ends up confirming reality through its aim to deliver up an unvarnished reflection of it, and thus reconciling the viewer to the elements of that reality, be they shop windows or the abject poverty of urban slums. This is a critique which would be taken up in the 1970s and 1980s by critical realist photographers and writers such as Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler. Further, as Brecht notes and Benjamin agrees, no documentary image of, for example, a factory can tell us much about the dynamics and contradictions of capitalist society. Rather than such neutralizing reproduction, Benjamin cites Brecht, arguing that 'something must in fact be built up, something artificial, posed' at the level of content, while the relations of artistic production must themselves be transformed and socialized.

Common to both Adorno and Benjamin's thinking around repetition and reproduction (as well as regression) is their engagement with the aesthetic-philosophical concept of mimesis. Having its roots in Aristotle's theories of drama and Plato's poetics, the concept of mimesis arrived with Adorno and Benjamin via German Romanticism and played a substantial role in their formulations of the aesthetic, making strong appearances especially in Benjamin's early work such as the essay 'On the Mimetic Faculty' and his habilitation thesis, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. It also occurs regularly in Adorno's work, including the late *Aesthetic Theory* and throughout *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Mimesis refers to nonsensuous similarity, the register of emulation and play which short circuits an instrumental and dominant approach of humans to nature. For Benjamin, magic and proto-sciences such as astrology are mimetic insofar as they discern reflections between the cosmos and aspects of human society and physiology. However, the best example of nonsensuous similarity is language. While mimesis has gradually and inevitably decayed, as we shall see in the next section, it returns anew in the relationship between human societies and their technologies. Perhaps it is more apt to say that the faculty of mimesis has been transformed, and that it is as historical as it is anthropological. Benjamin writes:

'To read what was never written'. Such reading is the most ancient: reading before all languages, from the entrails, the stars, or dances. Later the mediating link of a new kind of reading, of runes and hieroglyphs, came into use. It seems fair to suppose that these were the stages by which the mimetic gift, which was once the foundation of occult practices, gained admittance to writing and language. In this way language may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behaviour. (Benjamin, 1978: 336)

This is a theory of reflection, of cognition as determined by similarities, correspondences, and socially encoded affinities between the very remote and the interior as constitutive of

communication, which is in turn constitutive of subjectivity. Thus repetition is located at the basis of language, and thereby of culture and art as emulations by social individuals of phenomena 'out there'; they strive to understand the phenomena of nature in the act of mimesis by bringing them into the symbolic circle. Adorno's deployment of mimesis, as is typical of his approach generally, is characterized by a more sharply dialectical view. He accepts the account of mimesis as a mode of enacting a nonsensuous similarity that is in contrast to the subordination of nature that confirms the irrational rationality of Enlightenment – the domination and exploitation of internal and external nature by the calculating subject. It is in the artwork that the entanglement of play and domination stages a concept of mimesis as *aesthetic rationality*. Art represents a historical advance towards rationality from its 'dark precursors' in magic and ritual: 'The survival of mimesis, the nonconceptual affinity of the subjectively produced with its unposited other, defines art as a form of knowledge and to that extent as 'rational'. Adorno goes on to append a further dimension to the quasi-anthropological concept of mimesis in his formulation of 'mimicry'. As in the contemporaneous writing of Surrealist and taxonomist Roger Caillois, Adorno takes the apotropaic behaviour of the prey blending in with its environment as a strategy of panic rather than wise adaptation, and extends this to an analysis of fearful conformity both in aesthetics and in social behaviour. If mimesis is (equivocal) play, the Kantian purposiveness without a purpose in the space of art, mimicry is the pathology that invites catastrophe as it tries to ward it off by submission to or identification with its agents. Adorno and Benjamin meet on this second dimension of mimesis, with both glimpsing possibilities in the unmediated identification with the triumph of exchange. This comes across in Benjamin's writing on 'empathy' or 'fellow feeling' [*Einfühlung*] with the commodity or with exchange value: gamblers, financiers,

and crowds at nineteenth-century Great Exhibitions alike learned to identify passionately with exchange value as such, rather than with the useful or sensory elements of commodities. For Adorno, it is art as the 'absolute commodity' which guards the portal to disenchantment and ultimately redemption which the simultaneity of use and exchange in other commodities succeeds in blocking.

'Redemption' is also a key category for Siegfried Kracauer, whose work by 1960 was dedicated to outlining a theory of the 'repetitive art' of film as an important vehicle of realism (as it photographically registers an event which actually happened somewhere, scripted or not) capable of renewing faith in empirical reality (resonating with Gilles Deleuze's later writing on cinema, which argues in similar terms for film as capable of restoring faith in 'the world', albeit in different philosophical terms). However, it is acknowledged that Kracauer's most substantive work on the cultural logic of repetition transpired over three decades earlier, in the Weimar-era essays collected under the title of *The Mass Ornament*. He engaged with the ascendant visualization technologies of photography, film, and mass spectacle, such as the Tiller Girls (geometrically synced formation dance troupe that were Weimar Germany's equivalent to the Rockettes), in terms recognizable to readers of Adorno and Benjamin, appreciating the propensities of the new mass cultural forms both for normalizing stupefaction in the face of spectacle and for closing the coffin lid on the hegemony of elite aesthetics. In a language more immediate and journalistic than either of his Frankfurt School colleagues, Kracauer would similarly note the ubiquity of expertise and seriality, and the progressive potential of distraction as a resubjection of the collective in the experience of the cinema, an argument similar to that of recent theorists of media and attention such as Jonathan Crary, who notes the dual emergence of autonomization and control in the visual technologies of the

nineteenth century. Likewise, Kracauer signalled repetition as the modality suitable for art in a time of industrial production and universal quantification, with the Tiller Girls as strict equivalents (but with an erotic surplus) of factory labour on the after-hours stage: 'The hands in the factory correspond to the legs of the Tiller Girls. Going beyond manual capacities, psychotechnical aptitude tests attempt to calculate dispositions of the soul as well. The mass ornament is the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires'.

## TECHNOLOGY, ART, NATURE

Many of the debates on the role of technology in the corpus of Frankfurt School critical theory have tended to focus on Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility'. This is not surprising, if we consider that the text directly engages with the implications of technology for aesthetic and social transformation in a manner rare among the publications associated with this group, and has been one of the most widely circulated and diversely interpreted of all their texts, for reasons relating to its subject but also the history of its publication and appeal to a range of intellectual and artistic constituencies. In what follows, I will recapitulate some of the key themes of the essay before placing it in the context of Benjamin's critical trajectory and in relation to the work of some of his peers and later interlocutors.

'The Work of Art' essay saw its initial publication, after extensive revision, in the Institute for Social Research's *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in 1936, translated into French in the character of a dispatch from Paris, where Benjamin was resident at the time. It was subsequently revised twice, and the third version was the authoritative one until recently when the second version (also from 1936) became more widely available.

This is the version which is now deemed closest to Benjamin's original intention for publication. The essay undertakes a genealogy of the socio-economic position of art through the optic of singularity and multiplicity. Art is seen to evolve from an object of religious ritual, carrying with it 'cult value', to an institution with relative autonomy – hence marked by 'exhibition value' – in the secular, capitalist modern era in the West, finally to emerge as an instrument of political and aesthetic socialization with the rise of cinema and mass media. The primary lens of analysis is the nexus between technological and social progress, secured by the evolution of film as a mass art in the age of mass politics, with both the good (communist) and evil (fascist) dimensions of the phenomenon. Like 'The Author as Producer', the essay is poised to intervene on the side of the anti-Fascist struggle at a time when defeat was already tangible, though not yet as decisive as it was by 1940 when Benjamin wrote the 'Theses on the Concept of History'. Participation in aesthetic experience, made possible by technologies of reproduction, and the participation of the masses in self-determination – the abolition of relations of private property – were seen as inextricably linked. Crucially, such technologically enabled aesthetic experience, centrally film, embraces and to some extent compensates for the corporeal and mental impacts of modern life, with the innumerable shocks and syncopations of urban space and industrial labour. Here appears once more the 'mimetic comportment' that cuts across so much of the critical approaches to the aesthetic in the writers of the Frankfurt School, as Benjamin evokes the cinema of rapid-fire editing and dispassionate observation both evoking and liberating its viewers from assembly lines and aptitude tests. Technology is figured here as a *pharmakon* that inflicts the damage and offers the cure. It reminds the subject that she is not only a passive victim of its rationalizing brutalities but also a consumer and participant in the kinds of democratizing currents the 'kino-eye' of

Soviet cinema or the voices of workers in mass media publications put into reach. Also important here is the positive reading of 'distraction' as opposed to 'identification' as a relationship to the media image, one which Benjamin endorses in terms familiar from Bertolt Brecht's framing of epic theatre.

In the constellation drawn by Benjamin, film is the apex of the irresistible tendency carried by technologies of reproducibility such as lithography, offset printing, and photography since the nineteenth century, and earlier still, with woodcuts, the printing press, and the craft industries of antiquity. Techniques of reproduction act to demystify obsolete but still effective (and to that degree equivocal, if not toxic) concepts in culture such as tradition, eternal value, or creative genius – notions eclipsed by modernity that movements such as Fascism did not hesitate to invigorate in their chthonic political mythologies of greatness and exclusion. Key here is the proliferation of copies which render the original irrelevant. The forgery of an artwork would only reinforce the authority of the original, whereas the original cannot stand up to its mass reproduction, as an image or a recording. Thus all reproductions, regardless of their technical or formal qualities, lack aura, that is, uniqueness in time and space. They hasten the decay of aura and the static and exclusive notions of authenticity, authorship, and property it contains – in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, its class-related 'distinction'. While Benjamin does mention that certain reifications and commodifications can strive to recreate aura, such as the spurious iconicity of film stars, the argument has been made, already in Adorno's response to the text, that Benjamin underrates the extent to which aura is a socio-economic rather than technological artefact – a criticism only borne out by the tremendous expansion of the art market and film industry alike in subsequent decades. However, Benjamin attempts to maintain a dialectical balance between determinism and the speculative in his account, noting the countertendencies of the decline of

the aura, such as industrialization, capitalization, and the mass spectacles that ultimately habituate the popular masses to the 'aesthetic pleasure' of their own destruction in war.

An important aspect of the essay's argument is the discussion of the subjective and psychic layers of technologized aesthetic experience. The factor of 'shocks' has already been noted, with Benjamin pursuing a theme elaborated in his writing on Baudelaire, that of the rupture of perception heralded by the modern city and consumption: 'Technology subjected the human sensorium to a training of a highly complex sort ... There came the day when film corresponded to a new and urgent need for stimulation. This shock-like perception comes into play as a formal principle in film' (Benjamin, 2007: 175). Here we encounter a consistent theme in Benjamin's analysis, that of the historical character of the human sensorium, an idea which emerges in historical materialist thought as 'the *forming* of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present' (Marx, 1974: 96). Another theme, pursued since 'Little History of Photography', is the one of the 'optical unconscious' – the camera's ability to plumb aspects of perception unavailable to everyday vision, just as psychoanalysis discloses aspects of emotional life normally out of reach for the subject, further demystifying the real. The scientific and medical significance of these technologies of vision rivals its artistic import for Benjamin; nonetheless, he notes the astonishing consequences in 'The Work of Art'. Everyday life appeared claustrophobic before the cinematograph opened it up with its changes of speed and scope:

Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its farflung debris. With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. (Benjamin, 2002: 117)

To understand what was at stake in 'The Work of Art' essay's hopeful politics of technology, we must attend to a conceptual pairing which scholars such as Esther Leslie have highlighted: Benjamin's formulation of 'first' and 'second' technology (Leslie, 2000: 132–66). Departing from Georg Lukács' influential notion of 'second' nature (the reified social relations mediated by the commodity form), Benjamin proposed that there was a 'first technology', which is instrumental, crafted as it is by humans to control and dominate the forces of nature, and a 'second technology', which is open to historical needs and which would be rather a means of reconciliation between humanity and nature. 'Second technology' is an index of social development, which is to say that humanity may fail to develop the social forms that match the complexity of the technologies at its disposal. The outcome of this misalignment is almost inevitably war, an analysis Benjamin applied to World War I and to the inter-war period of rearmament that preceded the global slaughter of World War II. Central to the notion of second technology as a space of development for human social and affective capacities is the notion of mimesis as a mediating *Spielraum* between human and non-human nature. Leslie argues that the transition between cult object and mass artwork can be mapped onto Benjamin's characterization of the determinism of the first and the contingency of second technology in the concepts of *semblance* and *mimesis*, which Adorno would also develop at some length in his aesthetic theory:

Semblance is the most abstract – but therefore the most ubiquitous – schema of all the magic procedures of the first technology, whereas play is the inexhaustible reservoir of all the experimenting procedures of the second [...] what is lost in the withering of semblance and the decay of the aura in works of art is matched by a huge gain in the scope for play [*Spiel-Raum*]. (2002: 127)

We can thus see that for Benjamin, as for Adorno, there is the imprint of the 'aesthetic



forces of production', which denote at the same time the role of technology in artistic form and the historically mediated development of the senses – the sensory being the original connotation of *aesthesis*. From here, we can move to examine Theodor W. Adorno's engagement with art as a technology. The equation of art with technology makes sense in the first instance insofar as the phrase captures one of Adorno's main parameters for art's domain: the *aesthetic* domination of nature, implying both the violence of form over the material it shapes, and the index of an artwork's adequacy to its period of production. Although the question of technology vis-à-vis the reproduction of the artwork, predominantly as it registers the sphere of music, occurs relatively frequently in Adorno's writing, it is in the unfinished and posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, and to an extent in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that it is addressed most extensively. For Adorno, partially in dialogue with Benjamin, the aesthetic forces of production could fall out of sync with the general productive forces, but this is because the forces of production in art, though seemingly behind in rationalization and efficiency, are actually ahead in terms of material imagination and experimental scope. For Adorno, this is due to a key tenet of what he defines as materialist aesthetics: the artist embodies the social forces of production without being bound by them due to the specific position in the social *relations* of production occupied by art: 'the artist works as social agent, indifferent to society's own consciousness. He embodies the social forces of production without necessarily being bound by the censorship dictated by the relations of production, which he continually criticizes by following the rigors of his *métier*' (Adorno, 2013: 58). This then marks a certain dissociation between use value and technical development which can be explained in terms of the difference between the relations of production that obtain within and that obtain outside of art – a difference oriented around the respective influence of the subject:

There are historical moments in which forces of production emancipated in art represent a real emancipation that is impeded by the relations of production. Artworks organized by the subject are capable *tant bien que mal* of what a society not organized by a subject does not allow; city planning necessarily lags far behind the planning of a major, purposeless, artwork. (2013: 45)

The subjective content of the aesthetic forces of production, then, is what gives them their edge. This likewise accounts for the degree of modernity of any particular artwork, where modernity measures the adequacy of technical means to the differentiation of experience, not least the *crisis* of this experience (again echoing Benjamin in his diagnosis of the loss of experiential density in modernity). Hence, as Peter Osborne notes in a general discussion of the term, for Adorno 'modernity' is a critical and not a chronological category.

The bulk of the discussion of technology in *Aesthetic Theory*, however, is around the category of 'construction' which mediates the technical and expressive means in the making of any artwork. For Adorno, art has to reckon with advanced technology in its concept and construction, internalizing the challenge of social standards of production in its concept rather than boxing technology in to subject matter. Art has to reckon with the fact that the industrial organization of society penetrates social and subjective, and not just economic, life, thus running counter to all those who would see in the space of art a refuge or recompense for a fully rationalized, administered social world. The current state of the productive forces poses an internal problematic for artistic production, rather than a trivial external parameter confined to the moments of fabrication or exhibition, or an index of fashion to be superficially appropriated. However, Adorno's line on technology's relationship to the artwork is quite distinct from Benjamin's. Whereas Benjamin is interested in how social infrastructures and technical means of production affect one another, and concretely reshape the ontology

of artworks in turn, Adorno is more interested in the prospects technology generates for the autonomous artwork understood as a 'plenipotentiary' for, rather than (as 'The Work of Art' suggests) a practical instrument of, emancipated social experience. For Adorno, in one of his many suggestive (and among his more enigmatic) conceptual turns, the subject itself is a 'congealed technology' which came into use at a certain time and will just as certainly become outmoded. At the same time, this subject cannot be overlooked but must be retained as a dialectical category to be enlisted in the project of its own overcoming, as the introductory pages of *Negative Dialectics* emphasize. Moreover, neither emancipation, particularity, nor indeed aesthetic experience are thinkable without the subject. As Miriam Hansen has written, while for Benjamin, the potential antithesis within the system is generated 'by the internal logic of the productive forces, i.e. technology', for Adorno, it 'rests with the category of the subject, however historically emptied out and ideologically manufactured it may appear' (Hansen, 1982: 92). No less does the subject congeal *as* technology in artworks, by which Adorno means that the more independent of subjective influence an artwork is imagined to be, foremost by its maker (the chance procedures of Surrealism or, more aptly, the aleatory methods of John Cage or Fluxus), the more it evidences, if only in negative imprint, the role of subjective decision. Technology in this way becomes the site of elaboration of the aesthetic forces of production as encounter between the subject, its historical moment, and the artwork: an artwork using the most up-to-date technologies can still be regressive if it adopts a traditionalist stance at the level of its concept.

Picking up on the themes explored above with Benjamin's thesis of first and second technology, as well as the arguments outlined in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, we see here a concept of technology as a human activity that is not opposed to nature so much as a modality of liberation for both (human and

non-human nature alike), a process that can be unfolded in the laboratory space of art. A liberated technology would be an index of rationality that has overcome its irrational side – domination, exploitation, control – and aims for a reconciliation between humans and nature which the 'purposeless purpose' of the artwork can materialize through subjective experience. In this sense, art is de facto a technology allowing us to envision an emancipated time. Art is bound up with the pressure of domination, both in its mandated control over heterogeneous social and physical materials, and its existence as an alibi for a society of pervasive reification and unfreedom. Yet it mobilizes technique 'in an opposite direction than does domination', in alliance with the undirected space of mimesis which secures art both as play and as a form of (more-than-rational) knowledge. Mimesis acts to distil the opposing forces in art between expression and objectification, conveying the artwork's immanent logic through the density of its technical procedures. Significantly, this is what separates autonomous art absolutely from the culture industry, which uses technology as part of a rationalization process like any other industry – albeit on somewhat diversified, idiosyncratic, and residually entrepreneurial bases – and in this way sacrifices what distinguishes an artwork spiritually, technically, and aesthetically from the rest of social life, truly cementing a totalitarian grasp over the imaginary of capitalist social life, as well as hinting at a deeper moral torpor: 'The idea of "exploiting" the given technical possibilities, of fully utilizing the capacities for aesthetic mass consumption, is part of an economic system which refuses to utilize capacities when it is a question of abolishing hunger' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 111). By the mid 1960s, however, Adorno would come to a more nuanced assessment of film – one of the lynchpins of the culture industry in earlier texts – with his advocacy of the New German Cinema of his former student Alexander Kluge, among others. This assessment brought him to revise his former

identification of cinema with the heteronomy exerted by technique – the very same reproductive technology that for Benjamin tied the medium inextricably to mass politics, and for Adorno to big business, and was thus a medium bound by the law of value rather than to a self-legislating artistic telos. Adorno proposes, then, that it is possible to see these two dynamics in conflict rather than in fixed hierarchy, as with any other artistic medium. The conflict is mediated by the potential of a dissident cinematic collective (comprising filmmakers and film viewers) which does not approach film as spectacle but as a passage through subjective interiority, closer to ‘imageless thought’ and writing.

## USE AND EXCHANGE

As may have already become evident, Marx’s concepts of ‘use value’ and ‘exchange value’ were highly relevant for the variant of materialist, politicized cultural analysis performed by the Frankfurt School, and these were closely linked, as shown above, with questions of technology as it shaped the forces and relations of aesthetic production. For both Adorno and Benjamin, there is a continuity of interest in ‘empathy with exchange value’ as a sort of productive alienation. For Benjamin, this signifies the forms of ‘training’ undergone by populations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an era of ascendant imperialism, financialization, and consumerism. Figures such as the flaneur represented the Kantian attitude of disinterest cut with the capitalist subjectivity of detached, ephemeral investment in images, things, and people. The secret pedagogy of this ‘empathy’ is loss of tradition and the sway of social abstraction which tended towards the emergence of a revolutionary proletarian subject, in terms familiar from ‘the Communist Manifesto’ – a radicalizing process of disenchantment, commodity society as a ‘waking dream’ or ‘phantasmagoria’ that must be

critically engaged with and excavated by the radical critic if the dreaming collective is ever to awaken. It prefigures utopia even as it embodies ideology. Adorno viewed this dialectic otherwise, as earlier noted, believing the proletariat to be largely subsumed to the teleologies of work and nation already by the 1930s when the communist movement had been quashed in Germany, and, after the war, bought off by Marshall Plan ideologies of plenty and democracy (a Cold War scenario to which Adorno, as well as the Institute for Social Research, had a complicated relation). He continued to hold out hope for the reconstitution or, more optimistically, transvaluation of the subject in aesthetic experience that resembled empathy with exchange value to the degree that the non-identity offered by the artwork to the viewer was materially based on a type of identity: identity with exchange value. The artwork was principally useless and thus constituted an ‘absolute commodity’. As pure exchange value, then, it helped to demystify the dual nature of the commodity which sustained the fiction that capital was as interested in social use as it was in profit and was thus a benign social system. Both Benjamin and Adorno also had a more prosaic version of ‘empathy with exchange value’, noting how as the commodity economy developed, the price of commodities became the chief fascination for the buyer, whether or not she could ‘afford’ it. The symbolic value of a commodity becomes the source of its fetishism beyond any use or enjoyment its possession could materially bestow, as Adorno notes in an aside on the desirability of expensive concert tickets over any specific performance they might give admission to. Thus all commodities tend to be hollowed-out of any use value and to be filled with consumer desire; not only, and perhaps not even mainly, artworks. As Susan Buck-Morss notes, ‘[I]f the social value (hence the meaning) of commodities is their price, this does not prevent them from being appropriated by consumers as wish images within the emblem books of their private

dreamworld. For this to occur, estrangement of the commodities from their initial meaning as use-values produced by human labor is in fact the prerequisite' (Buck-Morss, 1989: 181). For both Adorno and Benjamin, this estrangement could be progressive insofar as it disclosed the 'real relations' of capitalist social life, as emphasized by Marx in his discussion of the spread of social abstraction. Empathy with the commodity could have radical consequences, though it was Benjamin who would deem empathy with the commodity to be a source of libidinal energy that could be actualized in a revolutionary direction.

Benjamin, however, would develop another vector in his thinking around use and exchange value for the agency of art and literature in social change, a line discernible in the focus on the use value of media infrastructure ('reproduction') for social emancipation in the 'Work of Art' essay, but also in the use value of the artist and intellectual in 'The Author as Producer'. In this essay, originally delivered as a talk at the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris in 1934 (and prefigured in contemporaneous essays such as 'The Present Social Situation of the French Writer'), he considers the need for the cultural producer to not just reflect on her position *with regard to* the productive relations of her time, but on where she stands *within* them, that is, how she can use her position to intervene and organize, in the first instance with other cultural workers and then in the relations of production more generally. Any work, no matter how radical in content, sees that content traduced by the all-consuming mechanisms of the market, and any political sentiments, no matter how radical, are traduced by the intellectual's distance from the struggles to which she may seek to lend her critical support. Benjamin wants to hold on to a conception of an intellectual or artist's specific skills and tasks and how these may be used to support social movements (as in Foucault's notion of the 'specific intellectual'), yet at the same time see how they

may be generalized: in the transgression of the social division of labour that separates art and politics, the reification of the useless and useful, theory and practice. Such a division can only serve conservative ends, especially in turbulent moments like Europe between the wars. Moreover, he wants to think about the dialectic between proximity and *estrangement*, as in the work of his friend Bertolt Brecht, who fervently believed theatre had a role to play in the workers' movement. This was not through simply affirming its slogans or programmes, but through working to provoke alienation – the 'estrangement effect' – from bourgeois dogma at the level of stagecraft and actors' behaviour.

For Adorno, however, such an approach as Brecht's was already far too affirmative, instrumentalizing the ontological distance art entertained to the brutal instrumentality of capitalist social life – or what he called its 'negativity' – ending up with an affirmation of use value as conceived and practised in this very life and not opening up a path beyond it. For Adorno, this constituted 'praxisism' – the notion that art or cultural production can and should be useful, for social change if not for society – and supplied the diagnosis Adorno would later use to excoriate Brecht for returning to East Germany after the war and putting his talents at the service of the state, as well as his own students for clamouring to apply the insights of critical theory to revolutionary strategy. In fact, art has to shun any imperatives that do not originate from its own aesthetic logic, even if this paradoxically cements its status as legitimating alibi for the continuing rule of those imperatives: 'Art's asociality is the determinate negation of a determinate society. Certainly through its refusal of society, which is equivalent to sublimation through the law of form, autonomous art makes itself a vehicle of ideology: The society at which it shudders is left in the distance, undisturbed'. Yet, '[t]o evaluate art according to the standard of necessity covertly prolongs the principle of exchange, the philistine's concern for what can be gotten for

it' (Adorno, 2013: 308, 341). Consequently, it was hermetic modern artworks that fully embodied opacity and resistance as key elements of their modernity, such as the plays of Samuel Beckett, the tales of Franz Kafka, or the music of Arnold Schoenberg, which, regardless of their ultimate approbation by the cultural establishment, give insights into the possibility of emancipated subjectivity, if only with the greatest obliquity and ambiguity. For Adorno, the artwork's capacity for figuring social change is entirely immanent to its construction as a work, as a 'windowless monad' that refracts the outside world but in principle denies it. It has virtually less than nothing to do with the relations of production that the artist or writer operates within, as these are *prima facie* irredeemably distorted by the constraints of the market or the state. The role of the artwork is rather to hold on to and exacerbate the antagonism between its vision of society, and subjectivity, as it could be, and what it really was. 'If artworks are in fact absolute commodities in that they are a social product that has rejected every semblance of existing for society, a semblance to which commodities otherwise urgently cling, the determining relation of production, the commodity form, enters the artwork equally with the social force of production and the antagonism between the two' (2013: 321). This summarizes Adorno's understanding of how the artwork occupies a conflictual space between autonomy and heteronomy. Far from the conservative notion of artistic autonomy – 'art for art's sake' – this is an idea of autonomy produced by and thoroughly steeped in heteronomy, that is, the socially effective, determinate form of value: exchange. Exchange value is the dominant force on both sides, yet spirit has more room to move in the thoroughly fetishized space of the artwork without an atom of use value to conciliate it.

In sum, the question of value in the work of the Frankfurt School authors was frequently read through how the patterns of mass industrial production in the era of

monopoly capitalism would extend to culture, just as they nourished the cultivated individual subject in the nineteenth-century age of liberal capitalism. For Adorno, notably, the analysis of art's value relations would be deeper and more comprehensive, touching on the ontological relationship between the form of art and the form of value. Yet his cultural analysis is more widely canvassed than his aesthetic theory, given its more 'accessible' and programmatic character – and just as often dismissed for those reasons, with much of the dialectical force of that work left aside. We can note the striking correspondence between Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry as the analogue of factory production in the realm of the spirit and Kracauer's discussion in *The Mass Ornament*, where value production is shown to be its own end both for corporations and for the large-scale enterprise of commercial culture. It is autotelic, not in the sense of autonomous art or 'art for art's sake' but in the sense of profit for profit's sake. Like a corporation, mass cultural spectacles are thoroughly integrated in all their functions but without any grasp of a purpose beyond themselves, and this comes to describe the whole of late-capitalist social organization:

Like the mass ornament, the capitalist production process is an end in itself. The commodities that it spews forth are not actually produced to be possessed; rather, they are made for the sake of a profit that knows no limit. [...] Everyone does his or her task on the conveyor belt, performing a partial function without grasping the totality. Like the pattern in the stadium, the organization stands above the masses, a monstrous figure whose creator withdraws it from the eyes of its bearers, and barely even observes it himself. (Kracauer, 1995: 78)

## CONCLUSION

The conceptual constellations that have been sketched in this chapter around the terms art, repetition, technology, use value, and exchange value hold layers of nuance and

lines of resonance with other concepts in the work of the Frankfurt School authors which it has been possible to indicate if not exhaustively describe here. The interested reader can refer to other chapters in this Volume to find further material on those points, and ones which may, no doubt, be framed through other perspectives and scholarly inquiries. The conclusion will thus indicate some perspectives and philosophical projects that resonate with the conceptual constellations of Adorno, Benjamin, and Kracauer, sketched above. These thinkers also remain prominent influences for practitioners who want to develop rich and dialectically reflected lines of opposition in the often all too affirmative bounds of contemporary culture, and contemporary art in particular. A well-known figure who has framed his project in archetypally Adornian terms is the United States artist, activist, writer, and publisher Paul Chan, who attempts to think through the conditions of artistic practice under current social and political conditions in terms both uncannily familiar to Adorno's hypotheses in *Aesthetic Theory*, and ones filtered through the intervening years of postmodernism and notions of the technological sublime. A typical dialectical reflection might read, 'Objective forces manifest in art today as subjective acts without an actual subjectivity, to express the power of inhumanity to define what is most human' (Chan, 2009). We could also consider the return to questions of reproduction and reproductive labour in feminist discourses manifesting in the spaces of politics, art, and the academy which can echo Benjamin's valorization of reproduction over uniqueness, its challenge to the sovereignty of the auratic art object, and its 'exhibition value' in favour of the impure, the derived, the everyday, and the invisible, albeit with an emphasis on questions of gender and race which were not explicitly within Benjamin's purview. Likewise, questions around use value in contemporary art, explored by theorists and exponents of 'social practice' and 'useful art' such as

Grant Kester, Shannon Jackson, Stephen Wright, and Tania Bruguera, while leaving something to be desired in terms of the dialectical complexity which attended Benjamin's optimism, espouse the idea that art can exceed its institutional bounds (including its in-house habits of institutional critique) and become a technique in the building of social movements and community bonds – an approach very much reliant on the 'mass reproduction' of images and information afforded by digital media.

Wider theoretical and political resonances are also of interest. We can map, for example, Benjamin's speculative approach to repetition onto Gilles Deleuze's writing on 'difference and repetition'; or the evocative concept of 'aura' onto Derrida's notion of the metaphysics of presence. The idea of 'art as a techology' can be articulated with Foucault's theories of social institutions and discourses as operational forces, or 'technologies'. The sovereignty of art's autonomy – from use – in Adorno's aesthetics echoes intriguingly Bataille's 'base materialism' (the sovereignty of the useless and discarded), which itself converges with Benjamin's 'ragpicker' technique in the *Arcades* project of mining the bygone and outmoded for the revolutionary sparks that may yet be contained there. Similarly, we can pick up on Benjamin and Kracauer's guarded approval of mass forms of cultural reproduction insofar as they are fatal to the mystifications of 'auratic art', and focus it on the role of 'reproductive labour' in breaking down the mystique of (also artistic) production from a feminist standpoint. From there, we can also connect to the renewed debates around 'usefulness' in contemporary artistic practice in light of shifts in forms of support and experience driven by wider social dynamics such as global economic austerity and the pervasiveness of the digital. Finally, the proximity between mimesis, second nature, and Benjamin's writing on first and second technology have found a lively echo in recent debates between scholars such as Jasper Bernes (*Endnotes*) and

Alberto Toscano, which coalesce around the question of the role of present-day technologies in a communist future. There are myriad strategic no less than political dimensions to such questions, and the prismatic materialism of Frankfurt School critical theory has much to tell us as we again face a darkening social horizon.

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# On Ideology, Aesthetics, and Critique

Owen Hulatt

## INTRODUCTION

This essay examines the connection between art, ideology, and pathologies of reason. And this in itself requires justification – why think that there is a connection between such radically disparate domains? For critical theory, of course, these domains are not simply connected, but deeply interrelated in such a way that they mutually determine one another. Indeed, for one significant strand of critical theory the artwork is a means of criticizing ideology, and for revealing deep-seated misdevelopments and pathologies in our form of reason and society. Much ink has been spilled on the specific claims which have been advanced regarding these interconnections and artwork-based critiques, with special reference to the work of Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, and, above all, Theodor Adorno. But, in this chapter, I am less concerned with these writers' specific claims than with the idea that is their precondition – that art can be critical at all.

Why has critical theory, at least in its first generation, been so enamoured with this idea? Is it cogent? And is it still applicable today? I will focus on the work of Theodor Adorno, whose work on aesthetics far surpasses that of his contemporaries in depth, complexity, and ambition. Many of the issues we will find in his work will be of importance to other writers of his time who made use of similar interpretive strategies, but I cannot here pursue these parallels in detail.

## HISTORICAL GROUNDS

Critical theory stands in the lineage of post-Kantian critical philosophy.<sup>1</sup> While we cannot here trace this historical relationship too deeply, a thumbnail sketch is of use in getting to grips with the reasons for Adorno's confidence that art is – in quite literal terms – a source of knowledge and social criticism. To grasp this point, we need to look again at

the puzzle raised above – on what grounds are art, social criticism, ideology, and forms of rationality seen as connected? Why should the latter be able to show up in, and be criticized by, the former?

The philosophical arguments which legitimate seeing these apparently separate conceptual domains as interconnected are complex, and largely stem from a number of features in the critical project more generally. It is far beyond the remit of this chapter to lay out this history in full, but an incomplete narrative can be given.<sup>2</sup> For one strand of post-Kantianism, increasing emphasis was given to the determining role of inter-subjective relationships in constituting self-consciousness. Much could be said here about the critical role of Fichte in introducing institutional and inter-subjective content into the transcendental preconditions of experience, but in the context of Adorno's account of art, it is Hegel that provides the most important explanatory link. For Hegel, the categories of one's thought were an expression of an underlying, trans-subjective process, which socio-historically determined the limits and nature of what was thinkable. While reason drew its features – and internal contradictions – from this process, it was not identical to it. And hence, this process – together with its contradictions, its problems, and its potentials – could have a determining influence on other areas of human life besides reason and philosophy itself. In other words, the problems which beleaguered reason were not only present in reason itself; they were reflections of features of the deeper process that structured reason itself. And these features of that deeper process could show up in the other areas of human life which drew on and gave expression to this process. Art was a paradigm case of one of these 'other areas' of human life; and it was art which was seen as, at varying historical points, mirroring, exceeding, or falling behind reason's capability to work through the contradictions of the process which underwrote them both.

For Hegel, then, art and reason both feed into and are fed into by a mutually underlying process. As this process – *Geist* – is a historical, developmental process, the relationship between problems of reason and features of art alters across time. What the artist is capable of doing is firmly constrained by when the artist is working; and the same constraint operating on the artist is at work elsewhere, in determining the possibilities of reason, ethical life, and so on. Hegel's is a *content-centred* aesthetics. *Geist* determines and shows up – to differing levels of explicitness – in the content and form of both art and reason. Accordingly, the various media of *Geist* (art, religion, and philosophy, for example) share the same content, and at different stages in the development of *Geist* they are capable of exceeding each other in their realization of that content. For Hegel, the content of art is thus intrinsically linked to and reflective of extra-aesthetic developments, and deficiencies. And so, the idea that art might interact with problems of genuine importance to philosophy and reason makes immediate sense; both art and reason are immersed in and determined by the same process, and so beset by and able to intervene in the same problems contained within that process.

With Hegel's extension of the critical project, a hermeneutic connection is made between what are, *prima facie*, entirely distinct domains; artistic form, socio-historical content, and rational problematics. And this opened the possibility to see art as a form of knowledge. So, Hegel provides a simple and neat set of structures which can allow for art and social pathologies to be inter-penetrative. There is a subtending process which underlies them both, and which shows up in and determines them. For Hegel, this subtending process is developing – continually improving humanity's comprehension of its own freedom, and progressively clarifying and pacifying the relationship between mind and world. And this process is ultimately more developed in reason than art; for Hegel, art in modernity came to forfeit the developmental

edge of *Geist*, and began to lag behind philosophy and religion.<sup>3</sup> *Geist* is a story of – among other things – increasingly adequate and explicit cognitive relationships between subjects and the objective world; accordingly, while art for a time comes to prominence as the most sophisticated statement and resolution of the goals and problems of *Geist*, it is finally superseded by religion and philosophy, as these goals and problems reach a level of discursive complexity no longer capturable by art, but must be taken up and carried further by reason, which has the conceptual complexity required to carry them further.<sup>4</sup>

Adorno drew on both Hegel and philosophies preoccupied with the notion of a ‘totality’<sup>5</sup> more broadly, and gave them a simple inversion. Suppose art and reason are indeed mutually underpinned by a process, but that – contra Hegel – this process is *agonic*; it does not develop, but degenerates; it does not progressively disclose the world, but rather progressively occludes it. Adorno replaces the metaphysical construct of *Geist* with the post-metaphysical idea of a ‘dialectic of enlightenment’,<sup>6</sup> a deepening crisis in the instrumentalization of reason, and its exclusion of non-abstract facts and experiences. For Adorno, as for Hegel, reason has developed and intensified this background process more than art. But as Adorno’s background process is one of degeneration, Adorno does not see reason as superseding art; reason has rather passed further along the stages of a harmful pathology. It falls to art to serve as a preserver of what is being lost. Art exhibits, but does not merely submit to, the deficiencies and pathologies by which Adorno understands reason to have been increasingly defeated.

Just as Adorno inverts the process/totality optimism found in the sources on which he draws, so too does he invert the idea that concepts and objects fall into a progressively more adequate relationship. Rather, for Adorno, reason increasingly abstracts away from, and hence fails to capture, the objects with which it deals. This

tendency – sometimes referred to by the catch-all term ‘identity thinking’<sup>7</sup> – has ostensibly reached such a pitch that all concepts ineluctably falsify their objects. This sorry state of affairs only compounds the crucial and unique role of art, to which falls the only opportunity to express problems in this underlying process/totality without having this expression falsified by the faulty tools of language and concepts. Art for Adorno comes to occupy an entirely central position; art can express entirely without falsification the ostensible problems with the world, and its form of reason. Art is less distorted by the contradictions of the social totality than reason; art lags behind reason and thereby preserves contact with the world in a way which reason increasingly does not.

In sum, for Adorno the relationship between art and reason is as follows. Both art and reason are informed by, and connected to, an underlying collection of processes (namely, the social totality). These processes are pathological – they are pathological in the sense of being mis-calibrated, tending towards the frustration, rather than realization, of human potential. The pathological nature of these processes finds realization in, among others, social pathologies (the generation of a social whole which tends towards the harm and even elimination of its constitutive members), and in epistemic pathologies (the progressive closing off of proper epistemic access to the world). Adorno’s account of the enabling conditions and origin of this pathology are intricate and complex – it ultimately stems and draws its nature from a move towards instrumentalization and abstraction which finds its origins at the very beginning of human culture.<sup>8</sup> Reason intensifies and succumbs to this pathology; art, by contrast, does not (fully) succumb, and so can critically reflect and make visible the often concealed faultiness of reason and rationality. It falls to art – like philosophy – to *express* rather than discursively *state* the falsity of reason. To *state* the falsity of reason would be to make use of concepts and conceptual

structures – as well as pre-set forms of judgement, inference, and justification – which Adorno claims irrevocably and ineluctably render false all claims and judgements which make use of them. The falsity of reason cannot be stated, then, as such a statement would have to be made via the very concepts and rational processes which have been made pathologically incapable of stating the truth.<sup>9</sup> To *express* the falsity of reason, by contrast, is for a philosophical text or artwork to embody or show the failure of concepts in a way which is not fully capturable in discursive terms. (This curious idea of non-discursive expression is a difficult one to fix; however, we will enter into it in some more detail further below.)

Adorno's account of the relationship between art and knowledge is superlatively complex, depending on an intricate critical picture of various interlocking structures of various types (social, cognitive, conceptual, somatic) and balancing a number of modes of description which are not obviously compatible (including the genealogical, historical, polemical, and musicological). In this respect, Adorno very likely represents the termination of one current in critical philosophy, expanding out the conditions of the possibility of features of human life to the very limits of cogency, embracing and claiming reciprocal causal interrelation between a dizzying array of phenomena and structures. This is responsible for much of the enjoyment and interest which can be found in reading Adorno, as it throws up no end of interesting technical problems in considering the cogency, or possibility, of its underlying structure. I have, however, explored these technical problems in Adorno's account in this way elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> What I would like to do here instead is to consider what Adorno's analysis of art is *for*. Quite beyond technical issues in critical philosophy, we might consider whether Adorno's account of art is true *now*; whether it provides a means of comprehending art's current place in the world and – if not – whether it can be modified to do so.

The primary function of an aesthetic theory – even and especially where it claims aesthetics is intertwined with political and philosophical problems – is to elucidate actual art. Accordingly, we are obliged to examine how things stand with contemporary art, reason, and society. Let us examine whether Adorno's aesthetic theory remains relevant, and remains capable of finding and elucidating an informative connection between art and reason; and whether the structural preconditions for Adorno's claims about the criticality of art still obtain.

## ADORNO'S ACCOUNT OF ART NOW

As Espen Hammer notes in his recent work on Adorno's modernism, Adorno largely had a blind spot for contemporary developments in the visual arts which had already showed signs of the kind of fragmentation which some would term post-modernism.<sup>11</sup> This 'fragmentation' consists in the multiplication and untethering of approaches to artistic construction from pre-set or canonical compositional rules. Adorno, unbeknownst to himself, flags up this blind spot in *Aesthetic Theory*. He writes of Picasso, and his stamping of newspaper fragments into his work:

[Philosophy's] labour of Sisyphus is that it must reflect the untruth and guilt that it takes on itself, thereby correcting it when possible. It cannot paste its ontic substratum into the text; by speaking of it, philosophy already makes it into what it wants to free itself from. Modern art has registered dissatisfaction with this ever since Picasso disrupted his pictures with scraps of newspaper, an act from which all montage derives. The social element is aesthetically done justice in that it is not imitated, which would effectively make it fit for art, but is, rather, injected into art by an act of sabotage.<sup>12</sup>

We see here Adorno's implicit autonomism; the importing of heteronomous material into the artwork can never be imitative, but always abrupt, 'injected ... by an act of sabotage'. Indeed, Adorno takes it that the autonomy of

the artwork strictly prohibits that an artwork explicitly imitates the world external to it. In this way Adorno dispatches any attempt to directly work the heteronomous, and criticism of the heteronomous, into the artwork. It is Adorno's claim that accomplished, successful art is constructed purely along formal lines, a 'windowless monad'<sup>13</sup> which foregoes any simple reflection of the world outside it. Rather, the artwork's criticality stems from a kind of formal compositional force found in the aesthetic materials themselves, whose demands alone the artist must follow.<sup>14</sup>

But this is of course beside the point. If art is a movable concept, about which the only thing that is self-evident is that 'nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore',<sup>15</sup> then we must read its constitution off the face of the artworld as we now find it. And what we find is that the formalistic experimentation which the newspaper was pasted into has waned. For Adorno, the direct pasting of the newspaper was only an opportunity to prove and test the power of the formally closed artwork to radically rework material from the external world, to strip it of its extra-aesthetic meaning and give it a role in the formally closed artwork, where it took on a radically new meaning. However, now we find that this act of 'pasting' – of allowing the world outside the artwork to show up directly, unchanged in the artwork – has become utterly central to modern art, and much of modern art cannot be understood without it. We now find that closed, autonomous artworks are no longer possible, and the direct importing of material from the extra-aesthetic world has taken on a new function. These 'pasted' or imitated parts of the external world retain their meaning from the extra-aesthetic world, and as a result the artwork is unclosed, does not conceal and complicate its meaning through formal innovation, but rather offers it to us directly.

To wit, artworks are now unclosed; if they were once windowless monads, their hermetic seal has now been punctured. To take two simple examples, we have Mark Wallinger's Tate entry *State Britain 2007*,

which perfectly replicated Brian Haw's Parliament Square placards from his protest against the Iraq War; or Ai Weiwei's S.A.C.R.E.D., consisting of six hyperrealist dioramas narrating the artist's arrest and imprisonment by the Chinese Government in 2011. Wallinger's *State Britain 2007* directly interpolates, without significant mediation, an act of political protest, and places it on display. In doing so, it bears its socially critical content substantially on its face, without the need for oblique, formal artistic means of producing social criticism. Wallinger and Ai Weiwei's artworks are irreducibly political, in no way capturable by attending primarily to their formal qualities, and held, at least by some, as artworks of considerable accomplishment. The relationship between the artwork and the world external to it is entirely open; the artwork does not only follow the demands of its own material but reaches quite directly into the world. And the converse is also true; the art appreciator is not rebuffed by the kind of non-representative formal complexity often characteristic of modernism, but explicitly invited in by the artwork's use of unambiguously meaningful materials. Adorno's emphasis on the artwork's hermetically closed autonomy leaves him with no obvious means of responding to these kinds of art. As Hammer puts it,

One final problem with Adorno's account of material is that it seems to contain few or perhaps no resources for thinking about art that wilfully ignores whatever demands may seem to be arising from the material. Examples of such art might be minimalism in music; video and installation art; land-art ... and indeed much of the often dematerialized, site-specific, or non-medium-specific art that rose to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s ... [and] continues to dominate the contemporary art world.<sup>16</sup>

The question now is, given the expansion of art's engagement with heteronomous content, what does this mean for art? Now that it is ungoverned by a canon, and under no compulsion to adhere to formally complex conventions of convention, it can directly import

critical heteronomous content. An artwork is under no compulsion to re-work or formally manipulate the external world – indeed, it can import parts of the external world directly as ready-mades or through collage, including parts of the external world which have discursive, directly political and socially critical content. This being so, is it in a better situation – with regards to its criticality, its connection to social content, or its quality, all of which were intertwined, for Adorno – or worse? After all, critical theory is selective – it is only ‘authentic art’ for Adorno which has the ability to engage and break the pathologies of reason external to it. Perhaps these kinds of art are no longer available. Perhaps we should not deny that there is art, but should deny there is any art worth having. This latter thought is not foreign to Adorno, whose theory often touches on a possible end of the possibility of autonomous, meaningful art.<sup>17</sup> But, again, this is couched in terms of a formalism, and a modernism, which we are now even less obliged to accept as necessary compositional demands than at the time of Adorno’s writing. Let us consider the state of contemporary art a little more, which is now no longer explicable in terms of modernist and formalist theories of composition and reception, and see what might remain of the criticality of the artwork.

We might note at the outset that art, by virtue of the puncturing of its hermetic seal, has in many ways lost its canon. The field of compositional possibilities is entirely open; while previous artworks might serve as reference points or inspirations, they cannot serve as determining *demands* on the artworks that come after them. With the loss of a canon – of causal, formal consequences of the interrelation between the past and future seen as a continuous history, no matter how imaginary – comes a delocation of aesthetic meaning. Wagner’s use of the unresolved dissonant ‘Tristan Chord’ is, objectively and necessarily, a building on, reference to, and extension of Beethoven’s ‘resolved’ use of these dissonant resources in his *Opus 31*. These works

stand within a continuous narrative; namely one of the ongoing formal expansion and development of compositional resources. By contrast, the reference of post-modern artworks to their forebears is *not* necessary; it is rather contingently selected by the artist, for contingent reasons which are provided to us in the exhibition catalogue. Here we see the loss of compositional weight of the canon; an artist is now free to interrogate it, and does so without objective compulsion, or indeed any need.<sup>18</sup>

We can in fact see in art itself, the symptoms of a great stress and strain which this hollowing out of a common system of meanings has created. Much of the consequence of this is the denuded search for common, universal structures of meaning. The plastic arts exhibit this tendency most readily, and perhaps have suffered the loss of a canonical anchoring most keenly. We might consider here the work of Anthony Gormley, which implicitly and relentlessly fastens onto the ineradicable horizon of common meaning which representations of the body will always carry with them. It is a matter of taste as to whether this is humane or manipulative, but the hermeneutic gambit here is clear. As a horizon of common significations of meaning and a compositional past is weakened, a clear response is to scuttle backwards into unassailable complexes of ahistorical meaning. We also find this tendency in land-art (we might consider Andy Goldsworthy’s use of natural materials and forms; Richard Long’s creation of ‘line’ artworks through walking; Robert Smithson’s creation of large-scale earthworks), which likewise seems to present itself as moving towards a putative basic layer of meaning. We find similar universalizing moves, through appeals to ostensibly basic forms of meaning, in other kinds of plastic composition. The work of Anish Kapoor, for example, evinces a kind of sensuous formalism, which yields entirely to what Adorno would have termed the ‘culinary’ appreciation of art (culinary appreciation being an exclusively hedonic and sensuous mode of

art appreciation directed towards drawing pleasure from the surface level properties of an artwork).<sup>19</sup> More broadly, the marked increase in the use of larger scale in plastic artworks is used as a blunt and immediate means of impressing a meaning and content on its viewer, simply by dint of its physical presence. Whatever the virtues of these works themselves, there is here a visible, and increasingly desperate, trajectory of flight away from a problem; namely, the evacuation of a hospitable, objective, and communal sphere of meaning.

This is by no means the only, or even predominant, response to this problem. The other main response moves in the opposite direction; rather than fleeing the 'emptied middle', it seeks to fill it. Here we find the peculiarly modern case of the artist with an expansive, and almost entirely private, personal iconography. Dali represented one of the earliest and most lurid examples of this modern tendency, in which artworks were filled with signifiers only comprehensible in tandem with the artist's own declaration of their meaning (see Dali's frequent use of ants, which symbolized decay, due to Dali's *private* childhood encounter with decomposing animals being consumed by insects; compare this with Manet's use of the frog in *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe*, which derives its meaning from the *public* slang term for prostitute, '*grenouille*').

The evacuation of the canon, then, amounts to an evacuation of a common compositional core. It also enervates any kind of compositional necessity, in the context of which an artist's autonomy, or originality, can be understood. This is a problem for, as well as a feature of, modern art. As Arthur Danto, writing about a different kind of end of art, from a different set of commitments, wrote:

As Marx might say, you can be an abstractionist in the morning, a photorealist in the afternoon, a minimal minimalist in the evening. Or you can cut out paper dolls or do what you damned please. The age of pluralism is upon us. It does not matter any longer what you do, which is what pluralism

means. When one direction is as good as another direction, there is no concept of direction any longer to apply.<sup>20</sup>

But what is the significance of this for critical theory? Art, for Adorno, reflected society by virtue of being compelled, via constraints on its compositional processes, in such a way that an oblique imprint of that society was left on it. If art is no longer externally compelled and constrained at all by compositional genres, social and artistic conventions, formal demands, or the canon, it would seem that the artwork begins to bear an arbitrary or frictionless relationship to its external world. And this would entail that socio-critical content could not be communicated to the artwork – or at least, not in the same way as before.

## THE EMPTIED MIDDLE

For Adorno, artworks were characteristically puzzle-like in nature.<sup>21</sup> The artwork formally manipulated contents which had significance beyond their mere formal properties. When Beethoven introduced a rogue element to his *String Quartet in F Major* sonata, irreducible to the pre-set demands of the sonata form, this was for Adorno no mere compositional quirk, but rather signified a criticism and revelation of a core feature of society in general, and reason in particular:

In the totality of its form, Beethoven's music represents the social process. In doing so it shows how each individual moment – in other words, each individual process of production within society – is made comprehensible only in terms of its function within the reproduction of society as a whole [...] Beethoven's music is Hegelian philosophy: but at the same time it is truer than that philosophy. [...] Logical identity as immanent to form – as an entity at the same time fabricated and aesthetic – is both constituted and criticized by Beethoven. [...] At this point a precise analysis of the D major passage from the slow movement of the great String Quartet in F Major [op. 59, 1: third movement, bars 70ff] must be given. [...] when the recapitulation fails to appear it is made clear that formal unity is insufficient [...]<sup>22</sup>

Analyses like these make sense – are possible – if and only if there is a unified continuity between forms of artistic composition (which Adorno believes, lending this common progress within a common problematic the term ‘aesthetic technology’<sup>23</sup>), and a unified social whole which relates to that unified continuity (which Adorno also notoriously believes to be the case, terming it a ‘social totality’).<sup>24</sup> The former condition has been broken off. There is not a centralized body of concerns and practices titled ‘art’ (or even less ambitiously ‘painting’, ‘poetry’, etc) which a social totality can determine and show up in. Rather we have a vast collection of forms of artistic practice at the peripheries, with an emptied hermeneutic middle which could have united them.

The artwork generated meaning, for Adorno, through its autonomy. Indeed, autonomy was for Adorno an absolutely crucial feature of the artwork; by virtue of being autonomous, it acquired a standpoint from which to resist and criticize the encroaching heteronomy of the society external to it. However, aesthetic autonomy is an intrinsically corrosive, relational feature. As Horowitz puts it,

[I]f autonomy in art is the work's refusal to let anything outside itself determine its form, then the autonomous work is just the appearance of that refusal [...] But this of course entails that the work is bound irredeemably to what does not determine it; it is constrained to show what does not constrain it. [...] [I]t must visibly negate something and can only appear as the negation of that thing.<sup>25</sup>

To be critical, then, the artwork rejects; and the ongoing possibility of this rejection is conditioned by what it rejects. When Wagner introduced dissonance into his compositional scheme, he was not only following on from Beethoven's continued opening up of compositional resources in his late period, he was also rebuffing and resisting the ‘culinary’ appreciation of Beethoven which increasingly dulled its edge. Dissonance was challenging. But, even in Adorno's time, social

heteronomy was finding ways of instrumentalizing heteronomy, and making it marketable, as for example in the popular jazz of his time:

To be sure, dissonances occur in jazz practice, and even techniques of intentional ‘mis-playing’ [*Falschspielens*] have developed. But an appearance of harmlessness accompanies all these customs; every extravagant sonority must be so produced that the listener can recognize it as a substitute for a ‘normal’ one. While he rejoices in the mistreatment the dissonance gives to the consonance whose place it takes, the virtual consonance simultaneously guarantees that one remains within the circle.<sup>26</sup>

This trajectory, of the normalization of dissonance, has at our time become more than completed. Popular music bristles with dissonance, to the extent that it is difficult to discern without effort. (One need only consider the use of tritone intervals as a mechanism for generating tension or emotional excitement, found in as diverse musical examples as *West Side Story*'s ‘Maria’, the theme-tune of *The Simpsons*, and film scores.) The preservation of art's autonomy, then, is a process of art emptying itself out, continually shrinking away from the heteronomous world (of commercial art, popular music, etc). And this is of course a finite business, as Adorno perceived.<sup>27</sup> The artwork has only so many compositional strategies and resources to throw overboard; it cannot empty itself infinitely, but must sooner or later find itself with nothing further to sacrifice. A deeper way of understanding the narrative above about canonicity, then, is in terms of autonomy. When the world external to artwork has completely absorbed and instrumentalized all of the compositional strategies left to the artwork, how can it preserve its autonomy? What remains?

The answer is: ‘nothing’. The critical autonomy which Adorno privileged has been obviated. Every last gasp of compositional radicality has been re-used and exhausted. Art, through staying true to both its autonomy and its canon, has destroyed both. It has



continually shrunk away from heteronomy until its own compositional rules became unsatisfiable. Adorno noted that art threatened to 'fall silent' – and if art had continued to insist on its autonomy, this would have come to pass. Instead, autonomy itself, and the conservation of the canon that was sustained by this autonomy, was jettisoned.

The progressive chain of increasingly autonomized artworks has been broken off, and the artwork must now seek its meaning elsewhere. The kinds of hermeneutics of suspicion which Adorno, Benjamin, and Bloch wielded so effectively are now obviated. For art to have common pathologies with society, both art and society must be minimally unified entities which can relate to and determine each other in the appropriate way. But with the uncoupling of meaning from some determinate anchor, it is no longer clear how this would be possible. With this emptied middle, artworks can be constructed in any way whatsoever, draw on any content whatsoever, and relate to society in any way whatsoever.

This is most fatal when we consider the central role, in Adorno's account and those like his, of art's expression of a critical stance in relation to social and rational problematics. When there is no centre of gravity in artistic composition – no necessary canon, compositional schema, or limits on what is acceptable as a compositional choice – the artist's choice cannot be understood as a refusal, criticism, or expression of the limits of pre-set formal units or demands. It was just these pre-set formal units or demands which Adorno identified with pathologies of reason and society, as mirroring the occlusive and dogmatic nature of concepts and social structures;<sup>28</sup> and it was in refusing and manipulating these that most often art could be true, by expressing the falsity of these demands, and the social problems they stand for. The conflict between autonomy and the externally imposed is utterly central to the idea of art working through or improving on that self-same conflict in reason (reason's struggle in reaching its own autonomy and throwing off the constraints of

dogmatism and ideology). When art is emptied of its compositional constraint, such a conflict cannot be generated; and expression of the same problems facing reason cannot be achieved, either. There is no longer a set of compulsions which can be rejected, so as to display and achieve autonomy. So not only has art degenerated into fragments, which can no longer maintain the kind of causal contact necessary for Adorno's account, but art has also lost the formal preconditions needed for the kind of critical expressivity which Adorno and those like him need to find in art. This leaves us with the question of whether critical theory's old strategy of seeing the artwork as true and critical is now – if it ever was – workable. For the reasons I have recounted above, I do not believe it is.

## A NEW CRITICAL LOOK AT THE ARTWORK

The question remains of how an artwork might be able to interact with, to critique, ideology, forms of thought, and other social pathologies. In one sense, the answer is apparent – an artwork is now free to be whatever it wants. Adorno once wrote:

Although judgments may occur in it, the work itself does not make judgments ... If the discursive element takes primacy, the relation of the artwork to what is external to it becomes all too unmediated and the work accommodates itself even at those points where, as in Brecht, it takes pride in standing in opposition to reality.<sup>29</sup>

But if the autonomy of art is no longer historically possible, this is no longer binding. An artwork may simply constitute a philosophical or political text or gesture, and be exhibited; it may advance explicit political, philosophical, or social judgements. And indeed, this has happened, as we have discussed above.

We of course find this response dissatisfying, precisely because such an artwork

is without significant effect. Precisely by virtue of being exhibited, it appears bloodless and divorced from its stated function of effecting a change in the world surrounding the artwork itself. The contemporary prevalence of the art installation can perhaps be understood as a reaction against this, an attempt to preserve not only the content, but the force of the artistic critique in the external world. As the artwork's strategies are continually co-opted and vitiated by the world external to it, the temptation to intervene directly in the world and dictate the conditions of its own effect and interpretation are clear. The installation not only represents, but brings about a critique of or visible change in, the world itself; the installation is a palpable intervention, no matter how limited, into the world which surrounds the artwork. As laudable as this attempt is, it is in no small measure undermined by the institutionalization of art (installations are most often installed, after all, in galleries), and above all by the comparative inability of the artwork to intercede in and overpower the society external to it, to counter-act that society's ability to absorb and re-interpret it.

Despite the evacuation of the hermeneutic centre, the threat to art remains the same as it was for Adorno – it must find a novel means of presenting criticism while evading absorption by that which it criticizes. For Adorno, this criticism was possible through autonomous formal experimentation, taking place against a unified backdrop of an objective canon. Autonomous formal experimentation was, as Adorno himself perceived, a limited and short-term response to the problem. The artwork continually evacuated itself of whatever content society succeeded in absorbing and placing to use; and it has now emptied itself entirely (as Adorno himself anticipated<sup>30</sup>). It remains now to be seen whether some critical art might be possible which foregoes the now impossible and ineffective closed, formal autonomous approach.

## CRITICISM WITHOUT JUDGEMENT

For Adorno the artwork expresses no judgement, but it affords to the art appreciator a formal complex which engages and criticizes the form of judgement. In other words, the artwork is for Adorno *judgementally germane*. Combined with Adorno's commitment to autonomy as a precondition for these judgementally germane productions, the thought emerges that for Adorno, ideology is characteristically a form of maladapted judgement; as are, more obviously, the pathologies of reason and society he criticizes. Art's autonomy is a resistance to a judgementally malformed world; and, hence, creates a properly ordered whole which invites properly ordered judgements. This judgemental propriety of the artwork was predicated on a resistive autonomy which is no longer available. However, Adorno also has a conception of the artwork's criticality, somewhat more muted, which provides a means of seeing the critical function of the artwork in a quite different light. This is his notion of non-representational expression more generally.

Expression, for Adorno, is a means by which the artwork can grasp and display the nature of the society external to it. Crucially, however, this expression is non-representational. Adorno most often understood this expression as the expression of normative complaints, or somatic suffering.

[E]xpression is scarcely to be conceived except as the expression of suffering – joy has proven inimical to expression, perhaps because it has yet to exist, and bliss would be beyond expression – expression is the element immanent to art through which, as one of its constituents, art defends itself against the immanence that it develops by its law of form [...] Art is expressive when what is objective, subjectively mediated, speaks, whether this be sadness, energy, or longing. Expression is the suffering countenance of artworks.<sup>31</sup>

In these respects, the expressivity of the artwork was critical by virtue of that which it was expressing. Namely, given states of suffering which – or so Adorno believed – contained an

intrinsic normative demand which was effective without the need for any further normative justification.<sup>32</sup> Here, then, the subject of expression was capable of having critical power in relation to forms of judgement. As somatic states of suffering have – so Adorno claims – intrinsic normative weight, their expression amounts to an irresistible rebuff to any judgement that the world – and the form of reason which underwrites the world – is adequately realized and free from pathology. Suffering informs us that how things are, should not be so; and thereby has an ineliminable critical power in relation to structures of judgement.

Quite apart from Adorno's dubious claims about the intrinsic normative power of states of suffering – and the artwork's ability to express them – Adorno is here operating with a needlessly denuded conception of expressivity. Expression need not only be a literal expression of some given pathic state; we can also conceive of expression as giving oblique expression to experiential states, as expressing alternative relations in which phenomena might stand.<sup>33</sup> What might find expression is some *experiential ordering*, some structured presentation of objects of experience which find themselves ordered and arranged in a means which breaks with our conventional means of grasping and using them.

For Adorno, ideologies, or indeed rational and social pathologies, were most often understood as kinds of occlusion, or covering.<sup>34</sup> And, indeed, it was the job of art, like philosophy, to bring about a revealing of that which was concealed; an 'identification of the non-identical'.<sup>35</sup> While this uncovering could only be accomplished by a highly complex set of paratactical critiques (in the case of philosophy), or formalist experimentation (in the case of art), it is nonetheless the case that we find here a vertical model of critique. We have the criticized form of reason, which culpably abstracts away from the lower-level and more genuine state of affairs of the world. Here, it is the job of the artwork to forcibly acquaint the former with the latter;

to drag abstract concepts back down to the terrain of the real, where they will founder on those 'non-identical' features which they rose above, and are incapable of accommodating. This 'vertical' model, then, is characteristically about interceding in judgements, and attempting to repair the explanatory connection between forms of judgement and the objects they have lost contact with. The expression of suffering was one means of forcibly dragging abstraction down to the level of the particulars which it – in Adorno's view – was causing harm to.

By means of exploiting Adorno's notion of expression, however, we could instead make use of a horizontal model. On a horizontal model, we do not seek to judgementally connect concepts with some exterior set of excluded facts about the world – in other words, we do not seek to bring concepts into contact with 'non-identical' states of affairs which those concepts had culpably failed to capture. Instead, we confine ourselves to the realm of semblance and appearances themselves, and give expression to alternative ways in which those appearances could be organized and ordered. But what do we mean by this? As a first pass, we can say simply that we mean that the artworks can recast the relational properties which obtain experientially between phenomena. They can invert or modify relations of prominence, of compossibility, of entailment, and of significance. They can force the insignificant to appear entirely significant, to break relations of entailment between phenomena which appeared to us necessary, and set up relations of entailment where in our present social reality none exist. This makes palpable to the art appreciator the existence of other alternatives. Art demonstrates that our intuitively experienced world, with its relationships of apparent necessity, compossibility, and entailment, is in fact genuinely and constantly revisable.

This amounts to a criticality of the artwork only where we reveal possibilities where none were meant to exist. In other words, when the officially necessary is shown to be,

in fact, contingent. The creation of the false appearance of necessity is entirely key to Adorno's understanding of the operation of both ideology and identity thinking. In either case, we are misled into seeing the field of possibilities as standing in a single way, and as standing in this way necessarily. If an artwork can demonstrate alternative possibilities of ordering, this in itself would serve as a rebuff to these kinds of implicit ideologies to which we are subject.

The important question now is: how would this be *socially* critical? It is obviously true that artworks can place phenomena in different relational positions, and present alternative norms, patternings, and orderings in relation to those artistic phenomena. But how is this intended to intercede in ideologies, social pathologies, or pathologies of reason? To make sense of this, we will need to recast ideology, and pathologies of reason also, as no longer (merely) consisting in a vertical relationship which requires judgemental adjustment, but as also having a horizontal complement which art could expressively intervene in and demonstrate as contingent. In other words, we need to see ideologies and failures of reason as judgemental errors which are not exclusively combatable through vertical critique, which seeks to forcibly bring together the abstract form of judgement, and the real facts it has culpably excluded.

To make sense of this, we need only claim that cognitive practices and misdevelopments, as well as manifesting judgemental failures, also make claims derivative on those judgemental errors, which amount to a claim of complete accuracy, or necessity, about the relational layout of the experiential world. In other words, structures of judgement also entail structures of *appearance* and *semblance*. Ideologies and epistemic pathologies operate with an implicit assurance of the complete adequacy between concepts and the world. Just this, of course, is what Adorno liked to call 'identity thinking' – the belief in a rigid and irrevocable match-up between conceptual structures and the world itself. But

identity thinking – committed to the existence of a perfect fit between concept and object – entails that the relational properties which obtain between those concepts should likewise show up in relations of semblance between those objects subject to those concepts. And by adverting to and manipulating those relations of semblance – in showing them to be non-necessary and open to change – we can therefore show that the concepts which back them are likewise contingent, and fail to perfectly fit the world they are applied to.

We can express – give non-judgemental semblance to – a variety of pictures of the world, of its relational layout, which appear cogent and workable. And this serves not as proof that there is some non-identical 'beyond' or 'concealed' by concepts, but rather only that the world as we implicitly experience it, and conform to it, is revisable. Hence, ideology (understood as a misleading picture of necessary conditions) and malformed systems of thought remain vulnerable to criticism through the artwork, by virtue of their derivative semblances being able to be disconfirmed through the artwork's ability to tease out and express alternative relational layouts of appearance.

Examples of this kind of horizontal criticism can be found most easily in literature, where we are confronted with people behaving in ways we take to be puzzling; where relationships of apparently necessary entailment between action and response are broken, or distorted into causal lines we find unexpected and difficult to comprehend. We might consider here Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, in which the main character reliably and continually fails to exhibit the responses that seem demanded from the actions of others; the work of Beckett and Kafka (valued by Adorno, of course, for different reasons), in which inter-personal relationships lose their natural flow and become the continual imposition of interpretive puzzles (Kafka's *The Castle* is an especially clear example of this). We might consider similar examples, where human figures are shown in apparently absurd or non-naturalistic

patterns of action, response, and significance in other media (in film, for example, we could consider Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* and *Andrei Rublev*; Aleksei German's *Hard to Be a God*). Here we find quite easily traceable pictures of alternative forms of human relationship, reaction, and structure. But the same is also true in media which take up no explicit attempt to depict human figures or themes. In Kandinsky's intentional distortion of our reception of perspective in *Bustling Aquarelle*, or Schoenberg's relentless engagement and frustration of our melodic and rhythmic expectations in his *Five Piano Pieces* (Op. 23), we find the ordering of our experience and sensory modalities intentionally disarmed and confronted with alternative lines of explanation, causation, and combination. We find here a display of possibility; and, as has been said, the display of possibility suffices as critique when one's opponent (ideology; instrumental rationality) arrogates complete necessity to itself.

In closing, it should be admitted that this is a comparatively more meagre power we allot to the artwork than that which Adorno sought to give to it. We now find that artworks amount to expressive thumbnails of some possible relational contours, which serve only to loosen the apparently necessary relations of significance, entailment, and prominence, which are found in our everyday lives. This criticism essentially amounts to a kind of affordance of alternative viewpoints; a way of acquainting us with radically distinct means of ordering the experienced world. This presentation of relational possibility – the possibility of seeing things as structured differently – cannot hope to undo judgmental maladaptations, nor 'identify the non-identical'. What remains is an ability to counter poorly calibrated forms of judgement at a lower level, the level of derivative semblance, where alternative outcomes and structurings can be gestured towards and played out.

For us, then, the artwork's criticality is an altogether attenuated thing, compared with that which Adorno hoped to attach to it.

We find ourselves forced to give it a denuded and weakened function, capable at best of gesturing towards – but never defeating – false ideologies and forms of judgement. This more denuded function is, however – to repeat myself once more – historically produced, generated by the completion of a process of autonomization which Adorno himself, in pointing it out, realized was already hurtling towards its end point.

## Notes

- 1 See Clarke and Hulatt, 'Critical Theory as a Legacy of Post-Kantianism'.
- 2 For an enlightening history of this narrative of development, see Maharaj, *The Dialectics of Aesthetic Agency*.
- 3 '[I]t is certainly the case that art no longer affords that satisfaction of spiritual needs which earlier ages and nations sought in it [...] the conditions of our present time are not favourable to art [...] art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past' (Hegel, *Aesthetics*: 11–12).
- 4 Hegel, *Aesthetics*: 11–12.
- 5 For a conspectus of these, see Jay, 1992.
- 6 See Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.
- 7 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*: 149.
- 8 This is given direct, if at times vague, treatment in Adorno and Horkheimer's jointly authored *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.
- 9 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*: 8–9.
- 10 See my *Adorno's Theory of Philosophical and Aesthetic Truth*.
- 11 Hammer, *Adorno's Modernism*: 2.
- 12 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*: 334–5.
- 13 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*: 6.
- 14 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*: 72.
- 15 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*: 1.
- 16 Hammer, *Adorno's Modernism*: 191.
- 17 See my 'Hegel, Danto, Adorno, and the End and After of Art'.
- 18 We might ask here what is responsible for this dis-integration of the canon, the loss of formal compositional restraint, and the concomitant breakdown of the modernist form, or at least the breakdown of the connection between modernism and the canon that preceded it. This development has been produced by the reciprocal conflict and struggle between artistic autonomy and the heteronomizing processes of the society external to it. This will be covered below, in the section 'The Emptied Middle'.

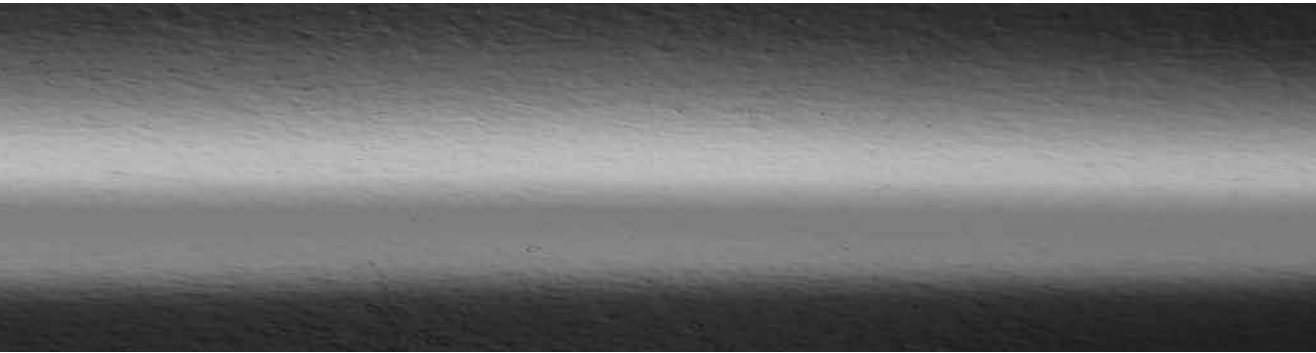
- 19 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*: 121.
- 20 Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*: 114–15.
- 21 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*: 160.
- 22 Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*: 13–14.
- 23 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*: 76–7.
- 24 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*: 47.
- 25 Horowitz, 'Art History and Autonomy': 274.
- 26 Adorno, *Essays on Music*: 306.
- 27 'What can only appear negatively mocks a resolution that it recognizes as false and which therefore debases the idea of the beautiful. Beauty's aversion to the overly smooth, the pat mathematical solution, which has compromised art with the lie throughout its history, becomes an aversion to any resultant, without which art can be conceived no more than it can be without the tensions out of which it emerges. The prospect of the rejection of art for the sake of art is foreseeable. It is intimidated by those artworks that fall silent or disappear' (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*: 69).
- 28 As Max Paddison puts it, 'At the level of the aesthetic, sublimated/repressed social antagonisms and internalized socio-cultural norms (including the process of rationalization itself) are displaced into the arena of the artistic material. The stage on which the conflict now plays itself out is the *structure* of the work of art, in the tension between mimesis and rationality, expression and construction, as the *immanent dialectic of the material*' (Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music*: 147, emphasis mine).
- 29 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*: 129.
- 30 'When according to history's verdict the unity of process and result no longer succeeds; when, above all, the individual elements refuse to mold themselves to the ever latently preconceived totality, the gaping divergence tears meaning apart [...] If artworks are alive in history by virtue of their own processual character, they are also able to perish in it [...] Ultimately their development is the same as their process of collapse' (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*: 235).
- 31 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*: 145–6.
- 32 'All pain and negativity, the moving forces of dialectical thinking, assume the variously conveyed, sometimes unrecognizable form of physical things ... The physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different. "Woe speaks: 'Go'"" (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*: 202–3).
- 33 We can see an analogy here with Clewis' account of the non-representational expression of the Kantian sublime, 'A Case for Kantian Artistic Sublimity': 169–70.
- 34 '[Ideology is] the surreptitious acquisition by indirect things of a directness vested with the authority of absolute, unimpeachable, subjectively evident being-in-itself' (*Negative Dialectics*: 82). 'The unity of that which general concepts cover differs fundamentally from the conceptually defined particular. The concept of the particular is always its negation at the same time; it cuts short what the particular is and what nonetheless cannot be directly named [...] the particular [is indissoluble] in the cover concept' (*Negative Dialectics*: 173).
- 35 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*: 29.

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*In memoriam*

Moishe Postone

Moishe Postone died on 19 March 2018. Words fail to express the sadness felt and the loss encountered. Amidst the misery of a time made abstract, a time of value for valorisation's sake, Moishe showed us what it means to think against the grain. He was *ein guter Mensch*.

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# Introduction: Contexts of Critical Theory

Beverley Best, Werner Bonefeld,  
and Chris O'Kane

Volume 3 is entitled 'Contexts of Critical Theory'. It brings together two distinct contributions. First, it discusses how critical theory emerged and developed in dialogue with and through the critique of other traditions and discourses, some of which it appropriated and transformed such as Marxism and psychoanalysis, others by way of challenging, critiquing or indeed polemically rejecting them. Second, it explores how critical theory lives on in a variety of contemporary contexts, likewise either by illuminating them critically, or negating them conceptually, or opposing them polemically. Volume 3 comprises three sections on the contexts of its emergence, the contexts of its later development, and finally on the elements of critical theory in the contemporary critique of capitalism and in contemporary social and political movements and theories, including feminism and gendered dynamics of social reproduction.

This Volume reaches back to Volumes 1 and 2 in that it provides theoretical context for the emergence of critical theory,

its further developments, and themes. The specific contributions and stance of critical theory developed through the critique of alternative approaches and by means of interdisciplinary argument and approach. Reality is always already-experienced reality mediated by thought. In this manner reality is a cognitive category that expresses social experience in theoretical terms. The dialogue with and critique of other traditions and discourses is therefore more than just a scholastic exercise of theoretical positioning and fine-tuning of a distinctive theoretical approach. Rather it is the development of theoretical understanding and insight into reality by means of immanent critique. It is through dialogue and critique that theory deepens its understanding of, and judgement on, the prevailing conditions of human-social existence, its conceptuality, dynamic and necessities, however contradictory and antagonistic this existence might be. The exploration of the contexts of critical theory thus reaches back to the key contributions in

Volume 1, adds an explanatory framework to the key themes of Volume 2, and establishes the contemporary character of the critical theory tradition, its rationale and immanent critique of contemporary social objectivity, probing the conditions of its 'transformability' [*Veränderlichkeit*], as Krahel put it.<sup>1</sup>

## PARTS AND CHAPTERS

Part VI, 'Contexts of the Emergence of Critical Theory', contains chapters that chart the development of critical theory as a critique of and in relationship to Marxism, Psychoanalysis, Council Communism, Positivism, Humanism and Existentialism, Neo-Kantianism, Sociology of Knowledge, art theory, Philosophy of Language, and Weberianism.

Frankfurt School Critical Theory emerged in the 1920s as a heterodox Marxist critique of political economy against the then-prevailing orthodoxy of the Second and Third Internationals. The characterization of orthodoxy has to do with its positivist manner of theorizing and its endorsement of historical materialism as the theoretical oracle of a supposedly quasi-mechanical unfolding of history, as Benjamin argued in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940). It was further characterized by its scientific approach to social objectivity, economic standpoint and political worldview. According to the then-orthodoxy, capitalism is the transition to socialism by means of the state. Jan Hoff's chapter expounds the critical theory critique of the Marxist orthodoxy and establishes its distinction from this tradition. The chapter conceives of critical theory as a reconstruction of Marxism as a critical social theory. The following chapter by Felix Baum introduces the council communist tradition and charts the significance of Karl Korsch's work for the founding of critical theory. Pollock in particular, and Horkheimer too, held close links to council communism and bemoaned its decline. Marcuse and Mattick, who was

a leading proponent of council communism, disputed the character of working class incorporation into the institutions of post-war capitalism. According to Marcuse, Mattick's objections to his *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) were the only 'solid' ones.

Anders Ramsay explores the dispute between critical theory and positivism, from Comte via the Marxist inclined Vienna Circle to the positivism dispute in the 1960s. For critical theory positivism obstructs a critical approach to society because it takes the social phenomena at face value without questioning its social contents. Yet, as became evident in the positivism dispute, positivism deals with posited reality, not idealized alternatives or fetishized social constructions, and for this reason positivism is an initial element of critical thought. Oliver Schlaudt explores the Frankfurt School's reading of sociology of knowledge, in particular the founding contribution by Karl Mannheim and his ostensibly Marxist-leaning theory of ideology. Schlaudt continues to explore Boltanski's more recent 'break' with Bourdieu, a rehearsal once again of the distinction between critical theory and sociology of knowledge. Sociology of knowledge attempted to understand the relationship between knowledge and society and establish the historical character of mind and life. It requires from the sociologist self-awareness of his or her standpoint of analysis. Critical theory rejects 'standpoint' thinking as ideological in character. For critical theory, reflexivity entails thinking through the social object whereas for sociology of knowledge it entails thinking about the object from different standpoints. Critical theory thus charges sociology of knowledge with providing 'sociological accounts' of society from a variety of plausible standpoints and perspectives, without in fact touching society by thought. Klaus Lichtblau deals with the importance of Weber for critical theory. Originally, Georg Lukács set out to connect Marx's analysis of the commodity with Weber's diagnosis of the age of bureaucratic rule. Later critical theory considered Weber's insights into instrumental

rationality as decisive for the patterns of rule and behaviour in developed capitalist societies. However, although much could be learned from Weber's sociology, its development of a formal framework of basic sociological concepts or types cuts short social critique. Lichtblau focuses on receptions and discussions of Weber in the works of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, concluding with Habermas's studies of Weber's work.

Philip Hogg explores the connection between critical theory and the philosophy of language. The linguistic turn of critical theory is conventionally attributed to Habermas's communicative action, in which language and linguistic speech acts are the means of reason. However, the philosophy of language was decisive also for the critical theory of Benjamin and Adorno. In their understanding language is not a socially independent category of reason. They emphasize the historical dimension of language. For them language does not transform the social relations. It expresses them. The critique of society is therefore also critique of language. Inara Luisa Marin's chapter explores Freudian psychoanalysis and the emergence of Freudian Marxism within critical theory, especially in the work of Fromm and Marcuse. She also discusses the later reading of Freudian psychology by Honneth. She argues that in abandoning Freudian drive theory, Honneth falls into a biologism that ceases to provide an account of social relations. By doing so, Honneth undermines what is critical about critical theory and ends up reaffirming a normative model of social critique. For Marin a critical theory of psychoanalysis is fundamentally the analysis of the inner physiology of bourgeois society. Dennis Johannssen's chapter examines the engagements of critical theory with humanism and philosophical anthropology from Walter Benjamin to Ulrich Sonnemann's *Negative Anthropology* (1969). Although the members of the first generation rejected the concept of an invariant human nature, they developed compelling ways to analyze and interpret the restrictions

and limitations that antagonistic societies impose on the human being. In this context, critical theory proposes the concept of a 'negative humanism' that takes its cue not from what is essentially human, but from what is inhumane and has to be abolished. In contrast to Fromm and Marcuse, Adorno spurned anthropological assumptions of any kind, while interpreting in a dialectical fashion how human beings are restrained and negated under the conditions of repressive societies. *Negative Anthropology* demanded a 'permanent anthropological revolution', seeking to demonstrate the impossibility of any conclusive knowledge of the human being. In the final chapter of this part, Jasper Bernes examines the concept of participation in art in critical theory and assesses its significance for its aesthetics. Within critical theory and beyond, many of the debates about the status of art turn, explicitly or implicitly, upon this concept. Though the debates between Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht and others are often discussed through concepts such as autonomy, totality, and mimesis, this chapter argues that we might usefully reorganize our understanding of such debates by thinking through the links between aesthetic and political participation. Articulated in this manner, continuities between critical theory and other theorizations – such as those of the Situationist International – become visible. The chapter assesses the potent critiques of participation as an aesthetic and political ideology as well as the impasses that participatory theory and practice encounter over the course of the twentieth century. These impasses are shown to be especially prominent within the social movements and cultural practices of the new century.

Part VIII, 'Contexts of the Later Developments of Critical Theory', charts the development of critical theory in relationship to Situationism, Feminism, Autonomist Marxism, Neo-Hegelianism, Cultural Studies, post-colonialism, Open Marxism and post-Marxism. Anselm Jappe

interrogates the relationship between the concept of the 'culture industry', which was developed by Adorno and Horkheimer in the 1940s, and Guy Debord's 'spectacle', which he developed in his key situationist text *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). According to Jappe the similarities between the two concepts are striking. Both concepts build on Marx's critique of the commodity form. The distinction between them has to do with the judgements about the critical role of art in bourgeois society. Whereas Debord argues that art can no longer play a critical role, and instead must either be 'realized' in everyday life or find itself transformed into another form of 'spectacle', Adorno holds that the 'autonomy' of art must be defended as a last refuge from the barbaric forces of capitalism. The following chapter by Vincent Chanson and Frédéric Monferrand explores the connection between autonomist Marxism and critical theory focusing on the early workerism of Raniero Panzieri and Mario Tronti and later elaborations by Antonio Negri. Both traditions are indebted to Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) and its theory of reification, and develop distinct interpretations of this text, from Pollock to Panzieri and from Tronti to Adorno. They differ in terms of their accounts of the possibility of emancipatory praxis, which is most clearly brought out later in relation to Negri and Krahll whose texts nevertheless were most influential for the development of autonomy in the 1970s. Christos Memos introduces theoretical developments that fall under the title Open Marxism starting with Axelos's original use of the term in the 1950s, the work of Agnoli from the late 1960s to the later contributions by Simon Clarke, Werner Bonefeld, Richard Gunn and John Holloway. Open Marxism is distinguished by its negative critique of capitalist society. According to Memos, it continues to advance the critical purposes of the early Frankfurt School, both as critique of traditional theory, especially the prevailing positivism and scientism in the Marxist tradition, and as a project committed

to human emancipation. Memos emphasizes that both traditions are characterized by their understanding of class as a negative category of social practice. Christian Lotz presents a critical overview of central issues in 'Post-Marxism', which he discusses as a set of distinctive theoretical conceptions of the social and philosophical vision of society, theory, and politics. Lotz argues that the core of Post-Marxist thought can broadly be defined by how critical philosophers (such as Mouffe, Laclau, Honneth, Castoriadis, Lefort, Gorz, Negri, and Badiou) have moved away from a Marxian critique of political economy as a critical theory of constituted social forms. Instead, he explains, most Post-Marxists argue that the political sphere and a multiplicity of social struggles are more fundamental than the social-economic structure of society. It thus identifies the social subject as an independent agent that is capable of politics independently from the mode of production that governs its social reproduction.

Tom Bunyard examines the interrelations, echoes and distinctions that can be identified between critical theory and cultural studies. Concentrating primarily upon its British and American instantiations, the chapter outlines the emergence and development of cultural studies, and, drawing on Horkheimer's seminal definitions of 'traditional' and 'critical' theory, places its central ideas in relation to those of Frankfurt School Critical Theory. Gudrun-Axeli Knapp explores the early Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory in order to establish why it proved so cumbersome for a broader reception by feminists. She holds that for contemporary feminist critique a re-inspection of its theoretical stance might be fruitful. Leaving aside the continuing relevance of Adorno's and Horkheimer's epistemology and critical methodology, she emphasizes two specific reasons for this. Firstly, and in the light of contemporary socio-political transformations, there is its insistence on the 'innately coercive character of capitalist society' (Negt/Kluge). The Frankfurt School critique of capital as social

relationship is decisively non-economistic in character and allows for the elucidation of the psychodynamics of socially induced forms of 'feral self-preservation' (Adorno). Secondly, critical theory represents a historically oriented way of thinking that can account for its own function and situation in society.

Richard Gunn and Adrian Wilding place Axel Honneth's thought within the context of academic political theory's adoption and domestication of the notion of recognition. By exploring the meaning of recognition in Hegel and Marx, the traditional character of Honneth's version is indicated and recognition's original revolutionary implications highlighted. Reviving a revolutionary notion of recognition, the chapter concludes, may contribute to a much-needed renewal of critical theory. Asha Varadharajan interrogates the traditions of Frankfurt School critical theory in conversation with the contemporary discourse of human rights and the critique of development. In particular, she examines the concerns of post-colonial theorists, specifically Edward Said, and the critical theory of Theodor Adorno to ascertain distinctions and common grounds. She argues that in particular Horkheimer's and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) offers valuable resources for posing the kind of questions that might animate the future of post-colonial studies.

Part VIII is the final part. It contains contributions about the elements of critical theory in the context of contemporary social and political movements and theories. In particular, it explores the manner in which critical theory operates as a force of negative reason within and against a variety of contemporary movements and contexts, Foucauldian notions of biopolitics, international relations theory, theories of space and urbanity, anti-imperialism, the internet and digital culture industry, environmentalism, feminist theories of social reproduction, false solidarity and rackets, capitalist crisis, contemporary anti-capitalism and social struggle. Frieder Vogelmann explores Foucault's concept of 'biopolitics'. Although the debate about this

concept is prolific, voices from the Frankfurt School tradition in critical theory have been absent from it. Vogelmann's chapter makes this good. He argues that Foucault's model of critique in which 'biopolitics' finds its conceptual home is very similar to that of the early Frankfurt School's model of critique. In a first step he relates Foucault's subtle distinction between a critical and a descriptive conceptualization of 'biopolitics' to Horkheimer's famous distinction between critical and traditional theory. He then connects Foucault's and Adorno's model of critique. Both, he argues, conceive of critique as a diagnostic practice of the present, which produces an *effective* knowledge about the conditions of emancipation. By paying attention to these affinities the understanding of the meaning of 'biopolitics' is changed from a conventional description of neoliberal governmentality towards critique of contemporary conditions. Shannon Brincat's chapter looks at the way in which the discipline of International Relations (IR) was subjected to a radical critique of its epistemology, ontology, and methodology, through the introduction of the themes and methods of the Frankfurt School in the 1980s. The theory that emerged, Critical International Relations Theory (CIRT), exposed the deep relation between the dominant approaches to IR theory and the interests of power they served in world politics. Many scholars in CIRT have since engaged with broader, normative questions of the purposes and interests of IR theory and the possibilities for advancing human emancipation. Brincat examines some of the key themes in this emancipatory approach based on intersubjectivity, dialogue, coexistence, and social equity, and identifies some of its limits, outlining the future tasks for critical theorizing in IR.

Greig Charnock explores geographical concepts of space and urbanity as categories of a critical social theory. The chapter introduces Neil Smith's notion of the production of space, which he develops in a dialogue with Alfred Schmidt's notion of the

production of nature. This sets the framework for the elaboration of Henri Lefebvre's theory of 'the production of space'. Lefebvre's theory parallels the critical theory of the Frankfurt School insofar as it subjects traditional theories of space and urbanity to critique on a human-social basis. The chapter expounds Lefebvre's contribution to the analysis of space as a social product, his theory of urbanization, and his writings on the politics of space, before reviewing significant criticisms of that contribution. For a critical theory of space and urban form Lefebvre's work is ground-breaking. The chapter by Marcel Stoetzler develops a critical theory of anti-imperialism. Frankfurt School critical theory aims to formulate a critique of the capitalist mode of production that includes the phenomena typically addressed as 'imperialism'. It rejects the traditional notion that 'imperialism' is an object in its own right that is to be distinguished from the capitalist mode of production, and that imperialism could thus be fought 'as such'. The chapter establishes the ways in which the concept of 'imperialism' is used in the writings of Marx as well as in the texts of some of the canonical writers of critical theory. It is argued that the critical theorists' Marxian usage of the term prevented the emergence of a concept of 'anti-imperialism' in their writings: 'imperialism' was for them, as for Marx, simply an aspect of capitalism. It thus criticized imperialism without recourse to the concept of 'anti-imperialism'. The chapter argues that the concept of 'anti-imperialism' implies the reification and fetishization of 'imperialism' as a seemingly independent term of social objectivity.

Nick Dyer-Witheford revisits Horkheimer and Adorno's account of the culture industry for a critique of today's *digital* culture industry. As Dyer-Witheford points out, Horkheimer and Adorno were writing in wartime North America where computers and networking were already emerging. Over the next fifty years, digital technologies incubated within the military-industrial-academic

complex, diffused into every aspect of production, circulation and financialization, and created a cybernetic capitalism. Early popular adoption of the Internet was disruptive for established media and seemed to contradict pictures of impregnable cultural control. Amidst a wave in networked counter-cultures and *alterglobalist* resistance, critics declared Horkheimer and Adorno's critique obsolete. However, after the dot.com boom and bust, Dyer-Witheford argues, internet capital has consolidated itself under the business model of Web 2.0, with Google and Facebook as its flagships. Search engines and social networks lead a new wave of commodification. Furthermore, this reaffirmation of capitalist cultural control is now itself being convulsed as the network outcomes of the financial crash of 2008 and the subsequent recession hit home. Michelle Yates contributes on Environmentalism and the Domination of Nature. She examines critical theory's conceptualization of capitalism's domination over nature, from Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Alfred Schmidt to the work of contemporary scholars like John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett. In this literature, domination over nature is situated in social mediation, specifically that labor mediates and determines the human relationship to nature. She argues against the anthropological notion of labor, a notion of labor *per se*, which treats labor in capitalism one-dimensionally. In this context she explores insights from the works of Norbert Trenkle and Moishe Postone about the abstract character of labor in capitalism. It is in analysing this abstract dimension that the historically unique character of capitalism's domination over nature can be unveiled.

Roswitha Scholz explores the value form analysis of *Wertkritik* as a way of moving feminist critical theory forward from its focus on gender relations towards a theory of social form, exploring gender relations as form-determined. With recourse to the work of Horkheimer and Adorno she expounds the meaning of social form and explains it

as critique of patriarchy. Her contribution warns both against apologetic accounts of the Enlightenment that endorse equality without regard to specific social contents and against the tendencies of counter-Enlightenment thought in contemporary identity politics. She presents value form analysis as critique of identity. The chapter by Amy De'Ath makes connections between key works in queer Marxism, value-critique, and social reproduction feminism to argue that gendered social relations are form-determined by capitalism's imperative towards the production of surplus-value. De'Ath's contention is that analyses of gender based on a critique of reification, while productive in several ways, fall short of accounting for the relationship of gender to capital's general laws of motion, and thus for gender's continued existence. Instead of locating the production of gender at the level of exchange, De'Ath argues that gender's relation to capital accumulation must be conceptualized through the opposing and mutually constitutive dialectic of production and circulation. This point has significant consequences for social reproduction feminism because a focus on the reification of gender at the level of exchange necessarily excludes a consideration of how gender is produced through reproductive activities that are defined by their unpaid and unsubsumed status – in other words, their *dissociation* from exchange.

Gerhard Scheit assesses the contemporary meaning of the term racket. Critical theory adopted this term to designate the continued or reconstructed relations of personal dependency in conditions that had ostensibly abolished that dependency: the rule of law and the social relations of capitalism. The juxtaposition of rackets to the law also opens up a new perspective on the law. It is no coincidence that in the legal sphere the term racket refers to illegal economic practices and criminal methods that frequently run alongside contractual agreements or replace them and that must be combatted to maintain the rule of law. When the concept

of the racket is applied to the issue of state sovereignty, the very principle of legality is called into question, as was explained by Max Horkheimer in his analysis of societies 'that organize themselves along totalitarian lines'. Joshua Clover tackles the term subsumption, which is a term of art within Marx's critique of political economy that has had a complex reception history. It is subdivided into *formal subsumption* and *real subsumption*. These terms designate changes to the production process during the transition to, and ongoing development of, capitalism. These changes in the character of subsumption mediate the metamorphosis of human making into capitalist labor. Subsumption expresses the compulsion towards ever-greater productivity and accompanying changes, imparting a directionality to the history of capital often identified as modernization. Because of this historical dynamic, subsumption is intimately related to efforts at periodization that compass orienting strategies of accumulation, the changing relation between capital and labor, and the possibility of capitalist crisis. This entry provides an expanded definition, reviews publication and reception history, and assesses in particular the rise of 'subsumption narratives' after the Second World War wherein periodization, relations of production, and crisis come to the fore. It concludes with a theoretical synthesis of subsumption and capitalist crisis.

Amy Chun Kim writes about 'the figure of crisis' in critical theory. At its emergence the Frankfurt School sought to expose the contradictions of capitalism in the face of dramatic and potentially irreversible defeats of the labor movements in the West. The chapter surveys the understanding of 'crisis' in critical theory from its early conceptions via Habermas's arguments for greater democracy under welfare state capitalism to more contemporary contentions over where the focus of an adequate critique of capitalism should lie. The last is to be understood more generally as a debate between those interested in the 'value form' of social relations – the

abstract social logic of capitalism – and those working on the theorization of capitalist crisis. Chun Kim's overview underscores the relevance of the legacy of Adorno and Horkheimer today. How might their work be adapted to account for the inequality, precarity and stagnation that characterize the latest phase of capitalist development? Charles Prusik develops a critique of neoliberal economics through Adorno's concept of natural history [*Naturgeschichte*], in order to articulate the formation of what he defines as neoliberal 'second nature'. Through engagements with economic history, he demonstrates how the neoclassical, and neoliberal economic traditions have naturalized the concept of the free market in their relevant notions of value, efficiency, and competition. Drawing from Adorno's materialist engagements with Karl Marx and Alfred Sohn-Rethel, he develops the category of commodity fetishism in order to grasp the logic by which the self-regulating market appears as the subject of social coordination. Through engagements with Friedrich Hayek's critique of socialist calculation and the emergence of information sciences, he analyzes the reconceptualization of markets as information processors, as well as organisms of self-development. By delineating the logic by which the self-regulating market emerges as a natural process of immanent self-determination, Prusik's chapter demonstrates the way in which capitalist social relations and institutions of coercion are legitimated through their appearance as natural necessity.

The final two chapters explore contemporary arguments about human emancipation and conditions of misery. Sergio Tischler Visquerria and Alfonso Galileo García Vela focus on the contemporary potential of emancipation and revolution. Their argument emphasizes the importance of zapatismo as an alternative to classical ideas of revolution and emancipation. Within the Marxist tradition two distinct ideas of revolution are present; one stresses the importance of the party and taking state power, and the other rejects

the centralism of the communist party and focuses instead on the autonomy of struggles and the creation of new forms of social reproduction that are referred to as communizing. They develop their argument for autonomy through a critical reading of the works of John Holloway, Theodor Adorno, and Walter Benjamin. The final chapter is by Aaron Benanav and John Clegg. They conclude the *Handbook* by surveying the contemporary crisis of capitalism, both economic and political. The chapter specifies the ways in which our era differs from that of the post-war critical theorists, both in the contours of class struggle and the potentials for emancipation. On the basis of these differences, Benanav and Clegg question the usefulness of much of the theoretical legacy of the earlier generations of critical theorists. They offer their own twenty-first-century 'return to Marx', reading his original theory of immiseration (dismissed by many during the post-war economic boom) as a precocious theory of deindustrialization, and spell out the implications of this reading for the understanding of capitalist crises and the potentials of emancipation.

## Note

- 1 Hans-Jürgen Krahel (1971): *Konstitution und Klassenkampf. Zur historischen Dialektik von bürgerlicher Emanzipation und proletarischer Revolution* (Frankfurt am Main: Neue Kritik, 2008, p. 350).

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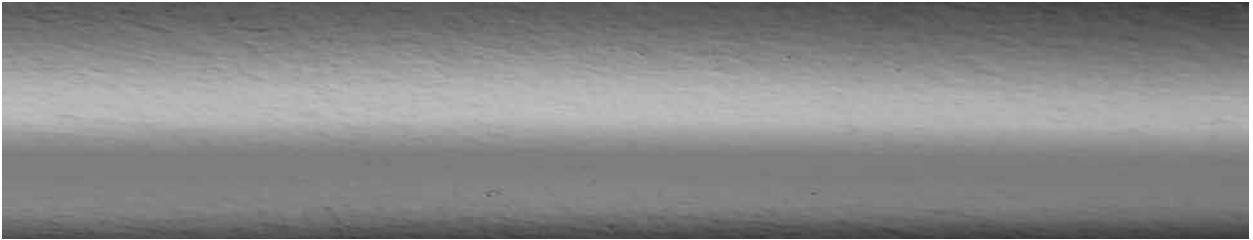


Communism' by Felix Baum. Adrian Wilding translated 'Critical Theory and the Philosophy of Language' by Philip Hogg, and 'Constellations of Critical Theory and Feminist Critique' by Gudrun-Axeli Knapp. Niall Bond translated 'Critical Theory and Weberian Sociology' by Klaus Lichtblau. Lars Fischer translated 'Rackets' by Gerhard Scheit. Memphis Krickeberg translated 'Workerism and Critical Theory' by Vincent

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PART VI

# Contexts of the Emergence of Critical Theory



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# Marx, Marxism, Critical Theory

Jan Hoff

In contemporary ‘Critical Theory’, Theodor is often seen as a ‘cultural critic’ or a ‘music theorist’, whereas Max is reduced to ‘having played the second fiddle’. This became especially clear during the ‘Adorno year’, 2003, when commentators in the (German) mainstream media wrote long articles about Adorno, which by and large ignored the relation of critical theory to Marxism. In distinction, this chapter elaborates the character of this relationship. It argues that at its foundation critical theory developed as a heterodox alternative to the positivist turn in Marxian thought.

This chapter is divided into seven sections. We first take a brief look at traditional Marxism, because this provides the historical background of critical theory – although this was a background Horkheimer referred to in a specifically critical way. Secondly we take a brief look at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research in its ‘Grünberg era’. As a third point, the political views of the young

Horkheimer are summarized which leads us to the fourth point – Horkheimer’s critique of (and alternative to) Marxist historical determinism as formulated in *Dämmerung*.<sup>1</sup> In the fifth section the link between 1937 (‘Traditional and Critical Theory’) and 1867 (*Capital*) is examined. In the sixth section Horkheimer’s critique of a deterministic interpretation of history is taken up again, this time in the context of his 1940/42 essay ‘Authoritarian State’. Finally, we have to mention some of the post-World War II developments including the critical standpoint put forward by Adorno’s disciple Hans-Jürgen Krahl. The main aim of this final section is to show that critical theory was built, at least to a large extent, on Marx’s critique of political economy and a related political standpoint of emancipation. Therefore the points of critique towards traditional Marxism – especially concerning the deterministic and objectivistic view on historical development – must also be highlighted.

## TRADITIONAL MARXISM

Marxism as a relatively coherent 'scientific' world-view developed in the period that began with Friedrich Engels' work on his book *Anti-Dühring* (1876) and the 1891 Erfurt Program of the German SPD. Marxism, therefore, is something different from the theory of Marx, although the former was developed out of the latter in a rather complicated process.

While Marx's own field of study was very comprehensive, ranging from the obvious political economy to history and from geology to mathematics, Marx himself had never formulated and elaborated a positive system of knowledge like the one that was put forward by his friend Engels in *Anti-Dühring*. The spectrum of topics dealt with in *Anti-Dühring* range from 'philosophy of nature' and the principles of dialectics to political economy and socialism. This approach paved the way for the transformation of Marx's critical theory into a comprehensive and systematic world-view.

In the late 1870s and the 1880s – the period of the 'Sozialistengesetz' – this type of Marxism was successfully disseminated in the SPD, while proponents of positions close to Dühring, Lassalle or Anarchism were either pushed out of the party or relegated into the background. In Karl Kautsky's theoretical contribution to the Erfurt Program of 1891 Marxism was codified as the official party ideology. However, this programmatic claim of Marxist 'orthodoxy' coexisted with the pragmatic and reform-oriented part written by Eduard Bernstein.

The deterministic and objectivistic tendencies in the historical outlook offered by traditional Marxism have been criticized many times. We will later see how Horkheimer formulated a convincing critique of this feature of traditional Marxism in *Dämmerung*. His critical viewpoints concerning this question will be presented in detail in fourth and fifth sections of this chapter. Another element of traditional Marxism that was criticized by

Adorno and Horkheimer was the epistemological position of 'Abbildtheorie'. Other problematic features of traditional Marxism consisted in the reading of Marx's method of exposition in *Capital* as a 'logico-historical' progression, in the reformulation of Marx's crisis theory as a theory of breakdown (although many traditional Marxists did not share this reformulation<sup>2</sup>), and in the construction of a theory of immiseration of the working-class and a growing class polarization. (It was exactly this construction that Bernstein protested against in the 1890s 'Revisionismusstreit'.) However, the protagonists of 'critical theory' were not the first Marxist theorists that left aside the 'dialectic of nature'. The same can be said of Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*.<sup>3</sup>

While it is true that the core member of the Frankfurt School paved the way for later productive developments in Marxist theory by critically questioning central elements of traditional Marxism, the relevancy of Adorno's and Horkheimer's thought to a reinterpretation both of Marx's critique of political economy and of the development of the capitalist mode of production should not be overstated. Perry Anderson's 1976 book, *Considerations on Western Marxism* is flawed in many ways,<sup>4</sup> but his critical assessment of Horkheimer and Adorno seems to point in the right direction: while Marx had moved from philosophy to politics and economic theory (or the critique thereof), Western Marxism developed exactly in the opposite direction. Horkheimer and Adorno played a considerable part in this theoretical reorientation towards philosophy, in turn reversed by some of their disciples like Backhaus and Reichelt who reoriented themselves towards a serious study of political economy and the Marxian critique of political economy.

In the context of these developments in Marxist theory and although Horkheimer and Adorno developed important criticisms of traditional Marxism, one considerable reservation has to be stated: they did not engage in the critique of political

economy producing anything comparable to Hilferding's *Finanzkapital* or Luxemburg's *Akkumulation des Kapitals*. The critique of political economy that is at the very centre of Marx's thought, did not figure prominently in their theoretical work. A systematic exploration of Marx's critique as a critical social theory was only developed by some of their students, including Alfred Schmidt and especially Hans-Georg Backhaus and Helmut Reichelt, from the late 1960s onwards.

### **THE FRANKFURT INSTITUTE: 'A MATERIAL BASIS FOR MARXIST RESEARCH'**

The year 1923 was one of political turmoil in Germany. It was not only the year of the Hitler-Ludendorff-Putsch, the failed coup that should have led to a 'March on Berlin' (inspired by Mussolini's 'March on Rome'). The year had started with the Occupation of the Ruhrgebiet. French and Belgian troops occupied Germany's industrial heartland, because Germany could not afford its Versailles Treaty reparation payments. Hyper-inflation reached its peak. The nationalist 'Black Reichswehr' attempted the Kùstrin putsch. The communists joined the SPD-led governments of Thuringia and Saxony, before these governments fell because of President Ebert's 'Reichsexekution'. The Reichswehr invaded these states in central Germany. The communist uprising in Hamburg failed. One of the results of the KPD's political disaster was the replacement of Brandler and Thalheimer as KPD-leaders in the following year, when the left faction of Ruth Fischer and Arkadi Maslow took over the party's leadership.

It was also an important year for Marxist theory in Germany. It was the year that Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* as well as Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* were published. Both texts can be read against the background of a radically critical attitude

towards the way Marxism had been interpreted in the period of the Second International. An important event for the historical development of 'Western Marxism' is probably much less known in the English-speaking world: the 'Marxist Work-Week' [*Marxistische Arbeitswoche*] conference located in the Thuringian forest in spring 1923.

About 20 intellectuals (most of them quite young at that time) met to discuss Marxist theory and to prepare the foundation of a Marxist-oriented 'think tank' for social science. The meeting was initiated by Felix Weil who had planned to found and fund such an institute in the preceding year. Other notable participants were: Karl Korsch, who held a talk on Marxist methodology; two Hungarian Marxist philosophers, Georg Lukács and Bela Fogarasi; Korsch's and Lukács' Japanese disciple, Kazuo Fukumoto, who wrote texts on Marx's methodology and became the political leader of the Japanese Communist party after the return to his home country; and Karl August Wittfogel and Franz Borkenau, who later worked for the Frankfurt Institute. Adorno and Horkheimer were not present during this meeting, but Friedrich Pollock was.

When the Institute – autonomous in its research, but affiliated to the University of Frankfurt – was founded in 1924, the Austro-Marxist economic historian Carl Grünberg (editor of the *Grünberg-Archiv* journal and previously the teacher of Otto Bauer and Rudolf Hilferding) became the first Director. However, the Frankfurt Institute was not the first academic institute with a strong Marxist orientation. The Ohara Institute in Osaka that employed many young researchers with sympathies for Marxism, had been founded in 1919. The Moscow Marx-Engels Institute dated from 1923. During the 1920s the Frankfurt and the Moscow institutes cooperated within the project of the publication of the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA). The first volume of this edition, containing early Marxian writings up to 1844, was published 1927/29.

However, in historical retrospective, the late Horkheimer played down the role of the *MEGA* edition in the Institute's history.<sup>5</sup>

Grünberg himself was an outspoken proponent of Marxism and socialism. According to him, the Institute's main tasks should consist of: research on the workers' movement, but also on counter-revolutionary political movements; questions concerning social policy; and the intensive study of social theory, including socialist thought. Bela Fogarasi's letter to David Rjazanov, the Director of the Marx-Engels Institute, points to the way the Frankfurt Institute was perceived by the intellectuals of the left: 'The institute is a material basis for Marxist research'.<sup>6</sup> The Institute was inaugurated in June 1924.

The explicitly Marxist profile of the Institute's research agenda was emphasized by the employment of the Polish economist Henryk Grossmann, who had emigrated from his home country to Frankfurt in 1925. Grossmann's formulation of a Marxist theory of capitalist accumulation, crisis and breakdown was published as the first volume of the Institute's book series.<sup>7</sup> Grossmann remained a member of the Institute until 1948. Another notable Marxist-oriented researcher at the Institute was Friedrich Pollock, who had been a friend to Horkheimer since adolescence. Pollock had finished his PhD thesis on Marx's theory of money in 1923.<sup>8</sup> It is not easy to assess to what extent Adorno's reading of Marx was influenced by Pollock and Grossmann. Adorno's biographer Stefan Müller-Dohm argues that Adorno never had a close relation to Grossmann,<sup>9</sup> whereas Hans-Georg Backhaus remembers Adorno referring to him as 'my teacher'.<sup>10</sup>

In 1931, due to Grünberg's serious illness, Horkheimer took over the position of Director. Georg Klauda critically stated that under Horkheimer the Institute basically turned away from Marxism.<sup>11</sup> In my opinion, Klauda's statement is an exaggeration. However, similar to Korsch, Horkheimer was aware that Marxism had entered a period of a critical, crisis-ridden condition.

Apparently, around 1930 Horkheimer had planned to write a book with the title 'Crisis of Marxism'.<sup>12</sup> It should have been published as a volume of the Institute's book series, but this project was never realized.

## THE POLITICAL VIEWS OF THE YOUNG HORKHEIMER

What about the young Horkheimer's political views and his relation to Marx and Marxism? Considering that Alfred Schmidt is right to locate the decisive step within Horkheimer's transition to Marxism in the period of his 'Privatdozentur',<sup>13</sup> it should still be noted that Horkheimer's interest in and contact with Marxist theory can be traced back to a much earlier period of his life.

It is well known that both Horkheimer and Pollock were located in Munich during the November revolution and the brief period of the Bavarian soviet republic (1919). They shared sympathies with the revolutionaries, but refrained from direct political involvement.<sup>14</sup> Horkheimer's early relation to Marx and Marxist theory was reconstructed by Hans-Joachim Blank, a disciple of Adorno and Horkheimer.<sup>15</sup> According to this study, Horkheimer was a reader of revolutionary literature, like Bucharin's political writings, economic and political texts of Luxemburg, and declarations by Liebknecht and others. Adorno, who had been in contact with Horkheimer since the early 1920s, called Horkheimer a 'communist' in a 1924 letter.<sup>16</sup> At this time, Horkheimer devoted his energy to studying the materialist conception of history. In 1926 the *Marx-Engels-Archiv* journal published important extracts from the 'German Ideology'. Horkheimer was eager to read and use this new material for his lectures and writings.<sup>17</sup>

In 1928/29 Horkheimer worked on an epistemological critique of Lenin's *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, pointing to the naïve shortcomings of the 'reflexion theory'

[*Abbildtheorie*] of consciousness (GS 2, ca. 180) – a criticism that can also be found in the late Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*. Besides this critical assessment of Lenin's philosophical work, Horkheimer offered a lecture on Hegel and Marx during the 1928/29 semester. Horkheimer also kept himself informed about the contemporary developments in Marxist theory, from Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* to the Grossmann–Sternberg controversy on imperialism.<sup>18</sup>

Horkheimer's essay collection *Dämmerung*,<sup>19</sup> written between 1926 and 1931, suggests that Horkheimer had already occupied himself with the study of *Capital*, because he refers to the concept 'reserve army' and to Marx's theory of the rising organic composition of capital in the course of capitalist accumulation. The essay on the impotence of the German working-class contains an interesting assessment both of social democracy and of the German Communist Party.

Horkheimer argues that the German working-class faces the problem of its political impotence because of its inner division between the employed and the unemployed. This social and economic division seems to be reflected on the political level. In this context Horkheimer points to the rivalry between the reformist SPD and the revolutionary KPD. Horkheimer states that the former party suffers from the erosion of revolutionary consciousness, whereas the latter one lacks 'the knowledge to prepare the revolution on the practical and theoretical level'. However, 'within both parties exists a part of those forces the future of mankind depends on'.<sup>20</sup> Horkheimer's relation to the two rival working-class parties reflects a combination of sympathy and criticism. However, it is significant that Horkheimer did not deal with the emergence of political alternatives to the SPD and KPD, represented either by the smaller left-winged socialist parties like Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands<sup>21</sup> or KPD-Oppeposition,<sup>22</sup> or by even smaller groups like the council-communist 'Rote Kämpfer'.<sup>23</sup>

It should also be noted that Horkheimer used a pseudonym for *Dämmerung*. In 1938 Korsch wrote in a letter to the council communist Paul Mattick that Horkheimer 'developed closer ties to my, to our political standpoint. But he is not ready at all to represent his views in public'.<sup>24</sup> This statement could be related back to the cautious attitude Horkheimer had already developed by the 1920s and early 1930s.

## THE CRITIQUE OF DETERMINIST MARXISM, PART I (*DÄMMERUNG*)

One of the most outstanding essays in *Dämmerung* is titled 'Skepsis and Morality'.<sup>25</sup> As a background one should recall that historical determinism is a well-established feature of traditional Marxism. The Marxist orthodoxy of the SPD also left little room for the ethical component of Marxism. One of the most famous examples for this tendency is Hilferding's sentence that, 'like its theory, also the politics of Marxism is free from value-judgements'.<sup>26</sup>

Horkheimer's ideas differ from these viewpoints. He describes socialism as a better form of society. Its elements of construction are present in capitalism and the tendencies of capitalist development. However, socialism does not automatically 'follow' from the economic laws of capitalism (laws which were, by the way, explained correctly by Marx, in Horkheimer's view). According to Horkheimer, socialism is 'desirable', but because this social order does not 'follow' from Marxist theory, one has to 'fight' for it. Horkheimer stresses that – on the subjective level – the position of each person to socialism represents his/her degree of individual morality. When 'it is said that Marx and Engels did not "prove" socialism, not pessimism but the commitment to practice which theory needs, will follow. Marx unveiled the law of the dominant inhuman order, and pointed to the levers that must be used to create a more human one'.<sup>27</sup>



Later on in the text, Horkheimer points out the perspective of revolutionary practice: 'Should socialism be improbable, it will require an all the more desperate determination to make it come true. What stands in its way is not the technical difficulty of its implementation but the apparatus of domination of the ruling class'.<sup>28</sup> For Horkheimer the idea of the 'inevitable necessity' of the development to socialism seems to be rather harmful:

The illusion that the advent of the socialist order is of the same order of necessity as natural events is hardly less of a danger to correct action than is skeptical disbelief. If Marx did not prove socialism, he did show that capitalism harbors developmental tendencies which make it possible. Those interested in it know at what point they must attack.<sup>29</sup>

Horkheimer's own position can be explained as a practice-oriented alternative to the tendencies towards passivity within the 'revolutionary attentism' of the pre-1914 social-democracy.<sup>30</sup> 'The socialist order of society is not prevented by world history; it is historically possible. But it will not be realized by a logic that is immanent in history but by men trained in theory and determined to make things better. Otherwise, it will not be realized at all'.<sup>31</sup>

However, it should be noted that Horkheimer was not the only socialist in this time period who was very sceptical of the determinist view of history and the historical optimism attached to the notion of an inevitable 'necessity' of proletarian revolution. The left-wing socialist intellectual Walter Loewenheim (1896–1977) shared a similar kind of hesitation. The Dutch socialist Henriette Roland Holst (1869–1952) can also be named in this context as can the anarchist socialist Gustav Landauer (1870–1919), who might have made a strong impression on Horkheimer during the time of the Bavarian soviet republic.

Like Landauer and Holst, Horkheimer was an *ethical* socialist. This becomes obvious when he describes the contemporary social

structure of the capitalist society and includes striking remarks about the suffering of the exploited.

At the top, the feuding tycoons of the various capitalist power constellations. Below them, the lesser magnates, the large landowners and the entire staff of important co-workers. Below that, and in various layers, the large numbers of professionals, smaller employees, political stooges, the military and the professors, the engineers and heads of office down to the typists. And even further down what is left of the independent, small existences, craftsmen, grocers, farmers *e tutti quanti*, then the proletariat, from the most highly paid, skilled workers down to the unskilled and the permanently unemployed, the poor, the aged and the sick.<sup>32</sup>

But Horkheimer is well aware of the specifically international character of capitalist society, especially in its 'imperialist' phase of development. In the layer below

we encounter the actual foundation of misery on which this structure rises, for up to now we have been talking only of the highly developed capitalist countries whose entire existence is based on the horrible exploitation apparatus at work in the partly or wholly colonial territories, i.e., in the far larger part of the world. Extended regions in the Balkans are torture chambers, the mass misery in India, China, Africa boggles the mind. Below the spaces where the coolies of the earth perish [krepien] by the millions, the indescribable, unimaginable suffering of the animals, the animal hell in human society, would have to be depicted, the sweat, blood, despair of the animals.<sup>33</sup>

It might be more difficult to summarize Adorno's political position and its development during the 1930s. However, there are indicators that suggest he was a vehement critic of the Soviet Union from a Marxist standpoint. In a text documenting a discussion between Horkheimer and Adorno, the latter one pointed out in 1939 that he regarded as a necessity 'to achieve the better society by force in Russia'.<sup>34</sup> The context of this quote suggests that Adorno thought about a socialist-proletarian revolution against the Stalinist regime. Earlier he had complained (in a letter to Horkheimer) about the

‘unspeakable trial against the Trotskyists’, referring to the first Moscow Trial.<sup>35</sup> The music theorist Heinz-Klaus Metzger (1932–2009), who came in contact with Adorno only after the war, told me that he once asked Adorno about his opinion on the Soviet Union. Metzger remembered Adorno’s reply that one should read *La Révolution trahie*.

For Adorno, faithfulness to Marxism could not mean to preserve traditional Marxist theory. Faithfulness to Marxism must imply its radical development beyond the theoretical status quo: ‘Everybody says that Marxism is obsolete (*erledigt*). In contrast to this we say: no, it is not obsolete, but it is decisive to remain faithful to it. However, really being faithful to it entails the further development of the dialectical process (*die Weiterbewegung des dialektischen Prozesses*)’.<sup>36</sup>

### CRITICAL THEORY: THE LINK BETWEEN 1867 AND 1937

What is critical theory? In my opinion, Kornelia Hafner points in the right direction when she describes ‘Critical Theory’ as a ‘Deckbegriff’, a concept that ‘covers’, encompasses and develops the theoretical succession from Kant to Hegel and from Hegel to Marx.<sup>37</sup> ‘Critique’ in this context implies critique both of society [*Gesellschaftskritik*] and of consciousness [*Erkenntniskritik*], both rooted in Marx’s critique of political economy. It was Alfred Schmidt, a disciple of Horkheimer, who stressed the ‘double nature’ of Marx’s concept of critique which aims both at capitalist society and the forms of consciousness that spring from capitalist forms and relations.<sup>38</sup> In this context, Marx’s critique of fetishism, reification and inversion [*Verkehrung*] is of central importance, an importance Adorno recognized.

Among Marx-scholars it is very common to refer to Marx’s main theoretical project as ‘critique of political economy’, but it must not be forgotten that during twentieth-century

traditional Marxism this specifically ‘critical’ characteristic was often ignored – like in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Germany, where Marx’s project was sometimes superficially conceptualized as ‘Marxist political economy’ or even as the ‘political economy of the working-class’.<sup>39</sup> In his letter to Lassalle on 22 February 1858, Marx himself pointed out: ‘The work I am presently concerned with is a Critique of Economic Categories or, if you like, a critical exposé of the system of the bourgeois economy. It is at once an exposé and, by the same token, a critique of the system’.<sup>40</sup>

‘Traditional and Critical Theory’, 1937 – including the postscript – is a text of programmatic character. According to Horkheimer, theory in the traditional sense (as inaugurated by Descartes) shapes the specialized sciences in contemporary academic life and aims at sustaining the reproduction of contemporary society. This is Horkheimer’s most basic definition. In contrast, critical theory conceives man as the producer of historical forms of life in their totality, and aims at emancipation of man out of enslaving relations/conditions [*Verhältnisse*].<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, Horkheimer indicates that this critical theory was obviously not developed by himself, but had existed – as he wrote in 1937 – for 70 years.<sup>42</sup> This means Horkheimer’s locates the beginning of critical theory in 1867, the year volume one of *Capital* was published. On the next page, Horkheimer refers directly to the critique of political economy and to the element he regards at its core: the reversal [*Umschlag*] of economic concepts into its opposite, considering that ‘just exchange’ develops into injustice, ‘free economy’ into dominance of monopoly, productive work into the stabilization of relations that erode productivity, the reproduction of life into the misery of peoples. Marx’s *Capital* focuses on the historical development of totality. Horkheimer concludes that theoretical and practical critique of the economy, not critique of cultural decay, is the most important element of critical theory.<sup>43</sup>

It is not difficult to identify the element of crucial importance in Horkheimer's reading of Marx: the economy, at first connected to categories linked to freedom and equality, reverses [*schägt um*] in a sphere of relations shaped by exploitation and domination. There are striking examples of similar ideas in Marx, for instance in the *Grundrisse*, a text Horkheimer did not and could not know at this time. However, he probably knew this passage from *Capital*:

This sphere that we are deserting, within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, say of labour-power, are constrained only by their own free will. They contract as free agents, and the agreement they come to, is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. [...] On leaving this sphere of simple circulation or of exchange of commodities, which furnishes the 'Free-trader Vulgaris' with his views and ideas, and with the standard by which he judges a society based on capital and wages, we think we can perceive a change in the physiognomy of our dramatis personae. He, who before was the money owner, now strides in front as capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his labourer. The one with an air of importance, smirking, intent on business; the other, timid and holding back, like one who is bringing his own hide to market and has nothing to expect but – a hiding.<sup>44</sup>

One can go even deeper into the question of Horkheimer's reading of Marx's critique of political economy by referring to a text written two years before 'Traditional and Critical Theory'. The essay 'On the Problem of Truth' was published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* and allows us to have a look at Horkheimer's concept of Marx's dialectical presentation in *Capital*.<sup>45</sup> Horkheimer claims that the specific nature of this dialectical presentation must correspond to the specific characteristics of its object. What Horkheimer, as a reader of *Capital*, has in mind is a stringent derivation within an interconnection of

economic categories leading from the abstract concept of the commodity to value, to money, to capital and its historical tendencies. However, the idea of a 'closed cognitive interconnection [of categories]' [*geschlossener gedanklicher Zusammenhang*], in which 'every thesis necessarily follows from the first premise' [*jede These notwendig aus der ersten Setzung*],<sup>46</sup> points to a rather one-sided interpretation of Marx's dialectical presentation of economic categories. Horkheimer describes Marx's method as an attempt to develop 'the theory as a logical presentation of immanent critique' [*die Theorie in der geschlossenen Gestalt eines in sich notwendigen Gedankengangs*]. According to Marx himself, this understanding is one-sided, at least if we take the term 'geschlossen' [closed] seriously. Marx was aware in his 'Urtext' from 1858 that 'the dialectical presentation is right only when it knows its own limits', which implies a break with the idea of a dialectical presentation of a context of logical immanence.<sup>47</sup> Of course, the Horkheimer of 1935 did not know the 'Urtext', which should only be published a few years later together with the *Grundrisse* manuscript. What exactly this sentence from the 'Urtext' means for the dialectical presentation in *Capital* has been discussed numerous times by Marx-researchers.<sup>48</sup>

Thus it becomes obvious that Frankfurt School 'critical theory' owes its theoretical fundamentals to Marx's critique of political economy. However, Adorno's and Horkheimer's engagement with Marx's works and manuscripts was limited in scope and intensity. During the 1930s Horkheimer participated in discussions on Marx's critique of political economy. Questions were raised concerning Marx's method, his theory of value, the theory of accumulation and crisis, and regarding the tendency of the profit rate to fall.<sup>49</sup> However, these discussions also illuminate the limits of Horkheimer's interpretation of Marx: neither did he comprehend the exact relation of the categories 'value' and 'exchange-value', nor was

he able to refute Engels' logico-historical interpretation of Marx's method of presentation.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, Korsch mentioned in a letter Horkheimer's 'illusionary' project [*Lebenslüge*] to write a definite book about dialectics.<sup>51</sup> Adorno's occupation with the commodity form (including his discussion with Alfred Sohn-Rethel<sup>52</sup>) is well known. But Adorno's understanding of Marx seemed to be limited, too – at least in the view of those readers of Marx who stressed the coherent interconnection of the critical analysis of economic categories within the three volumes of *Capital*. Hans Mayer complained in a letter to Horkheimer that he found a tendency in Adorno 'to isolate the problem of commodity fetishism out of the whole ("ensemble") of *Capital*, to make it absolute, and therefore to keep restricted to volume 1 instead of progression to the "total process"'.<sup>53</sup> In the 1970s, Hans-Georg Backhaus stated that Adorno and Horkheimer had 'reflected the foundation of critical theory within the labour theory of value only in a methodologically insufficient way'. Backhaus accused his teachers of having neglected Marx's value-form analysis. Backhaus continues: 'Despite the basic concepts of Marx's theory of value are conceived by Adorno and Horkheimer as transcending value-theory as an economic subject, they invested surprisingly little effort and precision into the interpretation of those concepts that were fundamental to "Frankfurt" sociology and philosophy'.<sup>54</sup> Even Dirk Braunstein, who attempts to (re-)construct 'Adorno's critique of political economy', has to admit that Adorno 'very often lagged behind [Marx's] economic knowledge'.<sup>55</sup>

Let us continue with another element of Horkheimer's 1937 essay, the relationship between the critical theorist and the proletariat.<sup>56</sup> The social situation of the latter constitutes no guarantee for a 'correct' conscience. Horkheimer reflects the social differentiations within this multi-layered class. Personal and class interests may fall apart in many proletarians. The theoretical practice of the critical theorist 'belongs' to the

development of the proletariat, Horkheimer continues; but the critical theorist should never give up a critical distance. So he 'thinks for' the oppressed [*unterdrückte Menschheit, für die er denkt*]. However, his thought can, at times, be in contrast to the assumptions that dominate the proletarians' views. The relationship between the critical theorist and the proletarian masses represents a complicated, mediated connection like a bond that sometimes is endangered to break. However, both types, the proletarians and the critical theorist, are needed in the socialist struggle for emancipation. The separating elements of this relation have nothing to do with the 'class origin' of the individual critical theorist, Horkheimer emphasizes. They reflect, instead, the complex social differentiation within the proletariat itself that can lead to the integration of considerable parts of the proletariat into the bourgeois social order. At this point one could remember Horkheimer's earlier text 'Die Ohnmacht der deutschen Arbeiterklasse' (see above).

At the end of his essay<sup>57</sup> Horkheimer makes another remarkable point. He constructs a community [*Gemeinschaft*] of critical theorists, striving for the radical transformation of society, tied together by 'uniting recognition' [*verbindende Erkenntnis*] and the bond of a 'strictest possible reception of critical theory' as the condition of the historical success of this transformation. Before the revolution [*vor dem allgemeinen historischen Umschlag*] truth can be in the hands of a small number of thinkers. But 'history teaches', Horkheimer continues, 'that such ostracized yet obstinate groups, even neglected by the oppositional parts of society, can become the leading force ["zur Spitze werden"] in the decisive moment, due to their deeper insight'.<sup>58</sup> It is likely that Horkheimer uses rather cryptic language to reaffirm the Bolshevik model of revolution, basing him on an 'avant-gardist' (or even 'sophocratic') theory of revolution. The party, however, seems to be substituted by the community of critical theorists.

In my opinion this conception of Horkheimer's has to be viewed critically. As Adorno's disciple Krahel (see below) would observe, neither Marx nor the Marxists have solved the problem of the conditions of constitution [*Konstitutionsbedingungen*] of revolutionary consciousness; they could not, therefore, convincingly formulate a mediation between the inner dynamic of the accumulation process of capital and the subjective preconditions for a revolutionary situation. Horkheimer, too, cannot provide an answer. Instead, he reformulates an avant-gardist conception of a hierarchical relation between conductors (the critical theorists) and the conducted (the proletariat).

In the year of publication of Horkheimer's essay he was also involved in intensive discussions on economic theory and the developments of contemporary capitalism. Together with Grossmann, Gumperz and Wittfogel, Horkheimer debated questions of monopoly capital, imperialism, and methodological aspects of *Capital*.<sup>59</sup> According to Horkheimer, monopoly capitalism should be understood as a concrete historical phenomenon, located on another level than the 'core structure' [*Kernstruktur*] of capitalism that was exposed by Marx in *Capital*. Unfortunately, Adorno did not participate in this debate. The discussion at the Institute on the most recent developments of capitalism (and of its relation to the state) was continued in the years to come, to a large extent inspired by Pollock.<sup>60</sup> This was reflected, for example, by a text of Horkheimer that we will look at now.

## THE CRITIQUE OF DETERMINIST MARXISM, PART 2 ('AUTHORITARIAN STATE')

Although it was already mentioned that Horkheimer did not produce anything comparable to Hilferding's *Finanzkapital*, he indeed devoted serious study to the recent

trends of capitalist development. In this context we can have a look at a rather short text written in the early 1940s, which is interesting insofar as it constitutes another critical assessment of determinist Marxism.

According to Horkheimer, the most recent phase of capitalism is shaped by the dominance of great trusts that gain independence from banks. The 'dorado' of bourgeois existence, the sphere of circulation, is losing importance. (This argument had already been made by Horkheimer in 'The Jews and Europe'.) In its stead, Horkheimer contends that the state has become increasingly important as an economic agency. He regards this new period as a capitalist system that has successfully transcended the 'market economy'. The modern and repressive 'authoritarian state' forms the decisive element of 'state capitalism'. Surplus value is created by exploitation of workers under state control, but profit is still appropriated by the class of industrialists.

This 'state capitalist' form is different from the social formation Horkheimer calls 'integral etatism', though Horkheimer also sees some similarities. It is obvious that in this context he has the Soviet Union in mind. Private capitalism is abolished, but the immediate producers remain wage labourers, exploited proletarians. The factory regime has spread over society as a whole. This form of bureaucratic dominance is repressive but instable, because the existence of this bureaucracy forms an obstacle to economic productivity.

Horkheimer's analysis of both 'state capitalism' and 'state socialism' (another term he uses for 'integral etatism') serves as the background for another critical commentary on the determinist conception of history. On this point, the text 'Authoritarian State' is a continuation not only of 'The Jews and Europe', but also of *Dämmerung*: a central aspect of traditional Marxism is criticized once again.<sup>61</sup> Horkheimer calls the assumption that history develops according to a 'fixed' law a 'metaphysical error'. This criticism is directed at the schematic 'fatalism' of both

Hegel and Marx. The deterministic conception of history differs both from the revolutionary's viewpoint and from the perspective of Critical Theory. From the standpoint of the revolutionary, social development is always 'mature' enough for significant change. The standpoint of critical theory must be the confrontation of history with the possibilities concretely visible in historical development.

### POST-WORLD WAR II POLITICAL POSITIONS AND THE NEW LEFT CRITIQUE OF THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

The relation of the New Left, especially the West German New Left, to Adorno and Horkheimer has been discussed before.<sup>62</sup> The critique should be interpreted against the background of strong similarities between critical theory and New Left Marxism. There is little doubt about the strong influence of critical theory on the understanding of Marxism among New Left theorists. This concerns, among other aspects, the critical attitude towards the 'Diamat' orthodoxy and towards an epistemologically questionable 'Abbildtheorie', which considers theory a mirror image of reality.

A dialogue between Horkheimer and Adorno from 1956 shows that the founders of critical theory had not given up discussing political questions after World War II.<sup>63</sup> On the one hand, Adorno states that we 'do not live in a revolutionary situation, and actually things are worse than ever. The horror is that for the first time we live in a world in which we can no longer imagine a better one'.<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, Adorno still emphasizes that he always wanted to 'develop a theory that remains faithful to Marx, Engels and Lenin'.<sup>65</sup> Yet despite his plea for a socialist party 'with a strictly Leninist manifesto',<sup>66</sup> Adorno was very well aware that theory should not be subordinated to a mere instrument of praxis. There were also several occasions in

the decade to follow when Adorno tried to explore the complex relationship of theory and praxis.<sup>67</sup> For Adorno, praxis will suffer if the autonomy of theory is denied.

However, the elements of political pessimism in Adorno's and Horkheimer's thought were stronger than ever in the post-World War II period of capitalist restauration and restabilization. While Horkheimer polemized against left radicalism [*gegen den Linksradikalismus*],<sup>68</sup> Adorno begins his 'Negative Dialectic' with the statement that 'the moment of realization of philosophy was missed',<sup>69</sup> implying that the Marxian idea of 'realizing' philosophy in the context of revolution<sup>70</sup> is no longer a political possibility.

On the purely theoretical level, Horkheimer maintained a certain degree of 'faithfulness' towards Marx and his theory. In a 1968 interview he stated: 'Today I still think that we cannot really understand society, how it exists without that theory, without Marx's analysis'.<sup>71</sup> Backhaus' notes originating from Adorno's 1962 lectures and Adorno's 1965 discussion with Sohn-Rethel show that Marx's theory of value was still of utmost importance for the late Adorno's views on capitalist society.<sup>72</sup> There can be no doubt about the strong impression of Adorno's reading of Marx on the young generation of leftist theorists in Frankfurt. For example, Ernst Theodor Mohl remembers when, as a young social scientist, his view on Marx fundamentally changed after Adorno introduced him to the chapter 'The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret thereof'.<sup>73</sup>

On the political level, however, and especially concerning questions of international politics, Horkheimer became more and more supportive of the bourgeois order. In 1967, Horkheimer put American war efforts, including the contemporary one in Vietnam, into the context of a 'defence of human rights'.<sup>74</sup> During the 1960s, the fear of a Chinese expansion became even irrational: Horkheimer talked about 'the Chinese on their way to the Rhine' and 'the hell of Chinese global domination';<sup>75</sup> Adorno explained his terrible

nightmare about ‘countless people [...] a mixture of riff-raff and monstrosities’ with the dangerous possibility that a pro-Chinese wing of the Italian Communist Party might emerge.<sup>76</sup>

With the advent of the student revolt in 1967/68 a completely new situation emerged. Adorno was now criticized by New Left theorists either related or unrelated to critical theory, by some of his own disciples as well as by opposing intellectuals like the libertarian socialist Johannes Agnoli.<sup>77</sup> Adorno’s relation to the student revolt could be described as rather ambivalent.<sup>78</sup> Adorno did not surrender to the political pressure put on him by his students. Therefore, he did not participate in their political activism. However, his opinion towards the revolt was not hostile, either; at least not until the escalation of the conflict during the occupation of the Frankfurt Institute.<sup>79</sup> Adorno simply would not and could not accept the verdict of ‘resignation’ that his ‘activist’ critics brought up in this situation. ‘We older representatives of what the name “Frankfurt School” has come to designate have recently and eagerly been accused of resignation’, Adorno complained shortly before his death in 1969. ‘Whoever only thinks, removes himself, is considered weak, cowardly, virtually a traitor’.<sup>80</sup> According to Adorno, the misguided political ideal of a unity of theory and practice quickly turns into ‘a prohibition of thinking’.<sup>81</sup> There can be no doubt, in my opinion, that Adorno was absolutely right to defend himself concerning this issue.

After Adorno’s death, the Frankfurt student leader and Marxist theorist Hans-Jürgen Krahl published his text ‘The Political Contradiction in Adorno’s Critical Theory’.<sup>82</sup> Krahl was both a disciple and a critic of Adorno. Krahl reflects how much the student movement owes to Adorno and his historical role. The criteria of emancipation; the theory of mystification, reification and fetishism; the emancipatory core of Marx’s critique of political economy: all these aspects were taught by Adorno. However, Krahl criticizes Adorno both on a theoretical and on a

practical/political level. Firstly, he charged that by theoretically abstracting from historical praxis, late critical theory was in danger of developing back into traditional theory and its forms of contemplation. Secondly, he argued that since Adorno was deeply shaped by the experience of fascism, both in his biography and in his thought, he was fearful of the danger of a fascist reassertion of monopoly capitalism and that this prevented him from supporting political practice directed against monopoly capitalism: the socialist attack from the left would trigger fascist terror as a response. At this point, Krahl continues, the political confrontation between Adorno and his students followed.

After Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s deaths a decisive bifurcation in Frankfurt School thought took place. Separated from and in opposition to Habermas’ theory,<sup>83</sup> a Marxist wing continued to exist and tried to develop Marxist theory further as critical to social theory. In this context the work of Alfred Schmidt and Oskar Negt, and Hans-Georg Backhaus and Helmut Reichelt is the most important.

The chapter argued that the founders of ‘Critical Theory’, especially the younger Horkheimer, were heavily influenced by Marx himself and by Marxism. Horkheimer explicitly criticized certain key aspects of ‘traditional Marxism’. His critique focuses on epistemological questions and especially the then-prevailing Marxist conception of historical development. Indeed, Horkheimer was of central importance for the later development of a critical theory reading of Marx’s critique of political economy, which elaborated central themes of Marx’s thought through his and Adorno’s reading of Marx.

## Notes

- 1 Published in English as *Dawn and Decline: Notes 1926–1931 and 1950–1969*, New York 1978.
- 2 See Rudolf Walther, ‘Aber nach der Sündflut kommen wir und nur wir’: ‘Zusammenbruchstheorie’, *Marxismus und politisches Defizit in der SPD, 1890–1914*, Berlin/West 1981.

- 3 At a later point in his intellectual life, Lukács was critical of his 'omission' of *Naturdialektik* and ontology in *History and Class Consciousness*. Accordingly, in the early 1970s he said: 'Grundlegender ontologischer Fehler des Ganzen ist der, dass ich eigentlich nur das gesellschaftliche Sein als Sein anerkenne und dass in *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*, da hierin die Dialektik der Natur verworfen wird, jene Universalität des Marxismus vollkommen fehlt, die aus der anorganischen Natur die organische ableitet und aus der organischen Natur über die Arbeit die Gesellschaft'. (Georg Lukács, *Gelebtes Denken. Eine Autobiographie im Dialog*, Frankfurt/M. 1980, p. 125).
- 4 See my *Marx Worldwide*, Leiden 2016.
- 5 See Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 18, Frankfurt/M. 1996, p. 571.
- 6 Bela Fogarasi, Letter to David Rjazanov, 20 February 1924, in: Rolf Hecker et al. (ed.), *Erfolgreiche Kooperation: Das Frankfurter Institut für Sozialforschung und das Moskauer Marx-Engels-Institut (1924–1928)*, Hamburg 2000, 137–9, p. 137.
- 7 Henryk Grossmann, *Das Akkumulations- und Zusammenbruchsgesetz des kapitalistischen Systems. Zugleich eine Krisentheorie*, Leipzig 1929.
- 8 Friedrich Pollock, *Zur Geldtheorie von Karl Marx* (Reprint), Frankfurt/M. 1971.
- 9 Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno. Eine Biographie*, Frankfurt/M. 2003, p. 392.
- 10 Hans-Georg Backhaus, *Dialektik der Wertform. Untersuchungen zur marxischen Ökonomiekritik*, Freiburg 1997, p. 30.
- 11 Georg Klauda, Von der Arbeiterbewegung zur Kritischen Theorie, in: Karl Reitter (ed.), *Karl Marx: Philosoph der Befreiung oder Theoretiker des Kapitals?*, Wien 2015, 86–118, p. 92.
- 12 Rolf Wiggershaus, *Die Frankfurter Schule. Geschichte, theoretische Entwicklung, politische Bedeutung*, München 1986, p. 50.
- 13 Alfred Schmidt, Einleitung: Die geistige Physiognomie Max Horkheimers, in: Max Horkheimer, *Notizen 1950 bis 1969, und 'Dämmerung'*, Frankfurt/M. 1974, xix–lxx, p. xxi.
- 14 Zvi Rosen, *Max Horkheimer*, München 1995, p. 19f.
- 15 Hans-Joachim Blank, Zur Marx-Rezeption des frühen Horkheimer, in: Iring Fetscher, Alfred Schmidt (eds.), *Emanzipation als Versöhnung. Zu Adornos Kritik der 'Warentausch'-Gesellschaft und Perspektiven der Transformation*, Frankfurt/M. 2002, 50–88.
- 16 Theodor W. Adorno and Leo Löwenthal, Brief vom 16. Juli 1924, in: Leo Löwenthal, *Mitmachen wollte ich nie*, Frankfurt/M. 1980, 247–8, p. 247.
- 17 Blank, *Zur Marx-Rezeption des frühen Horkheimer*, p. 65ff.
- 18 The Grossmann–Sternberg debate was a critical discussion between Henryk Grossmann and the left-wing socialist Fritz Sternberg on the topics of economic crisis and imperialism during the Weimar Republic. While Grossmann argued by referring to the concept of an over-accumulation 'breakdown' crisis and maintained that foreign-trade with pre-capitalist regions is not a necessary condition for capitalist accumulation in the developed countries, Sternberg's position was much closer to Rosa Luxemburg's theses according to which imperialist expansion was a necessity to overcoming the crisis-ridden character of capitalist accumulation that in her view was due to a lack of effective demand (a crisis of underconsumption) in the dominant capitalist economies.
- 19 Max Horkheimer, *Notizen 1950 bis 1969, und 'Dämmerung'*, Frankfurt/M. 1974.
- 20 Ibid., p. 286.
- 21 Hanno Drechsler, *Die Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands (SAPD). Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung am Ende der Weimarer Republik*, Meisenheim am Glan 1965.
- 22 Theodor Bergmann, 'Gegen den Strom'. *Die Geschichte der KPD(Opposition)*, Hamburg 2001.
- 23 Olaf Ihlau, *Die Roten Kämpfer. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik und im 'Dritten Reich'*, Meisenheim am Glan 1969.
- 24 Karl Korsch, Brief an Paul Mattick vom 20. Oktober 1938, in: *Jahrbuch Arbeiterbewegung 2*, Frankfurt/M. 1974, p. 183.
- 25 Max Horkheimer, *Dawn and Decline: Notes 1926–1931 and 1950–1969*, New York 1978, p. 35f.
- 26 Rudolf Hilferding, *Das Finanzkapital. Eine Studie über die jüngste Entwicklung des Kapitalismus*, Berlin 1955, p. 7.
- 27 Horkheimer, *Dawn and Decline*, p. 36.
- 28 Ibid., p. 37.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 'Revolutionary Attentism' was a political and ideological position held by the 'orthodox centre' of the pre-1914 SPD. The term describes a passive position that claims to be revolutionary without actively initiating a revolutionary situation. This term was used and popularized by the German historian Dieter Groh, *Negative Integration und revolutionärer Attentismus. Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie am Vorabend des ersten Weltkriegs*, Frankfurt/M. 1974.
- 31 Horkheimer, *Dawn and Decline*, p. 37.
- 32 Ibid., p. 66.
- 33 Ibid., p. 66f.
- 34 See Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt/M. 1985, vol. 12, p. 514.



- 35 See Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 15, Frankfurt/M. 1995, p. 669.
- 36 Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 12, p. 524.
- 37 Kornelia Hafner, 'Daß der Bann sich löse'. Annäherungen an Adornos Marx-Rezeption, in: Diethard Behrens (ed.), *Materialistische Theorie und Praxis. Zum Verhältnis von Kritischer Theorie und Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, Freiburg 2005, 129–55, p. 138.
- 38 Alfred Schmidt, Zum Erkenntnisbegriff der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie, in: Walter Euchner, Alfred Schmidt (eds.), *Kritik der politischen Ökonomie heute. 100 Jahre Kapital*, Frankfurt/M. 1968, 30–43.
- 39 The precise and insightful intellectual work of many MEGA-related Soviet and Eastern German Marx-researchers is a completely different story, of course.
- 40 *Marx/Engels Collected Works (MECW)* 40, p. 270.
- 41 Max Horkheimer, *Traditionelle und kritische Theorie*, Frankfurt/M. 1992, pp. 261, 263.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 263.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 266.
- 44 *MECW* 35, p. 186.
- 45 Max Horkheimer, Zum Problem des Fortschritts, in: Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, Frankfurt/M. 1986, 277–325.
- 46 By 'erste Setzung' Horkheimer means the exchange of commodities at the beginning of *Capital*.
- 47 Karl Marx, 'From the Preparatory Materials', *MECW* 29, p. 505.
- 48 See, e.g., Dieter Riedel, Grenzen der dialektischen Darstellungsform, in: *MEGA-Studien 1997/1*, Amsterdam 1998, 3–40; Frieder Otto Wolf, Marx's Konzept der 'Grenzen der dialektischen Darstellung', in: Jan Hoff, Alexis Petrioli, Ingo Stützel, Frieder Otto Wolf (eds.), *Das Kapital neu lesen. Beiträge zur radikalen Philosophie*, Münster 2006, 159–88; Dieter Wolf, Zum Übergang vom Geld ins Kapital in den Grundrissen, im Urtext und im Kapital. Warum ist die 'dialektische Form der Darstellung nur richtig, wenn sie ihre Grenzen kennt?', in: Rolf Hecker et al. (eds.), *Geld – Kapital – Wert. Zum 150. Jahrestag der Niederschrift von Marx's ökonomischen Manuskripten 1857/58 Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (Beiträge zur Marx-Engels-Forschung. Neue Folge 2007), Hamburg 2007, 45–86; Helmut Reichelt, Grenzen der dialektischen Darstellungsform – oder Verabschiedung der Dialektik? Einige Anmerkungen zur These von Dieter Riedel, in: *MEGA-Studien 2000/1*, Berlin 2003, 100–26; Werner Bonefeld, *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy*, London 2014, chap. 4.
- 49 Erich Fromm, Julian Gumperz, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Franz Neumann, Friedrich Pollock, Die Marxsche Methode und ihre Anwendbarkeit auf die Analyse der gegenwärtigen Krise. Seminardiskussion 1936, in: Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 12, 398–416.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 399f.
- 51 Karl Korsch, Brief an Paul Mattick vom 30. Oktober 1938, in: *Jahrbuch Arbeiterbewegung 2*, Frankfurt/M. 1974, p. 188. More on the 'Logikbuch'-project: Rolf Wiggershaus, *Die Frankfurter Schule*, p. 202ff.
- 52 Dirk Braunstein, *Adornos Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, Bielefeld 2015, p. 79ff.
- 53 Hans Mayer and Max Horkheimer, Brief vom 23. April 1939, in: Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 16, p. 590.
- 54 Backhaus, *Dialektik der Wertform*, p. 75f.
- 55 Dirk Braunstein, *Adornos Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, p. 13.
- 56 Horkheimer, *Traditionelle und kritische Theorie*, Frankfurt/M. 1992, pp. 230ff., 238ff.
- 57 *Ibid.*, p. 257f.
- 58 *Ibid.*, p. 258.
- 59 See Henryk Grossmann, Julian Gumperz, Max Horkheimer, Karl August Wittfogel, Diskussionen aus einem Seminar über Monopolkapitalismus (1937), in: Horkheimer *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 12, 417–30.
- 60 See Eva-Maria Ziege, *Antisemitismus und Gesellschaftstheorie. Die Frankfurter Schule im amerikanischen Exil*, Frankfurt/M. 2009, p. 104ff.
- 61 'Authoritarian State' was published in English in *Telos*, 15(3): 3–20, 1973. 'The Jews and Europe' is available in Douglas Kellner, Eric Broner (eds.), *Critical Theory and Society. A Reader*, London 1989, 77–94.
- 62 Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey, Kritische Theorie und Neue Linke, in: Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey, 1968. *Vom Ereignis zum Mythos*, Frankfurt/M. 2008, 223–47. My assessment of this relation differs from Gilcher-Holtey's.
- 63 Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 19.
- 64 Adorno, in: Adorno and Horkheimer, *Towards a New Manifesto*, London 1956, p. 40.
- 65 *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- 66 *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- 67 For instance: Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, Frankfurt/M. 1998, p. 146.
- 68 Horkheimer, *Notizen 1950 bis 1969, und 'Dämmerung'*, p. 210.
- 69 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, Frankfurt/M. 1966, p. 13.
- 70 Marx: 'Philosophy can not be realized without the abolition of the proletariat, the proletariat can not abolish itself without the realization of

- philosophy' (*Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung*, MECW 1, p. 391).
- 71 Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 13, Frankfurt/M. 1986, p. 191.
- 72 Theodor W. Adorno über die Grundbegriffe der soziologischen Theorie. Aus einer Seminar-mitschrift im Sommersemester 1962, in: Backhaus, *Dialektik der Wertform*, 501–13; Alfred Sohn-Rethel, Notizen von einem Gespräch zwischen Th. W. Adorno und A. Sohn-Rethel am 16. 4. 1965, in: Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit*, Weinheim 1989, 221–6.
- 73 See Ernst Theodor Mohl, Ein Reisebericht, in: Berliner Verein zur Förderung der MEGA-Edition e. V. (ed.) *In Memoriam Wolfgang Jahn. Der ganze Marx. Alles Verfasste veröffentlichen, erforschen und den 'ungeschriebenen' Marx rekonstruieren* (Wissenschaftliche Mitteilungen, Heft 1), Hamburg 2002, 13–32, p. 18f.
- 74 Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 18, p. 646.
- 75 Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 14, p. 360f.
- 76 Theodor W. Adorno, *Dream Notes*, Cambridge 2007, p. 74.
- 77 See Johannes Agnoli, Die Schnelligkeit des realen Prozesses. Vorläufige Skizze eines Versuchs über Adornos historisches Ende (1969), in: Agnoli, *1968 und die Folgen*, Freiburg/Br. 1998, 51–9.
- 78 This relation is examined in detail in Hanning Voigts, *Entkorkte Flaschenpost. Herbert Marcuse, Theodor W. Adorno und der Streit um die Neue Linke*, Münster 2009.
- 79 See Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno*, p. 705f.
- 80 Theodor W. Adorno, Resignation, in: Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10.2, Frankfurt/M. 1997, 794–9, p. 794.
- 81 *Ibid.*, p. 795.
- 82 Hans-Jürgen Krahel, Der politische Widerspruch in der Kritischen Theorie Adornos, in: Detlev Claussen et al. (eds.), *Keine Kritische Theorie ohne Amerika*, Frankfurt/M. 1999, 77–81.
- 83 For a critique of the Habermas school as 'usurper' of critical theory: Michael Hintz, Paradoxe Wandlungsprozesse kritischer Gesellschaftstheorie – der Stachel Adorno, in: Jens Becker, Hans Brakemeier (eds.), *Vereinigung freier Individuen. Kritik der Tauschgesellschaft und gesellschaftliches Gesamtsubjekt bei Theodor W. Adorno*, Hamburg 2004, 34–59.

# The Frankfurt School and Council Communism

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Translated by Jacob Blumenfeld

If the Frankfurt School, as Alfred Sohn-Rethel maintained, ‘derived from the German revolution that never happened’, which after the First World War ‘should have occurred and tragically failed’ (Sohn-Rethel, 1990: 10; 1978: xi et sq.), then certain affinities with German–Dutch council communism are to be expected. Council communism emerged in the post-war turmoil as an attempt to avert the failure of the revolution, which brought it into opposition not only to social democracy, but also to Bolshevism shortly thereafter. Following a brief period of mass appeal, council communism shrank to a theoretical enterprise, which, like the Frankfurt School, was still capable of critically comprehending the catastrophic course of history, yet could no longer intervene in it. Like the critical theory from Frankfurt, council communist critique became a message in a bottle. Its guiding principles – rejection of Leninism and all purportedly socialist regimes, self-activity of the proletariat, the construction of a society without wage labour and the

state – gained importance again around 1968. Even if a councilist revolution in the form envisaged a hundred years ago is not to be expected, many reflections of its advocates still hold true.

Council communists rarely appear in literature on the Frankfurt School. One exception is Slater (1977), according to whom one may ask, ‘not without some justification (...) whether Council Communism could perhaps be a concrete embodiment of many of the principles of the Frankfurt School’ (73). As a follower of Lenin, Slater does not mean this as a compliment. He depicts the council communists as blue-eyed spontaneists, who ‘similar to Horkheimer (...) did not point out the soviets’ own responsibility for the collapse of the revolutionary wave of 1918–19’. The Frankfurt School, like the council communists, ‘did not affirm the Leninist concept of the party (...) absolutised the soviet-system, and waited for a new revolutionary upsurge’. However, closer cooperation failed due to the ‘idealism’ (75) of the Frankfurt School.

Although biased and partly just wrong – the council communists did not idealize the actual councils and the Frankfurt School did not outright reject Lenin's concept of the party – Slater strikes upon an affinity also reflected in their interactions. In the 1930s and 1940s, Paul Mattick<sup>1</sup> and Karl Korsch,<sup>2</sup> the two driving forces behind *International Council Correspondence (ICC)*,<sup>3</sup> a council communist journal published in America, often dealt with the exiled Institute for Social Research (IfS) and wrote smaller contributions for the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung (ZfS)*. Korsch even hoped with good reason to collaborate on the book about dialectics planned by Max Horkheimer, which eventually became *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). Ultimately, however, the Institute always kept their distance from the left-wing radicals. Nevertheless, Horkheimer's (1940) essay 'Authoritarian State', a summary of council communist views enriched with reflections on the philosophy of history, testifies to their influence. The fact that this remained an intermezzo was not due to any Frankfurt 'idealism', but to the further course of history. In the early 1940s, the mass murder of European Jews became the centre of reflection for the Frankfurt School. While bourgeois democracy appeared as a refuge for freedom, their hopes for proletarian revolution vanished. Twenty years later, the paths of the two tendencies crossed again when Mattick started a controversy with Herbert Marcuse over his book *One-Dimensional Man* (1964).

In the following, the council communist current from 1918–19 until the 1970s will be presented. The Frankfurt School enters at the point when they come into contact with them. Finally, a few general considerations about the relationship between the two tendencies are made.

## **COUNCILS AS REALITY AND AS PROGRAMME**

Appearing for the first time in the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, workers' and

soldiers' councils shook the German Reich from November 1918 onwards. Starting in Kiel, where sailors refused to fight in a hopeless battle, the councils soon seized the entire country, briefly wielding de facto power; the German Empire collapsed. But as easily as the councils gained power, so could the social democrats wrench it back again. Their representatives had the majority in the councils, which already in December 1918 renounced power in favour of electing a National Assembly. The councils were integrated into the state as industrial committees with a mere right to co-determination.

For the left radicals who later became known as council communists, the councils still held out promise for a revolution that would not be carried out by workers' organizations as a political seizure of power, but by the workers themselves. Not by decrees of nationalization, but by means of collective direct action they attacked the system of property; it became conceivable to abolish the separation of producers and means of production, not just juridically but factually. Established on the basis of production, but capable of managing all of society, the councils thus pointed beyond the separation between politics and economics, characteristic of bourgeois society and the labour movement within it. They were considered a bridge to a future in which an egalitarian-horizontal system of directly elected and recallable delegates would replace the state (Pannekoek, 1947: 44–50). What had remained embryonic in the Paris Commune seemed to have gained a much more favourable foundation in the age of large-scale industry.

With this programme, the council communists went far beyond the actual council movement. Emergent council communism was never a mere reflection of actual practice; rather, it wanted to overcome the movement's weaknesses. The council communists attributed the councils' voluntary renunciation of power to a lag of consciousness behind what had become possible and necessary. Although large parts of the proletariat had

demonstrated an ability to act autonomously, '[p]arliamentary and Trade Union traditions' were still too strong (Canne Meijer, 1938: *New Conceptions*, para 3). They had to be attacked.

The conflict between new forms of struggle and traditional ones also came to the fore at the founding congress of the KPD, the Communist Party of Germany, at the end of December 1918. Against the will of Rosa Luxemburg, the delegates decided to call for the withdrawal from the trade unions and boycott the elections to the National Assembly. They counted on the nascent autonomous factory organizations to be the incubators of a council revolution. The spokesperson of this line was Otto Rühle,<sup>4</sup> later one of the most famous council communists. However, under the growing influence of Moscow, the KPD leadership rapidly distanced itself from the left radical consensus and in autumn 1919 excluded those adhering to it, thus losing about half its 80,000 members. In April 1920, the excluded members founded the Communist Workers' Party of Germany (KAPD).

With initially 38,000 members, the KAPD already marked the international zenith of the councilist movement. Together with its smaller sister party KAPN in the Netherlands, it briefly tried to form a left radical International in opposition to Moscow – with little success. The party was a manifestation of the fact that a relevant minority of workers wanted to push the social-democratically pacified revolution of 1918 further. The revolutionary factory organizations, which in 1920 formed the General Workers' Union (AAUD) closely linked to the KAPD, temporarily included 300,000 workers. There were frequent revolts and short-lived 'council republics', for instance, in Bremen and Bavaria. Not by chance, the KAPD was founded immediately after the Kapp-Putsch of March 1920, during which the workers, mobilized by the trade unions to a general strike, continued the struggle in places even after the defeat of the anti-Republican

putschists. The 50,000 armed workers of the Red Ruhr Army had to be put down by the armed forces of the Weimar Republic in tough street battles.

Council communism was the culmination of a critique of the old workers' movement that can be traced back to the era before 1914. Some of its leaders, such as Anton Pannekoek,<sup>5</sup> Hermann Gorter<sup>6</sup> and Rühle had already been active in pre-war social democracy, increasingly pushing against its organizational form, without questioning social democracy as such. Pannekoek, in a debate with Karl Kautsky, the head of the Marxist centre in German Social Democracy, advocated combining mass strikes and extra-parliamentary actions on the one hand, and participation in trade unions and parliament on the other (Pannekoek, 1912). It was only under the impact of war and mass unrest that this position radicalized into a rejection of the old organizations. Though maintaining that trade unions and parties generated an elite stratum closely interwoven with the bourgeois state and hence interested in the continuity of order, hostile towards any action beyond legality, this did not amount to a moral critique of betrayal. Rather, the 'counterrevolutionary potential' of the trade unions 'cannot be destroyed or diminished by a change of personnel, by the substitution of radical or "revolutionary" leaders for reactionary ones. It is the form of the organisation that renders the masses all but impotent [...]' (Pannekoek, 1920: part V). Similarly, the rejection of parliamentarianism

did not proceed from any immature illusion of quick, easy victory, but from the proletariat's need to emancipate itself from its psychological dependence upon parliamentary representatives – a necessary reaction against the tradition of social democracy – because the way to self-activity could now be seen to lie in building up the council system. (Pannekoek, 1920: part IV)

For the old workers' movement, the growth of their own organizations was synonymous with the advent of socialism; in the council

communist perspective, it was exactly the opposite. The councilists noted that Marx, whom they initially considered as an almost infallible authority, had also pursued a democratic-gradualist politics, but at a different point in time. During the ascending period of capitalism that allowed for reforms, such a line was not only possible, but also necessary because the proletariat had not yet grown to a size that would enable it to take revolutionary action. As Gorter noted, the First International, led by Marx, consisted of *national* organizations that successfully fought for gradual improvements. As a result, over time the 'revolution became theory and reform became practice' (Gorter, 1915: para 51). The nationalism of the working class was based on this exclusive orientation to 'immediate advantages', which extended to endorsing colonial policy and finally culminated in world war (Gorter, 1915: para 110).

Although organized as a party, according to their programme the KAPD was 'not a party in the traditional sense', but aimed at the 'elimination of any policy of leaders' (KAPD, 1920: para 1). This anti-authoritarian orientation, anticipating 1968, did not amount to spontaneism: the power of the old organizations was not due to manipulation by leaders, but adequately expressed the consciousness of the masses. As the KAPD programme stated: 'The psychology of the German proletariat (...) shows very distinct traces of a long-standing enslavement to militarism, and is characterised by a real lack of self-awareness', a consequence of the 'parliamentary cretinism' of social democracy and of the 'absolutism of the union bureaucracy (...). These subjective elements play a decisive role in the German revolution' (KAPD, 1920: para 4).

Contrary to the Bolshevik self-image of being destined to lead the working class by its unwavering adherence to revolutionary principles, the council communists accused the KPD of nothing less than opportunism since it opposed the 'new principles' that rejected parliamentarianism and trade unions in favour of short-term success:

The one current seeks to revolutionise and clarify people's minds by word and deed, and to this end tries to pose the new principles in the sharpest possible contrast to the old, received conceptions. The other current attempts to draw the masses still on the sidelines into practical activity, and therefore emphasises points of agreement rather than points of difference in an attempt to avoid as far as is possible anything that might deter them. The first strives for a clear, sharp separation among the masses, the second for unity; the first current may be termed the radical tendency, the second the opportunist. (Pannekoek, 1920: part II)

The task of the party was primarily to critique and elucidate, while the industrial organizations of the AAUD were responsible for practical class struggle.

This endeavour crashed. After the 'March Action' of 1921, an armed workers' revolt in the central German industrial region around Halle whose expansion miserably failed, left radicalism experienced a rapid decline, with many splits following state persecution. As early as 1920, a dispute broke out about the KAPD's right to exist alongside the unions. A fraction around Rühle saw this as a perpetuation of the classical dualism of party and unions, accusing the KAPD of a 'policy of leaders' with the same vehemence that the KAPD levelled this accusation against the KPD, and thus founded the General Workers' Union – Unitary Organization (AAU-E). In 1922, the KAPD split into two: while the so-called Essen tendency saw participation in wage struggles as a departure from the revolutionary maximum programme, the Berlin tendency held fast to it. Practically, the main difference was that the purist Esseners sank even more quickly into insignificance than the pragmatic Berliners. Due to the stabilization of the economy beginning in 1923 and because of endless sectarian splits, council communism no longer existed as a relevant force by the second half of the 1920s (Bock, 1976).

In the 1930s, council communist discussions primarily centred around the publications of the Dutch Group of International Communists (GIK), who emerged from

the KAPN in 1926 and kept contacts with Germany, as well as into the ICC in America, with whom the GIK closely cooperated.<sup>7</sup> The organizational question lost importance. Mattick retrospectively noted that ‘all theoretical divergences’ over it ‘had no practical meaning’, since the KAPD, AAU, and AAU-E did not differ in practice, remaining all “‘ultra-left’ sects’ (Mattick, 1978: 107). Henk Canne Meijer<sup>8</sup> stated that the unions held ‘an idea close to that of revolutionary syndicalism, which looked forward to seeing all the workers join their unions’. But today, ‘no longer was the ‘organized’ class struggle to depend on an organization formed previously to the struggle’ (Canne Meijer, 1938: The KAUD, para 2). In the council communist conception of the 1930s, independent groups for ‘critique and propaganda’ and spontaneous struggles of the class take the place of parties and unions: ‘the enterprises, public works, relief stations, armies in the coming war’ provided a sufficient basis for organized action (Mattick, 1939: 84–5). As a pole of critique, the groups inherited the KAPD’s role rather than the unions’. Nonetheless, the farewell to the party-form was consistent insofar as a party which neither aimed at electoral participation nor at seizing power strictly speaking had no reason to exist.

In contrast, the critique of political economy gained in importance. First of all, a debate developed between Pannekoek, Korsch, and Mattick over the theory of capitalist collapse by IfS member Henryk Grossmann (1929), which was vigorously defended by Mattick; essentially, however, the debate was less concerned with Grossmann’s prognosis than its practical significance (Korsch et al., 1973). As Mattick admitted in retrospect, it did not lead ‘to any notable result’ (Mattick 1973a, 16), since for Pannekoek ‘the emphasis on the objective untenability of the capitalist system (...) seemed to diminish the active role of the proletariat’ (Mattick 1973a, 13). This role, however, was not disputed by any of the parties. More interesting rather is how Pannekoek himself remained captured by

a historical determinism, for he conceived the much emphasized ‘will of the working class’, as ‘not free, but is itself completely determined by economic development’ (Pannekoek, 1934: Historical Materialism, para 9). Korsch, who regarded the inevitability of collapse as a ‘*meaningless question in this generality*’ and was interested only in ‘very limited forecasts sufficient for practical action’ (Korsch et al., 1973: 97 et sq.), recognized the futile nature of the dispute. It was only fruitful insofar as Grossmann’s theory would later serve as Mattick’s point of departure for his critique of Keynes (see section ‘After 1945: Mattick’s Critical Theory’).

Furthermore, the break with traditional conceptions of socialism became clearer in the 1930s. The old workers’ movement had drawn the message from *Capital* that, through the growing concentration of capital, culminating in monopoly, the bourgeois mode of production itself led to the threshold of socialism, the realization of which merely required the state takeover of large enterprises thus created. Thus the workers’ only role was to bring their own party to power in order to carefully manage the productive forces in the interests of all. As Mattick wrote:

However divided the old labour movement may be by disagreements on various topics, on the question of socialism it stands united. Hilferding’s abstract ‘General-Cartel’, Lenin’s admiration for the German war socialism and the German postal service, Kautsky’s eternalisation of the value–price–money economy (desiring to do consciously what in capitalism is performed by blind market laws), Trotsky’s war communism equipped with supply and demand features, and Stalin’s institutional economics – all these concepts have at their base the continuation of the existing conditions of production. (1939: 80)

While the 1920 KAPD programme recalled the list of demands from the *Communist Manifesto*, the GIK was now thinking about ‘another economic system, where the means of production, the products of labour power, do not take the form of “value”’ (Canne Meijer, 1938: Communist Society, para 8).

Elsewhere, they stressed that communism develops not only when ‘the workers have won the power in society’ (Canne Meijer, 1935: Class Struggle, para 2), but already in their struggles – for example, in wildcat strikes, which produce new forms of interaction and could lead to the appropriation of buildings and means of production. At the same time, a more concrete blueprint for a new society seemed indispensable to them, the absence of which was now seen as partly responsible for the failure of the council movement. *Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution* (GIK, 1930) was intended to remedy this shortcoming. Based on Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Program*, the GIK sketched out a post-capitalist economy, in which the calculation of labour time is pivotal for planning production as well as allocating distribution. They saw the best guarantee for preventing the emergence of a new exploiting class, as in Russia, in the exact calculation of what was due to the individual according to the measure of time worked. The bulk of the text served to prove that producers themselves could precisely calculate this by accounting. Although motivated by egalitarianism, *Fundamental Principles* restricted Marx’s vision of overcoming the logic of exchange in general to areas such as health care and education. For many years, the text remained authoritative for this tendency.

## FROM RED OCTOBER TO RED FASCISM

The Russian experience left its mark not only on *Fundamental Principles*. The confrontation with the October Revolution, Lenin, and Bolshevism takes up much space in council communist literature. In the initial enthusiasm about the Russian revolution, the KAPD tried to join the Third International. When the Bolsheviks supported the course of the KPD and when Lenin sharply attacked

Pannekoek and Gorter in ‘*Left-Wing Communism: an Infantile Disorder*’ for their anti-union and anti-parliamentary line, this was considered a disagreement that could be settled.

Gorter’s (1920) ‘Open Letter to Comrade Lenin’ accepted the Bolshevik strategy as adequate for Russia, but defended the dissenting council communist line with respect to the different circumstances in the West. While the Bolsheviks were supported by only a small industrial proletariat, a huge impoverished peasantry, and faced a weak adversary, it was precisely the reverse in Western Europe: a much larger proletariat, without allied peasants, opposed a much stronger capitalism. The importance of ‘leaders’ – whose necessity for Gorter at this point was as clear as that of a disciplined party – was correspondingly less: everything depended on the ability of the proletariat to break away from the deeply rooted bourgeois culture and act independently. Gorter took issue solely with the presumption of the Russian strategy being stipulated for Western Europe as well. When the Bolsheviks insisted on just that at the Second Comintern Congress (1920), demanding the KAPD to unite with the KPD, Pannekoek formulated for the first time the fear that the compulsion to find ‘a *modus vivendi* with the capitalist world’ could bring Soviet Russia into permanent opposition with the world revolution (Pannekoek, 1920: Afterword, para 4). After the Third Congress (1921), the KAPD withdrew in resignation.

The GIK later came to a much more negative conclusion. In their ‘Theses on Bolshevism’ (GIK, 1934), it is no longer about different strategies on the way to the same goal, but about the bourgeois character of the Russian revolution from the very outset. This made the struggle against Bolshevism one of the ‘first tasks’ of a revolutionary re-orientation (§67):

The economic task of the Russian Revolution was, first, the setting aside of the concealed agrarian feudalism and its continued exploitation of the peasants as serfs, together with the industrialization



of agriculture, placing it on the plane of modern commodity production; secondly, to make possible the unrestricted creation, of a class of really 'free laborers', liberating the industrial development from all its feudal fetters. (§7)

Politically, the task of the Russian Revolution was the destruction of the absolutist state in favour of modern administration. But these essentially bourgeois aims had to be enforced precisely against the weak bourgeoisie, who were aligned with tsarism. In the view of the GIK, the Bolsheviks accomplished this as representatives of the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia. With tactical skill and an absolute claim to leadership, they marched off workers and peasants as foot soldiers for their coup. The GIK determined their interests as contradictory: contrary to the rudimentary communist class politics of the numerically weak proletariat, the peasants wanted only to divide the large estates among themselves as small property owners. This 'two-class basis' of Bolshevism conditioned the independence of the new state power against both. The fact that the result was 'state capitalism', as Lenin temporarily admitted, was historically inevitable, but it also coincided with the Bolshevik ideal of a 'bureaucratically conducted state economy' (§49). The slogan of 'all power to the soviets' was therefore pure tactics; the Bolsheviks regarded the soviets instrumentally 'as organs of insurrection' and not 'as organs of self-government of the working class' (§39).

In light of the repression of all emancipatory efforts of the Russian proletariat, bloodily condensed in the crushing of the Kronstadt revolt in 1921, Lenin's organizational model of the leadership-party was severely criticized by the council communists in countless texts.<sup>9</sup> Yet this was primarily aimed at the debates in the *Western* workers' movement, because they saw no basis for a revolutionary alternative in Russia itself. Even Trotsky was just a 'failed Stalin' (Huhn, 1973). For the Bolsheviks the abolition of the capitalist mode of production is possible only after a certain degree of development, reflected

in the proletarianization of the majority of the population. After 1917, their approach shaped the entire twentieth century: it was not through social revolutionary movements in the metropolises that Marxism became effective, but as a legitimization ideology for national movements in the periphery. The GIK already observed how the Bolsheviks tried to export their model in Asia and discovered the 'national question' for themselves (GIK, 1934: §50–6). Forty years later, Mattick criticized the New Left for their identification with anti-imperialist movements of the Third World, whose 'prototype' was Russia and which could achieve 'at best only partial release from foreign exploitation but not the conditions of socialism' (Mattick, 1978: ix).

In the context of the early 1930s, the council communists used terms like 'state capitalism', 'state socialism', and 'state communism' synonymously, to determine the character of the Soviet Union, which they understood as a 'more advanced type of capitalist production' (GIK, 1934: §58–9). In reality, all these categories existed there only in a deformed way (see Aufheben, 1999). Appropriate to the concept of 'state capitalism' was that wage labour continued and was massively expanded; this was politically decisive for the council communists. While bourgeois revolutions produce politics and economics as separate spheres, they both fused in Russia in a way that undermined the law of value as a blind control mechanism. It was precisely this fusion of state and economy that spawned the phenomena which allowed the council communists to speak of 'red fascism'. As Mattick remarked about the Soviet Union: 'By adding control over the economy to the political control of the government the totalitarian rule over all of society emerges in full' (Mattick, 1947: 70). Here, too, the council communists took a position completely marginal in the left: neither was it taboo for them to name the similarities between Bolshevism and fascism, nor did it lead them to swear allegiance to Western democracy in

the spirit of totalitarianism theory. Pannekoek wrote on Russia and Nazi Germany:

The similarity of political forms and methods of government (...) strikes the eye at first sight. In both the same dictatorship of leaders, assisted by a powerful well-organized and disciplined party, the same omnipotence of the ruling bureaucracy, the same absence of personal rights and free speech, the same levelling of spiritual life into one doctrine, upheld by terrorism, the same cruelty towards opposition or even criticism. (1947: 179)

Taking into account the chronology, Rühle said: 'Hitler became Lenin's and Stalin's best student. Following the example of the Bolshevik state, he shaped and constructed the fascist state in his own image' (Rühle, 1940: 84 et sq.). At the same time, there was a tendency to mechanistically derive a universal fascization from the growing concentration of capital. According to Mattick, Bolshevism, fascism, and Western capitalism were in 'all essential aspects (...) identical and represent only various stages of the same development' towards 'a "fascist" world economy' (Mattick, 1978: 71). This perspective informed many council communist analyses of the 1930s and 1940s.

## FASCISM, DEMOCRACY AND WAR

When the German workers' movement was defeated without a fight in 1933, the council communists saw their critique confirmed.<sup>10</sup> The SPD 'had become only a façade behind which was such a rotten (...) building that it fell into ruins at the first strike of the enemy', as did the 'pseudo-revolutionaryism of the KPD', which turned their adherents into 'blind instruments', while the trade unions tried to 'submit entirely to national socialism' (Pannekoek, 1933: 442–6). Added to this were 'the nationalistic adventures' of the KPD: 'Ten years of competition with Hitler for the title to real nationalism turned the workers themselves into fascists' (Mattick, 1935: 27). The problem, however, was more fundamental.

Both wings of the workers' movement had significantly abetted Nazism through their statism: Bolshevism with 'its example of state dictatorship' and social democracy with its – albeit democratically understood – 'idea of State socialism' (Pannekoek, 1947: 157). To this extent, the course towards National Socialism was not set in 1932/33, but already in 1918/19, when its potential opponents were defeated by the Social Democrats in coalition with the right-wing Freikorps, and a 'republic without republicans' arose. In light of 'the growth of martial law and emergency power', Korsch considered this a 'preparatory phase' of National Socialism, which then came to power completely legally (Korsch, 1940a: 13).

It was during these years that the contacts between the Frankfurt Institute and council communism, represented by Mattick and Korsch, were most extensive. 'Horkheimer', Korsch wrote to Mattick in 1938, 'has (...) come very close to my, our political standpoint in recent years' (Korsch, 2001: 683 et sq.). In those years, Horkheimer wrote his most radical texts, which he later distanced himself from. The council communist influence is especially clear in 'The Jews and Europe' (1939) and 'Authoritarian State' (1940), where Horkheimer saw both the Soviet Union (about which he had been ambivalent for a long time) and Nazism as manifestations of a general trend towards statism to which he opposed the anti-authoritarian system of councils. By taking fascism as the necessary consequence of the irreversible bankruptcy of the liberal market economy, he declared meaningless any purely democratic anti-fascism that aims at restoring the status quo: 'To appeal today to the liberal mentality of the nineteenth century against fascism means appealing to what brought fascism to power' (Horkheimer, 1939: 91). While 'a generalizing sociology suffered from the fact that it was practiced primarily by people of the middle and upper middle classes who differentiate too conscientiously', the 'millions below learn through their experience from childhood on that the

various phases of capitalism belong to one and the same system. Authoritarian or liberal, society for them means hunger, police control and the draft' (Horkheimer, 1940: 104). The *ICC* recommended 'The Jews and Europe' as 'the best short exposition of fascism' (*ICC*, 5.1, 1940: 10).

A text that obviously influenced Horkheimer were the theses by Heinz Langerhans published in *ICC* in 1935.<sup>11</sup> As a student of Korsch and colleague of the Institute, Langerhans represented another bridge between the two currents. In his theses, he stated that capital and the state were being melted 'by the world crises into a single armor-plating, to the end of assuring their continued existence. From the automatic subject Capital with the sponsor State as a special organ has grown the unified state-subject Capital' (Langerhans, 1935: 9). The driving force was the immensely increased productive forces, which already in 1914 could only erupt in war, and would do so again, according to Langerhans' clear-sighted forecast, around 1940, in order to accomplish 'the special work of any crisis: destruction of value' that can no longer be valorized (8). Precisely thereby, 'the pre-supposition for crisis' is once again placed within the crisis, and competition – internally suspended through cartelization – is transposed onto the international level, therefore producing the 'Twilight of Autarchy' (10). Langerhans spoke here of a general tendency, though he obviously had Nazism in mind when he described how the 'state-subject Capital seizes the monopoly on class struggle. The breaking up of all class organs of the workers is its first accomplishment. A ruthless social-pacification process is introduced with the aim of "organically" incorporating that part of capital represented by wage labor into the new State' (9). Thus, 'the only possible social reform has [been] won against the workers' (12).

In 1935, Korsch objected to Langerhans, claiming that the capacity for pacification was 'damagingly overrated' and the 'sharpened class struggle of the workers' was ignored

(Korsch, 1935: 20). A few years later, however, he saw fascism as 'a non-socialist and undemocratic but plebeian anti-reactionary counter-revolution' (Korsch, 1940a: 14), and came closer to Langerhans insofar as he now saw the difference between fascism and traditional reactionaries precisely in its ability to integrate the working class: 'The fascist counter-revolution rather tried to replace the reformist socialist parties and trade unions, and in this it succeeded to a great extent' (Korsch, 1940b: 32). While council communist interpretations of National Socialism were hardly uniform, they mostly went beyond the image drawn by the Third International of a dictatorship of big business over the German working class by taking seriously its efforts to win over workers by means of ideology and social engineering. Even though the deprivation of workers' rights was beyond dispute, the 'national community' was more than a mere propaganda lie. Pannekoek described the pseudo-anti-capitalist features of National Socialism as a 'revolt of German against American capital, against the rule of gold', which masquerades 'as the new reign of labor' with considerable effect. The forced national community meant 'the end of the pitiless fight of all against all, (...) that everybody will have his place assigned, an assured existence, and that unemployment, the scourge of the working class, disappears as a stupid spilling of valuable labor power' (Pannekoek, 1947: 145, 147–8). The Nazi state also curtailed the liberties of private companies considerably and could thus present itself 'as the power that curbs capital' (149).

With regard to the exact relationship between politics and economics in National Socialism, there was as little unanimity among the council communists as there was among the exiled Frankfurt Institute. There, Franz Neumann vehemently argued with Friedrich Pollock, whose thesis that under state capitalist National Socialism, 'the profit motive is superseded by the power motive' (Pollock, 1941: 207) Neumann attempted to

refute in his major study *Behemoth* (1942). Korsch agreed with him: 'Neumann shows that in spite of the transition from free competition to monopolistic rule and an increasing interference of the state, the present German economy has pertained the essential features of a genuine capitalist economy'. It is 'based, now as before, on private ownership in the means of production', and 'it is still the profit motive that holds the machinery together' (Korsch, 1942: 47–8).<sup>12</sup> In this sense, he also accused Langerhans of blurring the political-economic differences between Bolshevik Russia and Nazi Germany when he described them as 'not of a fundamental nature' (Korsch, 1935: 20; Langerhans, 1935: 9). Mattick, on the other hand, emphasized more strongly the independence of the state, which had developed 'its own vested interests'. It could 'become the most important monopoly and within the framework of imperialistic rivalries combine all power in society in one hand, and thus begin to "plan" the nation' (Mattick, 1941a: 20). Although he did not deny the continued existence of the profit motive, he basically followed Horkheimer's claim that Nazism means 'the end of political economy' in terms of the further validity of categories such as 'exchange of equivalents, concentration, centralization, falling rate of profit, and so on', once 'the practice of methodical violence' takes the place of blindly operating mechanisms (Horkheimer, 1939: 83). Domination, once disguised, now appeared openly. The fascists

could not help unmasking the exchange relations as the relation between classes – one controlling, the other controlled – because they themselves rose to power by political struggles, not by grace of an economic law. (...) All capitalistic categories today are reproduced not in their fetishistic form but in their actual character. (Mattick, 1941a: 17, 20)

Regardless of such differences, the council communists at that time still shared an astonishing confidence in history. Ruthlessly scrutinizing the decline of the old workers' movement, they were certain that a new, truly

revolutionary one would emerge. In this respect, Horkheimer did not follow them even in his most radical writings, but attacked any such confidence with almost existential despair: 'Theory explains essentially the course of destiny'. 'The belief that one is acting in the name of something greater than oneself is bankrupt. Not a few Marxists paid homage to it'. 'As long as world history follows its logical course, it fails to fulfil its human destiny' (Horkheimer, 1940: 109, 112, 117). By contrast, Rühle claimed: '*History does not make mistakes*'. He declared that fascism, by eliminating the old organizations, had done the proletariat 'an enormous world-historical service': 'Did not we, since 1918, demand the disappearance of parties, parliament, trade unions, etc.?' (Rühle, 1939: 180). Though less harsh, Pannekoek also drew a certain hope from the fact that fascism, by destroying the 'old party divisions' in the proletariat, had restored its 'natural [!] class unity' (Pannekoek, 1936: 13). Korsch, on the other hand, in the spirit of Horkheimer warned against indulging 'comfortable illusions about a hidden revolutionary significance' of history in a bad Hegelian manner, as expressed for instance in the triumphalist slogan of the KPD: 'After Hitler, Our Turn!' (Korsch, 1940b: 34). But even he was not free from this. Following Langerhans (1940), who had discovered an affinity between the 'shock-troop principle' and the council principle, Korsch wrote that out of the 'fear of the emancipatory effect that a total mobilization of the productive forces' in military form 'would be bound to have for the workers', the rulers were afraid of unleashing a truly 'total war'. This demonstrates 'the impasse from which capitalism cannot escape even in its present rejuvenated fascist and counter-revolutionary form' (Korsch, 1940b: 35–6, 41).

It was presumably this historical confidence that prevented the council communists from perceiving the full extent of Nazi barbarism. This is where their path diverged from the exiled Institute, for whom from the early 1940s onwards the unprecedented

aggressiveness of Nazi antisemitism became far more important than all questions concerning the relation between the state and economy. In August 1940, Adorno wrote to Horkheimer that he could 'no longer ignore thinking about the fate of the Jews (...). It often seems to me as if all that we have been accustomed to seeing in the proletariat has now been transferred onto the Jews in terrible concentration' (Adorno, 1940: 764). In 'The Jews and Europe', Horkheimer had still derived antisemitism from the alleged liquidation of the sphere of circulation, understood it as an 'economic expediency' and predicted its 'end', since it belonged to the 'ascendant phase of fascism'. Even 'the hope of the Jews, which attaches itself to the Second World War' seems 'miserable' to him, since this war would only lead the world 'further into authoritarian-collectivistic ways of life' (Horkheimer, 1939: 89–92). In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), by contrast, Adorno and Horkheimer conceived of antisemitism as a delusional ideology, in which the national community projected the exploitative essence of the system onto 'the Jews' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944: 153). As the dimensions of the German policy of extermination became clearer, Horkheimer's emphasis on the continuum between authoritarian and liberal forms of capitalism from his left radical writings of 1939/40 faded away. Without illusions about the motives of the Allies, several members of the Institute practically supported the American war effort.

In council communist texts, antisemitism appeared on the margins, at best. Korsch remarked how in fascism a 'rational goal-directed state practice' combined with 'a completely irrational state mythology (represented by the nation, the race, and the mass)' (Korsch, 1932: §1.3), and that the repressed class struggle is presented as the work of an 'interested band of Jewish or other racially foreign agitators' (Korsch, 1935: 19). But such remarks remained marginalia. Pannekoek, who unlike Rühle, Mattick, or Korsch had lived under German occupation himself, came closest to

grasping the particular features of National Socialism. In *Workers' Councils*, largely written during the war, and published for the first time in 1947, he devoted a separate chapter to National Socialism as a form of fascism 'far more important' than the Italian variant, and recognized its 'central doctrine' in race theory, which aimed at the 'deliberate extermination' of the Jews (Pannekoek, 1947: 154). In general, he had an eye for distinctions. The bourgeois freedom of the individual, 'to be sure, often was no more than an ambiguous form, but it was something. National socialism took away even this semblance of liberty. (...) So it had to disappear; without liberty man cannot live' (158). However, just as Pannekoek had already pointed out the beginning of the persecution of the Jews in 1933, but had rejected calls for a boycott against Germany as a path to 'another 1914' (Pannekoek, 1933: 449), such insights had no practical impact.

In the Second World War, the council communists rejected Trotsky's demand that Stalinist Russia be defended as a merely 'degenerated' workers' state. 'Anti-fascism' served the international alliance policy of Russia, which stifled the class struggle – and had been realized in the Spanish Civil War as a suppression of the social revolution through 'Moscow fascism' (Mattick, 1937). In any case, world politics was quicksand: it was impossible to figure out who would ally with whom against whom. Central to the council communists was the assumption that the era of liberal-democratic capitalism had come to an end, and that the war would also turn the last democracies fascist. Yet while just as in the First World War it was necessary to refuse taking any side, the constellations had changed. 'None of the revolutionary slogans of the last war can be immediately applied', noted Korsch in 1941. The former call for 'transformation of the capitalist war into a civil war' was now obsolete, since the 'present war (...) has been a veritable civil war on both a European and a world-wide scale'. '*Down with the imperialist war!*' now fitted 'perfectly with the tendencies

of the bourgeois appeasers and isolationists'. 'Defeat of one's own country!' had become 'a practical policy of that substantial part of the ruling class in various European countries that preferred the victory of fascism to the loss of its economic and political supremacy' (Korsch, 1941: 2–3). Mattick soberly realized that the 'question as to what the "labor movement" should do in regard to the war' is 'artificial (...), for there is no labor movement which could raise it in actuality' (Mattick, 1941b: 61).

### AFTER 1945: MATTICK'S CRITICAL THEORY

The feared universal fascization did not take place either. Instead, after 1945, the Western world experienced a period commonly known as 'the three golden decades'. The thesis of an unstoppable monopolistic liquidation of democratic-liberal capitalism, temporarily shared also by Horkheimer, Pollock, and Neumann, too, proved to be wrong. Already in *Workers' Councils*, Pannekoek was implicitly moving away from the thesis of fascization; he now understood bourgeois democracy as 'the adequate political form for rising and developing capitalism' and described not any fascism, but 'American democracy' as 'still the strongest force of capitalism' (Pannekoek, 1947: 133, 135).

The upheavals around 1967/68 brought greater interest to council communism once again. It had a strong influence on the restless *Situationist International* (1957–72), for example. Its internationally renowned representatives were now Mattick and former GIK member Cajo Brendel.<sup>13</sup> Brendel carried on classical council communism unaltered, leaving no doubt until his death that the future belonged to the self-emancipating working class. He reacted to the disappearance of the councils – they appeared one last time in Hungary in 1956 – by equating them with wildcat strikes: through them, 'spontaneous resistance (...) enters more and more onto the

historical stage' (Brendel, 2001: 8). Mattick took another path. His remark that 'workers' self-initiative and self-organization offers no guarantee for their emancipation' could also be directed against Brendel (Mattick, 1978: xi). In his post-war writings, the historical optimism receded. While Pannekoek's or Gorter's Marxism sometimes displayed features of a world-view, for Mattick only the critique of political economy was relevant. Marx had 'talked a lot of nonsense, not because he was a babbling idiot, but because he lived in another world with other problems (...) In Marx, I really only care about this one idea, the discovery of immanent contradictions in the capitalist system of production' (Mattick, 2013: 105).

Starting from these contradictions, Mattick in his main work, *Marx and Keynes*, tried to conceptualize the post-war constellation, which though far from a universal fascism, no longer corresponded to classical liberalism. Already during the 'golden decades', Mattick debunked the idea that the 'mixed economy' guaranteed stability through clever political management. He showed that the public demand propagated by Keynes does not provide a solution to the problem of declining profitability, but is itself dependent on the private economy, as it is financed by taxes or by the anticipation of future taxes in the form of growing public debt. Though state intervention can compensate for economic downturns in the short term, it remains impotent against the fall of the rate of profit, rooted in the rising organic composition of capital. Prosperity after 1945 was not due to some new Keynesian expertise among those in power, but to the gigantic destruction of capital caused by the Depression and World War, which enabled capital to expand again along the same old cycle of recovery, boom, and crash. But for the same reasons, according to Mattick, this prosperity could not last. The return of crisis in the 1970s proved him spectacularly right.

This assessment also underlies Mattick's critique of Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*. By no means did Mattick contradict

Marcuse's gloomy picture of a state-pacified 'society without opposition', but rather agreed 'with all his observations' on ideology in advanced industrial society. This even extended to Marcuse's notion of an integration of the proletariat: 'Marx says somewhere that "the proletariat is revolutionary, or it is nothing". Presently it is nothing and it may well be that it will continue to be nothing' (Mattick, 1972: §XII, para 12). To Mattick, however, this was not settled. His objection, therefore, was kindled by Marcuse assuming this constellation to be permanent, which led him to declare marginal groups in the metropolises and movements in the Third World as the spearheads of liberation. Though with a critical intention, Marcuse reproduced the belief in a crisis-free capitalism, which could secure mass loyalty through constant technical progress. Following his argument in *Marx and Keynes*, Mattick rejected this assumption and expressed doubts about the revolutionary potential of marginalized groups: 'The sporadic rebellions of despair by small minorities are easily handled by the authorities representing the smug majority, which includes the mass of the proletariat' (Mattick, 1972: §XII, para 14). Only the proletariat's change of heart in the wake of renewed crises offered a faint hope: 'If there can be no working class revolution, there can be no revolution at all' (Mattick, 1972: §XII, para 25).

Nevertheless, Mattick took *One-Dimensional Man* to be 'one of the most important and most beautiful books written in recent times' (Mattick, quoted in Roth, 2015: 275), while Marcuse considered Mattick's objections as 'the only solid and real criticism' of his book. In letters to Mattick, however, he essentially reaffirmed his position. Even if the post-war conditions were only 'transitory' ('but how long is transitory?! *A la fin on y meurt ...*'), it seemed that 'a (for the system) tolerable balance' between the state and private economy would also be possible for the long-term. And since only 'plain misery' drives people to revolution, 'the end of the system' will not be ushered in by the

industrialized countries, but rather by 'the life and death struggle with the backward neo-colonial countries, whose people are today really the heirs of the proletariat – the only ones who have nothing to lose but their chains'.<sup>14</sup>

Against the fetishization of the old working class, Mattick also emphasized the changed character of the proletariat: 'The industrial proletariat of a hundred years ago has meanwhile swollen to an amorphous mass of wage-receiving occupations and professions, all of which are dependent on the vicissitudes of market events' (Mattick, 1972: §XII, para 19). This social condition, not industrial employment, essentially defined the proletariat, which had grown immensely since the time of Marx. More clearly than in earlier council communist writings, Mattick called for the 'abolition of the proletariat' and not its victory, and also distanced himself from the old GIK conception of socialism (Mattick, 1972: §XII, para 30). As early as 1938 Korsch had already confessed to him that he thought 'worse and worse about the "Dutch" socialization program', in which he recognized an abstract idealization of the capitalist law of value; the calculation of the consumption quota due to the individual would 'soon lose all meaning without exchange and wage labour!' (Korsch, 2001: 651, 657). In his introduction to a reprint of *Fundamental Principles*, Mattick (1970) now saw a 'weakness' of the GIK model in that the calculation of labour time should also be applied to distribution. The GIK's appeal to Marx holds true 'only insofar as that thought is applied to a phase of socialist development within which the principle of the exchange of equivalents still prevails, a principle which will come to an end in socialism' (Mattick, 1970: para 17). In light of the high development of the productive forces in industrialized countries and the fact that 'more than half of all capitalist production as well as the unproductive activities associated with it (...) only make sense in the irrational economy of capitalist society', communist production

enables a surplus in which ‘any calculation of their individual shares of average socially necessary labor time would be superfluous’ (Mattick, 1970: para 19). In *Marx and Keynes*, Mattick regarded such calculation as ‘ridiculous’, and emphasized that the development of socialism was not a matter of ‘an always greater equality in “exchange”’ (Mattick, 1969b: 331).

While Mattick here belatedly took up Korsch’s position, their fundamental understandings of Marx increasingly diverged after 1945. Korsch regarded Marx’s critique of political economy as valid, but less and less decisive. This difference had already occurred in the debate over Grossmann’s theory of capitalist collapse in the early 1930s, in which Korsch advised against searching ‘for a “revolutionary” crisis theory per se, just as in the middle ages one searched for the philosopher’s stone’ (Korsch, 1933: §I, para 1). Korsch was more interested in contemporary proletarian action than future forecasts of how capital would evolve according to its own laws. From his point of view, what Marx’s thought had gained over time in ‘scientific character’ had been lost in the orientation to practice. He noted this defect already in the 1930s and 1940s: Marx’s relationship to the state had remained ambiguous, and the ‘umbilical cord between Marxism and Jacobinism was never cut’ (Korsch, 1939: §VI, para 1). In 1950, Korsch radicalized this criticism with his ‘Ten Theses on Marxism Today’ in which he called for a break from the ‘Marxism which claims to monopolize revolutionary initiative as well as theoretical and practical direction’, and insisted on recognizing other currents like anarchism as equally important. In addition, he urged to let go of Marx’s ‘overestimation of the state as the decisive instrument of social revolution’ as well as his ‘mystical identification of the development of the capitalist economy with the social revolution of the working class’ (Korsch, 1950: §7). In line with council communism, Korsch maintained the goal of the ‘control of the workers over the production

of their own lives’ just as firmly as he held to the critique of Bolshevism as a mere ‘ideology’ (Korsch, 1950: §10). But he detected the seeds of this ideology already in Marx himself.

In a late reply, Mattick saw little value in this critique. What Korsch dismissed as ‘mystical’, he judged as the strength of Marx’s theory. Developed during the ascending phase of capitalism, when a proletarian revolution had not yet been possible, Marx had already envisaged the self-abolition of the proletariat. Bolshevism for its part did not suffer from a ‘mystical identification’ of capitalist development and revolution, but, on the contrary, attempted to skip this development through putschist means. It was not Marx who ‘whisks away from the present movement the real emancipation of the working class and puts it back into the indefinite future’ (Korsch, 1950: §7). The movement itself had shown no revolutionary intentions, and so contrary to Korsch, it was precisely ‘the “pure theory” of social revolution, alienated from practice’, to which later radical movements could connect (Mattick, 1973b: 198). For the failure of those movements after 1918, however, Mattick could not point to any ‘objective’ reasons either. He could only note the ‘unwillingness’ of the masses for revolution, and draw a ‘truly sad record’ of the workers’ movement in the twentieth century (212).

## CONCLUSION

Starting off as revolutionaries, the council communists soon involuntarily became isolated critics, whose mockery as reclusive-purist ‘friars of Marxism’ is strikingly reminiscent of the accusations made against the Frankfurt School’s ‘ivory tower’ (cf. Brendel, 2008: 34). Both shared a growing distance to all currents of the established workers’ movement; they preferred the lack of practicality to a false practice. In the face



of world-wide counterrevolution and the foul peace of the post-war era, both council communists and the Frankfurt School adhered to the basic principles of Marx's critique against its misappropriation as the halo of state-socialist despotism. On the Frankfurt side, this is especially true for Adorno after the Second World War, who noted in 1968 that although 'the system's resilience has been confirmed' in Keynesian state interventions, 'so, indirectly, has the theory of its collapse' (Adorno, 1968a: 123). Furthermore, he regarded the 'harmony' between classes as probably 'not so permanent' as is pretended 'by the assured obsolescence' of Marx's critique: 'In crisis situations, social conflict may be realised as one of classes; whether once again in the forms of the administered world remains to be seen' (Adorno, 1968b: 186). This coincided with Mattick's views. Marcuse's new left approach to anti-imperialist movements in the Third World was by no means representative of the Frankfurt theorists, who were no longer a closed 'school' at this point. Similar to the council communists, Adorno recognized nationalism above all in such movements.

Despite all the similarities before, during and after Fascism, however, both currents reacted differently to the failure of the revolution. The leitmotiv of the council communists was the potential power of the class, while for the Frankfurt School it was more and more the real powerlessness of the individual. But as Mattick's broad agreement with Marcuse's diagnosis of the times shows, this is not an insurmountable contradiction, but rather aims at a better future in the first case, and a depressing present in the second. The council communists kept a close eye on the activity of the proletariat, which increasingly vanished from the horizon of the Frankfurt School: the only contribution in the *ZfS* on the Spanish Civil War, which might have halted the lemmings' march to fascism and World War, came from Korsch. Meanwhile, the Frankfurt School with its critique of ideology and culture analyzed the reflection of domination in the individual

much closer than the council communists, who remained focused on the critique of political economy and class conflicts. Rühle's programme for an anti-authoritarian psychology, very close in intention to the Frankfurt School, met with widespread incomprehension and rejection from his comrades.

On the relation between critique, consciousness, and practice, there existed conflicting views within council communism, which were correspondingly close to or far from those of the Frankfurt School. Pannekoek's distinction between a 'radical' and an 'opportunistic' tendency in the workers' movement meant that the battle of ideas was not an idealistic spectacle beyond the actual class struggle, but essential to its revolutionary unfolding. The organization remained indispensable to him as the vehicle for a critique of ideology. On the other extreme, for example, Brendel displayed an unshakable trust in the class, which on the basis of its 'everyday experience', had a 'clearer concept' of its oppression than all who wanted to instruct it and thereby ignore what the class 'will be forced to do' (Brendel, 1978). Adorno's critique of left-wing 'Hurrah-optimism' was aimed precisely at such a conjunction of workerism and metaphysics of history, which holds that every 'attempt radically to alter this consciousness [of the worker] by withholding assent to it is considered reactionary. Suspicion falls on anyone who combines criticism of capitalism with that of the proletariat'. The fact that Adorno rejected such optimism also by pointing out the 'lack of any spontaneous resistance by the German workers' to National Socialism once again shows the different significance that the latter had for both currents (Adorno, 1951: 113). Council communism moved between 'Hurrah-optimism' and critique of the proletariat. With Mattick's sober post-war writings, it comes very close to critical theory. Subversive endeavours today should draw on both currents in order to at least maintain the level of reflection achieved in the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Mattick (1904–81) came from a working class left-wing family in Berlin; he was politicized during the revolution of 1918/19, trained as a metal worker, and was a member of the KAPD youth. In 1926, he emigrated to the United States, and was active with both the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the autonomous unemployed movement in 1930s Chicago. During this time, he also corresponded with Henryk Grossmann, whose *The Law of Accumulation and Breakdown of the Capitalist System* (1929) was formative for him. Mattick was the driving force behind *International Council Correspondence*, and remained until his death one of the most prominent advocates of council communism. See the biography by Roth (2015) and the biographical interview with Mattick (2013).
- 2 Korsch (1886–1961) was a jurist and philosopher, successively a member of the SPD, the USPD and the KPD, from which he was excluded in 1926 because of left-wing deviations. He wrote *Marxism and Philosophy* in 1923 and is considered the spiritual father of the 'Marxistische Arbeitswoche' gathering in the same year, in which Georg Lukács, Felix Weil, Karl August Wittfogel, and Friedrich Pollock participated, all of whom belong to the immediate prehistory of the Institute for Social Research. In 1933, he emigrated from Germany, and lived in the United States from 1936 onwards, where he collaborated closely with Mattick. Korsch first became associated with council communism in the early 1930s, often advocating 'unorthodox' positions in this framework.
- 3 Published from 1934 to 1943, the magazine was later renamed *Living Marxism and New Essays*.
- 4 Rühle (1874–1943) was a publicist and educator for the SPD in the Reichstag from 1912 to 1918; he came to the KAPD via the Spartacist League and KPD, and in 1921 split to the AAUE. Influenced by his wife, Alice Rühle-Gerstel, Rühle became interested in Alfred Adler's individual psychology in the second half of the 1920s; he wrote numerous publications on psychology and pedagogy. In 1932, he emigrated to Prague, and in 1935 to Mexico, where the Rühles became friends with the Trotskys. He was a member of the Dewey Commission, which cleared Trotsky of the accusations raised against him in the Moscow show trials.
- 5 Pannekoek (1873–1960) was a renowned astronomer, going from the Dutch SDAP via the left-wing split SPD to the KPN and finally to the KAPN. As a teacher at the Berlin Party School of the SPD (from 1906), he was an important link between Germany and Holland. He was only marginally involved with the GIK. Pannekoek was perhaps the best-known representative of council communism, having written *Workers' Councils* (1947), a standard work of the tendency. On Pannekoek, see Brendel (2001).
- 6 Gorter (1864–1927) was a well-known poet, and like Pannekoek moved from social democracy to council communism. He participated in the Spartacus uprising in January 1919 and later in battles in the Ruhr.
- 7 There, during the Great Depression, the council communists also continued to develop activities in the independent movement of the unemployed, until they were booted from traditional left-wing organizations. The New Deal's social legislation also defused the situation somewhat. In 1936, Mattick wrote a detailed study for the IfS, but never published it (Mattick, 1969a; see also Roth, 2015: 166 et sq.).
- 8 Canne Meijer (1890–1962) was initially a metal worker, and later a teacher; he was active in the KAPN starting in 1921, and later a driving force in the GIK.
- 9 Pannekoek also showed in *Lenin as Philosopher* (1938) that the latter did not move beyond eighteenth-century bourgeois materialism. Korsch tried in vain to place a review of the book in the *ZfS*.
- 10 Council communism made a huge practical impact on events through the action of an individual: the Reichstag fire starter, Marinus van der Lubbe, came from their ranks. The reactions in the council communist milieu ranged from glorification to sharp condemnation (see Bourrinet, 2003).
- 11 Langerhans (1904–76) was a social and political scientist, excluded from the KPD for 'Korschism' in 1926. He received his PhD in 1931, with Horkheimer among his supervisors. He was arrested in 1933 as a member of the *Red Fighters*, sentenced to jail, then detained in Sachsenhausen concentration camp, and finally pardoned in 1939 in the course of an amnesty on the occasion of Hitler's 50th birthday. Korsch and the Institute worked together to help him enter the United States, where he lived from 1941 to 1956. He was later a professor at various universities in Germany.
- 12 For the most part, however, Korsch vehemently criticized *Behemoth*. In his eyes, Neumann's characterization of the Nazi regime as a non-state and a break with the previous republic amounted to an idealization of Weimar (Neumann was a Marxist social democrat). But since Neumann derived this break precisely from the impossibility of a democratic mediation of class antagonism in the crisis since 1929, Korsch's harsh polemic is surprising.

- 13 Brendel (1915–2007) was a journalist, and joined the GIK in 1934. After the Second World War, he was active in the council communist group *Spartacusbond*. After their split, he published the journal *Daad en Gedachte* until shortly before his death. His understanding of class struggle and revolution is exemplified most clearly in Brendel (1971).
- 14 Marcuse to Mattick, 25 October 1967 and 29 December 1965. The letters are in the Mattick papers in the IISG, Amsterdam. Thanks to Gary Roth for providing me with them.
- 15 Traces of both council communism and the Frankfurt School can be found today in the journals *Endnotes* (English), *Internationalist Perspective* (English/French), and *Kosmoprolet* (German).

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# Positivism

Anders Ramsay

Positivism and the critique of positivism becomes an issue in the history of critical theory on two occasions: first, in the 1930s, when Horkheimer and Adorno enter into a discussion with the Vienna Circle of logical positivism, and later in the 1960s when Adorno debates the critical rationalism of Karl Popper. To critical theory the critique of positivism becomes important not only because it is an issue in the philosophy of science. Positivism is also viewed as an obstacle to a critical approach to society, limiting the analysis to what is quantitative, measurable and empirically observable. In this chapter, I will first sketch the tradition of positivism in social science and the relation of Marxism to positivism. I will then introduce Horkheimer's central essay from the 1930s and its twofold critique of positivism's epistemology and politics. This discussion ended with a complete break between the Frankfurt School and the Vienna Circle. The positivist dispute of the 1960s between Adorno and Popper is then presented. It did

expose some common ground between Adorno and Popper, but also important differences. Popper's alternative to positivism is too limited and has not left the scientific ideal for social sciences behind. Adorno also advocates a concept of critique that unlike Popper's critical rationalism is also a critique of society, not just of theories.

## THE TRADITION OF POSITIVISM

Positivism, as a scientific philosophy based on sensory experience, has its forerunner in eighteenth-century empiricism, but as a current in modern thinking it dates back to the French philosopher Auguste Comte, his teacher Henri de Saint-Simon and his English contemporary John Stuart Mill. In addition to calling his doctrine positive philosophy or positivism, Comte, in the mid-nineteenth century, defined sociology as the scientific study of society. Hence, sociology and

positivism are intimately connected from the beginning. Indeed, for the Frankfurt School, sociology as science 'is a child of positivism' (Institut für Sozialforschung, 1956: 9). For Comte, central to positive science was finding law-like regularities in human history. During the nineteenth century, positivism came to represent the idea that the social sciences and the humanities should look to the successful natural sciences as a model for guaranteeing the most reliable and useful results. Scientific method should be empirical, anti-metaphysical and draw its conclusions according to formal logic. The close relation between positivism and sociology remained steady through the nineteenth century with thinkers like Herbert Spencer and Vilfredo Pareto. The most influential and ambitious positivist programme for sociology and anthropology inspired by Comte, however, was founded and carried through in France by the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by Émile Durkheim, who emphasized the particular nature of social facts and demanded that sociology investigate imperative social currents. Despite the success of the natural sciences in the nineteenth century, its hegemony was challenged by reactions to positivism that on the contrary defended the distinguished character of humanities and letters, such as neo-Kantianism and hermeneutics (Lane, 2003).

The attempt to formulate and develop a general positivist programme, not just for sociology, continued with even greater organizational and propagandistic force in the twentieth century. About a decade before the programme of a critical theory of society was formulated at the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt, the group of scientists and philosophers known as the Vienna Circle formulated a programme for a united science, also known under the names of logical empiricism, logical positivism or neo-positivism. Several of the members of the Vienna Circle were natural scientists or mathematicians, or, like the leading figure Otto Neurath, a sociologist with a natural scientific ideal of science.

The group understood itself as the beginning of a movement and connected itself to like-minded thinkers all over Europe. Like the members of the Institute, most of the members of the Vienna Circle were politically left-oriented and of Jewish origin, and when in exile after 1933, despite their differences in outlook, the two groups tried to find forms for mutual dialogue and cooperation. This attempt, however, ended after a few years and since then the divergences between the groups have become more prominent.

Some of the members of the Vienna Circle had sympathies for Marxism. The fact that despite this common ground the two groups could not agree, reflects an ambivalent relationship to natural science and positivism in the Marxist tradition. Marx and Engels had a genuine interest in the natural sciences, and Marxism as it developed after the death of Marx expressed the typical nineteenth-century belief in technological and scientific progress. This trait was particularly prominent in Engels' influential interpretation that dominated the labour movement before the First World War. In this understanding of Marxism, strengthened by Engels' interest in finding dialectical laws in nature, history was seen as governed by quasi-natural laws, similar to what positivism was trying to uncover. On the other hand, Marx (who dismissed Comte's positivism) was schooled in Hegel's philosophy that stressed the active part in subjectivity. In his 'Theses on Feuerbach' (1845), he objected to materialism in that it had so far not conceived reality from the point of 'sensual human activity, practice' (Marx, 1845: 5). This critique of materialism opened up an anti-positivist current in Marxism that became more visible with the Frankfurt School.

## THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL CRITIQUE OF POSITIVISM

With Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) the Hegelian heritage

in Marx's thought was rediscovered and an anti-positivist Western Marxism was conceived. In Lukács' book, the idea of an interest-free knowledge is rejected. The situation of the proletariat gives it a privileged position to understand society as a totality. The Frankfurt School carried on this tradition of the critique of value-free science. It has sometimes been criticized for using the concept of positivism in a much too general sense. In works like *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) and *Eclipse of Reason* (1947), it seems as if an all-encompassing positivism has taken hold of reason and rationality. However, the members were aware of the tension between the general meaning of positivism and its meaning for particular writers. Adorno stresses this point when he writes about Durkheim. Positivism for Durkheim, for whom science amounts to 'observe, compare, classify' (Adorno, 1967: 246), means something else than it does for the Vienna Circle, and something else again for Ludwig Wittgenstein. (Here Adorno most likely has in mind the early Wittgenstein of *Tractatus*.) Still, despite the difficulties in giving positivism an exact meaning, Adorno defends a general use of the concept of positivism. Such a general understanding of positivism advocated by Adorno, draws on the meaning of the positive as 'the existing, the actually given' (Adorno, 1967: 246), that is, as posited by society directly, in its immediacy. Since there are writers who affirm the natural scientific model as a general model of science, and who do not want to use the concept of positivism at all, avoiding using it would, according to Adorno, imply a ban to mention it and an apology for what is intended with the concept (Adorno, 1967: 246–7).

Adorno's reservation against any apology for positivism signifies the fundamentally critical stance of the Frankfurt School towards positivism. Critique of positivism is a recurring theme in critical theory. Already in his inaugural lecture as *Privatdozent* in Frankfurt, before he was a member of the

Institute, Adorno mentions 'the scientific philosophies' as one of the contemporary currents that cannot solve the problem philosophy runs into when it has failed to grasp in thought the totality of reality (Adorno, 1931: 325f.) The scientific currents differ, however, from the various idealistic attempts, such as neo-Kantianism, *Lebensphilosophie* or new ontological projects like Heidegger's, in that they have given up the question about the constitution of reality and simply take the given for granted, securely grounded in the results of the natural sciences (Adorno, 1931: 327). The problem that a natural scientific ideal implies affirmation of what is given is a recurring theme when critical theory criticizes positivism. This does not mean that critical theory rejects the results of the natural sciences, or that it accepts the division between the natural sciences and the humanities (Horkheimer, 1932: 307), in the way that hermeneutics or other philosophical currents that are critical of positivism too.

## HORKHEIMER'S ESSAY ON THE LATEST ATTACK ON METAPHYSICS

Horkheimer, in his introductory speech upon assuming the position of director of the Institute of Social Research, also brought up the critique of positivism by social philosophy (Horkheimer, 1931: 27), and in his articles in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* he developed his own critique. When Horkheimer went from calling his and the Institute's approach 'materialism' to the 'critical theory of society', the critique of positivism was simultaneously sharpened in the long, important article 'The Latest Attack on Metaphysics' (Horkheimer, 1937a). The article was preceded by extensive discussions with Adorno (see letters in Adorno and Horkheimer, 2003; cf. Dahms, 1994: ch. 3) that certainly strengthened Horkheimer's anti-positivism. Although it is in Horkheimer's name, it was their first extensive cooperation and marked Adorno's growing influence.



In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Eclipse of Reason* the critique was further intensified and developed regarding positivism as an expression of the overall tendency of instrumental reason. Positivism here is the moment of final decay and self-destruction of enlightenment, already inherent in enlightenment itself, that makes any connection to the results of modern science impossible to the authors (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1947).

Horkheimer explicitly emphasized in the introduction to the annual volume of *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* that contained 'The Latest Attack on Metaphysics' that this critique did not exclude discussion and cooperation between the Institute and members of the Vienna Circle: 'Critique of the positivist school does not prevent us from recognizing and promoting their scholarly achievements' (Horkheimer, 1937b: 107). This statement refers to discussions that were carried out in the Institute in New York a year earlier with, among others, Neurath (Dahms, 1994: 81–96). An article by Neurath was also published in the Institute's journal (Neurath, 1937). In August 1937 Adorno and Benjamin delivered a report to Horkheimer from Paris on their participation in the 'Congress for the unity of science' in organized discussions with leading members of the Vienna Circle. One subject of the discussions on this occasion was Horkheimer's recently published 'The Latest Attack on Metaphysics' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2003). When Horkheimer launched this sharp criticism against positivism, all members and dialogue partners of the Institute certainly did not appreciate it, and the article meant the end of 'diplomatic relations' with Neurath and his circle (Dahms, 1994: 174ff.) even though individual contacts with members continued. While in the United States, the Institute's members continued to cooperate with scholars who were influenced by the positivism of the Vienna Circle, most notably the psychologist Marie Jahoda and the sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld.

## SCIENCE AND METAPHYSICS

'The Latest Attack on Metaphysics' begins with the discussion of the relation between science and metaphysics in bourgeois consciousness and bourgeois philosophy. This relation occupied Horkheimer already in his early studies of Kant, in his dissertation (Horkheimer, 1922) and in his *Habilitation* (Horkheimer, 1925). In Kant the contradiction between science and metaphysics 'appear[s] in its most highly developed form' (Horkheimer, 1935: 280; cf. Abromeit, 2011: 309), but later bourgeois philosophy has not managed to solve it. Instead, it lives on in a recognition of spirituality and even occultism that exists side by side with scientism in several philosophical systems (Horkheimer, 1935: 281). This duality is also a recurring theme in critical theory, such as when Horkheimer discusses Bergson's *Lebensphilosophie* (Horkheimer, 1934). But in 'The Latest Attack on Metaphysics' the critique also concerns the relation between positivism and politics, the reduction of science to social behaviourism, the political impotency of positivism, and the entwinement of power and the positivist understanding of reason, a theme that later returns in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

The aim of the essay is not to defend metaphysics against positivism. Both are in themselves obstacles to actual thinking. The contradiction between metaphysics and science is not new but with logical positivism it has taken a new turn. Science and metaphysics exist side by side as a dichotomy and a contradiction and cannot be easily reconciled (Horkheimer, 1937a: 108). Metaphysics poses questions about human existence that are useless to science. Whereas science has its roots in the human confrontation with nature (Horkheimer, 1937a: 109), questions about such things as the soul, substance and immortality cannot be answered by science. Still metaphysics lives on. Science, when it makes nature an object of manipulation, shows that it is meaningless and contradicts

metaphysics. But this opens the need for an ideology that does not leave man alone in a desperate state, devoid of meaning. Official bourgeois consciousness is in this sense not on the same level as bourgeois science (Horkheimer, 1937a: 110).

Modern thinking has made efforts to handle this contradiction. Since Descartes there has been the notion of two substances (Horkheimer, 1937a: 111). On the one hand, man lives in the finite world of senses, and on the other hand she has a soul and has a part in a higher order. These different substances can be united in different ways; they are either actions founded in transcendental powers, or they have transcendental consequences. In either case, science doesn't have to be denied and can be connected to a higher meaning.

Horkheimer notices how a certain naiveté can be observed among some of the most prominent scientists who address this contradiction, such as Max Planck, who tried to solve it by talking about a 'spiritual world' which is also conditioned by natural occurrences. Simultaneously Planck tries to preserve free will with incoherent reasoning about causal determinations of other wills, while one's own will is free. This type of reasoning is typical of a worldview assembled by science and metaphysical beliefs that are not oriented to questioning the dominant order, but rather to finding peace and balance between the inner self and this outer order (Horkheimer, 1937a: 112).

There are two extremes according to which the ways to reach this harmonization may be grouped, according to Horkheimer (1937a: 112). The one extreme expressed itself in typical currents during the years after the First World War, such as philosophy of life [*Lebensphilosophie*] and existential philosophy. For those new metaphysics, science is a technique subordinated to true insights of what humankind really is. They express dissatisfaction with what befalls humans in capitalist society, where there is a constant threat that any person could become superfluous. Positivism, on the contrary, is hostile

to all such illusions and only recognizes knowledge based on pure experience in the severe form it is made in natural sciences (Horkheimer, 1937a: 114). This ideal is not new; it can be found both in thinkers that still held on to metaphysics, like Descartes and Spinoza, but also in the early positivists, like Comte and Spencer, whose thinking still had traces of a metaphysical worldview. Modern positivism, on the contrary, is signified by a scientific ideal of exact mathematical formulation and an ambition to predict the probability of an event in history with the same exactness as in nature. Although this is not yet possible in this view, it is only a matter of waiting for future results within special sciences. Metaphysics is superfluous nonsense and what man needs to know about himself he can learn from psychology and biology.

## POSITIVISM AND POLITICS

Horkheimer's critique of positivism combines epistemological and political critique. Positivism in its present form understands itself as apolitical and whatever opinions its adherents have, like the Vienna Circle, which consisted mostly of socialists, are external to the theory. According to Horkheimer, the history of positivism makes it attractive to anti-fascists. Not only did positivism struggle against metaphysical concepts, it also struggled against the authoritarian, organicistic concepts of state and society represented by fascism, where state and society, unlike in liberalism, are one. Although, today, positivism is more about eliminating problems in natural science and mathematics, its more glorious anti-fascist past still exerts attraction (Horkheimer, 1937a: 115). But present-day positivism has lost its political potentiality, since it has given up its connection to an independent, individual truth-seeking subject. Logic has taken the place of independent thinking. Experience is no longer based on the criteria of individual perception, but

on a preconceived judgement on perception that ties it to a scientific system based on protocol sentences about what is given, not sense perception as such (Horkheimer, 1937a: 115–8). The future only enters through induction (Horkheimer, 1937a: 120); only what is already a fact will occur. New historical tendencies or new thoughts have no place in science (Horkheimer, 1937a: 117). The highest authority for empiricism is recognized science which becomes an apparatus for ordering facts, what for Hegel is the activity of understanding [*Verstand*]. Ideal or social practice have nothing to do with science and no interests outside of science are allowed to criticize it. A critical theory, in contrast to traditional theory, has an interest in changing society (Horkheimer, 1937c). Such interests may, however, not interfere in the objectivity of science. A widespread current in social sciences after the war, such as social behaviourism (Horkheimer, 1937a: 125), is viewed by Horkheimer as the culmination of the logic of positivism. Since the concept of subject is rejected, only tendencies that can be estimated as regularities may be observed. Where acts of will are viewed as analogous with causes in nature, the relation between thinking and acting is comparable to a physical occurrence, like a brick falling on the head and the head getting hurt (Horkheimer, 1937a: 125). Such an epistemological view of the subject also makes the political actions of subjects incomprehensible to science as anything but physical reactions.

## THE POSITIVIST DISPUTE

In America the members of the Institute witnessed the continuing hegemony of quantitative research inspired by the kind of positivism criticized in Horkheimer's article. After the war this trend was unbroken, but the Marxists of the Frankfurt School were not alone in their critique. Voices were raised

against the consequences of the influence of positivism from different strands in social sciences and philosophy. The British historian of political philosophy, Peter Laslett, famously declared in 1956 that 'political philosophy is dead' (Lane, 2003: 338) because of the influence of positivism. From within analytical philosophy, Ludwig Wittgenstein's turn away from his earlier convictions inspired Peter Winch to the anti-positivist *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (Winch, 1958). Although the Frankfurt School's critique of positivism was of a different kind, the climate was more open and after the Institute had actually crucially contributed to establishing empirical research and quantitative methods in the post-war Federal Republic, albeit with reserve, Adorno could now vent his dialectical position in an open confrontation.

The so-called positivist dispute, beginning in 1961 at a conference of the German Sociological Association in Tübingen with a debate between Adorno and Karl Popper, contributed decisively to making critical theory known for its critique of positivism. The debate continued after the first round between Adorno and Popper with contributions throughout the 1960s in the leading German journal *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie* by Jürgen Habermas (1963, 1964), Hans Albert (1964, 1965) and Harald Pilot (1968). What is of interest here are the contributions by Adorno and Popper, since they can be read as a continuation of the debate of the 1930s and the critique formulated by Horkheimer at that time.

Although the debate has become known as the positivist dispute, critical theory here encountered a different kind of thinking from classical positivism in the critical rationalism of Popper, who had, as he points out himself, been criticizing the positivism of the Vienna Circle for several decades, since the publication of his *Logik der Forschung* (1934), from a position that he himself characterized as 'realist and anti-positivist'

(Popper, 1976: 290). Popper was therefore not content with playing the part of the positivist in the discussion. In this sense, since there was no self-identified positivist in the debate defending positivism per se, the debate has been described as 'a Hamlet without the prince' (Giddens, 1974: 18). When the book that finally collected the instalments of the discussion appeared (Adorno et al., 1969), Popper expressed a deep dissatisfaction not just with the debate itself, but with his own contribution and the way it was presented (Popper, 1976: 291). Ralf Dahrendorf, commenting on the discussion, had the impression that the two symposiasts were in agreement, while actually hiding profound differences (Dahrendorf, 1962: 146). To a certain extent this is true. Adorno did not consider Popper a logical positivist and they were in agreement on several points, not only in rejecting logical positivism, but also with respect to the relativism of the sociology of knowledge of Karl Mannheim, where there is no longer any way to tell truth from untruth (Adorno, 1962: 136–7).

However, what neither Dahrendorf nor later commentators noticed, but what is crucial to understand about the discussion between Adorno and Popper, about the similarities as well as the differences between their positions, is the imbalance between the two participants to what extent they had prior knowledge of the other's position. Adorno was actually familiar with Popper's position and on one occasion even expressed a great appreciation of it in the 1930s. In the predominantly negative report he wrote with Benjamin and sent to Horkheimer in August 1937 from the Paris conference, Adorno mentions, in passing, that 'Popper has in his book already prognosticated the total breakdown of the school ...' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2003: 562). 'The school' was the Vienna Circle and 'the book' was Popper's *Logik der Forschung* (later known under its English title *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1959)), which Adorno had read at the time of the Paris conference.<sup>1</sup> Adorno's

prior acquaintance with, and estimation of, Popper's position as a critique of logical empiricism is not explicit anywhere in the original debate (Adorno, 1962) since Adorno did not refer back to it; this may have given the impression that Adorno did not know Popper's work beforehand, which he actually did. However, in his later comment on the debate in the long introduction to the book-publication (Adorno, 1969), he did come back to it.

There is nothing known about any explicit previous statements from Popper on Adorno or the Frankfurt School. Popper did not reveal any prior knowledge of the work of his opponent and proudly declares in his comment to the debate that he 'never regarded' the Frankfurt School 'as important' (Popper, 1976: 289). He obviously considered Adorno to be 'Hegelian or Marxist' (Popper, 1976: 288). Popper had written two books wherein he attacked Marx and Hegel, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) and *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957), and took for granted that the Frankfurt School could be attacked with the arguments he had developed in these works, which he deplored that he had not done (Popper, 1976: 289). This indicates that he did not know the Frankfurt School's interpretation of Marx and Hegel, and that he subsumed Adorno's position under the one he had outlined elsewhere in his critiques of Marx and Hegel. Popper thought his position on the logic of the social sciences was not adequately understood by his opponent, but he had himself no understanding of Adorno's position.

This difference in the preconceptions of each other's position is crucial to understand how Adorno's answer to Popper's paper in Tübingen is a mixture of both appreciation and critique. Adorno understood that the arguments developed against positivism by himself and Horkheimer in the 1930s were still valid (Adorno, 1969: 25), but he now had to respond to a position which he both appreciated as an internal critique of logical positivism, and felt did not go far

enough in light of his own dialectical position. If Adorno's critique was not very well received by Popper, it was probably due to a lack of understanding of Adorno's form of critique of other philosophies. Adorno makes use of the method that he learned early on when reading Kant together with Siegfried Kracauer and later employed in works such as his books on Husserl (Adorno, 1957) and Hegel (Adorno, 1963). Philosophical texts were not read simply for the epistemological argument and scientific judgement, 'but as a kind of coded text out of which the historical situation of the spirit could be read' (Adorno, 1964: 389). Texts are products of society and, not unlike works of art, they unintentionally express a truth about social repression, social contradictions and social norms. This truth must be interpreted and is part of a theory of society, which it presupposes. This method of reading texts probably contributed to misunderstanding and discordance on the part of Popper. Adorno appealed to autonomous thinking, true philosophy. He was also aware of the risks of positions that label themselves dialectics. They cannot claim to be any kind of privileged thinking, neither are they a particular subjective capacity, or some kind of intuitionism (Adorno, 1969: 10). Positivists, on their side, must abstain from the attitude of not understanding and dismissing everything that does not correspond to their criteria of meaning (Adorno, 1969: 11).

## POPPER ON THE LOGIC OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

The debate started with Popper's paper, 'The Logic of the Social Sciences' (Popper, 1962), which took the form of 27 theses and a concluding suggestion that presents his critique of logical positivism and his own theory of critical rationalism. Logical positivism's understanding of the scientific method is the first target of Popper's paper. For logical positivism, only two kinds of propositions

are meaningful: analytical and empirical. Analytical propositions are tautologies (such as 'all bachelors are unmarried') and may be verified without any empirical evidence. This rules out metaphysical statements that can neither be verified logically or empirically. Empirical statements are those that can be verified by empirical evidence, through observation, and are left to scientific investigation. In this way, logical positivism could establish a demarcation between science and metaphysics. To the logical positivists then, the inductive method of observation and measurement of facts is the foundation for a unified science of natural and social sciences (Popper, 2002).

Popper, like the positivists, also starts from 'the overwhelming progress of the natural sciences' (Popper, 1962: 103) but calls logical positivism's understanding of the scientific method an example of 'the misguided and erroneous methodological naturalism or scientism which urges that social sciences should finally learn from the natural sciences what scientific method is' (Popper, 1962: 107). According to Popper this is a misunderstanding, a widespread 'myth of the inductive character of the natural scientific method' (Popper, 1962: 107). He is just as concerned as Adorno that misguided naturalism has spread in the social sciences. What is misguided, however, for Popper, is the understanding of scientific method as the method of verification, not the idea that social sciences should learn from natural sciences. He does not reject the natural sciences as a model of science, but presents another interpretation of the scientific method common to natural and social sciences. This is described not as the method of observation, but as the method of testing proposed solutions for problems (Popper, 1962: 105).

The textbook version of Popper's critical rationalism poses a method of falsification against positivism's method of verification, as an alternative criterion of demarcation. The scientific method is, according to Popper, about testing theories and attempting to prove

them wrong. If they survive the test, they can be accepted until further evidence can be produced against them. (In his paper, however, neither of the terms falsification nor demarcation are actually used.) Popper begins his contribution to the debate with the 'Socratic' (Popper, 1962: 103) contradiction between knowledge and ignorance and the concept of a problem. With every new step forward in knowledge we also discover our great ignorance and new problems. The tension between knowledge and ignorance is central to the logic of knowledge: 'No knowledge without problems – no problems without ignorance' (Popper, 1962: 104). From this it follows that knowledge does not, like logical positivism claims, start from observation and collection of data, but with the discovery that something is not in order with our supposed knowledge and the supposed facts; in other words, knowledge starts with a problem; Popper, 1962: 104f.). The method of solving problems is here called the critical method or the method of trial and error [*kritizistisch*], since proposed solutions are criticized and either temporarily accepted or rejected, but never verified. Rejected solutions may be considered again in light of new facts, and accepted solutions may later be rejected. As is the case for the method of verification, positive verification is not available (Popper, 1962: 107).

Against the inductive logic of verification, Popper poses deductive logic, the theory of the validity of logical inference (Popper, 1962: 115), which is the theory of rational criticism (Popper, 1962: 116). It is also a theory of truth and falsity, since if the premises of an inference are true, then the conclusion is true, and if the conclusion is false, then not all premises are true (Popper, 1962: 115). Deductive logic transmits truth from the premises to the conclusion, and in the case of falsification, retransmits falsity from the conclusion to the premises (Popper, 1962: 115–6). In this way the deductive method eliminates logical contradictions from theories and, for Popper, a theory is synonymous with a deductive system.

In addition, for Popper, all problems investigated by social science are theoretical problems. Even if the starting-point is always 'serious practical problems such as poverty, illiteracy or political repression', practical problems will lead 'to premeditations, to theorizing and thus to theoretical problems' (Popper, 1962: 105). There is no such thing as a thing-in-itself of a scientific subject: 'A so-called scientific subject is only a conglomerate of problems and attempted solutions. What is real are the problems and the scientific traditions' (Popper, 1962: 108).

### ADORNO ON POPPER'S RESTRICTED CRITIQUE OF POSITIVISM

Adorno's objections to Popper concern his concepts of problem, method and critique. The goal for Popper's critical method is to eliminate formal logical contradictions from scientific theories. Popper certainly considers himself a realist; to him, there is an independent, external world. But his concepts of problem and critique only concern theories, not the external world. And his concept of method in a significant way does not break with positivism and has some peculiar positivist traits. These are the issues on which Adorno concentrates in his reply to Popper.

In his introduction to the published debate, Adorno recognizes Popper's thesis that 'there is no such thing as a pure observational science, but only sciences that theorize more or less consciously and critical' (Popper, 1962: 119), that contain 'something like a common denominator' (Adorno, 1969: 31) for their positions. He agrees with Popper in his critique of positivism, both with respect to a misguided naturalism, and with respect to the thesis on the primacy of the problem before observation. But he also insists that it is necessary to go much further in this critique than Popper is willing to. The discovery of a problem, a contradiction between our knowledge and reality, is not only a supposed

contradiction between subject and object that can be ascribed to the subject alone and solved with increased knowledge and clearer formulations. The contradictions are found in reality [*die Sache*] (Adorno, 1962: 129), in the material we work with. It is the object of sociology, society in itself, that is a problem in the emphatic sense. To Popper 'a problem is something merely epistemological and for me at the same time something practical, in the last instance a problematic condition of the world' (Adorno, 1962: 129). According to Adorno, if we restrict the concept of problem to theoretical problems we risk fetishizing science in pure logical formalism, where facts only obey logical principles. (For Adorno, examples of this logical formalism are found in the formulations of Alfred Tarskis or Edmund Husserl.)

But Popper's concept of a problem is also restricted in the sense that it is atomistic when it postulates that sociology should only concern itself with what can be broken down to individual problems and individual solutions. Thus it will inhibit social scientific thinking. Adorno asks explicitly whether a work like Marx's *Capital* in that case should not be considered a work of social science, since it does not contain problems and solutions in Popper's sense (Adorno, 1969: 53). It points, instead, to irrationalities and contradictions in society and poses the question of the breakdown of capitalism, a problem that cannot be simplified to a deductive inference. Society itself is the context that is presupposed when it comes to problems in society and it cannot be broken down to testable hypotheses. With this natural scientific ideal of simplification serious problems are transformed to pseudoproblems that do not conform to the prescribed method of trial and error (Adorno, 1969: 52).

This is how Popper, despite his important critique of logical positivism, by holding on to what he understands as the scientific method modelled after natural sciences, still has something in common with positivism and is found guilty of scientism. As

with the latter, he advocates the primacy of method over the object of investigation. Popper is well aware that countless examples of sociological research suffer from lack of relevance and interest when they follow the primacy of the method and not the problem (Adorno, 1962: 130). If contradictions are real and not just theoretical, method must also be informed by reality [*die Sache*] rather than scientific ideals (Adorno, 1962: 130). Popper, like the positivists, becomes guilty of formalism when he prescribes a method a priori for the social sciences. Methods cannot just be adapted from the natural sciences for the social sciences since the problems of society cannot be grasped with the form of the hypothesis. When contradictions are eliminated in theory, real, objective contradictions that can be objects of research are also eliminated and the object of social science is falsified. Society to Adorno is 'contradictory and yet determinable; simultaneously rational and irrational, a system and yet fragmented; blind nature and yet mediated by consciousness' (Adorno, 1962: 126). Hence reality resists cognitive ideals that strive for simple coherent explanations; society is 'not consistent, not simple, not neutrally left to the capriciousness of categorical formulations'. Often an ideal of clarity and exactness is invoked in social science that is a threat to obtaining knowledge of society (Adorno, 1962, 126). If sociological method does not take the character of its object into account, it is at risk of falling into another contradiction, 'between its own structure and its object' (Adorno, 1962: 126). Therefore, for Adorno, the Socratic wisdom of abundance of knowledge and boundless ignorance that opens Popper's contribution expresses this difference between society as object and the traditional inductive understanding of method. The contradiction between method and object will hardly be resolved with an epistemology which, like Popper's approach, however critical, still gives prominence to its own methodology before the structure of the object.

## TWO CONCEPTS OF CRITIQUE

Since Popper and Adorno both identify their positions with the epithet 'critical', they agree in their emphasis on the concept of critique. This is one point where it would seem as if they might converge. However, similar differences, like those concerning problem and method, appear when it comes to the aims and scope of their notions of critique. Dahrendorf notes in his comments on the discussion that whatever congruity there may be between them, it is superficial. His summary of the difference between the two thinkers is quoted approvingly by Adorno. Popper's concept of critique is 'without any substantial determination; a pure mechanism of the provisional confirmation of general statements of science: "We can not ground our propositions", we can only "expose them to critique"' (Dahrendorf, 1962: 146; cf. Adorno, 1969: 31). To Adorno, critique and a critical theory of society entails 'developing the contradictions of reality through knowledge of them' (Dahrendorf, 1962: 146; cf. Adorno, 1969: 31).

As has already been shown above, Popper's concept of critique is more or less identical to his deductive method. Critique is directed towards proposed solutions for problems. Solutions must be formal, logical, coherent and endure empirical tests according to the deductive method. Pure deductive logic, formal logic is 'an organ of critique' (Popper, 1962: 116). The logical contradiction as an instrument for logical critique is objective and guarantees scientific objectivity. Thus Popper's concept of critique, just like his concept of problem, only concerns the logical coherence of theories.

Popper stresses that he is critical of the misguided naturalism of the positivists. Nonetheless, he found his own concept of critique in a naturalistic way. In his comment on the debate, he explicitly states:

We may start from Darwinian evolution. Organisms evolve by trial and error, and their erroneous

trials – their erroneous mutations – are eliminated, as a rule, by the elimination of the organism which is the 'carrier' of the error. It is part of my epistemology that, in man, through the evolution of a descriptive and argumentative language, all this has changed radically. Man has achieved the possibility of being *critical of his own tentative trials, of his own theories*. These theories are no longer incorporated in his organism, or in his genetic system: they may be formulated in books, or in journals; and they can be critically discussed, and shown to be erroneous, without killing any authors or burning any books: without destroying the 'carriers'. (Popper, 1976: 292)

Popper's concept of critique is thus an imitation of nature's evolution, as understood in a Darwinian way, in the form of discourse but without the cruel consequences of nature.

This concept of critique does not aim at a critique of society, but only at attaining scientific objectivity through the elimination of false theories. Critique is an inner-scientific affair between scientists. Despite modelling his concept of critique on nature and natural science, Popper is conscious of differences between natural and social sciences. He does not, like logical positivism, believe that individual scientists can completely liberate themselves from their values, but still argues that science must be value-free. It is, however, important to

be conscious of the fact that objectivity in the social sciences is much harder to achieve (if it can be achieved at all) than in the natural sciences; [...] only in the rarest cases can the social scientist free himself from the value system of his own social stratum and so achieve even a limited degree of value freedom and objectivity. (Popper, 1962: 107)

Mutual criticism among scientists creates a tradition that guarantees scientific objectivity. What we usually call scientific objectivity 'lies only in the critical tradition [...] the objectivity of science is not the individual matter of various scientists, but a social matter of their mutual critique [...] It is therefore dependent on a whole series of social and political circumstances which make this critique possible' (Popper, 1962: 112). However, despite this emphasis on



social circumstances, Popper considers that 'such minor details as social or ideological position of the scientists' (Popper, 1962: 113) will in the long run not have any importance.

Adorno sees the key role of the concept of critique as a crucial step away from positivism and the doctrine of the primacy of observation, but just as with the concept of problem, goes further than Popper. He recognizes that Popper's concept of critique is not completely alien to his own: 'Insofar as [Popper] identifies the objectivity of science with the critical method, he raises it to the organ of truth. No dialectician today would demand more' (Adorno, 1962: 134). But Popper's concept of critique is 'pure cognitive [...] or subjective' (Adorno, 1969: 31). It is not a question of a confusion of different meanings of the same word, but an actual ambiguity. For dialectics, thought necessarily strives towards grasping reality [*die Sache selbst*]. Critique of contradictions in theory must necessarily also become critique of reality. Popper's formalism asserts itself again when he insists upon a pure cognitive concept of critique. However, critical reason is the same in both instances. Critique is not purely epistemological, but also a critique of the non-identity between concept and object.

Cognitive criticism, of knowledge and especially of theorems, necessarily also examines whether the objects of knowledge are what they claim to be according to their own concept. Otherwise it would be formalistic. Neither is immanent criticism only purely logical but always substantial as well – the confrontation of concept and reality. (Adorno, 1969: 31)

The concept of critique hence refers back to Popper's starting point, when he claims that we always deal with real problems, but which he later shuts off from when he claims that we only work with theories.

This is also the limit of Popper's critique of logical positivism. A critical sociology as a critique of society will be inhibited by such a reduction to facts that follows from

the dismissal of solutions, in the name of social neutrality, that do not stand the critical test. This is where Adorno refers back to *Logik der Forschung*, where Popper concedes that so-called protocol sentences, the basis for objectivity according to logical positivism, are not inviolable (Adorno, 1969: 36). Such a concession takes critique further since it means that the reference to protocol sentences, 'simple observations, are pre-formed by society' (Adorno, 1969: 36). This opens up for a critical sociology:

There are sociological theorems, which, as insights into the mechanisms of society that operate behind the facade, in principle, even for societal reasons, contradict appearances to such an extent that they cannot be adequately criticized through the latter. Criticism of them is incumbent upon systematic theory, upon further reflection but not, [...] for instance, upon the confrontation with protocol statements. Therefore, facts in society are not the last thing to which knowledge might attach itself, since they themselves are mediated through society. (Adorno, 1962: 132)

If facts are not the last instance of knowledge, theory acquires a different role than what it does for Popper; 'it is the telos, not the vehicle of sociology' (Adorno, 1962: 133). Theory to a critical sociology is not something to be tested to see if it fits scientific logic, but is a goal in itself. We learn to know reality through theory, wherefore theory and reality cannot be separated. Contradictions in propositions can with a theoretical analysis be traced to structural contradictions that in turn cannot be eliminated by logic (Adorno, 1962: 136).

## IS THE CRITIQUE OF POSITIVISM STILL TIMELY?

What is left of the critique of positivism? The position of the Vienna Circle, as it was criticized by Horkheimer, hardly has any adherents today. The members themselves abandoned the more orthodox version of logical positivism,

such as the criterion of demarcation or the idea of a unified science. With Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), which appeared at the same time as the positivist dispute and which sparked an even more enduring debate, a post-positivism has come to dominate the theory of science, with insights such as the theory dependence of facts and the social dependence of the objectivity of scientists. Still, this discussion has moved within the tradition of natural sciences and has not affected the self-understanding of the social sciences as deeply as the Frankfurt School's critique of positivism and others did in the 1960s.

Traces of positivism, however, still live on in some corners of analytical philosophy. From some representatives of the current, despite the internal critique and attempts at rapprochement and dialogue with so called continental philosophy, demands for clarity and rejection of whatever does not fit into the analytical ideal can still be heard and have even gained a certain popularity (such as Frankfurt, 2005). An ideal of simplicity and cleanliness, the latter expressed as a dismissal of 'bullshit', follows logical positivism in putting up a barrier against any complexity and mediation when it comes to understanding and explaining society (Beck and Crooman, 2016: 93). Such expressions of a resurrected positivism under new names will also tend to reanimate the critique.

## Note

- 1 The report, titled 'Kongreß für Einheit der Wissenschaft (Logische Positivisten)', signed 'Paris, 4. August 1937', by 'Wiesengrund' and 'Benjamin', was not published until 2003 in the appendix to the first volume of Adorno's and Horkheimer's collected correspondence (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2003: 560–70). The source of the document is the Theodor W. Adorno Archive. Even such a meticulous work as Dahms (1994), who partly builds on archival research, has not had access to the document. (The title *Logik der Forschung* is not mentioned in the report but the editors estimate that it is the book referred to by Adorno.)

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# Critical Theory and the Sociology of Knowledge: Diverging Cultures of Reflexivity

Oliver Schlaudt

## INTRODUCTION

Sociology of knowledge has been an important point of reference for critical theory. The prominent place Max Horkheimer granted to it in his seminal paper 'Traditional and Critical Theory' (1937) illustrates this well. While Horkheimer puts much effort into analyzing 'traditional theory', and into providing an accurate description of it, his treatment of 'critical theory' is completely different: he offers neither a definition of critical theory nor a guide on how to think critically. Instead he introduces critical theory mainly by discussing examples and counter-examples. The Critique of Political Economy and the sociology of knowledge are Horkheimer's (1937: 262–3) first two examples. They thus play a crucial role in the text. While the former seems to exemplify for Horkheimer what critical theory is, and thus serves as a model for critical theory, the latter is an example for an approach

which seems to come close to, and indeed was confounded with, critical theory, but, according to Horkheimer, differs substantially from it. The discussion of the sociology of knowledge, which is present in a great number of texts from the Frankfurt School, probably had a twofold function: it was of didactic use for introducing the reader to critical theory, but moreover it was also crucial for the self-reflection of the Frankfurt School and the School's demarcation within the intellectual landscape of the pre-war period. Yet recent developments in critical theory, such as Boltanski's 'break' with Bourdieu, still seem to be related to the distinction between sociology of knowledge and critical theory.

The chapter analyses the Frankfurt School's reading of sociology of knowledge, in particular the founding contribution by Karl Mannheim, and identifies the differences between critical theory and a positivist sociology of knowledge. In a concluding remark, we will try to spell out these

differences in terms of diverging interpretations of 'reflexivity'.<sup>1</sup>

## SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

### *On Sociology of Knowledge*

At the time of critical theory's emergence, the sociology of knowledge was also a relatively young discipline. If we omit the question of the latter's alleged 'forerunners' we can identify the study on 'Primitive Classification' by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim and his nephew Marcel Mauss, first published in 1903, or, in the German-speaking world, the contributions to the volume *Versuche zu einer Soziologie des Wissens*, edited by Max Scheler in 1924 as the first substantial contributions. This volume contained in particular an essay by Wilhelm Jerusalem, entitled 'On the Social Conditions of Thinking and of the Forms of Thinking'. Jerusalem's essay is purely programmatic and does not present any empirical research, but its title already provides a good working definition of the sociology of knowledge. The sociology of knowledge, in particular sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK), contrary to sociology of science, does not restrict itself to the study of the social organization of science and its institutionalization, but claims that also knowledge itself, its form and its content, is socially conditioned or determined. Hence the opening paragraph of David Bloor's now classical introduction to SSK, first published in 1976:

Can the sociology of knowledge investigate and explain the very content and nature of scientific knowledge? Many sociologists believe that it cannot. They say that knowledge as such, as distinct from the circumstances surrounding its production, is beyond their grasp. They voluntarily limit the scope of their own enquiries. I shall argue that this is a betrayal of their disciplinary standpoint. All knowledge, whether it be in the empirical sciences or even in mathematics, should be

treated, through and through, as material for investigation. (Bloor, 1991: 6)

This definition still conforms to the way Wilhelm Jerusalem framed the task of a sociology of knowledge some 50 years earlier. The name of Jerusalem also points to the milieu of Viennese intellectuals of the 1920s, who shared an interest in the sociology of knowledge. Without exaggeration – though in need of further precision – it can be said that one element of Austro-Marxism, as it was coined at that time in Vienna, consisted in equating the programme of historical materialism with sociology, and in particular the critique of ideology with the sociology of knowledge (Goldmann, 1958). Indeed the sociology of knowledge, insofar as it offers a causal explanation of knowledge in terms of social factors, traces back the ideas which men form 'about their relation to nature or about their mutual relations or about their own nature' to 'their real relations and activities, of their intercourse, of their social and political conduct', as Marx and Engels put it in *German Ideology* (which was first published in parts in 1904/05; the first complete edition followed in 1932).

### *Horkheimer and 'Sociology of Knowledge'*

Given that in a certain strand of Marxism ideology critique was identified with the sociology of knowledge, it is not surprising that Horkheimer paid special attention to it when framing his ideas on critical theory. However, when Horkheimer or others close to the Frankfurt School mentioned the 'sociology of knowledge', they did in general not refer to the entirety of the approaches subsumed in this discipline. Instead they had something much more specific in mind. Indeed, in their writings they referred more or less exclusively to the Hungarian-born sociologist Karl Mannheim who completed his main work *Ideology and Utopia* in 1929 at Heidelberg

and became professor of sociology and political economy at the University of Frankfurt in 1930 (his office was actually located in the building of the *Institut für Sozialforschung*). Not only Horkheimer but also Herbert Marcuse reacted to the publication of *Ideology and Utopia* by publishing extensive reviews.<sup>2</sup> In 1937, Adorno too wrote a critique of Mannheim for *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* which however remained unpublished, 'out of consideration for the plight of the émigrés', as Müller-Doohm (2005: 520–1) supposes. Adorno returned to this critique several times during the following decades, in talks as well as his lectures on sociology (cf. Jay, 1985). In all these texts, the sociology of knowledge is practically identified with the work of Karl Mannheim.

Karl Mannheim's relation to the various strands of Marxism was ambiguous. He was acquainted with György Lukács from their common hometown Budapest where they co-founded, alongside others, the *Sonntagskreis* in 1915 (Karádi and Vezér, 1985, cf. also Löwy, 2002). Mannheim paid special attention to the publication of Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*, which he regarded as the 'most profound and significant of all [attempts to elaborate the dialectic method]' (Mannheim, 1952: 124). Mannheim drew much from Marxist philosophy, but, as we will analyse in more detail below, he also distanced himself from Marxism and criticized it as biased. The irritation caused among Marxist intellectuals by Mannheim's ambiguous position is well illustrated by Otto Neurath's review of *Ideology and Utopia* where he described Mannheim as a 'bourgeois Marxist', i.e. a bourgeois thinker who no longer bluntly rejected Marxism but adopted the Marxist vantage point and then, turning Marxist criticism against itself, claimed to show its one-sidedness and incompleteness.<sup>3</sup> Mannheim indeed thought of his own account as a modification or an enhancement of earlier approaches to a (Marxist) critique of ideology. It is not astonishing, then, that he was attacked from all political camps,

not only from critical theory, but also from conservative intellectuals.<sup>4</sup>

## KARL MANNHEIM'S APPROACH TO SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

### *Ideology, Symmetry, and Reflexivity*

Karl Mannheim defined his own position with reference to what he conceived to be the Marxist 'critique of ideology', i.e. the attempt to criticize 'false consciousness' in terms of class relations and social interests. Insofar as the Marxist critique of ideology equated social influences with error and bias, to put it into more contemporary terms, Mannheim was right to think of this approach, first, as *asymmetric*, because it was restricted to false consciousness, and, second, as *irreflexive*, because it was restricted to the adversary.

Mannheim's aim was to establish a symmetrical and reflexive style in sociology. 'Symmetry' means extending the sociological investigation to all items of discourse, regardless of whether they are evaluated as true or false. 'According to this view, human thought arises, and operates, not in a social vacuum but in a definite social milieu. We need not regard it as a source of error that all thought is so rooted' (Mannheim, 1929/1954: 71). Thus, by virtue of the principle of symmetry, the sociology of knowledge can study how claims 'emerge in the course of historical development out of the complex social process' (ibid.: 75) without evaluating them as false because of their social origin. Moreover, as a result of the principle of 'reflexivity', which demands the application of sociological analysis to the analyst himself, the theory of ideology is transformed into a sociological account of knowledge:

As long as one does not call his own position into question but regards it as absolute, while interpreting his opponent's ideas as a mere function of the social position they occupy, the decisive step

forward has not yet been taken. [...] A] general form of the total conception of ideology is being used [reached] by the analyst [only] when he has the courage to subject not just the adversary's point of view but all points of view, including his own, to the ideological analysis. [...] With the emergence of the general formulation of the total conception of ideology, the simple theory of ideology develops into the sociology of knowledge. (ibid.: 68–9)

Mannheim's sundering of the traditional link between social influence and distortion can be regarded as a major achievement in the 'positivist' camp. As Helen Longino points out, even today proponents of an alleged 'social' epistemology continue to 'explicitly equat[e] social forces with "bias"' (Longino, 2002: 56). Despite his sociological determinism Mannheim was thus not compelled to subscribe to what is called today an 'equal validity thesis', i.e. the thesis that all claims, because of their social determination, are equally false or equally valid (as Lukács objected later in his polemical *The Destruction of Reason*, Lukács, 1954: 501, and as also Adorno seemed to suppose in *Negative Dialectics*).

### **Particularism, Synthesis, and 'Privileged Standpoint Epistemology'**

All those who (1) equate social influence or determination with error and bias, (2) hold the intellectual sphere to be entangled with practical life (as it was suggested by Marx in the 'Theses on Feuerbach'), and yet (3) stick to the possibility of knowing and insight (insight in the functioning of society but in particular in society's influence on knowledge), have to subscribe to what might be called a 'privileged standpoint epistemology'. Such an epistemology holds that a privileged vantage point exists that provides unbiased insight into society, regardless of whether it is held that such a privileged standpoint somehow completely escapes from social determination, that social forces somehow neutralize each other at

that special standpoint, or that social forces somehow favour or catalyze insight at that special standpoint.

Standpoint epistemology was common among Marxist philosophers of that time. Ernst Bloch for example defended a rather simplistic version of a standpoint epistemology, arguing that only the proletariat is able to grasp reality because it is the only class not having the interest to veil the real situation:

what objectively distinguishes the proletarian 'ideology' from others is the fact that it is the *material interest* of the proletariat not to develop any veiling of reality, but rather to gain insight into the real driving forces and the real tendency of this reality; while it was likewise the material interest of all earlier classes that false consciousness should be formed and its limits should not be exceeded. (Bloch, 1935/1991: 264)

Bloch thus believed the proletariat really to escape from the mystifying effects of ideology. For him, a vantage point free from social determination existed, but access to it was socially restricted.

Lukács also formulated a standpoint epistemology, but his version was a more refined one. Following Marx's 'Introduction' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* from 1844, Lukács held that the interests of the proletariat are identical to those of the whole society. That is, the proletariat is the only class for which the gap between particular and general interests does not exist or collapses. The reason for this is that, according to Marx, the *particular* interests of the working class, due to the latter's material poverty, are reduced to the very basic and in this sense *universal* human needs. As a consequence, the proletariat is the only class that, though still driven by its particular interests, is able to take possession of the social power of society without however establishing a new class society (as the bourgeoisie did when freeing itself from feudal regimes):

In the formulation of a class with *radical chains*, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil

society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no *particular right* because no *particular wrong*, but *wrong generally*, is perpetuated against it; which can invoke no *historical*, but only *human*, title; [...]; a sphere, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the *complete loss* of man and hence can win itself only through the *complete re-winning of man*. This dissolution of society as a particular estate is the *proletariat*. (Marx, 1975, vol. 3: 186)

Note that Marx's point in the quoted passage is a purely practical one without any epistemological implications. It is not due to special insight that the working class, according to Marx, has the proficiency to establish a free and non-hierarchical society, but due to its specific social conditions. The working class in particular does not escape the determination of action by particular interests. But due to its special social condition, its particular interest is identical to the general interest of mankind. Thus when Lukács added in *History and Class Consciousness* that the 'self-understanding of the proletariat is therefore simultaneously the objective understanding of the nature of society' (Lukács, 1923/1971: 149; cf. Mannheim, 1952: 218), this *prima facie* is an element alien to Marx's framework. It seems however that in Lukács, contrary to Bloch, the proletariat is not automatically endowed with this kind of insight into society, but only insofar as it realizes the 'unity of theory and practice' as a revolutionary subject (Mannheim, 1952: 69, 225), i.e. when it becomes the 'mirror and motor of the historical and dialectical process' (ibid.: 39). In 'Traditional and Critical Theory', Horkheimer seemed to agree with Lukács' account, adding only that the critical theoretician becomes an ally of the working class, i.e. that his analyses of social contradictions does not only describe the historical situation, but becomes a stimulating factor for change (Horkheimer, 1937: 269).

Surprisingly Mannheim also subscribed to standpoint epistemology, despite the axiom of reflexivity. We have seen that Mannheim had disentangled social influence and bias and thus could have done without such an epistemological foundation (as does the contemporary positivist sociology of knowledge). Yet standpoint epistemology emerges on a meta-level in Mannheim from his theory of 'particularism' which I will turn to next.

We have seen that according to Mannheim social influences are not equated to distorting factors in the production of knowledge. From this it does not follow, though, that Mannheim thought of these factors as epistemologically neutral (as seems to be the case in contemporary positivist approaches in the sociology of knowledge, in particular SSK). Rather, according to Mannheim, social determinants act like spotlights, playing the double role of creating light *and* shadow. They highlight certain aspects of reality while keeping others from sight. Historical 'systems of meaning' thus 'furnish an appropriate expression' of their specific historical situation (Mannheim, 1929/1954: 76). Mannheim calls this phenomenon the 'particularism' of historical standpoints. It might equally well be called 'perspectivism'. This epistemological framing reflects Mannheim's 'liberal' or 'bourgeois' positioning. He staggers between two views, each of them incompatible with the Marxist views of his contemporaries: first, that there is no 'absolute' point of view ('with the eyes of god', Mannheim, 1952: 225) and that any quest for an absolute truth 'is merely a sign of the loss of and the need for intellectual and moral certainty, felt by broad sections of the population who are unable to look life in the face' (Mannheim, 1929/1954: 77); and second the conviction that the whole picture can only be grasped from a vantage point that succeeds in integrating the whole set of possible standpoints (e.g. liberal, conservative, socialist, and even fascist, cf. ibid.: 132–3). The 'totality' should then be revealed in the 'synthesis' of all particular, but complementary, standpoints.



In any case, as Mannheim stresses in the sense of his aforementioned relativism, such a synthesis can never be more than provisional, ephemeral, and, of course, relative:

A demand for an absolute, permanent synthesis would, as far as we are concerned, mean a relapse into the static world view of intellectualism. In a realm in which everything is in the process of becoming, the only adequate synthesis would be a dynamic one, which is reformulated from time to time. (ibid.: 135)

Quite telling is Mannheim's answer to the question of who can be the 'bearer' of the synthesis. He thought that this could only be provided by the 'socially unattached intelligentsia' (the '*freischwebende Intelligenz*', a term of Alfred Weber's) 'a relatively classless stratum which is not too firmly situated in the social order' (ibid.: 137). According to Mannheim, the intelligentsia is thus a socially heterogeneous group the unit of which is constituted solely by the members' commonly shared cultural values:

Although they are too differentiated to be regarded as a single class, there is, however, one unifying sociological bond between all groups of intellectuals, namely, education, which binds them together in a striking way. Participation in a common educational heritage progressively tends to suppress differences of birth, status, profession, and wealth, and to unite the individual educated people on the basis of the education they have received. (ibid.: 138)

Mannheim thus clearly advocates a variety of a 'privileged standpoint epistemology' according to which a certain vantage point is needed to disentangle the causal strands, tying consciousness to its historical context, and to sort of escape the forces of society. But his version is a more sophisticated one insofar as it is situated on a meta-level. For, as we saw, he granted a 'particular' view of the whole to each party and only the approximation of totality in a meta-synthesis called for a privileged standpoint, which Mannheim identified with that of the 'socially unattached intelligentsia'. However, in this context 'socially unattached' does not mean

intellectuals are not exposed to social influences – of course they are, at least as individuals – but that in the social community they form all of the possible different social determinants merge and provide access to any point of view:

Not, of course, that it [the stratum of the intellectuals] is suspended in a vacuum into which social interests do not penetrate; on the contrary, it subsumes in itself all those interest [...]. The individual, then, more or less takes part in the mass of mutually conflicting tendencies. [...] Precisely through the cultural attachments of this group, there was achieved such an intimate grasp of the total situation, that the tendency towards a dynamic synthesis constantly reappeared [...]. (ibid.: 139–40)

This view seems optimistic, if not naïve. To put the objection more to the point we can refer to Bourdieu's critique of the Mertonian school in the sociology of science and object to Mannheim that his view comes close to a *teleological* or *finalist* view insofar as everything takes place *as if* the community of the intellectuals was designed for gaining objective insight into society (cf. Bourdieu, 2002). In any case Mannheim's affirmative stance vis-à-vis the intellectual community is directly opposed to the critical attitude of the Frankfurt School. Whereas in the Mannheimian framework the intellectual can rely on the architecture of his community, endowing him with a privileged standpoint, critical theory demands 'consciousness of its own entanglement with the "false" world of economic inversion' (Bonefeld, 2014: 69).

To close this section, it should finally be mentioned that the contemporary positivist sociology of scientific knowledge could easily give up the search of a privileged standpoint. SSK restrains itself to the first step in Mannheim's scheme, to a particularistic (though scientific) view of its object of investigation, and is not interested in synthesizing particular views into a totality. So SSK can without further ado renounce a privileged standpoint and pursue their study under the title of 'reflexivity', now understood as a purely formal postulate:

If the condition of reflexivity is to be satisfied it ought to be possible to apply this whole account to the sociology of knowledge itself without in any way undermining it. This is certainly possible. There is no reason why a sociologist or any other scientist should be ashamed to see his theories and methods as emanating from society, that is, as the product of collective influences and resources and as peculiar to the culture and its present circumstances. (Bloor, 1991: 44)

## CRITICISM OF MANNHEIM FROM CRITICAL THEORY

It is evident that critical philosophers must have felt an urgent need to reply to Karl Mannheim. For not only did he present a positivist sociology of science as the legitimate inheritor of the critique of ideology (as did also Max Adler and whom must already have annoyed them); he also turned this approach against Marxism itself and pretended to lay bare its restricted perspective on history and society. There was thus a double motivation for reaction.

The reactions from authors close to the Frankfurt School were nevertheless quite heterogeneous, ranging from complete rejection to partial approval and even to inspiration. In what follows I will group the critical reactions according to their main concerns: positivism, reflexivity and symmetry, and the problem of validity.

### *Positivism: Horkheimer I and Adorno I*

In his first reaction, from 1930, Horkheimer concentrated on Mannheim's claim that the synthesis of partial views may lead to a less partial, though still not absolute, grasp of the social and historical totality. Horkheimer posited, without further explication, that at this point the sociological investigation of metaphysical worldviews might itself turn into metaphysics (Horkheimer, 1930/1982:

479). Horkheimer did not explain this criticism, but we have already seen that Mannheim's account at least looks somewhat teleological. Horkheimer's later commentary on the sociology of knowledge in 'Traditional and Critical Theory' concentrates on Mannheim's positivism. This commentary is clear, but very short, and does not really help us understand with any degree of clarity the distinction between critical theory and traditional theory. Rather, Horkheimer simply emphasizes that the sociology of knowledge, insofar as it is isolated from critical theory, is neither opposed to conventional academic science nor does it claim to be distinct from it in any way. It is just one discipline among others—Ironically, it is exactly this that contemporary sociologists of scientific knowledge put forward for their defence against the accusation of being self-refuting, idealist, or pseudo-scientific. 'My suggestion,' David Bloor replied once to one of his critics, 'is simply that we transfer the instincts we have acquired in the laboratory to the study of knowledge itself' (Bloor, 1981: 207). So while critical theory, at least in its early days, thought of itself as opposed to the academic sciences, the current sociology of science struggles for a place within the circle of academically recognized disciplines. (We will come back to this ambiguous status of SSK.)

Adorno's commentary from 1937, published in 1953, spells out what Horkheimer might have had in mind when opposing critical theory to positivism, or at least what is commonly identified with a critical approach. He concentrated his attack on Mannheim's bottom-up empiricism which lacks a sophisticated idea of experience and is thus led to systematically overestimate 'appearances', thus not being able to distinguish what is pure façade from what is fundamental (Adorno, 1937/1986: 17). Adorno fleshed out this overall attack, taking the notion of society as an example (ibid.: 19). Positivistic bottom-up empiricism can only attain a purely formal notion of society as the most general abstraction in its field of investigation. From this

point of view, 'society' is only a name for the purely formally conceived whole of all socialized men. Critical theory, on the contrary, starts from a material [*inhaltlich*] notion of society, that is, from a concrete theory of society's reproduction (including an account of its internal tensions and 'contradictions' which follow from its concrete mode of production and reproduction). In this approach the single 'facts' of experience, as they show themselves, are not taken as irreducible, but are rather gauged against the overall theory of social reproduction and possibly are further analysed.

### ***Reflexivity and Symmetry: Horkheimer II and Marcuse***

In his first reaction from 1930 Horkheimer also addressed himself to problems of social boundedness and truth. He correctly characterized Mannheim's attempt to establish a symmetric and reflexive approach in sociology of science, but it seems that he did not correctly assess the epistemic consequences in the Mannheimian framework. Rather it seems that Horkheimer continued to equate social influences with error or bias, and as a consequence thought that Mannheim's reflexive and symmetric turn necessarily discredits, and raises doubts about, Marxism (Horkheimer, 1930/1982: 488, 491).

This view however was not common to all critical authors. Herbert Marcuse had published a review of *Ideology and Utopia* one year before Horkheimer, in 1929. Despite a fundamental dissent in regard to many aspects, Marcuse's review is much more sensitive to Mannheim's methodological and formal achievements. He recognized in particular Mannheim's reflexive turn, applying the Marxist critique of ideology to itself and thus revealing its time-bound character. Contrary to Marxist critiques of Mannheim, and contrary also to Mannheim's own intention, Marcuse warmly welcomed this move, giving it again an unexpected twist. When

Mannheim related Marxist 'ideology' to the (historically conditioned and partial) standpoint of the working class, Marcuse thought he,  *nolens volens*, reestablished the original tie to its original political context, thus defending it against both revisionist and 'transcendental' reinterpretations (the latter is a reference to Max Adler's Austro-Marxism). According to Marcuse, Mannheim then reminds us that Marxism, contrary to Adler's interpretation, had never been intended as a 'universally valid sociology', but as the 'concrete theory of proletarian practice' (Marcuse, 1929/1982: 461). Marcuse's more critical remarks seem to join Horkheimer's and Adorno's attack on Mannheim's positivism. He complained that Mannheim regarded the different historical epochs as monolithic and incapable of further analysis, whereas in reality these stages were connected and transcended by forces acting within them. Feudalism, early capitalism, and so on had only in appearance been stable formations, and the task of sociology would be to analyze the underlying forces to which the epochs owed their relative stability for a time, but which eventually also sealed their fate.

### ***Validity: Sohn-Rethel and Adorno II***

Adorno resumed his criticism of Mannheim in his lecture 'Philosophy and Sociology', held at the University of Frankfurt in 1960 (Adorno, 2011). The target of his attacks on Mannheim however had considerably shifted compared to his remarks from 1937. He now concentrated on Mannheim's 'reductionism'. Rather than reducing intellectual phenomena to social interests, Adorno suggested, he should have offered a sociological account of their 'immanent logic' (Adorno, 2011: 287, 289). These comments are allusive and difficult to understand. However, I think that their meaning becomes much clearer when they are seen as a reference to Alfred Sohn-Rethel's remarks on Mannheim (on

Sohn-Rethel and his influence on Adorno see vol. 1, chapter 17 of this collection).

The Marxist philosopher of science Alfred Sohn-Rethel became acquainted with Mannheim as a PhD student under Emil Lederer's supervision at Heidelberg in the 1920s. As Lederer reveals in his final report on Sohn-Rethel's PhD thesis, Mannheim was a great 'pedagogical help' during the work on the thesis (Sohn-Rethel, 2012: 189). Sohn-Rethel also assisted at the 'joint seminar' of Alfred Weber and Karl Mannheim, the starting point of which was the publication of Lukács' book *History and Class Consciousness* (Mannheim, 2001: 109). It seems that Mannheim was of great importance for Sohn-Rethel, and, though there is no explicit discussion of Mannheim in Sohn-Rethel, the latter's own approach can be seen as a reaction to Mannheim's.

In his own work, Sohn-Rethel sought to modify Mannheim's approach in a twofold way. First he criticized Mannheim's reluctance vis-à-vis extending his sociological approach to mathematics and the mathematical sciences.

On the one hand, all phenomena contained in the world of consciousness, whether past, present or future, are understood historically as time-bound and dialectic. On the other hand, questions of logic, mathematics and science are seen as ruled by timeless standards. Is a Marxist thus a materialist as far as historical truth is concerned but an idealist when confronted by the truth of nature? Is his thought split between two concepts of truth: the one dialectical and time-bound, the other undialectical, consigning any awareness of historical time to oblivion? (Sohn-Rethel, 1978: 2–3)

Sohn-Rethel does not mention Mannheim in this quotation, but I think it is obvious that he refers to him, for Mannheim indeed granted an 'immanent logic' to mathematics and the mathematical sciences, escaping the social boundedness (Mannheim, 1952: 135).

Sohn-Rethel's second modification picks up the issue of 'immanent logic' and validity. We have already seen that Mannheim's symmetrical approach does in fact not imply

any kind of 'equal validity thesis', for social influences are not equated with sources of error. As a consequence, the sociological investigation remains neutral with regard to the question of validity. Hence the name 'non-evaluative sociology' in Mannheim. Sohn-Rethel, on the contrary, thought that a historical-materialist account of knowledge should not be confined to relating knowledge to its social causes, but should also attempt at explaining its validity in terms of its social causes (Sohn-Rethel spelled out this idea in a text written in 1937; cf. 1989: 204). A model for such an analysis might be seen in Marx's critique of political economy. Indeed, in *Capital* Marx attributed 'social validity' to the concepts of 'bourgeois economy':

The categories of bourgeois economy consist of such like forms. They are forms of thought expressing with social validity the conditions and relations of a definite, historically determined mode of production, viz., the production of commodities. The whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour as long as they take the form of commodities, vanishes therefore, so soon as we come to other forms of production. (Marx, 1975, vol. 3: 87)

It seems to me that Marx does not intend to deny the validity of the categories of political economy but rather to stress that it only obtains within a definite mode of production.<sup>5</sup> Though Marx's critical analysis reveals that 'value' is a disguised social relation rather than an autonomous ontological realm governed by its own irreducible laws, this does not mean that commodities do not *objectively* have a value in capitalist societies. In this sense Marx, in the quotation above, indeed gives an account of the 'immanent logic' of capitalist economy.

Without going into deeper detail (the reader will find a more extensive discussion in Volume 1, Chapter 17) Adorno's comment on Mannheim in his 1960 lecture might well have Sohn-Rethel's criticism in mind: Mannheim actually reduced the intellectual realm to social interests instead of

understanding its immanent logic in social terms and, in particular, why it is that an autonomous intellectual sphere emerged in history (Adorno, 2011: 289).

## Summary

Let us try to sum up to what the distinction between a critical theory of society and the sociology of knowledge, and in particular Karl Mannheim's approach, amounts to, according to the preceding analysis:

(1) Critical theory does not think of itself as pure theory but rather as entrenched within the social relations that it sets out to comprehend, and it is from this that it derives its epistemic status. Truth and objectivity are not understood in terms of 'disinterestedness' and fidelity to 'facts'. Rather, they challenge positivist epistemology from a political perspective. Mannheim, on the contrary, did not refer at all to the political role of the sociologist; for him the epistemic value of the sociology of knowledge was ensured by the architecture of the intellectual community. In Austro-Marxism the value of sociological theories was related back to politics, but not in the same manner as in critical theory. Political action was rather conceived instrumentally as a science-based 'social technology'.

(2) Critical theory focusses its attention on societies' concrete mode of production and reproduction, and demands that all singular empirical findings, including concerns of intellectual life, be interpreted in this context. In Mannheim there is no such theoretical insistence on the historically specific forms of the social organization of the metabolism with nature. Mannheim's notions of society and of historical epochs seem in fact to be bluntly positivist. Austro-Marxists in turn accepted the need of such a theory of society but stressed its empirical and inductive character. It is clear that critical theory disagreed on this point, but the epistemic fundamentals of the 'dialectical' or 'conceptual' approach often enough remained nebulous.

(3) Critical theory opposes the social 'reduction' of intellectual phenomena, as Adorno put it, i.e. the blunt denial of the 'immanent logic' of intellectual phenomena. From a critical perspective, the 'immanent logic' of truth claims has rather to be understood in terms of the social conditions they can be related to in a sociological analysis. In this respect, Mannheim has indeed little to offer. He might only have put forward the claim of 'particularism', i.e. the idea that some social groups are more apt than others to grasp certain 'aspects' of the social reality of their time. Austro-Marxism on the contrary probably subscribed to the idea of explaining the 'immanent logic'. However they did so by giving it a transcendental turn. Indeed Max Adler focussed on the social conditions of knowledge and science (hence his notion of a 'social apriori', cf. Adler, 1936/1975).

## CONCLUSION: POSITIVIST AND CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY

In the light of the foregoing analysis it is clear that a positivist sociology of science cannot claim the heritage of historical materialism. But does it follow from that that the sociology of science has no critical lesson to tell and simply blends in 'the usual business of the positive sciences', as Horkheimer (1937: 263) put it? At a second and closer glance, this discipline's place in academia might appear less unambiguous. This is what I will explore in this concluding section.

I already mentioned the precarious standing of the sociology of science, which is often violently attacked by philosophers and scientists. In actual fact, it is easily conceivable that the relationship of a positivist approach in the sociology of knowledge to both the other scientific disciplines and society as a whole carries many more tensions. This seems especially to be the case for the 'strong programme' of the Edinburgh School in the sociology of scientific knowledge, which

has always been under severe attack by both scientists and philosophers. Ironically, these tensions might have their origins nowhere else but in the very characteristics of the scientific enterprise, even if it is understood in positivist terms. When Robert K. Merton analyzed the social functioning of science he identified what he called 'organized scepticism' as one of its institutional values and he also signalled that this institutional attitude can cause conflicts between the sciences and other social institutions:

Science which asks questions of fact, including potentialities, concerning every aspect of nature and society may come into conflict with other attitudes toward these same data which have been crystallized and often ritualized by other institutions. The scientific investigator does not preserve the cleavage between the sacred and the profane, between that which requires uncritical respect and that which can be objectively analyzed. (Merton, 1973: 277–8)

It is almost trivial that this scientific attitude may conflict with religious or political institutions. But it is interesting to see that this characteristic also carries the potential of a conflict *within* the sciences, and it seems that this is exactly what happened when the sociology of science entered the scene. When David Bloor, a sociologist from the Edinburgh School, tried to understand the harshness of the critiques directed against his work, he picked up Merton's remark and suggested that in modern societies science and the production of knowledge occupy the place of the 'sacred':

If science is indeed treated as if it is sacred does this explain why it should not be applied to itself? [...] This is the answer to the puzzle that science is most enthusiastically advocated by precisely those who welcome least its application to itself. Science is sacred, so it must be kept apart. [...] This protects it from pollution which would destroy its efficacy, authority and strength as a source of knowledge. (Bloor, 1991: 47–50)

Sociology of science, relating science back to its 'social conditions of production' (Bourdieu, 1975), would thus bring the

sacred into contact with the profane. Hence the idea of contamination and harm. Bloor's analysis surely does not give a satisfying critical account of the apparent conflict insofar as it does not permit us to understand why in our society the attributes of the sacred and the profane are respectively ascribed to scientific knowledge and society. Why does modern society think of knowledge as something 'above-and-beyond' itself? In any case it becomes clear that the social conditions of knowledge production indeed are a kind of a blind spot, if not a taboo, of our society, and its identification absolutely is of relevance for a critical theory of knowledge. Positivist sociology of knowledge *nolens volens* stumbled over this taboo and continued to turn the knife in this wound. Hence the especially vague political connotations of SSK, which has always attracted liberal-minded scholars (and vice versa many of the violent criticisms, in particular the most recent ones from the camp of 'new realism', e.g. those of Boghossian (1996), launching vitriolic attacks against 'post-modernism' and 'multiculturalism', have unmistakable political overtones).

There thus seems to be a hidden subversive heritage in the positivist sociology of science, despite its efforts to prove innocuous and to become an established academic discipline. From this perspective, Pierre Bourdieu can be seen to have accepted the challenge to carve out and to revitalize this subversive heredity of sociology of science. He explicitly claimed to fulfil at least the above-mentioned conditions (2) and (3) for critical thinking, i.e. he explicitly aimed at accounting for the 'objective truth' of scientific knowledge in terms of the 'social conditions' of its production, and he explicitly attacked the 'positivism' of 'official sociology' (Bourdieu, 1975). Perhaps Bourdieu even subscribed to condition (1), i.e. non-neutrality as a condition of insight. In any case he systematically analyzed the 'rhetoric of scientificity' with a view to unmasking 'official sociology', and in particular political sciences, 'a false science serving to produce

and maintain false consciousness' (Bourdieu, 1975: 39). In the spirit of reflexivity, Bourdieu did not content himself to unmasking 'official sociology', but extended his analysis to 'radical' ideology which he suspected to be a 'thinly euphemised expression of the interests of those dominated in the scientific field' (ibid.: 40). According to Bourdieu, the dominated unknowingly help 'demarcate the field of legitimate argument':

Despite their conflict [...] the conservatives and their 'radical' opponents are objective accomplices who agree on the essential point: from the one-sided points of view which they necessarily adopt on the scientific field, by opting, unconsciously at least, for one or the other of the opposing camps, they are unable to see that control or censorship are not effected by any specific institution but by the *objective relationship between opposing accomplices* who, through their very antagonism, demarcate the field of legitimate argument, excluding as absurd, eclectic, or simply unthinkable, any attempt to take up an unforeseen position [...] (ibid.: 39–40)

How can a truly scientific sociology of science (i.e. a sociology opposed to the 'official' one) escape from this setting? For Bourdieu the answer lies in taking into account its own role in the constitution of the scientific field:

[T]he particular difficulty which sociology has in conceiving *science scientifically* is related to the fact that sociology is based at the very bottom of the social hierarchy of the sciences. [...] A scientific sociology of science (and the scientific sociology which it helps to make possible) can only be constituted on condition that it is clearly seen that different representations of science correspond to different positions in the scientific field, and that these representations are ideological strategies and epistemological positions whereby agents occupying a particular position in the field aim to justify their own position and the strategies they use to maintain or improve it, while at the same time discrediting the holders of the opposing position and their strategies. Every sociologist is a good sociologist of his rivals; the sociology of knowledge or of science is no more than the most irreproachable form of the strategies used to disqualify rivals, until it ceases to take as its object the rivals and their strategies and turns its attention to the complete system of strategies, i.e. the field of positions within which they are generated. (ibid.: 40)

It can clearly be recognized that Bourdieu, in contrast to the positivist sociology he attacked, did not settle for a purely formal interpretation of reflexivity as is common in SSK, demanding the pure applicability of sociology to itself. He in fact *applied* sociology to itself, situating it not only above but also within the rivalry of 'ideological strategies'. He thus surpassed the demands of the positivist sociology of knowledge, giving a more radical meaning to the postulate of reflexivity. He indeed applied it in an almost *autophagous* fashion. And yet he stayed behind a wholehearted critical reinterpretation of reflexivity insofar as he restricted his focus to academia. He reestablished the link between sociology and class struggle, but focussed only on power relations *in academia*. The 'social conditions' of sociology, i.e. the former 'transcendental unconsciousness' the sociologist shall now become aware of, remain restricted. They only comprise those conditions which allow the sciences to produce 'supposedly transhistorical truths' as the result of a historical process of research. Though working on a critical account of this historical process, modelled by Bourdieu on a capitalist scheme in his theory of symbolic capital, he ignores the ways the sciences in general and sociology in particular are 'entangled' (Bonefeld, 2014: 69) with the working of capitalist societies.

Bourdieu's restriction of the meaning of reflexivity, and thus also of criticism, seems to be at least one dimension of the dissent between him and Luc Boltanski. Renewing the theme of 'critique' in sociology, the latter explicitly denounced a sociology having its own accomplishment as its single aim (Boltanski, 2009). Widening the sense of reflexivity in this way extends beyond a reflexive style of academic research, or a pure reflexive but still contemplative stance of the researcher, for it confronts the sociologist with the role he *volens nolens* plays in society. As seen from this vantage point, the sociologist cannot choose between 'value-free' science and ideology, between political quietism and engagement. He rather realizes

the political role of sociology and then opts for a policy, affirmative or subversive. Boltanski opts for the latter and accordingly defined the aim of sociology as 'rendering reality unacceptable'.<sup>6</sup>

We finally come to understand that the differences between the unequal twins, the sociology of knowledge and critical theory, might best be grasped as centred around diverging cultures of reflexivity. In each case, positivist, Bourdieusian, and critical sociology, reflexivity is not a bonus but is linked to the epistemological status of sociological theory. But reflexivity is spelled out in differing ways. In the framework of positivist sociology, reflexivity is reduced to the mere possibility of applying sociology of knowledge to itself 'without in any way undermining it' (logically, not politically). This is a purely formal postulate. Bourdieu on the contrary asked for 'a specific kind of epistemological vigilance' in sociology (Bourdieu, 2001: 174). Reflexivity is no longer understood as a mere possibility but rather is 'embodied in collectives which have so much incorporated it that they practise it as a reflex' (ibid.: 220). In critical theory, finally, reflexivity extends beyond a pure attitude of the scientist or a style of research but commits the researcher to the project of emancipatory politics.

## Notes

- 1 The account is confined to purely methodological issues. As far as I know there was only one attempt by the *Institut für Sozialforschung* to contribute substantially to sociology of knowledge, beyond theoretical discussion. In 1934, the *Institut* published the book-length study *The Transition from the Feudal to the Bourgeois World Picture* which they had commissioned Franz Borkenau to write. In this study Borkenau tried to relate the rise of mechanistic philosophy to the social organization of early manufacture and to social struggles in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The *Institut* considered Borkenau's approach as neither Marxist nor accurate and charged Henryk Grossmann to write a response in order to distance the *Institut* from Borkenau's work (cf. Freudenthal and McLaughlin, 2009: 26, 247).

- 2 The discussion provoked by Mannheim's book is documented in Meja and Stehr (1982: vol. 2).
- 3 Neurath (1930/1982); in a similar fashion Ernst Bloch judged that Mannheim picked up ideas from Lukács and 'made them suitable for a bourgeois use' (Bloch, 1935/1962: 286).
- 4 Cf. e.g. his controversy with the conservative Ernst Curtius, analyzed in Hoeges (1994).
- 5 I draw on Heinrich (2006: 381 et sq.).
- 6 *Rendre la réalité inacceptable* (Boltanski, 2008; cf. also Heinrich, 2006: 380–4, on Marx's notion of 'critique').

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# Critical Theory and Weberian Sociology

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## INTRODUCTION

That Max Weber's work would one day play an important role for the development of Critical Theory or for the Frankfurt School of Sociology was anything but a matter of course. And it was certainly not planned to from the outset. In his book, *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein* [*History and Class Consciousness*], published in 1923, Georg Lukács attempted to use Weber's work for further developing a critical theory of society. He did so by trying to establish a clear close connection between Marxian analysis of commodities and Max Weber's diagnosis of his age that bureaucratic rule was the fate of modern society. The reification [*Verdinglichung*] of consciousness and the increasing predomination of purposive rational action or a 'formal' rationality in the capitalist world, according to this understanding, are thus two sides of the same coin.<sup>1</sup>

Max Weber himself promoted this interpretation of the world wide process of

modernization that had commenced in western Europe and North America because in his *Vorbemerkung* [preliminary remark] to the *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* [Collected Articles on the Sociology of Religion] he wrote that he saw the particularity of Western culture in universal history as lying in a specific form of 'rationalism', the principle of which lay in formal rational organization and concomitant 'calculability'. Accordingly, there are meaningful correspondences or 'elective affinities' between modern science, 'modern' capitalism and the modern legal-bureaucratic form of authority and the related type of highly specialized humans [*Fachmenschentum*].<sup>2</sup> He furthermore believed he perceived a close historical relationship between the emergence of modern industrial capitalism and the mercantile economy policy of the absolute states of modern Europe. The alliance between the monarchy and the bourgeoisie was not only directed against the privileges of the aristocracy through the estates; it was also a

platform on which politics and the economy were able to work together in promoting the modern market economy. In Weber's eyes, it was nevertheless a historically precarious balance that could at any time give way to the predominance of the bureaucratic administration of a central power, whatever its form.<sup>3</sup>

When the staff of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research had to emigrate to the United States of America after the Nazis took power, in contrast to other German emigrants to the United States, they apparently did not carry Max Weber's work in their luggage. It is true that there are traces of their reception of Weber that go back to the 1920s. However, these incipient attempts at establishing a well-founded position on Weber's work were so sporadic that it is impossible to gain an overview of them retrospectively. Instead, we have evidence that the most important representatives of emerging Critical Theory had apparently spent the early years of their emigration doing things that were more important to them than studying Weber's work at all thoroughly.

This attitude is characterized by the pertinent quote of Edward A. Shils, who later worked for Talcott Parsons and described the 'Frankfurt gang' 40 years after his personal experiences dealing with the group of German exiles as 'a very mean lot', or more precisely as

terribly edel, radical, cliquish, self-promoting. They were spreading their pernicious *Kritische Philosophie*, i.e. fancied up Marxism as well as they could. I used to go to their seminars at 429 West 117th Street. I never heard Max Weber mentioned there in the year 1937–8, and I cannot recall any of them writing about Weber. ... Horkheimer had no interest in Weber, nor did Marcuse, nor Adorno, nor Pollock. Even Wittfogel, who was then one of them, and thus very close to communism, did not pay attention to Weber in his *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Chinas* (1927). At least, I don't think so.<sup>4</sup>

It is all the more astonishing that the 'Frankfurt gang' were to play a leading role at the Weber Conference organized in Heidelberg in 1964 by the German Society for Sociology on the occasion of the hundredth birthday of Max

Weber. Herbert Marcuse read a paper on 'industrialization and capitalism' at the event, offering the assembled critical theoreticians a springboard which was later to be used inter alia by Jürgen Habermas, who was particularly attentive to Max Weber's work when he elaborated his theory of communicative action.<sup>5</sup> However, the present chapter is not primarily about Jürgen Habermas and his various intellectual conversions, but the importance of Max Weber's work for Critical Theory, the development of which is closely related to the history of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. More precisely, I shall be looking at Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse's readings of Weber's work. First, I shall look at Horkheimer's relationship to Weber. This is related both to his earlier sojourn in Frankfurt and his life in exile, and I shall also refer to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which he wrote together with Adorno. Then I shall try to reconstruct Theodor W. Adorno's reception of Weber. In doing so, I shall focus particularly on the lectures and seminars he held in Frankfurt following the Second World War. Finally, I shall dwell on the Sociologists' Congress in Heidelberg in 1964, which was the apogee of Critical Theory's attempts to deal with Max Weber's work. Here, I shall focus on Herbert Marcuse's 'Industrialization and Capitalism'. Furthermore, I shall also make a brief comment in this context on Jürgen Habermas' statement for discussion following Talcott Parsons' lecture on 'determination by value [*Wertgebundenheit*] and objectivity in the social sciences', marking the beginning of his own studies of Max Weber's work, which were to occupy him for several years.<sup>6</sup>

## MAX HORKHEIMER'S RELATIONSHIP TO MAX WEBER'S WORK

In the summer semester of 1926, Max Horkheimer held his lecture entitled 'Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy'

followed by a colloquium. He subsequently revised the manuscript on which the lecture was based and prepared it for publication, which however only took place posthumously.<sup>7</sup> In this lecture, he elaborated on the south-west German movement of Neo-Kantianism, as represented by Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert. In particular, the 'system of values' elaborated by Rickert appeared to him to be too formalistic and inappropriate for creating a '*Weltanschauungslehre*' – a new doctrine for a world view for the present age – as had been undertaken by Max Scheler and Karl Jaspers.<sup>8</sup> However, Horkheimer did not see the reduction of philosophy to a purely 'formal' discipline as a disadvantage.

In particular, he regarded Max Weber's methodological principles as worthy of discussion. This particularly concerned his thoughts on the 'logical' problems of the modern cultural and social sciences. In particular, Weber's 'humility with regards to all material questions of value' appeared at the time to Horkheimer to be a great advantage. Horkheimer furthermore declared in this context that he would use the following colloquium to 'explain at least the bare necessities on the philosophical position of this significant thinker'.<sup>9</sup> We do not know whether this in fact took place and if so, in what form. This is particularly a pity inasmuch as Weber was later massively criticized by important representatives of Critical Theory for dispensing with a *normative* justification of value orientations. At any rate, here it becomes clear that Horkheimer was interested especially in Weber's *methodological position* at the time.

In his inaugural address in Frankfurt in 1931, Horkheimer only mentioned Max Weber by name on one occasion. He was explaining how the modern sociology of knowledge founded by Vilfredo Pareto made a distinction between two different 'concepts of reality', thus undermining the claim for an 'objectively valid truth' made by the philosophy of history. It is true that Karl Mannheim, who had already taken over the chair for

sociology at the University of Frankfurt from Franz Oppenheimer, was not mentioned by Horkheimer in his inaugural address. However, it is clear that Horkheimer was less concerned with Max Weber's work than with Mannheim's 'relativism' with regard to *Weltanschauung*.<sup>10</sup>

That Horkheimer was particularly interested in Max Weber's methodology later on becomes clear in some of his writings during his asylum in the United States in which he spoke of Weber briefly. In his programmatic essay on 'traditional and critical theory' of 1937, in which he opposed the ideal of knowledge of the natural sciences, influenced by Newton's mechanics, to Marx's programme for criticizing political economy in the Hegelian tradition, he briefly alluded to Max Weber. He saw Weber as a representative of 'deductive' thinking which was usual in natural sciences and had been elevated by so-called 'logical positivism' to a norm for all the disciplines of the empirical sciences.<sup>11</sup> In this essay, Horkheimer also briefly dealt with Weber's position in the German debate on value judgements and decisively distanced himself from Weber's abstinence in acknowledging the significance of practical value orientations for scientific knowledge. While anticipating the later 'positivism debate' in the sociology of the Federal Republic of Germany, Horkheimer drew a conclusion that called into question the ideal of objectivity of a 'traditional' understanding of science radically: 'There is no theory of society, including generalising sociologists', that does not include political interests, the truth of which should be decided on in tangible historical activity rather than in apparently neutral reflection void of acting and thinking'.<sup>12</sup>

In *Eclipse of Reason*, published in 1947, Horkheimer presented a more radical critique of Weber. This radicalization is closely linked to the *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, which he wrote together with Theodor W. Adorno and which also appeared in 1947. Here, Horkheimer made a fundamental conceptual distinction between 'rationality'

[*Rationalität*] and 'reason' [*Vernunft*] which has repeatedly been used by various representatives of Critical Theory for founding their own position and is also the basis for Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action and his own critique of Weber. Max Weber's work was increasingly accorded attention by various representatives of Critical Theory. For Weber's emphasis on the uniqueness of Western rationalism in universal history appeared to them as too one-sided to be able to rise to the challenge of a critical theory of society oriented around the measuring rod of reason [*Vernunft*] since Hegel and Marx. The distinction Weber expressly emphasized between 'purposive rationality' and 'value rationality' disappeared into the background or remained unnoticed. Instead, Weber was accused by the principal representatives of Critical Theory of having a 'one-dimensional' understanding of 'reason' within the meaning of 'purposive rational action' that Weber allegedly claimed to dominate in universal history as well as of 'formal' rationality. However, Weber saw the particular position of purposive rational action in his *methodological* founding of a Sociology of Understanding as lying primarily in *heuristic* interpretation.<sup>13</sup> And his own understanding of 'rationality' and 'rationalization' is far more nuanced than the usual perceptions of the chief representatives of Critical Theory.<sup>14</sup>

At any rate, when criticizing instrumental reason, Max Horkheimer did not quite overlook the fact that Weber himself emphasized the polysemy of the concept of 'rationalism'. Only Horkheimer was primarily focussing on the difference between *functional* rationality on the one hand and *substantial* rationality on the other. In doing so, he referred to Weber's distinction between *formal* and *material* rationality as used both in his 'sociology of law' and his 'sociology of the economy'.<sup>15</sup> The opposition between 'functional rationality' or *instrumental reason* on the one hand and 'substantial rationality' or *substantial reason* on the other increasingly replaced the

distinction Horkheimer had made between 'traditional' and 'critical' theory:

The difference between this connotation of reason and the objectivistic conception resembles to a certain degree the difference between functional and substantial rationality as these words are used in the Max Weber School. Max Weber, however, adhered so definitely to the subjectivistic trend that he did not conceive of any rationality – not even a 'substantial' one by which man can discriminate one end from another. If our drives, intentions, and finally our ultimate decisions must a priori be irrational, substantial reason becomes an agency merely of correlation and is therefore itself essentially 'functional'. Although Weber's own and his followers' descriptions of the bureaucratization and monopolization of knowledge have illuminated much of the social aspect of the transition from objective to subjective reason (...), Max Weber's pessimism with regard to the possibility of rational insight and action, as expressed in his philosophy (...), is itself a stepping-stone in the renunciation of philosophy and science as regards their aspiration of defining man's goal.<sup>16</sup>

Although Max Weber had at this point at the latest been definitively dismissed by Horkheimer and Adorno as an arch positivist or a 'positivist at heart',<sup>17</sup> over the following period his work served as a theoretical frame of reference for leading representatives of Critical Theory which they could work off with greater or lesser success.

This also applies to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* written by Horkheimer and Adorno, whose dialectical understanding of 'Enlightenment' is also indebted to their readings of Max Weber. For Horkheimer's and Adorno's historical philosophical construction is closely related to Weber's theory of the 'disenchantment of the world' drawn from Weber's sociology of religion. Both the interpretation that 'myth' contains an aspect of 'enlightenment' and the interpretation that from a certain point 'enlightenment' turns back to 'mythology' are to be found in Max Weber, though using somewhat different concepts, even if Horkheimer and Adorno explicitly relate Weber's expression 'disenchantment of the world' to the 'programme of enlightenment'.<sup>18</sup>

It is no coincidence that Horkheimer and Adorno equate this 'disenchantment of the world' with the 'eradication of animism'.<sup>19</sup> For according to Weber, 'magic' takes on the place of 'myth'. Magical formulae of controlling the world are for him the first 'rational' attempts of human beings to change the form of the world according to their specific needs and interests. They already contain an element of 'calculability' which is the point of departure for the process of 'rationalization' in universal history. With the emergence of the great ethical religions of salvation, this process is accompanied by a process of 'intellectualization', which in individual cultural areas led to the formation of various world sets.<sup>20</sup> For Weber, the unique development of the Western world was so significant because it not only led to the breakthrough of industrial capitalism and a formal legal type of authority, but also because it contained a process of *Selbstaufhebung* [self-annulment] of 'Western rationalism'. These 'paradoxes of consequences' had already been expressly emphasized both in Weber's '*Zwischenbetrachtung*' of his essays on the economic ethics of world religions, *Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen* as in his lecture on 'Science as a Vocation'. The only difference between Weber on the one hand and Horkheimer and Adorno on the other is that in this respect Weber wrote of the 'return of the gods' while the latter preferred the formulation that the enlightenment suddenly turned into 'mythology'.<sup>21</sup>

### THEODOR W. ADORNO'S RECEPTION OF MAX WEBER'S WORK

The beginnings of Adorno's reception of Weber have not yet been clarified in relevant secondary literature. However, there is a manuscript from Adorno from the year 1937 which has survived as a corrected galley-proof of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, though it was not published in it and thus is

of no significance in the history of the reception but no doubt of significance in the history of the origins of Adorno's work. The manuscript in question is Adorno's essay 'New Value Free Sociology', which was published post-humously in 1986 in his *Gesammelten Schriften* and which he had written on the occasion of the publication of Karl Mannheim's book, *Mensch und Gesellschaft im Zeitalter des Umbaus* in 1935. In this essay, Adorno constructs a 'Weberian' school, in which he places Karl Mannheim alongside Karl Jaspers and Ernst Troeltsch.<sup>22</sup> Even if the essay is primarily devoted to the book by Karl Mannheim, it divulges the tenor which was to determine Adorno's relationship to Max Weber.

Incidentally, this tenor resembles that expressed in Georg Lukács' book, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft* [*The Destruction of Reason*] published in 1954.<sup>23</sup> Adorno also saw in the ethos of science espoused by Max Weber a stage of decadence of the bourgeois principle of reason. For Weber's 'claim to objectivity and rationality' is restricted, according to Adorno, to a pure 'attitude' [*Haltung*] or to science as a 'vocation' [*Beruf*].<sup>24</sup> In this respect, Adorno alluded to a 'second positivism' through which the 'liberal intelligentsia' withdrew from its original claims to a critique of knowledge [*Erkenntniskritik*] and a critique of society [*Gesellschaftskritik*] in a spirit of resignation, explicitly emphasizing the 'regressive consequences of the Weberian following'.<sup>25</sup> Even though he rejects making Weber's work and Weber's desideratum of a 'value-free' science immediately responsible for the alleged disappearance of the 'bourgeois' intelligentsia he was implacable in his judgement of Weber's sociology of understanding [*Verstehender Soziologie*]:

What has been said against Mannheim also applies to Max Weber, the head of the school. The method he employs can only make the appearance of a balance of theory and fact in a situation in which the theory is of the same origin as its own facts: the 'ideal types' only apply to a reality which

corresponds to such an extent to the classificatory concepts that the concepts can leave everything to self-correction so as to be sure of understanding society. This possibility, which was already an illusion in Weber, who by no coincidence continuously tried to confirm it in his constantly renewed logical approaches, is now in obvious decline.<sup>26</sup>

In the following period, Adorno continuously emphasized the alleged parallels he found between the 'relativism' espoused by Max Weber and that espoused by Karl Mannheim. This becomes apparent in his essay, 'A Contribution to the Teaching of Ideologies' ['Beitrag zur Ideologienlehre'] which appeared in 1954. In substance, it is closely related to the seminar on 'Max Weber's scientific theoretical writings' held by Adorno with Horkheimer in the summer semester of 1954 in Frankfurt am Main, of which some seminar proceedings [*Seminarprotokolle*] have survived.<sup>27</sup> In this essay, Adorno only alludes to Weber's work in passing, as it happens in his contrasting research on ideology with social theory, whereby Weber's work is definitively placed in the context of 'positivistic sociology'. For the latter

denied the existence or at least the possibility of knowing [*Erkennbarkeit*] a total structure of society and its relationship to the spirit or the mind [*Geist*] and required that no principle but only the ideal types subjugated to the research interest should guide unprejudiced enquiry into what was respectively primary and secondary.<sup>28</sup>

Adorno claims that Max Weber's writings on the *sociology of religion* had paved the way for Karl Mannheim's *sociology of knowledge*, because Weber had put forward a 'sociological relativism', contenting himself with proving 'purely empirical relationships between society and the spirit or mind [*Geist*]',<sup>29</sup>

In the seminar Adorno held with Horkheimer on Max Weber's scientific methodology [*Wissenschaftslehre*] in 1954, new central leitmotifs of Adorno's critique of Weber emerge, which he continued to develop later in his lectures on philosophical

sociology and in the seminar he held in the winter semester of 1963–4 on Max Weber's main sociological work, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. The central point was the conceptual form Weber advocated – ideal types – as well as the related issue of 'understanding' in sociology. Furthermore, the 1954 seminar also treated the desideratum defended by Weber of a 'value free' science, which was increasingly to become the centre of criticisms of Weber in Frankfurt. Because Max Weber reduced the problem of value to the theoretical 'value relationship' underlying scientific knowledge, the function of the knowing subject which was still *constitutive* in the transcendental philosophy of Immanuel Kant is reduced to purely 'subjective' arbitrariness. Moreover, the question Kant raised as to the 'object' lost its sense, thereby transforming epistemology to a doctrine of scientific method [*Methodenlehre*], incapable of uncovering the veil of reification [*Schleier der Verdinglichung*].<sup>30</sup> Because Weber also leaves value orientations to the field of subjective arbitrariness, the 'danger' arises 'of leaving what is specific and unique to chance'.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Weber does not see that every subjective judgement contains an 'objective structure'. His separation of the 'is' and the 'ought' is an arbitrary decision, even if his attempt to 'emancipate the social sciences from missionary moralising' was right.<sup>32</sup> Even if in this context Adorno thinks he has found a 'positive aspect' of Weber's thinking, and disqualifies his 'epistemology' as 'hostile to theory', he was prepared to acknowledge that what Weber had achieved as a researcher went further 'than the concepts with which he thought; for instance, what he said about the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism or about bureaucracy was theory and was different from his epistemology'.<sup>33</sup>

Adorno's ambivalent relationship to Weber's work continued in the following sessions of his seminar. In this context, a minor controversy between Horkheimer and Adorno is of interest. The issue was

the logical status of the ideal type used by Weber. Horkheimer put forward the position that Weber's programme amounted to 'making sociology superfluous and transforming it into history'. Adorno, by contrast, argued that Weber sought to translate 'historical basic concepts' into 'formal sociology', i.e. into 'invariants'.<sup>34</sup> While Horkheimer put forward his view that there was no 'correct thinking' without an 'aspect of relativism', thus coming surprisingly close to the position of Karl Mannheim in his sociology of knowledge, Adorno continued to insist, following Hegel, on the 'substantiality' or 'objectivity' of conceptual knowledge.<sup>35</sup>

In his lecture on 'philosophy and sociology' held in the summer semester of 1960 in Frankfurt, Adorno went into greater detail on his criticism of Max Weber. In doing so, he recommended his audience buy the separate print of *Basic Concepts in Sociology* [*Soziologischen Grundbegriffe*] that had just been published by Mohr Siebeck in Tübingen, so as to inform themselves 'what we are talking about when we are talking about sociology'.<sup>36</sup> Adorno's homage to Max Weber's work is to be found in a comparison with the foundation of modern sociology by Emile Durkheim. The concept of 'understanding' plays a central role. For Durkheim had recommended interpreting social facts as 'things', while Weber was of the opinion that all apparently 'objective' structures could be attributed to the 'subjectively meant meaning' which the individual social actors associated with their action. In this context, Adorno paid tribute to the accomplishments of the German tradition of *Geisteswissenschaften* in which since Wilhelm Dilthey's work, 'understanding' had been elevated to the methodical foundation. In so doing, he appreciated Weber's efforts at liberating the concept of 'understanding' from a narrower psychological interpretation, and by heuristically emphasizing 'purposive rational action', having placed what was really 'socially' interesting into the centre of modern sociology.<sup>37</sup> For 'rationality' was, on the one hand, something

that could be understood inasmuch as it could be understood with regard to action theory. On the other hand, this concept refers to an objective social context which could not be grasped by the 'subjectively meant meaning' of individuals and thus approached what Durkheim called 'social facts'. Adorno saw this as proof that Durkheim's position that society was something 'incomprehensible' included 'an extraordinarily true aspect, because it takes account of the compulsive and "reified" character of society'.<sup>38</sup>

Within Adorno's reception of Weber, the seminar he held on a 'discussion of selected chapters of Max Weber's *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*' in the winter semester of 1963–4 is of particular importance. This very well documented seminar took place in the context of Adorno's personal preparation for the fifteenth German Sociologists' Congress in Heidelberg in 1964, dedicated to Max Weber's work during Adorno's term of office as president of the *Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie*. The following subjects were concentrated on in this seminar for advanced students [*Hauptseminar*]:

- (a) The relationship between Weber's methodology and his material sociological analyses;
- (b) Weber's analysis of the various forms of community, with a thorough discussion of the specificity of the community of the home [*Hausgemeinschaft*] and the 'political community';
- (c) Weber's sociology of rule, focussing on charismatic and bureaucratic rule;
- (d) Weber's sociology of the city and the underlying typology of cities;
- (e) Finally, the relationship between the concept of class and that of stratus, while Adorno particularly elaborated on the status of 'honour' as a sociological category.

The corresponding programme of the seminar shows to what extent Adorno's grappling with Max Weber's work had advanced, even if it is apparent that the seminar ignored the parts of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* devoted to the sociology of religion and the sociology of law.<sup>39</sup> In this context, we can only look at



a few aspects of Adorno's appreciation of this monumental work. They do serve to clarify how important Max Weber had become for him in his conversation which allowed him to elaborate a timely critical theory of society.

With regard to the relationship between theory and methodology, Adorno again put forward his view that the historical and sociological analyses of Weber's were more important than the methodological positions he advocated. Once again, Adorno's discussion of Weber's position was restricted to freedom from value judgements in the empirical scientific disciplines as well as his concomitant understanding of 'theoretical value relation', as developed by Weber in his essay on objectivity of 1904 following Heinrich Rickert. Adorno saw this as a renunciation of social theory to the benefit of a purely formal methodology, which because of the asserted 'separation of fact and value judgement' was bound to lead to a 'positivistic interpretation'.<sup>40</sup> Adorno acknowledges that Weber was right in emphasizing the importance of 'cultural values' underlying the quest for knowledge in selecting objects of research. Nonetheless, this conception was too 'subjectivist', as the concept of cultural value was 'merely a descriptive category for what has normative character in a culture'.<sup>41</sup> The 'entirety of society' was to be found in the prevailing normative ideas of an epoch.<sup>42</sup> Weber had deliberately overlooked this, thus choosing to ignore the central role of 'normativity' in the methodological foundation of his sociology, although this was 'to a great extent the investigation of forms of behaviour that made value judgments'.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the 'Kantian question of constitution' is, according to Adorno, replaced by methodology and a radical philosophical quest for knowledge is abandoned.<sup>44</sup>

In contrast to his *methodological* views, the ideal types used by Max Weber in his *historical* analyses were, according to Adorno, of lasting value. This applies both to his typology of rule and to his 'typology of

cities' underlying Weber's investigations into universal history. At the same time, Adorno took a position against Weber's purely typological treatment of the forms of rule, because such a purely typological treatment contradicted 'their dialectical movement in history' according to Adorno.<sup>45</sup> It is true that in the case of 'charismatic authority', Weber had addressed a dynamic moment. But this ideal type in particular could 'not be saved since it presents relationships and processes in reality as irrational which in fact to the contrary should be called very rational'.<sup>46</sup> Adorno asserts that the tension between 'rationality' and 'irrationality' in such a form of concept formation becomes particularly obvious. Moreover, it runs the risk of being abused as an ideological concept by modern totalitarian mass movements assembling around a corresponding charismatic 'leader': 'This danger is all the greater since this form of irrationality merges with positivist value freedom and thus contains no immunity to abuse. In contrast, one should promote a rational sociology, which like Freud in psychology is capable of leading everything irrational to a rational solution'.<sup>47</sup>

When discussing charismatic rule in the seminar, a reference in substance was made to the ideal type of 'legal-bureaucratic rule' also used by Weber, which was dealt with thoroughly in the following sessions. For Weber had brought the 'charismatic leader' in as a contrast to modern bureaucracy and seen in it the only possibility of preventing the bureaucratic rigidification of the Western world in the form of 'Chinese petrification' and a concomitant new '*fellahin*'. The implications of this construction of fundamental concepts for the theory of revolution were explicitly underlined by Adorno. Nevertheless, he saw in charismatic rule over an administrative apparatus the danger of promoting a 'static' understanding of revolution 'inasmuch as despite individual changes society as a whole remains intact'.<sup>48</sup> Typical for such a revolutionary procedure was thus, as in the Bolshevik transformation of Russia and its

decline into a Stalinist rule by violence, the 'switch-over from a propensity towards social critique to a propensity of apologies'.<sup>49</sup> It was decisive for Adorno, whether one should 'consider or objectify these phenomena as aspects [*Momente*]'.<sup>50</sup> If one objectifies the phenomena, the concept formation would turn into reification [*Verdinglichung*] and not do justice to what Adorno, in the footsteps of Hegel, invokes as the 'effort to define the concept' [*Anstrengung des Begriffs*].

### THE HEIDELBERG SOCIOLOGISTS' CONGRESS OF 1964

With regards to *epistemology* as the theory of science, figurative worlds separate Adorno's understanding of 'grasping' [*Begreifen*] and the sociological categories developed by Max Weber for purely 'heuristic' purposes. Adorno enjoyed being coy with paradox formulations such as when he plays on the contrast between Emile Durkheim's and Max Weber's founding of modern sociology, claiming that the crux of the matter was in fact to understand what according to Durkheim 'could not be understood', namely 'society'. This nevertheless should not make access to the insight he obtained through work that Weber's work should be primarily understood as an intellectual 'field of force' [*Kraftfeld*] rather than purely as a 'historic monument'.<sup>51</sup>

This was the best possible preparation for Adorno's participation at the Sociologists' Congress of 1964 in Heidelberg which took place during his tenure as president of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie*. At the event, he held no lecture apart from a brief talk during the official reception of participants at the Congress in the Königssaal in Heidelberg Castle. Nevertheless, while preparing the congress, Adorno ensured that two prominent Weber critics from the circles of the 'Frankfurt School' took the floor as speakers or participants in the discussion: namely

Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas. Moreover, Max Horkheimer officially took over the moderation of the discussion, which took place immediately following Talcott Parsons' lecture on 'freedom from values' [*Wertfreiheit*] and objectivity'.

Because the preparations and the related intrigues surrounding this sociological congress have long been worked through in the literature,<sup>52</sup> in the present context we shall focus particularly on Herbert Marcuse's lecture on 'industrialization and capitalism', which was at least significant with regard to its reception. Then I shall go into the statement Jürgen Habermas read following Talcott Parsons' lecture on 'freedom from values and objectivity'. Thereafter it was mostly Habermas who was to place the discourse on Weber in the Frankfurt School at a hardly surmountable level of abstraction and who, at least in this sense, has not had a 'legitimate successor'.

Herbert Marcuse chose the topic of 'industrialization and capitalism' in consultation with Adorno. In the same year, Marcuse's book, *The One-Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* appeared, setting the theoretical frame of references for his critique of Weber in Heidelberg.<sup>53</sup> But there is another book that might have inspired Marcuse's lecture and which had been published ten years earlier by Aufbau-Verlag in Berlin, namely the monumental study of *The Destruction of Reason* by Georg Lukács. We cannot determine unequivocally to what extent Marcuse's understanding of Weber had been influenced not just by *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein*, but also by this later work of Lukács'. The fact is that in his chapter on Weber in *The Destruction of Reason*, Lukács had broached all the subjects that were playing a central role in the reception and critique of Max Weber's work in Critical Theory.<sup>54</sup> At the centre of Marcuse's paper at the Heidelberg Congress of 1964, we also find the full tension between 'rationality' and 'irrationality' that pervades throughout Weber's work.

Here, Marcuse alludes to one phenomenon of 'Western rationalism', which Weber calls 'formal rationality' and the importance of which for a materialist theory of society is explicitly emphasized by Georg Lukács in his book *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein* of 1923. Similarly to Lukács' book on *The Destruction of Reason*, now the 'irrational' character of modern capitalism and its age is placed at the centre of analysis, but far more emphatically. In his lecture, Marcuse particularly addressed the following points:

- (a) Weber's postulate of 'freedom from values in science' pursued the 'aim of making science free to accept binding values which are imposed on science from outside'.<sup>55</sup> In his inaugural lecture in Freiburg in 1895, Weber even explicitly called for placing German political economy and a concomitant national social policy at the service of 'imperialist aims'.<sup>56</sup>
- (b) Although Max Weber spoke of a 'rationalization' of many social fields, this 'bourgeois' form of rationality suddenly switches to its opposite at two central places. The first is the threat of the 'liberal' manifestation of modern capitalism through the 'rule of economic and political monopolies'.<sup>57</sup> Marcuse saw this danger both in the tutelage of capitalist companies by a burgeoning state bureaucracy and in the creation of joint stock companies and with the emergence of major trusts, the 'subjugation of the whole under its calculating managers'.<sup>58</sup> The other threat to the 'age of liberalism' was to be found in 'Caesarist' trends in modern mass democracies. According to Weber, state bureaucracy requires leadership through a charismatically gifted politician, who cannot come from the administration since political decisions are withdrawn from the logics of administrative acts. With the increasing dependence of political 'leaders' on the 'plebiscitary' agreement of each people, however, this system of rule runs the risk of promoting political 'decisionism' at the expense of 'calculability'. Through this, the 'spurious character of modern mass democracy' becomes apparent.<sup>59</sup>
- (c) The 'formal' character of Western rationalism promotes a purely 'technical reason'.<sup>60</sup> In this context, Marcuse even used the term 'technological veil', which conceals the assertion of particular social interests.<sup>61</sup> However, this is used

to denounce the utopian thought of a 'qualitatively *other* historical rationality'.<sup>62</sup> By equating technical, economic and bureaucratic rationality with *reason*, a structure of rule over society as a whole is legitimized, which is presented as having 'no alternative'. In point of fact, however, certain 'purposes and interests of the rule' are already integrated into 'the construction of the technical apparatus. Technology is a historical societal *project*: in it, prospects are explored as to what a society and the interests which dominate in it are considering doing with the people and the things'.<sup>63</sup>

In writing this, Marcuse had more acutely expressed many motives of the reception and critique of Weber which can also be found in Lukács, Horkheimer and Adorno, and can thus be regarded as characteristics of Critical Theory. When we compare the reception of Weber by Lukács, Horkheimer and Adorno, however, Herbert Marcuse's paper in Heidelberg appears very poor. This is particularly due to the recurrent equation of 'reason' and 'rationality', which really makes no sense at all, at least with regard to Weber's use of the language. For Weber used the word 'reason' as good as never. And Weber for good reason held no brief for counterfactual talk of 'reasonable circumstances' [*vernünftigen Verhältnissen*], which is to be found not just in Marcuse but also in other representatives of the 'Frankfurt School'. It is to be assumed that he would have relegated such terminology to obscurantism or modern doctrines of *Weltanschauung*, since personal value judgements are always related to it, and Weber felt that such value judgements could not be generalized at least with regard to discourse.

But the legitimacy of value judgements is the crux not just of Marcuse's critique of Weber, but also that of Lukács, Horkheimer, Adorno and Habermas. For they constantly insinuate that with the postulate of freedom from values in empirical and analytical sciences, Weber had opened the floodgates for ideological and political 'irrationalism', because he did not regard normative issues

as 'capable of being demonstrated as true'. When Marcuse uses the term, 'reason' in his paper in Heidelberg – a term that has to be read and construed in the context of Georg Lukács' formula *The Destruction of Reason* in the age of European imperialism – he is implying that reason can indeed be founded on discourse. Jürgen Habermas later attempted to reformulate the critique of reason through timely philosophy by referring to the 'linguistic turn' achieved by modern philosophy of language. To what extent he had managed to do so continues to be debated today. At any rate, he spent decades trying to achieve this claim at a high intellectual level and in recent years has received many international prizes for doing so.

It is, however, impossible to say that Herbert Marcuse's paper in Heidelberg in 1964 was a success. Instead, Marcuse implied that everyone knew what was meant by the concept, 'reason'. Marcuse equated the notion of reason with the term Weber preferred, 'Western rationalism', though he regarded the modern form of bureaucratic rule as the 'transition from theoretical to practical reason', i.e. to the 'historic form of reason'.<sup>64</sup> However, in his Heidelberg paper, Marcuse did not succeed in demonstrating a convincing relationship between the 'destruction of reason' and the development of 'formal rationality' within the meaning of the principle of 'calculability' in the most varied fields of society. Or how else should we interpret formulations of his such as the 'unfolding of capitalist rationality' becomes the 'irrationality of reason'?<sup>65</sup> As we have pointed out, Georg Lukács had still written of the 'destruction of reason'. This diagnosis was, however, directed towards a context of pure *intellectual history*. For when have 'reasonable' circumstances existed in the history of humanity?

However, in this context, Marcuse's aim was not a narrative of a history of the fall, as is the case both of the *Dialektik der Aufklärung* and the *Zerstörung der Vernunft*, in which Weber's diagnoses of the 'disenchantment

of the world' or the 'bureaucratic rigidifying' of 'liberal' capitalism played a central role. Instead, by equating 'formal rationality' with 'bourgeois' or 'capitalist reason', Marcuse tried to bring a possible escape route into play which was closely oriented to Martin Heidegger's critique of technology. Just as for Heidegger, he was looking for a new 'project' in the history of humanity in which the 'technological a priori' underlying modern science and technology as well as modern capitalism and bureaucracy would be suspended and replaced by a new and now mimetic way humans would treat 'nature'.<sup>66</sup>

Four years later, Jürgen Habermas put this speculative philosophy of technology developed by Herbert Marcuse in its place on good grounds, and here made a relativizing presentation of Marcuse's position as one of 'technology and science as ideology'.<sup>67</sup> His own statement which he read out in reference to the paper Talcott Parsons delivered at the 1964 Congress in Heidelberg was concerned with quite different questions. It is telling that at the time they were purely methodological, just as in the publications by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno of around the same time. At least at this point of time, Critical Theory had dispensed with a discussion of the *contents* of Max Weber's work, although Marcuse had been the first of the proponents of Critical Theory to attempt very publicly to take Weber seriously as a social theoretician against his own 'logical' understanding of his methods.

Habermas' central objection to Weber and Parsons concerned the methodological problem of 'understanding'. Habermas argued that Weber's sociological work was torn between the heuristic meaning of 'understanding motivations' of acting individuals on the one hand and 'understanding' objective social contexts of meaning on the other. However, Weber tried to withdraw the latter form of understanding from empirical analytical sciences through his postulate of freedom from values. However, these 'objective' references to meaning at the same

time had an epistemological significance through the meaning Weber emphasized of 'theoretical value references' or 'value ideas', terms he had adopted from Heinrich Rickert. 'Value structures' and 'motivation structures' [*Motivationsgefüge*] in Weber's thought were, however, completely divorced from one another and therefore not 'mediated' according to Habermas. However, the point was precisely to integrate the 'contents of meaning that had been passed down' into the analysis, as those contents served as the basic interests in the quest for knowledge of research in the cultural and social sciences.<sup>68</sup>

In doing so, Habermas had addressed a central point which is also expressed in the brief position taken by Max Horkheimer in Heidelberg in 1964. In this context, Horkheimer expressly stressed that his problem with Max Weber's postulate of freedom from values in the empirical analytical sciences consisted in the fact that the postulate led to an abdication of *philosophical* knowledge.

According to Horkheimer, this resigned position is closely related to the 'regression of liberalism' seen around 1900 as well as to the increasing domination of 'big business' [*der großen Konzerne*].<sup>69</sup> This is why only an adequate 'theory of society' would be able to avoid the reduction of modern sociology to a formal framework of sociological 'basic concepts' or 'categories'.

Adorno also took up this thought in the speech he gave at the official reception of the participants at the fifteenth German Sociological Congress in Heidelberg Castle. But in contrast to Horkheimer, he expressly pointed to the relevance of Weber's sociological studies for *social theory*, which he again divorced from Weber's *methodological* premises. For Weber's thesis of the increasing 'solidification of bureaucratic rule' had anticipated the trend to an 'administered world'.<sup>70</sup> However, this statement had to be read against the grain so as to prevent 'sociology, throughout the world' from having 'the tendency to be transformed into social

engineering [*Sozialtechnik*]'.<sup>71</sup> Thus, much could still be learned from Weber's sociological work, even though it should not be followed slavishly.

In this regard, Adorno offered a highly instructive point which was to occupy Jürgen Habermas to a vast extent in his own reception of Weber over the following years. For Adorno explicitly said,

It is clear that the concept of rationality would be the most important for Max Weber to move him beyond the relationship between the means and the end in which he had remained spellbound. Perhaps we should take on as the legacy of Max Weber: through unswervingly reflecting with one's judgement to contribute a little to a reasonable arrangement of the world.<sup>72</sup>

## EPILOGUE

Over the following period, Adorno showed reverence towards Max Weber's work. In two Frankfurt lectures – 'Philosophical elements of a theory of society' of 1964 and 'Introduction to sociology' of 1968 – he went into Weber's work in detail. He made reference to the 1964 Weber Congress in Heidelberg and explicitly mentioned Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, with whom he felt the greatest theoretical affinities.<sup>73</sup> He praised Weber exuberantly as 'one of not just the most knowledgeable but also intellectually most productive sociologists' who 'lived in the German tradition' and in whose works 'things are far more difficult than they would initially appear'.<sup>74</sup> Although he continues to rank Weber among the 'positivists', Adorno took him increasingly more seriously with regard to *social theory*. Nonetheless, he asserted that one had to read Weber's monumental work 'against the grain' in order to break open his 'anti-theoretical standpoint'.<sup>75</sup> He wrote that this was particularly true of Weber's ideal types as concept formation, which according to Adorno 'necessarily suddenly switches over to theory formation or cannot dispense with theory'.<sup>76</sup>

Once again, Adorno points out not Weber's *methodological* understanding of his own work was decisive, but what he had in point of fact 'done' in his *universal historical* studies. For in those studies he worked with constructions of development history that could be understood as dialectical 'laws of motion' of society. This particularly applied to Weber's typology of rule, the three types of legitimate authority of which Adorno sought to understand in a corresponding 'dynamic' sense.<sup>77</sup> While doing so, he situated Weber's work near the cyclical understanding of history of Oswald Spengler, which according to Adorno is also expressed in Weber's diagnosis of the emergence of a new 'steel hard casing of submission' [*stahlhartes Gehäuse der Hörigkeit*]. One thus might read Weber's work as an 'unconscious legate of the old cyclical theories of society'.<sup>78</sup> But does this not also apply to the work Horkheimer and Adorno wrote together, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*?

## Notes

- 1 Cf. Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein. Studien über marxistische Dialektik* [1923], Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand 1968, p. 170 ff.; for Lukács' reception of Weber, also see Klaus Maretzky, 'Georg Lukács als Schüler Max Webers in "Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein"', in: Georg Ahnweiler (ed.), *Betr.: Lukács. Dialektik zwischen Idealismus und Proletariat*, Köln: Pahl-Rugenstein 1978, pp. 164–89; Kurt Beiersdörfer, *Max Weber und Georg Lukács. Über die Beziehung von Verstehender Soziologie und Westlichem Marxismus*, Frankfurt am Main: Campus 1986; furthermore Rüdiger Dannemann, *Das Prinzip der Verdinglichung. Studie zur Philosophie Georg Lukács*, Frankfurt am Main: Sendler 1987, p. 83 ff.
- 2 Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, vol. 1, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1920, pp. 1–16.
- 3 Cf. Max Weber, *Abriß der universalen Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*. Aus den nachgelassenen Vorlesungen edited by S. Hellmann and M. Palyi, 3rd ed., arranged by Johannes Winckelmann, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot 1958, p. 288 ff.
- 4 Edward Albert Shils, 'Some Notes on Max Weber in America', unpublished manuscript, University of Chicago, Edward-Shils-Papers, Box 46, p. 37 f. (quoted by Lawrence A. Scaff, *Max Weber in America*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2011, p. 242).
- 5 On Habermas' reception of Weber, see Michael Sukale, 'Jürgen Habermas und Max Weber. Eine Studie über Wert und Rationalität', in: Stefan Müller-Doohm (ed.), *Das Interesse der Vernunft. Rückblicke auf das Werk von Jürgen Habermas seit 'Erkenntnis und Interesse'*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2000, pp. 344–75.
- 6 On the following, also cf. Harald Hohmann, 'Der Schatten Max Webers. Der Prozeß der gesellschaftlichen "Rationalisierung" in der Deutung der Kritischen Theorie', in: *Jahrbuch für Soziologiegeschichte 1995*, Opladen: Leske + Budrich 1999, pp. 151–72; also see Johannes Weiß, 'Max Weber und die Kritik der Kritischen Theorie', in: Karl-Ludwig Ay and Knut Borchardt (eds.), *Das Faszinosum Max Weber. Die Geschichte seiner Geltung*, Konstanz: UVK 2006, pp. 301–11.
- 7 Cf. Max Horkheimer, 'Einführung in die Philosophie der Gegenwart' [lecture from summer semester 1926], in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10: *Nachgelassene Schriften 1914–1931*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer 1990, pp. 169–333.
- 8 Cf. Heinrich Rickert, 'Vom System der Werte', in: *Logos. Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie der Kultur*, Band 4 (1913), Heft 3, pp. 295–327; Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, Berlin: Springer 1919; also Max Scheler, *Schriften zur Soziologie und Weltanschauungslehre*, 3 vols., Leipzig: Der Neue Geist Verlag 1923–4.
- 9 Horkheimer, 'Einführung in die Philosophie der Gegenwart', p. 256.
- 10 Max Horkheimer, 'Die gegenwärtige Lage der Sozialphilosophie und die Aufgaben eines Instituts für Sozialforschung' [1931], in: Horkheimer, *Sozialphilosophische Studien. Aufsätze, Reden und Vorträge 1930–1972*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Athenäum 1972, p. 39.
- 11 Max Horkheimer, 'Traditionelle und kritische Theorie' [1937], in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4: *Schriften 1936–1941*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer 1988, p. 167 f.; for a discussion of the meaning of logical positivism in the history of science, cf. Herbert Schnädelbach, *Erfahrung, Begründung, Reflexion. Versuch über den Positivismus*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1971, especially p. 57 ff.
- 12 Horkheimer, 'Traditionelle und kritische Theorie', p. 196. On the positivism debate in west German sociology in the post-war period, cf. Theodor W. Adorno u.a., *Der Positivismusstreit in der deutschen Soziologie*, Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand 1969.
- 13 Cf. Max Weber, *Gesamtausgabe*, section 1, vol. 23: *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Soziologie*.

- Unvollendet [1919–1920]*, edited by Knut Borchardt, Edith Hanke and Wolfgang Schluchter, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2013, p. 152 f.
- 14 On Weber's understanding of 'Western rationalism', cf. the relevant contributions in the anthology: Scott Lash and Sam Whimster (eds.), *Max Weber, Rationality and Modernity*, London: Allen & Unwin 1987.
  - 15 Cf. Max Weber, *Gesamtausgabe*, section 1, vols. 22–3: *Recht*, edited by Werner Gephart and Siegfried Hermes, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2010, pp. 304 f., 531, 563 and 672.; also cf. Weber, *Gesamtausgabe*, section 1, vols. 22–4, pp. 251 f., 283 ff. and 628 f.
  - 16 Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, New York: The Continuum Publishing Corporation 1947, p. 6.
  - 17 *Ibid.*, p. 81.
  - 18 Cf. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer 1969, p. 9. Horkheimer's and Adorno's talk of the 'administered world' also has its origins in their reception of Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy (cf. *ibid.*, p. ix). The chapter on 'concept of enlightenment', which was of central importance for *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, was apparently written by Horkheimer. On December 19, 1942 he wrote to Herbert Marcuse: 'During the last few weeks I have devoted every minute to those pages on mythology and enlightenment which will probably be concluded this week. I am afraid it is the most difficult text I ever wrote. Apart from that it sounds somewhat negativistic and I am now trying to overcome this' (Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 17: *Briefwechsel 1941–1948*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer 1996, p. 390 f.). On this point, cf. Rolf Wiggershaus, *Max Horkheimer. Begründer der 'Frankfurter Schule'*, Frankfurt am Main: Societäts-Verlag 2014, p. 90.
  - 19 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. 11.
  - 20 Cf. Max Weber, *Gesamtausgabe*, section 1, vol. 22: *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Die Wirtschaft und die gesellschaftlichen Ordnungen und Mächte*. From the estate, edited by Hans G. Kippenberg in collaboration with Petra Schilm with the participation of Jutta Niemeier, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2001, pp. 121 f. and 290 ff.; also see Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, vol. 1, p. 237 ff.
  - 21 Cf. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. 6: '*Schon der Mythos ist Aufklärung, und: Aufklärung schlägt in Mythologie zurück*' [Myth is enlightenment and enlightenment switches back to mythology]. Max Weber, 'Zwischenbetrachtung. Theorie der Stufen und Richtungen religiöser Weltablenkung', in: Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, vol. 1, p. 536 ff.; Max Weber, 'Wissenschaft als Beruf', in: Johannes Winckelmann (ed.), *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, 6th ed., Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1985, p. 605: '*Die alten vielen Götter, entzaubert und daher in Gestalt unpersönlicher Mächte, entsteigen ihren Gräbern, streben nach Gewalt über unser Leben und beginnen wieder ihren ewigen Kampf*' [The many old gods, disenchanted and thus in the form of impersonal powers, emerge from their graves, seek out power over our lives and again being their eternal struggle]. On this conspicuous parallel, see Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1981, vol. 1, p. 466.
  - 22 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Neue wertfreie Soziologie'. On the occasion of the publication of Karl Mannheim's 'Mensch und Gesellschaft im Zeitalter des Umbaus' [1937], in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 20: *Vermischte Schriften I*, Frankfurt am Main, S. Fischer 1986, pp. 13–45. On this point, particularly cf. pp. 36 and 44, in which Adorno not only writes of a Weberian school, but also explicitly calls Weber the head of the school [*Schulhaupt*].
  - 23 Cf. Georg Lukács, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft*, Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag 1954, p. 474 ff.
  - 24 Adorno, 'Neue wertfreie Soziologie', p. 13.
  - 25 *Ibid.*, p. 14 f.
  - 26 *Ibid.*, p. 44.
  - 27 Cf. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, Hauptseminar 'Max Webers wissenschaftlich-theoretische Schriften', summer semester 1954, Archive Center of the University Library, Frankfurt, shelf mark XIII 168. Subsequently, Adorno had meticulous proceedings made of the discussions in his seminars so that we are relatively well informed of how he taught.
  - 28 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Beitrag zur Ideologienlehre' [1954], in: *Soziologische Schriften I*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1972, p. 467.
  - 29 Adorno, 'Beitrag zur Ideologienlehre', pp. 467 and 472.
  - 30 Dieter Deininger, seminar proceedings, June 3, 1954, p. 3.
  - 31 Deininger, seminar proceedings, p. 1.
  - 32 Gerhard Beuter, seminar proceedings, June 24, 1954, p. 1.
  - 33 Helmut Olles, seminar proceedings, July 1, 1954, p. 1.
  - 34 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
  - 35 *Ibid.*, pp. 3 and 6. The changes of Horkheimer's view on this subject can be seen when we compare this to his inaugural lecture in Frankfurt in 1931. Then, he sought to surmount 'relativism' in world views.
  - 36 Adorno, *Nachgelassene Schriften*, section IV, vol. 6: *Philosophie und Soziologie* [1960], edited by

- Dirk Braunstein, Berlin: Suhrkamp 2011, p. 17. Here, Adorno refers to Max Weber, *Soziologische Grundbegriffe*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1960.
- 37 Ibid., pp. 95–7.
- 38 Ibid., p. 98 f. Adorno later did justice to the fact by distinguishing between the unintelligibility of society and reflection on society. The former is the reason for which we have to appeal to the concept in such way to break open the 'reified' character of social conditions through reflexion. The point is to understand the unintelligible and to deduce social circumstances 'from circumstances between people' (Theodor W. Adorno, article on *Gesellschaft* [1965], in: *Soziologische Schriften I*, op. cit., p. 12).
- 39 This emerges from the surviving documents for the seminar which can now be found preserved in the university archives of the Goethe University in Frankfurt (cf. Universitätsarchiv Frankfurt, Abt. 139, Nr. 12); also see Felicia Herrschaft, *Soziologische Lehrveranstaltungen 1949–1973. Archivbestände der Goethe-Universität Frankfurt*, Frankfurt am Main: private print, 2009, p. 13 [http://wiki.studiumdigitale.uni-frankfurt.de/SOZFRA/index.php/Soziologische\_Lehrveranstaltungen\_von\_1949-1973].
- 40 Manfred Bretz, seminar proceedings of November 12, 1963, p. 2.
- 41 Ibid., p. 1.
- 42 Ibid., p. 2.
- 43 Ibid., p. 2.
- 44 Ibid., p. 3.
- 45 Wolfgang Holler, seminar proceedings of December 3, 1963, p. 2.
- 46 Jens Janke, seminar proceedings of December 3, 1963, p. 1.
- 47 Ibid., p. 2.
- 48 Edgar Baltzer, seminar proceedings of December 16, 1963, p. 4.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Gerti Fey, seminar proceedings of January 14, 1964, p. 3.
- 51 Ibid., p. 6.
- 52 On this point, cf. Uta Gerhardt, 'Die Rolle der Remigranten auf dem Heidelberger Soziologentag und die Interpretation des Werkes Webers', in: Claus-Dieter Krohn and Axel Schildt (eds.), *Zwischen den Stühlen? Remigranten und Migration in der deutschen Medienöffentlichkeit der Nachkriegszeit*, Hamburg: Hans Christians 2002, pp. 216–43; also Uta Gerhardt, 'Der Heidelberger Soziologentag 1964 als Wendepunkt der Rezeptionsgeschichte Max Webers', in: *Zeitperspektiven. Studien zu Kultur und Gesellschaft*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner 2003, pp. 252–66.
- 53 Cf. Herbert Marcuse, *Dereindimensionale Mensch. Studien zur Ideologie der fortgeschrittenen Industriegesellschaft*, Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand 1970.
- 54 Cf. Lukács, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft*, pp. 474–89.
- 55 Herbert Marcuse, 'Industrialisierung und Kapitalismus', in: Otto Stammer (ed.), *Max Weber und die Soziologie heute. Verhandlungen des 15. Deutschen Soziologentages*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1965, p. 161.
- 56 Cf. Max Weber, *Gesammelte politische Schriften*, 4th ed., edited by Johannes Winckelmann, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1980, pp. 1–25.
- 57 Marcuse, 'Industrialisierung und Kapitalismus', p. 179.
- 58 Ibid., p. 179.
- 59 Ibid., p. 175; also see pp. 167 and 174.
- 60 Ibid., p. 164.
- 61 Ibid., p. 172.
- 62 Ibid., p. 166.
- 63 Ibid., p. 179.
- 64 Ibid., p. 163. Also see the pertinent study by Wolfgang Schluchter, *Aspekte bürokratischer Herrschaft. Studien zur Interpretation der fortschreitenden Industriegesellschaft*, München: List 1972, p. 236 ff.
- 65 Marcuse, 'Industrialisierung und Kapitalismus', p. 165. One can find similar formulations in a letter written from Marcuse to Horkheimer and dated July 18, 1947. Marcuse writes that 'reason, which switches over to complete manipulation and rule, remains reason, so that the actual terror of the system lies in reasonableness rather than unreasonableness [...]. The negative reasonableness becomes positive madness' (Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 17: *Briefwechsel 1941–1948*). These thoughts were developed by Adorno in his *Negative Dialektik* two decades later. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1966.
- 66 Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Die Technik und die Kehre*, Pfullingen: Neske 1962. On Marcuse's intellectual dependence on Heidegger's existential ontology, see Stefan Breuer, *Die Krise der Revolutionstheorie. Negative Vergesellschaftung und Arbeitsmetaphysik bei Herbert Marcuse*, Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat 1977, particularly p. 96 ff.; on this point, see also the individual answers to the anthology: Jürgen Habermas (ed.) *Antworten auf Herbert Marcuse*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1968.
- 67 Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Technik und Wissenschaft als 'Ideologie'*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968, p. 48.
- 68 Cf. Jürgen Habermas, discussion of freedom from values and objectivity in: Stammer, *Max Weber und die Soziologie heute*, p. 76.



- 69 Max Horkheimer, introduction to discussion of freedom from values and objectivity in: Stammer, *Max Weber und die Soziologie heute*, p. 66.
- 70 Theodor W. Adorno, speech on the occasion of the official reception in the Königssaal of Heidelberg Castle, in: *Max Weber und die Soziologie heute*, p. 100.
- 71 Ibid., p. 101.
- 72 Ibid., p. 102.
- 73 Theodor W. Adorno, *Nachgelassene Schriften*, section IV: lectures, vol. 12: *Philosophische Elemente einer Theorie der Gesellschaft*, edited by Tobias ten Brink and Marc Phillip Nogueira, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2008, p. 124.
- 74 Ibid., pp. 175 and 201.
- 75 Ibid., p. 14.
- 76 Ibid., p. 23 f.
- 77 Ibid., pp. 18–21; also cf. Adorno, *Einleitung in die Soziologie* [1968], edited by Christoph Gódde, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2003, pp. 206–9.
- 78 Adorno, *Philosophische Elemente einer Theorie der Gesellschaft*, p. 22.

# Critical Theory and the Philosophy of Language<sup>1</sup>

Philip Hogg

Translated by Adrian Wilding

## INTRODUCTION

From its beginnings up to the present day, language has played a central role in critical theory. Walter Benjamin's early essay 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' and Jürgen Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* differ widely in both methodological and thematic terms, yet both explore the resources through which language can offer an emancipatory critique of capitalist society. The differences in philosophical approach of the respective critical theorists can be traced to the philosophy of language which each confronted in their day. If Benjamin's reflections engage with motifs from the Kabbalah, with Karl Kraus's language criticism<sup>2</sup> and, at least implicitly, with the emerging analytical philosophy, Adorno's works on language develop their philosophical and ideology-critical form by confronting both Martin Heidegger's linguistic ontology and early analytical philosophy, particularly that of Rudolf Carnap and Ludwig

Wittgenstein, and can be traced back to his wider critique of positivism. Jürgen Habermas's turn to a theory of communication, by contrast, takes its inspiration above all from John Austin's speech act theory,<sup>3</sup> while engaging more recently with new theories of semantics, for example those of Robert Brandom, and ideas from linguistic anthropology, for example those of Michael Tomasello.<sup>4</sup>

In the past, a certain discrimination has marked the reception of critical theory's language-philosophical works, resulting in Benjamin's and Adorno's contributions to a philosophy of language receiving scant attention (cf. Hogg, 2017; Müller, 2012): Habermas's communication-theoretical version of critical theory was taken as a benchmark, in comparison with which the works of Adorno, Benjamin, and Horkheimer were viewed as remote from linguistic and communicative concerns. The reason for this lies in a specific decision about exactly what in language is relevant for philosophy and

social theory: since Habermas criticized earlier critical theory primarily for its inadequate conceptualization of intersubjectivity and adopted in his own theorizing elements of a philosophy of language which presents language as intersubjective social practice, it was exactly these speech-act theories and pragmatist ideas that were judged to be linguistically and social-theoretically relevant. Correspondingly, the early critical theorists' philosophies of language were seen as outdated because they had primarily understood language not as a medium for the intersubjective realization of rationality and communicative action but also as a medium of subjective and artistic expression, as a medium of world-disclosure as well as domination, as an object of critique as well as a medium of critique. It is true that Adorno recognizes intersubjective communication as a philosophically relevant aspect of language, but, in contrast to Habermas, he never used this idea for a paradigmatic refounding of critical theory as a theory of communication. Early critical theory already contained works on intersubjective communication, but since these did not fit the later paradigm of communication, they received hardly any theoretical attention after the communicative turn. Looking back today on the history of this reception one can ascertain that while critical theory since Habermas has produced a highly differentiated and theoretically fertile understanding of language as communication, this same development has led to a significantly narrower comprehension of language than that with which the early critical theorists operated (cf. Seel, 2016). In the pages that follow I sketch, by means of an exposition of the ideas of Benjamin, Adorno, and Habermas, the many layers that make up a critical theory of language, exploring both the obvious differences as well as the often overlooked commonalities between these authors. Adorno's language-philosophical works will receive the most attention, because there the Benjaminian motif of 'reconciliation' is retained and certain pragmatist

and intersubjectivist motifs from Habermas are anticipated.

## WALTER BENJAMIN: LANGUAGE AND RECONCILIATION

Walter Benjamin's reflections on the philosophy of language, like those of Adorno, are to be found not only in his systematic works but also in shorter pieces that deal with concrete problems. Even when Benjamin's individual language-philosophical works have diverse motives, his central theme can be seen to consist in a critique of the idealist construct of language as an instrument of subjective mediation. Instead of conceiving language starting out from the subject, as the subject's means of communication, Benjamin conceives language as that moment of reality in which subjectivity and objectivity in general first find common ground. The origin of this idea is already to be found in Benjamin's 1916 essay 'On Language as Such and On the Languages of Man' (Benjamin, 2004a), whose motifs are taken up and modified in his later works. As the title of this essay – unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime and known only to a small circle of friends and acquaintances – suggests, Benjamin understands language as including not only human language.

The existence of language, however, is coextensive not only with all the areas of human mental expression [*menschlicher Geistersäußerung*] in which language is always in one sense or another inherent, but with absolutely everything. There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of each one to communicate its mental [*geistigen*] contents. (Benjamin, 2004a: 62)

For Benjamin, every thing, whether living or inanimate, has a spiritual [*geistigen*] content which it communicates [*mitteilt*] in this way: every thing ceaselessly communicates with all other things and with humanity. A thing is

no mere dead material but in its spirituality [*Geistigkeit*] is understandable and interpretable. That every thing communicates with other things and with humanity means simply that it manifests itself as something definite [*etwas Bestimmtes*], that in its definiteness it is in need of interpretation. The definiteness of the thing, that manifests itself for humans in that thing's need to be interpreted, is the expression in language of that thing's spiritual nature. If the thing is treated as a mere material occurrence lacking a spiritual nature, it cannot, so Benjamin maintains, be understood at all.

There exists for Benjamin a continuous communicative relationship between humans and things, a form of communication that cannot be interrupted and which is to be conceived as a language-theoretical version of a perfectly reconciled world. This communication of mental [*geistige*] contents is what Benjamin ultimately calls 'language'. Human language is therefore not the only language; human speech takes place in a world in which every thing communicates its spiritual nature in language. This communication of things is, for Benjamin, the prerequisite for man being able to understand and determine things at all (2004a: 63). As humans we can understand something of things only if we understand them as communicating, that is, if we assume that they have something to say to us and to tell us.

The linguistic being of things is their language; this proposition, applied to man, means: the linguistic being of man is his language. Which signifies: man communicates his own mental being *in* his language. However, the language of man speaks in words. Man therefore communicates his own mental being (insofar as it is communicable) by *naming* all other things ... *It is therefore the linguistic being of man to name things.* (2004a: 64)

Against the background of this notion that things communicate their nature in their language, the naming of things can be seen as humans' attempt to understand the language of things.

Benjamin distinguishes his conception of human language from what he calls the

'bourgeois conception of language' where 'the means of communication is the word, its object factual, and its addressee a human being' (2004a: 65). The medium, object, and addressee in this bourgeois conception of language are independent of each other, Benjamin argues, and remain external to both the spiritual [*geistigen*] nature of humans and that of things. Language here would be merely an instrument with which and by which something is expressed that already exists independently of it. If language exists only as an instrument used by humans, it is understood anthropocentrically. The result is that things are denied participation in language, which ultimately reduces them to objects of instrumental action. This insight, one that will also prove significant for Adorno's philosophy of language (cf. Adorno, 2007), is directed primarily against a conception of language as a system of signs that exist in opposition to both their meanings and the world to which they refer, each relating in an arbitrary fashion.

In order to emphasize how his own view contrasts with the bourgeois conception of language, Benjamin undertakes an interpretation of the Book of Genesis, a text which runs parallel to his own conception 'in presupposing language as an ultimate reality, perceptible only in its manifestation, inexplicable and mystical' (Benjamin, 2004a: 67). According to the biblical creation story, God created the world by speaking and God completed his creation by bestowing a name upon every created thing. For humans, things are ultimately cognizable because God has given them a name. When humans listen to the language of things, they can give them the names that befit them. In contrast to the word of God, which is creative, human language involves mere cognizing: it cognizes in things the word of God, by calling things by their names. The 'Fall of the spirit of language' (71) occurs when the inhabitants of this paradisiacal state of perfect communication with things come to know 'good and evil', that is, when they eat from the tree

of knowledge. In the paradisiacal state, this knowledge is nevertheless 'nameless' and 'void', since it knows no evil and thus no distinction between good and evil. In leaving this state, however, human beings break off their magical communicative connection to things, and the language they speak remains forever external to the things themselves.

In stepping outside the purer language of name, man makes language a means (that is, a knowledge inappropriate to him), and therefore also, in one part at any rate, a mere sign; and this later results in the plurality of languages. (2004a: 71)

Although human language after the Fall no longer expresses the unity of humans and things, there still remains the task, according to Benjamin, of hearing the language of things and of translating it into human words. While in paradise the success of this translation was guaranteed, this is not the case in human languages. In the foreword to his 1923 translation of Charles Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*, 'The Task of the Translator' (2004b), Benjamin adheres to the notion that even after the Fall from a paradisiacal language of naming, all human languages aim at exactly this 'pure language'. Whereas in 'On Language as Such and On the Languages of Man' the translation of the language of things into human language stands in the foreground, i.e. an epistemological problem, 'The Task of the Translator' develops Benjamin's perspective by placing center stage the question of the relation of the various human languages to one another and to the objects to which they refer.

Whereas all individual elements of foreign languages – words, sentences, associations – are mutually exclusive, these languages supplement one another in their intentions. This law is one of the fundamental principles in the philosophy of language, but to understand it precisely we must draw a distinction, in the concept of 'intention', between what is meant and the way of meaning it. (2004b: 257)

While the words used to refer to a specific object differ across the various empirical languages, the object in question – what is

'meant' – remains the same. 'Bread', 'Brot', 'pain', 'ekmek', for example, are different ways of 'meaning' [*meinen*] the same object. Since the same object is represented in different empirical languages with different words, and no single language ever captures the object in its entirety, pure language functions as the language which all the various empirical languages complement, and in which language and things find common ground. For Benjamin the translation of a work from one language into another thus has the function of enhancing language: the language into which one translates should be enhanced by the language from which one translates. In translating, one should enhance the meaning of the language of the translation by means of the language of the original, so that the translation approximates pure language. Thus Benjamin is ultimately opposed to any fixation on the representative function of language, an idea he suggests is espoused only by bad translators and which forms a cornerstone of modern representationalist theories of language, as these developed after John Locke.

By contrast, works by Benjamin from the early 1930s, specifically 'Doctrine of the Similar' (Benjamin, 2005a) and the reworked text 'On the Mimetic Faculty' (Benjamin, 2005b) present a mimetic conception of language which is built, at least in fragmentary form, on anthropological foundations. At the origins of human history, our mastering of nature forced us to make nature similar to ourselves. If our imitation of nature consisted at first in the production of similarities between human products and natural objects, which, moreover, had been admitted into a context of magical ritual practices, Benjamin today finds only 'minimal residues' (721) of these mimetic practices. But these point less to the disappearance than to a transformation of the mimetic faculty. Language is now the one place that the mimetic faculty has occupied in the course of the historical rationalization of human practices, only that language is unable, due to its own abstractness, to produce sensuous similarities. Instead, it produces

non-sensuous similarities. In explaining this notion Benjamin makes clear reference to his reflections on the relation between individual empirical languages and pure language from 'The Task of the Translator': 'For if words meaning the same thing in different languages are arranged about that signified as their center, we have to inquire how they all – while often possessing not the slightest similarity to one another – are similar to the signified at their center' (Benjamin, 2005a: 696). Language should express and represent what it refers to, but it can do so only in its own forms; it cannot possibly be sensually similar to a particular object. That language is sensually dissimilar to its objects means in the last instance nothing other than that the relation between language and object is neither an arbitrary nor a representative one but one in which language and object are bound together by historical human practice. Nevertheless, the mimetic aspect of language cannot, for Benjamin, be understood independently of its 'semiotic' side. 'Rather, everything mimetic in language is an intention which can appear at all only in connection with something alien as its basis: precisely the semiotic or communicative element of language. Thus, the literal text of the script is the sole basis on which the picture puzzle can form itself' (2005a: 697). Benjamin does not invert the representationalist conception of the relation between sign and signified but shows us that in this relation the mimetic aspect of language must appear – i.e. that aspect by which language is linked to the world in a way other than the representative – if the enhancing character of individual languages in their relation to pure language is to be understood.

### **THEODOR W. ADORNO: COMMUNICATION AND EXPRESSION**

From their beginnings, Theodor W. Adorno's reflections on the philosophy of language show Walter Benjamin's influence; they nevertheless

develop decisively from the discussions with Max Horkheimer which led, among other works, to their collaborative *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997). In his 'Theses on the Language of the Philosopher' (Adorno, 2007), published posthumously but written in the early 1930s, Adorno takes up Benjamin's critique of the 'bourgeois conception of language':

Philosophical language, which intends truth, knows no *signa*. Through language history wins a share of truth. Words are never merely signs of what is thought under them, but rather history erupts into words, establishing their truth-character. The share of history in the word unfailingly determines the choice of every word because history and truth meet in the word. (2007: 35–6)

Language, so Adorno is convinced, is a sedimentation of the historical practice of humans. If therefore linguistic signs appear as detached from historically and socially mediated objects and human practices, this is the expression of a specific socio-historical situation in which human practice as a whole is affected by reification. Adorno's reflections on the philosophy of language thus have as context a philosophy of history: the independence which capitalist society gains over those who live within it is the result of an historically relentless process of formalization of reason, wherein reason threatens to become more and more a mere instrument for the domination of nature (cf. Bernstein, 2004: 7). For linguistic practice this means that language itself serves to coordinate social domination, so that linguistic statements refer to their objects not as specifics and particulars but merely as examples of a universal. Objects are then relevant as exemplars of a universal only insofar as they are identical with that universal, not in their particularity. Adorno then hypothesizes that this is a feature of conceptual language as such: it must necessarily identify objects with concepts, otherwise as humans we would be incapable of making sense of a world in which we are supposed to understand each other and orient ourselves. He is referring

here simply to the function that concepts must occupy as general terms in predicative statements. Without this function, i.e. without predication and identification – one can neither think nor speak.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* this function of language is explained in terms of a philosophy of history and an anthropology: for humans to free themselves from their natural environment, language needed to become a means for dominating nature. This liberation from nature, however, was, according to the authors, attainable only at the price of humans being schooled in shared social practices, which in turn contributed to the maintenance of prehistoric domination. This dialectic of freedom and domination characterizes language as language, and neither the moment of freedom nor the moment of domination can be explained independently of each other (cf. Hogg, 2014). Adorno held to this notion even in his later work, even though he would more finely differentiate it in terms of a theory of meaning and aesthetics. Instead of explaining linguistic meaning and concepts solely referentialistically, by relating non-linguistic objects to corresponding linguistic utterances and concepts, or by understanding meaning and concepts inferentialistically from the juxtapositions in which they stand, Adorno develops – specifically in *Negative Dialectics* (Adorno, 1973) but also in a series of shorter works – a ‘constellative’ theory of concepts. According to this theory, concepts as such refer to non-conceptual reality, but never as isolated individual concepts, rather always in concrete linguistic contexts that Adorno calls constellations:

In truth, all concepts, even the philosophical ones, refer to nonconceptualities, because concepts on their part are moments of the reality that requires their formation, primarily for the control of nature ... Dissatisfaction with their own conceptuality is part of their meaning, although the inclusion of nonconceptuality in their meaning makes it tendentially their equal and thus keeps them trapped within themselves. The content of concepts is immanent to them, as far as the mind is concerned, and transcendent as far as being is concerned. (Adorno, 1973: 11–12, trans. amended)

Conceptual and linguistic contents are thus determined in the same way that concepts in linguistic constellations refer to nonconceptual reality.

According to Adorno, in order for concepts to have a certain content they must be used repeatedly in the same way. In this manner, conceptual content is enriched and differentiated in the historical course of a concept’s use. Socially dominant ways of usage emerge, but these can always only update a certain part of the meaning of the respective concepts, leaving other aspects unaffected. To use language in a socially shared way allows a speaker to participate in social life, but, according to Adorno, at a price: the individual’s expression of their experiences is predefined by what is socially recognized and socially intelligible. Philosophy’s critical task with respect to language is thus, for Adorno, to dissolve the dominant modes of linguistic usage of concepts into the moment of their historical formation, while connecting each moment to others. According to Adorno, changed forms of linguistic practice are to be created which would allow for a changed access to reality, and thus ultimately the possibility of changing reality itself. By bringing concepts into changing constellations, and thus learning something new from each issue it interprets, philosophy, through its own form of linguistic representation, should contribute to this change in humans’ theoretical and practical relations to the world.

Philosophy’s critique of language, is not here directed against language and concepts as such, as was the case with Fritz Mauthner (see Hartung, 2012: 139–78), but against the specific form of their socially and historically produced determinations. Thus it cannot dispense with the identification involved in judgments and propositions, but it must focus on what remains silent in ordinary linguistic practice.

Dialectically, cognition of non-identity lies also in the fact that this very cognition identifies – that it identifies to a greater extent, and in other ways,

than identitarian thinking. This cognition seeks to say what something is, while identitarian thinking says what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what, accordingly, it is not itself. (Adorno, 1973: 149)

For Adorno, this motif is what connects philosophy with art. Of course there are differences between the two fields – the language of philosophy aligns itself with the objects it wishes to determine and to present, while art is oriented primarily by its own laws – nevertheless both seek to unsettle the fixed definitions which by necessity exist in ordinary language. Since art is not constrained to impart anything definite about specific objects and circumstances it is, at least measured against ordinary linguistic practice and the language of the sciences, unintelligible: ‘Prior to questions of narration about the world, concepts as such have something hostile to art about them; they represent the unity as sign of what they subsume, which belongs to empirical reality and is not subject to the spell of the work’ (Adorno, 1992: 99). Instead of reproducing in its works the ordinary meanings of words, linguistic art attempts to free those semantic and aesthetic aspects that are needed for the respective context of a work. This, according to Adorno, does not lead to the disappearance of the ordinary meanings of words; on the contrary, the semantic and aesthetic surplus of words, which is decisive for a work of art, can only be developed in relation to ordinary meanings: ‘it is not that artworks differ from significative language by the absence of meanings; rather, these meanings through their absorption become a matter of accident. The movements by which this absorption of meaning occurs are concretely prescribed by every aesthetically formed object’ (Adorno, 1999: 124). Art and philosophy thus offer language possibilities that typically remain unused in everyday language. Although Adorno is a decided critic of the tendencies of everyday language to become mere catchphrase and jargon (cf. Adorno, 2003), he does not discard everyday language and

communication as such, as Habermas suggests he did (Habermas, 1987: 516). Questionable for Adorno is, on the contrary, the idea that everyday language contains the possibility of interpersonal speech – where speakers mutually elucidate a matter in hand while mutually recognizing each other (see Adorno, 1974: 37; Hogg, 2017). This is never or only rarely achieved, counters Adorno, and not due to everyday language itself but because it is bound up with social mechanisms of domination. This becomes clear in Adorno’s argument with Heidegger’s critique of ‘idle talk’ [*Gerede*] in *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 2010) and which merits a brief discussion.

Heidegger defines ‘idle talk’ as having the following characteristics:

one understands not so much the beings talked about; rather, one already only listens to what is spoken about as such. This is understood, what is talked about is understood, only approximately and superficially. One means *the same thing* because it is in the *same* averageness that we have a common understanding of what is said. (Heidegger, 2010: 162)

Heidegger, like Adorno, makes clear that everyday language inserts itself between the speaker and the subject matter such that understanding becomes oriented not to the matter itself but to the average understanding expressed in idle talk. Adorno concurs broadly with Heidegger’s view when he says that ‘the business of communication and its formulas cut in between the matter and the subject, and blind the subject against precisely that which all the chatter is about’ (Adorno, 2003: 82).

However, Heidegger emphasizes at the beginning of his analysis that the concept of idle talk ‘is not to be used here in a disparaging sense ... Terminologically, it means a positive phenomenon which constitutes the mode of being of the understanding and interpretation of everyday *Dasein*’ (Heidegger, 2010: 161–2). His explanations are not intended as a critique of idle talk, though it



is easy to understand them in this way. While Heidegger clearly renounces negative normative evaluations of idle talk, the rhetorical forms in which he discusses it implicitly convey such evaluations:

The groundlessness of idle talk is no obstacle to its being public, but encourages it. Idle talk is the possibility of understanding everything without any previous appropriation of the matter ... Thus, by its very nature, idle talk is a closing off since it omits going back to the foundation of what is being talked about. (163)

For Adorno, the problem with Heidegger's theory lies primarily in the fact that it views the negativity of idle talk not as an historically and socially determined form of linguistic communication but as a type of being of everyday existence [*Dasein*], i.e. as an ontological determination. Where Adorno conceives idle talk within the framework of a philosophy of history and social theory, Heidegger ontologizes it. The 'closing off' of a subject matter which idle talk induces is for Heidegger not something that everyday human existence [*Dasein*] can rid itself off or change. At the same time, idle talk is not the only possible form of world-concealment; Heidegger will set alongside it 'genuine discourse' [*echte Rede*] whose presupposition is 'an authentic and rich disclosedness' of *Dasein* to itself (Heidegger, 2010: 159). This disclosedness of *Dasein* – and with it the world – is achieved however only when *Dasein* distances itself from the 'speaking a lot about something' (159) and begins to determine its own ontical and ontological constitution. This form of consciousness is admittedly not everyday but it is also an 'existential possibility' of *Dasein* (158), a possibility therefore which belongs to *Dasein* as *Dasein*. Only when *Dasein* grasps this possibility can it gain a different access to a subject matter than that determined by the averageness of idle talk. This access, which the term 'genuine discourse' is meant to convey, nevertheless behaves quite other than in a neutral way; it 'subdues' [*schlägt nieder*]

idle talk (159, trans. amended). Heidegger thereby reveals that he understands idle talk to be a deficient form of linguistic practice, one which, as ontological determination, is simultaneously unavoidable and unchangeable. It can only be subdued by 'genuine discourse', which itself is also an ontological determination, so that the vanishing point of Heidegger's implicit criticism of idle talk is not a changed everyday linguistic practice, one which would no longer define access to a subject matter and to the world solely on the basis of custom, but the permanent subjugation of an ontologically anchored linguistic practice – idle talk – by another ontologically anchored linguistic practice – genuine discourse.

Adorno's critique comes in precisely at this point. 'The mobility of words unquestionably continued their degradation from the beginning ... But without mobility language would never have become capable of that relation to the matter at hand, by whose criterion Heidegger judges communicative language' (Adorno, 2003: 85). For something like 'genuine discourse' to exist, i.e. a form of linguistic expression in which the speaking subject articulates their experiences in a way adequate to the matter at hand, it is necessary to have social communication – the 'mobility of words' – since only thus can subjects exchange their various perspectives on a matter in their various modes of expression. Here, linguistic modes of expressions differ only in order to allow the particular matter to be determined specifically. That this is inadequately achieved in everyday communication under late capitalism is, for Adorno, less down to language than to the social relations of which language is a moment. Precisely this point is overlooked by Heidegger, Adorno argues. Heidegger 'condemns idle chatter, but not brutality, the alliance with which is the true guilt of chatter, which is in itself far more innocent' (83). Heidegger's implicit critique of idle talk is abstract in that it isolates such talk from the social domination of which it is a

moment, and condemns its 'groundlessness' and fungibility. From Adorno's perspective, by contrast, idle chatter or everyday linguistic practice make visible the historically and socially determined condition of subjectivity. Hence Adorno criticizes Heidegger in the last instance for having dehistoricized everyday communication under capitalism by making it an ontological determination of *Dasein*.

This mischief has arisen and is to be got rid of; we do not need to bemoan it and leave it in peace as if it were the essence of *Dasein*. Heidegger rightly perceives the abstractness of chatter 'as such', which has emptied itself of any relationship to its content; but from the aberrant abstractness of chatter he draws conclusions as to its metaphysical invariance, however questionable that may be. (82, translation amended)

In this way Adorno's reflections on communication display an idea that will also play a decisive role in his epistemology and social theory, namely the priority of the object. Subjects engaging in communication are, on the one hand, concerned with expressing themselves in a way appropriate to the particular object of experience, while on the other hand they must mutually grant each other the same freedom of expression which they themselves take. In the back and forth exchange of their individual experiences of an object, subjects increase the possibility of the most comprehensive possible experience of that object. In this way, intersubjective communication, in which the priority of the object is observed, serves subjects' mutual enlightenment. That communication in late capitalism serves less to promote mutual enlightenment than the maintenance of social domination is precisely down to the fact that it does not respect the priority of the object and that language is removed from the objects concerned and the experiences of subjects. Here Adorno anticipates certain of Habermas's reflections on communication theory. For the early Habermas, so it is for Adorno: fulfilling the potential of communication is bound up with a rational organization of society. As long as this society

remains unrealized, communication can only be understood negatively, since it falls short of its own possibilities (cf. Hogg, 2016). For this reason the language of philosophy and the language of art can each deliver only in limited ways an anticipation [*Vorschein*] of the fulfillment latent in everyday language. Since Adorno's philosophy of language is built on the idea that the historical life of humans has been sedimented in language, and that this historical life took on catastrophic forms in the National Socialist's war of extermination in the twentieth century, Adorno's reflections are also an attempt to find a linguistic form of representation which is able to express the injustice that has been done, and at the same time to intervene critically wherever linguistic forms of representation are chosen which gloss over or silence the past. Thus he adheres to Benjamin's reflections on reconciliation in the philosophy of language while at the same time criticizing the linguistic practices of late capitalism where communication's enlightening potential remains unfulfilled. To this extent he anticipates one central idea of Habermas's work (cf. Morris, 2001).

## JÜRGEN HABERMAS: COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

One cannot overestimate the significance of Jürgen Habermas's magnum opus the *Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas, 1984, 1987) for critical theory, social and legal philosophy, as well as sociology. But already in his 1965 Inaugural Address at the University of Frankfurt, Habermas formulated an idea that would be fundamental to his later work, and which bears similarity to reflections in Adorno's theory of communication:

The human interest in autonomy and responsibility is not mere fancy, for it can be apprehended a priori. 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 universal and unconstrained consensus. (Habermas, 1971: 314)

That the structure of language supplies the necessary criteria for accomplishing a critical normative reconstruction of capitalist society is the thesis that Habermas would elaborate in the following years (cf. Habermas, 1986) and give systematic form in his *Theory of Communicative Action*. The reason why he reconfigures critical theory in terms of a language- and action-based theory of communication is, so he himself argues, that Adorno's and Horkheimer's version of critical theory ran into methodological problems which made it impossible for them to implement the 'programme of an "interdisciplinary materialism" in whose name the critical theory of society was once launched in the early thirties' (Habermas, 1984: 385–6). In order to revive this program it was necessary, according to Habermas, to make a paradigm shift from the philosophy of consciousness to the theory of communication and so make philosophy compatible with social scientific practice. Accordingly, Habermas's philosophy of language, as developed in the *Theory of Communicative Action*, is situated within a theoretical framework that is directed toward grasping the rationality of intersubjective social relations, to which end Habermas undertakes a critical engagement with Max Weber's concept of rationality and draws upon the already communicatively oriented concepts of George Herbert Mead and Émile Durkheim. The references to Hegel and Marx that were typical of early critical theory thereby lose significance.

Habermas begins his investigations with the question of what can legitimately be called 'rational'. His answer is: the linguistic utterances and actions of persons and these persons themselves. Linguistic utterances and actions involve an implicit knowledge which provides the reason for the respective utterances and actions. For Habermas,

linguistic expressions and actions must be differentiated according to the respective discursive realm or part of the world to which they refer, and he stresses the relation between the meaning of a linguistic utterance and its validity, where an utterance's meaning can only be understood if it is also understood why it is supposed to be true. 'One can understand reasons only to the extent that one understands *why* they are or are not sound, or why in a given case a decision as to whether reasons are good or bad is not (yet) possible' (Habermas, 1984: 116). This truth-semantic feature is supplemented by a 'use' theory of meaning wherein the meaning of a linguistic expression consists in the way it is used. However, Habermas is primarily concerned with those forms of linguistic utterances with which validity claims can be raised. 'Not all illocutionary acts are constitutive for communicative action, but only those with which speakers connect criticisable validity claims' (305). Thus, firstly, linguistic expressions take effect as statements about objects in the objective world. Such statements make a claim to be *true*. Secondly, linguistic statements can refer to the social world, that is, to something that is negotiated between subjects and which must be valid for the subjects involved. Such statements raise the claim of normative *correctness*. Thirdly and finally, linguistic statements can refer to what the speaking subject feels. Such statements relate to the subjective world and raise claims to *truthfulness*.

Three different worlds open up here: an objective world to which we refer with statements which claim the validity of truth; a social world to which we refer with statements which claim the validity of normative correctness; and a subjective world, to which we refer with statements which claim the validity of truthfulness. For Habermas, since speech acts are differentiated according to their worldly references, actions which cannot be classified primarily as speech acts must also be differentiated according to their reference to something in the world. Thus, firstly,

teleological actions, which simply seek the appropriate means to reach an end, refer to the objective world in which they wish to intervene. Here the acting subject merely follows an intention directed toward a specific goal. Secondly, subjects can be guided in their actions by norms which are valid in the social world and which they regard as binding upon them and upon all other subjects concerned. Here Habermas speaks of norm-regulated action, the execution of which requires that the subject be able to distinguish the objective world from the social world. Thirdly and finally, the subject can present other subjects with something of themselves, i.e. something from their subjective world, and let themselves be guided by how this world is perceived by others. Habermas calls this form of action 'dramaturgical' action.

Habermas gains these insights by studying the actions of subjects as they are performed in modern societies and by inquiring into the rules and norms which underlie them. In order for them to challenge the conditions of their lives, subjects living in the modern capitalist world must therefore be able to distinguish between the validity of their linguistic statements and actions with regard to the three worlds mentioned. With their statements and actions, a subject raises different validity claims for each of the respective three worlds. Since a subject's speech and action claim validity, members of modern societies commit themselves to making their statements and actions criticizable by other subjects and to substantiating and justifying those statements and actions. The type of justification will differ according to the respective form of the validity claim. Now social life is not performed in such a way that the respective spheres of action – the objective, the social, and the subjective worlds – are strictly separated from each other and one form of action is to be found in only one sphere. Rather, Habermas makes these distinctions only in order to enable subjects, in their interrelationships, to make themselves transparent to the demands and

claims they make. Communicative action is understood correspondingly as that social process in which all participating subjects 'refer simultaneously to things in the objective, social, and subjective worlds in order to negotiate common definitions of the situation' (Habermas, 1984: 95). In doing so, the subjects involved may only demand consent for their statements and proposals for action if no other participant involved and affected by them dissents with good reasons. The only compulsion that governs in communicative action is what Habermas calls 'the unforced force of the better argument' (Habermas, 1984: 28, trans. amended). For Habermas, every subject who has been socialized in a modern society is potentially capable of participating in processes of communicative action and ensuring that the coordination of social action takes place in a communicative manner. This means that all subjects must be involved in all decisions which directly or indirectly concern them, which is nothing less than an idea of a radical democracy. This idea, Habermas suggests, is what language itself aims toward: 'reaching understanding is the inherent telos of human speech' (Habermas, 1984: 287). Understanding, which has been achieved in communicative action between the subjects, also possesses a context-transcendental force; argumentative communication is not to be understood as having validity merely in specific situations or contexts (cf. Habermas, 1984: 35f.). Linguistic action is therefore concerned with those criteria which can be used to assess whether the social relations of a society are, in the communicative sense, rationally arranged. This represents the fundamental moment of Habermas's theory, an approach he has described as 'formal pragmatism'. By reconstructing the forms in which speech acts raise context-transcending validity claims, critical theory acquires normative standards which are located in the subject's speech acts themselves and thus in social reality. Theory thereby gains access to the real actions of subjects.

Soon after its appearance, the *Theory of Communicative Action* prompted wide-ranging and heated debate, centering on the one hand on Habermas's critique of the philosophy of consciousness, with which he founded his paradigm shift to communication theory, and on the other, the universalistic claims of formal pragmatism. Habermas, however, subsequently devoted himself less and less to elaborating those aspects of his work that touched on the philosophy of language in the strict sense. Likewise he did not subject 'the real prevailing life-conditions to a staunch critique of pathology and estrangement' (Celikates and Pollmann, 2006: 98). In fact, he merely applied the normative criteria obtained in the *Theory of Communicative Action* to present conditions and devoted himself to explicating the moral and legal-theoretical implications of his magnum opus, shaping the course of subsequent political, legal, and moral philosophy, particularly in the form of 'discourse ethics'.

Since the start of the twenty-first century Habermas has undertaken a renewed examination of questions raised by anthropology and the philosophy of religion, turning his attention once again to a series of themes in the philosophy of language that had already played a role in the *Theory of Communicative Action*. Starting from an engagement with the work of anthropologist Michael Tomasello, who locates the evolutionary origins of human communication in the prelinguistic gestural communication of primates and the action-oriented and socially synthesizing effects these generate, Habermas has begun to revise his thesis that the linguistification of the sacred is a feature of modernization and rationalization (cf. Habermas, 2012: 7–95). Whereas in the *Theory of Communicative Action* Habermas assumed that 'the rational-motivational binding force of good reasons, which is the decisive factor for the action-coordinating function of linguistic communication, can generally be attributed to the promulgation of an initially ritually secured basic understanding' (13), he now proposes

that the 'binding force of good reasons' should be considered more differentiated in its evolutionary formation with regard to the validity claims of truth, normative correctness and truthfulness. Normative content, and thus validity claims for normative correctness, which were supposed to control and coordinate social actions, were shared in the form of ritual actions before they were linguistically shared, and 'had first to be detached from their ritual encapsulation and then transferred to the semantics of everyday language' (14). In the form of rituals, Habermas recognizes that pre-linguistic human practices have a greater socially binding force than he took them to have in *Theory of Communicative Action*. Habermas has thus returned to a topic which had already been explored by Adorno and Horkheimer in the first chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: the connection between language and the genesis of the subject from the perspective of natural-history and philosophy of history. If critical theory's differentiation of the communication-theoretical aspects of the philosophy of language was accompanied by a narrowing of the concept of language, Habermas himself now tries to counteract this, by expanding his concept of language in the ways examined above.

## CONCLUSION

An overview of the works of Benjamin, Adorno, and Habermas shows that critical theory contains a multitude of reflections on the philosophy of language, each theorist's work building in part on the other while also diverging from their predecessor. What the three theorists discussed have in common is that they find a significant critical potential in language for the rightful organization of society, even when each interprets and exploits this potential in different ways. Where for Benjamin, language was to be understood as the place where humans exist

in a reconciled relationship with themselves and with things, and he explicated this potential by reverting to theological motifs, Adorno attempted to critically discern in language, i.e. in the linguistic practices of everyday life, philosophy and art, the historical status of the relationship between subjectivity and society. Holding on to language's liberating potential, i.e. its potential for reconciliation, Adorno concentrated above all on showing how the organization of society prevents this potential from being socially realized. Habermas, while developing his philosophy of language in opposition to what he saw as the 'philosophy of consciousness' of the early critical theorists Benjamin and Adorno, and via a constructive adoption of linguistic-analysis approaches, also retains the motifs found in his predecessors. The 'unconstrained consensus' (Habermas, 1971: 314) at which every linguistic utterance ultimately aims, is the form which Habermas calls the liberating potential of language, and which he then attempts more precisely to define by means of his system of validity claims, so that critical theory can remain capable of intervening in scientific and social discourse, which was its original purpose. However, in contrast to Benjamin and Adorno, Habermas completely neglects the sphere of linguistic art, so that when it comes to propositional speech, while he may have a much more differentiated concept of language than his predecessors, in terms of language's aesthetic and rhetorical aspects of language, his conception remains much narrower than the comprehensive conceptions of Benjamin and Adorno. The subsequent transformation of critical theory into a theory of recognition, on the other hand, takes place almost entirely without language-philosophical reflections (cf. Hogg and Deines, 2016b). What remains of the communicative turn in contemporary critical theory is to a large extent merely the focus on intersubjectivity; language-philosophical considerations play almost no role. While recognition theory attempts to

make material social conflicts fertile for social philosophy without paying attention to the linguistic form in which these conflicts are conducted, Habermas concentrates primarily on the formal requirements of communicative practices, without taking sufficient account of their material conditions and the subjects involved in them. Adorno's philosophy of language could now serve as the source for a language-philosophical *extension* of the recognition-theoretical transformation of critical theory, since Adorno assumes that the social life of humans has historically been sedimented in language and that the way people treat each other can be read precisely in their linguistic practice. Recognition theory, which is mainly concerned with normative questions, could be extended in such a way that subjects' material linguistic forms of expression can be more precisely examined as a medium of recognition (cf. Kuch, 2016). Contra Habermas, it is possible to bring to light in linguistic communication the real social life-process with all its crises and distortions, without isolating in a formal-pragmatic way the norms operating therein. Again contra Habermas, one can conceive language (as does Adorno) as a material practice of socialized subjects, and contra Honneth, as a material form in which recognition and misrecognition are accomplished. Contra both thinkers, one must (with Adorno) nevertheless hold on to the idea that the redemption of the liberating potential of linguistic practice can be achieved not through language alone but first through a fundamental transformation of social relations. For this reason Adorno's philosophy of language remains negative, as critique of language and of the society which is expressed in it.

## Notes

- 1 This text develops key insights of an earlier publication that appeared in 2015 under the title 'Die sprachkritische und sprachsoziologische Tradition', in Kompa (2015: 69–79).

- 2 Karl Kraus (1874–1936) was one of the most significant Austrian writers and language-critics. In the journal he edited, *Die Fackel*, he confronted the politically and ideologically dangerous positions around him by exposing the flawed use of language by contemporary literati, politicians, and writers. His most important works include *The Last Days of Humanity* (Kraus, 1986), which deals with the intellectual and political dilapidation of Austria and Europe before and during the First World War, and the *Third Walpurgis Night* (Kraus, 1989), in which he confronts national socialism. For Benjamin and Adorno, Kraus's language-critical works were, in terms of aesthetics and ideology-critique, of the utmost importance.
- 3 John L. Austin is considered the founder of the philosophical theory of speech acts. His work *How To Do Things With Words* (Austin, 2002), written in the 1950s, made human speech philosophically comprehensible as a form of practice. His theory was developed further by John Searle, but also critically by Judith Butler.
- 4 Michael Tomasello is an evolutionary anthropologist whose work centers on the development of human thought and speech out of the gestural communication and practice of primates. For recent publications, see e.g. Tomasello (2009 and 2014).

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# Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory

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This chapter analyzes the relationship between Critical Theory and psychoanalysis. Critical Theory has two fundamental principles: the orientation toward emancipation and the critique of ‘traditional theory’. Both of them provide not only for a diagnosis of society’s historical circumstances [*Zeitdiagnose*], but also allow us to distinguish between identifiable emancipation potentials in capitalist societies and the obstacles which block these potentials.

Since its inception in 1923, the goal of the Institute for Social Research [*Institut für Sozialforschung*] was to broaden discussion among Marxist thinkers beyond both established disciplinary divisions and dogmatic postures of official Marxist doctrines at that time.<sup>1</sup> The attempt at interdisciplinarity included the integration of psychoanalysis into critical social theory and the development of a critical theory of psychoanalysis, wherein the contributions of Max Horkheimer and Erich Fromm are central. The version of psychoanalysis elaborated by Fromm marks a transformation of this discipline into social

psychology.<sup>2</sup> Fromm’s social psychology placed psychoanalytical categories firmly into a historical context, expounding them as categories of definite social relations. Indeed, the Frommian version of psychoanalysis led to the progressive abandonment of Freud’s libido theory. It was on this point that Horkheimer and Fromm started to part company, leading to Fromm’s break with the Institute in 1939.

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno retrieved and reformulated key themes of Freud’s drive theory. Indeed, Freudian notions of fear, anxiety, horror, and terror became central to a psychoanalytically enhanced critical theory of society. The psychoanalytical framework was of decisive importance for the understanding of why the ‘impulse’ for and reality of emancipation appeared to be blocked.

In the 1940s, psychoanalysis takes a central place in Critical Theory, which it retained for the next 30 years. The historical context for the integration of psychoanalysis into Critical Theory is Nazism.<sup>3</sup>

Although psychoanalysis continued to have a central presence in Jürgen Habermas' *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968), it soon vanished, to all intents and purposes, from Habermas' work from then on. The focus of social diagnosis shifted away from Nazism toward the Welfare State and questions of legitimation. As a consequence of this shift, theories of language and communication became central to Habermasian critical theory, especially in *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), which would be substituted again later on by a theory of law in *Between Facts and Norms* (1992). After Adorno's and Horkheimer's analysis of the blockage of emancipation, Habermas relocates its possibility to the field of intersubjective relations of communicative action.

After Habermas, these intersubjective relations have been reformulated as relations of recognition. In his *Struggle for Recognition* (1996) Alex Honneth reintegrates psychoanalysis into critical theory and sees it as an explanatory device for the contemporary diagnosis of intersubjectivity. Nevertheless, in Honneth's work psychoanalysis ceases as a distinguishable account of the social relations. In fact, despite the fact that his theory of recognition deals with intersubjective relations, his usage of psychoanalyses reaffirms ontogenesis as a normative model of social critique.

The chapter starts with an account of the central role of psychoanalysis in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which amplified the regressive character of society in distinction to its – blocked – emancipatory potential. Then the chapter explores the manner in which Critical Theory presents a deep psychology, another name for Freudian psychoanalysis. It includes interpretation of texts by Freud in order to shed light on what I consider to be psychoanalysis' critical potential. Finally, the argument turns to Social Sickness and Ego, which explores Axel Honneth's conceptions, such as the difference between normality and normativity, intersubjectivity and emancipation in order to consider the problem of social

pathologies from a viewpoint other than that of biologism. I hold that regardless of my critique of Honneth's approach, it articulates a number of questions and challenges that must be addressed by those who remain committed to the interdisciplinary character of Critical Theory.

## SOCIETY AND REGRESSION<sup>4</sup>

We will take the highly celebrated *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as the reference for the theme of society and regression. In Germany, in the early twentieth century, Marxist theory was not suspect of the concept of rational action and considered that workers would act according to what were supposedly their own interests, insofar as the development of the productive forces would establish the objective conditions for overcoming capitalist society. Instead of socialism, however, it was National Socialism that came to the fore in 1933, destroying the labor movement that collapsed almost without a fight. As Wilhelm Reich states, 'at the crossroads between "socialism and barbarism", it was in the direction of barbarism that society first proceeded'.<sup>5</sup> How can this regression be explained? This is the question that Critical Theory confronted and tried to answer with recourse to psychoanalysis, which seemed to offer explanatory insights into the omnipotence of bourgeois ideology, including what Reich saw as the irrational political behavior of the German working class at that time.<sup>6</sup>

Until the writing of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno followed a philosophy of history inspired by Hegel, Marx, and Lukács, according to which they considered the unfolding of an emancipatory rationality along the development of productive forces. Even though an increasingly instrumental form of science, culture, and morality prevailed, modern capitalism and bourgeois culture still had an emancipatory potential. The critique of ideology would demystify the established relations of unreason

in support of emancipatory praxis. With Nazi domination and the exhaustion of revolutionary possibilities, this type of ideology critique had become historically obsolete because it lacked an empirical referent which theory could summon in support of praxis.

Furthermore, this referent – that is, reason and the objective rationality of the productive forces of human labor – was now considered to be the heart of domination itself. Reason, which had appeared as a project of human emancipation, had not just vanished. It had in fact turned against itself as a means of domination. Thus, reason no longer held the promise of liberation from prejudices and mythologies. Rather, it had become a mode of control over nature and Man, and over itself, too. The philosophy of history which had inspired notions of reasons as the means and ends of progress toward a future liberated humanity had run its course. Progress appeared in the form of an acute regression of ever-increasing domination.

In the context of Nazi barbarism, the critique of political economy as a philosophy of history fell into disrepute and ceased as the organizing center of Critical Theory. In its stead, psychoanalysis came to the fore as a central category of interdisciplinary research and it remained there for the next two decades. The central text is *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In this work, psychoanalysis provides the main categories for the analysis and comprehension of domination.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer attributed a central place to reflection on the relation between myth and enlightenment, stressing that tradition opposed reason to myth: 'Enlightenment's program was the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge'.<sup>7</sup> Against this opposition the authors suggest another interpretation that insists on a complicity between myth and enlightenment: 'Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology'.<sup>8</sup> In order to develop this proposition they go back to the adventures

of Ulysses in Homer's *Odyssey*. Here, we find myth in Homer, although its narration is already a sign of escape from myth. For Adorno and Horkheimer, Ulysses' story is that of the appearance of subjectivity, a birth which is fundamentally *ambivalent*: on the one hand we have the relief of escape; on the other, the fear of uprooting. This reflection on origins, always returning to myth, inaugurates for subjectivity a founding history, which the Enlightenment exemplifies. Liberation as a distancing from its origins is ambivalent at best, that is, the promise of reason remains tied to the conditions of unreason from which it derives its claim for liberation. Indeed, myth is the condition of reason and reason's promise of liberation carries within itself the force of its own delusion. Myth is the premise of reason to which it is bound. Myth thus blocks the desire for emancipation, and reasserts itself as premise of desire. Reason reverts to myth as the foundation of its origins. The derivation of liberation from existing conditions of unreason does not emancipate reason from unreason. It rather makes unreason appear as reason, leading to a relapse into mythical powers and submission to them: this is how in Adorno's and Horkheimer's argument Enlightenment returns to mythology, from which it could never escape.

Why does this occur in such a way? In the course of his adventures, Ulysses reinforces and consolidates his ego. He cannot simply enjoy this new freedom, because it is comprised of many dangers: he must set limits to himself in order to overcome danger. In this renouncement, he acquires his identity, bidding farewell to the joyful archaic unity of external and internal nature, as it is only at the cost of a *repression of their internal nature* that humans learn to dominate external nature. This figure of thought provides the model for both faces of enlightenment progress: renouncement – the split between ego and its own nature, which becomes anonymous in the Id – is the consequence of the introversion of sacrifice. In this gesture of

self-preservation against external danger lays the origin of this movement of freedom qua domination.

This general argument is anchored in three fundamental elements of Critical Theory: first, a new diagnosis of the present (developed to a great extent by Friedrich Pollock in his *State Capitalism: Its Possibilities and Limitations*);<sup>9</sup> second, a new interdisciplinary arrangement, reflecting political economy's loss of centrality; and third, the articulation of the general problem concerning the foundation of this perspective, in which psychoanalysis has a decisive role.

In the introduction to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer thus argue as follows:

While we had noted for many years that, in the operations of modern science, the major discoveries are paid for with an increasing decline of theoretical education, we nevertheless believed that we could follow those operations to the extent of limiting our work primarily to a critique or a continuation of specialist theories. Our work was to adhere, at least thematically, to the traditional disciplines: sociology, psychology, and epistemology. The fragments we have collected here show, however, that we had to abandon that trust.<sup>10</sup>

This passage makes clear, political economy is not to be replaced by another discipline as the principle of enquiry. Instead interdisciplinarity itself becomes the principle of enquiry. Thus, it is possible to hypothesize that Adorno and Horkheimer replaced the previous model of critical thought with what we could call a new 'space of interdisciplinary dialogue'. At its center is a 'critique of instrumental reason', the basis of which, I argue, can be found in Freudian drive theory. This hypothesis allows us to put forward a more general problem of the foundation of this critique without entangling us in a paradox. In the introduction of their book, Horkheimer and Adorno affirm that:

The aporia which faced us in our work thus proved to be the first matter we had to investigate: the self-destruction of enlightenment. We have no

doubt – and herein lies our *petitio principia* – that freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking. We believe we have perceived with equal clarity, however, that the very concept of that thinking, no less than the concrete historical forms, the institutions of society with which it is intertwined, already contains the germ of the regression which is taking place everywhere today.<sup>11</sup>

According to our interpretation, this aporia should be understood as the expression of an objective repression of society. The most familiar theses of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* are those in the introduction, such as: 'The critical part of the first essay can be broadly summed up in two theses: Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology'.<sup>12</sup> We have already highlighted the second thesis, the return to mythology: 'the cause of enlightenment's relapse into mythology is to be sought not so much in the nationalist, pagan, or other modern mythologies concocted specifically to cause such a relapse as in the fear [*Furcht*] of truth which petrifies enlightenment itself'.<sup>13</sup> The first thesis, in turn, which stated that myth is already reason, is explained in the opening of the first essay of the book: 'Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity'.<sup>14</sup>

This theoretical insight takes us directly to Freud, particularly to the text 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'. The dialectic that is posed here is one that operates between mimetic behavior and self-preservation, resulting in the expulsion of mimesis from the rational field and its repression in such a way that the exclusive claim of self-preservation to determine the rational is fulfilled.<sup>15</sup> In the purely natural scope of its existence the species finds itself in 'absolute danger' [*absolute Gefahr*]. Even though already mediated by anxiety [*Angst*], the moment of danger is not avoided: it shows itself as 'terror' [*Schrecken*]. According to Horkheimer and Adorno:

The oldest fear [*Angst*], that of losing one's own name, is being fulfilled. For civilization, purely natural existence, both animal and vegetative, was the absolute danger [*absolute Gefahr*]. Mimetic, mythical, and metaphysical forms of behavior were successively regarded as stages of world history which had been left behind, and the idea of reverting to them held the terror [*Schrecken*] 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 [*Grauen*].<sup>16</sup>

The dialectic that takes place here – resulting from the domination of internal and external nature – starts with anxiety about a threatening and essentially unintelligible nature. This anxiety requires an internalization of the threat, a determination of the dangerous object in order to neutralize it. This neutralization appears as fear [*Furcht*]. Fear indicates that the successive attempts of internalizing the anxiety-inducing threat could never remove it completely. It is no longer possible to internalize external nature and its threats without any traces. This is the impossibility, along with its scars, marks and wounds that never disappear, that Horkheimer and Adorno name ‘fear’ [*Furcht*].

This schema is clearly borrowed from Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, even though it is modified to suit Horkheimer and Adorno's arguments. As we can read in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*:

‘Fright’ [*Schreck*], ‘fear’ [*Furcht*] and ‘anxiety’ [*Angst*] are improperly used as synonymous expressions; they are in fact capable of clear distinction in their relation to danger [*Gefahr*]. ‘Anxiety’ describes a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one. ‘Fear’ requires a definite object of which to be afraid. ‘Fright’, however, is the name we give to the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it; it emphasizes the factor of surprise.<sup>17</sup>

Comparing both theoretical schemes, one can see that Horkheimer and Adorno rely on Freud to establish the general framework that moves from primitive ‘danger’ to the ‘fear’ of an entirely ‘enlightened’ world. But the

differences are as important as the similarities: if Adorno and Horkheimer use Freud to build this ‘negative’ philosophy of history, they do not share Freud's analysis of a distinction between ‘real anxiety’ and ‘neurotic anxiety’.<sup>18</sup> Contrary to Freud, Horkheimer and Adorno consider it an impossibility ‘to bring danger to conscience’, as it is objectively blocked by a social organization (the ‘administered world’) in which repression is a second nature elevated to the condition of a functioning mechanism of a flawless domination: ‘Enlightenment is mythical fear radicalized’.<sup>19</sup>

If we do not sustain an interpretation of the Freudian statement ‘*Wo Es war Soll Ich werden*’ [*Where the Id was, the Ego shall be*] in a classical sense, Horkheimer and Adorno's objections go even deeper, especially when they refer to the social order. As Adorno wrote in a Notebook in 1941:

Freud represents drive processes as a kind of equivalents exchange. But the drive exchange schemata, which Freud presents, are no longer valid as soon as the I has no longer the power of disposition over the many drives that are subordinated to it. When collective subjects form, the whole drive economy together with the pleasure principle is overridden. In his most advanced works, especially *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud saw something of this, but did not draw the consequences.<sup>20</sup>

Even while rejecting the Freudian drive scheme and against the background of their ‘negative’ philosophy of history, Horkheimer and Adorno reach a conclusion fundamental to Critical Theory. In opposition to the second Freudian drive theory, they return to the forefront what Freud had set aside. Reason, insofar as it is the objective process of the individual as presented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ends up reduced to self-preservation, which, at least for now, takes the place of the Ego and confuses the narcissistic mechanism, preventing it from becoming aware of instrumental reason.

This is precisely what we find in a decisive passage of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where

Horkheimer and Adorno discuss the internalization of domination in the form of the individual's relation to her or his own body:

In the relationship of individuals to the body, their own and that of others, is reenacted the irrationality and injustice of power as cruelty; and that irrationality is as far removed from judicious insight and serene reflection as power is from freedom. In Nietzsche's theory of cruelty, and still more in the work of Sade, the extent of this connection is recognized, while in Freud's doctrines of narcissism and the death impulse it is interpreted psychologically.<sup>21</sup>

According to our reading, this is a better way to interpret the idea that, 'Not only is domination paid for with the estrangement of human beings from the dominated objects, but the relationships of human beings, including the relationship of individuals to themselves, have themselves been bewitched by the objectification of mind'.<sup>22</sup>

Even if both authors go far with psychoanalysis, one can ask if it is far enough, a question that arises from the following statement: 'Just as myths already entail enlightenment, with every step enlightenment entangles itself more deeply in mythology. Receiving all its subject matter from myths, in order to destroy them, it falls as judge under the spell of myth'.<sup>23</sup> Psychoanalysis allows us to diagnose as insurmountable<sup>24</sup> the element represented by the constellation of anxiety, but it should also show how this element shifts. From the point of view of psychoanalysis it is not possible to affirm how the repetitive cycle between myth and enlightenment can be broken, nor how or when it is going to shift. However, even if we cannot predict its direction, we can at least say that it is going to shift.

## PSYCHOLOGY AS CRITICAL THEORY

Psychology as critical theory is the psychology of the depths, that is, psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is the attempt to grasp the

unconscious in order to understand passions and human psyche. In other words, psychoanalysis' critical role takes the form of Freudian diagnosis.

*Civilization and Its Discontents* is a late text (1929) wherein Freud sketches a theme that runs through all his work: a sometimes silent, sometimes explicit tension between the individual's realizations and the demands of the group. This section explores the tension in explicit terms in order to establish a clear conceptual frame for psychoanalytical doctrine, bringing psychoanalysis' critical potential to the fore. Even if this tension has been reformulated several times with respect to Freud's writings – either in biological or metapsychological terms, or even according to different viewpoints (economic, dynamical, and topographical) – our reading does not focus on the epistemological clarification of Freudian developments, which is not to say that such a clarification is not important. For the purposes of this text, the critical potential of Freud is the key question: what are the ethical and political dimensions of psychoanalytic discourse as unveiled by Freud?

In *Civilization and its Discontents* Freud (1989) argues that with the birth of civilization (or culture) humans turn from animals into rational beings. The more repression perpetuates itself, the more civilization advances and progresses; civilization seems to follow this single dynamic forever, one that involves both exploiters and exploited. As Freud understands it, the opposition between individual and society is immutable, and in light of this irreconcilable character Freud denies and defends civilization at the same time. He denies it by claiming that overcoming the state of nature is impossible; he defends it insofar as civilization is responsible for producing cultural goods, and insofar as it is impossible for humans to live under the dominance of the pleasure principle. Since sublimated drives originate culture, Freud considers the struggle for existence to be eternal and relentless, as it is with the conflict between the pleasure and the reality principles.<sup>25</sup> In other words,

psychoanalysis posits the actualization of discontent in the construction of the social and the individual. This is, in general terms, the so-called Freudian cultural pessimism.

Let us now turn to the drive problematic in Freud. It has become a convention to divide Freud's work in two different moments according to the variation of drive theory which underlies them. The first moment posits the idea of a conflict between two drive types: sexual and self-preservational (the latter would later be called Ego drives). In the second moment the conflict shifts to a tension between life drive (Eros) and death drive (Thanatos). This shift aims toward evincing the unbinding character which constitutes the death drive. This unbinding character assumes the clinical form of the repetitive compulsion; a compulsion that displaces the pleasure principle as the only principle of intelligibility of psychoanalytic theory, that is, as the sole organizer and regulator of psychic causality.

With the death drive, Freud proposes a 'beyond'<sup>26</sup> the pleasure principle, in contrast to the first model of high and low excitements, lived as pleasure or displeasure. This first model is maintained by Freud until 1895, having at its core the quantitative hypothesis presented in his *Project for a Scientific Psychology*. This model is also pervasive in all of Freud's metapsychology, supplying the qualitative terms for capturing the economic and dynamic accounts of the libido. The shift undertaken by Freud – from the pleasure principle to the death drive – adds topographical consideration to the quantitative and qualitative problematic. The first Freudian topographic model of the psyche has three instances: the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious. This model is reformulated after the introduction of the death drive and is subsequently expressed as a division between the Ego, the Id, and Superego. This shift has the Freudian maxim *Wo Es war soll Ich werden* as a corollary.

This is an important and revealing maxim in that it solicits different interpretations

among the critical theorists of the first generation. For Fromm, the Ego takes the place of the Id and the emancipation of the Ego from the unknown forces of Id is possible. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the total displacement of the Id by the Ego is not possible and the emancipation of the Ego from the Id will always remain incomplete. For Marcuse,<sup>27</sup> the relation between the Ego and the Id is dialectical, and emancipation, even if as a utopia, is necessary.

The specificity of the critical aspect of psychoanalysis resides precisely in envisioning more than the proposition of a worldview or an entrenchment of the discipline in the clinic. Above all, the critical aspect intends to put in evidence how the Freudian doctrine is rooted in history. That is, Freud is concerned with the construction of a clinical-theoretical corpus rooted in the relation of the human subject to the world. The choice of the term 'diagnosis' reflects precisely this intention of revealing this interest for the human subject conceived under the prism of its insertion into a world of definite social relations. Thus, 'diagnose' should be understood in its etymological sense, as able to recognize, as the search for that which is not transparent in the relation of the subject with her or himself and with the representations of the world surrounding this subject. From a Freudian perspective, diagnosing is to aim for the return of what is repressed in the form of the symptom that replaces it. In present-day terms, it consists in searching for what is dysfunctional in intersubjective and intrapsychic relations. The critical account does not intend in any case to create a worldview. Rather, Freud's timeframe of diagnosis, far from being a closed one, takes into account the historical dimension and, therefore, has an unfinished character. The very idea of a diagnosis implies, fundamentally, an *opening*.

In order to avoid any misconceptions that might be formed from the idea of an opening – such as the possibility of having no clear aim – we should consider as open the statement according to which a diagnosis

forcefully presupposes a normative reference: to criticize compels us to mobilize a shared reference and, therefore, a norm. The normative reference does not come from Freudian developments; it comes from philosophy where reason incarnated in the form of an autonomous subject is seen as transparent to itself and as posing its own rules from the scientific-medical *ratio*, which considers the normal to be the norm. Freud's greatest discovery is precisely this 'beyond reason' we call unconscious, in which an opacity always subsists, the very opposite of *philosophic ratio*. The search for a normative reference in psychoanalysis would be, strictly speaking, strange or even hostile to it.<sup>28</sup>

## SOCIAL SICKNESS AND EGO

My approach to the theme of social sickness and Ego will be indirect. The purpose is to briefly examine how Axel Honneth uses psychoanalysis in his work up until the 2000s. I hold that his ontogenetic use of psychoanalysis undercuts the critical potential of this discipline in the field of critical theory. In addition I also show a new tendency in Honneth's more recent work, a 'biologizing' one, so to speak, which shows up especially in his 2014 text 'The Diseases of Society: Approaching a Nearly Impossible Concept'. In this paper Honneth reconstructs Alexander Mitscherlich's attempt – and also Freud's, in a certain sense – to justify the use of the term 'pathological' in reference to the subject of society. For Honneth, Mitscherlich's justifications are insufficient. According to Honneth the comprehension of society requires that one thinks of society as though it were a living organism. I will discuss the groundings of Honneth's theory and its relationship to psychoanalysis, but my approach will be more oriented toward a presentation of Freud's interpretation of the passage from nature to society (or from the biological to the social) instead of a deep reconstruction of

Honneth's arguments. Thus, we intend to show how the Freudian articulation goes beyond that offered by Honneth.

Although psychoanalysis (as well as psychology, generally) is not fully elaborated in Honneth's works, his approach to Critical Theory, especially from 1992 onward, contains a number of formulations which, however tentative, provide sufficient ground for critical engagement. Further, in *Struggle for Recognition*, in which he develops his now famous recognition paradigm, Honneth affords psychoanalysis a central position in Critical Theory's interdisciplinary constellation. The objective of Honneth's approach is to provide social psychology with a critical foundation. For this purpose the work of Georg Herbert Mead<sup>29</sup> and Donald Winnicott<sup>30</sup> is of special importance to him.

Honneth's approach to psychoanalysis does not put into question the narcissistic ego, and its overcoming is no longer a goal for a critical theory of society. This abandonment results from a partial reading of Winnicott's notion of the transitional object, which Honneth views as a break with Freudian drive theory, and not as an extension of it. This is related to a large extent to the fact that, as shown above, Honneth views psychoanalysis as an account of intersubjectivity. It demonstrates the primacy of recognition. For Honneth, therefore, the psychoanalytic account provides a foundation for social critique as thinking in normative orders. For this purpose, Honneth sets Freud and the Freudian orthodoxy against the relational model of object relations theory.<sup>31</sup> In Honneth's view, Freud neglected the relation with the other, intersubjectivity, and thus disregarded the communicative model of interaction. As a consequence, Freud's contribution remained restricted to the drive model.

Two things must be taken into account as an answer to this statement. First, contrary to Honneth, it is possible to articulate object relations theory and the drive model in a dialectical fashion without opposing one to the other. Both models can be complementary,



especially because they were built according to the clinical developments of Freud and Winnicott.<sup>32</sup> Second, it seems that a statement such as Honneth's contributes mainly to further misunderstandings rather than to a clarification of the problem. It would be useful to remember that at the time of Freud's writing psychology far from ignored the relational issue of the orientation toward the other – this was, in fact, a predominant issue. Freud's contribution was precisely to put in evidence other instances such as the Id and drives as the materialization of the unconscious. The unconscious was seen as a constitutive factor of Ego formation, of personality, that which is in conflict with everything that sets a limit to its search for satisfaction. Thus, Honneth's view that Freudian psychoanalysis does not take into account the relations with the external world and the role of reference people seems strange, to say the least. We know that Freud begins *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* with the war neurosis, an issue which is nothing other than that of *trauma*, and which refers precisely to an experience originating in the external real world that remains unfathomable to the subject – this experience drives Freud, so to speak, to a reformulation of his drive theory. Therefore, Honneth's view that Freud's works fail to take into account the relations which constitute the subject in its relationship to the external world seems entirely misconceived.

Moreover, Honneth's emphasis on the relational model does not prevent him from falling into the trap of a narcissistic conception of the subject (Ego), which, in a certain sense, is opposed to the intersubjective assumptions of recognition theory. The radicalization of the intersubjectivity principle applied to socialization concepts silences the traumatic dimension of intersubjective relations. This turn is not only problematic with regards to the formation processes of the Ego, which Honneth conceives of in terms of child development psychology, but also with respect to the role psychoanalysis should play in a critical theory of society. In

Honneth's non-Freudian model, overcoming the narcissistic ego is no longer an objective because narcissism no longer appears as a problem of, nor as an obstacle to, the practical movement of emancipation. In recognition theory the non-Freudian appropriation of psychoanalysis leads to a monist theory of the subject, according to which, as paradoxical as it may seem, emancipation can be thought as a *realization of the narcissistic Ego*.

Such a conception is quite removed from the approach of the first generation of critical theorists and their appropriation of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis cannot serve as an ontogenesis articulated to a normative model of social critique; it is, rather, a means of understanding the obstacles that block the reasonable organization of society, of emancipation. The dialectical method in psychoanalysis proceeds from the pathology toward the universal, from neuroticization to normality, from pathology to reason's project of emancipation. From this conception, psychoanalysis helps to identify the obstacles without removing them and without guaranteeing normativity's moral progress or its practical anchorage. It demonstrates that the model of a 'normal' subject inhabiting a world permeated by neurosis is an impossible ideal. Psychoanalysis allows Critical Theory to reconstruct a possible explanation for modern capitalist societies' blockages and pathologies. Thus, Critical Theory's diagnosis is mirrored in Freudian drive theory, revealing the latter's critical potential. These are the grounds for Adorno's, and also Marcuse's, strong criticism of Eric Fromm, Karen Horney, Harry Stack Sullivan, and many other theorists from the 'revisionist' school, which is rejected because it leads to the abandonment of Freud's drive theory.<sup>33</sup> Adorno and Marcuse stress the impoverishment that such an abandonment would bring to a critical theory that is associated with a 'monist'-reduced psychoanalysis. This 'revisionist' perspective rejects the death drive principle or, in other words, the specific element along with the life drive that founds all

of Freud's late elaborations. Honneth, despite his efforts to the contrary, does not offer a worthwhile alternative to his predecessors' insights.

But one could still ask whether Honneth's ontogenetic use of psychoanalysis is necessarily condemned to an idealist perspective that refuses to see the role of the narcissistic ego. The perspective developed by Jacques Lacan is helpful in dealing with this question. Lacan's conception of recognition is strictly linked to the concept of misrecognition. In contrast to Honneth, Lacan's notion is therefore not premised on reconciliation and universal civility. It is premised on conflict. Nevertheless, it is also the case, that the concepts of identification, misrecognition, and recognition display in fact affinities; that is, recognition entails the pathology of misrecognition, and misrecognition entails recognition as its civilized resolution. Even though these terms are not posited explicitly as such by Honneth himself, his ontogenetic application of psychoanalysis recognizes the narcissistic ego and in this manner it summons the individuated individual as self-seeking. That is to say, by implication recognition is premised on misrecognition. Despite itself, his theory promises reconciliation and recognition as either mutually beneficial at best, or under duress at worst. Indeed, once the question of normativity is translated into the field of psychoanalysis, we are tempted to reduce it to a question of *normality*. There are no guarantees that psychoanalysis can contribute to Honneth's normative order of universalized standards of recognitive reason without undermining the very basis of his project.

Many critical interpretations of Freud insist on his reference to biologism.<sup>34</sup> When Freud first alluded to a biological reason with respect to the drive duality – which led him to distinguish between Ego drive and sexual drive – he established a corresponding difference between hunger and love – that is, he introduced the idea that the same erogenous zone can be invested in different ways.

By doing so, he established that the relationship of the subject with its culture and with nature cannot be of the same order. The former requires mediation whereas the latter is immediate. By following Freud's clues one can reconstruct this mediation. My analysis of the role of biologism in Freud insists on the idea of *anaclysis* [*Anlehnung*]: biologism intervenes insofar as it is attached to the sexual functions, an idea that appears only in the second part of *Introduction to Narcissism*:

The first auto-erotic sexual satisfactions are experienced in connection with vital functions which serve the purpose of self-preservation. The sexual instincts are at the outset attached to the satisfaction of the ego-instincts; only later do they become independent of these, and even then we have an indication of that original attachment [*Anlehnung*] in the fact that the persons who are concerned with a child's feeding, care, and protection become his earliest sexual objects: that is to say, in the first instance his mother or a substitute for her.<sup>35</sup>

Here we can observe how Freud conceives the passage from the biological to the psychical: the latter *is attached* to the biological. We have then an idea that goes back to the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* and that is represented by the concept of support [*stützen*] or *anaclysis* [*Anlehnung*]: if something must be supported by something else in order to be itself, this implies that both of them are distinct. One can only come into being making use of the other. If human sexuality requires support for its development it is because it is poorly sustained. The notion of *anaclysis* allows us to move from the biological to the psychical, and this 'new psychic action' takes the form of narcissism; it also organizes all the partiality of the drives in one image. *Anaclysis* allows Freud to consider a genesis of sexuality, opening the way to an organization of the body from helplessness [*Hilflosigkeit*], that is, the biological dependency of the child in relation to its mother or person of reference. In other words, the experience of pleasure is also supported by the experience of a maternal other.

If we follow Freud strictly we can see how the subject organizes the parts of its body that have a biological function such as feeding and care. Thus, the determination of the erogenous zones also depends on anaclysis.

Consequently, Freud cannot be accused of neglecting the other and of having a monadic conception of the subjectivation process. Anaclysis does not presuppose a state of symbiosis between mother and child; the central idea of anaclysis is that human sexuality is poorly sustained. Thus, we come to the idea of helplessness, the idea of a first traumatic experience of the subject that sees itself 'thrown into the world'. This is the first trauma that characterizes human sexuality: the characteristic of human sexuality is that the biological cannot do this work alone if the other is not there beforehand. With these explanations it should now be possible to understand why the continuous passage from the biological to the social, or from nature to society, does not occur. They also allow us to understand why this passage is always a mismatch, a continuity that always imprints itself in a discontinuity.

When we compare Honneth's solution to that of Freud, we notice that his attempt does not go as far as Freud's because it falls in a biologism without considering the notion of anaclysis, which poses a dialectic between the realm of biology and that of the human, allowing passages between them. Honneth becomes stuck in one of the poles of this conflict, namely, that of biology; we cannot infer anything else from his 2014 text 'The Diseases of Society: Approaching a Nearly Impossible Concept', which he concludes quite laconically: 'Without rehabilitating this organic conception that has long since been declared dead, I fear the thesis that societies also can be stricken by diseases cannot be justified'.<sup>36</sup>

With all its paradoxes and theoretical reformulations, Freudian psychoanalysis still has much to offer a critical theory of contemporary society. This is why Axel Honneth's attempt at reformulation is of interest, as

well as deserving of critique. In order to further develop an effective collaboration between psychoanalysis and Critical Theory we should interrogate the appropriateness of the ontogenetic perspective for a critical theory of society, and one should not endorse biological perspectives that debunk Critical Theory method *par excellence*, that is, the dialectic.

## Notes

- 1 These groups were increasingly dogmatic. It seems easy to judge the ideological dogmatism of the Third International, but this was not so evident in the 1920s. A clear example of this is Georg Lukács' book *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), which initiated Western Marxism and which would later be condemned by its own author after the massive rejection it received from the communist movement.
- 2 The fact that Fromm was a psychoanalyst and also a Marxist oriented sociologist played an important role in his integration into the very select group of researchers of the IFS. See Jay (1973, especially chapter 3). Also Funk (2000: 72).
- 3 This holds not only for the already mentioned *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) but, also for Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and the research project on Authoritarian Personality.
- 4 The analysis presented here of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was developed with Marcos Nobre. See Nobre and Marin (2012). A French language version was published as 'Une nouvelle anthropologie. Vers une lecture psychanalytique de l'unité critique de La Dialectique de la Raison'. *Illusio*, no. 14/15: 259–76, January 2016.
- 5 Reich (1970: 9).
- 6 'Rationally considered, one would expect economically wretched masses of workers to develop a keen consciousness of their social situation; one would further expect this consciousness to harden into a determination to rid themselves of their social misery. [...] the thinking ("consciousness") of the worker would be in keeping with his social situation. The Marxists called it "class consciousness". We want to call it "consciousness of one's skills", or "consciousness of one's own responsibility". The cleavage between the social situation of the working masses and their consciousness of this situation implies that, instead of improving their social position, the working masses worsen

- it. It was precisely the wretched masses who helped to put fascism, extreme political reaction, into power' (ibid.: 10).
- 7 Horkheimer and Adorno (2002: 1).
  - 8 Ibid.: xviii.
  - 9 In the early 1940s, Friedrich Pollock proposed an analysis of capitalism that questioned some central aspects of Marx's diagnosis. With his idea of 'State Capitalism', Pollock states that the primacy of the economic has been replaced by the primacy of the state. In State Capitalism, the market is a political event. Pollock distinguishes between an 'authoritarian form', presented by Nazi Germany, and a 'democratic form', which exists only as a possibility. Accepting Pollock's central thesis, Adorno and Horkheimer introduced the formula of an 'administered world' [*verwaltete Welt*] to highlight instrumental reason's domination over nature.
  - 10 Horkheimer and Adorno (2002: xiv).
  - 11 Ibid.: xvi.
  - 12 Ibid.: xviii.
  - 13 Ibid.: xvi.
  - 14 Ibid.: 1.
  - 15 'The reason that represses mimesis is not merely its opposite. It is itself mimesis: of death' (ibid.: 45).
  - 16 Ibid.: 24.
  - 17 Freud (1961: 6). In *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, Freud (1925–6: 165) states this more precisely as 'anxiety [*Angst*] has an unmistakable relation to *expectation*: it is anxiety *about* something. It has a quality of *indefiniteness and lack of object*. In precise speech we use the word 'fear' [*Furcht*] rather than 'anxiety' [*Angst*] if it has found an object'. In the original it reads: 'Die Angst hat eine unverkennbare Beziehung zur Erwartung; sie ist Angst *vor* etwas. Es haftet ihr ein Charakter von *Unbestimmtheit* und *Objektlosigkeit* an; der korrekte Sprachgebrauch ändert selbst ihren Namen, wenn sie ein Objekt gefunden hat, und ersetzt ihn dann durch *Furcht*' (Freud, 1999: 197–8).
  - 18 'Real danger is a danger that is known, and realistic anxiety is anxiety about a known danger of this sort. Neurotic anxiety is anxiety about an unknown danger. Neurotic danger is thus a danger that has still to be discovered. Analysis has shown that it is an instinctual danger. By bringing this danger which is not known to the ego into consciousness, the analyst makes neurotic anxiety no different from realistic anxiety, so that it can be dealt with in the same way' (Freud, 1925–6: 165).
  - 19 Horkheimer and Adorno (2002: 11).
  - 20 The German original reads: 'Freud stellt sich die Triebprozesse als eine Art von Äquivalententausch vor. Die Tauschschemata des Triebes, die Freud aufstellt, gelten aber nicht mehr, sobald das Ich nicht mehr die Verfügungsgewalt über die ihm unterstehende Triebmenge hat. Wenn sich Kollektivsubjekte bilden, dann ist die ganze Triebökonomie mitsamt dem Lustmechanismus ausser Kraft gesetzt. Freud hat in seinen avanciertesten Arbeiten, vor allem in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* etwas davon geahnt, aber nicht die Konsequenz daraus gezogen' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2004: 454).
  - 21 Horkheimer and Adorno (2002: 193).
  - 22 Ibid.: 21.
  - 23 Ibid.: 8.
  - 24 'In myths, everything that happens must atone for the fact of having happened. It is no different in enlightenment: no sooner has a fact been established than it is rendered insignificant'. Further, 'The "unshakable confidence in the possibility of controlling the world" which Freud anachronistically attributes to magic applies only to the more realistic form of world domination achieved by the greater astuteness of science. The autonomy of thought in relation to objects, as manifested in the reality-adequacy of the Ego, was a prerequisite for the replacement of the localized practices of the medicine man by all-embracing industrial technology' (ibid.: 7–8).
  - 25 As a clarification of Freud's vocabulary, it is possible to think of a mirroring between psychoanalysis and philosophy. In general terms, the pleasure principle would correspond to something like the Hobbesian state of nature, in which men are guided by their passions. The reality principle would correspond to the establishment of civil society.
  - 26 *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud's text from 1920 where he first presents the new drive duality.
  - 27 Marcuse is not discussed in this chapter. See however Marin (2016).
  - 28 For our reading of Freud the question of normativity is hostile to psychoanalysis, but in the history of Critical Theory we have works that deal with normative referents in the figure of Erich Fromm. See Jacoby (1997).
  - 29 George Herbert Mead was an American philosopher of decisive importance for sociology and social psychology. Along with James, Pierce, and Dewey, Mead was part of a theoretical current of American philosophy known as pragmatism. Mead's works are read and interpreted by Honneth under the influence of Hegel and his intersubjective innovation. Honneth revisits this Hegelian insight, with the help of Mead, in his formulation of the social foundations of intersubjective communication. Mead shares with the earlier Hegel the intuition that the socialization process should be understood through the

- individuation process. Mead introduces a distinction between the entities that constitute the driving forces of human action: the *I* and the *Me*. The formation of individuality is then considered as the product of a tension between these forces. See *Mind, Self and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* (Mead, 1962).
- 30 Donald Winnicott was a British child psychoanalyst who was neither affiliated with the tradition associated with Melanie Klein, nor with the tradition associated with Anna Freud. Winnicott's importance for Honneth lies in the way Winnicott emphasizes the environmental factors of the subjectivation process, differing from Freud, who mainly stressed the internal motivations that form the psyche. Winnicott's approach is informed by the logic of the interwar period when psychoanalysis was losing interest in notions of the father, Oedipus and patriarchy, in favor of motherhood and the feminine. According to Honneth, Winnicott's psychoanalytical formulations are a translation of Hegelian concepts and Winnicott's work influences Honneth's conception of the first sphere of recognition, that of love and affective relations. For Honneth, Winnicottian psychoanalysis serves as the empirical proof of Mead's reading of Hegel, according to which the stages of recognition follow a determinate direction. See *Playing and Reality* (Winnicott, 2005).
  - 31 The so-called object relations theory actually comprises a variety of positions. In general terms, 'object relations' signals an opposition to Freud and Melanie Klein who posit the intrapsychical character of the relation between subject and object. The common ground for psychoanalysts associated with the object relations school is the idea that the object exists as something real apart from the relation, and not merely as an internal object. Winnicott shares this position, according to which the object relation is a relation to a real object, an object that is characterized by its environment.
  - 32 As in Winnicott's (2005) *Playing and Reality*.
  - 33 See Adorno (1955, 1963). See also Marcuse (1969).
  - 34 See Junior (1991) for a brilliant account of the Lacanian approach to the problematic relationship between biologism and narcissism.
  - 35 Freud (1914–16: 87).
  - 36 Honneth (2014: 702).
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# Humanism and Anthropology from Walter Benjamin to Ulrich Sonnemann

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the twentieth century, the notions of humanism and anthropology became increasingly problematic. From Walter Benjamin to Ulrich Sonnemann, the writers and philosophers associated with the Institute for Social Research accompanied this process in a distinctly critical fashion, yet with significantly different emphases. Between the mid 1910s and the late 1960s, they formulated a critical theory of society and culture that rejected the idea of an invariant human nature. At the same time, they studied the restrictions and limitations that repressive and antagonistic societies impose on the human being. Engaging with various philosophical currents from transcendental philosophy to Marxism, psychoanalysis, and phenomenology, the first generation of the Frankfurt School criticized assumptions about ‘human essence’ that justified a world based on identity thinking and the principle of exchange. To

counter such assumptions, they proposed interventions in anthropological discourses that work toward a less coercive and dehumanized social order.

The following reconstruction begins with a genealogy and outline of the anthropological problematic as encountered by the Institute’s founding members. The second section presents Benjamin’s linguistic destabilizations of traditional humanist and anthropological discourses. Section three turns to Max Horkheimer’s critique of philosophical anthropology and bourgeois humanism, which provides, together with Benjamin’s efforts, the basis for the School’s subsequent engagements. Tracing the afterlife of Benjamin’s and Horkheimer’s responses, the fourth section portrays the anthropological implications of Erich Fromm’s and Herbert Marcuse’s works, while section five discusses the notion of ‘negative anthropology’ in the writings of Theodor W. Adorno and Ulrich Sonnemann.

## THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL AND THE 'ANTHROPOLOGICAL PROBLEMATIC'

Most forms of humanism rely on a specific understanding of the human being and its essence or nature. Jürgen Habermas (1973: 89–90; also Marquard, 1971, 1992) distinguishes three ways of studying the human being. *Anthropology*, in the broadest sense, is concerned with the practices, condition, and development of the human species, often in close conversation with ethnology and human biology. *Philosophical anthropology*, in the narrower sense, designates the various ways of posing, responding to, and reflecting on the question 'What is the human being?' The early members of the Frankfurt School employed the term anthropology primarily in this understanding. Thirdly, *Philosophical Anthropology* refers to a German school of thought associated with, among others, Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen (Fischer, 2008).

Before Plato's ironic definition of the human being as the 'two-legged animal without feathers' and Aristotle's more serious determinations as *zōon politikon* and *zōon logon echon*, translated into Latin as *animal rationale*, Homer's epithets for the human being were, as Jacob Grimm (1984: 7, 25n6) points out, 'οἱ μέρορες [*hoi méropes*], μέρορες ἄνθρωποι [*méropes ánthrōpoi*] or βροτοί [*brotōi*] from μέρομαι [*meíromai*] or μερίζω [*merízō*], who divide, articulate their voices. Essentially however,' Grimm continues, 'this sound articulation depends upon the upright gait and stance of men,' since, 'ἄνθρωπος [*ánthrōpos*], having man's face or aspect, points to this upright position of the countenance'. Historically, philosophical anthropology is either considered to be as old as thinking itself, because humans have always asked themselves what they are, or seen as a response to modern philosophy's more recent crisis after having lost many of its central themes to disciplines such as psychology and sociology (Blumenberg, 2006:

484–5; also Schnädelbach, 1984: 220). Odo Marquard (1971: 362) argues that both of these extremes conceal anthropology's actual genesis in the late eighteenth century.

Kant formulated the specifically modern anthropological question. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1998: 415 [A347/B405–6]), he excluded empirical psychology 'as a species of physiology' from transcendental philosophy, because it 'would perhaps explain the appearances of inner sense, but could never serve to reveal such properties as do not belong to possible experience at all'. Although he subsumed empirical psychology under 'applied philosophy', Kant argues that 'one must still concede it a little place (although only as an episode) in metaphysics. It is thus merely a temporarily accepted foreigner [*Fremdling*], to whom one grants refuge for a while until it can establish its own domicile in a complete anthropology' (1998: 700 [A848–9/B876–77]; trans. changed). In this transitional state, empirical psychology transformed into Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Although this anthropology claimed to be merely pragmatic, it holds an important place in Kant's system. In the introduction to his lectures on ethics, Kant states that 'practical philosophy' and 'anthropology [...] are closely connected, and morality cannot exist without anthropology, for one must first know of the agent whether he is also in a position to accomplish what it is required from him that he should do' (Kant, 1997: 42).

In his lectures on logic, Kant (1998: 677 [A805/B833]; 1992: 538) adds a fourth question to the three he listed in the first *Critique*: 'What can I know?' (metaphysics), 'What should I do?' (morals), 'What may I hope?' (religion), and: 'What is man [*der Mensch*]?' (anthropology). 'Fundamentally, however,' Kant adds, 'we could reckon all of this as anthropology, because the first three questions relate to the last one'. Blumenberg (2006: 501) notes that this addendum is 'problematic and much more difficult than it



seems'. It indicates that, for Kant, empirical psychology became more than an 'episode' in metaphysics. His pragmatic anthropology, asking not 'what nature makes of the human being', but 'what he as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself' (Kant, 2007: 231; also Brandt, 1999; Stark, 2003), puzzled and inspired many philosophers, including various members of the Frankfurt School.

In Hegel's (2007: 29–141) systematic philosophy, the 'Anthropology' chapter occupies an odd, but important position, namely, the transition from the philosophy of nature to the philosophy of mind. Hegel seeks to demonstrate 'the emergence of spirit from nature', which he describes as the victorious 'struggle of spirit against its corporeity' (Lucas, 1992: 132, 135). In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002: 42) criticize this 'victory' as the 'denial of nature in human beings'. Although Alexandre Kojève (1969: 48) proposed an anthropologically informed interpretation of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel himself seems to have struggled with integrating the anthropological question in accordance with his dialectical method (Fetscher, 1970: 25).

Marx's writings are one of the Frankfurt School's preeminent sources regarding the anthropological problematic. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, first released in the Soviet Union in 1927, Marx (1988: 75–7) describes labor as the activity that produces human consciousness. This description gave rise to the interpretation that, while different forms of labor result in different stages of human self-realization, or 'anthropogenesis' (Avineri, 1968: 85), the constitutive function of labor itself remains unaltered by history. Leo Kofler (1967: 28; my trans.) characterized this formal anthropology as the 'science of the unchangeable preconditions of human changeability'. Taking Marx's later works into account, Alfred Schmidt (1971: 68) presents labor as the 'living interaction' between nature and humanity, which

commodity form turns into the abstract relations of a 'dead and thing-like reality'. Marx (1978: 145, 144), however, had already criticized the understanding of the human being as mere 'genus' [*Gattung*] in the 'Theses on Feuerbach', instead proposing to understand labor as 'practical, human-sensuous activity'. Louis Althusser (2005: 227) maintained that Marx's early anthropological work, embodied in the 1844 *Manuscripts*, is opposed to the more mature, sociological view of *Capital*, which focuses on the social and political transformation of the labor process. Yet Marx adhered to his early conviction that the human being does not yet exist because restrictive forms of society hinder the unfolding of its 'species-character' (Bien, 1984: 67–8, 210–11), an idea that permeates the works of the Frankfurt School's first generation.

Martin Jay (1972: 289, 292, 295) argues that the critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno differs in two pivotal respects from 'humanist' as well as from Althusser's 'scientific' Marxism. Because of their skepticism toward identity theory, Adorno and Horkheimer never 'read society as a manifestation of the creator-subject'. Unlike Marcuse and Fromm, however, they also 'never de-historicized labor into man's "ontological" activity'. These divergences are the 'primary reasons', Jay (1972: 296) suggests, for why Critical Theory 'cannot be included among the variants of Marxist Humanism'. Inquiries into the relationship between Critical Theory and Philosophical Anthropology (Ebke et al., 2016) indicate that the anthropological problematic exceeds the debates about Western Marxism. Perceived as a 'blind spot of Critical Theory' (Weiland, 1995) from the perspective of Philosophical Anthropology, (Weiland, 1995), the anthropological question has co-shaped the outlook of the Frankfurt School from the beginning.

It was of particular importance for the early Frankfurt School that, in the wake of Kant's critical philosophy, anthropology

and philosophy of history were perceived as being mutually exclusive (Marquard, 1992: 125, 128–34; Blumenberg, 2006: 485–8). The moment one turns to the human being's invariant nature, one turns away from the realization of freedom in history, and vice versa. Marx's (1988: 102) sentence that 'communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism' seeks to reconcile this tension. Rather than reconciling nature and history by conflating them, Wilhelm Dilthey (1977: 116) suggested that every historical epoch is the distinct 'expression' of the 'relative uniformity of human nature'. This view gave rise to the distinction between 'formal' (or 'weak') and 'substantial' (or 'strong') anthropology, which became important, in varying degrees, for Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Fromm. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Georg Lukács excluded anthropological assumptions from dialectical materialism because they limit the human being's historical changeability, agreeing, in this respect, with Horkheimer and Adorno. Allowing the human being to 'become frozen in a fixed objectivity', Lukács (1971: 186–7) warned, 'is the great danger in every "humanism" or anthropological point of view'.

Another key aspect of the anthropological problematic that shaped the Frankfurt School's responses unfolded between logic and psychology. In a review from 1894, Frege (1972: 336) pointed out that Husserl's *Philosophy of Arithmetic* is vulnerable to the charge of psychologism, the view that the laws of thinking are reducible to empirical psychology. This charge motivated Husserl to provide a basis for 'pure logic' by analyzing the structures not merely of human consciousness, but of consciousness as such. In 1931, Husserl feared that the recent advances of psychology and anthropology could undermine his transcendental project, which led him to dismiss Scheler, and implicitly also Heidegger, in his lecture 'Phenomenology and Anthropology'. Inquiring about the origins of Husserl's concern, Blumenberg (2006: 22; my trans.) traces the immediate

beginnings of Philosophical Anthropology back to Scheler's essay on sympathy from 1913, in which, as Blumenberg claims, 'for the first time the relationship between ontology and anthropology was established as a "realism" that does not begin with epistemology anymore'.

In 1927, Heidegger (1996: 46) introduced the formulation 'anthropological problematic' [*anthropologische Problematik*] to indicate that the human being became a problem, not only as the object of science and philosophy, but also as a term and question; as the being that asks for and tries to understand and describe itself. Heidegger (1996: 45) rejects philosophical anthropology for conceiving of the human being only through the lens of Aristotle's metaphysics, or, theologically, as the being 'that goes beyond itself'. He emphasizes that his 'existential analytic of Dasein comes *before* any psychology or anthropology, and certainly before any biology' (Heidegger, 1962: 71), suggesting that fundamental ontology can provide the basis for 'working out fully the existential a priori of philosophical anthropology' (1962: 170). These remarks not only caused Plessner (1985: 328) and Husserl (Breeur, 1994: 13; also Husserl, 1981) to charge *Being and Time* with practicing philosophical anthropology in an unacknowledged manner, they also increased the Frankfurt School's skepticism toward ontology's renewed efforts to provide absolute principles.

Heidegger insisted that the anthropological reading of *Being and Time* is a misunderstanding. Between 1936 and 1938, he demanded to release the human being 'from the fetters of "anthropology"' (Heidegger, 2012: 67), and, in the 'Letter on "Humanism"' (1946), he declared that the word 'Dasein' meant from the beginning that 'the human being occurs essentially in such a way that it is [...] the clearing of being' (Heidegger, 1998: trans. changed, 248), rather than a privileged way of understanding its meaning. The tensions between *Being and Time* and Heidegger's later writings encouraged poststructuralism's

subversions of anthropology and humanism, especially a series of works by Michel Foucault (1989, 2008) and Jacques Derrida (1978, 1982), which complement and challenge the interventions of the Frankfurt School.

While Scheler and Heidegger negatively delimited the Frankfurt School's relation to philosophical anthropology, the other positive reference besides Marx is psychoanalysis. The members of the first generation were confronted with the choice of integrating Freud's 'heavy' theory of the drives, which relies on assumptions about the human being's biological constitution and animalistic past. Emphasizing Eros's ultimate superiority over the 'death drive' offered strong support for the belief in humanity's intrinsic striving for emancipation, an idea that Horkheimer, Fromm, and Marcuse embraced to different degrees. Adorno and Sonnemann, by contrast, refused such assumptions because they preclude the radical openness of society's future development. Instead, Adorno incorporated 'lighter' anthropological elements such as Freud's belief in the fragmentary and antagonistic constitution of the individual, which expresses, as Jay (1972: 302) notes, 'one aspect of the non-identity of man in an unreconciled totality'.

Between Freud and Marx on the one hand, and Scheler and Heidegger on the other, Blumenberg (2006: 32–3, 30) describes two conflicts that reappear throughout the following sections. The first arises between critics who fear too much essence from philosophical anthropology, so that the human being cannot change radically enough in history, and others who worry about too little essence, so that what is truly human can be treated arbitrarily and with disrespect. The second conflict unfolds between interpreters who accuse Western philosophy of never having seriously inquired about the concrete 'bearer' of science and theory, and those who insist that philosophy must provide an understanding not only of the human being's contingent self-understanding, but of any form

of consciousness, world, or language. These conflicts shape the discourses of philosophical anthropology to the present day, including the Frankfurt School's various interpretations and interventions.

## **BENJAMIN: ANTHROPOLOGICAL MATERIALISM AND THE HISTORY OF PERCEPTION**

Benjamin was one of the first to register the renewal of anthropological thinking during the mid 1910s. He rarely engaged directly with the terminology of philosophical anthropology, but his interpretations contain unexpected and still unexplored perspectives on the relationship between Critical Theory and anthropology.

In 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' (1916), Benjamin criticizes 'the bourgeois conception of language' according to which 'the means of communication is the word, its object factual, and its addressee a human being' (Benjamin, 1996a: 65). Challenging this conception, he proposes a broader understanding of language as a 'medium' in – not through – which the spiritual essence of a thing communicates itself (1996a: 63). In human language, an elevated sub-category of language 'as such', things are named through cognition [*Erkenntnis*], which led to the hubristic 'chatter' of judgment and assertion. The 'judging word expels the first humans from Paradise' (1996a: 71), ensnaring them in a perpetual history of guilt. Benjamin's gesture can be seen as anthropomorphizing nature, a danger that did not escape Adorno's critical attention. At the same time, it destabilizes humanity's place in the order of things, resembling Heidegger's later understanding of language (Arendt, 1968: 204–205; Seel, 2002).

Around 1918, Benjamin discerned in Kant's epistemology 'unreflected relics of an unfruitful metaphysics' (Steiner, 2010:

229; my trans.), endorsing Husserl's attempt to undercut 'the relation of knowledge and experience to human empirical consciousness' that Kant overcame 'only very tentatively' (Benjamin, 1996b: 103). These comments pertain to Benjamin's search for a 'sphere of total neutrality in regard to the concepts of both subject and object' (1996b: 104), a sphere that he finds in a radically transcendental and non-pragmatic understanding of language. In a diagram titled 'Anthropology' (c. 1918), Benjamin explores this sphere by distinguishing 'elementary concepts of a metaphysical, historico-philosophical theory of the human being' (Benjamin, 1991b: 64; Benjamin, 1991c: 672; my trans.). These concepts rest on the principal distinction between body [*Leib*] and language, while the 'individual', located in the center of the diagram, is the result of their relation, rather than a primary category (Duttlinger et al., 2012: 22). In the related 'Outline of the Psychophysical Problem' (c. 1922), Benjamin seeks to further dissolve the mind-body dualism by distinguishing a third element: 'mind', 'body', and 'corporeal substance' [*Körper*]. In this elusive fragment, he proposes a positive, yet self-destabilizing anthropological definition: 'The system of [...] possible competences [*Zuständigkeiten*]' for assigning meaning to perceptions, he writes, 'is human nature' (Benjamin, 1996c: 399). Based on this system of competencies, Benjamin's 'Outline' blurs the border between language and perception, unsettling categories such as 'pleasure' and 'pain', 'nearness' and 'distance', and 'dream' and 'waking consciousness'.

Beginning to integrate an unorthodox materialist vocabulary, Benjamin (1999d: 217) argues that 'the metaphysical materialism, of the brand of [Carl] Vogt and Bukharin' cannot be transferred without rupture into the 'anthropological materialism' evinced by 'the experience of the Surrealists', adding that materialism should not be founded on 'abstract matter or the cosmos', but on the 'bodily collective' (Benjamin, 1991a:

1041; my trans.). Continuing this thought in the notes to the *Arcades Project*, he outlines a conflicted 'history of anthropological materialism' (Benjamin, 1999e: 633) in Germany and France. 'Anthropological materialism', he writes, 'is comprised within dialectical materialism', while its Surrealist version is 'refractory to Marxism' (1999e: 591, 698; trans. changed). Rather than relapsing into pre-critical materialism, Benjamin seeks to reintroduce the sensual registers of the human collective neglected by overly positivistic forms of Marxism (Kittsteiner, 1998; Wohlfarth, 2011; Khatib, 2012). This mobilization of anthropological categories is reflected in his remarks about the 'poverty of experience', which he describes as a poverty of 'human experience [*Menschheitserfahrung*] in general' and 'a new kind of barbarism' (Benjamin, 1999a: 732). This 'positive concept of barbarism' has strong anti-humanist overtones; the destruction of 'classical humanism' creates space for another, 'real humanism' (Benjamin, 1999b: 454; trans. changed). Neither Horkheimer nor Adorno failed to hear these overtones, which echo key moments of Marx's critique of bourgeois humanism.

After beginning to work more closely with Horkheimer and Adorno, Benjamin (1994: 372) tried to construct a 'strained and problematic [...] bridge' between 'the way dialectical materialism looks at things' and his 'particular stance on the philosophy of language', a bridge he admittedly never completed (Scholem, 1981: 209). This bridge was supposed to relate the metaphysical elements of his early understanding of language to the revolutionary materialism that he discerned in the writings of the Surrealists, but precisely how he intended to relate them remained unanswered. Extensive reviews of ethnological and sociological literature on language (Benjamin, 2002b) eventually led Benjamin to propose a renewed mimetic understanding of human language as a historically sublimated 'canon [...] of nonsensuous similarity' (Benjamin, 1999c: 721; also

Menninghaus, 1995: 60–77). His essay ‘On the Mimetic Faculty’ (1933), which links the emergence of human languages to the earliest forms of animal mimicry, begins with one of Benjamin’s strongest ontological and anthropological assumptions: ‘Nature produces similarities’, he writes, and ‘the highest capacity for producing similarities [...] is man’s’ (1999c: 720).

In the following years, Adorno repeatedly criticized Benjamin’s ‘anthropological materialism’. In Adorno’s eyes, this materialism’s ‘undialectical ontology of the body’ renders it ‘profoundly romantic’ (Adorno and Benjamin, 1999: 146–7, 283; Reijen, 2006). Adorno’s complaint that Benjamin gives ‘conspicuous individual features from the realm of the superstructure a “materialist” turn by relating them immediately, perhaps even causally, to certain corresponding features of the substructure’, has a socio-epistemological basis. Benjamin, however, attempted to rethink immediacy and mediation [*Vermittlung*] in terms of language. For Adorno, ‘anthropology’ signifies a naturalist reduction of spirit – a monistic conflation of the mind–body dualism – while Benjamin employs the notion to explore a realm that precedes and transcends the bifurcation of sensibility and understanding.

Benjamin’s anthropological materialism is an integral part of what he describes in 1938 as his contribution to the work of the Frankfurt Institute, namely, his studies of ‘the historical variables of human perception’ (Benjamin, 2002a: 310). These variables, condensed in his mimetic understanding of language, co-constitute the ‘bridge’ he envisioned between dialectical materialism and his early theory of language. Benjamin’s peculiar entwinement of anthropology and philosophy of history surfaces in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility’ (1935–6), where his anthropological notion of perception works as the driving force behind the essay’s aesthetic and political concepts (Lindner, 2012: 371–92). The same notion of perception underlies the ‘*weak* messianic power’ that gathers the

sensuous and affective ‘understanding’ of the past to interrupt the historical continuum of guilt and violence (Benjamin, 2003: 390; also Honneth, 1993).

## **HORKHEIMER: NEGATIVE HUMANISM AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE BOURGEOIS ERA**

Horkheimer explicitly engages with philosophical anthropology in a series of essays from the 1930s (Abromeit, 2011: 248–82). These works reveal a ‘negative anthropology’ that Jay (1973: 56) describes as ‘an implicit but still powerful presence’ in Horkheimer’s earlier thinking. When Horkheimer returns to the issue during the 1950s, his views have changed, casting the School’s internal tensions regarding anthropology in sharper relief.

In his early essay ‘History and Psychology’, Horkheimer (1993b: 121) proposes to integrate a ‘differentiated group psychology’ as an auxiliary science for Critical Theory. This proposition breaks with Hegel’s exclusion of psychology from the philosophy of history, abandoning the security granted by the metaphysical interpretation of history and society characteristic of orthodox dialectical materialism. In his critique of what he considers to be philosophical anthropology – Scheler and Heidegger – Horkheimer denies almost all essence of the human being; almost, since an absolute denial would again result in a trans-historical, metaphysical position. Instead, he develops a historical psychology of human beings as they are under the social conditions of the present. This psychology studies

the extent to which the function of the individual in the production process is determined by the individual’s fate in a certain kind of family, by the effect of socialization at this point in the social space, but also by the way in which the individual’s own labor in the economy shapes the forms of character and consciousness. (1993b: 121)

Because Heidegger's notion of historicity is 'too narrow' to capture the variety of social groups, Horkheimer suggests transforming the 'doctrine of being within man [*Lehre vom Sein im Menschen*]' along with 'all kinds of philosophical anthropology from a static ontology into the psychology of human beings living in a definite historical epoch' (1993b: 112–13; trans. changed).

Horkheimer proposes a similar transformation with respect to Dilthey's belief that 'the unitary human essence originally given in every individual unfolds itself in its various aspects in the great historical cultures' (Horkheimer, 1993b: 126). More uncompromisingly than Marcuse and Fromm, Horkheimer considers this unitary essence to be a metaphysical residue that has no place in critical psychology (1993b: 127). Neither the structure of economic transformation, nor the individual's mental dispositions remain stable. Only the premise that all concepts have to be derived from the historical present and the observation that certain 'motifs' run through history offer some orientation. Based on these premises, Horkheimer (1993b: 128) distinguishes periods of consolidation and dissolution. The dispositions of some groups gravitate toward new social relations even before the change occurs, while others remain bound to the obsolete relations even after their transformation.

In his 'Remarks on Philosophical Anthropology' (1935), one of the earliest critical discussions of the anthropological problematic, Horkheimer proposes to integrate a certain interpretation of philosophical anthropology as another auxiliary discipline. While he continues to oppose the view that 'a constant and unchanging human nature functions as the foundation for an epoch' (Horkheimer, 1993c: 151), Horkheimer now proceeds to criticize the idea that a power independent of the human being dictates the historical process (1993c: 153). He rejects the attempt of Scheler's *Man's Place in Nature* (1928) to show how 'all the specific achievements and works of man [...] arise from the basic

structure of human existence', which, in Horkheimer's eyes, perpetuates the idealist project of establishing 'absolute principles that provide a rationale for action' (1993c: 154). For the same reason, he dismisses Heidegger's efforts to provide a deeper meaning for human existence by introducing notions of 'authentic' life and death.

Horkheimer argues that philosophical anthropology, like phenomenology, derives an ideal 'ought' from values found in a unified essence. Critical Theory, rejects such positive normativity. 'A theory free from illusions', Horkheimer (1993c: 159, 156–7) writes, 'can only conceive of human purpose negatively, and reveals the inherent contradiction between the conditions of existence and everything that the great philosophies have postulated as a purpose'. This negative conception promotes the humanist belief in the 'unfolding of human powers' without projecting ideals into the future. It also implies, however, that the 'denial of an unchanging, constant human nature' cannot be absolute. For Horkheimer, Critical Theory has to recognize 'that happiness and misery run constantly through history; that human beings as they are have their limits and deserve consideration; and that there is a price to be paid for overlooking those limits' (1993c: 175).

In 'Egoism and Freedom Movements: On the Anthropology of the Bourgeois Era' (1936), Horkheimer demonstrates his materialist integration of psychology and anthropology by presenting egoism as a psychological trait that is meaningful only with respect to the social conditions of a specific historical period. 'The badness of egoism lies not in itself but in the historical situation; when this changes, its conception will merge with that of the rational [*vernünftigen*] society' (Horkheimer, 1993a: 108). Horkheimer's analysis reveals that anthropological doctrines such as Hobbes's and Rousseau's condemn egoism, while social reality forces the isolated individual to internalize the demand for happiness articulated in these doctrines. Bourgeois humanism 'shows a double face'

(1993a: 98); it glorifies the human being's self-determination, while its actual power to determine its situation is so limited and unequally distributed that the denied realization of freedom returns as the idolization of the modern leader, endowed with the magical qualities of self-determination that the individual lacks.

Horkheimer is convinced that 'the practical but also the theoretical solution to the anthropological question can be attained only by the progress of society itself, and [...] no philosophy and no clever education methods will be adequate to this problem' (1993a: 108). Anthropological doctrines have only diagnostic value as precipitations of the various historical attempts to distort and cover up the contradictions of social reality. Critical Theory interprets the discrepancies between what these doctrines proclaim and the results of concrete historical and psychological analyses. These discrepancies help understand the present's tendencies to transgress oppression and deprivation, but do not allow for any inferences about the future.

Although Horkheimer continued to study up-to-date ethnological literature during his work on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Wiggershaus, 1995: 321–2), after World War II and the publication of *The Eclipse of Reason* (1947) his tone became more sober, and his critique of anthropology less empirically grounded. In 1952, he noted under the title 'Negative Humanism': 'The essence of the human being cannot be determined, but surely that which is inhumane; not what is good, but what is not good' (Horkheimer, 1988: 200; my trans.). Truth can be approached exclusively through the process of determinate negation. Traditional concepts mobilized against each other by nation states have to be destroyed; the positive can only be found 'in the negation of what is merely preliminary or became a fetter long ago' (1988: 200; my trans.). Surprisingly, around the same time he and Adorno defended Freud's 'biological materialism' against the proponents of 'revised psychoanalysis'

(Horkheimer, 1948: 111; Adorno, 1972; Wiggershaus 1995: 271, 502), a determinism that they simultaneously criticized in the works of Fromm and Marcuse.

In 'The Concept of Man', a text originally written for Plessner's *Festschrift* from 1957, Horkheimer (1974: 11) compares the way in which ontological philosophy speaks about existence to the 'critical view of the human being' that emerged from Kant's philosophy. In the light of the transcendental ideas, finite existence is imbued with the hopeful task of realizing a just moral order. This 'utopic element', preserved in the difference between the finite and the infinite, 'has disappeared from the relation between being and concrete existence [*Dasein*]' (1974: 16). 'Quite differently than in the context of critical philosophy, to speak about man today is to engage in the endless question of the ground of man and, since in ontological philosophy ground supplies direction, in the endless quest for an image of man that will provide orientation and guidance' (1974: 13).

Horkheimer lost faith in negating bourgeois humanism through empirical research and historical psychology alone. Instead, he appealed to the quasi-theological ideas of 'the highest good and absolute justice' (1974: 10) to distinguish humanity as it is from another humanity, capable of using the technologies of the present to realize these ideas. In existential ontology, Horkheimer still discerns nothing but superficial depth and resignation, and his discussions of youth, gender relations, labor conditions, and urban life demonstrate the kind of concreteness that existential ontology, in his eyes, could not achieve. The antagonistic social totality determines the character of the human being, he concludes, until 'the rational spontaneity proper to society becomes the transparent principle of the individual's existence. [...] In other words, society becomes rational only to the extent that it fulfills the Kantian hope' (1974: 36–7).

When the photography exhibition 'Family of Man' came to Frankfurt in 1958, Horkheimer (1989: 31) argued in his opening remarks that

the pictures complement the ideas of enlightened philosophy. The exhibition would allow millions of visitors from all over the world to experience the 'sameness' [*Selbigkeit*] of humanity within the vast ethnographical and geographical particularities of the depicted situations and practices. This allegiance to the ideals of the Enlightenment, which falls prey to Horkheimer's own early critique, is challenged, in different ways, by Fromm's and Marcuse's versions of humanist Marxism as well as by the negative anthropology of Adorno and Sonnemann.

### MARCUSE AND FROMM: SPECIES BEING AND HUMANIST PSYCHOLOGY

Fromm and Marcuse differ from the rest of the first generation by maintaining a more positive formal anthropology, derived in large parts from their interpretations of Marx's *1844 Manuscripts*. Marcuse (1973: 29) wrote one of the first commentaries on these manuscripts, emphasizing Marx's 'discovery of the historical character of the human essence'. Man's 'existence is a "means" to the realization of his essence', he continues, 'or – in estrangement [*Entfremdung*] – his essence is a means to his mere physical existence. [...] It is precisely the unerring contemplation of the essence of man that becomes the inexorable impulse for the initiation of radical revolution'. Alienated labor blocks the realization of human essence until this barrier is eliminated by 'total revolution'. Marcuse's version of Critical Theory supports this process through reflection on the human being's unfulfilled potentials, as indicated by its contradictory existence under capitalism.

In 1948, Marcuse (1948: 322) published the Frankfurt School's most comprehensive critique of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, reproaching it for its ontological concept of human essence. That Sartre's demonstration of the subject's absolute freedom 'is ontologically correct and a time-honored and

successful feature of idealism only proves the remoteness of this demonstration from the "réalité humaine". [...] Behind the nihilistic language of [Sartre's] Existentialism lurks the ideology of free competition, free initiative, and equal opportunity', a concealment resulting from the 'fallacious identification of the ontological and historical subject' (1948: 323–4). According to Marcuse, Sartre ignores that the subject freely chooses class positions, nationalities, and ethnic identities that are produced by an antagonistic historical process. Reiterating Marx's basic conviction, Marcuse concludes that the human being's 'concrete historical existence, is not (yet) the realization of the *genus man*', or species being [*Gattungswesen*], since the 'historical forms of society have crippled the development of the general human faculties, of the *humanitas*' (Marcuse, 1948: 334).

During the years leading to the student movement of 1968, Marcuse replaced his Hegelian concept of reason and his ontological vocabulary with Freud's metapsychology. As he argues in *Eros and Civilization* (1955), reason is the resolution of the dynamic struggle between Eros and Thanatos in favor of Eros's emancipation (Marcuse et al., 1978: 36). This interpretation indicates that Marcuse was willing to embrace and formulate elements of a positive anthropology that were spurned by other members of the first generation such as Adorno and Horkheimer (Jay, 1973: 56, 74). In the *Essay on Liberation*, Marcuse (1969: 7–23) demands a 'biological foundation' for socialism, a 'new anthropology, not only as theory, but also as form of existence', resulting from 'the emergence and development of vital needs for freedom' (Marcuse, 1967: 15; my trans.). This 'biological dimension' he considered necessary for the masses to stand up and demand that the objectively available means of production are no longer used as instruments of domination, but as means for the realization of freedom.

Fromm disagreed even more strongly with Horkheimer and Adorno over Critical Theory's interpretation of Freud, which was



an important reason for his dismissal from the Institute in 1939 (Wiggershaus, 1995: 265–73). In the following decades, Fromm turned to Marx's early writings in order to develop a humanist social psychology. In *Marx's Concept of Man*, which includes the first complete English translation of the 1844 *Manuscripts*, Fromm (1966: 58) argues that 'in spite of certain changes in concepts, in mood, in language, the core of the philosophy developed by the young Marx was never changed', and that understanding Marx's critique of capitalism is only possible 'on the basis of the concept of man which he developed in his early writings'. Like Marcuse, Fromm finds this core in the idea of realizing the human being's true potentials by overcoming alienated labor.

Unfolding his interpretation, Fromm (1966: 24) argues that Marx distinguished, like Dilthey, between 'human nature in general' and 'human nature as modified with each historical period', and based on this distinction between 'constant' and 'relative' drives. Examples of the first kind are hunger and sexual desire, which cannot be changed as such, but only in their form and directionality. The prime example of a 'relative' appetite is the drive for enrichment and accumulation, which, as a specific historical modification of the primary drives, can vanish entirely. These distinctions seek to bring out Marx's 'contribution to humanistic depth psychology', a contribution in which Fromm (1970: 47) sees the potential to correct the 'mechanistic parts' and social blind spots of Freud's psychoanalysis.

Wiggershaus (1995: 60) notes that Fromm's social psychology eventually rests on circular reasoning, which he tried to escape by adopting a 'messianic humanism'. The seamless workings of society did not allow for changes in the living conditions, while only such changes could transform the comportment of the masses. Reflecting on the theoretical implications of this dilemma, Jay (1972: 299–300) suggests that Fromm's Marxist humanism could only fully emerge

after he had freed himself from the 'pessimistic elements' of psychoanalysis such as libido theory and its biological determinism.

Although Fromm and Marcuse agreed with the rest of the early Frankfurt School that humanity creates itself and makes its own history, they adhered to the assumption that the human being's fundamental drives condition and underlie historical change. Their willingness to grant ontological status to the process of 'anthropogenesis' distinguishes them decisively from Horkheimer, Adorno, and Sonnemann, creating a productive tension among the members of the first generation.

### **ADORNO AND SONNEMANN: NEGATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL REVOLUTION**

Adorno rejects anthropological assumptions more decisively than any other member of the School. Despite his overall dismissal, however, he practiced an implicit negative anthropology himself. By observing and interpreting the habits, language, and character traits of individuals and groups in comparison with what is ascribed to them as universal qualities, he follows Horkheimer and Benjamin in illuminating the dim intimations of a truly human comportment among what he sees as an increasingly damaged and dehumanized life.

In his first habilitation thesis, Adorno (1973a: 175; my trans.) tellingly remarks that 'Kant's anthropology' – and the philosophical importance it grants to empirical knowledge – 'is still far from being sufficiently appreciated'. Related comments in *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (Adorno, 1989: 26, 33) distinguish Kierkegaard's psychology from both ontology and anthropology, indicating that, for Adorno, the anthropological problematic is closely tied to the concept of existence. This concept, he recapitulates later, 'impressed many as a philosophical approach,

because it seemed to combine divergent things: the reflection on the subject – said to constitute every cognition and thus every entity – and the concrete, immediate individuation of each single subject's experience' (Adorno, 1973b: 123). This combination is characteristic of philosophical anthropology's deceptive ontological circumvention of epistemology, Adorno argues, since the tension between constitutive subjectivity and particular experience is not merely an epistemological problem that can be solved by focusing on the 'whole' human being; it has objective social and historical reasons. 'The principle of domination, which antagonistically tears apart society', he writes with a side glance to Marx, 'is the same principle which, spiritualized, brings about the difference between the concept and that which is subjugated to it' (1973b: 48; trans. changed). Rather than conflating constitution and experience in a holistic notion of existence, dialectical thinking has to consider the human being as a social category of reflection.

In his early lectures and seminars, Adorno explores critical alternatives to existential ontology. In 'The Idea of Natural History', he juxtaposes Benjamin and Lukács to dialectically overcome the contradiction between nature and history, which is also at the heart of the anthropological problematic since Kant. According to the logic of extremes that Adorno (1984: 117) found in Benjamin's works, nature can be deciphered as history where it is considered to be most 'natural' (or mythical) and vice versa. From this lecture until his last comments on this question, Adorno (1973b: 359–60) follows Benjamin in interpreting 'decay' [*Verfall*] – the 'secular category pure and simple' – as the moment of commensuration between nature and history. Regarding the question of philosophical anthropology, this means that only a dialectical optics and critical language that traces finitude's dependencies on transcendence can discern possibilities of non-violent reconciliation amid the human being's antagonistic life under capitalism.

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno (1973b: 124; trans. changed) articulates a complete theoretical refutation of philosophical anthropology. 'We cannot say [*angeben*] what the human being is. Today, it is a function, unfree, regressing behind whatever is attributed to it as invariant [...]. To decipher the essence of the human being by the way it is now would sabotage its possibility'. Adorno's claim that philosophy cannot determine the human being springs from his conviction that invariants limit historical possibilities; a claim that he supports by criticizing metaphysical monism. We cannot say what the human being is because such assertions totalize over the intrinsically fractured and conflicted condition of the individual. For Adorno, criticizing concepts like 'man' or 'existence' means 'wrestling them away from the spell of monistic construction out of a single principle' (Adorno, 1986: 262; my trans.). No anthropology seems to escape Adorno's verdict. He even dismisses 'so-called historical anthropology', which ascribes 'becoming' and 'openness' as qualities to the human being, as an attempt to 'pass off its own indefiniteness' as positive knowledge. 'That we cannot tell what man is,' Adorno (1973b: 124) concludes, 'does not establish a particularly majestic anthropology; it vetoes any anthropology'.

Despite this verdict, Adorno (1974: 18) contends in *Minima Moralia* that from 'the narrowest private sphere [...] follow considerations of broader social and anthropological scope; they concern psychology, aesthetics, [and] science in its relation to the subject'. This description reflects his early comment about the unrealized potentials of Kant's anthropology. *Minima Moralia* is a strong example of Adorno's attempts to trace residues of a truly human life amid the barbaric regressions of Western culture. In discussing themes such as friendship, labor conditions, and dwelling [*wohnen*], he brings out the increasing difficulty of relating in a respectful way to oneself and others. The reason is that the coldness and rigidity of the

social sphere forces the individuals to retreat into the most occluded regions of life where their humanity is in constant danger of withering away.

Adorno interprets the individual's actual constitution as the precipitation of the abstract laws that govern society as a whole. From this perspective, the 'essence' of the individual appears as the sedimentation of universal principles. Because the individual is 'in the strict sense [...] a monad, representing the whole in its contradictions' (Adorno, 1967: 77), understanding the social process requires analyzing how these principles are mirrored in the minutest cells of the social fiber, where they virtually produce the individual as just another commodity. 'With the dissolution of liberalism', for example, 'the truly bourgeois principle, that of competition, far from being overcome, has passed from the objectivity of the social process into the composition of its colliding and jostling atoms, and therewith as if into anthropology' (Adorno, 1974: 27). In view of this conception, Stefan Breuer (1985: 34, 50; my trans.) argues that Adorno's 'negative anthropology' is his 'genuine contribution to the development of dialectical social theory'. Whether or not it is the 'organizing center' of his work, as Breuer contends, Adorno's 'turn toward second nature' challenges his own verdict over anthropology. Like Benjamin and Horkheimer, Adorno opens *Critical Theory* toward the interpretation of particular social phenomena. His 'Physiognomy of the Capitalist Form of Life' (Honneth, 2005) deciphers the individual as both the constituent of the whole and the manifestation of its organizing principles.

Adorno's (2003: 69; my trans.) posthumously published 'Notes on New Anthropology' demonstrate the extent of his concern with the 'new human type, forming under the conditions of monopoly and state capitalism'. These notes pertain to the fragments of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which, according to Horkheimer and Adorno's (2002: xix) preface, 'relate to a dialectical

anthropology'. In the 'Notes', Adorno suggests that, in his epoch, the human being's 'fundamental constitution [*Grundbeschaffenheit*]' underwent such radical change that even the basic assumptions of psychoanalysis are rendered obsolete (Adorno, 2003: 62, 69–82; my trans.; also Coomann, 2017). Accordingly, in his *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* (Adorno, 2008: 46), he emphasizes the importance of 'dialectical anthropology' for understanding why the 'revolutionary practice', which his generation expected, 'did not happen and why it *could* not happen'.

Ulrich Sonnemann was a psychologist, philosopher, writer, and friend of Adorno's who fled to the United States in 1941. After his return to Germany in 1955, he became loosely connected to the Frankfurt School (Schmied-Kowarzik, 1999: 34). In his book *Negative Anthropologie* from 1969, he argues for the 'determinate negation of the possibility of any non-contradictory positive anthropology', and for the 'inference [*Erschließung*] of what is human from its denial and absence' (Sonnemann, 1969: 227; my trans.). The fallacy and malicious consequences of assuming that the human being can be the object of positive science is exemplified by the complementary failure of the 'two main versions of anthropological determinism', Marxism and psychoanalysis (1969: 87; my trans.). Both are trapped, according to Sonnemann, in a circular monologue due to their unreflected anthropological assumptions; Marx's social philosophy because of its unacknowledged 'interiority' – the presupposition of a potential 'real' human being, which in truth depends entirely on its present condition – and Freud, because he neglects the social determinations of the history of the mind, epitomized by the naturalization of the drives. Marxism and psychoanalysis fail in the moment they are confronted with each other, revealing a shared defect: the restriction of human spontaneity (Sonnemann, 1969: 87–8).

Sonnemann (1969: 21; my trans.) insists that positivism blocks 'spontaneity that acts,

through thinking, in history'. The attempt to criticize this restriction conceptually as well as in the realm of language makes *Negative Anthropologie* a largely unexplored document of the student movement (Mettin, 2016), complementary in many ways to Foucault's archaeologies of the human sciences. (Tellingly, both authors wrote on Ludwig Binswanger's existential psychology in the mid 1950s.) In his review of *Negative Anthropologie*, Adorno (1986: 262–3; also Edinger, 2017) reads Sonnemann's (2011: 361–3; my trans.) call for a 'permanent anthropological revolution' as a continuation of Horkheimer's early engagement with anthropology, acknowledging the book's effort to 'defetishize' the ontological fundaments of Marx and Freud. What distinguishes Adorno's and Sonnemann's negative anthropology from the approaches they criticize is their refusal to 'define itself in any fixed way', while 'de-emphasizing', without completely denying, the 'autonomy of man' (Geroulanos, 2010: 12; Jay, 1973: 65, 266).

## CONCLUSIONS

The critical humanism of the Frankfurt School crystallizes around a series of struggles regarding the potentials and limitations of negative anthropology. After Benjamin unsettled the bourgeois understanding of 'human language' and the antithesis of nature and history, the members of the first generation were confronted with the decision to embrace or reject the more or less substantial anthropological underpinnings of historical materialism and psychoanalysis. While Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Fromm were willing to ascribe an immutable demand for happiness and self-realization to the human being, Adorno and Sonnemann attempted to reject all anthropological assumptions, examining instead the human being's practical and theoretical negations and deprivations under

capitalism. As the members of the first generation developed their versions of critical theory, Heidegger's existential ontology and Scheler's Philosophical Anthropology repeatedly forced them to reflect on the anthropological implications of their own works and approaches.

In *Beschreibung des Menschen*, Blumenberg indicates that at the heart of the struggle between Neo-Marxism and philosophical anthropology resides the question as to how much essence we are willing to ascribe to the beings that we are ourselves. If 'human nature' is considered to be entirely contingent, human beings deserve as much suffering as they deserve happiness, which leaves hardly any shared grounds for distinguishing between repressive and emancipatory forms of social organization. On the other hand, the more ontological qualities we attribute to the human being, the more we tend to generalize over ethnical, gender, class, and other differences, threatening to relapse into the dogmatic bourgeois humanism that Critical Theory opposed in the first place. Finding effective and versatile vocabularies to balance the demands of critical humanism and negative anthropology is one of Critical Theory's ongoing challenges to the present day.

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# Art and Revolution

Jasper Bernes

In the twentieth century, Marxist theories of art turned upon a number of important themes – totality, autonomy, mimesis – recorded in the historical literature and frequently debated even now. Mutually entangled, these concepts produce familiar oppositions: Theodor Adorno's modernism against Walter Benjamin's avant-gardism, György Lukács's realism against Bertolt Brecht's didactic theater. We may, however, reorganize our account of these critical concepts and the art and literary movements they take as their objects through a study of a less shopworn concept the above-mentioned terms imply: participation. Avant-garde and modern art movements conceived of themselves as emancipatory, in part, by imagining themselves enablers of mass cultural participation, aspiring to a totalizing abolition of the barriers of skill that prevented proletarians from participating in art as makers or writers and the barriers of access that prevented them from participating as viewers or

readers. Frequently, these movements aimed to abolish altogether the division between cultural producers and cultural consumers. The most prominent twentieth-century Marxist critics of art, Benjamin, Adorno, and Lukács in particular, developed their ideas in large part by reflecting critically upon these movements and the potentials and problems that such aspirations introduced. Though Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism are particularly important to such discussions, no single artistic figure looms as large here as Bertolt Brecht. A sophisticated Marxist theorist in his own right, Brecht becomes for many of these writers a metonym for the avant-garde as such, and Benjamin, Adorno, and Lukács often articulate their differences from each other by way of Brecht. Participation looms large in these debates in part because of its importance for Brecht's 'epic theater', designed to recruit the participation of audiences, if not as actors or writers then as critical interlocutors.

## MARXISM AND SELF-ACTIVITY

From the earliest moments of their association, the communist theory Karl Marx develops independently and with Friedrich Engels distinguishes itself from nineteenth-century socialism and communism by its emphasis on 'self-activity' (Marx and Engels, 1976). As the declaration of the First International described it, '[t]he emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself' (Marx and Engels, 1989: 262). As opposed to the didactic and moral socialisms of their day, Marx and Engels saw the working class as capable of self-organization and self-education, developing the tactics and strategies necessary for the revolutionary overthrow of society without the intervention of extrinsic authorities or leaders. In this view, history is the unfolding of self-organized class struggle, and militant intellectuals such as Marx and Engels simply reflect, catalyze, and disseminate forms of awareness and consciousness already immanent within those struggles. Marx illuminates his anti-didactic theory of self-activity and self-organization in an early letter:

[We] do not confront the world in a doctrinaire way with a new principle: here is the truth, kneel down before it! We develop new principles for the world out of the world's own principles. We do not say to the world: Cease your struggles, they are foolish; we will give you the true slogan of struggle. We merely show the world what it is really fighting for, and consciousness is something that it *has to* acquire, even if it does not want to. (Marx, 1992: 208–9)

Though Marx never elaborates this theory of self-activity with regard to art or literature, later writers will. If the masses are capable of creative, rational activity, independent of whatever moral, political, or aesthetic education they receive from life experience, then an art and literature should take account of this, looking with skepticism on the barriers that prevent mass participation in the enjoyment or production of art. Artists might, in fact, address themselves positively toward

these mass creative capacities and negatively toward the institutions and other social forces that prevent their expression.

Perhaps the most lucid early account of these social and aesthetic energies can be found in the work of Walter Benjamin. Among the Frankfurt School accounts most sympathetic to the avant-garde movements that adopted these positions, Benjamin's essays of the 1930s, reflecting in part on the Soviet avant-gardes of the 1920s, make explicit the connection between emancipatory politics and participation. In 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' (1935), Benjamin attaches the 'mass existence' of technically reproduced art, such as film, to the 'mass movements' of his time (Benjamin, 2008: 22). Whereas many of the writers – Guy Debord, Theodor Adorno – discussed in the following pages will identify film and other mass media with passive consumption, Benjamin links mass reproduction to an appropriative and perhaps expropriative frenzy on the part of popular subjects: 'the desire of the present-day masses to "get closer" to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness [*Überwindung des Einmaligen jeder Gegebenheit*] by assimilating it as a reproduction' (22). For Benjamin artworks are riven by two contradictory measures of value – on the one hand, a cult value, which attempts to remove artwork from circulation, and values it according to its distance from perception, and on the other, an exhibition value, in which that artwork is valued the more it is made available (25–6). Technologically reproducible artworks inaugurate an era in which exhibition value triumphs over cult value, introducing forms of art designed for mass rather than restricted audiences and produced by growing numbers of people. These new technologies are mass media in a number of senses: first of all, anybody might be the subject of such arts – 'any person today can lay claim to being filmed' – but also the growth of the press turns readers into writers through such things as 'letters

to the editor'. The result is an overcoming of the barriers of expertise that have heretofore excluded proletarians. The emancipatory character of these transformations is clear to Benjamin:

Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its axiomatic character ... At any moment the reader is ready to become a writer. As an expert – which he has had to become in any case in a highly specialized work process, even if only in some minor capacity – the reader gains access to authorship. Work itself is given a voice. And the ability to describe a job in words now forms part of the expertise needed to carry it out. Literary competence is no longer founded on specialized higher education but on polytechnic education, and thus is common property. (34)

Benjamin thus sees the participatory overcoming of the aesthetic division of labor – the division between writers and their publics – occurring as a result of the technical division of labor within capitalist industry. This illuminates one of the complexities of the concept of participation, which may mean the overcoming of all barriers – in other words, a situation in which anyone can participate in any activity – or rather a reorganization of the relationships of parts to wholes and the absorption of individuals into a differentiated division of labor. The Latin derivation of the term is formed from the roots for 'part' and 'take' – as with the verb 'partake' – and thus concerns the relationship of parts to wholes. A part may partake or participate in the whole in a differentiated and unequal way.

Benjamin quotes this very passage in a later essay, 'The Author as Producer' (1934), concerned with similar questions. There, he argues that an emancipatory art practice must overcome the divisions between the arts and between various artistic labors. Writers such as himself must 'take up photography', Benjamin says:

Technical progress is for the author as producer the foundation of his political progress ... [O]nly by transcending the specialization in the process of intellectual production – a specialization that, in the bourgeois view, constitutes its order – can one

make this production politically useful; and the barriers opposed by specialization must be breached jointly by the productive forces they were set up to divide. The author as producer discovers – even as he discovers his solidarity with the proletariat – his solidarity with certain other producers who earlier seemed scarcely to concern him. (Benjamin, 1996: 775)

Though he is vague about the precise relationship between the division of artistic labor and the division of labor more generally, he identifies class struggle as the catalytic element of this overcoming, suggesting that the 'state of the class struggle determines the temperature at which' the boundaries between genres and forms break down, 'entering the growing, molten mass from which the new forms are cast' (776).

## THE ANTINOMIES OF PARTICIPATION

For Benjamin, no single figure better emblemizes the new participatory aesthetic and the overcoming of artistic boundaries and the artistic division of labor than Brecht, whose collaborations with musicians such as Kurt Weill and Hans Eisler united music and literary language. Benjamin uses Brecht's term *Umfunktionierung* – usually translated in English as 'refunctioning' – to describe the recasting of the artistic division of labor. By uniting word and music, Brecht and Eisler's didactic short plays, such as *The Measures Taken*, 'effect[ed] the transformation ... of a concert into a political meeting' and 'eliminate[d] the antithesis ... between performers and listeners' (776). Brecht's theater was anti-illusionistic, first and foremost, opposed to the Aristotelian conventions of theater in which characters were primarily the objects of the audience's empathic feelings: 'epic theater ... appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason' (Brecht, 1964: 37). Brechtian theater 'turns the spectator into an observer but arouses his capacity for action ... forces him to take decisions'.

The chief instrument here is what Brecht called the alienation effect [*verfremdungseffekt*], an anti-illusionistic practice in which the gap between character and actor was intensified. Defamiliarized, the objects and scenes presented force audiences to reflect on their meaning rather than accept them as mimesis of action. Unlike later formulations of a participatory art, in which meaning is entirely elaborated by the audience, the active role of the audience in epic theater sits in tension with the didactic character of the scenes, especially in the learning-plays [*Lehrstücke*] such as *The Measures Taken*, where the actions of characters are presented in the form of lectures or overlaid with such. The didactic and the participatory are brought together, in Brecht's plays, in the oft-repeated figure of the trial, implicitly placing audiences in the place of judge or jury and asking them to evaluate, rationally, the polemical material with which they are confronted.

Some of Brecht's critics, Adorno most forcefully, felt that the didactic character of his work essentially overrode the claims to audience participation, making the plays into a delivery vehicle for Bolshevik dogma with emancipatory trappings (Adorno, 2007: 182–3). If this critique is correct, then the participatory becomes a powerful mechanism of domination, recruiting viewers or readers in such a way that they feel themselves to have independently decided upon an outcome determined in advance. In Adorno's letters to his friend Benjamin, responding to 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', he 'doubts the expertise of the newspaper boys who discuss sports and suggests that 'the laughter of the audience at the cinema is anything but good and revolutionary; instead it is full of the worst bourgeois sadism' (Jameson, 2007: 123). His letters express his wish 'to hold [Benjamin's] arm steady until the sun of Brecht has once more sunk into exotic waters'. Throughout his writings on art, Adorno uses the term participation in primarily a negative sense, to mean the subordination of the individual

person or work of art to social or other forms of heteronomy.<sup>1</sup> For Adorno, the emancipatory character of the work of art is vouchsafed chiefly by its resistance to external forces. The social work it does is not through its direct participation in society but by its resistance to such participation:

Art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as 'socially useful', it criticizes society by merely existing, for which puritans of all stripes condemn it. There is nothing pure, nothing structured strictly according to its own immanent law, that does not implicitly criticize the debasement of a situation evolving in the direction of a total exchange society in which everything is heteronomously defined. (Adorno, 1997: 225–6)

The mark of the authentic artwork is non-participation and negativity. If the work of art turns toward the viewer directly, attempting to provoke action or reflection, it risks either engaging in instrumental domination of its audience or subordinating itself to the evaluative schema that viewers bring to the work of art. At the same time, this autonomy can never be expressed as a simple positive feature of the work of art, lest the omnipresence of heteronomy be belied. Adorno proposes a dialectical account of autonomy and heteronomy: 'If art cedes its autonomy, it delivers itself over to the machinations of the status quo; if art remains strictly for itself, it nonetheless submits to integration as one harmless domain among others' (237). It is precisely in this fraught space of heteronomy and autonomy that art's emancipatory value can be found, not through any instrumental effects, but as a kind of placeholder: '[o]nly what does not submit to that principle [heteronomy] acts as the plenipotentiary of what is free from domination; only what is useless can stand in for the stunted use value' (227).

Adorno's powerful defense of aesthetic autonomy amounts to a wholesale rejection of any attempt to overcome the boundaries that prevent mass proletarian participation in the

arts, as makers or as viewers. In the face of an 'all-powerful system of communication' artworks 'must rid themselves of any communicative means that would perhaps make them accessible to the public' (243). The rebarbative character of modern art – as protest against the instrumentalization of culture – vouchsafes forms of free aesthetic experience beyond the 'false needs of a degraded humanity', but any attempt to actually make these forms of experience available in a durable way destroys them. Artworks thus remain marked, ineluctably, 'by the guilt of the separation of physical and spiritual labor' (227). The debate between Adorno, on the one hand, and Benjamin and Brecht, on the other, reveals not only two opposed concepts of artistic participation, but also two dangers inherent within twentieth-century art movements. Brechtian participation can become a vehicle for dogma and domination, disguised by a pseudo-democratic formalism. Adornian autonomy, though, is at best a stalling measure, defending the thin forms of freedom permitted to a small number of people within bourgeois society against a future catastrophe in which even these possibilities vanish. The position makes sense for an aesthetic philosophy 'crippled by resignation before reality', where 'praxis, delayed for the foreseeable future' offers little chance of reorganizing, in any emancipatory way, the social division of labor that is the basis of art's guilty autonomy (Adorno, 1981: 3). The differences between these positions in a certain sense derive from their optimism or pessimism about the possibilities for social revolution as well as the historical period in which they emerge. Written during the 1930s, before the extent of the Stalinist counter-revolution was evident, Benjamin's essays as well as Brecht's works assume that art and social revolution were in a mutually defining relationship and that revolution was still possible. Adorno's most prominent essays date from the post-war period, and look back on decades marked by Stalinist and fascist counter-revolution, on the one hand, and the triumph of post-war US-dominated capitalism, on the other.

## POST-WAR

One solution to the antinomies of aesthetic participation was to radicalize it, evacuating the Brechtian model of its didactic character. This was often the position taken up by neo-avantgarde and other post-war treatments of the concept, adapted for an era much more skeptical about the usefulness of authorities, intellectual, cultural, or otherwise. Take, for example, the influential theories of the 'writerly' text developed by Roland Barthes, in which the goal of the writer is no longer the conveyance of 'authoritative' meanings but instead the provision of a polysemic field out of which readers produce their own meanings. 'The goal of literary work (of literature as work)', Barthes claims, in the manifesto-like opening pages of *S/Z*, 'is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text' (Barthes, 1975: 4). His immediate referent here was the *nouveau roman* of Alain Robbe-Grillet and others, but the influence of such conceptions on post-war literary production as well as post-war literary theory was immense. Cognate developments emerge in the visual arts, whether by emphasizing the phenomenology of encounter between viewer and artwork, as in minimalism, or by actively involving audiences, as in the 'do-it-yourself' art of Fluxus and the participatory enactments of Happenings. In many of these examples, the participatory form of the artwork is itself its content, and the political values that were, in Brecht, attached to particular contents are formalized. Participation is in and of itself a good.

The formalistic character of post-war experiments in participatory art made them radically portable. Indifferent to context and stripped of the didactic contents of the Brechtian construction, participatory structures could be and were adapted to numerous civic, corporate, or cultural institutions from the 1960s onward. As argued in my book, *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization*, the hostility that the political movements of the period expressed toward hierarchical and

authoritarian structures derives, in some part, from the vocabularies and grammars of participation developed within the arts and reproduced by a fascinated mass media (Bernes, 2017: 10–19). The resistance that workers offered management in the 1960s – at least as far as the advanced capitalist countries are concerned – often centered on qualitative rather than quantitative demands. These usually consisted of calls for a greater participation in decision-making, for a democratization of the workplace, for more varied and creative work, for greater autonomy, and even for workers' self-management. Models from the arts had a particular purchase in part because of the very forms of autonomy that, as Adorno describes above, accrue to art in modernity. Art became the other of labor, and art work a form of labor that was non-labor – free, self-directed, creative. Participatory models were useful to corporations – and civic institutions, as is clear from things like community policing initiatives – not only because they warded off potential unrest but because they allowed firms to shed unprofitable managerial layers. As an end in itself, artistic labor is also something one does without regard to its material rewards, and despite the initial demands from which they emerged, these models were used as ways to get people to work harder and longer for less money.

Adorno may seem to get the last word here, given the sad fate of these participatory constructions (which contemporary arts still display somewhat naively and often with little awareness of the uses to which these models have been put). Surprisingly, however, Brecht's commitment and direct, referential politics – which Adorno thought were capitulations, in form if not in content, to social heteronomy – seem now, in retrospect, to inoculate his works from the sort of uses to which the participatory constructions of the post-war period were put. Participatory formalization itself is what allows for the uptake of these models, and Brecht's communist didacticism may have warded off, if only for a short time, the recuperation to come.

Today, participatory models of action are ubiquitous. This is especially visible in the case of contemporary information and communication technology, which emphasizes 'interactivity' and allows for all manner of customization and personalization by users. Notably, the pioneers of this technology were, in many instances, influenced by the participatory aesthetic experiments of the 1960s (Turner, 2006: 41–68). Unlike broadcast media, which depend upon unidirectional signals, the new media involve a dialectical interplay between transmission and user action, undoing clear divisions between producers and consumers. This is especially true in the case of so-called Web 2.0, in which media firms provide 'platforms' (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) for user expression, communication, and elaboration. In this case, the erstwhile viewers of television and radio become producers of content and therefore participants. From the beginning, these new technologies were attended by significant claims for their emancipatory potential, inasmuch as they could overcome the monopolization of media by powerful conglomerates and vested interests, allowing for new forms of volunteer and amateur production, whether in the areas of journalism or art. Many were quick to point out, however, the various ways in which such amateur energies were being exploited by the companies that controlled these platforms or acted as the distributors of the products and services generated therein and therefrom (Terranova, 2000).

By the 2010s, as a new 'sharing economy' emerged in which 'disintermediating' companies profited from the profusion of new participatory forms of labor, both paid and unpaid, such critiques were widely accepted. The generalization of these critiques occurred alongside a continued valorization of the participatory within political movements and the arts. Many of the movements that emerged in the wake of the economic crisis of the later 2000s and early 2010s were distinguished by their eschewal of traditional organizational

structures – unions and parties – and models of leadership, and their reliance on informal, horizontal structures involving mass participation and mass decision-making. From the Arab Spring in Egypt and Tunisia, to the ‘movement of the squares’ and the Occupy movement in Europe and the United States, direct democracy and participatory organization was the order of the day, often formalized as ‘consensus’ decision-making, whereby nearly complete accord between all participants was the (admittedly impossible) goal. Organized outside of traditional political structures and relying, in many cases, on the facilities of new digital media, such movements did, on occasion, give way to more formal structures such as political parties (SYRIZA in Greece, Podemos in Spain). They also precipitated strong critiques of the formalistic character of participatory democracy, which was felt to bracket political content, neutralize important political dissent, and create a situation felt by many to be as oppressive and anti-minoritarian as more conventional authoritarian structures, such that the individual or small group was effectively forced to reconcile with the larger collective. Movements organized on this basis were unable to settle on a course of action or unifying objective, and in some cases turned inward, losing any sense of direction. For some, this meant the necessity of a return to traditional structures such as party or union, and the need for strong leaders (Dean, 2012: 1–23). For others, however, the impasses of the current conjuncture result from the collapse of the workers’ movement and workers’ identity, which was the basis for the programmatic unification of earlier political movements (*Endnotes*, 2013). Therefore, attempts to overcome this impasse by reverting to prior modes of organization will fail. One must find a way through disorganization by way of disorganization.

As far as evaluation of participatory form is concerned, all of these critiques return us to the question of content or, perhaps, function. Participation in what? Participation with

whom? To what end? In Benjamin’s ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility’, he distinguishes between those mimetic works of art, such as paintings, which require concentration on the part of an individualized viewer, and the works which, conversely, viewers themselves absorb and which are received in ‘a state of distraction and through the collective’ (Benjamin, 2008: 40). Architecture, he writes, is the ‘prototype’ of the latter, inasmuch as buildings can be interacted with in numerous ways. And yet, paradoxically, we might imagine architecture as the most inflexible and indeed authoritarian of forms, given its association with political or economic power and rigid materials. Flexibility of use depends, it seems, on an inflexible production. In ‘The Author as Producer’, the distinction Benjamin introduces is between ‘the mere supplying of a productive apparatus and its transformation’. Without a doubt, Benjamin imagined that the arts could be made more like architecture, in order that they align with the emancipatory, mass-oriented politics of his day. Artistic solidarity with the workers’ movement demanded more than the contribution of an emancipatory content to a non-participatory and non-emancipatory apparatus. But attention to the side of production allows us to see how architecture resists transformation and directs the free actions of users despite their ability to select from a range of uses. The truly participatory architecture would, like the barricades of nineteenth-century uprisings, be built and rebuilt according to the energies and imaginings of its user-builders.

## THE DIVISION OF LABOR

We might sum up the conclusions of the preceding sections as follows: the participation of viewers and audiences in the work of art almost always depends upon relatively immutable frameworks and infrastructures in which viewers and audiences have no say; to

the extent that participatory works naturalize or occlude these frameworks they may be thought of as the buttresses and bulwarks of a veritable aesthetic ideology, one that obstructs any reckoning with domination as it actually functions. In his critique of the emancipatory pretensions of contemporary digital technology, Alexander Galloway argues that the rhizomatic, horizontal, participatory interactions of the World Wide Web depend upon highly centralized and codified infrastructures run by a small number of institutional players (Galloway, 2004). In the case of digital technology, the participatory character of the object or service is a function of its use by the consumer, rather than its production. There is a division of labor, in other words, between producers and consumers that occludes the site of production and the inflexibilities engendered there. This occlusion occurs because the participatory *use* but not manufacture of an object leads users to believe they have overcome the division between producers and consumers altogether, as in the case of 'Web 2.0', where users are simultaneously content-providers. As should be clear from the discussion above, what Galloway says of the ideology of participation in digital technology is true of aesthetic participation as well.

The problematic of participation is therefore bound up with that of the division of labor, and particularly the 'reification' that Lukács attributed to the capitalist division of labor. For Lukács, capitalism fragments the organic labor processes of precapitalist societies, replacing integrated production of finished objects with various kinds of intermediate detail work (Lukács, 1972: 88–9). The consequences of such rationalization are extreme, since 'the fragmentation of the object of production necessarily entails the fragmentation of its subject'. As the specific qualities demanded by the labor process are abstracted from 'the human qualities and idiosyncrasies of the worker' the result is that 'his activity becomes less and less active and more and more contemplative'. It becomes,

to translate into the terms of the above, less participatory. This is what Lukács terms reification, the objectification of formerly free-flowing, open-ended human capacities under the reign of the commodity form. Reification affects all classes within capitalism but for the bourgeoisie the process is especially deleterious, as reification in such a case concerns not just specific labor powers but cognition itself. The reified cognition of the bourgeoisie thus produces a series of philosophical antinomies (between subject and object, freedom and necessity, individual and society, form and content) that more or less encapsulate the history of modern philosophy. Proletarians experience these antinomies as well, but are given a way to transcend them and transcend false immediacy through their practical engagement with the object-world. While the bourgeoisie cannot know itself as objectified, because it is the bourgeois mind itself that is objectified, the physical domination of workers leaves their mind free 'to perceive the split in [their] being'. The 'consciousness of the proletariat' is therefore the consciousness of an object that sees itself as object, consciousness of the rift between subject and object but also, in turn, the rifts of the division of labor. De-reification, in this sense, requires not only an overcoming of the passive, objectified forms of action which capitalism engenders but also an overcoming of the fragmentation of the labor process. In his insistence on the insoluble link between capitalist fragmentation of the labor process, on the one hand, and the passive, objectified character of human action, on the other, Lukács makes possible a critique of those participatory enactments that still depend upon a division of labor.

Lukács was an enormous influence on the thinking of Guy Debord and his conspirators in the Situationist International (SI hereafter), a thinker and a group notable for building a communist aesthetic and political practice around an explicit critique of the social and artistic division of labor. Their project was an overarching 'critique of separation', detailing



the many ways that proletarians are separated from each other and rendered passive, in the workplace and elsewhere, so that they may be integrated by the active constructions of capital and what Guy Debord described as 'spectacle'. Against this society of generalized non-intervention and separation, the SI proposed interventions into everyday life that they called 'situations'.

The situationist goal is immediate participation in a passionate abundance of life, through the variation of fleeting moments resolutely arranged ... Situationists consider cultural activity, from the standpoint of totality, as an experimental method for constructing daily life, which can be permanently developed with the extension of leisure and the division of labor (beginning with the division of artistic labor). (Situationist International, 2004: 61)

The accent of this critique falls not just on the world of wage labor and artistic practice, but political milieus themselves: 'A revolutionary association of a new type will also break with the old world by permitting and demanding of its members an authentic and creative participation ...' (Situationist International, 2006: 112). They therefore inveigh against pedagogical art or politics based upon the 'unilateral transmission of a revolutionary teaching', instead basing their sense of revolutionary possibilities on a spontaneous tendency toward revolt already present within the youth of the age (112). Importantly, the SI targets not just the division of social labor but the division between art making and social labor: 'The next form of society will not be based on industrial production. It will be a society of *realized art*.' The integration of art and social production will overcome the industrial division of labor as well as the division between free and compelled activity. The theorization of participation that we find in the SI does not imagine a reform of the existing mode of production, such that workers are allowed to participate in corporate decision making, much less a participatory transformation of the art system; rather, they envision the liberation of aesthetic energies, broadly

distributed among proletarians, that might be the basis of a revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist mode of production. What emerges from the rubble will be based upon the activation of those creative energies and oriented toward the participation of all, but that is something different than the recruitment of worker participation (or reader or viewer participation) in an already constituted system.

From 1960 until the events of May 1968, in which many members were involved and which more or less spelled the dissolution of the group, the SI turned away from engagements with artists and interventions in the art world and dedicated itself entirely to political theory and activity, while still retaining a broadly aesthetic theory of revolution, where revolution would be put 'in the service of poetry', in the service of aesthetic experience and creative freedom, rather than the other way around. Through an interrogation of anarchist and Marxist theory, and through their interaction with Socialism ou Barbarie, a post-Trotskyist group that had turned toward council communism, they developed a 'councilist' perspective on the revolution, in which workers' and students' councils would direct the revolution. Workers would seize control of the means of production directly and dispose of its products as they saw fit. However, the SI never really reckoned with the possible contradictions between a worker-directed system and the society of *realized art* they imagined. In the views of Gilles Dauvé and the group Theorie Communiste, who emerge after the SI, as part of a general revival of ultraleft ideas, the SI managed to expose the flaws within council communism without overcoming them (Dauvé, 1979; Simon, 2015). Whereas council communism views revolution as the emancipation and affirmation of labor through the seizure and eventual self-management of the means of production, the SI counters this affirmed labor by examining it in the unfavorable light of creative activity. The goal for the SI is not to liberate the

toil but to abolish it altogether. And yet, for *Theorie Communiste*, the SI never moves beyond a critique of labor and toward a critique of capital as such, instead imagining, in various incomplete theorizations, that the overcoming of the division of labor and art can be had either by the cultivation of a particular subjectivity (an attitude toward labor) or by a simple extension of the development of the productive forces (Simon, 2015: 382). They therefore avoid thinking about whether or not the division of labor is baked into the very industrial machinery they would make the basis of their society of realized art. In truth, as their critics note, the overcoming of labor as passive, compelled activity would require a total reorganization of the means of production at a technical level. As Marx notes in *Capital*, the large-scale machinery of the factory implies ‘the separation of intellectual faculties of the production process from manual labor, and the transformation of those faculties into powers exercised by capital over labor’ (Marx, 1990: 548). A change in ownership would not rectify such dehumanization, which is part of the technical arrangement of the factory. Abolition of labor would require placing social production on another footing altogether. Posing the problem of non-participation in aesthetic terms, as the SI does, occludes an understanding of the real basis of domination, and forces an engagement with the problem on a superficial level. This is perhaps clearest in the visions of the Situationist city produced during their artistic period. In Constant’s Situationist city, titled *New Babylon*, the city’s industrial infrastructure is secreted underneath the street level, which is therefore transformed into an open plane for free-floating encounter. This does not overcome the need for industrial infrastructure, however, but merely renders it and whatever labors it involves invisible. Literalizing the opposition between base and superstructure, productive forces and social relations, Constant’s utopia preserves the division between spaces of freedom and unfreedom.

## THE CRITIQUE OF SELF-MANAGEMENT

The SI was part of, and to a certain degree responsible for, a general revival of the thought and practice of the historical ultraleft – council communism in particular. The critiques of the SI summarized above find their roots in the years after 1968, when important communist theorists such as Jacques Camatte, Gilles Dauvé, and others confronted the perspective of the historical ultraleft – emblemized in the work of Anton Pannekoek and Paul Mattick – with the left communist thought of Amadeo Bordiga. Part of a broader left opposition within the Communist International during the 1920s, Bordiga conceived of the communist party as a class party that was not, at the same time, a mass party; in his view, the legitimacy of the party was not gained by the participation of proletarians, by its numerical incorporation of the proletarian masses, but by its doctrinal commitment to communist revolution (Bordiga, 2003a, 2003b). The party was an offensive and ultimately administrative instrument and therefore attempts by socialists and communists to opportunistically reposition the party such that it enabled mass participation, by for instance weakening its programmatic commitments, were wrong-headed. At the time, revolutionary developments in Germany and Italy were proceeding according to the council form, as proletarians spontaneously took over their workplaces and formed councils to determine what to do next. This was the great headwaters of council communism. In Bordiga’s essay, ‘Seize the Factory or Seize Power?’, written in 1920 while this council movement was raging in the north of Italy, he commended the militancy of the workers and their turn from the defensive tactic of the strike but suggested the workplace takeovers would not accomplish anything if the occupiers did not gather together their force for an assault ‘aimed directly at the heart of the enemy bourgeoisie’ (Bordiga, 2003c).

Later, Bordiga would develop a more robust critique of all forms of proletarian self-management, indicating that it was the enterprise-form itself and not the management of the enterprise by capitalists that made it into an instrument of exploitation:

The independent, local enterprise is the smallest social unit which we can think of, being limited both by the nature of its particular trade and the local area. Even if we concede, as we did earlier, that it was somehow possible to eliminate privilege and exploitation from within such an enterprise by distributing to its workers that elusive 'total value of the labour', still, outside its own four walls, the tentacles of the market and exchange would continue to exist. And they would continue to exist in their worst form at that, with the plague of capitalistic economic anarchy infecting everything in its path. But this party-less and State-less system of councils prompts the question – who, before the elimination of classes is accomplished, is going to manage the functions which are not strictly concerned with the technical side of production? And, to consider only one point, who is going to take care of those who are not enrolled in one of these enterprises – what about the unemployed? In such a system, and much more so than in any other cell-based commune or trade union system, it would be possible for the cycle of accumulation to start all over again (supposing it had ever been stopped) in the form of accumulation of money or of huge stocks of raw materials or finished products. Within this hypothetical system, conditions are particularly fertile for shrewdly accumulated savings to grow into dominating capital.

The real danger lies in the individual enterprise itself, not in the fact it has a boss. How are you going to calculate economic equivalents between one enterprise and another, especially when the bigger ones will be stifling the smaller, when some will have more productive equipment than others, when some will be using 'conventional' instruments of production and others nuclear powered ones? This system, whose starting point is a fetishism about equality and justice amongst individuals, as well as a comical dread of privilege, exploitation and oppression, would be an even worse breeding ground for all these horrors than the present society. (Bordiga, 1976)

Many of the ultraleft groups and writers that followed the SI utilized the Bordigist critique to purge council communism of its

emphasis on self-management while still retaining its commitments to spontaneity, self-organization, and the self-activity of the proletariat (almost entirely absent in Bordiga's dogmatic, party-oriented, and idealist presentation). Thinkers such as Gilles Dauvé and journals such as *Troploin*, *Négation* and others put forward the idea of revolution as communization, which would involve not the affirmation of the proletariat through self-management but its self-abolition, unmaking the productive resources of capitalism and replacing them with new means and new relations through which people would meet their needs directly, without the need of money, the wage, the state, or centralized administration.

Through a double-sided critique of council communism and Bordigism, these groups effectively resolve the antinomy – between proletarian self-management, on the one hand, and refusal of labor, on the other – which the SI posed but could not resolve. The revolution will involve the self-organizing action of proletarians from below, but these proletarians will not hypostasize the productive forces and their place in it through an affirmation of labor; instead they will engage in a total transformation of both the relations and forces of production of capitalist society. In one sense, revolution as communization cannot be thought by way of the logic of participation, since none of the institutions upon which one might make participatory demands would remain after such a revolution. In another sense, however, such a state of affairs would be more participatory than any imaginable, inasmuch as the members of such a society would have freedom of access and opportunity, allowing engagement in every aspect and activity imaginable. The desire for meaningful creative activity and social empowerment that underlies participatory demands remains, implicitly or explicitly, as proletarian motive, at the same time as these groups imagine a new route for its unfolding, avoiding the trap of self-management.

## CONCLUSION

Abandoning self-management, the communitization perspective allows for a critique of political formalism and a new emphasis on political content while still retaining an underlying vision of proletarian self-organization. Participatory relations may be desirable, but one must ask: participation in what? To what purpose? With what overall function? In the light of this critique, Adorno's view of participation as heteronomy becomes thinkable in a newly radical manner: it is fully possible for people to actively participate in their own domination, for people to self-manage their suffering and exploitation, and in fact capitalism may find it desirable to reorganize social relations in this manner. In judging political movements and revolutions, one must consider form and content both. We live in a society in which information technologies and the social arrangements they permit, allow people to participate in all manner of activities that might have been closed to them 30 years ago. And yet, the character of this participation is anything but free, predicated on deep-seated logics of social control and surveillance maintained by corporate conglomerates and the repressive apparatus of the national security state. One participates, but one also generates, at every turn, information about one's habits that is used to channel that participation in directions the media owners and their clients will find profitable. In social movements, informality gives way to the 'tyranny of structurelessness', in which individuals and pre-existing social formations can opportunistically exploit the fluid character of social relations; the formalistic participatory models that might control this opportunism end up being as constricting and anti-minoritarian as the centralist political formations they are designed to replace. In art, too, participatory models have become a technics of redevelopment, recruitment, and surveillance that interface directly with non-profit organizations, states, and corporate sponsors.

The participatory persists as a flavor and tone within contemporary capitalism, but dissatisfaction with it is by now general. Calls for a return to traditional models of authority or leadership seem, however, to fall on deaf ears, and the social movements of the twenty-first century continue to unfold by and large without centralized organization and without the leaders and structures one would expect in an earlier era. Likewise, arguments to reorganize art around older values – such as absorption, intentionality, or mastery – in opposition to the participatory seem unlikely to produce a general trend within visual art or literature. While Adorno's critique remains pertinent, it is unclear how it could be made into the basis for contemporary aesthetic activity. Indeed, it is Brecht's didactic and committed participatory aesthetic that remains the most incompatible with the formalistic experiments of contemporary exponents of the participatory. Both authors, therefore, were correct in their way but neither is capable of offering a way forward. The desire for meaningful action and creative expression mobilized by the participatory forms of the past century cannot be made to go away. At the same time, it appears that, within capitalism, no social form can absorb this desire without at the same time betraying it. We can add this to the long list of reasons to be done with capitalism once and for all.

## Note

- 1 See e.g. the following usage of the term from *Aesthetic Theory*: 'That artworks are offered for sale at the market – just as pots and statuettes once were – is not their misuse but rather the simple consequence of their participation in the relations of production' (Adorno, 1997: 236).

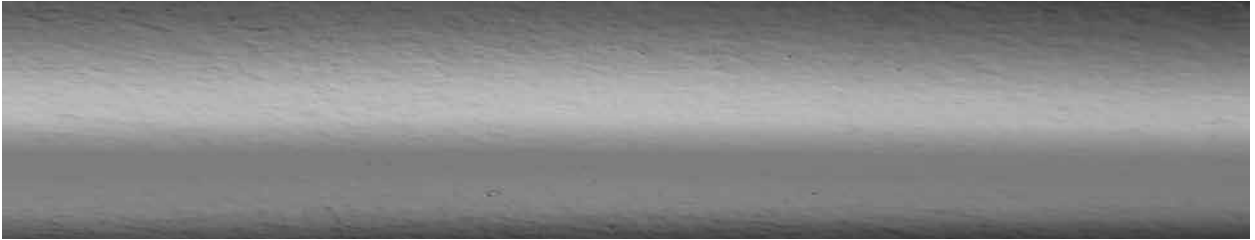
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PART VII

# Contexts of the Later Developments of Critical Theory



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# The Spectacle and the Culture Industry, the Transcendence of Art and the Autonomy of Art: Some Parallels between Theodor Adorno's and Guy Debord's Critical Concepts

Anselm Jappe

Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith

Our focus will be a comparative analysis of the contributions of Theodor W. Adorno and Guy Debord, author of *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) and main theoretician of the Situationists.<sup>1</sup> It is about objective parallels, not about direct influence: no book of Adorno's was translated into French before 1974, by which time Situationist theory had already been worked out; similarly, we can be sure that Adorno never became aware of Debord's work.

Adorno and Debord are among the pre-eminent exponents of a social critique centered on the concept of *alienation*. Both regard alienation not as some vague dissatisfaction with 'modern life' but rather as an antagonism between humanity and forces that humanity has itself created but that have now entered into opposition to it in the guise

of independent beings. This process is none other, for them, than the transformation of the economy from a means into an end, a transformation brought about by the conflict between exchange-value and use-value. Hence quality is subordinated to quantity, ends to means, and men to things, while a historical process is set in train that obeys economic laws alone, eluding any kind of conscious control.

This calls for some preliminary remarks. Both authors base their theories largely on Karl Marx's categories: less on what was by then the best known of them, that is to say class struggle (even if the search for 'new forms of class struggle' remains strong in Debord), but very much on the category of 'exchange'. 'Exchange' means for them not just circulation of products between men, but a specific capitalist phenomena: the use-value



of goods – their true human dimension – is subordinated to what one can get in exchange for it, and that is money in a capitalist society. ‘Exchange’ signifies for Adorno as for Debord a mode of production which is not directed to the satisfaction of human needs, but only to the accumulation of an abstract wealth which can be considered an inversion of means (the production of goods and services) and ends (the satisfaction of needs and desires). When products exist mainly for exchange, they are ‘commodities’, in Marx’s theory, and it is only in a commodity-based society that ‘the economy’ installs a dictatorship over the whole society. What is meant by ‘the economy’ is not, of course, material production as such, which obviously cannot be dispensed with, but the organization of that production as a separate sphere to which the rest of life is subordinated. It must be noted that the autonomization of the economy is in fact the consequence and phenomenal form of the triumph of value and abstract labor in social life.<sup>2</sup>

Let us first consider the central role played by the categories of ‘exchange’ and ‘economy’ in our authors’ analyses of alienation. What Debord calls ‘the spectacle’ is, precisely, the economy ‘developing for itself’ and bringing human beings totally ‘under its sway’ (SS §16) – the phenomenon whereby ‘the very powers that have been snatched from us reveal themselves to us in their full force’ (SS §31).<sup>3</sup> In this, the supreme form of alienation, real life is increasingly deprived of quality and broken up into activities that are fragmentary and separated from one another, while *images* of that life become detached from it and form an ensemble. This ensemble of images – the *spectacle* in a narrower sense – takes on a life of its own. As in the case of religion, activities and possibilities appear as separate from the individuals or the society that actually engender them; in the spectacle, however, they appear to be not in heaven but on earth. Individuals find themselves cut off from everything of concern to them, their only contact therewith mediated

by images chosen by others and distorted by interests other than theirs. The fetishism of the commodity, as described by Marx, meant the transformation of relationships between human beings into relationships between things; those relationships have now become relationships between images. The downgrading of social life from *being* into *having* continues with the reduction to *appearance* (SS §17), as human beings become mere spectators passively contemplating forces that are really theirs, without any power to affect them. The spectacle is the most recent manifestation of political power, which, though it is the oldest form of social specialization (SS §23), has only in recent decades achieved such a degree of autonomy as to be able to subject all social activity to its dictates. In the spectacle, where the economy transforms the world into the world of the economy, ‘the principle of commodity fetishism [...] is absolutely fulfilled’ (SS §36) and ‘the commodity completes its colonization of social life’ (SS §42). The generalization of the rule of the commodity and of exchange entails ‘the loss of quality so obvious at every level of the language of the spectacle’ (SS §38); that abstraction of all particular qualities which is the basis and consequence of exchange ‘finds perfect expression in the spectacle, whose very *manner of being* concrete is, precisely, abstraction’ (SS §29).<sup>4</sup>

Adorno too minces no words in stigmatizing the ‘universal domination of mankind by exchange-value [...] which a priori keeps subjects from being subjects and degrades subjectivity itself to a mere object’ (ND, 178), for under the reign of exchange ‘All qualitative moments [...] are flattened’ (ND, 88), and everything is ‘maimed’.<sup>5</sup> Exchange is ‘the bad foundation of society in itself’, and the

abstract character of exchange-value goes hand in hand, before any particular social stratification, with the domination of the universal over the particular and of society over its members. [...] The reduction of men to the status of agents and bearers of commodity exchange conceals the

domination of man over man. [...] The system as a whole is founded on the following principle: each must submit or perish.<sup>6</sup>

The fetish-character attaching to the commodity extends 'its arthritic influence over all aspects of social life' (DE, 28). Whereas use-value is 'stunted' (AT, 227), what is consumed is exchange-value (AT, 21).<sup>7</sup>

Inasmuch as the spectacle relies largely on film, sports, art and so on, it is remarkably reminiscent of that 'cultural ideology' which Adorno and Horkheimer, in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, had the opportunity to describe at the moment of its inception. A more detailed comparison between these two ideas may be useful here, for it will demonstrate not only their relevance today, but also their close affinity, despite their having been arrived at separately in very different surroundings and at very different periods. According to Debord, the spectacle as 'ideology in material form' has replaced all specific ideologies (SS §213); according to Horkheimer and Adorno, social power is much more effectively expressed by means of the seemingly non-ideological culture industry than by means of 'stale ideologies' (DE, 136). The content of the culture industry is not an explicit apologia for a particular, allegedly flawless political régime; rather, it is the continuous presentation of what exists as the sole possible horizon. 'To demonstrate its divine nature, reality is always repeated in a purely cynical way. Such a photological proof is of course not stringent, but it is overpowering' (DE, 147–8). For Debord, writing in 1967, 'All [the spectacle] says is: "Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear". The attitude that it demands on principle is the same passive acceptance that it has already secured [...] by its monopolization of the realm of appearances' (SS §12); 12 years later he noted that the spectacle no longer makes even that promise, and now merely says 'It is so'.<sup>8</sup> The culture industry is no more the result of 'an evolutionary law of technology as such'

(DE, 121) than the spectacle is 'the inevitable outcome of a technical development perceived as *natural*' (SS §24). And just as the culture industry 'impresses the stamp of sameness on everything' (DE, 120), the spectacle is a process of trivialization and homogenization (SS §165). Adorno and Horkheimer realized early on that 'amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work' (DE, 137), that it reproduces the same rhythms as industrial labor and that it too teaches 'obedience to the social hierarchy' (DE, 131). For Debord, 'the leading edge of the system's evolution' is increasingly oriented toward 'a realm of non-work, of inactivity. Such inactivity, however, is by no means emancipated from productive activity' (SS §27). The culture industry is a sphere where lies can be 'reproduced at will' (DE, 135); the spectacle a sphere 'where deceit deceives itself' (SS §2). In the spectacle, even 'truth is a moment of falsehood' (SS §9); in the culture industry even the most evident propositions, such as the claim that the trees are green, or the sky blue, are nothing but 'so many cryptograms for factory chimneys and service stations', that is to say, figures of the false (DE, 149). The spectacle is a veritable 'colonization' of everyday life (SI, 6/22; SIA, 70), so designed that no needs can be met save through its mediation (SS §24). Horkheimer and Adorno likewise describe how, as early as the 1940s even in the most everyday kinds of behavior and in the most normal forms of expression, such as variations in tone of voice according to occasion, or the way romantic relationships are conducted, people strive to adapt to models imposed by the culture industry and advertising (DE, 167). The culture industry is more than a way of advertising particular products, for it promotes products in general, and society per se it can shift with the greatest of ease from soap advertising to propaganda for a *Führer* (DE, 156–60). The spectacle, for its part, is 'an apologetic catalog' for 'commodity production in general' (SS §65). It is the 'epic poem' of the strife in which commodities engage before their

human spectators, a strife in which, even if particular commodities 'wear themselves out', the commodity-form as such becomes ever stronger (SS §66). Thus, when politics becomes one commodity among others, 'Stalin, just like any obsolete product, can be cast aside by the very forces that promoted his rise' (SS §70).

The basis of the culture industry, as of the spectacle, is the spectator's identification with the images presented to him, and his consequent renunciation of life lived in the first person. All who fail to win the world trip offered as a prize in a magazine contest are offered photographs of the countries they would have visited (DE, 148); 'the diner must be satisfied by the mere reading of the menu' (DE, 139). Images so overrun real life that the two spheres become indistinguishable, and the illusion comes to prevail 'that the outside world is the straightforward continuation of [the world] presented on the screen' (DE, 126). These observations closely echo Debord's assertion that 'lived reality suffers the material assaults of the spectacle's mechanisms of contemplation' (SS §8), or his claim that when the real world is transformed into mere images (as when a country is reduced to photographs), then 'mere images are transformed into real beings' (SS §18); reality becomes an extension of cinema. As early as 1953, Adorno wrote that television 'holds the possibility of smuggling into [its] duplicate world whatever is thought to be advantageous for the real one', for it 'obscures the real alienation between people and between people and things. It becomes a substitute for a social immediacy that is being denied to people'.<sup>9</sup>

Here Adorno's words anticipate Debord's almost to the letter. It is clear what distinguishes our authors from many of their contemporaries who pondered the same reality and described it, more or less subtly, as 'consumer society', 'mass society', and so forth: Debord and Adorno both realized that they were confronted by a false form of social cohesion, an unacknowledged ideology

designed to create consensus around Western capitalism, a way of ruling society, and, lastly, a technique for preventing individuals, who were just as ripe for emancipation as the state of the productive forces would allow, from becoming aware of that fact.<sup>10</sup> According to Debord and Adorno, the infantilization of the spectator is no mere side-effect of the spectacle and the culture industry, but the embodiment of their anti-emancipatory goals: for Adorno, the ideal of the culture industry is to reduce adults to 'the level of twelve-year-olds';<sup>11</sup> for Debord, 'the need to imitate that the consumer experiences is a truly infantile need' (SS §219).

Despite these parallels, however, Adorno and Debord are completely at odds when it comes to the role of art. Both bring to their accounts of modern art the concept of a contradiction between the possible uses of the forces of production and the logic of capital's self-valorization. Both see modern art – and specifically its formal development – as embodying an opposition to alienation and to the logic of exchange. Yet Adorno and Debord came in the 1960s to epitomize two diametrically opposed views on 'the end of art'. Adorno defended art against those who sought to 'transcend' it in favor of a direct intervention in reality, or who preached 'commitment' in art; Debord was meanwhile announcing that the time had come to *realize in life* what had hitherto been merely *promised in art*. Debord nevertheless saw the *negation* of art, through the transcendence of its separation from life's other aspects, as a continuation of modern art's critical role, whereas for Adorno the critical function of art was guaranteed precisely by its separation from the rest of life. In what follows we shall attempt to explain how it was that the two authors arrived, despite a common starting-point, at opposite conclusions; we shall also see that Adorno ends up, in spite of himself, espousing the thesis of the exhaustion of art.

Debord maintained from the beginning of the 1950s that art was *already dead*, and that

it must be 'surpassed' by a new form of life and revolutionary activity – a form that would at once *preserve and realize the content* of modern art. An explanation of the fact that art once had a great part to play, but can no longer do so, is set forth in sections 180–91 of *The Society of the Spectacle*. There, Debord brings out the fundamental contradiction of art: in a society riven by separations, art's function is to represent the unity that has been lost and the social totality. But just as the notion that a part of the totality can replace the totality itself is manifestly contradictory, so too is culture once it becomes an autonomous sphere. It is precisely in its role as a replacement for what is missing from society – for dialogue, for a unity of life's different moments – that art must refuse to be nothing but the *image* of those lacks. Society has relegated communication to the cultural realm, but the progressive dissolution of traditional communities, from the *agora* to working-class neighborhoods, formerly the seedbeds of communication, means that the arts now register only the *impossibility of communication*. The process of destruction of formal values, from Baudelaire to Joyce and Malevich, testifies to art's refusal to be the fictive language of a now non-existent community; it also testifies to the necessity of *rediscovering* a common language that can support real 'dialogue' (SS §187). Modern art reached its acme, and came to an end, with the Dadaists and the Surrealists. These contemporaries of 'the proletarian revolutionary movement's last great offensive' (SS §191) strove, albeit imperfectly, to abolish *and* to realize art. The twin defeat of the political and artistic avant-gardes in the inter-war period brought the 'active' phase of art's decay to a close (IS, 1/14). Art had now arrived at the same point reached by philosophy with Hegel, Feuerbach and Marx: it now understood itself to be a form of alienation, a projection of human activity into a separate entity. Henceforth anyone who wished to remain faithful to the true *meaning* of culture could do so only by denying it *qua* culture,

and realizing it in the theory and practice of the critique of society. Thus the decay of the arts continued after 1930, but it now had a different significance. The self-destruction of the old idiom, once detached from the necessity of finding a new language, was coopted in 'defense of class power' (SS §184). The impossibility of all communication was recognized as a value in its own right, to be hailed joyfully or accepted as an unchanging fact of life. Such rehashings of the formal destruction of art as the Theater of the Absurd, the *nouveau roman*, the new abstract painting, or Pop Art no longer expressed history's dissolution of the social order: these tendencies stood for nothing but a flat copying of what exists invested with the objectively positive value of an 'unadorned claim that the dissolution of the communicable has a beauty all its own' (SS §192).

Adorno likewise acknowledges that by becoming autonomous and detaching itself from its practical function, art is no longer an immediate social fact and is now separate from 'life'. For him, however, this is the only way for art genuinely to contest society. Bourgeois society has created an art that is *necessarily* antagonistic to that society, regardless of its specific content (AT, 7–8, 12, 225–6). Art comes eventually to question its own autonomy, and begins to betray 'signs of blindness' (AT, 1). Adorno recognizes that art's crisis is so acute that 'not even its right to exist is self-evident any more' (*ibid.*); 'the revolt of art ... has become a revolt against art' (AT, 3). But when he evokes the thesis that 'the age of art is over; now it is a matter of realizing its truth content', he is certainly not in line with Debord's thinking on the matter. Indeed, he ends his thought by declaring such a conclusion 'totalitarian' (AT, 251). Adorno never had the opportunity to become acquainted with the Situationists' ideas, or to respond to them, but there is every reason to assume that had he done so, he would have assimilated their critique of art to that of the *contestataires* of 1968 whom he described as wanting to promote 'street battles' as a new form of beauty

and as recommending ‘jazz and rock-and-roll instead of Beethoven’ (AT, 319). Although the attack on art mounted by such people was in Adorno’s view far less original than they supposed (AT, 251, 319–20), he still looked upon their attitude as a very dangerous one, expressing ‘ego-weakness’, ‘an incapacity for sublimation’, or simply a ‘lack of talent’, which was ‘below, not above, culture’ (AT, 251). Adorno took this challenge to art to task, not on the grounds that it was an attack on the existing social and aesthetic status quo, but rather on the grounds that it was in harmony with that status quo, and indeed with its worst tendencies. A ‘demise of art’ so conceived would thus be ‘a gesture of conformism’ (AT, 319), because ‘the abolition of art in a half-barbaric society that is tending toward total barbarism makes itself barbarism’s social partner’ (AT, 251). Aspiring to realize the pleasure or truth attendant upon art directly, on the social plane, in no way runs counter to the logic of exchange, which expects of art, as of anything else, that it serve some kind of *utility*. For Adorno, art always embodies a social critique—even hermetic art, even art for art’s sake – precisely because of its autonomy and its ‘asocial’ character. He speaks explicitly of the antagonistic position that art takes toward society, a position it occupies only in its capacity ‘as autonomous art’. Likewise for him ‘there is nothing pure, nothing structured strictly according to its own immanent law, that does not implicitly criticize [...] a situation evolving in the direction of a total exchange society’ (AT, 225, 226). The art work owes its critical function to the fact that it ‘serves’ no purpose, neither the growth of knowledge, nor immediate gratification, nor yet a direct intervention in praxis. Adorno rejects all attempts to reduce art to any of these aims. ‘Only what does not submit to that principle acts as the plenipotentiary of what is free from domination; only what is useless can stand in for the stunted use-value. Artworks are plenipotentiaries of things that are no longer distorted by exchange’ (AT, 227).

Adorno and Debord thus reach opposite conclusions on the end of art. Since their respective theories have the same starting point, this is something that needs to be explained. Both of them discern the contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production as also in play within the realm of art. Despite their differences, the two adopt the same attitude with respect to the unfolding of economic and technological potentialities. Neither idealizes or rejects this development; rather, both see it as a *precondition*, which will eventually abolish itself, of a liberated society: ‘The economy’s triumph as an independent power inevitably also spells its doom, for it has unleashed forces that must eventually destroy the *economic necessity* that was the unchanging basis of earlier societies’ (SS §51). The development of the forces of production is now so far advanced as to allow humanity to emerge from what Adorno calls ‘blind self-preservation’, and what the Situationists call ‘survival’, and accede at last to authentic life. What prevents this are the relations of production, or in other words the existing social order; in Adorno’s view, ‘given the level of productive forces, the earth could here and now be paradise’ (AT, 33), whereas in actuality it is in the process of becoming an ‘open-air prison’.<sup>12</sup> Production relations founded on exchange condemn society to endless subjection by the imperatives of survival, creating what the Situationist Raoul Vaneigem calls ‘a world where the guarantee of freedom from starvation means the risk of death from boredom’.<sup>13</sup>

The reduction of life to mere ‘survival’ should also be understood in a broader sense, as meaning the subordination of the content of life to apparent external necessities. An example would be the refusal of city planners to entertain any proposals for a really different kind of architecture on the grounds that ‘people need a roof over their heads’ and that a great deal of housing is urgently needed (IS 6/7). As the Situationists put it in 1963:

The old schema of the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production should

certainly no longer be understood as an automatic short-term death sentence passed on capitalist production, as if this were bound to stagnate and become incapable of further development. But it should indeed be understood as a death sentence (yet to be executed, with whatever arms may be required) passed upon those niggardly and dangerous forms of development which this self-regulating production system is planning, the sheer magnificence of possible development notwithstanding. (IS 8/7; SIA, 104)

The economy and its organizers have served a useful function by liberating society from 'natural pressures', but society must still be 'liberated from [these] liberators' (SS §40). It is present-day social hierarchies which, in order to perpetuate themselves, ensure survival but bar life.

For their part, Horkheimer and Adorno write that 'By subjecting the whole of life to the demands of its maintenance, the dictatorial minority guarantees, together with its own security, the persistence of the whole' (DE, 31). The whole 'dialectic of enlightenment' turns on the fact that *ratio* fails to deploy its liberatory potential because from the outset it finds itself threatened by the overwhelming forces of nature and is therefore obliged to concentrate entirely on combating and subjugating those forces as far as it can. This struggle continues even once physical survival is no longer in jeopardy, thus subjecting humanity to fresh mutilations that are now not natural but social in origin: 'But the more the process of self-preservation is effected by the bourgeois division of labor, the more it requires the self-alienation of the individuals who must model their body and soul on technical apparatus' (DE, 29–30). The gigantic accumulation of means does not in itself suffice to make life richer, argues Adorno: 'A mankind which no longer knows want will begin to have an inkling of the delusory, futile nature of all the arrangements hitherto made in order to escape want, which used wealth to reproduce want on a larger scale'.<sup>14</sup> Debord says much the same thing: 'The reason there is nothing *beyond* augmented survival, and no end to its growth, is

that survival itself belongs to the realm of dis-possession: it may gild poverty, but it cannot transcend it' (SS §44). In criticizing the blind mechanism of economic laws and discussing the necessity for society's capacities to be brought under conscious control, Debord and Adorno sometimes even use the same references. Thus Debord writes, 'By the time society discovers that it is contingent on the economy, the economy has in point of fact become contingent on society. [...] Where economic id was, there ego shall be' (SS §52). Adorno attributes a comparable coming to consciousness, precisely, to art: 'Where id is, there shall ego be, says modern art along with Freud'.<sup>15</sup>

Adorno's entire aesthetics is predicated on the idea that the contradiction between the potential of the productive forces and their actual use can also be found in art. It makes sense to speak of 'aesthetic forces of production' because art too is a form of domination over objects, over nature: it does not leave these as they are, but makes use of a set of procedures and techniques, which it gradually refines and improves, in order to transform them. This is especially true of modern art, which does not confine itself to copying reality but restructures it completely according to its own rules – one has only to think of cubist and abstract painting, or of the suspension of the rules of ordinary experience in modern literature. The mastery of objects in art does not aim to subordinate nature, but to reinstate it: 'Through the domination of the dominating, art revises the domination of nature to the core' (AT, 138). As 'the social antithesis of society' (AT, 8), art presents society with examples of a possible use of its means that would enable it to relate to reality in a non-dominating, non-violent way: 'By their very existence artworks postulate the existence of what does not exist and thereby come into conflict with the latter's actual nonexistence' (AT, 59). Whereas material production is directed exclusively toward quantitative accumulation, art must represent such qualitative aims as the individual's

happiness, which scientific rationality looks upon as 'irrational' (AT, 43, 289, 331). By virtue of its 'uselessness', its wish to be solely for-itself and to elude the laws of universal exchange, the artwork frees nature from its role as mere instrument or means: 'It is only through the nonfungibility of its own existence and not through any special content that the artwork suspends empirical reality as an abstract and universal functional nexus' (AT, 135). This is not necessarily a conscious process. So long as art hews fast to the laws of its own development – and the radicalization of the avant-gardes was an instance of precisely that – it will reproduce within itself the level of development of the extra-aesthetic forces of production without, however, falling under the constraints that the relations of production impose in the normal way (AT, 43–4). An art whose techniques remain backward relative to the point reached at a given moment in the development of artistic productive forces is thus 'reactionary', and cannot offer an account of the complexity of the problems of the moment. This is one of the reasons for Adorno's condemnation of jazz, but it applies equally, for instance, to 'socialist realism'. Formalist art, by contrast, quite apart from any 'political' content it may have, expresses the evolution of society and its contradictions. 'The campaign against formalism ignores the fact that the form given to content is itself a sedimented content' (AT, 144). It also ignores the fact that 'Incomparably deeper and more socially relevant experiences can be sedimented in the *how* of a painting than in faithful portraits of generals or revolutionary heroes' (AT, 150).

Debord also uses the concept of 'aesthetic productive forces', and he too makes the parallel between these forces and extra-aesthetic productive forces the basis for his defense of the formalist tendency of art up until 1930, of which art's 'self-transcendence' was the historical outcome. Like Adorno, Debord sees art as the representation of social potentialities: 'What is termed culture reflects, but also

prefigures, the possibilities for the organization of life in a given society'.<sup>16</sup> And, again like Adorno, he postulates a link between the liberation of these potentialities in art on the one hand and in society on the other: 'We are trapped, in the cultural sphere also, by relations of production that stand opposed to the necessary development of productive forces. We have to demolish these traditional relationships, along with *the theses and fashions that they foster*'.<sup>17</sup> The realm of aesthetic productive forces had indeed experienced a rapid and inexorable development in which each innovation, once achieved, made its own repetition useless. Around 1955, *Potlatch*, the bulletin of the Debord group, variously asserted that painting after Malevich was breaking down doors already open (215), that the cinema likewise had exhausted its groundbreaking potential (139), and that onomatopoeic poetry on the one hand and neo-classical poetry on the other signaled the end of poetry itself (209). This 'vertiginously accelerated evolution' was henceforward 'running on empty' (178). In other words, the deployment of aesthetic productive forces is now complete, because the parallel deployment of extra-aesthetic productive forces has crossed a decisive threshold. This has made possible a society no longer entirely dedicated to productive labor, a society with the time and the wherewithal to permit 'play' and the pursuit of 'passions' – the pursuit, one might say, of that society's 'ends'. Art as simple *representation* of such possibilities, and as substitute for passion, has thus been transcended thanks to scientific progress, already responsible for making religion superfluous.<sup>18</sup>

At that time, Debord was not particularly suspicious of the development of productive forces per se, judging that the decisive issue is not the *content* of new technology but the matter of *who* will make use of it, and *how*. He identifies the domination of nature with freedom,<sup>19</sup> because it broadens the subject's activity, and he directs his critique at the backwardness of superstructures, of morality and

art, as compared with technological advances. Debord deems anachronistic not only traditional art but also the entire organization of human desires in the form of art. The role that art once played, but can no longer play, is to help adapt life to the particular state reached by the forces of production.<sup>20</sup>

In Adorno's work this line of thinking is complicated by the dual aspect that he ascribes to the forces of production. His critique does not confine itself to the subordination of productive forces to production relations, after the fashion of the Marxist tradition, nor to that growing autonomy of material production as a separate sphere – the economy – which is Debord's central theme. For Adorno, all material production, since it implies the domination of nature, is a subset of the general category of domination, and as such cannot be the bearer of freedom. The domination of nature has ever and always meant both a liberation of mankind from dependence on nature and the introduction of other forms of dependence. Adorno accentuates now one and now the other of these aspects. Thus in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the quantitative procedures of science and technology are seen as themselves forms of reification, whereas in 1966 Adorno wrote – alluding, perhaps, to Heidegger's then-fashionable critique of 'technological thinking' – that the tendency toward totalitarianism

should not be attributed to technology as such. [Technology] is merely one form of human productive power, an extension of the human arm even in the case of cybernetic machines, and hence but one moment in the dialectic between forces and relations of production, and not some third, demonic independent entity.<sup>21</sup>

In the same year he observed that 'with the expansion of the natural sciences, reification and reified consciousness also brought about the possibility of worldwide freedom from want' (ND, 191–2). Apropos of the twentieth century, Adorno asserts that it is impossible to speak of an opposition between forces and

relations of production: being substantially homogeneous as forms of domination, all have finally been fused into a single 'block'. State control of the economy and the 'integration' of the proletariat have been the decisive developments in this process. And, to return to the aesthetic question, under such circumstances art must not simply follow in the wake of the forces of production, it must also criticize their 'alienating' aspect.

If for Adorno art can continue to fulfill its 'disalienating' role, whereas for Debord it no longer can, this is largely because Debord takes alienation to mean the violation of subjectivity, whereas for Adorno subjectivity itself can easily become a form of alienation; indeed, in his later works, Adorno evinces a good deal of skepticism about the concept of alienation. Debord's conception of alienation is strongly influenced by the notion of reification, as developed by Georg Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness*, first published in 1923. Reification in Lukács's account is the phenomenal form of commodity fetishism, whereby the commodity as an 'ordinary, sensual' thing is invested with the characteristics of the human relationships that presided over its production. The extension of the commodity and its fetishism to the totality of social life causes human activity, which in reality is process and fluidity, to appear as a series of things that have been wrested from human control and follow no laws but their own. There is no modern problem, according to Lukács, 'that does not ultimately lead back to [...] the riddle of the commodity-structure'.<sup>22</sup> Everything, from the fragmentation of production procedures that seem to unfold quite independently of the workers, to the very structure of bourgeois thought, with its opposition between subject and object, led man to contemplate reality in a passive way that turns it into 'things', 'facts', and 'laws'. Forty years before Debord, Lukács described this human condition as that of a 'helpless onlooker'.<sup>23</sup> Later, Lukács repudiated these theories of his on the grounds that they repeated an error of Hegel's and



treated all objectivity as alienation. Debord was not unaware of this danger, and several times drew a distinction between objectification and alienation. For example, he opposed time, which, 'as Hegel showed [...] is a *necessary* alienation, being the medium in which the subject realizes himself while losing himself', to 'the alienation that now holds sway', which Debord describes as a 'spatial alienation' that 'radically severs the subject from the activity that it steals from him' (SS §161). In many respects, nonetheless, Debord's critique of the spectacle seems to resuscitate the need for an identical subject-object, as when he evokes 'life', understood as a fluid state in contradistinction to the spectacle's 'congealed form' (SS §35), or its 'visible freezing of life' (SS §170). We should not therefore be too surprised if from time to time Debord's critique of the commodity becomes a critique of the 'things' that reign over human beings. Neither Debord nor the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* doubt that a 'healthy', non-reified subjectivity could exist. Both authors discern such a subjectivity in the proletariat, but both hesitate in their definition of the proletariat between sociological and philosophical categories. In any event, the subjectivity in question is threatened *from without* by bourgeois ideology, or by the spectacle, but is in principle capable of resisting that threat.<sup>24</sup>

For Adorno, by contrast, it is 'subjectivism' and the subject's tendency to 'devour' the object (ND, 22–3) that alienate the subject from the world. Subject and object do not form some ultimate unsurpassable duality, nor may they be reduced to an ultimate unity, such as 'being'; rather, they 'constitute one another' (ND, 174). But according to Adorno the objective mediations of the subject are more significant than the subjective mediations of the object,<sup>25</sup> since the subject never ceases to be a form of existence of the object. To put it more concretely, nature can exist without man, but man cannot exist without nature. The subject-object as conceived of by Lukács is for Adorno an extreme expression

of those 'philosophies of identity' whose categories are means whereby the subject attempts to appropriate the world. The object is identified by means of categories set up by the subject, with the result that its identity, its status as *individuum ineffabile*, is lost, and it is reduced to identity with the subject. Such 'identifying thought' has knowledge of a thing only inasmuch as it fixes that thing as an exemplar of a type; it thus finds only what it has itself previously supplied and can never know the real identity of the object. The 'good' objectivity that gives objects back their independence stands in sharp contrast to an objectivity that indeed 'reifies', transforming man into a thing and the product of labor into a commodity-fetish. It is the identity imposed by the subject that deprives modern man of his 'identity'. 'The principle of absolute identity is self-contradictory. It perpetuates nonidentity in suppressed and damaged form' (ND, 318). In a world where any object is equivalent to the subject, the subject becomes a mere object, one thing among others. The negation of the identity of objects in favor of the identity of a subject that wishes to recognize itself everywhere as itself is linked by Adorno, albeit in a rather vague way, with the principle of equivalence, with abstract labor and with exchange-value. The reification that actually exists results from aversion to the object *tout court*, just as alienation results from the repression of what is different or alien: 'If the alien were no longer ostracized, there hardly would be any more alienation' (ND, 172), whereas at present 'the least surplus of nonidentity feels to the subject like an absolute threat [...] because it pretends to be the whole' (ND, 183). A unity of subject and object did not exist in the past: man never emerged out of some essence or *in-itself* (ND, 191) by the same token, the goal for the future is not an 'undifferentiated unity of subject and object', but rather 'the communication of what is differentiated'.<sup>26</sup> It should nevertheless be borne in mind here that these observations of Adorno's are directed at philosophies such as those of

the existentialists. His strictures are not particularly pertinent to the Situationists, who indeed take the spectacle to task for depriving subjects of the opportunity to lose themselves in events: 'Social alienation, though in principle surmountable, is nevertheless the alienation that has forbidden and petrified the possibilities and risks of a *living* alienation within time' (SS §161).

We can now better understand why Adorno defends art: he feels it can contribute to the supersession of the subject's dominance. Only in art can subject and object be 'reconciled'. In art the subject is the main productive force (AT, 42, 192) it is only in art, as for example in Romantic music, that the subject can freely develop itself and master its material without doing violence to it (which always, in the end, means doing violence to itself). Thus art is the 'representative' of that 'real life'<sup>27</sup> which is a condition of freedom from 'operation, planning, having one's way, subjugating', a condition wherein '*[ne] rien faire comme une bête*, floating in water and looking peacefully at the sky [...] might take the place of process, act, fulfillment [...]'.<sup>28</sup> True artistic praxis resides in just such a non-praxis, just such a rejection of instrumentality and of that much vaunted 'communication' which for Adorno is no more than a reciprocal acknowledgment of empirical subjects in their mere 'being-so' [*Sosein*]. The true subject in art must be the work and that which speaks through the work, and neither the artist nor the recipient subject, for 'communication is that adaptation of spirit to utility whereby spirit is made into one commodity among the rest' (AT, 74). Rimbaud, prototype of the avant-garde, was in Adorno's view 'the first artist of the highest importance who rejected communication' (AT, 316). 'Art now reaches people, moreover, solely by way of the sort of shock that strikes a blow against what pseudo-scientific ideology calls communication; art for its part achieves integrity only when it refuses to play along with communication' (AT, 321).

For Debord, the task of art was to augment the subject's activity and facilitate its communication. The prerequisites of such communication were assembled, for instance, under ancient Greek democracy. Their dissolution has resulted in the present absence of 'the prerequisites of communication *in general*' (SS §189), and the evolution of modern art has reflected that dissolution. The spectacle is defined as 'independent representation' (SS §19) and as 'the communication of the incommunicable' (SS §192). In 1963 *Internationale Situationniste* stated somewhat peremptorily that 'Wherever there is communication, there is no State' (IS 8/30; SIA, 115), and as early as 1958 Debord wrote that 'all forms of pseudo-communication must be brought down to utter destruction, so that one day a real, direct communication may be achieved' (IS 1/21) – no longer through art, but through a revolution that incorporates art's content.

It is worth recalling that the difference between Adorno's ideas and Debord's relates less to the question of what would be desirable in itself than to the question of what is actually possible at the present moment in history. Both Adorno and Debord criticize the relegation of rationality to the detached realm of culture. Adorno evokes 'the guilt [culture] incurred by isolating itself as a special sphere of spirit without realizing itself in the organization of society'.<sup>29</sup> And he too admits that, in a very general sense, 'in a society which had achieved satisfaction [...] the death of art [would] be possible'.<sup>30</sup> Or again: 'It is not inconceivable that humanity, once realized, would no longer need a closed, immanent culture' (AT, 320). He views this prospect as an extremely distant one, however, and although he acknowledges that art is simply a representation of something that is lacking (AT, 2), he adds that for the time being making that lack manifest must suffice, since it cannot be remedied: 'Whoever wants to abolish art cherishes the illusion that decisive change is not blocked' (AT, 251). What goes for art goes too for philosophy, 'which once seemed obsolete

[but] lives on because the moment to realize it was missed' (ND, 3). Even revolution does not strike Adorno as an impossibility; rather, it is no longer opportune: 'The proletariat to whom [Marx] appealed was not yet integrated into society: it was rapidly sinking into destitution, whereas on the other hand societal power did not yet command the means to assure overwhelming odds for itself in the event of any serious conflict'.<sup>31</sup> Until 1920 there was still a slight chance for revolution, and in this connection Adorno speaks in 1969 of 'What fifty years ago for a short period of time in the eyes of those who nourished the all too abstract and illusory hope for a total transformation might have appeared justified – that is, violence [...]'.<sup>32</sup> Adorno does not look upon art as too 'high' to have the individual's happiness as its aim, and, like Debord, he sees it as embodying a *promesse de bonheur*.<sup>33</sup> Unlike Debord, however, he does not believe this promise susceptible of direct realization; to the contrary, he considers that 'art must break its promise in order to stay true to it' (AT, 311).

With regard to the period from 1850 to 1930, Debord shared Adorno's convictions concerning the value of pure negativity. He believed, though, that a shift to the positive had become possible, not because of any improvement in social conditions, but because the *prerequisites* of such an improvement were now present. Adorno, on the other hand, assumed that any such conciliation in social reality was presently impossible and that there was no choice but to be satisfied with its evocation in great works of art. We are thus confronted by two opposing interpretations of the possibilities and limitations of modernity. In 1963, an optimistic editorial in the eighth issue of *Internationale Situationniste* was devoted to 'the new protest movement'; in the same year, Adorno was evoking 'a historical moment [...] where a praxis that would refer to the totality appears to be blocked everywhere'.<sup>34</sup>

This divergence does not hinge simply upon differing assessments of the situation

during the 1950s and 1960s; it also reflects profounder differences in the way in which the historical process itself is conceived by Adorno on the one hand, and Debord on the other. The concepts of exchange and alienation determine the rhythm each author assigns to historical transformations. For Debord, as for Lukács, alienation arises from the predominance of the commodity system in social life; it is thus associated with industrial capitalism, and has not existed for more than about two hundred years.<sup>35</sup> Within such a relatively brief period of time, changes occurring in the space of a decade may naturally assume great importance. By contrast, the changes of even a whole century can carry little weight for Adorno, whose yardsticks for measuring events are 'the priority of the object' and 'identity'. By 'exchange' he does not in the first instance mean the exchange of commodities embodying abstract labor – the origin of the preponderance of exchange-value over use-value on the social plane – but rather a suprahistorical 'exchange in general' that coincides with the entire *ratio* of the West. The antecedent here was the kind of sacrifice that sought to win the favor of the gods by means of an offering that soon became purely symbolic; this fraudulent aspect of sacrifice foreshadowed the fraud inherent to exchange. According to Adorno exchange is 'unfair' because it suppresses quality and individuality, and it did so long before it came to consist in the appropriation of surplus labor in the unequal relationship between labor-power and wages. Exchange and the Western *ratio* concur in the reduction of the multifariousness of the world to mere differing *quantities* of an indistinct substance, be it spirit, abstract labor, the numbers of mathematics, or science's matter devoid of quality.<sup>36</sup>

One gets the general impression that for Adorno the particularity of different historical periods fades in the face of the working of certain unchanging principles that have obtained since the beginning of history, such as domination and exchange. In *Dialectic of*

*Enlightenment*, the historical genesis of identifying concepts is ascribed to a very ancient epoch. Whereas 'the shaman's rites were directed towards the wind, the rain, the serpent, or the demon in the sick man, but not to materials or specimens' (DE, 9), the division between the thing and its concept had already begun in the animistic period with the distinction between the tree in its physical presence and the spirit that dwells within it (DE, 15). Logic arose from the earliest relationships of hierarchical subordination (DE, 21), and the identification of things by means of their ordering by kind begins with the 'I' that remains identical through time. 'Unity is the slogan, from Parmenides to Russell. What is continually insisted upon is the destruction of gods and qualities' (DE, 8) – which means that the same 'reason' applied in the Presocratic period applies today. For Adorno, therefore, it ought to be well-nigh impossible to surmount reification, for he sees it as rooted in society's very deepest structures. He refuses, however, to treat it as some kind of anthropological or ontological constant: 'It takes untruthfulness to push reification back into Being and into a history of Being, to mourn and consecrate as "fate" what might perhaps be changed by self-reflection and by the action it kindles' (ND, 91). The wall between the subject and the object is not an 'ontological wall', but a wall built by history, and it can be transcended on the historical level: 'If no one any longer had part of their living labor withheld, rational identity would be a fact, and society would have transcended the identifying mode of thinking' (ND, 147).

Despite such assurances, it remains unclear how reification could really be overcome, if indeed, as Adorno argues, it resides in the very structure of language: even the copula 'is' conceals the principle of identity, that is to say, the identification of a thing by means of its identification with another thing that it *is not* (ND, 100–104, 147–8). In predicative sentences, the object in question is identified by virtue of its 'depreciation [to] a mere

sample of its kind or species' (ND, 146). If the 'identical I' already contains a society divided into classes,<sup>37</sup> and if thought in general is 'complicit' with ideology (ND, 148), then finding the 'way out' that Adorno seeks promises to be a laborious quest. Meanwhile Adorno also seems to locate whatever hope the future may hold outside concrete history, in a 'state of reconciliation' that he compares to a religious state of 'redemption' (AT, 6).

Adorno seems occasionally to suggest that revolution, and the realization of philosophy, were real possibilities around 1848. Subsequently the fusion of the forces and relations of production stripped all progressive value from the development of the productive forces, nullified any prospect of revolution, and even set in motion a kind of regressive anthropogenesis. Since that time, only art has experienced progress. 'That according to Hegel art was once the adequate stage of spirit and no longer is' – this is also Debord's view – 'demonstrates a trust in the real progress of the consciousness of freedom that has since been bitterly disappointed. If Hegel's theorem of art as the consciousness of needs is compelling, it is not outdated' (AT, 208). Regression to barbarity and a definitive triumph of totalitarianism are in Adorno's view ever-present dangers, while the positive role of art is to represent at least the possibility of a different world, of a free deployment of the forces of production. Art thus takes on the aspect of the lesser evil: 'Today the thwarted possibility of something other has shrunk to that of averting catastrophe in spite of everything' (ND, 323). Adorno notes an invariability in the avant-gardes: for him, Beckett plays more or less the same role as Baudelaire. He attributes this stagnation to the seamless permanence of the situation described above – the situation, precisely, of modernity. He conceives of modern art not only as a historical phase but also as a kind of category of spirit. He acknowledges this himself, writing that the tendency of modern art to represent industry only by putting it in brackets 'has changed as little as has the

fact of industrialization for the life process of human beings; for the time being, this grants the aesthetic concept of the modern its peculiar invariance' (AT, 34).

Modernism emerged as something qualitatively new, something different from exhausted models; for this reason it is not purely temporal; this helps to explain why on the one hand it acquired those invariable features for which its critics gladly indict it and why, on the other hand, the new cannot simply be dismissed as being obsolete. (AT, 271–2)

The Situationist distinction between an active, critical phase in the formal decomposition of traditional art, and a second phase characterized by the empty repetition of the first, ought, therefore, to clash with Adorno's position in that it assumes a possibility of a radical change in society that for Adorno has become inconceivable. In point of fact, however, Adorno seems to have some doubts of his own regarding the permanence of modern art. His defense of modernism is always based on the same figures: first and foremost Kafka and Schoenberg, and then Joyce, Proust, Valéry, Wedekind, Trakl, Borchardt, Klee, Kandinsky, Masson and Picasso; his philosophy of music reposes almost exclusively on the Vienna School (Schoenberg, Webern and Berg). When Adorno speaks of modernity, he is referring in fact to the period from 1910 to 1930, and especially to expressionism, and thus to the moment considered by the Situationists to be the pinnacle and end of the unity of art. With the exception of Samuel Beckett and a very few others, artists and tendencies that emerged after the Second World War receive scarcely more consideration from him than they do from the Situationists. Even though he had 24 years to observe post-war artists, Adorno either ignored them, as he did, for instance, Yves Klein, Pollock or Fluxus, or condemned their efforts, as in the case of the 'happening' (AT, 103). Pierre Boulez has recalled that, in the 1950s, his generation of composers saw Adorno as representing a musical movement of the past, while Adorno himself was full of

doubts concerning this new generation, and wrote of 'the aging of the new music'.<sup>38</sup> The phenomenon that Debord described as the destruction of already decayed structures 'over a low flame' so as to derive some further advantage from them<sup>39</sup> was also targeted by Adorno: 'If a possibility for innovation is exhausted, if innovation is mechanically pursued in a direction that has already been tried, the direction of innovation must be changed' (AT, 22).

In Adorno's view the deployment of society's productive forces has unquestionably reached the point of being simply an end in itself. It is hard to see, however, why such a stagnant situation, when it lasts for over a century, should not eventually throw the development of *aesthetic* productive forces into the same stagnation. These forces might well continue to evolve for a time even in the absence of a corresponding development at the level of society overall, but the process must surely have some limit. The fact is that Adorno was perfectly aware of the serious crisis facing modern art and skeptical of the meaningfulness of a great deal of the artistic experiments of the 1950s and 1960s. Nor was this awareness contradicted by his passionate defense of Samuel Beckett, whom the Situationists by contrast cited as an example of complacent acceptance of nothingness. It should be noted that Adorno described Beckett as representative of the last stage of art, not as evidence of art's vitality. With the benefit of hindsight, one might be tempted to treat the difference between the two views as reducible to the simple question of whether the activity of the 'last artists' should be placed in the 1930s or in the 1950s.

In 1952 Debord, then 20 years old, first showed his film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*.<sup>40</sup> For the first half-hour of this film the screen is empty, alternately white and black, while the soundtrack is made up of a collage of miscellaneous texts; the final 24 minutes leave the audience in complete darkness and silence.<sup>41</sup> It is a curious fact that in this

film of Debord's we encounter every feature that Adorno admired in modern art, and especially in Beckett: the absence of communication; the deliberate frustration of the spectator in his expectation that the work will serve to 'mollify alienation' (AT, 170) and his exposure to the maximum reification possible; and a strictly enforced 'prohibition on images'. The film even conforms with Adorno's prescription as to color: 'To survive reality at its most extreme and grim, artworks that do not want to sell themselves as consolation must equate themselves with that reality. Radical art today is synonymous with dark art; its primary color is black' (AT, 39). And yet it is precisely here that one may discern the great difference between Debord and Adorno: for Debord, who can hardly be accused of excessive modesty, his film was the extreme point of negativity in art, due to be followed by a new positivity. For Adorno such a development was impossible, since 'negation may reverse into pleasure, not into affirmation' (AT, 40). In 1963, apropos of Debord's film, *Internationale Situationniste* noted that 'the real action of the negative avant-garde' had never been 'an avant-garde of pure absence, but always a *staging of the scandal of absence* intended to invoke a desired presence' (IS 8/19). In the same article, the fact that the audience at the première of *Hurléments en faveur de Sade* became furious and disrupted the film was deemed a successful outcome, for it meant that the spectators had refused their role as consumers and escaped from the logic of the work of art. The Situationists ridiculed almost all the artistic production of their contemporaries, dubbing it 'neo-Dadaism' and denouncing it as 'comfortably ensconced in insignificance'<sup>42</sup> and as an 'apologetic trashcan art' (IS 9/41; SIA, 144).

In response to the question whether or not the last decades have in fact produced works of value, both Adorno and Debord offer statements that are essentially little more than personal opinions. Thus Adorno delights in the notion that 'The making of every authentic

work contradicts the pronouncement that no more can be made' (AT, 251), while Debord declares dispassionately, in his preface to the 1985 reprint edition of *Potlatch*, that 'the judgment of *Potlatch* concerning the end of modern art seemed very excessive in the context of the thinking of 1954. We now know [...] that since 1954 not a single artist, anywhere at all, has emerged who could be considered worthy of the slightest attention'.<sup>43</sup>

## Notes

- 1 The ideas of the Situationist International are not always identical with those of Debord. We cite them here, however, when there is no significant difference.
- 2 It should be noted that Adorno's and Debord's critical uses of the concepts of 'exchange' and 'economy' – which have a common root in Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, as I shall explain later on, but that each of them has elaborated independently – was an important break with traditional Marxism, for which 'exchange' and 'economy' were neutral categories which could be either used in a 'bourgeois' or in a 'socialist' mode. Nevertheless, their reference to these categories of Marx's critique of political economy shows also important limits. They overlook the fact that exchange-value is only the phenomenal form of *value* which is created by the abstract side of labor. Stressing the 'exchange' dimension, they implicitly locate the origin of value (but the question is not clearly raised) in the *circulation* sphere, not in that of *abstract labor*. This last is not well understood either by Adorno or by Debord, and this often leads them to relapse involuntarily into traditional Marxist views. In this chapter, I lay out the problem in the terms they use themselves. For a criticism from the viewpoint of the 'critique of value' I refer the reader to my *Guy Debord* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), and especially to my *Les Aventures de la valeur. Pour une nouvelle critique de la valeur* (Paris: Denoël, 2003).
- 3 The most frequently cited works are indicated by the following abbreviations: SS = Guy Debord, *The Society of Spectacle* [1967], trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), citations being to section (§) rather than page number, and thus valid for all editions; IS = *Internationale Situationniste* (1958–69), the journal of the group of the same name, citations being to issue number and page; AT = Theodor W. Adorno,

- Aesthetic Theory* [1970], ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); DE = Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [1947], trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1997); ND = Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* [1966], trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973); SIA = *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (1981). Sometimes the English translations quoted have been modified.
- 4 In recent years the term 'society of the spectacle' has been widely used in a journalistic context to refer to the tyranny of television and the like, but Debord himself held the view that the 'mass media' were merely the spectacle's 'most stultifying superficial manifestation' (SS §24). According to Debord, the global structure of all existing societies including those in Eastern Europe, was 'spectacular' – a particularly bold thesis in 1967.
  - 5 Theodor W. Adorno, 'On Subject and Object' [1969], in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 253.
  - 6 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Gesellschaft', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 8: *Soziologische Schriften I*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), pp. 13–14.
  - 7 Adorno had already arrived at this conclusion in the 1930s. See *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 14: *Dissonanzen: Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie* [1956], ed. Rolf Tiedemann et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), pp. 24–5.
  - 8 Guy Debord, *Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of 'The Society of the Spectacle'* [1979], trans. Michel Prigent and Lucy Forsyth (London: Chronos, 1983), p. 21.
  - 9 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Prologue to Television' [1953], in *Critical Models*, pp. 49, 53.
  - 10 See Theodor W. Adorno, 'Culture Industry Reconsidered' [1967], trans. Anson G. Rabinbach, in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 92.
  - 11 *Ibid.*, p. 91.
  - 12 Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms* [1955], trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (London: Neville Spearman, 1967), p. 34.
  - 13 Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life (Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations)* [1967], trans. D. Nicholson-Smith, second revised edition (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), p. 4.
  - 14 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* [1951], trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), pp. 156–7.
  - 15 Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber NicholSEN (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991–2), vol. 2, p. 106.
  - 16 Guy Debord, « Rapport sur la construction des situations et sur les conditions de l'organisation et de l'action de la tendance situationniste internationale » [1957], in *Internationale Situationniste* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1997), p. 689; partial English translation in SIA, p. 17.
  - 17 Guy Debord, *Guy Debord présente Potlatch* [1954–7], (Paris: Gallimard, Collection Folio, 1996), p. 274.
  - 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 143–4.
  - 19 See for example Debord, *Rapport*, p. 696.
  - 20 After 1970, Debord became much more critical about the role of technology and the development of the forces of production, and even before that date he had no confidence in the notion that technological and scientific progresses would automatically cause social progress.
  - 21 Adorno, *Soziologische Schriften I*, p. 16.
  - 22 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* [1923], trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press/Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), p. 83.
  - 23 *Ibid.*, p. 90.
  - 24 Here, and throughout this article, no account is taken of the somewhat different views expressed later by Debord in his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* [1988], trans. Malcolm Imrie (London and New York: Verso, 1990).
  - 25 Adorno, 'On Subject and Object', p. 250.
  - 26 *Ibid.*, p. 247.
  - 27 Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Artist as Deputy', in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, pp. 107–108.
  - 28 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 157.
  - 29 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America', in *Critical Models*, p. 241.
  - 30 Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music* [1949], trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 15.
  - 31 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Why Still Philosophy' [1962], in *Critical Models*, p. 14.
  - 32 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Marginalia to Theory and Praxis' [1969], in *Critical Models*, p. 268.
  - 33 Debord, *Potlatch*, p. 205.
  - 34 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Introduction to *Eingriffe: Neun kritische Modelle*' [1963], in *Critical Models*, p. 4.
  - 35 This does not necessarily imply any positive judgment of earlier societies, which experienced other forms of alienation.
  - 36 We see here that the confusion between value and exchange-value, which is clearly a very specific problem of Marx's theory, neglected by

nearly all Marxists, can lead to important consequences: the core of capitalism, and of capitalism alone – namely the fetishistic transformation of human activity into ‘value’ – becomes for Adorno just a particular case of the suprahistorical category of ‘exchange’, based on giving-and-taking-relationships of all kinds, even those with the gods.

37 See Adorno, ‘On Subject and Object’, p. 258.

38 ‘Du Domaine musical à l’Ircam’, interview with Pierre Boulez by Pierre-Michel Menger, *Le Débat* 50, May–August 1988, p. 259.

39 Debord, *Potlatch*, p. 273.

40 The script of this film is in Guy Debord, *Oeuvres cinématographiques complètes* [1978] (Paris: Gallimard, 1994); English translation by Richard

Parry, ‘Howlings in Favor of Sade’, in Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle and Other Films* (London: Rebel Press, 1992) and by Ken Knabb, ‘Howls for Sade’, in Guy Debord, *Complete Cinematic Works* (Oakland, CA, 2003).

41 In view of the date, this film may be considered an important step in the radicalization of modern art. Debord asserts that the painter Yves Klein was present at the screening and that the film was the inspiration for Klein’s later monochrome paintings (Guy Debord, *Considérations sur l’assassinat de Gérard Lebovici* (Paris: Gérard Lebovici, 1995), p. 46; trans. Robert Greene (Los Angeles: Tam Tam Books, 2001)).

42 Debord, *Rapport*, p. 692.

43 Debord, *Potlatch*, p. 9.



# Workerism and Critical Theory

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Translated by Memphis Krickeberg

Workerism and the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory played a crucial part in the development of the 1960s Italian and German extra-parliamentary left. Both attempted to reactivate the meaning of the Marxian concept of 'critique'. This chapter explores the conceptions of critique developed by these two traditions in order to establish a critical dialogue between them.<sup>1</sup>

Frankfurt School Critical Theory, with *Dialectic of Enlightenment*<sup>2</sup> as its fundamental text, intends to account for the *failure* of the post-1917 revolutionary period, for the rise of authoritarian and fascist political phenomena as well as for the processes of mass culture and integration which characterize its concept of late capitalism. Critical Theory thus represents a tradition rooted in a foundational paradox, i.e., the will to maintain the emancipatory inspiration of critical reflexivity as elaborated in *Traditional Theory and Critical Theory* by Horkheimer while simultaneously acknowledging the closure of political hope and the disappearance of the

historical subject that had been destined to realize it.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, workerism proposes to reopen the question of historical and political antagonism. Indeed the mutations of post-war Italian capitalism, characterized by a massive influx of labour power from Southern Italy in the big factories of the North then in full Fordist restructuring, inspired the members of *Quaderni Rossi* and later of *Classe operaia* to relaunch an inquiry into the class composition of the proletariat in order to establish its revolutionary potential. The emergence of the unqualified 'mass-worker', alien to workers' traditions and identities, hostile to traditional forms of political organization, signalled the irruption of a new type of antagonist subjectivity as well as the beginning of a new cycle of struggle which workerism sought to theorize.

To put it in starkly contrasting terms, melancholic reflections on the 'end of hope' in the wake of 1917 on the one hand, attempts to relaunch the revolutionary movement on the other: Frankfurt Critical Theory and

workerism seemingly belong to different worlds. Should we conclude therefore that dialogue between these two traditions is impossible and satisfy ourselves with opposing historical pessimism to the theory/practice of antagonism? We do not think so. One could for example recall that a text such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* contributed to the intellectual formation of many *operaisti*, or that *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, a work in which Alfred Sohn-Rethel, a close collaborator of the Institute for Social Research, attempts to derive the categories of the understanding from the forms of commodity exchange, was translated and published by the Institute for Political Science of Padua where Antonio Negri and his friends elaborated the guiding hypotheses of workers autonomy.<sup>4</sup> We could also emphasize the proximity of certain philosophical themes elaborated by Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Mario Tronti, all of whom rejected the idea of history as progressive<sup>5</sup> and compare the workerist practice of ‘worker’s inquiry’ to the empirical studies carried out by the Institute for Social Research on employees and the authoritarian personality.<sup>6</sup> But we feel that it is primarily the shared intellectual and political matrix of these traditions that allow for a dialogue between Critical Theory and *operaismo*.

## THE LUKÁCSIAN MATRIX

Workerism and Critical Theory’s elaborations are rooted in a common matrix: that of 1920s west-European Marxist tradition of Korsch and, more fundamentally, Lukács. We argue that workerism and Frankfurt Critical Theory represent two possible developments of the two main theses articulated by Lukács in his 1923 seminal work: *History and Class Consciousness*.<sup>7</sup>

In the main article of *History and Class Consciousness*, ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat’, Lukács

articulates a critique of capitalism as a reified social totality with a theory of revolutionary praxis. On the one hand, he assigns to theory the task of exposing the various processes through which social relations present themselves as a ‘second nature’, that is, as entirely reified and thus as seemingly removed from any attempt at revolutionary transformation. It is this critique of reification that Critical Theory develops. But, on the other hand, Lukács also explains that the proletariat is the producer of our world and the collective subject of its historicity while at the same time the victim of its workings and the object of its reproduction. For Lukács, therefore, the proletariat represents the only class capable of knowing and transforming the world. And it is the subversive potential of the subjective contradiction entailed in labour-power – as the productive power of capitalist development and as the disruptive power of its further progress – that workerist theories explore.

However, Lukács’ two theses can seem contradictory: if society is totally reified, how can one even imagine transforming it? His solution lies in his conception of political organization. For Lukács, the party is the true consciousness of the false totality. It materializes the knowledge of reification that the proletarians could objectively acquire according to their position in the social relations. Through its actions and slogans, it presents the workers with the image of the political autonomy they can aspire to. By assigning a historical goal to the class, it participates in its very constitution as a political subject. But in order to do so, and inasmuch as revolutionary consciousness is unequally developed among them, it has to be relatively separated from the spontaneous movements of the workers. But this speculative interpretation of Leninist vanguardism seems to merely displace the contradiction between the critique of reification and the theory of proletarian revolution. Indeed, Lukács does not ask nor explain why the party, which is part of the reified totality it aims at transforming, is not itself affected by reification.

With the bureaucratization of the communist movement in the aftermath of the October revolution, it will not be possible to repress this contradiction any longer. This is why we can sum up the *problematique* workerism and Critical Theory inherited from Lukács as follows: given that the latter's 'Leninist' conception of political organization has fallen into crisis, how can one simultaneously criticize the process of reification of all spheres of life under the logic of capitalist wealth, that is value as surplus value, money as more money, and keep open the possibility of an antagonism sufficiently strong to break up the reproduction of the reified social relations and establish an emancipated society? Reification and antagonism represent the two conceptual indicators we will use to explore workerism and Critical Theory.

To that end, we begin by examining how Raniero Panzieri and Friedrich Pollock applied Lukács' idea of an extension of the capitalist logic to the whole of society. Then we consider the conclusions that Mario Tronti and Theodor Adorno drew from their diagnoses. Finally we compare the treatment by post-workerism of the themes of reification and antagonism with the theses developed by Hans-Jürgen Krahl in *Konstitution and Klassenkampf* [*Constitution and Class Struggle*].

## STATE CAPITALISM AND NEOCAPITALISM: THE TOTALITARIAN TURN OF CAPITALISM

The importance of Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* in twentieth-century thought lies in his synthesis of two major currents of thought which deal with the epochal transformations brought about by industrialization and the concomitant rise of the bureaucratic state in western societies: the *Kulturkritik* developed by Georg Simmel and Max Weber on the one hand, and the social critique represented by Marxism on

the other. For Lukács indeed, capitalism is not just characterized by the exploitation of the 'free' labourer but, also, by a tendency towards the solidification of social relations. The reifying effects of this development express themselves in the type of rationality mobilized by science and philosophy as well as in the way individuals become mere character masks (Adorno) of autonomized social functions. In other words, for Lukács, capitalism is not reducible to a form of 'economy': it constitutes a real historical world, a total system which deeply transforms all aspects of human existence.

The Lukácsian intuition that capitalism should be conceived of as a totality is fundamental to the theory of 'state capitalism' developed by Friedrich Pollock in the 1940s. It is also fundamental to the theory of 'neo-capitalism' that was elaborated at the beginning of the 1960s in the pages of *Quaderni Rossi* by Raniero Panzieri, a thorough reader of both Lukács and Pollock.

### **Friedrich Pollock: The 'Statification' of Capital and the Primacy of Politics**

With the concept of 'state capitalism', Pollock seeks to systematize the understanding, shared by numerous representatives of 'Western Marxism',<sup>8</sup> that all developed countries, ranging from Nazi Germany, western democracies (including New Deal Keynesianism in the United States), to the Soviet Union, are heading, to various degrees, towards forms of 'administered capitalism'. Presented as a simple 'ideal-type', state capitalism is actually understood to constitute a new *phase* of capitalist development. From a technical point of view, state capitalism first implies the development of industrial production on a massive scale as well as the elaboration of basically Keynesian policy tools for adjusting production and consumption, thereby precluding the possibility of economic crises. From an institutional point

of view however, state capitalism is characterized by the separation of capitalist property from the function of management as well as by the concomitant transfer of the economic functions of the individual capitalists to the state which acts as a 'collective capitalist'. Pollock thus conceives of the market as a form of mediation between production and consumption characteristic of liberal capitalism and argues that this market-mediated form of social reproduction is in the process of giving way to bureaucratic planning. Commodities no longer objectify the socially necessary labour time required for their production – *abstract labour* – but instead the political requirements of population control, *concrete domination*.<sup>9</sup> This diagnosis constitutes the objective basis of the dystopia of Western rationality that Adorno and Horkheimer elaborate in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, according to which the totalitarian character of domination in late capitalism represents the original domination of external and internal nature in the form of quasi systemic processes.

However, contrary to what Adorno and Horkheimer suggest in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for Pollock capitalist planning does not imply the complete depoliticization qua *integration* of the social conflict, but its *displacement* from the economic sphere to the political-bureaucratic sphere. In state capitalism, the main contradiction does not necessarily appear in the form of the class antagonism between labour and capital but rather in the form of an opposition between the state and a society that has been reduced to 'an integrated unit comparable to one of the modern giants in steel, chemical or motorcar production'.<sup>10</sup> When the whole of society transforms itself into a factory organized by the state, class struggle transforms itself into a conflict between those who have at their disposal the political means of coercion and those they govern, or pretend to govern, a conflict whose major issue can be summed up as follows: who decides which needs deserve to be satisfied

and upon the way and means of satisfying them?

### **Raniero Panzieri: Neocapitalism and Workers' Centrality**

In 'Surplus-Value and Planning', Panzieri adheres faithfully to Pollock's analyses when it comes to thematizing economic planning in what he calls neocapitalism. He identifies as neocapitalist in character the scientification of the production process, the growing importance of finance capital in the accumulation cycle, including the regulation of competition through formation of monopolies and financial concentration of credit in the form of big banks. According to Panzieri, these phenomena render obsolete the opposition between 'the anarchy of the market' and the 'factory despotism' on which the identification of communism with planning had traditionally rested.<sup>11</sup>

For Panzieri however, these transformations do not suggest its mutation into a statist mode of production. Instead they allow us to grasp what is specific about capitalism as a coherent and unified mode of production; not competition but planning. Building upon the analyses of cooperation developed in chapter 14 of *Capital*, Panzieri indeed reminds us that capitalism does not become socially dominant before having subsumed the process of production in real terms, that is, by totally restructuring it to achieve conformity with the requirements of valorization. The paradox of real subsumption is that it mystifies the historical specificities of the capitalist mode of production. When the valorization process transforms the labour process into a process of valorization, the material means of production seem to become 'natural' embodiments of value. Similarly, the technical rationality as well as the despotic organization of cooperation reified in the machine system present themselves as the trans-historical conditions of the development of the productive forces. In this perspective, the

identification of socialism with the liberation of productive forces from the fetters imposed upon them by the relations of production turns out to be nothing other than the political reflection of real subsumption: a second-degree fetishism.

In fact, as Panzieri explains, the main vector of real subsumption is planning. Capitalist planning has to be conceived of as the immediate unity between the alienation of the worker's cooperative capacities in the machine system on the one hand, and the appropriation of those capacities by the capitalist on the other. Hence, whereas for Pollock capitalist planning depoliticizes the relations of production, for Panzieri it constitutes on the contrary a form of class struggle that is intrinsically political i.e., it characterizes the economy as entirely antagonistic. Thus as the different 'workers' investigations' conducted by the *Quaderni Rossi* group showed, workers are led by their daily experience not only to demystify the reified forms of capitalist valorization but, also, to organize their own resistance beyond individual revolt or trade unions organization. In conclusion, the extension of despotic planning from the factory to society, from the process of production to the process of circulation, makes factory struggles (workers' counter-planning in the workshop) appear retrospectively as the fundamental condition of capitalist crisis.<sup>12</sup>

## POLITICS OF THE NON-IDENTICAL

Both Pollock's theory of state capitalism and Panzieri's analysis of neocapitalism point towards the emergence of new forms of social negativity in administrated capitalism. Within this theoretical-political constellation, Adorno's intervention proves to be deeply original as it consists in conceiving of negativity as such under the category of the 'non-identical', independently of its subjective incarnations: 'in the unreconciled

condition, non-identity is experienced as negativity'.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Theodor Adorno: Administered World, Real Abstraction and Damaged Life***

A number of texts and conceptual elaborations of Adorno discuss the Pollockian idea of a historical period characterized by state domination and bureaucracy. In 'Late Capitalism or Industrial Society' Adorno writes,

Contemporary society exhibits, in spite of all assertions to the contrary, as its dynamism and increase of production, static aspects. These include the relations of production. These are no longer merely the property of the owner, but of the administration, all the way to the role of the state as total capitalist.<sup>14</sup>

Ever since *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno defend the thesis of a life totally administered in late capitalism. A thesis which tightly connects the critique of rationality (as instrumental rationality, as the logic of objectification and mutilating subsumption) to the critique of capitalist forms of socialization (commodity exchange as the space of social synthesis, as the mode of social interactions instituting a regime of domination of abstract-value). 'The critique of society, Adorno writes, is a critique of knowledge and vice versa',<sup>15</sup> so that the categorical abstraction of philosophical discourse reflects the abstraction operated through the process of exchange. Thus, Adorno's and Horkheimer's theoretical apparatus aims at no less than thinking through the isomorphic rationality and the social logic of exchange, thereby conferring to the hypothesis of total administration its full philosophical significance. One and the same process of reduction through equivalence, quantification and objectification takes place here:

The [exchange] principle, the reduction of human labour to the abstract universal concept of average

working hours, is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification. [Exchange] is the social model of the principle, and without the principle there would be no [exchange]; it is through [exchange] that non-identical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical.<sup>16</sup>

In his sociological writings, Adorno concretizes this thesis: the cultural industry, consumer society, the bureaucratic control of mass movements, the integration of all singularities under the regime of commodity abstraction lead him to a conception of the social in which phenomena of standardization and homogenization play a leading role. Capitalism is not only characterized as a system based on exploitation but also as a devalued, mutilated and damaged 'life form'. Henceforth the notion of 'administered world' has to be interpreted as an actualization of the Lukácsian critique of reification. From this perspective, notwithstanding its Pollockian accents, the Adornian notion of 'administered world' cannot be merely reduced to the thesis of the primacy of political domination. Indeed, as indicated by the above quote, Adorno maintains a conception of domination based on the capitalist social relations of production and their appearance in equivalent exchange relations that are governed by law. Reification thus appears as a modality of the abstract form of social domination imbedded in the logic of value production. And correlatively, the 'non-identical' appears as what is mutilated by social abstraction, and as what resists the false totality.

What Adorno opposes to reification is indeed not social and political antagonism, as in Lukács or Panzieri, but the 'non-identical'. Inasmuch as social antagonism is innate to the false world, the only way to disrupt the false totality is to consider negativity as the resistance of the heterogeneous. Negativity, for Adorno is less related to a 'strategic' problematique than to a conception attached to the *micrologic* paradigm. Indeed, for the author of *Minima Moralia*, the inversion of the figure of the revolutionary producer into

the figure of a mass consumer as well as the internalization of capitalist ideology into the social psyche entails fabrication of the individual as a consumer beyond class. Whereas Adorno's contemporary Marcuse, on the basis of a similar diagnosis, concludes that social conflict has been externalized towards marginal, counter-cultural figures,<sup>17</sup> Adorno embarks on a phenomenology of damaged life whose challenge resides in capturing those rare moments of negativity which resist capitalist modes of subjectivation (for example the autonomous work of art or what Adorno calls 'knowledge Utopia', which he conceives of as a form of 'critical-epistemic' messianism). Paradoxically, Adorno's reluctance to interpret the various events and upheavals of his time (student revolts, counter-culture, anti-imperialist and feminist struggles) as manifestations of a revolutionary conjuncture positions him as a coherent Marxist. Indeed, if it is true that late capitalism has completed the totalization and mutilation of experience, then no *praxis* can claim any emancipatory privilege. With his rejection of activism, Adorno confronts us with a dilemma which, according to Hans-Jürgen Krahl, the traumatic experience of fascism prevented him from tackling:<sup>18</sup> 'how can a capitalist society come into contradiction with the production process of capital?'.<sup>19</sup>

### **Mario Tronti: Capitalist Totality and Worker Partiality**

Tronti's *Workers and Capital*, published at the same time as *Negative Dialectics* (1966), reformulates the Panzierian description of neocapitalism in a quasi Adornian manner.<sup>20</sup> It is true, Tronti explains, that social experience is from now on entirely determined by the mediations through which capital reproduces itself as a social totality. For the Italian philosopher, 'the social' is indeed not the contrary to 'the economic'. 'The social' is what materializes constant capital

(the infrastructures, urbanity, including means of transportation and communication) and what unifies the cycle of capitalist accumulation. To take but three examples: commodity exchange connects all individuals with each other as sellers and buyers, schools socialize labour-power and the family reproduces it. Hence, for Tronti, society objectifies itself in the form of social capital:

At the highest level of capitalist development, the social relation is transformed into a moment of the relation of production, the whole of society is turned into an articulation of production, that is, the whole of society lives as a function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive domination to the whole of society.<sup>21</sup>

The term social capital thus connotes a transformation of the capitalist production relations into society at large, into a social factory. Tronti thus speaks about the emergence of an 'organic' unity of 'capitalist production and bourgeois society'.<sup>22</sup> His reading of capitalist transformation appears as a politicized version of some of Adorno's arguments. As Tronti points out, capitalist objectification of social experience implies a socialization of capital to the extent that the latter tends to identify with society 'in general' and therefore disappears in the experience of society as a historically specific mode of production. But this process of fetishization of the social relations contains a moment of truth: when workers painfully experience their existence as character masks of 'variable capital' in their daily social life, they become totally alien to society as well as to themselves as mere carriers of labour power. From this perspective, the integration of the proletariat into the social reproduction of capital cannot be unilaterally conceived of as disempowering. In fact, it also implies an increasing vulnerability of capital to the different forms of social refusal practised by workers (political organization, sabotage, absenteeism, illegal actions) as well as to various subversive actions by which proletarians negate themselves as mere

personifications of valorization. Tronti's account thus suggests that the Frankfurt School critique of mass consumption, cultural industrialization and their reifying effects needs to be complemented with an analysis of the composition of the mass-worker and its antagonistic potential, for 'within the class, only the "alienated" worker is truly revolutionary'.<sup>23</sup>

From an Adornian perspective, however, we should recognize that when the universal realizes itself in the form of total domination of value, the identification of the proletariat with a 'universal class', as put forward by Lukács, loses all of its critical force. It is precisely for this reason that Tronti claims that the proletariat cannot be revolutionary whenever it conceives of its actions as expressing some kind of general interest against the private interest of capital. On the contrary, it becomes revolutionary when it asserts its particularity, its partiality in its confrontation with capital. Consequently, in this struggle what is at stake is the struggle of the worker against its capitalist identity as a personification of labour power. This struggle, then, presents a form of self-negation.<sup>24</sup> This self-negation amounts to the affirmation of its *non-identity* in and against the capitalist objectification of social totality. It is then and only then that damaged life can be recomposed into an antagonist class.

## BEYOND POST-WORKERISM?

From Lukács to Tronti via Pollock and Adorno, a common thesis comes to the fore that 'the more that capitalist production develops, the more the capitalist form of production grasps all the other spheres of society, invading the whole network of social relations'.<sup>25</sup> This thesis can be developed in two directions.

The analogy between factory and society can first be taken literally. This implies extending the Marxian category of

'productive labour' to all social practices and consequently subsuming the most heterogeneous social strata in the concept of 'working class'. This solution was adopted by workers' autonomy groups under the concept of 'social factory' in the 1970s and further developed in post-workerism. But, it is also possible to study the different fragmentations produced within the proletariat by the extension of 'the capitalist form of production' to the 'network of social relations'. This is the path explored by Adorno's student Hans-Jürgen Krahl in his *Konstitution und Klassenkampf*.<sup>26</sup>

### **Antonio Negri: Social Factory and 'General Intellect'**

Antonio Negri's major contributions to workerism fell into the interval between the foundation of *Potere Operaio* in 1969 and its dissolution in 1974. In his hands the nebula of 'autonomy' branches out into two main directions: on the one hand, it stresses the correlations between the institutional transformations of the state and the restructuring of the capitalist mode of production; on the other, these transformations point towards the coming of a new antagonistic subject. Concerning the former, Negri examines the growing integration of transnational firms and states that transforms the state into a sort of transmission belt of global capitalist rationality. From texts such as *Crisis of the Planner-State* or *Proletarians and the State*, one can thus retrieve the Pollockian image of a vast collective capitalist despotically exploiting a society that has long since transformed into a vast (global) factory.

For Negri, the emergence of multinational enterprises and their impact on nation-states corresponds to a restructuring of the mode of production not yet qualified as 'post-Fordist' but already characterized by the externalization of production, the rise of services and telecommunications and

flexibilization of labour-power beyond the neocapitalist political economy as analyzed by Panzieri and Pollock, too.<sup>27</sup> All these phenomena lead to a dissemination of cooperation previously concentrated in the factory throughout the whole territory. Hence, Negri argues that this 'productive unification of the social'<sup>28</sup> results in the emergence of a new 'class composition': the 'socialized worker' composed of figures such as the scientist employed by the petrochemical plant of Porto Marghera, the female worker recently hired at the assembly line of Fiat to replace formerly specialized workers now turning to independent entrepreneurship or home-based work, the unemployed youth, the precarious but highly qualified student alongside other actors from counter-cultural movements.<sup>29</sup> For Negri, the unity of this 'socialized worker' is not sociological, but political: all the characters that compose it tend to engage in the same antagonistic practices such as absenteeism, sabotage or the refusal to pay electricity bills or rents ('self-reductions'). Inasmuch as these practices are practices of autonomization from the capitalist relations of production, they need to be unified by a 'party of autonomy' whose function is to establish a real proletarian counter-power in Italian cities: 'Within this jungle of the social factory [...] the vanguards can construct focal points of insurrectional struggle around which the masses of the exploited can reassemble'.<sup>30</sup>

Post-workerism's central hypotheses can all be found in Negri's texts drafted during the 1970s. The 'Empire' or the 'Multitude' have indeed replaced the 'Planner-state' and the 'socialized worker' but a shared diagnosis unifies the contemporary elaborations of Antonio Negri and his comrades with the programmatic texts of *Potere Operaio*: inasmuch as all social practices are now productive practices, social labour has transcended the command of the law of value which now only survives in parasitic forms of political control. As explained by Carlo Vercellone, we have therefore moved to a new *phase*



of capitalism – ‘cognitive capitalism’ – characterized by the coming hegemony of immaterial labour in the process of capital valorization. ‘Immaterial labour’ designates all those activities which – irrespective of the branch of social labour division – mobilize social knowledge accumulated by and within social totality (the ‘General Intellect’). In this new phase of capitalism, accumulated value does not primarily objectify the quantity of labour time expended in production, but rather the quality of knowledge invested by workers during the process of production. To the extent that acquiring knowledge depends on a whole complex of relations which individuals accumulate during their social life, capital will tend to retire from production and satisfy itself with privatizing the collective product of cooperation through patents, rents or stocks.<sup>31</sup>

Notwithstanding its undeniable theoretical and political interest, this picture of contemporary capitalism requires critical scrutiny. From the point of view of the critique of political economy, this depiction of contemporary capitalism tends to understand capital not as a social relation but as an instrument of control externally imposed upon an autonomous process of production. From the point of view of a political critique of economy, this conception of capital consequently leads the cognitivists to identify the development of the productive forces with a tendency towards the abolition of capitalism and hence to a reassertion of a certain technological determinism which Panzieri had originally opposed. Finally, as already emphasized by Sergio Bologna in *The Tribe of Moles*, the homogenization of differentiated labour processes which capital subsumes in the figure of the ‘socialized worker’ or the ‘multitude’ can prove counterproductive for identifying and going beyond the different cleavages which decompose the proletariat.<sup>32</sup> Insofar as the international division of labour – which articulates both high-tech firms and industrial exploitation, neo-slavery and flexible wage labour – reflects itself in every social

formation, workers are structurally divided along revenue, qualification, gender and race lines. Thus, any attempt to understand and possibly transcend these cleavages calls for a differentiated analysis of real subsumption of the social within contemporary capitalism. To this end, we now turn to Hans-Jürgen Krahl’s contribution.

### **Hans-Jürgen Krahl: Dialectics and Organization**

An emblematic figure of the new West German student left and ‘notorious’ disciple of Adorno’s, Krahl tried to elaborate a differentiated concept of capital as a constituted social totality. As leader and main theoretician of the SDS (*Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund*), he embarked on a critical dialogue with Adorno that culminated in his single posthumously published book (a collection of articles, that was introduced and edited by Detlev Clausen) which was rapidly translated into Italian and played a central role in the development of the ‘autonomia’: *Konstitution und Klassenkampf*. From his various reflections assembled in these articles, it appears that the Adornian conception of the negative as non-identity or that Tronti’s localization of antagonism within the confines of the factory prove to be one-sided. Opposed to these two ‘reductionisms’, Krahl intends to reevaluate the antagonist potential of labour as it expresses itself in different instances of the social totality. This perspective situates him uniquely at the point of articulation between Critical Theory and workerism.

Committed to thinking through and organizing the student struggles, Krahl poses a decisive question: can one apprehend the form of anti-authoritarian consciousness which emerges at the time as a form of class consciousness?<sup>33</sup> His answer is quasi workerist in method because it amounts to understanding late capitalism from the standpoint of the new forms of

radicality it generates. It comprises three moments.<sup>34</sup> Krahel first explains that the student movement corresponds to the emergence of the figure of the collective worker on the political scene. If this is the case, he continues, then the collective worker is the form of subjectivity which is implied by the integration of intellectual labour (be it in scientific research or in university education) in the process of capital reproduction. It is precisely this integration of the intellect to production, concludes Krahel, that makes the student movement a form of expression of the dialectic of reification and self-realization specific to the 'dual character of labour' (concrete and abstract labour) identified by Marx.<sup>35</sup>

Although Krahel shares with post-workerist theoreticians the diagnosis of the growing subsumption of knowledge under capital, creating the so-called knowledge industry that characterizes contemporary academia, he distinguishes himself from post-workerism by claiming that this process is not related to a logic of *homogenization* of all spheres of social totality, nor to a *universalization* of proletarian experience and subjectivity but rather to a *diversification* of the forms through which the capital/labour contradiction manifests itself. Indeed, for the author of *Konstitution und Klassenkampf* this contradiction exists nowhere else than in the different conflicts it generates. Workers' struggles are only one expression of capitalistic conflicts and are in no way privileged expressions of the social antagonism, which also entail student or feminist struggles. Insofar as the 'collective worker' is not an unequivocal 'Subject' but a set of contradictory subjectivities, Krahel's elaboration enables us to reformulate strategic problems in contemporary terms: how can we ensure the convergence of different social struggles on the basis of their respective autonomy? Tackling this problem collectively is likely the big task ahead for anyone wanting the traditions of workerism and Critical Theory to flourish and grow at their intersection.

## THE GHOST OF LUKÁCS AND THE QUESTION OF ORGANIZATION

We began our inquiry on the relationship between workerism and Critical Theory by relating both traditions to Lukács' articulation of a critique of reification with a theory of revolution. As a conclusion, we would like to emphasize that both traditions tried, although differently, to articulate anew reification and antagonism rather than unilaterally develop one aspect of Lukács' theoretical construct at the expense of the other. Indeed, from Pollock to Adorno, Critical Theory always complements its analyses of capitalist society by an attempt to track the elements of negativity which disrupt the bureaucratic totalization of the social world. And, from Panzieri to Tronti, workerism always interprets the transformations of capitalism from the standpoint of the antagonist subjectivity these transformations depend on. Without acknowledging that negativity and conflict is irreducibly part of the false reality of capital, no critical thinking is possible.

Since Lukács, the question is thus: how to organize this negativity and what is its most appropriate organizational form? We argued that the elaborations of workerism and Critical Theory stem from the crisis of the Leninist answer that Lukács gave to this question. But this crisis does not imply the abandonment of any inquiry about the political organization of antagonism and the organizational means of the struggle for revolutionary ends. From his reflexions on the 'party of autonomy' to his contemporary appeal to a 'becoming-Prince of the multitude',<sup>36</sup> Negri indeed never stopped looking for political forms which could institutionalize the disseminated resistances capital generates along the whole network of social relations. As the example of Krahel shows, the Frankfurt School is no stranger to such political concerns. *Konstitution und Klassenkampf*, we argued, is to be read as a treatise on the dialectics of fragmentation and unification of the proletariat produced by the

capitalist totalization of the social world. The question of political organization thus seems to haunt anyone who, following Lukács and his successors, seeks to elaborate a ruthless critique of the present while keeping the hope of a better future open.

## Notes

- 1 We warmly thank Alexis Cukier, who participated in drafting the first version of this article for a presentation given at the tenth 'Historical Materialism' Congress in London in November 2013, and Werner Bonefeld, for his comments on an earlier version of this text.
- 2 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2007) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Tr. E. Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- 3 Max Horkheimer (1997) 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in *Critical Theory. Selected Essays*. Tr. M. O'Connell. New York: Continuum.
- 4 We thank Antonio Negri for this information. See Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1978) *Intellectual and Manual Labour. A Critique of Epistemology*. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press.
- 5 See Walter Benjamin (2006) 'On the Concept of History' in *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938–1940*. Tr. E. Jephcott. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- 6 For Adorno's contribution to this research see Theodor W. Adorno (1993) *The Authoritarian Personality*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company; see also Siegfried Kracauer (1998) *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*. Tr. Q. Hoare. London: Verso.
- 7 Georg Lukács (1972) *History and Class Consciousness. Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Tr. R. Livingstone. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. The hypothesis of a common Lukácsian matrix of Critical Theory and workerism has been brilliantly developed by Andrea Cavazzini in *Enquête ouvrière et théorie critique. Enjeux et figures de la centralité ouvrière dans l'Italie des années 1960* (2013). Liège: Presses Universitaires de Liège.
- 8 See concerning this point Marcel Van der Linden (2009) *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union*. Chicago: Haymarket.
- 9 Friedrich Pollock, 'State Capitalism: Its Possibilities and Limitations' in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (eds.) (1990) *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. New York: Continuum. pp. 71–94.
- 10 Ibid., p. 77.
- 11 Raniero Panzieri, 'Surplus-value and planning: notes on the reading of *Capital*', <https://operaismoinenglish.files.wordpress.com/2010/09/surplus-value-and-planning.pdf>
- 12 'In the factory system, the anarchical aspect of capitalist production lies solely in the insubordination of the working class, in its rejection of "despotic rationality"'. Ibid.
- 13 Theodor W. Adorno (2004) *Negative Dialectics*. Tr. E. B. Ashton. London and New York: Routledge. p. 31.
- 14 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?' Tr. R. Livingstone. in R. Tiedemann (ed.) (2001) *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- 15 Theodor W. Adorno (1998) 'On Subject and Object' in *Critical Models. Intervention and Catchwords*. Tr. H. W. Pickford. New York: Columbia University Press. p. 250.
- 16 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*. p. 146.
- 17 See notably Herbert Marcuse (1967) *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston: Beacon Press; and Herbert Marcuse (1972) *Counter-Revolution and Revolt*. Boston: Beacon Press. The work of Marcuse certainly deserves longer developments but, according to a conversation we had with Antonio Negri, it played a subordinate role especially when compared to Adorno's and Horkheimer's influence, in the development of workerism.
- 18 See Hans-Jürgen Krahel (2008) 'Der politische Widerspruch der kritischen Theorie Adornos' in *Konstitution und Klassenkampf. Zur historischen Dialektik von bürgerlichen Emanzipation und proletarischer Revolution. Schriften, Reden und Entwürfe aus den Jahren 1966–1970*. Frankfurt-am-Main: Verlag Neue Kritik. pp. 291–4.
- 19 Mario Tronti, 'Social Capital', <https://libcom.org/library/social-capital>
- 20 A dialogue between Mario Tronti and Theodor Adorno has already been attempted by John Holloway. See his 'Why Adorno' in John Holloway, Fernando Matamoros and Sergio Tischler (eds.), *Negativity and Revolution: Adorno and Political Activism* (2009). London: Pluto Press. pp. 14–17.
- 21 Mario Tronti, 'Factory and Society', <https://libcom.org/library/factory-society>
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Tronti, 'Social Capital'.
- 24 As already mentioned, Herbert Marcuse seems to have played a subordinate role in the development of workerism. However, Tronti's conception of revolution as self-negation shows interesting similarities with Marcuse's claim that 'slaves have to be free for their liberation so that they are able to become free'. See Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*. p. 41. On this point, see Werner Bonefeld

- (2002) 'State, Revolution, Self-Determination' in Werner Bonefeld and Sergio Tischler (eds.), *What is to be Done? Leninism, Anti-Leninist Marxism and the Question of Revolution Today*. Aldershot: Ashgate. pp. 128–49.
- 25 Tronti, Social Capital.
- 26 On Krah!l, see Jordi Maison's chapter in this *Handbook* (Volume 1, Chapter 20).
- 27 See Antonio Negri (2005) 'Proletarians and the State: Toward a Discussion of Workers' Autonomy and the Historic Compromise' in *Books for Burning: Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970s Italy*. Tr. M. Arianna Bove, E. Emery and Fr. Novello. London: Verso. pp. 131–5.
- 28 Ibid., p. 143.
- 29 Ibid., p. 139.
- 30 Negri, 'Crises of the Planner-State' in *ibid.*, p. 35.
- 31 See Carlo Vercellone (2014) 'From the Mass-Worker to Cognitive Labour: Historical and Theoretical Considerations' in Marcel van der Linden, Karl-Heinz Roth and Marx Henninger (eds.), *Beyond Marx: Theorising the Global Labour Relations of the Twenty-First Century*. Chicago: Haymarket. pp. 417–443.
- 32 See Sergio Bologna (2007) 'The Tribe of Moles' in *Autonomia: Post-political Politics*. New York: Semiotext(e). pp. 36–61.
- 33 Hans-Jürgen Krah!l, 'Zur Dialektik des antiautoritären Bewusstseins' in *Konstitution und Klassenkampf*. pp. 309–16.
- 34 Hans-Jürgen Krah!l, 'Thesen zum allgemeinen Verhältnis von wissenschaftlicher Intelligenz und proletarische Klassenbewusstsein' in *ibid.* pp. 336–53.
- 35 Concerning this last point, see Hans-Jürgen Krah!l, 'Zur Wesenslogik der Marxschen Warenanalyse', in *ibid.* pp. 31–83.
- 36 See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2009) *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. pp. vii–xiv.

# Open Marxism and Critical Theory: Negative Critique and Class as Critical Concept

Christos Memos

Revolutionary transformation has a tradition that must continue. (Horkheimer, 2007: 104)

Dialectics opens concepts. It focuses on social contents and does so by moving within their social forms. It is tasked with subverting the economic categories by revealing their social basis. (Bonefeld, 2014: 68)

## INTRODUCTION

‘Every age’, according to Walter Benjamin, ‘must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it’ (1969: 255). In this astute observation, Benjamin opposes any kind of falsification and forgetting of the struggles against exploitation and repression. He emphasizes the dangers of dogmatism, orthodoxy and conformism that, have repeatedly stifled the advancement of radical and emancipatory movements and, by extension, the interests of the oppressed. He lays the groundwork for a subversive thought that

seeks to draw a line of demarcation between critical social theory and the survival of positivism – of whichever variety. Benjamin’s perspective succeeds in encapsulating the work of the early Frankfurt School that has provided the anti-capitalist movement with valuable resources upon which to draw in the fight against positivism. Rejecting the appearance of social and economic relations as supposedly natural phenomena, they were critical of any naturalization of society, and adamant in their denunciation of evolutionary conceptions of history and the philosophy of progress. Critical theory’s conceptualization of society aimed to reveal the social world as the product of sensuous human activities. In doing so, its critical intention was not to attempt to humanize inhuman conditions, but to abolish social injustice with the aim of creating a society of the free and equal. However, during the complex progression of the twentieth century, reason often became ‘a poor ally of reaction’ (Horkheimer, 1972: 271). Reason was

‘forced to live in the shadows’ (Agnoli, 2003: 28), thereby renouncing its purpose to undertake incorruptible criticism and to fight barbarism in all its varieties. In other instances, as Agnoli (2003: 29–30) noted, with a biting irony, love prevailed: love for global justice, love for freedom and the democracy of the markets, love for the rights of man, for constitutional patriotism, communicative action, systems and life-worlds. In other examples, love was expressed for party loyalty, for workers’ parties and their leaders, for unconditional discipline, subordination to the party line and to ideological monolithism. In contradistinction to this affirmative, constructive love, the early and radical Octavio Paz, in his *Piedra de Sol* [*Sunstone*], supplies us with a different, subversive meaning of love: ‘to love is to battle, to open doors, to cease to be a ghost with a number forever in chains, forever condemned by a faceless master’ (1991: 37). To love means to fight, refusing to ‘turn the mill that squeezes out the juice of life, that turns eternity into empty hours, minutes into prisons, and time into copper coins and abstract shit’ (1991: 39).

This chapter argues that in the ongoing battles to unlock doors and open up concepts and fissures, with a view to opening up history itself in order to pave the way forward for class struggle, the Open Marxist tradition continues to advance the critical purpose of the early Frankfurt School, and of critical theory, in the direction of critical confrontation with traditional theory and positivism. Maintaining a critical strand, that originally manifested as critique of traditional theory, and of the prevailing positivism and scientism in the Marxist tradition of the Second and Third Internationals, Open Marxism constitutes the most recently renewed attempt to critique mechanistic interpretations of Marxism and any form of evolutionism, as well as naturalized conceptualizations of history and society. More precisely, the chapter focuses on the ways in which the Open Marxist tradition carries forward critical

theory, with regards to negative critique and the critique of political economy as critical social theory. Through a consideration of ‘exposition, interpretation and contextualisation’ (Clarke, 1994: 12), this chapter follows the development of Open Marxism: from Axelos’s original and critical use of the term in the 1950s, to Agnoli’s work of the 1980s, to the work of Clarke, Bonefeld, Gunn and Holloway – developed within the framework of the Conference of Socialist Economists (CSE) – since the 1990s. It will argue that the evolution of the Open Marxist tradition has to be understood as a process of interaction with socio-historical reality. Taking into account the complex history of the Open Marxism tradition, and the changes to the meaning of ‘Open Marxism’ that occurred over time, it argues, in line with Schmidt, that ‘historical process is constitutive for the theoretical process and modifies its categories’ (1981: 70). The second section argues that what makes Open Marxism specific, and constitutes common ground throughout its development phases, is its use of critique as a *negative* and *destructive* critique. This section scrutinizes the notion of critique, establishes connections, and identifies key differences in the thought of the members of this particular Marxist tradition. Finally, the chapter focuses on the elaboration of the critique of political economy as critical social theory seen in the CSE Open Marxist School, and discusses that school’s conception of social practice as a critique of the notion of class.

## MARXIAN THEORY AS AN OPEN-ENDED PROJECT

The close of the Second World War signalled a period of intense intellectual ferment in France. Liberal political institutions were heavily undermined and strongly criticized, and past intellectual traditions, such as ‘analytical rationalism’, were challenged and

forcefully disputed. The establishment of German military authority in 1940 and the role played by the resistance movements during the years of German occupation led to a turn in intellectual discourse towards the critical philosophical tradition, whose conceptual framework was regarded as a highly suitable tool for the undertaking of in-depth analysis of the events and preoccupations of the time. In this context, a renewal of interest in Hegel's work, in particular, and primarily, in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, and in the radical interpretation of that work as supplied by Kojève and Hyppolite, occurred alongside a growth of interest in Marx's early writings, and especially in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. Additionally, Husserl and Heidegger were brought into the emerging critical dialogue, or, were read in conjunction with Marx's Paris manuscripts. Hence the French intellectual landscape witnessed the emergence of a variety of philosophical strands, such as Hegelian Marxism, Heideggerian Marxism, Freudo-Marxism, Phenomenological Marxism and Existentialism. Opposed to the economism of the Second and Third Internationals, these schools of thought sought to locate the philosophical content of Marxism at the epicentre of their endeavour to renew Marxian theory and overcome its limitations and shortcomings. Nonetheless, despite the flourishing of these disparate versions of Marxism, each of which claimed to provide a non-dogmatic reading of Marx's work, the ideological power that the orthodox Marxism of the French Communist Party exerted over French political and intellectual developments remained powerful and dominant. Under these circumstances, and leaving Jean-Paul Sartre and the journal *Les Temps Modernes* aside, the journals *Arguments*, *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and *Internationale Situationniste* created a public forum for the critique of dogmatism and orthodox Marxism and functioned as a laboratory for the development of critical and radical ideas.

More specifically, the journal *Arguments*, which began publishing in 1956 and folded in 1962, developed into a critical space for theoretical debate that sought to transcend the sectarianism of the Left and strove towards an 'opening up of Marxism towards new intellectual currents and new social phenomena' (Poster, 1975: 212). *Arguments* was edited principally by scholars who attempted to simultaneously remain affiliated to the Left, being mostly ex-communists, and to maintain a critical perspective, while also adopting a critical distance from the Cold War period's anti-communist hysteria. *Arguments* brought together, as editors or contributing authors, intellectuals – such as Edgar Morin, Jean Duvignaud, Pierre Fougeyrollas, Maurice Blanchot, Gilles Deleuze, Roland Barthes, François Fejtö, Henri Lefebvre and Kostas Axelos – who sought to think beyond 'orthodox Marxism' and to formulate counterarguments to the ideological use of Marx. Axelos joined the editorial board of *Arguments* in 1958, and from 1960–2 acted as its editor-in-chief. He conceived of *Arguments* as a collective project, with the goal of elaborating an 'open Marxism, of a revised and corrected Freudo-Marxism and finally, a post-Marxism and post-Heideggerian thought' (Elden, 2005: 27) and he emphatically stressed that Marx is not 'an orthodox Marxist' (Axelos, 1976: 302). Contradicting Althusser, Axelos emphasized that Marx's thought, which evolved in stages, must be seen as a unitary process, as 'there are not two Marxes, the early and the late, the youthful and the mature', but rather, 'two periods integrally bound together' (Axelos, 1976: 45). In his view, 'one cannot propose a one-dimensional approach and reading of Marx. If someone did so, she would be dogmatic' (Memos, 2009: 134). Nonetheless, Axelos's analysis of Marx's thought, and in particular his exposition and interpretation of Marx's concept of alienation, is almost exclusively concerned with Marx's early writings, and principally with the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* – he

pays far less attention to the study of *Capital*. Axelos grounded his interpretation of Marx in the Paris *Manuscripts of 1844*, since they contain the ‘central point’ of Marxian thought, retaining a ‘place of absolute centrality’ and being ‘richest in ideas of all Marxian and Marxist writings’ (1976: 46, 45). Axelos’s adoption of this approach is rooted in his opinion that transcending the deformation of Marxism necessitated an opening up of Marxist thought, and he coined the term ‘Open Marxism’ (Axelos, 1957). In Axelos’s own words:

By using the term ‘Open Marxism’, I meant a theoretical current – which never came into being as a movement – and which, in opposition to Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism-Maoism, did not render Marxism an ideology of power, but attempted to pose fruitful questions and demystify the so-called ‘existing realizations’. Lukács and Korsch made an effort, but their contemplative measures were limited. Any kind of action, political or non-political, cannot be defined *a priori*. (Memos, 2009: 133)

The core of Axelos’s approach stemmed from his position that ‘more than science, it is technique that affects Marx’s enterprise’ (1976: 19). Marx’s technicism constituted a significant part of what can be called the dogmatic element in his thought, and led to the forestalling of many lines of critical thought. It also made possible the reification of Marx’s thinking and the development of orthodox and closed Marxism. Closed Marxism took on various forms, including sects of Marxist-Leninist, Stalinist and Trotskyist persuasions and the established ideology of bureaucratic regimes, all of which promoted the technicist elements of Marx’s work. In consequence, technicism became dominant in both the theory and historical realization of orthodox Marxism, and the sectarian ‘-isms’ prevailed, thereby transforming Marxian thought into systematized theory and reactionary dogma. Axelos’s undertaking to overcome the metamorphosis and closure of Marxism entailed the deployment of a mode of thinking that sought to

broaden horizons and to render Marx as more problematic a thinker than is actually the case. This is a discourse that foregrounds questioning thought and complex enigmatic responses. Drawing upon Heraclitus’s poetic thought, Axelos’s Open Marxism is principally articulated as a project that seeks to open up Marx’s more original and creative thinking (e.g. the concept of alienation) by entering it into a productive dialogue with other thinkers, including Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger (Axelos, 1966), with the aim of bringing it back to a ‘much more basic wandering’ (Axelos, 1970: 107). Axelos paid particular attention to reading Marx in conjunction with Heidegger, since, despite the considerable incompatibilities in their respective work, Axelos was impressed by what he perceived to be a ‘concurrent affinity – between what Marx calls *alienation* and Heidegger *oblivion of Being*’ (Memos, 2009: 135). Therefore, in his work on Marx and Heidegger, Axelos sought to elaborate a future thought, one that could think through them and eventually ‘beyond them’ (Axelos, 2015b: 37).

In the late 1960s, renewed interest in radical politics and the resurgence of social, anti-capitalistic and anti-authoritarian movements facilitated the revival, and continuation of, the legacy of critical Marxism and the Frankfurt School’s discursive traditions. In Germany, this renewal found expression, in part, in the re-assessment, and further development of, Marx’s critique of political economy by the ‘new reading of Marx’ – as instigated by Alfred Schmidt, Hans-Georg Backhaus and Helmut Reichelt – or, as a supplemental strand of the critique of political economy, and critique of the political, and of the state, undertaken primarily by Johannes Agnoli. In his influential *Die Transformation der Demokratie* [*The Transformation of Democracy*] in 1967, as well as in his other critiques of politics, Agnoli interrogated the transformation of ‘parliamentary democracy’ into a representational mode of political power and domination, and supplied us with



a profound critique of the form of the capitalist state. In contrast to Axelos, Agnoli's devastating assessment of 'constitutional oligarchy' and parliamentarism (Agnoli, 2012a: 208) resulted not from situating Marx's work in a 'productive dialogue' with Nietzsche or Heidegger – but rather, his critique of the transformation of democracy and the institutionalization of a radical opposition derived from his 'productive dialogue' with Left communism, anarcho-syndicalism and revolutionary syndicalism (Agnoli, 2012b: 153). In his debate with Ernest Mandel with regard to the meaning of Marx's 'critique' (Agnoli and Mandel, 1980), and against the background of Althusser, in 1977, publicly announcing a crisis in Marxism – which sparked impassioned debates in France and Italy – Agnoli employed the term 'Open Marxism' in an attempt to distinguish his own critical reading, and use of Marxian thought, from that of 'Orthodox Marxism' (1980: 7). For Agnoli, Marx is concerned primarily with the categories of 'critique and destruction' (1980: 148) and his critical project of social emancipation amounted in no sense to a *Weltanschauung* [worldview]. By underscoring the unity of theory and practice, Agnoli's Open Marxism indicates that concepts and categories remain open and incomplete in that the 'heresy of reality' and the unpredictability of class struggle question the validity of the meaning of concepts. (Agnoli and Mandel, 1980: 9, 148; and Bonefeld, 1992: 84). History is not construed according to pre-established concepts and norms; it is, rather, the case that, as Open Marxism argues, critique connects conceptualization and unpredictability, opens theory up to the practice of definite social relations, and opens up practice to theory (Bonefeld, 1992: 85).

A few years later, in 1991, the demise of the USSR and the disintegration of soviet Marxism denigrated all the existing versions of 'closed' and traditional Marxism. This was not simply another crisis of Marxism, of a sort that put into question its validity – the 'end of history' was announced, and the triumph of

the global-market society was seen as eliminating any alternatives to capitalism. Against a backdrop of necrology, renunciation of radical praxis and ideas, withdrawal and pervasive pseudo-consensus, eventually – as a consequence of the deep dissatisfaction with disintegrating Marxist orthodoxies and dogmas – a resurgence of strong interest in critical, open forms of Marxism came about. Traditional versions of Marxism were severely criticized and the historical tendency to uphold the party and the state as means of emancipation, and instruments of revolution, was discredited and rejected. In Britain, and specifically within the work of the members of the Conference of Socialist Economists (CSE), this process of reassessment fostered the development of a critical strand that owed much to a critical Marxist tradition elaborated, inter alia, by Luxemburg, the early Lukács, Korsch, Pannekoek, Rubin, Pashukanis, the early Frankfurt School, Rosdolsky, Johannes Agnoli and the tradition of 'autonomist' Marxism (Bonefeld et al., 1992a: xii). This discursive development crystallized, in the form of the work of a group of critical theorists, under the rubric of 'Open Marxism' who included, among others, Simon Clarke, Werner Bonefeld, Richard Gunn and John Holloway. As distinct from Axelos's understanding of the term 'Open Marxism', *openness* in this context referred to the 'openness of Marxist categories themselves' (Bonefeld et al., 1992a: xi). That was an 'openness on to practice' and had as its initial assumption 'the class antagonism between capital and labour' (Bonefeld et al., 1992b: xi). This openness to the unpredictable, antagonistic character of social reality underlined the Open Marxism's acceptance of the inevitable incompleteness of concepts and categories. Contrary to the traditional Marxist separation of theory and practice, and its reproduction of the dualism between subject and structure, Open Marxism holds that object and subject, objectified structures and class struggles subsist in, and through, an internal relation. This entails that class struggle is viewed as

‘the movement of the contradiction in which capital, itself, consists’ (1992b: xii) and the concept of class is grasped ‘not as a matter of grouping individuals, but as a contradictory and antagonistic social relation’ (1992b: xiii).

Open Marxism does not propose a complete, definitive interpretation of Marx – it aims, rather, to open up a space for a theoretical and practical critique that seeks to pave the way forward, towards a defetishized and emancipated social world. Along with numerous individual and collective publications, the richness and diversity of theoretical and political discussions within the Open Marxist discourse were best exemplified by the three-volume work entitled ‘Open Marxism’, which was published between 1992 and 1995. Together with Holloway’s (2005[2002]) *Change the World without Taking Power* and Bonefeld’s *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy* (2014), they provided the basic outlines for a radical rethinking and re-examination of fundamental Marxian concepts and Marxist categories, rejecting, at the same time, the dogmatism, orthodoxy, determinism and positivism that marked the initial phases in the development of Marxist thought. Open Marxism’s critical undertaking was associated with the journals *Capital and Class* and *Common Sense* (1987–99). In contrast to Axelos’s focus on Marx’s early writings, Clarke, Bonefeld, Gunn and Holloway examined Marx’s work in its entirety. It can be argued that they uncovered a ‘young’, ‘new’ Marx in the ‘mature’ Marx. Their individual contributions are varied and one must not overlook the disparities in the approaches. And these differences do affect the content of their intellectual trajectory and their critical endeavour. However, there is a discerned common foundation to the work of these authors, which, along with its other shared features, result in Open Marxism’s distinctiveness. In his article entitled ‘Open Marxism’ with which Bonefeld (1987) launched the first issue of the journal *Common Sense*, one can identify

the key concepts that determined the future character of what came to be regarded as the CSE Open Marxist School: ‘crisis’, ‘class struggle’, ‘critique and destruction’, ‘demystification’, ‘openness of categories’ and ‘the principle of doubt’. More specifically, the negative character of Open Marxism’s critique, that is, their radical rethinking of the meaning of critique not as a normative and constructive, but as *negative* and *destructive* critique, has defined the common ground of the Open Marxist tradition from the work of Axelos up to the present day. The following section focuses on the subversive character of their critique, which enables connections and mutual lines of development to form alongside points of individual departure.

## DESTRUCTIVE CRITIQUE, NEGATIVITY AND SUBVERSIVE REASON

Marx and Engels envisaged the radical transformation of capitalist social relations through revolutionary, practical-critical activity by the ‘proletarian movement’, which they regarded as ‘the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority’ (Marx and Engels, 1991: 44). As such, the creation of this radical movement would rely ‘solely and exclusively upon the intellectual development of the working class, as it necessarily had to ensue from united action and discussion’ (1991b: 33). Independent, united action and intellectual growth are the fundamental premises for the movement’s further quantitative and qualitative improvement. The prerequisites to these premises are freedom of expression and independent critical thinking, which are more needed at moments of danger and defeat, and against the survival of positivism that has over and over again predominated the struggles for human emancipation. This independent, living movement of the people becomes aware of its own essence in the process of

class struggle itself. It is in, and through, the unfolding of class struggle that such a movement breaks the continuum of history by the deployment of 'courage, humour, cunning and fortitude' (Benjamin, 1969: 255) and never forgets 'its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice' (1969: 260). Within the long, continuous and autonomous process of social struggles, subversive cunning and refusal – fuelled by rage and hate – constituted the springboard for an ongoing, penetrating criticism of capitalist relations. Yet, during the course of the twentieth century, a tendency towards theoretical conformity overpowered the various existing dogmatic and mechanistic versions of Marxism, and resulted in a less critical and subversive, and more affirmative, Marxist discourse. In contradistinction to Marx's own critical thinking, traditional Marxism was now reduced to mere 'ideology', sterilizing and preserving theory as a codified set of 'holy canons'. The notion of 'orthodoxy' was introduced into the socialist movement, and Marxism turned into a 'scientific *Weltanschauung*', thus becoming a complete(d), and closed, theoretical system. The institutionalization of Marxism reduced it to a reformist and established ideology marked by fatalism, positivism and technicism. The socialist movement transformed from a revolutionary class-struggle movement into a political and social reform movement, and Marxism ceased at this time to develop as a living, and subversive, body of theoretical work.<sup>1</sup>

This transformation, from pro-actively subversive, to fatalistic, entailed the 'positivization' of Marxian thought, in conjunction with the loss of Marxism's radical and critical character, and constituted what Adorno explicitly berated as a 'widespread [...] anti-critical spirit [...] in those whose interest should lie in critique' (Adorno, 2005: 286). Demands for 'positive', 'constructive' and 'responsible' critique neutralized the impact of that critique by limiting the terms of its aims and scope from the outset. Marxist tradition and modes of 'heretical' thought lost

impetus. Appeals to positivity resulted in a debasement of intellectual critical purpose and rendered it 'a mere ornament to the material base which it claims to transcend' (Adorno, 1967: 21). Hence, Axelos, in his work, calls for a ceaseless interrogation, questioning and problematizing of Marx's thought in order to make sense of and to overcome the positivization of critical discourse and the crisis in Marxism. He argues that the crisis is unfolding on three levels: on an economic level, at which Marxism has appeared seemingly incapable of resolving or effectively eclipsing the economic problems of capitalism; on a political level, at which Marxism has failed to solve the question of political power and to address it in a radical way – on the contrary, instead of recycling political power, Marxism has *recycled revolution*, by seizing upon its aftermath as an opportunity to establish new forms of authority – and thirdly, the crisis is obvious on a philosophical level, since Marxism has abandoned radical and questioning thought. On this point, Axelos notes that 'Marxism does not place itself in question sufficiently enough and does not ask radical questions' but, rather, it has remained 'determined by that which it claimed to negate' (Axelos, 2015a: 148, 149).

One of Axelos's basic assumptions is that Marx's critical confrontation with the thought of Hegel, Smith and Ricardo aimed not to supply us with an improved philosophy of history, or a better and alternative exposition of political economy. Marx's purpose was to introduce 'philosophical and historical *criticism* into philosophy and economy' (1976: 57). In pursuing this end, Marx's critical endeavour points towards 'concreteness and freedom from mystification' (1976: 56). Following Axelos's view, Marx introduces us to the 'movement of the negativity that runs through universal history' and at the same time, he opens himself 'to the future that lies at hand, which, through its negativity will in turn generate what more distantly is yet to come' (1976: 333, 335). For Axelos, Marx's

thought encompasses negativity, but this negativity has been blocked, since Marx's original work was systematized into the various Marxisms, and as a result, became reified and objectified itself. In Axelos's understanding, this process sidelined Marx's revolutionary elements and constricted the inherent openness of his theorizing. The problems posed and the questions addressed by Marx did not remain open. On the contrary, the internal contradictions of his thought were pacified and concealed by the reduction of Marxism to an ideology and apologetic doctrine. The freeing of the Marxian thought, according to Axelos, entails the releasing, reactivation and putting into action of its very negativity. It postulates the need to 'put the negative to work' (Axelos, 1982: 67), and favours the significance of critical and negative thinking, which is '*calling everything in question and keeping the question open*' (1982: 67).

Axelos's critique of Marx's early writings, however, remained restricted insofar as it did not take into account Marx's criticism of fetishism, and failed to fully conceive of Marx's critique of political economy and economic categories. He sought to activate and make effective the function of negativity, but he did not elucidate what exactly constitutes this movement of negativity. Categories and concepts, such as truth and power, do not derive their value from the social relations in which they occur. Instead, it appears that in Axelos's account their validity derives from the questioning process itself, which is hypostasized and fetishized as an end in itself, while the social relations and social conditions of productions are neutralized (1982: 68). Instead, for critical theory, concepts are socially valid and 'even the most abstract categories [...] are valid only in the context of specific relations' (Schmidt, 1981: 36–7). In Axelos's theorizing, negativity and questioning thought reveal themselves, in an abstract and ahistorical manner, as being part of the 'game-playing' of the world, which in turn constitutes the essence of being. Thus, the meaning of his negative critique is not made

explicit. Neither does he explain with clarity the object of his critique, nor his explicit purpose. He persists in his efforts to proceed towards broadening horizons and opening up closed systems, but his stance remains contemplative and his engagement with the material world and social reality, which feature primarily in his writing as references to 'technology', is limited, failing thus to achieve 'the changing of philosophy into a philosophy of changing the world' (Bloch, 1976: 9). The issue regarding the *constitution* of the world remains untouched, and Marx's critical undertaking is not understood as a theory of struggle against capitalism. This implies a misunderstanding and disregard of Marx's work as a critique of economic categories, and Axelos's critical approach to Marx unfolds as a philosophical critique. His attempt to read Marx alongside Heidegger left his planned project – a comprehensive critique of philosophy, of political economy and of politics – ultimately underdeveloped, and embedded in the speculative.<sup>2</sup>

In the Open Marxist tradition, Agnoli's work sees Marx's critique of political economy as an unfinished project – not only in the sense of an ongoing need for further development of this critique, but also from a perspective that maintains that Marx's thought must be complemented with a critique of the political. Agnoli's (2003) critique of the political developed alongside the distinction he drew between 'destructive' and 'constructive' critique, which has functioned as a touchstone for his critical and subversive work. Akin to Adorno, he argues that the notion of constructive critique acts as a servant of existing powers and state institutions. It enhances trust and confidence to the established order, while, at the same time, seeking to reconcile social contradictions by institutionalizing and integrating any form of radical opposition. Constructive critique encourages responsibility, and contributes to political stability. It endorses the normative values of capitalist society and seeks to improve the existing political system by accepting the rules of

parliament. Social and parliamentary responsibility has led to the pacification of social conflict and the transformation of the Left. Agnoli's notion of critique amounted not to a critical political science, but to a critique of politics. Though critical political science still provides significant negative material for reflection, it ends up being an endless process of protesting for the humanizing, beautifying and reforming of capitalist institutions, without revolt and without any genuine anti-capitalist agenda (Agnoli, 2012c: 197). Opposed to scholarship that produces constructive critique, Agnoli vindicated the meaning of critique as *destructive*, and a *negative* undertaking. Destructive critique reaffirms the very essence of critical thought, and has played a vital historical role in 'provoking insubordination and destroying horrors' (2003: 26). For Agnoli, the purpose of critique is refusal, negation and subversion – both practical and theoretical – of a world that lacks freedom and equality, a world of capitalist misery. His negative, destructive critique, then, is a negation of all conditions of exploitation, humiliation and coercion. It is a subversive and destructive critique of capital and its state, which challenges existing social relations of domination and finds its positive moment in the creation of different relations, the 'society of the free and equal', and not merely in the improvement of existent capitalist power relations. In turbulent and miserable times, as Agnoli argues, a concrete project of emancipation only with the negative potential, – a 'subversive science' – can effectively coexist (2012c: 200).

One of the tenets of the strand of Open Marxism that emerged in the early 1990s was that 'the central category of openness is that of critique' (Bonefeld et al., 1992a: xiii). Expanding on Agnoli's negative critique of the political, and under the influence of Adorno's work – especially his *Negative Dialectics* – Bonefeld further elaborated the meaning of critique and in doing so advanced both critical theory and the legacy of Adorno. Based on a critical deployment of the 'new

reading of Marx' (see Bonefeld, 2014), he spelled out the political and social implications of Marx's critique of political economy as a critique of economic categories. Along with Clarke, Holloway and Gunn (with all their differences), Bonefeld maintained that critique is not to be regarded as a means of demonstrating alternative Marxist economic theory, and its superiority to classical political economy (2001: 54). As Simon Clarke has maintained, the term 'Marxist political economy' is 'a contradiction in terms, since Marx always referred to his work as a "critique of political economy"' (Clarke, 1994: 10). Marx criticized not only bourgeois political economy, but also the very notion of 'political economy'. Viewed this way, as Holloway noted, Marx's own understanding of the concept of 'science' does not imply a search for objectively 'correct' knowledge. Rather, it amounts to 'the movement of criticism', which finds form as a double movement: 'an analytical movement and a genetic movement, a movement of going behind appearances and a movement of tracing the origin or genesis of the phenomenon criticised' (Holloway, 2005[2002]: 109).

For the Open Marxism thinkers of the CSE, the meaning of critique amounts to a critique of economic categories, one that challenges the unreflected presuppositions of economics. Its scope is to decipher the social constitution of the objectified economic forms and show that economic categories such as money, profit, rent, wage and capital are inverted social relations, which appear as independent self-acting economic forces. The purpose of critique, then, is neither to discover economic laws nor to define social reality by registering and classifying facts. It does not seek to explicate one economic phenomenon with reference to another, but to comprehend each phenomenon as a form, or mode of existence of the actual relations of life (Bonefeld, 2014, 2016). However, whereas for the 'new reading of Marx' and for Backhaus in particular, critique is developed from an 'anthropological' standpoint

with the intention of demystifying economic categories on a human basis (Backhaus, 2005: 28), for Bonefeld the starting point for an *ad hominem* (see Adorno) critique is ‘neither economic nature nor anthropology but the “definite social relations” that manifest themselves in mysterious economy forms’ (Bonefeld, 2014: 8). Critique questions the outward appearance of economic things, and its objective must be the disclosure of economic categories as *social categories*, by revealing their ‘essence’ – that is to say, by ‘deciphering them as human social forms, not of Man as an “abstract individual”, but of Man as a member of a definite form of society’ (2014: 39). In this respect, for Open Marxism, conceptuality does not mean an application of theory to practice, with a view to analyzing reality from the outside as objective, external observers. The ‘form analysis’ entails a dialectical, internal and reciprocal relationship between theory and practice, where ‘practice is theory-inclusive just as theory, for its part, is practice related’ (Gunn, 1987a: 41). In distinction to Axelos’s abstract negativity, theory and theoretical concepts are held here, then, to be practically *reflexive*, as they perceive their own validity in their ‘practical and social constitution’ (Gunn, 1987a: 42). As Bonefeld has succinctly put it, ‘validity is a social category. Only for society can something be valid and have validity’ (Bonefeld, 2014: 25).

The concept of ‘social form’ is at the core of the Open Marxist critical tradition. By investigating the social constitution of economic categories, Open Marxism seeks to understand why definite social relations (content) acquire the ‘forms’ (appearance) of state, parliament, money, capital and so on. Gunn conceives of social phenomena and structures as ‘forms’, assumed during the processes of class struggle, as ‘appearances’ or ‘modes of existence’, of the contradictory movement of antagonistic social relations and, especially, capital–labour relations (Gunn, 1987b: 60; 1992). Capitalist forms appear, for Open Marxism, as self-established

economic entities, which render invisible the constitutive role of human social practice. Actual social relations are reduced to mere by-products of economic forms. The world of economic abstractions and economic categories assert themselves as ‘perverted forms’ of definite social relations. Relations between individuals appear in their perverted form of economic objectification, in the apparently independent movement of coins and economic forces. These inverted and distorted forms (e.g. state-form, money-form or capital-form), are forms through, and in which, class antagonism subsists – they must be deciphered, therefore, in order to reveal their social origins. According to Bonefeld, ‘there is only one world, and that is the world of appearances’ – that is to say, society as a relation of objectified economic forms – and ‘this appearance is real’ (2016: 63). The world of appearance must be decoded in order to unveil its constitution within social relations. The purpose of negative critique, then, is not to ponder fetishized economic things, but to think ‘out of these things’ (Bonefeld, 2014: 10). Instead of aiming to criticize the ‘thing-in-itself’, it chooses to interrogate the ‘definite social relations that express themselves in the form of a relationship between things’ (Bonefeld, 2014: 37). In other words, the critique of political economy ‘thinks out of, and in and through, “the existent” society. In order to understand things, one has to be within them’ (2014: 38). Its objective is to discover the social constitution of these reified things, to grasp the social relations that result in the existence of these objectified things, and then disappear by denying themselves in the appearance of economic objectivity.

For Open Marxism, conceptuality does not just mean the process of deciphering the hidden essence of things in human practice. It also involves a process of disclosing their contradictory constitution and movement. At the same time, critique is immanent to its social context, criticizing both the ‘perverted social existence and the perversion through

which it itself exists' (Bonefeld et al., 1995: 3). According to Adorno, for negative critique to proceed dialectically would involve thinking 'in contradictions, for the sake of the contradiction once experienced in the thing, and against that contradiction' (Adorno, 2003a: 133). Open Marxism gives particular emphasis to the concept of contradiction and holds dialectics as 'signalling a unity of opposites and movement of contradiction' (Bonefeld et al., 1992c: xiv). In this sense, it understands criticism as an 'assault on identity' (Holloway, 2005[2002]: 106) and argues that if Marxism is a "theory of" anything, it is a *theory of contradiction*' (Gunn, 1994: 53). For Gunn and Holloway, in opposition to the various schools of traditional Marxism, Marxism is not regarded as a theory that aims to supply a theory of society and an interpretation of the objective laws of capitalist society. Marxism should not be reduced to a theory of capitalist domination and the study of the function and reproduction of existent structures. Instead, for both these writers, Marxism must reclaim its lost negativity and become a theory *against* society, a theory that intends the destruction of capitalist society (Gunn, 1992, 1994; Holloway, 1993: 19, 2005[2002]: 135–6). As a subversive negation of capitalist social relations then, Open Marxism provides a thorough and radical critique of the various perverted social forms, and seeks to reveal the social content, the essence, hidden under the surface of this 'topsy-turvy world'. Human practice is enslaved, and rendered invisible by the very nature of what it has created and produced. The producers are governed by their own creation, and dominated by abstract economic forces and laws. The creators appear as derivatives of an inverted world, one that acquires an eternal quality by presenting itself as wholly natural, and constitutive of actual social relations.

Revealing the social genesis of a world governed by coins, things and economic abstractions, Open Marxism's negativity amounts primarily to a critique of fetishism,

an approach that deciphers and conceptualizes the convenient 'forgetting' of societal constitution. The theme of fetishism is central to Open Marxists' critique of capitalistically organized social relations, despite the differences that exist regarding the interpretation of fetishistic categories within this body of work as a whole. For Holloway, the concept of fetishism is at once a '*critique of bourgeois society, a critique of bourgeois theory and an explanation of the stability of bourgeois society*' (2005[2002]: 51). He argues that in the world of capitalist relations, commodities and things rule, and human creativity is rendered invisible. There is an inversion between subject and object, people and things and, as a consequence, social relations are themselves fetishized. Following the critical tradition, Holloway does not consider fetishism as a closed and static concept. According to Horkheimer, 'tension characterizes all the concepts of the critical way of thinking [...] the critical acceptance of the categories which rule social life contain simultaneously their condemnation' (Horkheimer, 1972: 208). Holloway's work unfolds in a processual, dynamic analysis of the notion of fetishism and makes a distinction between 'hard fetishism' and 'fetishization-as-process' (Holloway, 2002a: 29). He conceived of fetishism as a process – that is, as fetishization, the constant struggle between fetishism and anti-fetishism – and as an open, contradictory category. In his words:

The concept of alienation, or fetishism, in other words, implies its opposite: not as essential non-alienated 'home' deep in our hearts, but as resistance, refusal, rejection of alienation in our daily practice. It is only on the basis of a concept of anti-alienation or anti-fetishism that we can conceive of alienation or fetishism. If fetishism and anti-fetishism coexist, then it can only be as antagonistic processes. Fetishism is a process of fetishisation, a process of separating subject and object, always in antagonism to the opposing movement of anti-fetishisation, the struggle to reunite subject and object. (2002a: 31)

From Clarke's (2002) point of view, Holloway uses Marx's vocabulary from *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* in his

interpretation of *Capital*. Alienation is not the same as fetishism, and Holloway, in his analysis, seems not to distinguish between the terms reification, alienation and fetishism. Rather, he uses the three terms synonymously. As Holloway has argued, ‘although people are, in their species characteristic, practical creative beings, they exist under capitalism as objects, as dehumanised, as deprived of their subjectivity’ (2002a: 29). In Clarke’s view, Holloway ‘bases his rejection of capitalism not on a critique of capitalist exploitation but on a romantic aspiration to reclaim creativity from capitalist labour’ (2002: 41). In his reply to Clarke, Holloway maintains that Marx’s early and mature writings are equally concerned with the dehumanization and objectification of people under capitalism: ‘The young Marx speaks of “alienation”, the older Marx speaks of fetishism, but both concepts refer to the same objectification of the subject’ (Holloway, 2002b: 62). On the other hand, Bonefeld holds that the *ad hominem* critique of the fetishism of the commodity form does not amount to a ‘fuzzy humanism’, but rather focuses on the ‘actual social relations of a definite form of society’ (2014: 39). As he has argued: ‘Man is always objectified Man. Subjectivity means objectification. To be an object is part of the meaning of subjectivity. The issue that the critique of fetishism brings to the fore is not the subject’s objectification but its reified mode’ (2014: 63). In this line of thought, Bonefeld expresses his view that ‘the fetishism of commodities does not disguise the “real” social relations of capitalism. Rather, the fetishism of commodities expresses the “real” social relations in the form of capital as the automatic subject of bourgeois society’ (2014: 54).

### **THE CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY AS A CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY: ON CLASS AND STRUGGLE**

The fetishism of commodities amounts to a process in which capitalist social relations

manifest themselves as being abstract economic forces. The ‘new reading of Marx’ has made a valuable contribution to the task of unpacking the ‘natural’ appearance of economic objectivity and in showing the ways in which social relations are inverted, and reshaped into reified economic forms that assume a mantle of inevitability, and of necessity. Yet, according to Bonefeld, the ‘new reading of Marx’ does not ‘explain the social character of economic objectivity’; after all, ‘What is objectified?’ (Bonefeld, 2014: 10). Because it did not seek to expound the ‘fundamental categories’ of ‘class and labour’ (2014: 41, 42), the critical work of the ‘new reading of Marx’ was incomplete. Elaborating upon the critique of economic categories as a critical theory of social constitution, the CSE Open Marxist School ‘substitutes the critique of the actual social relations for a logical development of the value form as some secularized thing that is valid in-itself’ and builds upon a ‘critical theory of abstract labour, class and class antagonism’ (2014: 42). Open Marxism theorists developed the critique of political economy into a critical social theory of economic objectivity, one that includes not only critique of economic form but also of the political form of a society. A key aspect of this critique is its refutation of positivistic and ‘scientific’ pretensions, which it finds within the various strands of traditional Marxism. During the radical debates conducted by the Conference of Socialist Economists (e.g. see Clarke, 1991a), Open Marxism’s ideas flourished – and this theoretical-critical activity was never conducted in isolation from political questions and concerns. Most importantly, these scholars’ critical analyses centred on the determining role of class struggle, as they saw that a purely logical exposition of economic categories dismisses the relationship between capital and labour, and class antagonism from critique of political economy. Arguing against traditional Marxist theories, which proposed the notion of a ‘Marxist economics’,



Holloway notes that they conceive of economic categories, such as value, price, crisis and so on, 'as having an objective validity which does not depend on class struggle' (Holloway, 1995: 161). For the CSE Open Marxism School, the deciphering of the social basis of economic categories reveals that these relations are contradictory and antagonistic and that, therefore, class struggle acts as a constitutive precondition of objectified economic forms.

By addressing the issue of economic objectivity and its class character, Open Marxism views class struggle as the content of concepts, as the constitutive essence concealed within economic and political categories. Social individuals become invisible in the movement of economic quantities and, as a consequence, class relations disappear in the exchange of economic things. Therefore, the notion of class cannot be adequately conceptualized at the mere, basic level of appearances and levels of reliance upon revenue sources as means of classifying people into the various social classes. Marx's critique of the 'Trinity Formula' (capital – profit, land – rent, labour – wage) involves a rupture with the world of appearances and the conceptualization of class as a group of people, or a structure. According to Clarke, a class 'is not an interest group, defined as a coalescence of individuals with a common *interest*, but is an inseparable part of a relation of production and as such is analytically prior to the individuals who comprise it' (1978: 41). Class relations are the 'logical and historical presupposition of capitalist production' (Clarke, 1991b: 118), that is to say, a *precondition* of the specific relations of domination and exploitation that unfold between the capitalist and the workers in the realm of production. In his critique of Althusserian Marxism, Clarke has argued that class is not a 'thing' but a definite social production relation, and that class relations between capital and labour acquire specific economic, ideological and political forms, which are '*historically developed forms of the relations of production*'

(Clarke, 1980: 53). They constitute a contradictory unity of diverse and specific forms of social relationships. As such, class relations, which are grounded in the extraction of surplus value occurring in the production process, 'are not purely "economic" but are, in class societies, multidimensional power relations which are expressed in particular ideological forms' (1980: 53).

In an influential article, Gunn also argues against a traditional and 'sociological' conception of class. Class is neither a group of individuals classified together according to their common socio-economic trait, nor a 'place', that is, a 'structure' in which individuals are located in relation to the fixed position they occupy within the social landscape. For Gunn, the terms 'class' and 'class relation' must be understood as undifferentiated – as class is always a 'class relation of some historically particular kind' (Gunn, 1987c: 15). Further, he sees class relations as the aggregate of social relations, which must be understood as production relations. In other words, the antagonism between capital and labour is not merely an economic, but a social relationship. Within these social relations, the classes do not confront each other as pre-established entities and structurally pre-determined categories. In an active, dynamic and unpredictable process, class struggle defines and constitutes the formation of class. Developing his argument, Gunn maintains that class is a relation of struggle, and therefore, 'class struggle is class itself' (1987c: 16). Being an antagonistic struggle, class relation, that is, the capital–labour relation, does not seek to fit people into groups or pigeonholes. As a fluid relationship, it is independent of individuals, yet also constructs their lives, as it subsists in and through them. In short, it permeates their lives. As Gunn puts it, class relations structure the 'lives of different individuals in different ways. It allows the line of class division to fall through, and not merely between, the individuals concerned' (1987c: 17). Running through individuals, fragmenting

individuals' lives and as a result, their existence, in the individual and collective senses, becomes contradictory. Being contradictory, class divides and fragments members of the working class, whose 'feet remain mired in exploitation even while his or her head [...] breathes in bourgeois ideological clouds' (1987c: 17). In many different ways, Gunn's contribution offers a number of insightful and intriguing comments, but failed to adequately set out the theoretical and political implications of his approach. What is of particular note is his attempt to argue against traditional Marxist class analyses, which viewed class as an 'object' and conceptualized class and class struggle in a rather instrumentalist manner. From that perspective, by breaking with traditional and positivist interpretations of classes as 'social groups', he offered a critical conception of class and class struggle, thereby opening up space for a more in-depth treatment of the subject informed by negative dialectics. Besides, as Tischler has put it, 'if class is viewed as an object, then revolutionary dialectics as negative dialectics cannot exist' (2002: 178).

Extending Gunn's perspective and building on Adorno's own critical theory, Bonefeld aims at offering a critique, and not a theory, of class. From the standpoint of critical theory, Bonefeld argues that 'class is not primarily a category of consciousness. It is a category of a perverse form of social objectification' (2014: 114). As he succinctly put it, 'Marx's critique of political economy does not derive the existence of classes from class-consciousness. He analyses the manner in which society organizes its social reproduction' (2014: 117). For Bonefeld, social theory is critical when it makes sense of society from a starting point of recognizing its social constitution, thus investigating society from within its mode of subsistence and from the standpoint of struggle and contradiction. From this vantage point, he has pointed out that 'class is not an affirmative category, but a critical concept' (2002: 66). Capitalist society is fundamentally antagonistic and torn by

contradictions. Adorno pointed out that society is reproducing itself because of its contradictions and opposing interests. Mankind survives and 'preserves itself not despite all irrationalities and conflicts, but *by virtue of them*' (Adorno, 2006: 50). The antagonistic class relationship between the rulers and the ruled, between capital and labour, reproduces the system and assists it in extending itself as 'society stays alive, not despite its antagonism, but by means of it' (Adorno, 2003a: 320). In this struggle between antagonistic forces, opposing individuals act as personifications of specific and definite class relations and class interests. In this process, to exist as a seller of labour power and to 'be a productive labourer is not an ontologically privileged position' (Bonefeld, 2016: 69). As Marx argues, and Bonefeld frequently reminds us, 'to be a productive worker is therefore not a piece of luck, but a misfortune' (Marx, 1990: 644). As a negative and critical concept, then, class is part of a reified society and belongs to a perverted world of social relations, being an 'objective category of the false society' (Bonefeld, 2014: 100). As part of the perverted appearance of social relations, class is experienced as a 'living contradiction. Contradictions cannot be classified' (2014: 107). Struggling in and through this contradiction, labourers share a common class experience, that is, their separation from the means of production and the compulsive selling of their labour power, which creates the conditions for 'class unity and collective action' (2014: 114). On the other hand, as Bonefeld forcefully remarks, economic compulsion denotes the 'common class experience of labour market disunity, as each individual seller of labour power competes against the other for employment as the condition of gaining access to the means of life' (2014: 115).

On this, Holloway argues that 'we do not struggle *as* working class, we struggle against being working class, against being classified' (Holloway, 2002a: 36). Holloway, viewing attempts to define the working class

as subordinated to capital, as part of the traditional 'understanding' of the working class, considers class as process, as a dynamic concept. In this line of thought, classes are not pre-constituted, fixed, static entities. Their existence cannot be separated from their constitution. Rather, classes are in a constant process of being constituted, as people are subjected to an unceasing process of classification and reclassification. This in turn entails that class struggle 'is the struggle to classify, and against being classified' (2005: 143). In this struggle, the working class battles against labour and against being working class, in order to emancipate itself. In this respect, according to Holloway, the working class 'can be considered revolutionary only to the extent that it exists not only in but also against-and-beyond itself as working class' (Holloway, 2010: 118). Holloway surmises that class struggle is unfolding within capitalist society, and at the same is moving forward in a direction that leads *beyond* this society. The issue at stake, as Bonefeld notes, is 'what this "beyond" might be. The class struggle for subsistence does not foretell the future. It does however entail a profound judgment on the existing relations of social wealth' (2014: 118).

Class struggle constitutes part of the rationalized irrationality of the capitalist reality as long as it continues to feature within the framework established by the Trinity Formula, principally seeking, merely, to ameliorate exploitation within the labour process. This struggle can be viewed as one that operates inside the perimeters of the perverted capitalist social reality, from where it satisfies itself with demands for a 'just' wage and trade union recognition; such struggles implicitly accept the reality and structures of capitalist society and assist in the continuing reproduction of the 'cold inhumanity of free wage labor' (Adorno, 2003b: 94), driving society into a situation of 'permanent transition or unchanging change' (Adorno, 1961: 45). Integrated class struggles perform a reproductive and stabilizing

function within capitalism, and in that sense, as Adorno put it, 'all history is the history of class struggle because it was always the same thing, namely, prehistory' (2003b: 94). At issue, then, for Open Marxism is how to end the prehistory of class struggle and how to present Communism as a movement, constructed from a synthesis of previous political and critical experiences and struggles, which fights for a classless society of the 'free and equal' rather than for a rationally organized socialist economy of labour (Bonefeld, 2015: 239–42). The unfolding of the Open Marxist tradition, in a continuing critical dialogue, develops questions inherited from the early Frankfurt School, and advances critical social theory as a result. From this perspective, Marcuse's argument gains a new significance:

All development of the productive forces by the established society would perpetuate and increase the productivity of destruction and repression, and that this fatal link could be broken only by the praxis of a class whose vital need was, not the perpetuation and amelioration but the abolition of the established society. And this abolition would be liberation: freedom appears first as negation; the 'positive' definition remains an X, an open variable – just: self-determination. (Marcuse, 1972: 214)

## Notes

- 1 For critical discussions of traditional and world-view Marxism, see Bonefeld and Tischler (2002) and Holloway (2005).
- 2 It is in the work of Karel Kosik that we see Axelos's original aims undertaken with critical rigour and executed with vehemence, although Kosik's legacy resides in undeserved obscurity. Kosik's *Dialectics of the Concrete* represents the finest example of his critical interpretation of Marx and his combined reading of phenomenology and Marxism. Kosik argued that 'Marx's *Capital* is not a theory but a theoretical *critique* or a *critical* theory of capital' (1976: 112) and maintained that economics and economic categories cannot be properly comprehended without addressing and replying to the basic question: 'how is social reality formed?' (1976: 117). 'Marx's theory', Kosik asserted, 'is a critique of economics' and

this critique 'exhibits the real movement of economic categories as a reified form of the social movement of people' (1976: 115). According to Kosik, the economic world appears as a collection of natural, self-evident and autonomous phenomena, which constitute the world of the *pseudoconcrete*. Economic categories, then, must be grasped as 'phenomenal forms' (1976: 108), 'forms of being' or 'existential determinants' (1976: 114), which conceal the *essence of things*: the structure and the material reality of existence, and the world of human praxis. In the *pseudoconcrete* world of economic categories, the distinction between phenomenon and essence disappears. A dialectical theory of society needs, therefore, to demystify and deconstruct the *pseudoconcrete* and its apparent independence, in order to render essence perceptible. Such a theory must seek to reach the concrete and to demonstrate economic categories as derivative and mediated phenomena of social praxis and human social relations, organized in an historically specific and concrete manner. 'Economics', Kosik opined, 'is the objective world of people and of their social products; it is not the objectual world of the social movement of things' (1976: 115).

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# Post-Marxism

Christian Lotz

## INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS AT STAKE IN POST-MARXIST THOUGHT?

The task of presenting a critical overview of all the movements, writers, and academic schools that, in a broad sense, have been connected to twentieth-century (Western) Marxism, is quite impossible. This is not just a matter of space; it is also a conceptual problem. On the one hand, the term 'Post-Marxism', refers us to thinkers who followed classical Western Marxism and in one way or another tried to overcome it. On the other hand, 'Post-Marxism' can also refer to a set of systematic issues, problems, and demands. This entry is based on the latter approach to Post-Marxism as a set of theoretical and conceptual moves. As a consequence, this entry does not follow Therborn (2008) who uses 'Post-Marxism' as an empirical term that brings together everything written after the First World War in the left tradition of thought.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, more recent attempts to

redefine the field in this manner, such as theories of intersectionality, feminist theory, post-colonial theories, and identity politics will not be discussed.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the turn toward the symbolic and language (in its connection with psychoanalysis), which is especially crucial for the French intellectual post-war world, will not be discussed, as this background could fill an entire book length study.<sup>3</sup> Instead, primary attention will be paid to what should be considered the core of Post-Marxism in relation to Marxist and Non-Marxist critical theory, namely, its conception of the social. This shift is of importance for its overall philosophical vision of society, theory, and politics.

The systematic approach can broadly be defined by how French and German philosophers (at least those who are taken here to be main representatives of Post-Marxism, such as Mouffe, Laclau, Honneth, Castoriadis, Lefort, Gorz, Negri, and Badiou) have moved away from a Marxian utilization of the capitalist social form in terms of

political economy and that which is polemically called by the popularizers of Post-Marxism, Laclau and Mouffe, 'economism'. Economism, which they identify with the classical Marxist position, is the idea that political struggle, democracy, and political movements need to be exclusively analyzed in socio-economic terms. In theories labeled 'economism', as Laclau and Mouffe put it, 'political struggle is itself only a superstructural fact, since it does not constitute reality but is simply the expression of a process inscribed in history from its inception' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1981: 18). Put differently, 'according to such a perspective [i.e., an economist perspective, C. L.], political struggle is seen not as being constitutive of the social order, but as being a mere "superstructure" of an inexorable economic process' (17). The rejection of economism implies the rejection of Marx's critique of political economy and the rejection of a critical theory of society, which then, in turn, leads, in Post-Marxism to 'a "Copernican revolution" in Marxist theory' (17; for this, see also Choat and Rekret, 2016). According to this view, the political no longer is conceived of as a superstructural effect; instead, put in Gauchet's words, 'the political constitutes the most encompassing level of the organization [of society], not a subterranean level, but veiled in the visible' (quoted in Breckman, 2013: 151). Consequently, giving up on a critical theory of society leads to the Post-Marxist claim that we should no longer assume that our contemporary world is in any social or economic sense united or a coherent whole. Instead, it is characterized by political or normative struggles and conflicts on *all* levels of society which can no longer be synthesized into a unity. As Laclau puts it concisely in a summary of his contribution to Post-Marxism: 'One consequence of our analysis is that we have to assert the primacy of politics in the structuration of social spaces' (Laclau, 2006: 112).

Given this main struggle of how to conceive the political in relation to society as

a whole, it becomes clear immediately that Post-Marxist ideas are to a large extent rooted in political and social experiences after 1945 in Europe, such as the failure of the French and Italian Communist party, the exhaustion of the East-European socialist project, the downfall of the Soviet Union and the GDR, the development of welfare states, the stabilization of representative democracies in Europe, the development of the European Union, as well as the events in Hungary, Prague, and May 1968 in Paris. Moreover, these ideas are also rooted in the development of the neoliberal era, which began with the Thatcher and Reagan administrations in the Great Britain and in United States, and which was extended by social-democratic governments under Blair, Schröder and Clinton, which, in turn, lead to a destruction of traditional labor organizations and, through the embracement of global capital, to the fast arrival of post-industrial social structures in Europe and the United States. Moreover, new international left perspectives (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987: 106), new left movements, as well as of the importance of identity for these political movements and social theory had to be acknowledged. In the context of these changes and in accord with the overall liberal-democratic and centrist turn in most Western countries, most Post-Marxists gave up the idea of a fully liberated society, which is opposed to a model of philosophy that, as Adorno has it, perceives and judges the existing world from the standpoint of redemption. As Laclau and Mouffe nicely put it (and which can equally be found in Foucault, Honneth, Habermas, and others), 'the myth of the transparent and homogenous society – which implies the end of politics – must be resolutely abandoned' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987: 106). Equally abandoned, according to this view, should be the desire of classical Marxists to assume the emergence of a collective subject without fundamental divisions. As Mouffe puts it, 'there will always be antagonisms, struggles and divisions of the social, and the need for institutions to deal



with them will never disappear' (Mouffe, 2013: 84). Thus, thinking about political movements in a pluralistic context is more central for most Post-Marxists than thinking about the possibility of a revolutionary party (with, perhaps, the exception of Badiou).

As a consequence of moving away from Marx's critique of political economy and of the aforementioned real political and social developments, Post-Marxist philosophers shifted the ontological framework of their theories and evaluations of contemporary social changes and political events. The latter move is crucial not only for understanding how their *thinking* changed, but also since the underlying conceptual displacements tend to be overlooked by readers who understand Post-Marxism only as a loosely connected set of 'ideas'. However, looking back onto the development of left theory during the last 50 years reveals a surprisingly coherent picture. As already indicated, Post-Marxist philosophers tend to argue that the social-economic structure of society, i.e., that which Marx called the relations of production, are no longer a proper basis for thinking about social reality and the *being* of society. Consequently, their thinking of *what society is* changed, and, as such, it can easily be contrasted with how critical theory and the Frankfurt School, at least to some extent, conceive of the world. Instead of focusing on a theory of society as the *primary* level of human reality, Post-Marxist philosophers, including so-called second and third generation Critical Theory, tend to argue that social reality is either based on language and, hence, meaning (Habermas, Mouffe/Laclau), or on norms and ethics (Habermas, Honneth), or on the political (Mouffe/Laclau, Lefort, Badiou), or on power (Foucault). As we will see, the move toward making either normative or political struggle the substance of social reality is decisive, since it leads to a universalized conception of struggles, conflicts, and antagonisms. As a consequence of this move, most Post-Marxists reject that which in the literature

sometimes is taken to be a Marxist dogma, i.e., the assumption of a 'law of value', which is most visible in Hardt/Negri and Gorz, as well as that which is conceived of as Marx's preference for 'productivism' (Baudrillard, Castoriadis, Habermas).<sup>4</sup>

In sum, I follow commentators, such as Choat and Rekret (2016) and Wallat (2010), who claim that the main feature of Post-Marxist thought is the divorce of the political from the critique of political economy (as introduced by Laclau and Mouffe in Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). However, in addition, I want to broaden the perspective in this entry by indicating that other central concepts used in recent attempts to redefine, leave, or overcome classical Marxism, such as normativity and power, are also important to be considered for grasping main philosophical shifts of the last 50 years.<sup>5</sup> As a consequence, in my view newer Frankfurt School proponents, such as Honneth and Habermas, can also be subsumed under the term 'Post-Marxism'.

In order to get a sense of the overall direction of Post-Marxist philosophies in contrast to critical theory and Frankfurt School theorizing, the following should be used as a guideline: Post-Marxists moved away from three central elements of Marxist and Frankfurt School thought, namely, (1) the concept of class, (2) the concept of capital as the concept of societal unity and its accompanying task of a social theory, and (3) a dialectical understanding of the relation between the socio-economic and the political sphere.<sup>6</sup> Instead, Post-Marxism shifted toward (1) the concept of antagonisms and conflict, (2) the concepts of difference and openness (and the rejection of the task of a theory of society), and (3) a hierarchical and dual model of human reality, within which the existing social organization is the effect of either norms, or politics or power struggle. Let me briefly outline the main shift, before I go into more detail.

Laclau and Mouffe put it succinctly by claiming that 'the first condition of a radically democratic society is to accept the

contingent and radically open character of all its values – and in that sense, to abandon the aspiration to a single foundation’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987: 102). Since they reject a single foundation for the pluralization of social conflicts and political struggle, Laclau and Mouffe also reject a single theoretical framework that could provide us with (a) a theory of society as a totality and (b) a single ‘mechanism’ for understanding the plurality of political struggles from an underlying logic. As a consequence, a dialectical theory of social reality in the Marxian and Hegelian tradition is no longer feasible to understand contemporary society and politics, and, in addition, it can no longer function as a framework for political praxis based on the concept of class conflict. Laclau’s and Mouffe’s arguments are straightforward: since contradictions are logical and since we are asked to give up the dialectical concept of social reality, they propose to develop a concept of ‘antagonisms’ that no longer can be subjected to a hierarchical ‘meta’-frame that ultimately would remove these antagonisms as a *constitutive* factor of social reality and turn them into an *effect* of social reality (see Laclau, 2006: 105). According to Laclau’s and Mouffe’s reading of Marx and classical Marxism, the pluralization of antagonisms has been reduced by classical Marxism to an underlying a priori framework, which led to a covering up of the *reality* of political struggle. Accordingly, classical Marxism no longer can be used to understand political movements that are based on diverse national and global contexts, on identity politics or on movements based on sexual identity, gender, or race. As a consequence, their attempt of pushing Marxism toward a new stage is centered in re-thinking the concepts of difference, conflict, struggle, and so on. The political becomes the center of Post-Marxist theory, and the concept of struggle loses its dual logic. As Dick Howard puts it, ‘because the political transcends the society that it constitutes, it can never be incarnated (by the proletariat, the party, or any social institution);

it can only be represented because, in itself, it must always remain “an empty place”’ (Howard, in Breckman, 2013: xiii). Society is now conceived as a ‘multiverse’ of struggles in which no representative logic exists that can express the ‘negative’ status of the pluriverse as *the real*. Put in Derridean terms, *differance* is inscribed in the roots of social constitution and can no longer be reduced to a unitary logic. In this version society becomes a black box that can no longer be caught and fenced in by theory and philosophy. Given this, and although we might see some connections to Adorno’s concept of non-identity, we immediately understand that Post-Marxist theory is uninterested, if not hostile, to the Frankfurt School that (though with some hesitations) did not give up a conception of society as a coherent whole that can be grasped on the level of *its own* constitution, i.e., not as an effect of something else. One of the central hinges for reconstructing social totality in the tradition of critical theory and Marxian political economy is, of course, capital as the overall determining social form of social relations under capitalism. It comes as no surprise that almost all Post-Marxist theorists, with perhaps the exception of Žižek, have given up on the idea that we need to assume an underlying principle and social form that determines the unity of capitalist social organization and enables everything and everyone to be *integrated* into *one* system. In fact, due to the pluralization of political struggle, which is now taken to be the *ground* of the social, society itself appears to be fragmented, plural, and a system of differences that can no longer be unified as ‘one’. As Lefort succinctly puts it:

Whoever dreams of an abolition of power secretly cherishes the reference to the One and the reference to the Same: he imagines a society which would accord spontaneously with itself, a multiplicity of activities which would be transparent to one another and which would unfold in a homogeneous time and space, a way of producing, living together, communicating, associating, thinking, feeling, teaching which would express a single way of being. (Lefort, 1986: 270)<sup>7</sup>

As we can see here, the influence of Derrida's deconstruction and post-metaphysical thought on Post-Marxism, which also includes the rejection of Althusser's attempt to save Marx's theory, should not be underestimated.

With the rejection of critical theory as a critical theory of society, Post-Marxists, such as Laclau and Mouffe, reject the idea that there could be a political representative of this totality, such as the party. As Murray and Schuler put it, 'for Post-Marxists, the epistemological use of "totality" actually invites some Party to reserve for itself the standpoint of the Absolute, take the reins of society, and direct it according to its "scientific" vision' (Murray and Schuler, 1988: 330). Independent from the question of whether the idea of a revolutionary party is obsolete, it is important to note that we *do* find a coherent reformulation of the relation between theory and praxis in Post-Marxist thought. The experiences of the later twentieth century, especially the development of plural political movements, is intrinsically connected to the theoretical re-formulations of society and politics. In its rejection of critical social theory, Post-Marxist thought is not alone: anarchists, such as David Graeber and Noam Chomsky, are equally hostile to theory and theorizing society. For them, in opposition to philosophers such as Adorno and Marx, society is a transparent reality, which does not need to be reconstructed philosophically. As such, these movements tend to dismiss the entire problem of fetishism on the level of the commodity form, and they are equally uninterested in money and capital. It comes as no surprise, then, that the central issue of fetishism and the in-transparency of capitalist social organization and its own mystification as *the* source of (abstract) domination does not play any important role for Post-Marxists, such as Laclau, Mouffe, Foucault, Honneth, Habermas, Badiou, or Rancière. As a consequence, domination is no longer localized on the level of society and, instead, it is conceptualized as a form of intersubjectivity.

Put differently, society tends to become replaced by sociality.

## POST-MARXISM: ONE ATTEMPT OF GRASPING IT

### *The Primacy of the Normative*

Contemporary Habermasian critical theory has turned its back on classical critical-theoretical concepts, including class. Indeed, in the wake of Habermas' theoretical turn toward communication and language, it gave up a unified theory of society. As Habermas argued, (1) the production paradigm must be replaced with the communicative action paradigm (Habermas, 1989: 89), (2) the theory of society with the lifeworld/system distinction, (3) the focus on ontology and epistemology, most visible in Adorno, with a pragmatic theory of linguistics and communicative action, (4) the priority of social-economic considerations with a theory of normativity. The latter is especially important since it shifts the entire basis of critical theory toward considerations of morality, justice, fairness, recognition, and so on, that make up either the transcendental framework for discourses and communicative claims (Habermas) or the framework of intersubjective recognition (Honneth).<sup>8</sup>

Honneth's sharp move away from early critical theory is most visible in one of his more recent publications on democratic ethics. He argues that the entire framework of modern societies, under which he also subsumes the capitalist market, is framed and made possible by recognitional relations. This update of the Hegelian concept of recognition underlies, according to Honneth, all market exchanges as well as the institutional structure, including the family and the political apparatus. Independent from how we think about this neo-Hegelianism (Honneth, 2011), we need to see that Honneth has an entirely different vision of social reality than

traditional critical theory and Marxism, insofar as he argues that normativity is the true basis of society. Given this basic assumption, although Honneth does not acknowledge the ontological implications of his theory, he stands opposed to the French traditions in Post-Marxism, since he argues that the normative framework also underlies and determines political struggle. As he puts it in a very telling phrase, his approach to society is based on a concept of 'reality constituting ethics' [*wirklichkeitsbildender Moral*] (Honneth, 2013: 358). However, since he argues that society cannot be grasped on the level of *its own* constitution, he defends a similar position to other Post-Marxists who claim that the political is the ground of the social. In Honneth, the ground of the social is the ethical.

Honneth's position is nicely visible in a recent article on Marx in which he argues that the concept of capital can be reduced to a normative relation and that that which Marx called an *antinomy* between capital and labor should be taken as a conflict of normative claims. The 'capital relation', as he puts it, is 'shot through' with normativity (Honneth, 2013: 359). He thereby no longer acknowledges that the conflict between labor and capital is *constitutive* for capitalist society; instead, it is reduced to one conflict among many other social and psychological conflicts. Moreover, as Honneth claims, the 'temporal schema of a non-stoppable and uninterrupted expansion of capitalist valorization interests' (356) is unable to render understandable the dynamics of modern societies that are based, he claims, on normative progressions and advancements, such as consumer protections, the welfare state, and improved working conditions. Progress in these areas, Honneth argues, can no longer be conceptualized with the tools of critical theory, since its epistemology does not give us access to the normative struggles for recognition that are multidimensional and cannot be derived from one principle.<sup>9</sup> With the rejection of a constitutive unity of

society, a theory of society in the tradition of Marx and Adorno goes out the window, too. Categories, relations, concepts, and political economy move into the background of Honneth's theory and, instead, intersubjective relations move into the foreground. In short, the analysis of sociality replaces society. As a consequence, instead of analyzing social totality with the concept of value, Honneth, though in a different fashion than other Post-Marxists, falls back onto idealist assumptions, the most important consequence of which is that capitalism is no longer analyzed as a historically specific unity and, instead is based on a *universal* normative background and a plural definition of normative conflicts that run through all levels of social constitution.<sup>10</sup> Though this relation seems at first surprising, we can see how Honneth, although he focuses on the ethical instead of the political, comes very close to the vision of social reality that Laclau and Mouffe offer by what they call the 'multiplicity of conflict zones' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1981: 18). Similarly, Laclau and Mouffe claim in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* that 'the economic space is itself structured as a political space' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987: 94), the position of which is, on the one hand, close to Honneth (who claims that the economic space is shot through with what he calls 'normative claims') and, on the other hand, even Foucault (who, as we will see further down, claims that the economic space is shot through by power relations).<sup>11</sup>

Although Marx and Adorno would not have doubted that normative (or political) conflicts make up social progress, they would have denied the claim that we can base our theory of society on conflictual claims by social agents; instead, capitalist society as such would be conceived as the framework *in which* these normative conflicts unfold and find their limits. This framework as a *totality* is denied by most Post-Marxist philosophers, and, consequently, they also reject the need for a dialectical theory of society.

### ***The Primacy of the Political***

One of the most prominent representatives of Post-Marxism, although his philosophy to a large extent is opposed to Laclau and Mouffe, is Alain Badiou's Maoist political thinking and his attempt to make philosophy political again by radicalizing the concept of truth.<sup>12</sup> Badiou's theory of reality is based on his concept of 'event'. According to Badiou, events are those moments in time through which entire areas of our reality are restructured and based on different principles than before. Events can only retroactively be determined and they cannot be instrumentally planned. Badiou argues that there are four 'realms' of reality in which truth events can occur: art, love, science, and politics. Whenever 'the' truth changes in these areas, reality becomes restructured. For example, one could argue that the modern revolutions with their bourgeoisie principles are an event in the history of politics, insofar as we no longer can understand ourselves as 'pre-modern' subjects. Who and what we are as political agents is, whether we acknowledge it or not, determined by the horizon that the modern revolutions have initiated and under which we are still defined as political agents. Events trigger 'truth procedures' that define some organized ways in which a truth can be followed up, organized and actualized. For the sake of this entry, it is important to note that the social-economic is not on the list of truth related events, according to Badiou's ontology. In short, reality restructuring events and the installment of new 'meta'-truths come about through politics, but not, however, through the event of capital, as one might want to argue from a social-economic standpoint. As a consequence, the political as a truth-related realm of reality and the realm in which humans are defined as subjects (of a specific political framework and as agents), is introduced as the primary realm of being and the root of all (possible) changes, insofar as they are not science, art, or love related. Politics is, then, the ontological ground of the

social. As Oliver Marchart demonstrates, for Badiou politics defines the reality, but it cannot be translated into social relations (Marchart, 2010: 160). Seen from Badiou's standpoint, social and economic relations are therefore always only the consequence of political revolutions. It comes as no surprise, then, that for Badiou (a) classes only exist in concrete practical confrontations, but are nothing in themselves, and (b) Marxism is neither a philosophy nor a theory, but primarily a political praxis:

Marxism [...] is neither a branch of economics (theory of the relations of production), nor a branch of sociology (objective description of 'social reality'), nor a philosophy (a dialectical conceptualization of contradictions). It is, let us reiterate, the organized knowledge of the political means required to undo society and finally realize an egalitarian, rational figure of collective organization for which the name is 'communism'. (Badiou, 2012: 8)

This reduction of Marxism to politics is especially visible in Badiou's rather sporadic references to capital, capitalism, and other categories of society in relation to empirical data, which thereby denies that we are in need of a *theory* of capital, as, for example, Adorno would argue. Capitalism, for Badiou, is a 'regime of gangsters' (Badiou, 2012: 12). According to Badiou, theorizing about capitalism remains within the existing paradigm, as it only analyzes what is taken to be untruth, whereas Marxism as a praxis (already) exists outside of the existing paradigm.

Since Badiou defines Marxism as a political praxis, his writings on how contemporary society could be overcome are defined in terms of ideas and subjects. According to Badiou, social reorganization is based on the 'force of an idea' (Badiou, 2012: 15) as an a priori condition, namely, the force of the idea of communism, which runs through the entire philosophical history. The communist idea can 'interpellate' individuals, the consequence of which is that they turn into subjects (of the idea). Agency is constituted, according to this model, through the

subjection of individual bodies to the truth who then, as quasi-militants, reorganize the reality in accordance with the idea. Indeed, according to Badiou, the political subject is 'a militant of this truth' (Badiou, 2010a: 3). According to this quasi-religious model of political agency, individuals now belong to a new order of humanity (Badiou, 2010: 35).

Although Rancière's Maoism is not as strong as Badiou's, some of his positions regarding radical democracy come close to Laclau and Mouffe, and his shift toward the ontology of the political can be located in close proximity to Badiou's ideas.<sup>13</sup> According to Rancière, democracy should be understood as an anarchist concept in the sense of an 'ungoverning' element in all government and as a 'non-foundation' that founds *all* attempts to organize social reality. Again, politics becomes the true ground of the social and it loses its social form. All political governing of society is forced to control the democratic and uncontrollable foundation that underlies and threatens political control. Society, as Rancière argues, becomes 'bracketed' by events of democracy. As a consequence, democracy as a *possibility* of the breakdown of the control mechanisms of society refers to fundamental instability of the entire social order. Rancière's turn to the political and his turn away from Marx's critique of political economy, as in Badiou, lead to the reappearance of historically universal concepts and to the rejection of the concept of class: 'The power of the people is not that of a people gathered together, of the majority, or of the working class. It is simply the power peculiar to those who have no more entitlements to govern than to submit' (Rancière 2006, 46; for a critique of such a position, see Wood: 1998). Rancière offers a radical version of the 'political autonomy' theorists by claiming that the political as the 'groundless ground' of society does not depend on *any* social, ethical or historical forms:

comes to assist and to rival it. It is not based on any nature of things nor guaranteed by any institutional form. It is not borne along by any historical necessity and does not bear any. It is only entrusted to the constancy of its specific acts. (Rancière, 2006: 97)

The problem with this position is not that it reintroduces a strong concept of politics; rather, the problem with this vision is, as in Badiou, that it is unable to conceptualize the political agent as a *historically specific* and social-economic agent who can only *be* a political agent because its being is social.<sup>14</sup>

Badiou's and Rancière's substantializing of the political can also be found in Lefort and Castoriadis. Lefort was very influential for the French discussion, and his definition of the political can be seen as paradigmatic. He writes: 'the *political* refers to the social ensemble itself, for the entire collectivity is affected by conceptions of the nature of power and the mode of the exercise of government' (Lefort, 2007: 113). As Breckman has it, 'Lefort urged us to see that social conflict can only be defined as representing an internal division, a division opening within and defined by a single milieu' (Breckman, 2013: 150).

In a similar fashion, Castoriadis detects in Marx a 'naïve contempt for the political question' (Castoriadis, 2008: 197) and a naïve belief in the disappearance of politics once the relations of productions would be revolutionized and collectivized. According to Castoriadis, Marx did not understand the full force of the political realm as a realm of freedom and equality since he underestimated the role of power in societies. In short, in search of a radical praxis and in search of a revolutionary subject after the downfall of traditional Marxism, Post-Marxist thinkers such as Castoriadis see Marxism as an obstacle to new ways of thinking about society and a different future. He criticizes traditional Marxism by arguing that its focus on theory, sciences, and laws cannot help us understand contemporary society. Socialism, as he argues,

Democracy is as bare in its relation to the power of wealth as it is to the power of kinship that today

is not in classical Marxism understood as a historical and political project of people and its praxis; instead, it conceives of society as the result of an objective historical movement (Castoriadis, 2014: 76). Castoriadis's position has immediate ramifications for the concept of class in his thinking, since he claims that the concept of class can no longer be determined by its relation to the relations of production alone. As a consequence, he identifies traditional Marxism with its political effects in the twentieth century and, given these twentieth-century failures of the left, he argues for a strong concept of social autonomy that is based on the idea that an autonomous society (which he no longer calls 'socialism') is a society that determines its own institutional reality as the result of its own collective actions and is able to make corrections whenever it realizes faults or different needs (Castoriadis, 2014: 55). Seen from this mix of Kantian and anarchist ideas, Marxism as a doctrine becomes on *all* levels and institutions of society a 'massive restriction' of human self-regulation (Castoriadis, 2014: 77), 'self-administration' (Castoriadis, 2014: 78), and 'participatory democracy' (Castoriadis, 2012: 82). Again, this idea is best expressed by Laclau and Mouffe:

We have rather to conceive society as a complex field, crossed by a diversity of political struggles, in which the multiplicity of subjects must be recognised and accepted if we are one day to achieve a truly liberated and self-managed society. (Laclau and Mouffe, 1981: 22)

Finally, for Castoriadis, truth must be liberated from fixed knowledge and ought to become the 'free movement of people in a free realm' (Castoriadis, 2014: 61). Castoriadis himself connects the emergence and strength of the concept of self-administration to the events of 1968 (Castoriadis, 2014: 153). As in Laclau and Mouffe, any metaphysical framework of thought should be abolished, and since dialectics is ultimately rooted in metaphysics, dialectics has to go, too.<sup>15</sup>

### ***The Primacy of Power***

Treating Foucault as a Post-Marxist is contentious, insofar as Foucault's work is not only characterized by many changes, but Foucault distanced himself from Marxism and showed contempt for academic Marxists. However, Foucault appeared in public with many masks, and a more generous reading of Foucault reveals that Marx's critique of political economy is present in many of Foucault's analyses of the modern disciplinary institutions, such as the hospital, the schools, and the prisons, i.e., his work in the 1970s. The recently published lecture courses during this period of his thinking, such as *The Punitive Society*, in which Foucault develops a first version of what then became *Discipline and Punish*, shows an uncanny closeness to many issues that Marx dealt with in volume one of *Capital*. Due to Foucault's rather narrow reception as a 'Post-modernist' this important aspect of his work can easily be overlooked. Equally important is his appropriation of Althusser's concept of ideology (Althusser, 2014) and his further development of an institutional and spatial theory of knowledge. For example, in the lecture course *The Punitive Society* as well as in some writings on biopolitics, Foucault is concerned with the production the human body as a human body that must be prepared and 'inserted' into the disciplinary framework in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The adjustment of the accumulation of men to that of capital, the joining of the growth of human groups to the expansion of productive forces and the differential allocation of profit, were made possible in part by the exercise of bio-power in its many forms and modes of application. The investment of the body, its valorization, and the distributive management of its forces were at the time indispensable. (Foucault, 1990: 141)

In other words, the subjection of the labor process to money and the wage form required the subsumption of the human body to the process of valorization (for this, see also

Macherey, 2015). After the first historical upset by capital the production of migrating bodies had to be controlled (vagabonds, homeless, etc.).

Foucault analyzes the *constitution of social reality* through the body. For example, the history of handwriting, as Foucault shows in *Discipline and Punish*, can be conceived of as a disciplinary process that produced the effect of different 'spatial' and bodily configurations and different social relations, which, in turn, had to be in place in order to bring about the subjection of labor to capital. Accordingly, for Foucault, knowledge is tied up with the body, the topic of which has been totally missed by critical theory, since social formations are rarely analyzed by Frankfurt School philosophers as embodied processes. As Foucault argues, capitalism

would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes. But this was not all it required; it also needed the growth of both these factors, their reinforcement as well as their availability and docility; it had to have methods of power capable of optimizing forces, aptitudes, and life in general without at the same time making them more difficult to govern. If the development of the great instruments of the state, as *institutions* of power, ensured the maintenance of production relations, the rudiments of anatomo- and bio-politics, created in the eighteenth century as *techniques* of power present at every level of the social body and utilized by very diverse institutions (the family and the army, schools and the police, individual medicine and the administration of collective bodies), operated in the sphere of economic processes, their development, and the forces working to sustain them. (Foucault, 1990: 141)

Moreover, Foucault understands the production of knowledge in the form of ideology and in the form of social relations as a material process, which also includes architecture and geography. For example, in his analysis of power relations he includes the architectural form of prisons, and he is very interested in understanding how time and space became productive along with the historical

emergence of the wage form. As such, despite his intellectual turns and the fascinating breadth of his work, Foucault can be read in the framework of Marxism.

Although power in Foucault is a heavily debated topic and though he is not always clear about the ontological ramifications of his concept, seen from a Marxian background and the topic of embodiment, it becomes clear that Foucault moves power onto *one level* with the social-economic determinations and relations of production. As Balibar has convincingly argued, Foucault shares with Marx the anti-liberal position that power relations are prior to contractual relations (Balibar, 1992: 50).<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, power, as Foucault shows, is the force that reorganizes the social relations in accordance with the new social-economic principle of capitalism, which is the wage-form.<sup>17</sup> What Foucault attacks are certain caricatures of base and superstructure in which power is solely located in the superstructure of society. According to Foucault, following Althusser's concept of structural causality, power should be analyzed on the level of social relation and not from 'above' or independent from it. As a consequence, power is something that is never 'power over' or simply oppressive; instead, it is the very struggle that *organizes* the relations in accordance with its overall form (value).

In this way, Foucault makes the same move as other Post-Marxists by arguing that the political has been reduced to the social in Marxism and that we would do well to rescue political relations as relations of struggle as a topic on its own by analyzing it on what Foucault famously calls, in *Discipline and Punish*, the 'micro-analytic of power'. According to Foucault, then, all social-economic relations are political, insofar as every reorganization of the social is connected to the struggle between power and 'counter-power'. But this relation is not one-dimensional; instead, it is a pluriverse of relations that cannot be rescued by a dialectical theory of society. This all-pervasive concept



of the political also explains Foucault's closeness to Maoist movements. Since power is all-pervasive, power relations always *transcend* the social relations in which they are expressed and which they organize.

We can see here that that which Foucault worked out in hundreds of essays and interviews, becomes then finalized and popularized in Laclau and Mouffe. As they put it,

The Gramscian concept of the war of position implies a rupture with such a conception, a rupture which finds its theoretical source in the notion of the integral state. For if the articulations of the social whole are political articulations, there is no level of society where power and forms of resistance are not exercised. Since these articulations do not come from a single and necessary source, there can be no absolute and essential location of power, but rather a multiplicity of dimensions and struggles, whose unity – or separation – are constantly being re-defined. (Laclau and Mouffe, 1981: 20)

Although the transcendence does not occur external to existing society, as in Badiou, power always escapes the attempt to fix it in social categories, such as class, gender, or race. Put simply, power cannot be grasped as a unified principle; for power underlies those categories and brings their organization about without being determined by them.

## CONSEQUENCE: THE REJECTION OF CAPITAL AND THE LAW OF VALUE

All Post-Marxists reject that which has been (unfortunately) called the 'law of value', i.e., Marx's labor theory of value. The main proponents are, on the one hand, André Gorz (2004), and, on the other hand, Hardt and Negri (especially Hardt and Negri, 2001: 280–304). Gorz, although often not considered as a Post-Marxist philosopher, was one of the first, with Postone (1996, 2015), who understood Marx's philosophy of labor not necessarily as a critique of alienated labor and communism as a state of unalienated labor. He argues that Marx's philosophy is in

truth a critique *of* labor and a critique of wealth connected to labor and production, the thesis of which is most prominently featured in Marx's so-called 'Machine Fragment' in the *Grundrisse*. Given the further processes of automatization, the intellectualization of labor, ecological issues, the general importance of knowledge for production and the increasing unimportance of fixed capital for wealth, Gorz argues that the labor theory of value loses all of its meaning, and with it, at least to some extent, Marx's general philosophy, too. Even before Hardt and Negri, Gorz takes on 'immaterial labor' as the central issue for a Post-Marxist theory of the economy and contemporary society: 'Underpinning the capitalist knowledge economy, we find, then, an anti-economy in which the commodity, commodity-exchange and money-making don't apply' (Gorz, 2010: 13). Gorz's general thesis, which Hardt and Negri also support, is simple: immaterial labor and the centrality of subjectivity and knowledge for contemporary capitalism, points to the end of the attempt to privatize and to subsume everything for surplus value production. Since, as these philosophers argue, knowledge is intrinsically social, cannot be privatized, and belongs to the commons (Gorz, 2010: 36), capital is left with *power* and strategies to enclose knowledge. On this view, control societies are societies in which capital can no longer make labor more productive and, instead, tries to control it. Value, according to these Marx readers, is based on labor and is a measure, and, since immaterial aspects of labor products can no longer be measured, the labor theory of value becomes obsolete: 'by "immaterial labor"', as Negri explains, 'we mean the ensemble of intellectual, communicative, relational and affective activities which are expressed by subjects and social movements' (Negri, 2008: 62). Communism is already around the corner, and we are observing the last attempts by capital to go against its own downfall. Consequently, we can celebrate and declare critical theory a thing of the past.

Capitalism is now identified with 'limitless control' (Castoriadis, 2012: 83) of individuals, which no longer allows individuals to identify an overall meaning in contemporary society. Similarly, Negri and Hardt argue that under conditions of its dissolution capital turned into pure forms of control, insofar as the category of value can no longer be applied to the contemporary form of capitalism in which *measurable* labor no longer determines the value of commodities. As Negri has it, we are 'in a situation where *labour time* on the one hand and, on the other, the *criterion of measure* of this time (and hence the law of value) becomes less and less important as *central quantifying elements of production*' (Negri, 2008: 63). As a consequence, and this connects Negri and Gorz to other Post-Marxists, political relations (outside of their class determination) become again very important for understanding social relations, although, to be fair, Negri's analyses always move in close proximity to political economy:

When the entire paradigmatic framework of labour is changed, when labour comes to consist of a totality of knowledge borne and put into production by mass intellectuality, then political control comes to be exercised through war. (Negri, 2008: 65)

It is clear that the current shift toward a network society, which implies a 'socialization of production' (Negri, 2008: 64), as well as the 'internet of things' produces many problems for capital's ability to come up with new strategies to enclose the common, such as patents and intellectual copyrights. Once the products become more and more driven by digital technologies and information, commodities can be reproduced at almost no cost, which, in turn, reduces their marginal utility to zero and, ultimately, makes it almost impossible for capital to squeeze more profits out of labor power. According to Hardt and Negri, biopolitics in the form of control of entire populations, is the consequence (Negri, 2008: 71).

As a result, Hardt and Negri can be moved close to Laclau, who argues that the 'objectivist theory of history' was based (among other things) on the internal contradiction of surplus value production as well as on the assumption that the profit rate of capital will decline over time and bring capitalism to an end: 'The labour theory of value, on which it was grounded, was shown to be plagued by all kinds of theoretical inconsistencies' (Laclau, 2006: 104).

## CONCLUSION

Two concluding comments are in order: first, many of the Post-Marxist figures who have been discussed in this chapter seem to have a somewhat narrow understanding of the later Marx as an 'economic' philosopher who no longer can tell us much about our contemporary world. Second, given this, it is also crucial to understand why in more recent work done by academic Marxists who do *not* want to give up the Marxian heritage, a 'different' and 'new' Marx emerged that is most visible in the German school of the so called 'new Marx reading' (Backhaus, Heinrich, Reichelt), the re-envisioning of critical theory (Bonefeld), the Italian readings of Marx (Finelli, Fineschi), ecological Marxism (Saito, Foster, Burkett), and readings that deal with globalization and international issues (Padella, Anderson). These new readings move away from the classical understanding of Marx's critique of political economy as a theory of a specific mode of production to a wider understanding of Marx that includes all spheres of society.

Recent popular movements that are based on 'flat' political structures and that are directly influenced by Laclau and Mouffe, such as *Podemos* in Spain, can be traced back to a long intellectual left tradition after the Second World War, and should be seen in the light of the intellectual world of Post-Marxist thought. As Laclau and Mouffe have

it, 'the political subject, the agent of this outcome, can no longer be conceived of as the simple product of an infrastructural logic' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1981: 19). As such, any attempt to pose critical theory as an alternative theoretical paradigm should equally think about whether it can be accompanied by different forms of political praxis. The rejection of any hierarchical organization of contemporary left politics leaves us with the Badiouan question of whether a mass movement can be organized in a way that differs from the party conception of organization. It should not surprise us that contemporary left movements no longer look for traditional Marxist language to describe their struggles and no longer conceive of critical theory as something that helps them to understand the society within which they live. Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that, as Laclau and Mouffe have it, 'any reformulation of socialism has to start today from a more diversified, complex and contradictory horizon of experiences than that of 50 years ago' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987: 80). We are living in a historical period in which 'new generations, without the prejudices of the past, without theories presenting themselves as "absolute truths" of History, are constructing new emancipatory discourses, more human, diversified and democratic' (80).<sup>18</sup>

However, even if this situation is undoubtedly true, we should be concerned with the tendency of Post-Marxism to reduce society to an effect of pluralized social struggles, since this leads to the assumption that we can think about the political or the ethical without determining from where, how, and what is at stake *as a whole*.

## Notes

- 1 One of the most insightful and detailed discussions of Post-Marxism as a whole is without doubt Breckman's (2013) *Adventures of the Symbolic*. Breckman, in contrast to almost all other commentators, in my mind correctly, also includes lengthy discussions of Lefort and Castoriadis.

- 2 On this, see Kouvelakis and Bidet (2008).
- 3 For a general discussion, see Breckman (2013). Baudrillard's work on the symbolic dimension of commodity culture and his critique of 'productivism' was very influential during the 1980s (for this, see Baudrillard, 1981).
- 4 Though I disagree with these two claims about Marx's theory, for the sake of this entry, I will not discuss this critique in more detail.
- 5 Engster (2013) and Wallat (2010) are too narrow since they leave out of their pictures of Post-Marxism feminist Marxism, theories of intersectionality, or, most importantly, works by Lyotard and Baudrillard. The best systematic approach to the philosophical questions raised by Post-Marxists, at least in my mind, is the work by Oliver Marchart (2010, 2013).
- 6 For this, see also Wallat (2010). As Wallat also points out (279), the concept of radical democracy, which gets pluralized and historically universalized in Laclau and Mouffe, loses its socio-economic specificity, the consequence of which is that the analysis of the state as a *unifying* force in capitalism gets lost. This stands in stark contrast to (early) critical theory and the German Marxist tradition after 1968. For this, see also Bonefeld (2014). For Badiou, the state is implied in all 'true' politics as a negative praxis, but his concept of state remains empty and becomes an equally universally unspecific placeholder for existing orders. As such, Badiou's concept of the state remains socially empty.
- 7 It would be interesting to contrast the French tradition in political philosophy with Adorno's philosophy of non-identity. Adorno's epistemological concept of non-identity implies an ethics, but its political ramifications remain unclear. For two different readings of Adorno, see Wellmer (1985) who moves Adorno closer to a theory of (post-)modernity, and Bonefeld (2016) who tries to push Adorno back to Marx. One should note though that there is an unfortunate tendency in the recent literature on the Frankfurt School, at least in my view, to remain silent on political philosophy altogether.
- 8 This and the following subsection are loosely based on what I have developed in Lotz (2014, 2016). How foreign these approaches are to Adorno's theory, can be seen nicely when we contrast Habermas and Honneth's basic assumptions about the being of society with what Adorno says in his instructive *Introduction to Sociology* (Adorno, 2002: 32). As we can see here, Adorno claims that we need to base our analyses on a constitutive principle, which, for him, is the exchange principle. As a consequence, following the logic of constitutive principles, Adorno also assumes that this principle establishes a unity and

- integration, against which his *Negative Dialectics* are posited.
- 9 As a consequence, Honneth declares early critical theory as a project of the past (for this, see Honneth, 2007).
  - 10 Choat and Rekret detect a similar problem in Laclau, since they argue that Laclau cannot solve his oscillation between his ontology of the social and the foundational role of antagonisms (which is universal) and the historicity of social formations (for this see Choat and Rekret, 2016: 284 and 285). Similarly, Wallat argues that Laclau and Mouffe do not offer a proper theory for understanding the specific form of the political (Wallat, 2010: 272). In my view, Heidegger's and Badiou's ontologies offer a way out of this problem by historicizing ontology itself, although for both philosophers the social-economic is of no importance for their ontologies of the 'event'.
  - 11 Two comments are in order: first, this position has been left behind by critical theory inspired by Lukács' early attempt to define each element of a social totality as an element of its totality and its form, as well as, to some extent by Marx himself. As Marx has it in his arguments against this Hegelian position, 'what is forgotten, finally, is that already the simple forms of exchange value and money latently contain the opposition (and inequality, C. L.) between labour and capital. Thus, what all this wisdom comes down to is the attempt to hold fast to the simplest economic relations, which, conceived independently, are pure abstractions; but these relations are, in reality, mediated by the deepest antagonisms, and represent only one side, in which the full expression of the antagonisms is obscured' (Marx/Engels 2005: 173). As Wallat points out, Marx never held the position that we can separate the logic of capital from political struggles that Post-Marxists, such as Laclau and Mouffe, ascribe to him (Wallat, 2010: 278). This thesis is also confirmed by Foucault, who detects in the process of formal and real subsumption in Marx's *Capital*, power relations on the same level as the social-economic.
  - 12 Badiou is not the only philosopher who argues for the primacy of the political. The theories of Rancière, Laclau/Mouffe, and Lefort/Castoriadis are equally influential, though it seems as if Lefort and Castoriadis have a smaller readership in the Anglo-American context. The unpopularity of Castoriadis might also be related to his undogmatic spirit and wide intellectual horizon. Castoriadis moves easily between left-wing revolutionary thoughts and the entire history of Western thought.
  - 13 For more on the different conceptions of democracy in Post-Marxism, see Zakin (2014).
  - 14 We should also note that Post-Marxist thought has led to very interesting re-readings of Marx. The best example for this is Abensour (2011), who tries to reveal that democracy can be understood as an anarchist (and Machiavellian) concept in Marx.
  - 15 Many of his ideas have anarchist roots and have moved into recent theories of democratic socialism, workplace democracy, and economic democracy, as it was developed by Erik Olin Wright, Richard D. Wolff, and David Schweickart. As Castoriadis further argues, an autonomous society cannot exclusively be achieved by a different political praxis, but it also needs a different form of how a society *imagines* itself as society, which led him to develop a theory of social imagination that still awaits its appropriation by contemporary critical theory, insofar as the analysis of the culture industry as a theory of the knowledge that capitalist society produces about itself could be easily connected to Castoriadis' idea that every society needs to *produce* an imagination of itself as that which determines itself as social reality. Accordingly, one would need to think about a different form of social imagination and ask whether the answer given by Frankfurt School thinkers, such as Marcuse and Adorno, that art and aesthetics can function as the place for envisioning a different world is sufficient.
  - 16 For the confrontation between her agonistic model of politics with the liberal tradition in Habermas and Rawls, see also Mouffe (2005).
  - 17 As Poster (1984: 95–120) argues, Marxist takes on prison development have reduced it to the issue in class and missed Foucault's broader claim that class is an *embodied* structure. Foucault's dismissal of the state as a unifying structure that belongs to capitalism and its form, moves Foucault closer to Post-Marxism (for this and his relation to Poulantzas, see Smart, 1983). A very good analysis of the problem of class in Foucault can be found in Bidet (2015).
  - 18 We can see here that, although Lyotard is rarely mentioned, the Post-Marxist framework is heavily indebted to Lyotard's famous diagnosis of the (post-modern) age as being characterized by the downfall of all meta-narratives that formerly defined philosophies of history (Lyotard, 1984).

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# Critical Theory and Cultural Studies

Tom Bunyard

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to address some of the connections, differences and tensions that can be discerned between Critical Theory and Cultural Studies. This requires a few brief qualifications. Firstly, one cannot discuss the relationship between such broad and varied bodies of thought without making problematic generalisations. Consequently, and whilst I shall try to nuance the remarks that follow as much as I can, it will need to be taken as read that a good deal of work within both traditions differs from the themes and trends that this chapter will describe. Secondly, and in order to make that problem more manageable, these two fields will need to be narrowed to some degree. When referring to Critical Theory, I shall be primarily concerned with the latter's first generation, and thus with writers such as Adorno, Benjamin, Horkheimer and Marcuse; when looking at Cultural Studies, I shall concentrate on the history and characteristics of its

British iterations. This focus on British Cultural Studies is not due to chauvinism on my part, but rather follows from the fact that Cultural Studies' most seminal and defining forms first emerged within the British context of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. The debates and problematics that shaped its development exemplify many of the issues that have informed Cultural Studies' often vexed relation to Frankfurt School Critical Theory: a relationship that has been greatly informed by the differing conceptions of modern culture associated with these two bodies of thought.

From the 1930s onwards, writers associated with Critical Theory contended that modern culture was becoming progressively assimilated and restructured by capitalism. This, they held, was having deleterious effects upon both culture and upon those who consumed it. In their view, society had become marked by a tendency towards mechanistic rationalisation, which had resulted in a culture characterised by conformity and

complacency. This had become all the more alarming in the aftermath of the Holocaust: for having proved so amenable to domination and barbarity, modern society needed to be condemned, and its culture recognised as a stupefying, debilitating influence upon humanity's capacity to attain a less degraded condition. The 'mansion' of culture thus needed to be recognised as having been 'built of dogshit' (Adorno, 1990: 366).

In sharp contrast, most of the work that has been conducted in the tradition of classical Cultural Studies has tended to view modern culture not as a calamity, but rather as the site of emancipatory struggle. Popular culture is not seen simply as a locus of domination, but rather as a space of both consent *and* resistance: as a site of hegemonic contestation, wherein meanings and ideological formations are continually negotiated and challenged by both the producers and receivers of cultural messages. This then means that culture is seen to be inherently *political*, for once it is understood in this manner, culture becomes a space in which modes of struggle both for and against established forms of power are continually conducted.

The distinction drawn here is overly simplistic, but it should serve to indicate why proponents of these two fields of thought have often held each other at arm's length. For writers associated with Cultural Studies, Frankfurt School Critical Theory (and Adorno in particular) has become associated with an outdated Marxian cultural elitism. Conversely, some scholars of Critical Theory have viewed aspects of Cultural Studies as effectively endorsing capitalist culture. The differences between these views derive, in part, from the twists and turns that shaped the development of British Cultural Studies, which involved the adoption of positions that contrast with those that characterise first-generation Critical Theory. For example, there is an obvious distance between Adorno's bitter despondency regarding the effects of mass culture (e.g. 'every visit to the cinema leaves me ... stupider and worse' (Adorno, 2005: 25))

and the outright celebration of popular culture that Cultural Studies adopted towards the end of the 1980s. Perhaps the most extreme illustration of that short celebratory period can be found in John Fiske's *Reading the Popular* of 1989. Where Adorno and Horkheimer talked of a 'mechanically relentless control mechanism' (Adorno, 2002: 64), marked by consumption and fetishism, Fiske boldly described shopping centres as spaces of subversion (Fiske, 2002: 17); and where Marcuse complained of a society in which 'people recognise themselves in their commodities' (Marcuse, 1970: 24), Fiske presented a televised game show, in which contestants guessed the price of commodities for cash prizes, as a source of feminist liberation (the show, he claimed, took 'skills and knowledges ... out of the devalued feminine sphere of the domestic' and gave them a 'carnavalesque inversion' (Fiske, 2002: 21)).

Such views are easily ridiculed when viewed from a broadly Marxian perspective. However, the approach to modern culture from which they arose should not be dismissed quite so readily: for as I shall propose below, that approach may be of some relevance when considered in connection to our modern social and political context, and indeed when viewed in relation to the impasses into which first-generation Critical Theory eventually fell.

In this regard, it may be useful to underscore the gravity of the political engagement that informed the development of the Gramscian conception of culture that I sketched above. Just as Gramsci's interest in hegemony was informed by Italian fascism, so too was British Cultural Studies' turn to Gramscian thought informed by the rise of the right in the 1970s and 1980s. Serious attempts were made to theorise how and why Thatcherism had been so successful; and whilst the responses offered certainly did not ignore the changing socio-economic climate of the time, they they also pointed out that the political right had been particularly adept at re-framing the meaning of key terms and ideas



(‘democracy’, ‘freedom’, ‘choice’, etc.). This implied that subsequent attempts could be made to challenge and re-position these meanings (McRobbie, 2005: 22). During the 1970s and 1980s, therefore – and thus during the period in which many of this tradition’s core ideas were established – British Cultural Studies was attempting to operate as a critically and concretely engaged political project. It was not intended to function purely as means of interpreting the social world, but was also attempting to change it. Given that our own historical moment seems clearly marked by a drift towards new forms of ‘authoritarian populism’, the ideas that were advanced during this period of research may well merit attention today. That said, I shall also suggest that there are aspects of the Cultural Studies tradition, and indeed of contemporary Cultural Studies in particular, that may seem rather more dubious.

## ORTHODOXY AND ACCEPTANCE

There are a number of significant points of correspondence between aspects of Cultural Studies and Critical Theory. For example, early British Cultural Studies emerged from a frustration with traditional Marxism similar to that which motivated the writers of the Frankfurt School. It has also been consistently marked by a concern with the ways in which power operates within modern society, and by an orientation towards the pursuit of emancipatory political change. Furthermore, both Critical Theory and Cultural Studies have often shared a similarly inter-disciplinary and anti-dogmatic ethos. Indeed, just as it is somewhat problematic to talk of a ‘Frankfurt School’ of Critical Theory (Finlayson, 2007: 627), so too is it questionable to refer to a ‘Birmingham School’ of Cultural Studies (associated with Birmingham University’s celebrated Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies). In fact, Stuart Hall, one of the most prominent and influential figures within that

period of Cultural Studies research, once remarked that references to a ‘Birmingham School’ only served to remind him ‘of the arguments we used to have in Birmingham that we were never one school’, and of the fact that there was no desire ‘to create that kind of orthodoxy’ (Hall, 1996a: 149). Nonetheless, such an orthodoxy does seem to have taken root within some aspects of Cultural Studies.

Hall’s remarks were made in the late 1980s, in response to a growing tendency within Cultural Studies towards its institutionalisation and codification as a discrete academic discipline. Semiotics, theories of ideology and post-structuralist ideas had once been selected as tools from amongst a range of other possible approaches, and had been employed as means towards furthering an open-ended political project. Yet due in part to Cultural Studies’ growing prominence within academia, this set of tools had started to coalesce into a distinct, recognisable methodology. This was fostered by Cultural Studies’ gradual spread overseas, where it was adopted, particularly in America, as though it were a discrete, established doctrine. At the same time – and whilst a broad commitment to notions of liberation certainly remained in place – the direct connection to concrete politics that had characterised some of the most significant Cultural Studies work of the 1970s and 1980s started to subside. Hall was thus concerned that Cultural Studies was turning into a relatively settled body of thought: one that was certainly suited to describing modern culture, but which had become rather less invested in changing the latter than had once been the case.

These issues would become further complicated during the 1990s, as a result of British government policies concerning the supposedly socially regenerative and wealth-creating attributes of art and culture. Cultural Studies flourished as an academic discipline, and its university departments became increasingly closely tied to employment within the so-called ‘creative industries’.

Such connections have since become firmly established: academic Cultural Studies has become interwoven with media studies, and students who pursue such courses are now often schooled in ideas suited to work within advertising, industry and the media.

This entails a departure from critical theoretical concerns that could be phrased as follows. If Cultural Studies can be said to have evolved a relatively firm body of methods and precepts; and if that resultant set of ideas serves to produce knowledge suited to the continued operation of the existing social order, and which does not seriously challenge the latter (as is the case, for example, if it serves as a training ground for industry); then it could be construed as an instance of what Horkheimer referred to as *traditional* theory, as opposed to a form of *critical* theory. In brief: it seems possible to argue that whilst some of the aspects of Cultural Studies that I referred to above might accord with the characteristics of a *critical* theory, its subsequent development brought it much closer, at times, to the status of *traditional* theory. In order to develop that claim, we need to look at Horkheimer's seminal definitions.

## TRADITIONAL AND CRITICAL THEORY

Horkheimer's 'Traditional and Critical Theory' essay of 1937 begins by contending that theory involves subsuming facts under conceptual structures that afford the explanation and interpretation of those facts. He then goes on to argue that traditional theory is characterised by the use of largely unquestioned theoretical structures. Because they are taken for granted, the modes of thought and relation to the world that they entail are effectively naturalised. Traditional theory operates in this manner, according to Horkheimer, because its conceptual structures are shaped in such a way as to be

fruitful for particular kinds of knowledge, which are oriented – however tacitly – towards particular kinds of results. These results are suited to the pursuit of goals that accord with the needs and nature of a given social context. Thus, as Horkheimer puts it: if the 'properties' of a theory are 'seen as advantages, this very fact points beyond itself to the fundamental characteristics of social action at that time' (Horkheimer, 2002: 195).

In consequence, traditional theory tacitly serves and perpetuates the social context in which it is situated. It also accustoms those who employ such theory to that same social order, whilst masking its own ideological contextuality. Because it does not address or examine the degree to which its conceptual frameworks accord with the extant social world, it has no engagement with its own specificity to the historical moment that it serves and naturalises. Instead, it merely confronts the world through fixed contexts and categories, making sense of that world in a manner that suits the operational schema of the society from which such theory arose. In this regard, and as Horkheimer pointed out, traditional theory is somewhat analogous to Kantian philosophy: for it too subsumes contingently given input under a fixed conceptual framework, the ultimate unity, purpose and operation of which remains beyond the perspective afforded by that same framework (Horkheimer, 2002: 203).

How might this relate to our concerns? The answer is simply that some of the criticisms that have been levelled at contemporary Cultural Studies, from positions sympathetic to Critical Theory, can be seen to echo these themes. According to Slavoj Žižek, for example, 'the field of Cultural Studies, far from actually threatening today's global relations of domination, fit[s] their framework perfectly' (Žižek, 2001: 226). Or, as Esther Leslie once put it, whilst echoing Horkheimer: Cultural Studies has evolved into a parody of Kantianism; a parody 'in which the object is slotted into a framework of categories such

as gender, race, identity (and its flipside difference), language, culture, space, time' (Leslie, 1999: 123), and in which that object is thereby interpreted in a manner that does not truly contest the nature of the society in which both theory and object reside. Modern Cultural Studies, in other words, has been cast as a body of thought that is certainly able to produce knowledges and skills suited to conduct within the extant social order, but which does not seriously challenge the latter in any fundamental sense.

Horkheimer's notion of traditional theory owes a good deal to Max Weber, but it also echoes some of the claims that Lukács made in his highly influential *History and Class Consciousness* of 1923. Similarly to Horkheimer, Lukács described capitalist society as having engendered a mode of thought that both reflects and perpetuates a socially conditioned inability to grasp the historical contingency of capitalist society. Such 'bourgeois thought', Lukács claimed, views the social world as largely unchanging. Like Horkheimer, Lukács illustrated this point by way of reference to Kantian philosophy: 'bourgeois thought', he claimed, tends to treat the world as a *given*, addressed by a consciousness that simply *interprets* that which it confronts. Such thought is certainly suited to the pursuit of individual ends within the existing social structure, but it ultimately suits the requirements of an effectively sovereign economic system. This is because its limited perspective fails to take full cognisance of the sense in which the social world is not just a given object that stands at one remove from the consciousness that contemplates it, but rather the result of the potentially transformative collective agency of human subjects (Lukács, 1971).

One can find much the same view in Horkheimer's essay. Like Lukács, Horkheimer presented traditional theory as an approach to the world whereby individuals try to adapt to reality without fully grasping the fact that the world that they confront is really the result of their own social activity. In other words,

traditional theory understands and categorises a given social world in accordance with the needs *of* that same world. Through doing so, it breeds a degree of conformity *to* that world, and thereby occludes the sense in which the latter is in fact contingent upon its continued acceptance by its inhabitants. As we will see towards the end of this chapter, it is rather hard not to be reminded of these views when one considers some of the more instrumentalised aspects of contemporary media and cultural theory.

In contrast to such forms of thought, *critical* theory, according to Horkheimer, would recognise that social reality is mutable, and that it is the product of social activity. It would not bring human beings into tacit alignment with a world that they have themselves created, but would instead foster emancipation from their subordination to that world's effectively autonomous logics. In this regard – and as Horkheimer pointed out – critical theory would function in a manner that bears direct relation to Marx's critique of political economy (Horkheimer, 2002: 206n). If political economy can be understood, from a Marxian perspective, as the flawed, limited self-consciousness of bourgeois society, then a *critique* of political economy would aim to address and lay bare the presuppositions and normalised assumptions that characterise that consciousness. Similarly, if traditional theory can be understood as operating within the extant framework of modern society, then critical theory is engaged in addressing the unquestioned assumptions that characterise that framework. By extension: critical theory must then be a kind of *practice*, insofar as it is oriented towards liberating human agents from their own inadvertently self-imposed domination. Rather than forming part of the existing social order, such theory must be oriented towards the latter's transformation: for 'the kind of theory which is an element in action leading to new social forms is not a cog in an already existing mechanism'. Rather than forming part of the existing social order, it

must instead be part of a struggle against that order; it cannot be 'self-sufficient and separable from the struggle' (Horkheimer, 2002: 216). Consequently, a genuinely critical theory cannot take its role and position in society for granted, but must self-consciously assess its own relation to the existing order.

The following sections of this chapter will argue that many of these ideas can be mapped onto the problematics that informed the development of British Cultural Studies.

## THE ORIGINS OF BRITISH CULTURAL STUDIES

Raymond Williams, a formative figure in British Cultural Studies, once pointed out that 'culture' is 'one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language' (Williams, 1988: 87). In the past, the term had been associated with cultivation, and thereby with refinement; hence its connection to sources of 'cultured' intellectual and aesthetic appreciation, such as high art, music and literature. In its more modern usage, however, 'culture' tends to be identified with a people's way of life. Cultural Studies is generally closer to the latter view, and its initial emergence, in the 1950s, was greatly informed by frustration with earlier perspectives that associated culture with refinement and improvement. We should begin, then, by looking at such views, and perhaps the best place to start is with Matthew Arnold.

Arnold was a nineteenth-century English critic and poet, who held that the role of cultural criticism was to 'cultivate what is best and noblest' (Arnold, 1992a: 591) in people. Through doing so, criticism would help 'to keep from man a self-satisfaction which is retarding and vulgarising', and thereby 'lead him towards perfection, by making his mind dwell upon what is excellent in itself, and the absolute beauty and fitness of things' (Arnold, 1992b: 597). Cultural criticism,

therefore, should concentrate on the improving, uplifting qualities of the high arts, on the grounds that the dissemination of such values could assist the improvement of humanity in general. Arnold's ideas thus informed and echoed the nineteenth-century liberal view that art, poetry and high culture could help to remedy the degraded conditions of the working classes.

The notion that high culture might form a bulwark against barbarity can also be found in the work of F. R. Leavis, whose *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* of 1930 sought to respond, from a conservative perspective, to the aspects of mass society that began to alarm Adorno during that decade. Leavis claimed that the minority of individuals within society who are capable of fully appreciating high art and literature 'constitute the consciousness of the race' (Leavis, 2005: 34). In his view, such elite, cultivated culture, and the ability to engage in its appreciation, was under threat from 'the processes of mass production and standardisation' (Leavis, 2005: 35). Faced with the radio programmes, pulp literature and magazines that had begun to flood society, Leavis warned, in terms that echo Adorno and Horkheimer, that 'a standardised civilisation' was 'rapidly enveloping the whole world' (Leavis, 2005: 37).

British Cultural Studies has, however, almost always been marked by a longstanding antipathy to anything that resembles such cultural elitism. Some of the primary roots of this rejection of elitist values (and, by extension, of its longstanding antipathy to any Adornian readiness to describe the consumers of cultural products as 'infantile' and 'forcibly retarded' (Adorno, 2002: 46–7))<sup>1</sup> can be found in one of the originary texts of British Cultural Studies: Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*, which appeared in 1957. Hoggart's book certainly echoed the view that modern society was under threat from the corrosive effects of a standardised, mass-produced culture, which had grown increasingly pervasive since Leavis' time. Yet rather than viewing high culture as the

last bastion of defence against that encroaching threat, as Leavis had done (and as Adorno had done too, albeit in a very different and nuanced manner), Hoggart focussed on the often-neglected merits of the working class communities in which he had grown up. With an admirable absence of romanticism, although with a slight trace of conservatism, he argued that the close communities and old, organic social relations that could still be detected within England's Northern industrial towns were being broken down. '[W]e are moving towards the creation of a mass culture', he claimed, and 'the remnants of what was at least in parts an urban culture "of the people" are being destroyed' (Hoggart, 2006: 9–10).

Importantly, Hoggart rejected the view that the working classes could be construed as dupes, and that they had been led astray and infantilised by the new 'mass culture'. So too did Raymond Williams, who was at pains to stress that the members of the Welsh working class community within which he had grown up were not dazzled by the glamour of popular culture, but rather retained a strong capacity for critical discernment. It would be a serious mistake, Williams claimed, to view the denizens of such a culture as incapable of conducting any kind of critical assessment of the meanings, products and entertainments with which they were confronted. Williams also foregrounded the view, which had already been present in Hoggart's work, that 'culture' need not designate a collection of prized books and paintings, but rather referred to a mode of life. In 1958, Williams famously argued that 'culture is ordinary' (Williams, 2002: 92): that it needed to be understood as 'a whole way of life', and that the activities and interactions that composed it were articulated via the 'common meanings' produced by 'a whole people' (Williams, 2002: 95–6). Williams' work thus introduced some of the key themes that would run throughout much of the work that followed: namely, the emphasis on culture as a locus of constructed meaning; the

view that individuals within a culture are able to critically address, contest and create these meanings; and indeed the further view that an orthodox Marxism could not accommodate such ideas. This latter point would also be inflected by the work of E. P. Thompson, who argued, in his *The Making of the English Working Class* of 1963, that class cannot be understood as an economic category, but should instead be seen a culture formed by human relationships through time.

The work of Hoggart, Williams and Thompson lies at the origin of British Cultural Studies, which grew and coalesced further following Hoggart's founding of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in 1964. These early years were also very much informed by the New Left, which had been given a good degree of impetus by the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. A desire for distance from the so-called 'actually existing communism' of the East; frustration with an ineffectual mainstream labour politics; a concern with the need to break away from an orthodox interpretation of Marxism; all of these aspects of the New Left greatly inflected the emergence of British Cultural Studies, and became key themes when Hall took over the directorship of CCCS in 1968.

## SHIFTING MEANINGS

The struggles around black power, gay rights and feminism that are often grouped together under the heading of '1968' certainly fostered greater degrees of social equality. Capitalism, however, ultimately proved quite commensurable with these demands. These efforts towards liberation were gradually accommodated through the emergence of a mode of capitalist society that placed an increased emphasis on *individual* liberty, and which responded to the 1960s more hedonistic and utopian demands with a new-found emphasis on consumer desire, variety and

distraction. Assisted by the slow demise and growing disrepute of the old, traditional left, these circumstances led to a condition of greater social atomisation and fragmentation (Gilbert, 2008a: 21–2). Thus, whilst the struggles identified with 1968 were successful in some regards, the era that followed was a disaster for the political left. In Britain, this was compounded by the rise of right-wing popular politics.

As was indicated above, the work pursued by Hall and others during the 1970s and 1980s sought to address the reasons for, and possible responses to, this new state of affairs. One of the most important instances of such analysis was *Policing the Crisis* of 1978: a text that analysed a racially inflected bout of hysteria in the press concerning muggings, and which thereby investigated the changing nature of the political and economic circumstances of the time. It showed that popular unrest was being steered by the right-wing press and politicians into an antipathy towards immigrants, unions, and to the left more broadly.

The theoretical resources that would be employed as means of addressing this state of affairs drew on the advances that Gramsci, Althusser and semiotics afforded over a more traditional Marxian understanding of culture and ideology. With Althusser, one could address the relative autonomy of ideology vis-à-vis an economic base; with Gramsci, one could cease to view ideology as a top-down mode of control, and instead see social attitudes in terms of a constant struggle for hegemony; from semiotics, one could take a set of conceptual tools suited to the analysis of those contested cultural messages and norms.

Steps towards this position were taken in 1973, with Hall's 'Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse' essay: a text that emphasised the politicised nature of cultural discourse, and which stressed that audiences might interpret messages in a manner opposed to that which was intended by the senders of such messages. Semiotics had become particularly important by the late

1970s, when Dick Hebdige produced his *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979): a book that argued that youth subculture involved subversive interventions into society's dominant system of meanings. Cultural Studies was thus moving towards the conception of culture sketched at the outset of this chapter: a view according to which culture could be seen not simply as a site of ideological domination and control, but rather as a space of political contestation, wherein meanings and messages could be contested as elements of hegemonic struggle.

It is perhaps important to note here, given the nature of the positions that would later emerge within both Cultural Studies and Critical Theory, that such contestation was *not* envisaged as a 'mere "discursive" operation' (Hall, 1996b: 41). Work such as this certainly led to Cultural Studies' later and enthusiastic appropriation of post-structuralist ideas, but for Hall at least, cultural meanings and symbols did not float 'in language or ideological representation alone' (Hall, 1996b: 41): instead, 'reality exists outside language', although it is 'constantly mediated by and through language' (Hall, 2001: 95). Although ideological formations were not held to be reductively tied to an economic 'base', they were nonetheless seen to pertain, in more or less adequate ways, to the economic structure of society. The aim of a hegemonic cultural politics would then be to 'articulate' these ideological formations to concrete realities in a manner that might assist social change. 'No ideological conception can ever become materially effective', Hall claimed, 'unless and until it can be articulated to the field of political and social forces and to the struggles between different forces at stake' (Hall, 1996b: 42).

## THE GRAND HOTEL ABYSS

Having now reached what was, arguably, the defining period in the evolution of British

Cultural Studies, we should pause here in order to take stock. Despite important differences, elements of this work certainly chime with aspects of Critical Theory. Although Hall and others sought to remain within 'shouting distance' of Marxism (Hall, 1996c: 265), they stressed at the same time that a radical consciousness could never be mechanically generated by the economy or assumed by the theorist (views associated with the very traditional and orthodox conception of Marxism that they sought to reject). This work also incorporated a high degree of self-reflexive awareness of its location within its own object of enquiry. Above all, it was not intended to operate as a purely academic and socially descriptive exercise, but was instead motivated and formed by a drive towards social change. Yet when viewed from a perspective sympathetic to the concerns associated with first-generation Critical Theory, this vision of culture, and of counter-hegemonic intervention, is by no means unproblematic. It can be seen as a form of capitulation to a world in which truth and falsehood were becoming floating signifiers, and in which politics was beginning to be shaped by opinion polls (Norris, 1993: 6–7). In addition, its pragmatism could also be seen to tacitly normalise both social democracy and the supposed need to steer potentially compliant masses towards particular political goals. One might also wish to voice objections to its theoretical legacy, given that work such as this opened the door to Cultural Studies' later willingness to locate some kind of liberatory potential in practically any aspect of mass culture.

It follows, from our earlier discussion of Horkheimer's notions of critical and traditional theory, that if a body of theory were to accept and endorse capitalist culture, it would, presumably, amount to an instance of *traditional* theory. Could this assessment apply to the views described above? As we will see shortly, Cultural Studies would later undergo a period of theoretical debate in which fierce defences were offered for the

pleasures and supposedly emancipatory virtues of commodity consumption. These discussions were certainly predicated upon the views described above, but even so, it would be a serious mistake to view all Gramscian Cultural Studies as an elaborate apology for capitalist culture. Work in this vein has tended to be marked by critical engagements with the ways in which social structures are maintained through culture. Insofar as it is thus concerned with contesting the tacit naturalisation of a given social order, it can be framed not as an instance of traditional theory, but rather as according with some of the attributes that Horkheimer ascribed to critical theory.

It might seem that a stronger case could be made if one sought to reproach this period of Cultural Studies for its ties to social democracy, given that the latter was viewed with deep suspicion by some critical theorists (Benjamin, for example, spoke of the 'conformism which has been part and parcel of social democracy from the very beginning' (Benjamin, 2005: 258)). For first-generation critical theorists, the disastrous nature of modern society meant that reform was untenable: attempts to make its intolerable conditions more tolerable would only serve to acclimatise its inhabitants to their domination.

However, Adorno and Horkheimer tended to avoid direct reference to 'revolution', and also rejected the view that theory should operate in the latter's instrumental service (Finlayson, 2007: 654). Rather than conceiving revolution as a social remedy, efforts were directed towards developing a notion of utopia that would illuminate the failings of the present. Ideas such as these led Critical Theory into an impasse. This is because both a messianic, redemptive notion of revolutionary change, and withdrawal from a purportedly damaged, broken world, can court the danger of collapsing critical theory into traditional theory: for if less drastic forms of political change and engagement are rejected, one is left in a position of potential inaction; a position of lordly, etiolated separation from

which the world can be condemned en bloc. Such a purely condemnatory relation to capitalist society could only be *contemplative*, in Lukács' sense of the term, no matter how much it involved railing against reification. Indeed, for the Lukács of 1962, some of the key proponents of Critical Theory seemed suspiciously content to merely observe and lament the world's miseries.

A considerable part of the leading German intelligentsia, including Adorno, have taken up residence in the 'Grand Hotel Abyss' ... 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, 2006: 22)

We will return to this apparent impasse later. Suffice it to say here that whilst Critical Theory can certainly afford trenchant criticisms of some aspects of Cultural Studies, those who work within the tradition of Critical Theory may have something to learn from classical Cultural Studies' readiness to engage and intervene with culture and politics. There is, however, perhaps rather less to be gained from the more celebratory accounts of mass culture that would be advanced in the years that followed.

## POPULAR PLEASURES

British Cultural Studies' subsequent evolution was greatly informed by its encounters with the feminist, post-colonial and queer concerns. Some of these encounters were quite jarring (Hall, 1996c: 269), as they involved critically addressing the degree to which Cultural Studies had retained and normalised the assumptions of the society that it inhabited. In 1989, for example, Paul Gilroy criticised Raymond Williams' unintended proximity to racist discourse in *There Ain't no Black in the Union Jack* (Gilroy had already contributed to *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism*

*in 1970s Britain* (1982), and would go on to write his influential *The Black Atlantic* in 1993). Feminism and gay issues had been similarly important throughout the 1970s. Cultural Studies' engagements with such issues were also facilitated by its readiness to adopt aspects of 'post-modern' theory, which was becoming increasingly prevalent within Anglophone academia at this time. This encouraged the 'shouting distance' that Cultural Studies had maintained with Marxism to grow fainter, as the influence of writers such as Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Baudrillard and Lyotard pushed that distance even further.

At the same time, the success and growing prominence of Cultural Studies was facilitating its increasing acceptance into the academy. This came with obvious advantages, but it also fostered the tendency, which we saw Hall object to earlier, towards the disciplinary codification of what had previously been an open-ended and inter-disciplinary project. According to Hall in 1986, semiotics was becoming an established methodology. Althusser's thought was being shorn of its Marxist connotation, and Gramsci's conception of hegemony was being treated as if it simply meant ideological domination (Hall, 1996a: 149). Cultural Studies was turning into a discrete, recognisable academic discipline, in which its former political dimensions were being gradually eclipsed by a purely theoretical commentary upon modern culture (Hall, 1996c: 273–4).

This is not to deny that Cultural Studies continued to engage with political issues, as racism, sexism, homophobia and domination would remain key concerns. The point, rather, is that such issues were now being addressed within an institutional context that was itself situated within a capitalist social formation that had proved itself more than capable of accommodating feminist, anti-racist and gay demands (Gilbert, 2008a: 49). To what extent, then, could the Cultural Studies to which this gave rise lay claim to the status of *critical theory*? Perhaps very little, if all it offers is a mode of quasi-critical commentary



that does not seriously challenge the seeming inevitability of social relations that are predicated upon commodity exchange. Cultural Studies had evolved a relatively coherent conceptual framework by this time, but if all that framework affords is a mode of interpreting the world that effectively leaves the latter untouched, then it must surely come closer to the status of *traditional* theory. This issue seems particularly pertinent when considered in connection to some of the work on consumption that was produced during the 1980s and 1990s.

As noted earlier, Cultural Studies had long been marked by the view that hegemonic consensus is never final, and that total ideological domination does not exist. If cultural meanings are indeed fluid, then elements of mass culture can be re-purposed (buying a safety pin might constitute capitalist conformity; wearing it through one's nose might signify refusal and opposition). Furthermore, if culture is understood in terms of hegemonic consensus, then cultural phenomena may exhibit both progressive and regressive attributes. The roots of these ideas go back a long way. For example, Angela McRobbie, who joined CCCS in 1974, studied the ways in which cultural products marketed towards teenage girls not only construct forms of femininity, but also respond to and incorporate feminist concerns. In 1979, Richard Dyer's 'In Defence of Disco' argued that disco, despite its glossy and polished aesthetics, played an important part within gay culture. Popular music might well be a commodity, he argued, but its status in this regard does not prevent it from creating important loci of potential change: 'The anarchy of capitalism', he claimed, 'throws up commodities that an oppressed group can take up and use to cobble together its own culture' (Dyer, 1979). Such views are obviously very far removed from those of Adorno, whose irredeemable blindness to the black politics of jazz has often been a sore point for Cultural Studies.

The claims made by these writers were typically insightful and pertinent. However,

they gradually led towards the celebratory accounts of consumerism to which I referred at the start of this chapter. Such views were informed by the contention that the outright condemnation of popular culture that had characterised an earlier generation of cultural commentary was no longer relevant. Despite their obvious political differences, both Adorno and Leavis were viewed as cultural elitists: as writers whose claims were irrevocably tied to a period in which capitalism had relied on mass production and consumption, and whose work could not, therefore, address the politics and possibilities that followed from the new conditions and vastly expanded consumer choice of Post-Fordist society (Nava, 1987: 204). Added impetus was provided by the contention that much left-wing and Marxian thought involved a puritanical distaste for the simple pleasures of consumption that could not connect to the concerns of the modern populace, and further assistance to such ideas was also provided by the ambience of Foucauldian notions of resistance, Deleuzian conceptions of desire, and Baudrillard's nihilistic comments on consumer society. As a result, work began to emerge that sought to reclaim consumer culture from the scorn that had been heaped upon it in the past.

Some of the most eloquent work in this vein was presented by Mica Nava, who argued in 1987, whilst drawing on Foucault, and whilst also expressing evident frustration at the patriarchal dimensions of Marxian politics, that consumerism needed to be understood in terms of resistance as well as subjection (Nava, 1987). The 'female' sphere of shopping and consumption, she claimed, as opposed to the 'male' realm of production, had previously been viewed as replete with foolishness and confusion. However, the cultural dimensions of consumption had afforded steps towards female emancipation that needed to be recognised, and Marxian theory had been far too slow to acknowledge this. Similarly, in an essay of 1991, she attacked the critical theoretical notion,

associated with Adorno and Marcuse, that the pleasures, needs and satisfactions of consumerism could be deemed 'false'. Nava attributed a quasi-religious and puritanical dimension to these notions of 'falsity', contending that such judgements had associated 'false' pleasures with material objects and escapism, and thus with a kind of worldly failure to approach the 'authentic' virtues of 'true' political and creative activities (Nava, 1991: 159–60).

Cultural Studies' brief, celebratory fixation on consumerism during the late 1980s would soon be supplanted by more nuanced responses to the pleasures of consumption (see, for example, McRobbie, 1991). Nonetheless, these ideas remain a part of Cultural Studies to this day: in 2010, Nava dismissed 'the pessimistic rhetoric of the Frankfurt School' as 'a now discredited critical framework', claiming that such views express 'disdain for this aspect of modern economic and social life [i.e. shopping and consumption]', and thereby disparage 'those most involved, usually women' (Nava and Lawson, 2010).

## TRUTH AND FALSEHOOD

References to 'false' pleasures and desires can certainly be found in the material that Nava criticised. Marcuse, for example, spoke of 'false needs' (Marcuse, 1970: 21–2), and Adorno talked of the 'false happiness' (Adorno, 2002: 33) that could be found through the fulfilment of such needs. Yet this notion of falsity does not possess the pious, Methodist dimensions implied by Nava, and nor is it predicated upon a fixed human nature, as often seems to be supposed. Marcuse, for example, stated very explicitly that 'false' needs are simply those 'which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression' (Marcuse, 1970: 21). The 'wrongness', 'falsity' and 'perversion' attributed to the

modern world was not seen to follow from the occlusion of a 'natural' human essence, or from some timeless and detached moral principle, but rather from a historically situated demand to rationally implement the possibilities for human emancipation that modern society currently employs as means of maintaining its social order.

In this regard, there is a strong sense in which Critical Theory responded to the inversion of subject and object that had been diagnosed by Marx: a condition wherein human beings had been reduced to the status of mere objects, and in which the objects that they create operate as though they were society's determining subjects. For Lukács, whom we referred to earlier, the rectification of this state of affairs would afford a social condition wherein human agents could become the conscious authors of their own existence: a condition in which the social world would cease to be 'contemplated' as though it were an immutable, detached object, and would instead become a collective project (Lukács, 1971). Lukács described this condition as a state of subject–object identity, and held that this could be ushered in via the agency of the Party. These views were treated with deep and justified suspicion by later critical theorists (Adorno, 2008: 16–17). Yet despite such criticisms, similar views were nonetheless expressed: according to Marcuse, for example, 'a critical theory of contemporary society' should thus analyse society 'in the light of its used and unused or abused capabilities for improving the human condition' (Marcuse, 1970: 9–10); or, to use Benjamin's expression: it should identify the 'weight of the treasure which accumulates on the back of humanity', and 'provide the strength to shake off this burden in order to be able to take control of it' (Benjamin, 1975: 36).

There are two points to be made here. Firstly, it follows from this that it is quite wrong for writers like Nava to contend that the Frankfurt School and their fellow travellers rejected pleasure *per se*, in favour of

some kind of morose asceticism. Rather than rejecting desire, sexuality and hedonism, they sought to reclaim such pleasures from their current capitalist integument, and even expressed explicitly anti-puritan views (Adorno, 1967: 102–3; see also Soper, 1999: 149). The problem, therefore, was not material pleasure, but rather the fact that such pleasure had come to serve an effectively autonomous social system. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, such a view would seem to fall beyond the perspective enabled by the theoretical paradigms employed by these versions of Cultural Studies. If an outright critique of capitalism is rejected in favour of a more moderate attention to the supposedly progressive possibilities afforded by consumption, any such vision of the end of alienation seems untenable. Such a perspective can only seem to accord with the attributes of a traditional theory.

## THE UNITY OF SUBJECT AND OBJECT

It would be incorrect to contend that modern Cultural Studies has become entirely a-political. The feminist, anti-imperialist and broadly socialist concerns of earlier forms of Cultural Studies all tend to remain in place. However, the explicit connection to political intervention that marked the work of Hall and others seems relatively absent, or to have at least subsided. Generalising to the extreme, it seems possible to contend that relatively traditional forms of Cultural Studies, which follow in that tradition, have become somewhat eclipsed by two rather polarised offshoots. On the one hand, some of the more sophisticated and overtly theoretical elements of modern Cultural Studies now draw on continental philosophy and science in order to describe cultural and technological change. At the other end of the spectrum, cruder forms of Cultural Studies now seem to operate as training grounds for employment in advertising, media and industry. The latter

tendency has been apparent for some time. In 1999, the cultural theory journal *New Formations* published a special issue focussed on the relation between Critical Theory and Cultural Studies. Writing in that edition of the journal, Kate Soper asked the following question: ‘In what sense,’ she asked, ‘does a Cultural Studies approach remain in any radical critical relation to the wider social context if the training it provides is simply going into the creation of more compelling advertising copy?’ (Soper, 1999: 149).

Cultural Studies’ drift towards this position was fostered by Blair’s Third Way politics during the 1990s, which involved the assumption that culture and the arts could assist urban regeneration, boost the economy, and assist the growth of capital. British Cultural Studies thus became increasingly tied to the cultural and creative industries. Esther Leslie has made some particularly pointed remarks concerning this connection. In a short polemical essay of 2006, she argued that Cultural Studies had been steadily remoulded as cultural policy. Writers associated with modern Cultural Studies, she claimed, whilst ‘echoing terms from the cultural theory they absorbed’, now ‘marshal the language of market research and niche marketing, capitalism’s tools for product placement in competitive industries’ (Leslie, 2006). In order to illustrate this point, Leslie quoted from a eulogistic discussion of Britain’s hugely successful Tate Modern art gallery, in which the members of the public who visit the gallery were described as becoming ‘actors’ rather than ‘spectators’. Leslie presented this as an invocation of Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Author as Producer’: an essay in which Benjamin set out a vision of cultural audiences becoming producers of their own culture (Benjamin, 1970). Yet where Benjamin saw this as an aspect of an emergent communism, the text from which Leslie quotes simply praises the Tate as ‘one of Britain’s Coolest Brands’, and describes the participation that it celebrates as the opportunity to identify and associate oneself with that brand (Leslie, 2006). Clearly,

this takes the contemplative attributes of traditional theory to an extreme: for where the latter engages with its object in a manner that renders the subject compliant to that object, we can now find instances of contemporary cultural theory that effectively parody the unity of subject and object described above, insofar such as bodies of theory describe the subject's integration into that estranged object.

Towards the beginning of *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse remarks that 'the concept of alienation seems to become questionable when the individuals identify themselves with the existence which is imposed upon them and have in it their own development and satisfaction' (Marcuse, 1970: 26). This seems pertinent when viewed in connection to Post-Fordist society and culture, where work-time, leisure-time and consumption have almost fused into one; and it can seem all more relevant when considered in relation to forms of cultural theory that seem content to describe or even endorse this state of affairs. As an illustration, we might think here of Henry Jenkins' description of a 'participatory' 'convergence culture', inhabited by 'prosumers': individuals who help to create the culture that they consume, due to the degree to which it has become so fully integrated into their activities and enthusiasms. 'Convergence', according to Jenkins, is both a 'top-down corporate driven process and a bottom up consumer-driven process' (Jenkins, 2006: 18): a happy unity of industry and audience, and of commodity and consumer, wherein subject and object become one – albeit in an entirely antithetical manner to that envisaged by Hegelian Marxism.

Jenkins' book is an obviously extreme example, and it would be a mistake to view all contemporary Cultural Studies in these terms (although its decidedly instrumental lessons are now taught on media studies degree courses). As was noted above, much modern Cultural Studies continues to operate in the tradition of the work developed by Hall and the CCCS. However, such work can also

be challenged in a somewhat similar vein, on the grounds that it too could be seen to echo the nature of the conditions that it seeks to describe.

As was also noted earlier, Critical Theory's classical visions of the 'culture industry' have been described as symptomatic relics of a Fordist society marked by mass production and managed consumption. Cultural Studies, on the other hand, evolved as an attempt to grasp the nature of a *Post*-Fordist society, and sought to conceive the exigencies and possibilities of contestation within those new conditions. The development of a Gramscian politics of hegemony, and its later adoption of post-structuralist anti-essentialism, must be understood in that light. However, this development led it to a point at which its typical theoretical stances appear to mirror its own object of enquiry: for where Cultural Studies has viewed Critical Theory as an artefact of Fordism, one could, by the same token, view modern Cultural Studies as a symptomatic reflection of *Post*-Fordism. Its development led it to drift ever further from Marxism, to reject humanism, to embrace post-structuralism, and to cast practically all claims to universality under a deep cloud of suspicion. When this is coupled to its enthusiastic engagements with mass culture, Cultural Studies – despite having developed as a means of theorising neoliberal, *Post*-Fordist society – may in fact echo the all-encompassing 'spectacle' and absence of fixity that characterise that very society. Neoliberalism has cut away and undermined the older modes of organisation, interaction, education and orientation that might have helped to articulate political dissent in the past. The organised, militant political opposition of the past is now long gone, and opposition, today, often seems to have become a confused, inarticulate impetus towards populist revolt, capable of lurching either to the left or to the right in its rejection of that which is perceived to be the status quo. In such circumstances, the need for a politically engaged and critical engagement with modern culture seems more pressing

than ever. But has Cultural Studies' trajectory through structuralism, post-Marxism and post-structuralism echoed neoliberalism's steady erosion of a solid, coherent basis for such opposition? As Gilbert points out, whilst commenting, sympathetically, on the contemporary field of Cultural Studies: the situation today is such that 'if [a body of work] does not assume that social identities are the contingent products of discursive practices, then it is probably not Cultural Studies'; yet 'an anti-essentialist perspective is one that is very easily articulated to a neo-liberal paradigm' (Gilbert, 2008b: 560).

### **CULTURAL STUDIES AND THE IMPASSE OF CRITICAL THEORY**

Neoliberal capitalism is marked by a tendency towards re-fashioning social interaction in terms of the market relations between the buyers and sellers of commodities. If Cultural Studies is to retain some kind of critical purchase on modern society, it must, presumably, address this tendency within society and culture, and pursue the notion that some other form of human interaction might be desirable (Gilbert, 2008b: 563). Frankfurt School Critical Theory seems eminently suited to this. Yet any such dialogue should also be reciprocal, given that Critical Theory is marked by its own problems. Its first generation's concern with the formal character of instrumental rationality led to a relative disregard for the political and personal content of such social forms (and thereby to a questionable account of fascism, wherein the latter's political dimensions were eclipsed by the mechanics of the social whole (Cannon, 2016)). Ironically enough, this fixation on formal, mechanical structure brought it rather too close to the status of a fixed conceptual system. It can also be seen to have argued itself into an impasse. Adorno is a case in point here. By *Minima Moralia* (1951), he had come to the

view that if instrumentality was to be avoided, then praxis had to be rejected (Jay, 1996: 279); the production of critical thought independent from the requirements and exigencies of action thus remained the only option available. This resulted in a paradoxical posture, whereby a Marxian social theorist not only condemned mass culture whilst effectively praising high art, but also stressed the need for change whilst stepping away from instances of transformative action (Bernstein, 2002: 7).

It seems possible to contend, therefore, that if Critical Theory really did consign itself to the Grand Hotel Abyss, then steps towards an exit could be found by drawing on some of the resources offered by aspects of Cultural Studies. Granted, its occasional endorsement of consumption jars with Marxian and critical theoretical concerns, but its ability to locate and explain political possibilities in mass culture deserves to be taken seriously. After all, opposition to the existing state of things cannot simply appear from out of the ether, and whilst it may well be the case that 'wrong life cannot be lived rightly' (Adorno, 2005: 39), we are, nonetheless, situated within a wrong world. In consequence, it seems hard to avoid a degree of 'wrongness' inflecting any incipient efforts to change that state of affairs. Provided that it is accompanied by an awareness of its own inadequacies, an engagement with the ways in which popular culture might serve to generate or sustain possibilities for political contestation hardly seems automatically flawed a priori. It is, therefore, surely possible, from a Marxian and critical theoretical perspective, to draw upon Cultural Studies' insights into the potential for contestation within capitalist culture, so as to address the ways in which opposition to capitalist society might emerge from *within* that same society. Besides, given that our current political climate has become marked by a ready susceptibility to 'authoritarian populism', a synthesis between Critical Theory's insights into such phenomena and Cultural Studies' attendance to its cultural roots may be timely.

## Notes

- 1 Without doubt, Adorno employed a deeply condescending tone when referring to such consumers as 'infantile' and diminished ('the culture industry ... incessantly drills the same formulas on behaviour', and such 'steady drops hollow the stone' (Adorno, 2002: 105)). Yet Adorno also held that one of the key characteristics of this impoverishment was that the obedience generated by such conditions was by no means blindly robotic. Instead, one of the most disturbing aspects of his work is his emphasis on the sense in which people see through the images with which they are presented, and yet go along with them anyway ('the triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 167)). There is also a sense in which his criticisms of the culture industry operate in a somewhat similar manner to Marx's early views on religion: the problem is not just that the culture industry presents fantasies and falsehoods, but rather that it provides solace for the privations imposed by a flawed world (see e.g. Adorno, 2002: 103, 92, 126).

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# Constellations of Critical Theory and Feminist Critique

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Translated by Adrian Wilding

## INTRODUCTION

Famously, feminist theory and gender research, which emerged from the feminist movement and the issues it raised, could not easily be connected with existing theoretical traditions. Gender relations – as fundamental ideas and as empirical phenomena – were either completely erased, regarded as subordinate to the analysis of society, or were polarized and affirmed in a functionalistic manner as complementary role-differences. There was and still is a tendency to restrict the concept of gender relations to intimate relations and the family rather than taking a comprehensive view of cultural constructions of difference and the gender-mediated structuring of society as a whole. This also applies to the Critical Theory of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who in key passages of their *Studies on Authority and Family* (Horkheimer et al., 1987[1936])<sup>2</sup> and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979[1944]) spoke of the social

situation of women, femininity and the constitution of bourgeois masculinity. Despite raising a number of proto-feminist issues and insights, these thinkers' androcentric traits make it impossible to join together feminism and Critical Theory without significant revisions to the latter. In the following, I look at what made Critical Theory awkward for a feminist audience and why, according to many feminists, it is still worth engaging with this tradition. Alongside the continuing relevance of their epistemological and methodology-critical reflections, there are two reasons for this. Firstly, in the light of contemporary socio-political transformations, it is important to have theories which insist on the 'innately coercive character of capitalist society' (see Negt and Kluge, 2014: 250–5) and which do so in the spirit of a non-economistic critique of capitalism while at the same time elucidating the psychodynamics of today's socially induced forms of 'feral self-preservation' (Adorno, 1973: 289, amended). Secondly, Critical Theory



represents a historically oriented, self-reflective way of thinking that can account for its own function and situation in society. The historical reflexivity of Critical Theory can also inspire reflections on the dialectic of feminist enlightenment, the flipside of the success of feminist critique.

## NO 'SCHOOL' – MUCH TO LEARN

In a review of his texts from the 1930s sent to the Fischer publishing house in 1965, Max Horkheimer writes that Critical Theory 'knows its concepts as moments of the historical constellation, as an expression of the will to the rightful society, which may express itself in different historical situations and in different theoretical and practical ways but which always remains constant' (Horkheimer, 1988a: 13). Such combining of a diagnosis of the times, political interest in change, and self-reflexive positioning is an essential feature of early Critical Theory. Diagnosis of the times and self-reflection are articulated via the medium of a specific conjunction of the critique of society, knowledge and the subject. Critique, consistent with the notion established in the Hegel-Marx tradition, is not to be imported into society – as in ideas of an ethical 'ought' derived from abstract principles – but is defined instead as determinate negation and immanent critique arising from the relations of tension between social reality and possibility. This presupposes a form of historically grounded social analysis that pays particular attention to conflicts, contradictions and non-simultaneities (Adorno et al., 1976: 120). Its extra-academic emancipatory demands and its consciousness of the historicity not only of objects and their perception but also the concepts formed for analyzing them, distinguishes Critical Theory from disciplinary theoretical techniques and strategies which rely on formulating conceptual systems in the sense of general sociology or developing

sets of ubiquitously applicable formal distinctions.

The Frankfurt School's critique of society (or more broadly, civilization) is directed at the interrelations between social objectivity, subjects' self-relations and their relations with others, which are mediated by an overpowering logic of exchange and identity thinking. The critique focusses on the pathologies of a capitalist society which tends to subordinate everything, including cultural production, to the imperative of valorization. Despite their trenchant criticism of instrumental reason and their diagnostically incisive notion of a 'circle' of individuation and socialization<sup>3</sup> (which brought them the accusation of performative contradiction),<sup>4</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno steadfastly maintained (and for this they needed psychoanalytic theory) that 'historical time and psychical time ... are out of synch' (Claussen, 1988: 41). Critical Theory seeks to determine in its (negative) dialectical reflection the historical configurations of the mediation and differentiation of subjectivity and social objectivity. In 1966, Adorno writes:

Psychology is relevant not only as a medium of adaptation, but also there where socialization finds its limits in the subject [...]. Whether processes of integration, as it seems, only weaken the ego to a minimum, or whether, as in the past, the process of integration can still, or once again, strengthen the ego, is something that has scarcely been questioned with any precision. (Adorno, 1971: 92)

In the contemporary (mostly Foucault-inspired) debate over self-management, governmentality and subjectification under conditions of an intensified marketization of society, one can envisage such questions being taken up, but they would be developed in ways quite different from early Critical Theory. Three paths are usually followed. Firstly, the central claim of early Critical Theory, which defines individual phenomena in terms of their mediation by the overall social context, is scaled back. Rather than thinking about social mediation in terms of Marx's critique of political economy or

variants of differentiation theory or a concept of totality informed by social philosophy, focus falls nowadays more on dispositions of knowledge and power within institutional contexts. Secondly, under the banner of 'the cultural turn', the obstinacy of cultural dispositions and forms of knowledge are taken into account more systematically than in early Critical Theory. Here it is worth remembering that Critical Theory, in contrast to Marxist orthodoxy, already emphasized the social significance of the psychological and the cultural (and was labelled 'bourgeois' for doing so). While certain recent approaches extend the field of cultural analysis in different ways (Reckwitz, 2000), the psychological dimension of early Critical Theory and its enquiry into the dynamics of the drives, tends to get lost. Thirdly and finally, the praxeological-physical dimension of the social is now more strongly developed than in the work of Horkheimer and Adorno, although these two thinkers, whose materialistic impetus was influenced by Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, gave prominent place to the bodily side of subjectivity and the social, along with the somatic dimension of thought and of the critical impulse. It is in almost programmatic terms that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* speaks of a 'subterranean history' running beneath Europe's more familiar past, comprising the fate of the repressed and disfigured human instincts and passions and manifesting itself above all in relation to the body (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979[1944]: 231–6).

### **THINKING IN DISSONANCES – BINDING STATEMENTS WITHOUT A SYSTEM**

Current talk of the 'Frankfurt School' suggests a uniform doctrine which does not exist and never did. Although Horkheimer and Adorno always emphasized how united they were in their thinking, and exegetes have

repeatedly pointed out their mutual influence on each other, the two figures who left the greatest mark on early Critical Theory were never one. Adorno, in particular, who did so much to shape and develop Critical Theory after his return from American exile, was significantly influenced by the ideas of Walter Benjamin, which ran counter to those of Horkheimer, as Buck-Morss (1977), Jay (1976), Schmid-Noerr (1997) and Wiggershaus (1986) have shown. As early as the 1930s, when Horkheimer wrote about the interdisciplinary research programme of the Institute for Social Research and about the relationship between traditional and Critical Theory (Horkheimer, 1988a, 1988b), Adorno, who was not yet part of the Institute, was sceptical towards the idea of individual sciences taking guidance from social philosophy and attempting to arrive at a theory of society as a whole. For him, there was an irreducible epistemological gap between philosophical interpretation and disciplinary forms of empirical research, which should be taken into account both theoretically and logically (Adorno 1990a). In no way was Adorno rejecting empirical research; on the contrary, he had long engaged in it himself, continually reflecting on the potential and limitations of this form of knowledge. 'No prudent social scientist,' he writes in 1969, 'can dispense with empirical research; not only because, in Germany especially, social speculation ... was severely compromised by such doctrines as race as the decisive factor in the life process', but also because, since the collapse of German idealism, the historical relationship between spirit and facts has been fundamentally altered. Adorno continues: 'Walter Benjamin, certainly no positivist, once said that the power of existence today lies more in facts than in convictions. He thus expressed a consciousness of the presently omnipresent hegemony of being, which the mind cannot cope with other than by satiating itself with what is, with facts' (Adorno, 1990b: 539). Such indications of the historicity of epistemic

constellations of 'mind' and 'facticity' are also highly relevant for present-day diagnoses which want to take account of the power which new media of representation and communication now have in structuring reality. However, with each defence of empirical research, Adorno strongly opposed the idea of making empirical social science, with its surveys and studies of subjective consciousness, into the only acceptable basis of scientific knowledge, into the standard of what is theoretically conceivable and conceptualizable. Over the years, in several thematically wider-ranging studies, Adorno developed his critique of wholistic theories of society that are built upon empirical disciplinary research, presenting epistemological, methodological and historical arguments for his scepticism.<sup>5</sup> For Adorno, society is no formal classification but an historical concept that reflects real social tendencies. The concept of society does not only *speak*, in the nominalist sense, of something other, but in reflecting upon diverse social formations *is* itself other. Under conditions of exchange-value production in capitalist social relations, the term 'society' refers not only to an increasing division of functions and a parallel increase in interdependencies, but also to forms of systemic independence and heteronomy. In this form of socialization [*Vergesellschaftung*], and 'before all specific social differentiation' (Adorno, 1969[1970]: 148, amended), the rule of the general over the particular is manifested, the preponderance of social conditions over the individual. As a process and mediation, society cannot be grasped by the criteria of its immediate givens, nor is it fully revealed by the behaviour and action of the socialized subjects who perform these processes. In an analysis of Max Weber's sociological concept of understanding [*Verstehen*] and Durkheim's rule of treating social conditions as things, Adorno first defends the moment of truth in both approaches before concluding that Durkheim's apparent antithesis to Max Weber 'remains just as partial, because it consoles itself with the postulate

of incomprehensibility just as the other does with the postulate of comprehensibility. Contra both, the task would be to comprehend the incomprehensibility which distorts relations between humans into opaque self-sufficient relations' (Adorno, 1969[1970]: 147, amended). This systemic aspect of late-capitalist society, the 'gravity of social conditions', whose compulsive moment burdens each subject and whose survival involves 'making humans owe their lives to what is done to them' (Adorno, 1969[1970]: 152, amended) is what Adorno calls 'totality'. He explicitly distinguishes this understanding of totality from conceptions of society as a 'whole' or 'Gestalt' in the sense of a 'social atlas' and its theorization as 'wholism' (Adorno et al., 1976: 81).

The fact that without reference to the real totality (which is not immediately synonymous with a total system) it is impossible to think the social, while this totality itself can only be recognized by grasping facts and individual phenomena, lends its weight to *interpretation*, also in sociology. [...] To interpret means primarily to become aware of the totality through the traits of the socially given. (Adorno et al., 1976: 32, amended)

Adorno's procedure of using the 'exact imagination' in a constellatory interpretation of individual phenomena in their mediation by the 'whole', a procedure he presents as mutually illuminating 'ensembles of model analyses', aims to achieve 'binding statements without a system' [*Verbindlichkeit ohne System*] (Adorno, 1973: 29). The form of critique he employs to this end is a continual negative-dialectical reflection on the dissonances 'between thought and reality, between concept and object, identity and non-identity' (Benhabib, 1992: 110). It is a notion of knowledge which reveals not only the results of an intense confrontation with the European philosophical – particularly epistemological – tradition but also the great significance which aesthetics and musical composition have for Adorno's thought. The name Adorno gives to this form of societal analysis goes back to Walter Benjamin – 'physiognomics' – and

involves a conceptual reflection and interpretation that sinks into its historical material, seeking traces and instances of the social whole in individual phenomenon. As a result of historical experience, this can only be a physiognomy which regards the world 'when it shows its most harrowing side' (Wiggershaus, 1986: 346). The new categorical imperative which Nazism imposes upon humans is to 'arrange their thinking and conduct, so that Auschwitz never repeats itself, so that nothing similar ever happens again' (Adorno, 1973: 365, amended). Auschwitz, according to Adorno, who hereby reaches what is in his view an unavoidable conclusion on European modernity under capitalist conditions, is not to be understood as the result of Germany following some special historical path [*Sonderweg*], or as a one-off regression, but as a development in the historical form of enlightened civilization itself: 'Fascism, as a rebellion against civilization, is not simply a repetition of the archaic, but the repetition of the archaic by civilization itself' (Adorno, 1971: 61). This point of departure, which distinguishes early Critical Theory from its later forms, leaves none of the classical concepts of social analysis unscathed: progress, enlightenment, differentiation, individuality, communication, humanity and especially the talk of the modernity of modern society. These are all broken apart, problematized, dialecticized, interpreted against a background of social domination, translated back into the social and cultural history of their emergence, their progression, their contradictions and their failure.

## GENDER IN CRITICAL THEORY

The aspect of domination in relations between the genders along with the constitution of male and female subjectivity is repeatedly discussed in early Critical Theory, albeit without a theory of gender relations being

worked out. Among the ranks of Critical Theorists, it was Herbert Marcuse who publicly and unreservedly expressed his solidarity with the women's liberation movement and its concerns. In his last years of life he often addressed feminism: above all in socialist feminism he saw the embodiment of many of his 'dreams and themes' (Cerullo, 1979: 22). Yet the fact that Marcuse explicitly based his hopes for a subversion of instrumental reason and the ruling performance principle upon ostensibly feminine qualities (receptivity, tenderness, non-violence) was regarded as a flaw in the eyes of many feminists who drew upon early Critical Theory. The supposedly subversive potential of the feminine on which Marcuse gambled (as did certain strands in the feminist movement at the time) seemed to them an affirmation of stereotypical bourgeois ideas from the legitimatory repertoire of women's oppression (Rajewsky, 1967). In contrast to Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer had a more ambivalent relationship to feminism, and in public commented comparatively rarely on the topic. Adorno and Horkheimer's theoretical statements on gender relations relate mainly to the family and to the question of the constitution of historically specific psychological dispositions. That said, these statements go beyond the sociology of the family or socialization theories in the strict sense; they gain their specific force and their contours within the framework of Critical Theory's historical diagnoses (themselves underpinned by a social philosophy) and within the context of the problem of emancipatory theory.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, the promise of social emancipation was linked in European history to a form of individuality which, for the first time in the liberal phase of the aspiring bourgeoisie, formed both a powerful ideology and a specific masculine social type. Both thinkers assume the fundamentally ambivalent character of bourgeois culture and self-relationships, an inseparable link between economic self-preservation and

discipline, liberation and oppression. The psychological dispositions and the autonomous and destructive potentials which develop under these conditions take on different forms over time, one being an increasingly perceptible tendency towards a weakening of the ego and the superego.

The work of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research and the texts of Horkheimer and Adorno touch on various facets of this topic. They explore the philosophical reasoning, the socio-cultural presuppositions, the entanglements, pretensions, illusions and self-delusions of the emphatic (male) subject of Enlightenment and humanism. They also illuminate the social history of the formation of individuality along with the fate of individuality today, its waning forms in today's modern mass societies. In this context, the problem arises of the crisis-ridden transformation of the bourgeois family, which had become hegemonic in the course of the nineteenth century and which, in the form of the post-war nuclear family, spanned class divisions and played a highly significant role, becoming a lived reality for many.

That the heroic epoch of the rising bourgeoisie coincides at least in part with the evolution of the modern gender system, with its emphatic polarization of gender characteristics (Hausen, 1976), its radicalization and normalization of heterosexual role differences and modernized forms of patriarchal domination which would become particular objects of feminist criticism (Beer, 1990; Gerhard, 1978), points to a potential conflict between Frankfurt School and feminist theory.

Confronted with a series of tectonic social shifts which had transformed a market society into a society ruled by industrial monopolies and political cliques, and shocked by the widespread conformism which greeted the monstrously destructive capability of an advanced civilization, the Frankfurt intellectuals posed the question of where, if anywhere, a potential could be found to go

beyond the status quo. Where and how might the inhabitants of the apparently ineluctable world of late capitalism come to have an experience that would remind them that society and its relation to nature could or should be different? In search of potential experiences that might transcend the dominant logics of utility and exploitation they turned above all to art, the utopian dimensions of the imagination and of childhood, along with the family and particularly the mother-child relationship. Horkheimer in particular would frequently claim that such a potential is to be found in the early mother-child relationship and as a result he emphasizes the humanizing moment of the bourgeois family and maternal practice. At best, a human could find there the experience of being an unconditional end rather than a means. The fact that, despite his critique of patriarchal domination and the 'deformations of female nature' which arise historically from women's lack of status as subject, Horkheimer still held to the bourgeois form of gender role-differences, is one of the antinomies in his thinking. In his later – or as Mechthild Rumpf (1989: 23) calls them, his 'uncensored' – notes, Horkheimer writes that 'as a result of a fatherly authority that is not abused, as a result of truly motherly love, which would vanish without the differentiation of male and female tasks and rights, bourgeois families have often represented the symbol of something better' (Horkheimer, 1988c: 165).

Rather than once again detailing the androcentric and maternal-idealizing traits evident particularly in Max Horkheimer's writings, it is more productive to call upon an article by Adorno written in 1955, during what can now be seen as the heyday of the breadwinner plus housewife model, namely 'The Problem of the Family' (Adorno, 1986). This short text, which appeared as an 'auxiliary work' in the final volume of Adorno's *Gesamtausgabe* (GS 20.1), brings together certain motifs already employed in the *Studies on Authority and the Family* (1987[1936]) written by Horkheimer, Fromm, Marcuse and others.

The text contains a succinct description of the contradictory nature of the institution of the family while at the same time revealing the desideratum of a theory of gender relations.

Contrary to the widespread habit of presupposing the family as an ahistorical natural nucleus of society, Adorno emphasizes the thoroughly historical character of the family and that it is an institution bound up with the dynamics and contradictory constellations of society at large. The logics and forms of relationship prevailing in the family, their irrational moments, exist, according to Adorno, in a specific relation of mediation and tension with the socially dominant form of rationality. The principle of a rational society needed the help of irrational institutions such as the family to obtain the appearance of being naturally justified. But the unleashing of productive forces and social dynamics 'did not allow the family, which was immanent and internally cohesive yet ultimately incompatible with these forces, to survive unchallenged' (Adorno, 1986: 305). In post-war (West) Germany, in a period of restructuring and restoration, Adorno noted a crisis in the family, which manifested itself in symptoms such as increasing divorce rates, consciously childless marriages, the high number of 'incomplete' families, and a decline in extended families in the countryside. He sees the crisis neither as a new phenomenon nor as a 'mere symptom of decay and decadence' but as already inherent in the basic structure of the family, whose various facets he explores in a series of theses.

Nowadays the family is 'presented with the bill', Adorno says, not only for the 'crude oppression' which women and children have so often experienced at the hands of the head of household, but also for 'economic injustice, the exploitation of domestic labour in a society which otherwise obeys the laws of the market', as well as 'all those suppressions of the drives which family discipline imposes on its members', without any prospect of compensation from secured and transferable

property, as the liberal bourgeois age at least promised the upper classes (Adorno, 1986: 303).

In the ideologization of the family, Adorno sees a questionable reaction to the 'experience of the decline of familial relations' (Adorno, 1986: 303). The cult of the family, an exaggeration of conventions, and emotional coldness, are all different sides of the same development. It is true that the bourgeois family with its privileged function was always a facade, and scepticism about family ideology had long been articulated within bourgeois society, for example in the youth movement. At the same time, the ideology of the family also embodied the prolepsis of something better. Historically, in ideologies of caring and love, ideas of human dignity and equality became concrete and thus served as reference points for social critique and emancipation (Adorno, 1986: 305). Although Adorno refuses to speculate on the future of the family, it seems clear to him that

the preservation of that in the family which, by sacrificing outdated traits, has proved itself humane, as a condition of autonomy, freedom and experience, will not be easy. That a family of 'equals' can be realized in the midst of a society in which mankind itself is heteronomous, where human rights in a more fundamental and universal sense have yet to be created, is probably illusory. One cannot preserve the protective function of the family and remove its disciplinary features so long as the family has to protect its members from a world in which – be it mediated or immediate – social pressure is inherent, and is felt by every social institution. The family suffers the same affliction as everything particular that struggles for liberation: there is no emancipation of the family without the emancipation of the whole. (Adorno, 1986: 307)

That early Critical Theory linked historical advances in women's autonomy, such as vocational training and a general chance to participate in paid labour, so closely (even logically) to the erosion of the family's substance and protective function, has rightly been criticized in feminist theory. Likewise

criticized was the fact that femininity and motherhood were almost elided, and individuality implicitly aligned with masculinity. The argument that there is 'no emancipation of the family without the emancipation of the whole' may also provoke scepticism, because it seems to underestimate the improvements in women's situation that have already been achieved. From a contemporary perspective, however, it is also clear that this raises a painful issue for feminism. When in 1955 Adorno criticizes the limiting of emancipation to the precarious participation of women in the public sphere and to the imitation of patriarchal principles, today it evokes memories of the fact that the demand for emancipation made by many in the women's movement of the 1970s encompassed more than the admission of women to all levels of education, training, professional activity and political participation. In those days it was not only about creating a bearable 'work-life balance', nor merely about creating opportunities for participation in different spheres of modern society, but about realizing these aims under the condition of a different set of gender relationships in a different society: not so much about women getting a bigger slice of the cake, nor even having a better selection of cakes, but the creation of a whole new bakery! At a time of awakening and questioning of everything that seemed solid, such demands did not only result from a surplus of radical pathos, with which a younger generation sought to challenge the blinkered world of the post-war 'functionalist freeze' (Friedan, 1963). They were also based on the first insights of feminist researchers into the historical co-constitution and interdependence of a specific form of gender relations and society as a whole. It is a feature of the dialectic of feminist enlightenment that with the growing awareness of the complex relationship between changes in gender relations and overall socio-structural change, and the experience of the paradoxical effects of efforts to educate and achieve equality (Fraser, 2009, 2013; Knapp, 2009; Lenz,

2008; Wetterer, 2003), that the need for substantive social change can be more easily justified while the prospects for such change appear more remote.

## FEMINIST ENGAGEMENT WITH CRITICAL THEORY

The founders of sociology, including Marx, Durkheim and Weber, had each noted the separation of domestic economy from business (and thus the potential specialization of functions) as a feature of social progress. A narrative of (European) social modernization typically heard in sociology lectures runs as follows: the gradual transfer of the function of domination from the feudal head of household to the head of state, the emergence and spatial expansion of markets, the development of productive forces, the rationalization of the division of labour and of government, an increasing loss of function of the 'whole household'<sup>6</sup> and the resulting development of a private sphere of the family concentrated around intimacy, generativity, early socialization and predominantly personal forms of work and care, which involve a sexual division of roles and polarized yet complementary psychic dispositions for women and men.

Against the background of this influential narrative, feminist researchers have examined in particular the facticity and the ideological aspects of the separation of public and private, as well as those aspects of the gender role construct which conceal domination and through which class-specific norms gain universal validity. The relationship between patriarchy and capitalism and their interwoven modernization, the masculine, fraternal dimension of the modern state, as well as connections between class, gender and sexuality, were also central themes which fed into women's- and gender studies.

The thematic development of feminist critique has taken on different accents and

emphases in different countries and regions. Nevertheless a transnational, Anglophone, feminist discourse has developed, supported by new technologies of communication, and feminist theories have travelled particularly well across the Atlantic (Davis and Evans, 2011). Some terms and approaches have even taken a 'world tour', for instance the concept of gender and Judith Butler's (1990) treatment of it in *Gender Trouble*, the concept of 'intersectionality' (Crenshaw, 1989; Lutz et al., 2011) and the triad of race, class and gender. Not only the contextualization of political problems and the cultural framing of feminist criticism (Ferree, 2012; Ferree and Tripp, 2006) but also the divergent character of the respective theoretical discourses and their rearticulations in different parts of the world has become a widely discussed phenomenon (Bose and Kim, 2009; Connell, 2007; Griffin and Braidotti, 2002; Knapp, 2005).

When we turn to the feminist debate on Critical Theory, differences between the German and English-speaking discussions cannot be overlooked. It is true that, in Anglo-American feminism, psychoanalysts such as Nancy Chodorow or Jessica Benjamin had already taken up and reworked the socialization theories of the Frankfurt School. But this strand of Critical Theory reception broke off in the course of feminism's cultural turn, which was also a more or less interactionist and post-structural turn. In recent decades occasional anthologies were still being published on the early Critical Theorists and their significance for feminism (O'Neill, 1999), but well-known American feminists such as Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser were becoming more interested in the work of Jürgen Habermas, who had begun to reformulate Critical Theory on the basis of discourse theory and to ground it on systematically reconstructed normative foundations (Meehan, 1995). More recently, however, feminist interest in theorists such as Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno seems to have revived again, these two thinkers often seen

as 'postmodernists' *avant la lettre* (Brown, 2006; Heberle, 2006).

In what follows, a specific line of feminist engagement with early Critical Theory will be traced whose outstanding feature is an historical and social-theoretical orientation for which there is no equivalent in Anglo-American feminism. It goes back to Regina Becker-Schmidt, a student of Adorno's, who taught at the Leibniz Universität Hannover. There, in the 1970s, Oskar Negt and other former 'Frankfurters' had formed an alternative centre for Critical Theory, which linked itself closely to Adorno and Horkheimer's work and more or less explicitly rejected Habermas's far-reaching revision of Critical Theory.

Becker-Schmidt took exception to the idealized constructs of polarized gender roles, feminine practices and feminine qualities. These were not only to be found in the texts of her teachers and in mainstream theory but circulated in various manifestations through left and feminist thinking. Against these, Becker-Schmidt proposed the thesis of the '*doppelte Vergesellschaftung*' [double socialization] of women (Becker-Schmidt 1991).<sup>7</sup> A central thrust of the thesis of a double 'Vergesellschaftung' of women was to critique notions of the polarized breadwinner plus housewife model and the corresponding blue vs. pink pattern of gender-typical socialization dominant in society as well as in sociology. Historically and quantitatively speaking, women's employment and subsistence work were not the exception but (albeit in class-specific and socio-geographically varying forms) the rule. Whether in the countryside or in the factory, whether as subsistence work or in other labour relations, an overwhelming number of women had always worked for a living as well as taking on the majority of private care work within the family.

Against this background, it seemed theoretically more appropriate and empirically more productive to assume a dual and contradictory integration of women into processes



of societal reproduction, and then to specify the respective socio-structural manifestations, the class-specific shapes and historical transformations of this involvement.

Becker-Schmidt later developed these considerations into a social theory of the gendered character of processes and constellations of 'Vergesellschaftung'. Her term 'Vergesellschaftung', which she uses in line with early Critical Theory, denotes three different aspects of socialization: firstly the structures of social integration of individuals and groups, secondly the systemic integration and contradictory constellation of societal spheres of practice, and thirdly the dialectics of human animals in becoming individuals and social beings.

With regard to gender, Becker-Schmidt formulates a theorem of a dialectical interweaving of two relationalities which shape the contradictory social situation of women. These two relationalities involve the social relations between the genders on the one hand and the gendered aspects of the historical constellations of societal spheres on the other. Gender relations [*Geschlechterverhältnisse*] are understood as an ensemble of all those social arrangements and structurings – cutting across other social positions and divisions and regardless of their empirical diversity – by which the genders are positioned and related to each other. The focus is on gender classifications, attitudes and relations between men and women in the heterosexually grounded order of polarized gender relations, along with policies and laws, such as the social security system, and institutional regimes, whose programmes, temporal economies and structures all imply and presuppose role differentiations.<sup>8</sup> However, the focus is also on rigid structures of praxis and interaction, such as the various forms taken by the sexual division of labour in the private sphere and in the workplace (Gottschall, 2000; Wetterer, 2002). Their persistence is due not solely to agents' normative beliefs, rational self-interest or will, but also needs to be explained in terms of the

material, institutional and interactional conditions under which motivations develop and practices unfold.

Furthermore, the relationality in question also obtains between different social spheres or subsystems, which are themselves both mediated by and mediate existing forms of gender relations. In the historical-materialist tradition taken in a broad and non-dogmatic sense, upon which some feminist theorists have drawn, the main focus is on connections between market economy and domestic economy (often shortened to the misleading terms 'realm of production' vs. 'realm of reproduction'), state and education systems. Science and law are also usually included in analyses of social statics and dynamics. By different 'spheres' or fields one is not to think of homogeneous, spatially distinct parallel worlds, but rather complex spheres of praxis, which differ in their historically acquired meaning and functions and in their forms of institutionalization. Spheres interrelate in conditions of exchange and dependency, of partial autonomy on the one hand and of intrusion and transgression of boundaries, on the other. Not only in the manner of their internal differentiation but also in the imbalances between the sub-systems and the form of their mutual socialization we find revealed (and concealed) the effects of past and present power constellations and relations of domination (Becker-Schmidt, 2004b: 67).

Drawing methodologically upon Marx and Adorno (Becker-Schmidt, 2004a) and against the background of current issues, Becker-Schmidt investigates imbalances and inversions in the manner in which the historically separated spheres of praxis come together. In this context, she highlights the material paradoxes of division and conjunction, above all when focussing on the social-theoretical context of women's lives (Becker-Schmidt and Krüger, 2009). Her argument identifies a 'construction flaw' in the basic structures of social exchange and which has reached its peak in European

modernity. This 'flaw', concealed by harmonizing interpretations of functional differentiation, consists in the fact that processes of specialization and division tend to conceal the concerns and requirements of different spheres, whose fulfilment is nonetheless necessary for the workings of the whole. The comparatively far-reaching concealment of interests particularly effects the sphere of private reproduction (family, intimate relations, domestic economy) and impacts especially upon women even when it manifests itself in different ways in different countries and different welfare states and in different political situations. This constellation is currently breaking down. Not only personal relationships, including sexuality, but also the provision of care which, in a heterosexual relationship, is expected to be free of charge and to be (indeed usually is) provided by the female, is becoming increasingly inconsistent with the growing demands of market-mediated labour. The latter's temporal structures and forms of rationality are transferred to the private sphere, altering domestic practices but also coming up against the limits of rationalization.

The current erosion of a triad which typified industrial society in many Western countries – a full-time permanent employment contract, a nuclear family based on the breadwinner plus housewife or breadwinner plus female support-work and a supporting welfare state<sup>9</sup> suggests that we are living through a crisis that is affecting the fundamental way in which these three spheres of market, household and welfare state are connected. These developments, which manifest themselves empirically in such symptoms as increased overburdening and exhaustion, and in altered marriage-, divorce- and birth rates, are strengthened by the collaboration of different policies and tendencies: policies of economic deregulation and globalization; labour market crises and loss of trade union influence leading to a weakening of the 'breadwinner's' position even among the middle classes; an increasingly sought-after

but also enforced maternal employment; a reduction of welfare state support and its partial re-privatization; processes of precarious marketization and the social reorganization (including ethnicization, racialization) of parts of the care- and nursing sectors. The 'adult-worker model' which is spreading throughout society as an effect of women's interests in participation and as a success of state policies around equality (Fraser, 2009), but which is also becoming a vehicle for new forms of control, proves to be – at least under present social conditions – incompatible with women's demands for emancipation, which the model presents only in perverted form. Under present conditions, it also proves to be incompatible with the demands of families, or, more generally, the demands of everyone – regardless of age – for a good life. The 'adult worker model' is just as fundamentally (if differently) in conflict with modern society's promises of justice and solidarity as the breadwinner plus housewife model was.

## WHO CARES?

The sociologist Uwe Schimank (2007) has assessed the manner in which the dynamics of boundary incursions between social subsystems has been diagnosed in sociological analysis over the last 20 years. His particular focus is on incursions between spheres of social praxis, which can lead to restrictions in the autonomy of each sphere. Schimank categorizes which social subsystems are viewed as 'victims' in the sociological literature and which are seen as the 'perpetrators' of hostile incursions. While 'victim' status, according to Schimank, is relatively widely distributed in sociological diagnoses, only three subsystems (economy, politics, mass media) regularly appear as 'perpetrators', with the power of the economy consistently viewed as the main culprit. Border incursions which occur at the expense of the *private*

sphere (family, household, intimate relations) are listed only once in Schimank's overview of contemporary diagnoses. This suggests that the private sphere has not yet been widely grasped as a place of central social dynamics and structural conflicts.

This concealment of a basic conflict, which connects back to narrow views of social relations and crises, has a long and multifaceted tradition in sociology. The conceptual erasure of the role of the domestic side of private reproduction in the economy and the neglect of generative reproduction as a necessary part of societal continuity almost exactly parallels the bourgeois-androcentric self-description of the family as a realm of intimacy, of leisure and recuperation from 'hostile life'. If 'economics' refers only to the market-mediated sectors of business, national and world economies and concerns itself only with buying, selling and valorization, then the private element of the necessary delivery of services in their mediation by a specific and problematic organizational form of the gender relation remains invisible. The feminist question with its double meaning – who cares? – refuses to go away.

To simplify somewhat, the structural problem that has emerged in a number of Western countries with the achievement of legal equality, normative change and successful educational opportunities for women could be formulated as follows. In the comparatively short period of time in which the breadwinner plus housewife model could be (and in fact was) realized by a majority of the population across the classes (from the 1950s to the end of the 1960s), the bourgeois-patriarchal gender relationship of the long nineteenth century was articulated and challenged in the short history of the democratic late-capitalist twentieth century. The year 1989/90 saw the end not only of the European post-war period and the phase of 'Organized Modernity', which comprised nation-states in their capitalist and socialist variants (Wagner, 1995), but also of the respective (and in part politically contoured) forms of the gender

order (Dölling, 2003). In this light, what certain sociological diagnoses at the turn of this century termed a successful 'de-traditionalization' of gender relations appears not only to herald the end of a specific form of gender relations, but also the end of the possibility of its modernization. With the increasing visibility of various barriers hindering change to the gender relationship and the persistence of a relationality of private sphere (family, intimate relations, domestic economy) and sphere of employment still imbalanced by a domination which undermines the rhetoric of equality, an arena of social conflicts reopens in which the discrepancy between social necessities, realities, and possibilities will need to be determined anew under radically changing social conditions.

## PROSPECTS

Early Critical Theory distinguishes itself from present-day sociological diagnoses by regarding the sphere of private reproduction (intimate relations, family, domestic economy) as a site of fundamental social conflicts and by recognizing the relevance of these conflicts for society as a whole. Even when some of Critical Theory's statements on gender relations remain aporetic and even repellent, and even though Horkheimer and Adorno failed to formulate an adequate theory of gender relations, the texts of the early Critical Theorists still contain numerous indications of how an analysis of gender could be furthered. In order to make these suggestions fruitful, however, it is important to go beyond the accusation of androcentrism and to reacquaint oneself with the concepts and forms of reflections of the early Critical Theorists in general and Adorno in particular.

The following perspectives provide a basis for such a re-engagement:

In light of the glut of naturalizations and ontologizations in thinking about gender

relations – which has reached new levels with the advance of the biosciences – together with their apparent opposite – a revitalization of notions of human nature’s infinite plasticity and availability – Adorno’s negative dialectical thinking remains important. The full potential of his critique of identity for feminist theory has yet to be explored. Particularly Adorno’s dictum that it is necessary above all to ‘comprehend the incomprehensible’ (Adorno, 1969[1970]: 147), that is, the rationally-irrationally coercive and heteronomous character of social relations, is still challenging and topical. This applies both to questions of sociality as the coexistence of human beings, as well as to questions of society as a systemic constellation of large historical formations. Here, a sociologically concrete determination of crisis tendencies in gender relations and of the relationships between spheres of social practice must go beyond Critical Theory’s framework of analysis. This has implications, on the one hand, for the systematic consideration of various conditions of social differentiation and inequality and their relationship to one another (Collins, 2007). On the other hand, the problem is that many of the most important insights of gender theory and research cannot easily be articulated within the framework of a subject–object dialectic. These would need to be counterbalanced by looking at subject–subject relations and their cultural-theoretical correlations. The fact that the productivity of this proposal cannot ultimately be ascertained by the formal cross-linking of theoretical approaches but only by deeper material explorations and interpretations of social conflicts and crises, should be clear.

Last but not least, for a better understanding of the present, any analysis of the constitutional history of bourgeois-capitalist modernity in Europe and in the Global North must be extended beyond Critical Theory. Europe’s development cannot to be understood in isolation from its cultural, political and economic interdependencies with other parts of the world (Bayly, 2004; Osterhammel,

2009) and their particular forms of modernization. For a critical re-inspection of capitalist modernity, there are currently numerous points of connection to be found in the debates on intersectionality, in the interaction of different forms of social domination, division and differentiation (Klinger et al., 2007; Knapp, 2011), and in postcolonial theory and recent debates about ‘multiple modernities’ (Adams et al., 2005; Boateá and Spohn, 2010; Knöbl, 2007; Schwinn, 2006). A pertinent question to pose today, in the spirit of Adorno and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, would be: Which dialectics weave together the socio-political radicalization of ‘difference’ in the nineteenth and early twentieth century with the cultural and institutional assertion of universal values of freedom, equality, justice and solidarity? What is the relation between diversely constituted modes of social inclusion/exclusion and those systemic constraints and forms of abstraction which cross the boundaries between distinct spheres via instrumental rationality and identity thinking and which, according to early Critical Theory, prove essential ‘before all specific social differentiation’ to late capitalist socialization [*Vergesellschaftung*]?

## Notes

- 1 This is an expanded and revised version of a much shorter article that appeared in German in Heike Kahlert and Christine Weinbach (eds.) *Zeitgenössische Gesellschaftstheorien und Genderforschung. Einladung zum Dialog*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2012.
- 2 [Translator’s note: Translations of German language texts are by Adrian Wilding.]
- 3 ‘So we come full circle. Men must act in order to change the present petrified conditions of existence, but the latter have left their mark so deeply on people, have deprived them of so much of their life and individuation, that they scarcely seem capable of the spontaneity necessary to do so’ (Adorno, 1969[1970]: 153).
- 4 The accusation misunderstands the fact that performing this aporia for Adorno is both a conscious means of expression and a medium of knowledge.

- 5 In a text published in 1957 on the relationship between sociology and empirical research (and which in the subsequent 'positivism dispute' would become central to the argument over the concept of society and the relationship between theory and empiricism) Adorno formulates the issue in concise terms: 'Theoretical reflections upon society as a whole cannot be completely realized by empirical findings; they seek to evade the latter just as spirits evade parapsychological experimental arrangements. Each particular view of society as a whole necessarily transcends its scattered facts. The first condition for construction of the totality is a concept of the object [Sache], around which the disparate data are organized' (Adorno et al., 1976: 69). Better suited to an historical diagnosis is the argument that, given the reign of systemic domination, a form of social theory which merely reproduces and mirrors the systematic character of socialization, is impermissible (see, e.g. Adorno, 1990b: 361; Adorno, 1986: 167).
- 6 For an historical critique of the concept of the 'whole household' [ganzes Haus] see Opitz (1994).
- 7 This thesis goes back to a research project undertaken at the Psychological Institute of the University of Hanover at the beginning of the 1980s under the supervision of Becker-Schmidt. The study examined the living conditions and experiences of women engaged in piece work who also had small children and a comparison group of former piece-workers who had given up their jobs due to having children. For a thorough summary see Becker-Schmidt (2004b).
- 8 As Helga Krüger has investigated in innovative ways in her 'Institutional Approach to Gender Research' (Krüger, 2001).
- 9 On differences between East and West Germany, see Dölling (2003); for international comparison, see Daly and Rake (2003).

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# Critical Theory and Recognition

Richard Gunn and Adrian Wilding

For most of the twentieth century, academic political theory addressed liberal themes. It has operated, that is, with a conception of human individuals as beings who possess an ‘area of personal freedom’ (Miller, 2006: 40–7) – the area itself being clear-cut and hard-edged. Perhaps for this reason, the notion of ‘recognition’ has not found favour in it. Whoever speaks of ‘recognition’ sees individual identity as socially constructed and not as something self-enclosed or atomistic.

This said, the term ‘recognition’ found acceptance in political theory in the last decade of the twentieth century. In an influential article of 1992, Charles Taylor turned to this concept as a means of gaining purchase on multiculturalist issues that, otherwise, liberalism found difficult to touch. Later, in the 1990s and the 2000s, Axel Honneth urged that ‘recognition’ may be seen as a basis on which critical (i.e. left-wing) theory might rest. With Taylor and subsequently with Honneth, the term ‘recognition’ gains an academically

acceptable voice. The present chapter takes issue with this academic consensus.

By and large, our discussion of Honneth (see Section 2) is critical. This said, we start by noting a point on which we agree with Honneth’s views. For Honneth, critical theory rests on a ‘recognitive’ foundation; if the notion of recognition is kept in the foreground, critical theory’s characteristic claims come into view. In what follows, we do not dispute that recognition can play this foundational role. Like Honneth, we see critical theory in recognition-based terms. Our claim is that if Honneth’s (and Taylor’s) views are followed, recognition (and critical theory based on recognition) loses its revolutionary – its truly *critical* – edge. Critical theory risks reverting to traditional – i.e. uncritical – thinking. To show what a *revolutionary* idea of recognition looks like we discuss Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (see Section 3) and a selection of Marx’s writings (Section 4). In conclusion (Section 5) we underline how these reflections can help revive a truly



*critical* theory. Firstly, however (Section 1), we provide some background to the recognitive turn in political theory that has paved the way for Honneth's work.

## 1. TAYLOR, RECOGNITION AND MULTICULTURALISM

In his pioneering article of 1992, 'The Politics of Recognition', Charles Taylor notes that 'minority or "subaltern" groups' have campaigned in defence of their social status: campaigning by 'nationalist movements' exemplifies the politics Taylor means. In his view, an analyst or a politician should not address the unanswerable question of whether different cultures have equal value. Instead of becoming distracted by this red herring, politicians and analysts should ensure that the cultures concerned are recognised in an even-handed way (Taylor, 1994: 64). By turning to the idea of recognition, liberalism becomes able to address issues that were previously beyond its conceptual pale.

Our response to Taylor's assertion is a qualified one. It is that a multiculturalist approach is surely preferable – much preferable – to an approach which demeans "subaltern" groups'. But multiculturalism by no means exhausts the emancipatory potential that the concept of 'recognition' entails. We do not intend to close the door on what Angela Davis terms 'radical' (as distinct from 'conventional' or 'superficial') multiculturalism (Davis, 2012: 103–4). However, we urge that multiculturalism turns on a notion of group identity wherein what we term contradictory or 'alienated' recognition is implied. Our claim (developed in Section 2) is that emancipated or, in Hegel's usage, 'mutual' recognition is recognition where individuals' (and not merely groups') freedom comes into its own. It is not that multiculturalist scenarios of emancipation admit of too much diversity but that, in our view, they do not go far enough.

A first ground for disquiet with Taylor's discussion lies in turns of phrase that he frequently employs. In the course of his discussion, we learn that recognition is something that may be *given* or *withheld*, or *demande*d, and that it may be *lacked* or (when lacked) *sought for*; that it may (or may not) be *due*. In the last of these instances – an instance where it is synonymous with *respect* – recognition is understood as a moral desideratum. In the other instances, it is understood as a resource which may be absent or present. Taylor's characteristic turns of phrase portray recognition as a sort of entity (or quasi-entity) concerning which questions of fair distribution can be raised. In short, his phrases draw the notion of recognition onto the conceptual terrain of liberal political theory.

To this comment, a note must be added. Taylor presents his claims as liberal in character – but as conflicting with liberalism of a specifically 'procedural' kind.<sup>1</sup> In the light of the phrases italicised in the preceding paragraph, it is tempting to qualify Taylor's disclaimer: his quarrel appears to be less with proceduralism's restrictions to issues of fairness than with its failure to regard recognition as a resource which should be distributed in a 'fair' way. Read thus, 'The Politics of Recognition' is more closely embedded in recent forms of liberal theory than at first sight appears.

A second ground for disquiet is more overtly political. It concerns the notion of 'distinct cultural identities' – in effect, the unit of analysis which multiculturalism employs. We do not deny that, in the existing world, an individual's sense of identity is mediated through his or her cultural grouping. Nor do we deny that an individual's sense of identity is affected if his or her cultural grouping is viewed in a demeaning way. For us, however, the mediation of identity through distinct groupings (cultural or otherwise) is, itself, a seed-bed of difficulties. Problems arise not merely when a group or culture is demeaned but when individual identity is seen in a membership-based way.

Why, it may be asked, should a membership-based view of individual identity be viewed with suspicion? Our aim is not, here, to rehabilitate an abstract or asocial view of the individual self. It is, on the contrary, to uphold a view of individuality which is social and recognitive through and through.<sup>2</sup> Not the least of our reservations concerning a membership-based view is that – see Sections 2, 3 and 4, below – it denies various potentials which the notion of recognition contains.

Problems with membership-based views of individuality come into focus, we propose, when an individual's relation to his or her cultural group is considered. Two points especially strike us as significant. One is that a group or culture of which an individual is a member stands *over against* the individual concerned. Whilst penetrating deeply into the individual's mind, and affirming its authority, the group is experienced as a predominant feature – sometimes a nurturing, sometimes a suffocating – feature of his or her external world. Individuals who grow up in families experience this in an all-too-vivid way. The other point is that a sense of identity rooted in a group is, at best, incomplete. Only part of individuality is acknowledged. As a *something* – as, say, a *man* or *woman* or *Christian* or *caucasian* – an individual is recognised under a certain category which, although it has a determinate content, applies to a number of disparate individuals alike. So to say, such an individual is divided into *universal* (and acknowledged) and *particular* (and unacknowledged) aspects. Taken together, these points bring into focus an alienation that is not removed if the group concerned is valued in a positive and even-handed way. In order to grapple with *this* alienation, and move beyond it, what is needed is (we claim) a notion of recognition which thinks beyond a world where groupings – for example, cultural groupings – are the order of the day.<sup>3</sup> In a social world where recognition is 'mutual', membership-identity no longer obtains.

Where do these comments leave Taylor's discussion? Certain passages in 'The Politics

of Recognition' reject the view that cultures *qua* cultures have 'equal worth'; Taylor is adamant in rejecting a 'fused horizon of standards' approach (1994: 72, 64). Might such passages be read as questioning a membership-based view of individual identity? Although such a reading may be favourable to Taylor, we caution against adopting it here. Taylor's article does show awareness of alienations<sup>4</sup> that a membership-based notion of identity may entail, but a reader of 'The Politics of Recognition' remains uncertain how argument on such alienation may proceed.

We turn briefly to the literature on multiculturalism and recognition which emerged in the wake of Taylor's discussion. Does such literature contain answers to questions that our own comments raise?

In part, we suggest, this literature raises familiar issues. One such issue is the terms in which recognition is seen. For Emcke and Fraser, for example, recognition is something that may be *claimed* (Emcke, 2000: 484; Fraser, 1997: 129; Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 46); for Tully, it makes sense to say that recognition may be *demanded* or *sought* (Tully, 2000: 473–4; 476). Such turns of phrase – all of which jar on the ears of readers familiar with Hegel's discussion – hint, as we have suggested, at a transposition of 'recognition' from Hegelian onto liberal and analytical-philosophical terrain. One of our aims in the present chapter is to focus on 'recognition' in its *wild* (as distinct from its *domesticated*) state.

In further part, the post-Taylor literature introduces fresh considerations. Two points in particular call for comment here: (a) multiculturalism is understood in a broad fashion as a 'politics of identity and difference' (Markell, 2003: 9; Thompson, 2006: 186) and (b) attention is given to forms of grouping which may or may not be of multicultural concern. For Emcke, for example, group-given identity may be 'chosen' or 'imposed' and must, in other respects, be seen in a 'historical context' (Emcke, 2000: 485, 487).

For Tully and Markell, identities rooted in group membership are transformed by the struggles in which they are upheld (Tully, 2000: 476–9; Markell, 2000: 499). Both writers insist that social and cultural groupings be viewed in a non-fixed and non-given and, so to say, non-essentialist way.

Do these considerations render our comments on alienation and group membership inapplicable? We propose that, since Taylor's ground-breaking formulations, little in the literature has changed. Regarding point (a): the significance of a broadening of multiculturalism into a politics of identity and difference depends on how the term *difference* is to be viewed. If the term is taken to mean, merely, *difference between identities*, the conceptual situation is unaltered. If, by contrast, difference is seen as *more fundamental than identity*, then an element of ambiguity is introduced. *Either* identity which is vested in groups continues to be important *or* – and here comes a fresh possibility – difference is seen as coming into being when group-based identity is set aside. The latter may be Fraser's meaning when she refers to a 'shifting field of multiple differences' (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 106) but her wording is unclear. Regarding point (b): the question of whether membership identity involves alienation and questions about essentialism are conceptually distinct,<sup>5</sup> at any rate in the all-important sense that a group which an individual has chosen to join, and which has no fixed or given essence, retains an existence that stands *over against* the individual concerned. A group which an individual has chosen to join, and which is not fixed and given, remains (or may remain) one where membership divides an individual into *what is particular* and *what is universal*. No doubt, the fixed and given character of a group may intensify the alienation that membership in it involves. But the source of the alienation lies in the existence of group-based identities themselves.

Besides commenting on the circumstance that groups change through multiculturalist

struggle, Tully and Markell argue for positions which distance themselves from what in our view counts as a recognition-based approach. We do not discuss these larger issues here. Our comments have sought, merely, to demonstrate that weaknesses in Taylor's discussion left a number of unresolved issues in their wake.

## 2. HONNETH AND RECOGNITION

If Taylor and multiculturalism represent a first step in recognition's domestication into political theory, Honneth and debate within critical theory represent a second and still-more-influential stage. Honneth's project, launched in his *The Struggle for Recognition* (originally 1992) is to find in 'recognition' a basis for Frankfurt School-style Critical Theory. At the outset of our comments on Honneth, let us record a point of agreement: we agree wholeheartedly that critical theory can be understood in terms of recognition (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 111, 237). If the concerns of critical theory are viewed in this manner, their radicality become clear. A critical theory of society and, indeed, social relations per se come into focus if viewed in a recognition-based way.

This vital point of agreement having been noted, disagreement with Honneth and his followers begins. We argue that critical theory can be grounded in recognition *only if* 'recognition' is understood in a non-Honnethian way. The non-Honnethian view of 'recognition' that is required is – so we maintain – the conception of recognition that is already to be found in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and, following the *Phenomenology*, in Marx. The sections which follow attempt to substantiate these claims.

At the core of Honneth's work is a claim that recognition, in the present world and, indeed, an emancipated world, is differentiated into 'three social spheres' (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 137–8). The 'spheres' – which mirror, in

rough outline, the ‘ethical powers’ of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* (see Hegel, 1952: §142–7) are ‘The “We” of Personal Relations’, ‘The “We” of the Market Economy’ and ‘The “We” of Democratic Will-Formation’ (Honneth, 2014: chapter 6). The names of these stipulated ‘shapes’ differs in different parts of Honneth’s work and, here, we quote the terms which he favours in part three of his ‘mature’ and systematic *Freedom’s Right*. In his earlier *The Struggle for Recognition*, where the three-way distinction is first set out, his terms are more succinct: chapter 5 refers, simply, to ‘love, right, and solidarity’. But whilst the terminology changes, *The Philosophy of Right*-style typology remains a thread running through his thinking – as his early reference to ‘family (love)’, ‘civil society (law)’ and ‘state (solidarity)’ makes clear (Honneth, 1995: 25).

What should be our response to the notion of ‘spheres’ of recognition? We may wonder about how specific spheres are characterised – is ‘love’, for example, a form of recognition or an affect? Does it involve the reciprocity that, for Hegel, recognition entails? Here we set such questions aside to focus on what we see as the vital issue. Once recognition has been divided into ‘spheres’, as Honneth recommends, can we avoid picturing the spheres as standing over against – and as estranging – individuals who confront them? Just as group identities constrain individuals who are group members, so recognition that is part of a ‘sphere’ must be constrained by the sphere itself. Stated differently: must a sphere-specific view of recognition not mirror, in outline if not in detail, an estranged social world?

Let us agree that central to critical theory is the critique of alienation, a critique deriving from the ideas of Hegel and Marx.<sup>6</sup> How may Honneth’s work be situated in terms of this lineage? Our suspicion is that Honneth’s approach downplays the overcoming – the revolutionary overcoming – of alienation upon which Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and Marx’s writings turn. This suspicion is

heightened once Honneth’s underlying conception of history is considered. For Hegel and for Marx, the most deep-seated change in history is that from ‘history’ proper to existence of a post-historical sort. Or from – in Marx’s terms – prehistorical to truly ‘historical’ being.<sup>7</sup> No previous historical transformation is significant in this way. For Honneth, by contrast, the major event in a history of recognition has already taken place: at the ‘breakthrough to bourgeois-capitalist society’, ‘traditional’ notions of status were ended and the ‘differentiation of three spheres of recognition’ took place (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 138–40). The form of recognition which is most favourable for freedom and ‘individuality’ is recognition subdivided into Honneth’s aforementioned ‘spheres’ (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 143). With the emergence of capitalism, and of the ‘modern’ or post-traditional world, recognition has, for Honneth, taken its definitive and most desirable form. Though the rough edges of these spheres may need to be smoothed out, their essential boundaries will not change. What remains ahead, for Honneth, is reformation rather than revolution: not a new manifestation of recognition but a polishing of already established forms.

Here, we note a circumstance which (to some extent) softens the criticism of Honneth that we have made. Whilst Honneth acknowledges his indebtedness to Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 143–7), he at the same time expresses a reservation about the notion of ‘ethical powers’ employed in that work. Hegel’s notion is, Honneth contends, ‘over-institutionalised’ (Honneth, 2010: 63). That is to say, in writing about the family, civil society and the state, Hegel (so Honneth maintains) links the form of recognition exemplified in each too closely to the social institution concerned. For example, Hegel’s treatment links love and the dynamic of intimate relations too closely to the bourgeois family of Hegel’s own day. For Honneth, what is important is less the detail of this or that bourgeois

institution than the concept of recognition that (even in its bourgeois instantiation) the institution employs. A reader who works through Honneth's writings in chronological order forms an impression that he wishes to free the idea of 'spheres' of recognition from institutional embodiment and to place conceptions of recognition centre-stage.

How should we respond to such an institutional/conceptual distinction? Does it succeed in freeing Honneth's discussion from the charge that, like Hegel's treatment of 'ethical powers', it is overly trapped in existing institutional forms? Our feeling is that it does not. If this or that institution provides at least a first approximation of a specific recognitive 'sphere', as Honneth maintains is the case, it is difficult to free a sphere-specific account from the suspicion that it does, indeed, follow the outlines of existing institutional forms. It is difficult to picture conceptions of recognition other than as variants of recognition in this or that institutional form. From a phenomenological standpoint, such forms stand over-against the individuals whom they purportedly define. Such a view of recognition consolidates and confirms, rather than criticises, the alienations of the social world that it describes.

The line of critique which we have pressed against Honneth is not, we observe in passing, one unique to the present chapter. Amongst critics of Honneth, Emmanuel Renault presents arguments that most closely resemble our own. Renault is unusual in believing (as we do) that spheres of recognition per se involve alienation. We disagree, however, with Renault's claim that 'institutions' should be seen as 'constitutive of recognitive relations' (2011: 228). Such a remedy intensifies the alienation that it is intended to remedy. Another critic whose line of attack resembles our own is Jean-Philippe Deranty, who wonders whether critical theory's edge is 'blunted' by a spheres-of-recognition approach (Deranty, 2004: 298). And Max Pensky shares our concern about the conception of history – or the periodisation of

history – which Honneth favours. A history where the only decisive revolutionary transformation is one which lies in the past has more in common with Weber than with Marx or Hegel:

Honneth like Habermas demonstrates his extreme indebtedness to the tradition of German sociology from Weber to Luhmann, wherein modernity is to be taken primarily as a process of differentiation. (Pensky, 2011: 138)

Pensky's observation chimes in with our own belief that Honneth thinks of recognition in a less-than-revolutionary way. Modernity, for Weber, is a condition with which a theorist must make at least a grudging peace.

So far, in our present remarks, we have concentrated on Honneth's conceptions of recognition and of history – and found these to be 'less than revolutionary', to borrow the title of one of our earlier articles (Gunn and Wilding, 2013a). There is, however, a further dimension to Honneth's work that makes its less-than-revolutionary character clearer still. In his *Freedom's Right*, the work in which Honneth presents his latest and most systematic discussion of recognition, he follows what he terms the 'methodological procedure of normative reconstruction' (Honneth, 2014: 7). What does he mean by this?

On the face of it, 'normative reconstruction' seems a laudable attempt to restate the notion of immanent critique in its Frankfurt School and Marxian<sup>8</sup> sense. Immanent critique proceeds without a priori ethical standards, instead unfolding its values from the criticised object (here, existing society) itself. However, a closer look indicates that 'normative reconstruction' is subtly but decisively different. 'To normatively reconstruct', Honneth tells us, means analysing 'whether and how culturally accepted values are ... realized in various different spheres of action, and which norms of behaviour ideally prevail' (Honneth, 2014: 64).

Such a procedure, we feel, gets the situation back to front. It asks that the social critic or revolutionary activist starts from (so to say)

the best side (what ‘ideally’ prevails) of what existing society offers, or claims to offer. It succumbs to a danger present in immanent critique: staying so close to the criticised object that it fails to break with or overcome it. In a word, such a procedure can lose its revolutionary edge – and this, we suggest, is what occurs with Honneth’s ‘normative reconstruction’: immanent critique becomes *so* immanent that critique all but disappears.<sup>9</sup>

Is there an alternative way to undertake critique? We suggest there is. It is to focus, as Brecht put it, not on the ‘good old things’ but on the ‘bad new ones’ (cited in Benjamin, 1998: 121). It is to dwell on what, in existing society, is insufferable or horrendous. It is to begin with what Marcuse calls a ‘refusal’ (Marcuse, 1968: 200) or a ‘scream’, to employ John Holloway’s vivid expression (Holloway, 2005: 1). Such expressions point more fundamentally to notions of inversion, resistance, rebellion and revolt (cf. Hardt and Negri, 2012: 31). They point, that is, to a social rupture which is anathema to a methodology that concentrates on society’s best and brightest and most seemingly humane side. Though revolution is destined to draw its values from what is latent in existing society, this process of drawing need not involve looking fixedly on society’s most positive or promising side. It can involve noting harsh juxtapositions and letting contradictions move.

### 3. RECOGNITION IN HEGEL

We have proposed that recognition be understood as a revolutionary (rather than a Honnethian or less-than-revolutionary) category. Where is such a revolutionary concept of recognition to be found? Our answer is that it is already present in the work of Hegel and Marx. The Hegel that we have in mind is the Hegel of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and it is *Phenomenology*-style recognition that, we claim moreover, figures in Marx. Section 4 of

our chapter discusses certain writings from Marx that, we claim moreover, figures in certain writings by Marx (see the following section on Marx). But here, we suggest a way in which Hegel’s *Phenomenology* may be seen.

We have noted that, in Hegel interpretation, a controversial question is whether Hegel’s earlier writings (including the *Phenomenology* of 1807) and his later writings (including the *Philosophy of Right*, 1821) say similar or different things. Amongst current academic Hegel scholars, the most common view is that the earlier Hegel and the later Hegel form a unity, and that recognition is a theme common to both.<sup>10</sup> For ourselves, we resist the current fashion in Hegel interpretation. Recognition is, indeed, referred to by both the earlier and the later Hegel but, we consider, his treatment of recognition changes significantly over time.

At the core of this change is the circumstance that, whereas the younger Hegel was deeply moved by the French Revolution, the Revolution’s significance dimmed, for him, over time. This is not to say that the later Hegel succumbed to reaction: the *Philosophy of Right* was the work of a ‘liberal reformer’, to employ Frederick Beiser’s useful phrase (Beiser, 2005: 216). In the *Phenomenology*, by contrast, the entirety of human history (or European history at any rate) is viewed as a narrative in which the French Revolution is the culminating act. It is in the ‘sunburst’ of the French Revolution that (Hegel tells us) the *Phenomenology* was written (1977: 7). In Hegel’s later works, the French Revolution receives a mention – it counts as a ‘glorious spiritual dawn’ (1956: 447). But these works do not respond to its challenge in the way that the *Phenomenology* attempts.<sup>11</sup>

Here, our aim is not to supply a detailed interpretation of Hegel but to indicate the Left Hegelian reading of Hegel of which our comments on Honneth form a part. Our concern is, primarily, with the *Phenomenology*’s account of history – and with the mutual recognition which, for the *Phenomenology*, history ends.

In the *Phenomenology*, we consider, history comes into focus in two places.

In chapter 4, which deals with 'self-consciousness', events which amount to *history's beginning* are set forth. These events take the form of a 'life-and-death struggle' (1977: 114) on which human individuals (or 'self-consciousnesses', in Hegel's terminology) embark. In the paragraphs leading up to the 'life-and-death struggle', Hegel's chapter discusses human desire – say, desire for food or survival – and (we consider) Hegel invites the *Phenomenology's* reader to think of the struggle itself as desire-based. However, in and through the struggle, a new issue (and a new human capacity) comes into being: if, at the start of the struggle, humans saw themselves as creatures of desire, at its end they picture themselves as beings who can relate to one another through recognition. The struggle, although it turned on life-and-death issues, ended not in slaughter but in submission – the one who submits becoming the slave of the combatant who wins. The upshot of the 'life-and-death struggle' is a relation of recognition, a master/slave relation, an instance of 'recognition that is one-sided and unequal' (1977: 116).

At this point, we must take stock of the picture of history that the *Phenomenology* presents. It is a history of patterns of recognition which change as social eras come into being. The patterns of recognition differ from one another but have one point in common: from the beginning of history until its end, the patterns are, indeed, of recognition – but of recognition in a contradictory or alienated form. The very first form of recognition – the form which emerges directly from chapter 4's history-founding fight – is, as we have noted, 'one-sided and unequal'. The entirety of *Phenomenology*-style history is, in effect, a 'work' through which contradictions to recognition – or contradictory forms of recognition – are removed. *History ends*, according to the *Phenomenology*, when and only when uncontradicted recognition is achieved.<sup>12</sup>

Here, we should like to enlarge on how, in the *Phenomenology*, contradictory recognition is seen. 'One-sided and unequal'

recognition is one form that contradictory or alienated, recognition takes – but there is a second. Another form which gains widespread currency in history is what we term *role-definitional alienation*. The notion of role-definitional alienation is our attempt to unpack a paragraph in chapter 6 that is, at first sight, baffling. The paragraph reminds us that 'nature displays itself in the ... elements of Air, Water, Fire and Earth' (1977: 300) and a reader responds: what has happened? Has the argument of an admittedly complex book launched into nature mysticism? A moment of thought allows a reader to form a different impression. What has happened in the page concerned is that Hegel is offering an analogy. In the history which unfolds between the Ancient and classical world and which endures until French Revolutionary times, society displays features which are 'similar' to the natural elements of air, water, earth, etc. Society presents itself in 'universal' – but here spiritual [*geistige*] – 'masses' or 'spheres' (1977: 300). What (a reader then wonders) does Hegel mean by spiritual masses [*geistige Massen*]? An answer to this question suggests itself. By *geistige*, Hegel means social and historical, and by *geistige Massen*, the *Phenomenology* means *social institutions*. Hegel's claim is that, in the course of European history, institutions which possess a social weight and quasi-natural inertia have come into being. The point of his analogy is that institutions, insofar as they possess a social equivalent of this inertia, alienate the individual that they confront. Already in ancient Rome, he tells us, the social world 'has the character of being something external' (1977: 294) and, in the post-Roman world, the number of institutions increases but their inertia and externality and, so to say, over-againstness remains. Not until the French Revolution does self-consciousness grasp the fact that it itself is 'the essence of all the spiritual "masses" or spheres, of the real [or practical] as well as of the supersensible [or religious] world' (1977: 356) – thereby bringing a social world

patterned through social institutions (and the role definitions that social institutions involve) to its end.

For the just-quoted passage to be made clear, a detailed discussion of the *Phenomenology*'s section on the French Revolution is needed (1977: 355–63). In the space of this chapter, the discussion which is needed cannot be attempted.<sup>13</sup> In its place, we offer some observations. When Hegel embarks on discussion of the Revolution, he offers an image of crowd activity: in a Revolutionary crowd, he says, 'each, undivided from the whole, always does everything, and what is done by the whole is the direct and conscious deed of each' (1977: 357). The Revolutionary crowd is thus presented as a *group-infusion*, in Sartre's meaning of that term (see Sartre, 1976: 345–63). Another way of summarising Hegel's image is to say that, for the *Phenomenology*, the Revolutionary crowd is a group where mutual recognition prevails. For the Hegel of 1806–7, French Revolutionary freedom is (as evinced in its crowd activity) freedom of a mutually recognitive sort.<sup>14</sup> Of course, crowd activity of the sort to which the *Phenomenology* refers is evanescent – its freedom is transient – and the section of the *Phenomenology* on the French Revolution unfolds the steps, all of which were self-defeating, which the Revolution took to keep recognitive freedom in play. In the French Revolution, as presented in the *Phenomenology*, mutually recognitive freedom is touched upon – never to be sustained in a socially stable way.

Hegel's point regarding the French Revolution is that, its instability notwithstanding, it is an event of a history-ending sort. As a living social principle, mutual recognition has made its appearance – not merely in theory, or in a religious 'beyond', but in a practical and political way. By signifying the appearance of mutual recognition in practice, the French Revolution brings the 'work' of history to its close. In the following section of this chapter, we suggest that Marx carries forward the notion of

mutually recognitive freedom where Hegel (or, rather, the earlier Hegel) left off. Here, we add to our all-too-hasty discussion of the *Phenomenology* some remarks on the notion of mutual recognition itself.

Two points concerning mutual recognition deserve emphasis. One is that recognition as understood by Hegel is not merely cognitive but constitutive as well: by calling recognition constitutive, we mean that recognition is a process which makes a recognised object what it is.<sup>15</sup> The second point is that, where mutual recognition exists, *what is mutually recognised* are the self-determining actions which the recognising individuals perform. The circumstance that, as Hegel tells us, self-consciousness 'exists only in being recognized' (1977: 111) does not mean that Hegel recommends determinism. On the contrary, a world where there is mutual recognition is one where individuals' self-determination is accented and thrown into relief. It is, so to say, a bright field where 'self-consciousnesses [or human individuals] ... enjoy perfect freedom and independence: I that is We and We that is I' (1977: 110).<sup>16</sup>

We draw our comments together by underlining a contrast. The *Phenomenology*, as we understand it, contrasts contradictory recognition and recognition of an uncontradicted and 'mutual' form. In a sequence of crucial paragraphs (1977: 111–12), Hegel outlines what, in his view, recognition involves. These paragraphs, which correspond to what Michael Monahan terms 'pure' recognition (Monahan, 2006: 393), culminates in the sentence: 'they [mutually recognitive individuals] *recognize* themselves as *mutually recognizing* one another'. It is when we turn to experience – and, especially, the experience of history – that one-sided and unequal recognition – or 'the duplication of self-consciousness in its one-sidedness' (1977: 112) – begins. This being so, the argument of the *Phenomenology* is missed, and Hegel's 1806–7 conception of recognition is falsified, if the distinction between contradicted and



uncontradicted recognition is lost sight of. The all-important distinction is not, we think, merely one between 'pure' and 'impure' recognition. Monahan's preferred terminology does not bring out the force of Hegel's meaning. Historical recognition does not become 'mutual' from a process of purification.<sup>17</sup> On the contrary, it becomes 'mutual' through the movement of contradiction and revolution – the French Revolution, or an equivalent upheaval. The social world must be turned upside down.

What is it (it may be asked) to move beyond contradictory recognition, and to aspire through revolution to recognition of a mutual sort? It is to establish a world where the to-and-fro movement of recognition is unimpeded, and where 'one-sided and unequal' recognition is no more. It is, likewise, to prise recognition out of channels which *geistige Massen* have made familiar and where recognition proceeds in formal and institutional ways. In a word, 'mutual' recognition or 'pure' recognition is unstructured recognition – meaning by this not that it is chaotic but that it is recognition that follows its own dynamic, in the sense that a good discussion follows its subject-matter wherever the debate (or, here, the interaction) leads. If recognition goes forward in terms of *geistige Massen*, it tends to be confined by the channels that social role definitions – the role definitions inscribed in such institutions as nations or cultures or ethnicities (as in the multiculturalism debate) involve. Recognition confined by role definitions is formal and takes place within pre-established bounds. Mutual recognition, by contrast, is unstructured not least because *geistige Massen* are no longer dominant. Interactive conversation may consult its own dynamic – and be guided by its own flow.

Our comments on the *Phenomenology* are, in the confines of a single chapter, schematic. They are designed to indicate something of the richness into which a 'Left Hegelian' reading of Hegel may tap.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. RECOGNITION IN MARX

If a recovery of Hegel's notion of recognition involves cutting through a dense web of recent theory (spun by Honneth and his followers, in particular) a discussion of Marx on recognition faces an even more difficult challenge. Due to longstanding prejudices, the concept of recognition has an 'unmarxist' ring. At best, recognition features at the edges of discussion of Marx on alienation. As worst it is assumed to belong to the Hegelian baggage jettisoned by the 'mature' Marx.

Bound up with such stereotypes is a particularly dogged orthodoxy: for Marx, so this orthodoxy runs, changes in the economic 'base' lead to changes in the legal and political and ideological 'superstructure'.<sup>19</sup> A phenomenon such as recognition, if it fits at all within Marxist theorising, must have a merely 'superstructural' (and thus epiphenomenal) character. Here, we do not discuss the image of base and superstructure – save to note an incoherence that it contains: in picturing an economic base, so-to-say 'superstructural' elements are already present. Regarding the orthodoxy, we offer an observation: despite its incoherence, the model of base and superstructure is widely (if tacitly) employed. All too frequently, an understanding of Marx relies sotto voce on a diluted version of the base-and-superstructure model.

What should be put in place of a base-and-superstructure interpretation? We propose that instead of thinking of Marx as a theorist of base and superstructure, he is to be thought of as a theorist of *recognition*.<sup>20</sup> Our argument brings recognition from the outermost edges of Marx's thinking to its very centre. In our view, social relations are relations of recognition; recognition (by which we understand *Phenomenology*-style recognition) goes, socially, *all the way down*. If our views are endorsed, recognition (which is not, and cannot be, merely economic) explodes the base-superstructure model. Reliance on the orthodox model becomes not merely conceptually impossible, it becomes

redundant. Once *Phenomenology*-style recognition is placed at the centre of Marx's work, and allowed to pervade his discussion, a definitive break with base-and-superstructure thinking can be achieved. Sotto voce and semi-acknowledged dependency on the model of base and superstructure become a thing of the past.<sup>21</sup>

In this section we attempt two things: firstly, to show a continuity between 'early' and 'late' Marx when he invokes 'recognition'; and secondly, to suggest that passages in Marx only make sense if he is understood as drawing on *Phenomenology*-style recognition, that is, a fundamental distinction between contradictory recognition and mutual recognition.

The key 'early' work where Marx invokes recognition is the *Comments on James Mill* (1844).<sup>22</sup> Not the least fascinating aspect of this text is its highly Hegelian analysis of the relation between creditor and debtor, which follows remarkably closely the *Phenomenology*'s discussion of mastery and servitude [*Herrschaft und Knechtschaft*]. Marx presents the creditor-debtor relation in strikingly Hegelian terms: a contradictory mix of 'independence' [*Selbständigkeit*] and 'dependence' [*Unselbständigkeit*] – Hegel's own title for what is usually called the 'master-slave dialectic' (Hegel, 1977: 111). The relation of creditor to debtor, like that of master and slave, is asymmetrical and unstable, premised on power and unequal recognition. It is unstable in part because it is unclear who is dependent upon whom: what if the debtor defaults on his or her debt? Moreover, each of the terms of the relation – creditor and debtor – are individuals who become defined by the relation, their identities and lives determined by the credit system. For Marx the 'bond' of debt defines (subjectively, morally) the creditor and particularly the debtor, whose 'creditworthiness' comes to exhaust his or her identity: they are 'recognised' (Marx uses the term explicitly) solely in terms of their ability to repay (Marx, 1992: 264).<sup>23</sup> In the credit system human individuality – indeed

human morality itself – becomes 'an article of commerce' and 'man himself transformed into money' (Marx, 1992: 264). In other words, credit involves not only *one-sided and unequal recognition* but also *role-definitional alienation*.<sup>24</sup> Thus Marx writes in a passage that is worth quoting in full:

Within the credit system, credit's estranged nature operates under the semblance [*Schein*] of the highest political-economic recognition of man [*der höchsten national-ökonomischen Anerkennung des Menschen*]. It does so in a double way: 1) The antithesis between capitalist and worker, between big and small capitalists, becomes still greater since credit is given only to him who already has it, and is a new opportunity of accumulation for the rich man, or since the poor man finds that the arbitrary discretion of the rich man and the latter's judgment over him confirm or deny his *entire* existence and that his existence is wholly dependent on this contingency. 2) Mutual dissimulation, hypocrisy and sanctimoniousness are carried to extreme lengths, so that on the man without credit is pronounced not only the simple judgment that he is poor, but in addition a pejorative moral judgment that he possesses no trust, no recognition [*Anerkennung*], and therefore is a social pariah, a bad man, and in addition to his privation, the poor man undergoes this humiliation and the humiliating necessity of having to ask the rich man for credit. (Marx, 1992: 264; Marx and Engels, 1968: vol. 40, 449–50, trans. amended)

The 'humiliation' involved in such a relation of dependency is one practical expression of recognitive inequality, and Marx is clear about the moral wrong thereby committed. But it is not the case that Marx's concerns are simply and solely moral. Because also noteworthy in this passage is that 'mutual dissimulation, hypocrisy and sanctimoniousness are carried to extreme lengths'. In other words, under a condition of what Marx terms merely 'political-economic recognition', mutual recognition *turns into its opposite*, becomes mutual dissimulation: trust becomes distrust, honesty becomes dissimulation and even the individual is 'counterfeited' like money. The 'mutual complementing' of an individual's freedom that Hegel spoke of has become instead 'mutual plundering'

(Marx, 1992: 275; Marx and Engels, 1968: vol. 40, 460, trans. amended), the relation between creditor and debtor has become one of 'mutual servitude' [*wechselseitige Knechtschaft*] (Marx, 1992: 277; Marx and Engels, 1968: vol. 40, 462, trans. amended), the dependence of both on an 'alien mediator': money (Marx, 1992: 260). In short, mutual recognition has turned into contradictory recognition.

When we turn to what later works such as *Grundrisse* (1857–8) and *Capital* (1867) have to say about recognition it becomes clear that there is no radical change in outlook on Marx's part; here is no 'epistemological break' (Althusser) but merely a change of emphasis. *Grundrisse* and *Capital* share the aim of the *Comments on James Mill* to expose two forms of contradictory recognition: one-sided and unequal recognition and role-definitional alienation. The relevance of Marx's later works to our discussion lies in their showing not only the credit system but *commodity exchange as such* to consist in contradictory recognition. Where the *Comments on James Mill* showed up the recognitive inequality between – and alienated social roles of – creditor and debtor, *Grundrisse* and *Capital* widen this critique to encompass the roles of capitalist and labourer. Again the semblance of mutual recognition in the language of political economy is Marx's particular target. As with the credit relation, commodity exchange generates a merely formal or apparent recognition between those who exchange ('proprietors'), a recognition whose praises may be sung by political economists but which belies an infernal reality – the inherently exploitative relation of the capitalist to the labourer.

In our view the *Grundrisse* renews the critique of contradictory recognition which preoccupied the young Marx: a situation where individuals have the role of proprietors is a relation of recognition shot through with alienation. It is the same merely 'political-economic recognition' which Marx

referred to in the *Comments on James Mill*. What the *Grundrisse* adds to the early work is to expose the inversion of the liberal axiom that proprietors must be legally free: 'no one seizes hold of another's property by force. Each divests himself of his property voluntarily' (Marx, 1993: 243). As Marx immediately points out, this freedom is semblance: a 'surface process, beneath which, however, in the depths, entirely different processes go on, in which this apparent individual equality and liberty disappear' (1993: 247). When we look behind the appearance of proprietors or persons exchanging on free and equal terms, when we look instead at capital and labour (their 'prerequisite'), this 'equality and freedom ... prove to be inequality and unfreedom' (1993: 248–9).<sup>25</sup>

It is worth noting that, in his reflections on Marx, Honneth staunchly resists this conclusion, invoking notions of 'moral economy' drawn from Durkheim and Polanyi in order to try to show that exchange – even the exchange involved in wage labour – rests on a promise of autonomy for the contracting partners (Honneth, 2014: 178–98). It should be clear how strongly Marx opposes such a view. Marx is a harsh critic of the semblance of mutual recognition where its opposite in fact prevails. His work is a relentless exposé of the reversal of equality and freedom into their opposite, of mutual recognition into contradictory recognition. Conversely, the equality and freedom which flow together in mutual recognition remain for Marx the measure by which actual inequality and unfreedom may be judged. Put another way, mutual recognition is the measure by which contradictory recognition may be judged – and condemned. Marx's immanent critique rests upon no other values than the mutual recognition which capitalism in its very essence undermines; yet in unfolding the contradictions to mutual recognition this critique points forward – in revolutionary manner – to a post-capitalist world.

Turning to *Capital* we find a work where a relation of recognitive inequality is hard

to miss. That exploitation – of worker by capitalist – involves Hegelian ‘one-sided and unequal recognition’ should be clear. Our contention is that in addition to exposing one-sided and unequal recognition, a critique of role-definitional alienation lies at the heart of *Capital*. In what sense? The answer is to be found in the notion of ‘personification’ whereby Marx treats capitalist and labourer as ‘embodiments’ or ‘incarnations’ or ‘bearers’ (he tries out various metaphors) of particular class relations and interests (Marx, 1976: 92). The capitalist *just is* capital personified: only as such does he become ‘respectable’ (Marx, 1976: 739). Likewise, the worker *just is* labour personified: lacking means of production, owning only the ability to work, he or she has become wholly fungible: ‘abstract labour’. Both capitalist and worker are to this extent ‘machines’ or ‘cogs’ in a ‘social mechanism’ (Marx, 1976: 742, 739). To be labour or capital personified is to be an abstraction, with all one’s individual characteristics bracketed out and one’s many-sidedness reduced to a single generalisation.

The implications of this should not be under-estimated. One such implication is that Marx cannot straightforwardly be endorsing or siding with the category of labour.<sup>26</sup> A class is a pole of a one-sided and unequal recognitive relation. It involves, moreover, role-definitional alienation; to be a ‘worker’, to be a ‘member’ of the ‘working class’, is to be recognised in a contradictory way. Hints of this radical line of thought were already present in the *Comments on James Mill* where Marx opposed ‘life’ to ‘labour’ (Marx, 1992: 278). They reappear in Marx’s later work where communism is construed as a form of social existence which would no longer involve labour but instead some wholly new ‘self-conscious activity’. As the *Grundrisse* describes it, ‘the development of the rich individuality which is all-sided in its production as in its consumption, and whose labour also therefore appears no longer as labour, but as the

full development of activity itself’ (Marx, 1993: 325).<sup>27</sup>

A comment on this conclusion is in order. Our recognition-based reading of Marx as a critic of personification is an unorthodox one. That ‘worker’ and ‘capitalist’ are social roles which misrecognise individuals goes barely mentioned in the recent literature on Marx and recognition. The work of Emmanuel Renault is a rare exception. In treating capitalist and worker as ‘*Charaktermasken*’, Marx is (according to Renault) calling attention to the ‘coercive dimension’ and ‘falseness’ of these roles (Renault, 2013: 709).<sup>28</sup> We endorse Renault’s argument and generalise the point: *all* social roles are ‘coercive’ and ‘false’. We add merely the following: that it is a focus upon contradictory recognition (the common preoccupation of Hegel and Marx) which brings the falsity of social roles fully to light.

We conclude this section with an observation on Marx’s relation to Hegel.<sup>29</sup> We have implicitly argued against a commonplace in Marx interpretation, namely that Marx wanted to turn Hegel – who is ‘standing on his head’ – the right way up (Marx, 1976: 103; Marx and Engels, 1968: vol. 23, 27; also Engels, 1946: 39).<sup>30</sup> In fact, putative opposition between the two thinkers looks more like common ground once we study what each has to say about recognition. For the Hegel of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the social world is already topsy-turvy and the task of critique is to draw attention to the shifting relation between appearance and essence in a world turned upside down. Critique is no different for Marx. In the above-discussed works it is as if Marx *plays off* the Hegel of the *Phenomenology* (as we have argued, the already-radical Hegel, the Hegel for whom the existing world is ‘inverted’, i.e. contradictory, hypocritical) against the Hegel of the *Philosophy of Right* (the later Hegel for whom the social world seems firmly on its feet). He plays off the thinker who is alive to contradictory recognition and whose thought aims at free, unconstrained, unalienated interaction, against the thinker of ‘reconciliation’

(Hegel, 1952: 12) who believed the modern State had mitigated or even transcended the alienation and inequality in civil society. Marx in effect reminds Hegel that civil society, by his time more clearly visible as the realm of capitalist exploitation, is a realm of inherently contradictory recognition. Capitalism inverts the very principle of mutual recognition that both thinkers hold dear.

## 5. RECOGNITION AND CRITICAL THEORY

The foregoing discussions of Hegel and Marx have been brief but – we hope – sufficient to show how far-reaching and *revolutionary* is the concept of recognition in their work. What we have said shows, by contrast, how domesticated and hidebound this notion has become in Honneth's hands. Honneth's notions of 'recognitive spheres', of 'normative reconstruction' and of a history which all but ends in the transition to modernity are, taken together, ideas that clip recognition's revolutionary wings. Our chapter has attempted to reopen a path to a revolutionary notion of recognition which currently lies hidden behind a tangled undergrowth of liberal and recent Frankfurt School (Habermasian and Honnethian) debate. The task of clearing this path may also be conceived as the recovery of critical theory's original intention. The radicality of critical theory in its original – Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse – phase has, we suggest, become obscured to the same degree that Hegel's and Marx's understanding of recognition has been pushed aside.

To survey the terrain of so-called Frankfurt School theory today is to observe a very different landscape to that of the heyday of the Institute for Social Research. That heyday saw an explosion of radical and challenging ideas and – despite the occasional pessimism of a Horkheimer or an Adorno – a lasting commitment to revolutionary perspectives. Such descriptions fit uncomfortably with

recent Frankfurt School theorising. In recent decades a decisive shift has taken place from the philosophies and politics of the Frankfurt School's founders. Honneth's monumental *Freedom's Right* presents itself as renewing critical thought, yet, we fear, provides little more than an intricate philosophical justification for reform over revolution. It seems no coincidence that Honneth's latest book, *The Idea of Socialism*, fires a broadside at Marxism and champions the same core values as the German Social Democratic Party.<sup>31</sup> To us, it becomes ever clearer that Habermas and Honneth have traded in a Marxist philosophy for a social democratic, i.e. a reformist, ameliorist and institution-oriented, worldview.<sup>32</sup>

We began with Taylor's expansion of liberalism into multicultural issues, a view that equated recognition with respect for cultural identities. We showed how uncritical such a view must be towards the alienation involved in cultural identity. Honneth seemed at first glance to offer an alternative to liberalism's problems, but his appropriation of recognition for Frankfurt School thought succumbs to its own severe weaknesses. Standing back, we note that in these various appropriations of recognition the boundaries between critical theory and liberalism have become increasingly blurred. In Frankfurt, we note in passing, the vocabulary of liberal political philosophy seems to have won out over the rich Hegelian-Marxist thought-world in which the early Frankfurt School moved. This has political implications. Despite their difficulty, a book by Adorno or Marcuse could inspire a generation of political activists; it is hard to see the work of their successors having a similar effect. Against the tide, our discussion has attempted to show – via a recovery of the original revolutionary meaning of recognition – how a revival of critical theory might proceed.

## Notes

- 1 By 'procedural' liberalism, Taylor understands the view according to which 'a liberal society must remain neutral on [the question of what is

- to count as] the good life, and restrict itself to ensuring that however they see things, citizens deal fairly with one another and the state deals equally with all' (1994:57).
- 2 We agree with Taylor that an individual's identity 'crucially depends' on his or her dialogical – indeed, recognitive – 'relations with others' (1994: 34). Indeed we find ourselves in broad agreement with various of Taylor's declarations.
  - 3 John Holloway makes the same point in striking terms: 'We rebel because we misfit ... We are anti-identitarian. It means that we don't fit into identities ... the problem with identity politics is that it tends to fit everything into classifications and we don't! This is of fundamental importance – We don't fit in! We don't fit into classifications, into little boxes. We can say, as I think the Zapatistas do, We are indigenous but we are more than that. We can say We are gay but we are more than that. We are women but we are more than that or We are Irish but more than that. But if we don't say "but more than that", then it becomes reactionary. It becomes a conservative statement' (Holloway, 2016: 13–14).
  - 4 Or, so to say, over-againstnesses.
  - 5 How are the terms 'essentialist' and 'non-essentialist' to be understood? Answers to this question differ in Wittgenstein's *Blue and Brown Books* (where questions about essences are explored) and in Althusser's writings.
  - 6 See Honneth's Foreword to Jaeggi (2014a).
  - 7 Whether Hegel thought in terms of an 'end of history' remains controversial amongst commentators. His remark, in the *Phenomenology's* final chapter, that 'until spirit ... has completed itself as world-spirit, it cannot reach its consummation as self-conscious spirit' (1977: 488) suggests that, in that work at least, he thought in such terms. See also Marx (1971: 21–2).
  - 8 For the notion of immanent critique (as distinct from external critique) in Marx, see Marx and Engels (1975: vol. 3, 270).
  - 9 On this point we concur with Rahel Jaeggi: when Honneth takes himself to be undertaking 'immanent' critique he is actually engaged in 'internal' critique, a critique that is unable to free itself from the normative standards of its object, an alienated social world (see Jaeggi, 2014b: 261–8).
  - 10 See e.g. Williams (1997).
  - 11 For an account of Hegel, and the *Phenomenology* in particular, see Gunn (2015). An English-language version of Gunn's account of Hegel is forthcoming.
  - 12 So to say, history as seen in the *Phenomenology* is a story or narrative with a 'happy ending'. We should note that this 'happy ending' – an ending of alienation – is not foreordained. Nothing prevents Adorno's bleak version – a history that leads from the slingshot to the atom bomb – from being the more accurate one (see Adorno, 1973: 320).
  - 13 For more detailed discussion, see Gunn (2015).
  - 14 For historical background to Hegel's formulations, see Rude (1959).
  - 15 Kojève's examples of objects which are made what they are through recognition are medals and 'the enemy's flag' (Kojève, 1969: 6). Though such objects belong in a world of alienation, they sufficiently highlight what 'constitutive' recognition means.
  - 16 Having quoted this moving and challenging passage, still further commentary suggests itself. The 'I that is We and We that is I', to which Hegel refers, exists in a deeply interactive way.
  - 17 Where Monahan's argument does prove useful is exposing the error of an 'agonistic' view that assumes all recognition is *inevitably and inescapably one-sided and unequal*, a view that predominates in Lacan and various postmodern theories.
  - 18 Our discussion has focussed on the *Phenomenology of Spirit* rather than the *Philosophy of Right*. Whilst recognition as a term reappears in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, recognition no longer exists there in an unstructured and uncontradicted sense.
  - 19 For the classic statement of the base/superstructure distinction, see Marx (1971: 20–1).
  - 20 Our argument here condenses a much more detailed discussion. See Gunn and Wilding (2014).
  - 21 Andrew Chitty (1998) rightly argues that a focus on recognition upsets a base-and-superstructure reading. Our suggestion is that, if Marx is understood in terms of recognition, the justification for a base-and-superstructure reading disappears.
  - 22 Honneth – understandably – turns to this text at several points in his recent works. The conclusions he draws from Marx, however, are very different from our own.
  - 23 When Lazzarato, in his analysis of the *Comments on James Mill*, refers to the element of 'self-constitution' and 'subjectivation' in the creditor-debtor relation, he unwittingly refers to the constitutive power of recognition (here, contradictory recognition) upon subjectivity (Lazzarato, 2011: 55, 59). An explanation in terms of recognition is missing from Lazzarato's otherwise useful book because he is set upon reading Marx's *Comments* alongside Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* rather than alongside Hegel's *Phenomenology*.
  - 24 See Section 2, above.
  - 25 What in the early work appears as moral inversion appears in the late work as a '*Lichtbild*'. (Marx uses a metaphor from early photography: just as

- a photographic slide inverts reality, so capitalism presents to us a world through the looking glass (1993: 249).) On Marx (like Hegel) as theorist of the 'inverted world' [*verkehrte Welt*], see Helmut Reichelt (2005).
- 26 Marx notes drily that he by no means depicts the capitalist 'in a rosy light'. But it seems to us that he could have added the same about the worker, since both roles involve alienation. Of course one role is more 'comfortably' alienated than the other.
  - 27 From a rich literature on Marx as critic of labour we recommend particularly Holloway (2010: 87–99); Holloway (2015) and Cleaver (2000: 127–31).
  - 28 On another point we find ourselves in agreement with Renault: Marx's use of 'recognition' is indeed 'at odds with the Hegelian connotations of "recognition" on which the contemporary debate draws' (Renault, 2013: 704). But we suggest this is precisely because of the Honnethian assumptions upon which the contemporary debate rests. For us, Marx is best understood in terms of the Hegelian contrast between contradictory recognition and mutual recognition, a contrast whose force is absent in recent debates.
  - 29 That Marx, as Renault (2013) argues, may have received Hegel's ideas on interaction filtered through the work of Feuerbach and Hess seems to us both plausible and intriguing. But for us these lines of lineage are less pertinent than the underlying congruence between Marx's arguments and Hegel's critique of one-sided and unequal recognition and role-definitional misrecognition.
  - 30 Michael Quante has shown that this famous phrase of Marx's is more subtle than meets the eye. Marx does not say that the correct response to Hegel who is 'standing on his head' is to put him 'back on his feet' (this is *Engels'* phrase) but rather to 'turn him inside out' [*umstülpen*]. In German, *umstülpen* is something one can do with clothing, e.g. a jacket or a glove. The two metaphors – putting Hegel on his feet (Engels) and turning him inside out (Marx) – are far from synonymous. As Quante suggests, Marx's 'turning Hegel inside out' may well be a reference to Hegel's own Logic of Essence, Marx merely pushing Hegel's dialectic of essence (inside) and appearance (outside) further. See Quante (2014: 425–7).
  - 31 Freedom, Justice and Solidarity. See Honneth (2015).
  - 32 For a small but significant qualification to this view, see Gunn and Wilding (2013b).
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# 'Ideas with Broken Wings':<sup>1</sup> Critical Theory and Postcolonial Theory

Asha Varadharajan

## THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL: WHY NOW?

In his 22 September 2014 essay in *The New Yorker*, Alex Ross wrote, 'If Adorno were to look upon the cultural landscape of the twenty-first century, he might take grim satisfaction in seeing his fondest fears realized'. Two years later, Ross would comment, with both rue and bitterness in the wake of the election of Donald Trump, 'I spoke too soon. His moment of vindication is arriving now' (2016). Ross's account of Adorno and Benjamin's 'skeptical ardor' and 'relentless scouring of mundane surfaces' as well as his acuity in characterizing their contribution to thought as a 'dialectic of doubt' resonates with my own passionate dalliance with the Frankfurt School, particularly with Adorno's inimitable brand of philosophical reflection. Ross's invocation of the Frankfurt School in the context of Trump's rise to power highlights once again their indispensable

diagnoses of 'the authoritarian personality' while serving as a reminder of the still prevailing scholarly consensus that they remained 'stunningly silent on racist theory, anti-imperialist resistance, and oppositional practice in the empire' (Said, 1993: 278). Indeed, new aficionados of Critical Theory such as Amy Allen call for 'open[ing] critical theory up to a deep and substantial engagement with the challenges of postcolonialism' (2017: 201), arguing that a 'decolonization from within' must accompany or complement 'a more radical decolonization from without' (2017: 202). Allen endorses what she describes as a radically reflexive and historicized form of immanent critique practised by Adorno and Michel Foucault which simultaneously fractures the social world and systems of thought. In what follows, I elaborate upon Ross's invitation to rethink acquiescence and resistance in moments of crisis and despair and Allen's parallelism between 'decolonial' (185, 202) and Critical Theory to indicate why some of Adorno's writings in

this regard are singularly suggestive for the (diasporic) postcolonial intellectual.

### THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL: WHY STILL?

Adorno's interrogation of 'the contradiction between democratic order and the actual consciousness of those who are kept in a continuing state of minority by social conditions' (1991a: 129), who lack 'the prerequisites for an existence marked by human dignity' (1991a: 126), illuminates the disturbing consequences of a 'callous appeal to the common will' (1991a: 129) even as it explains Ross's attraction to this explanation for the 'boredom' and 'nihilistic glee' as much as 'economic dissatisfaction or racial resentment' that moved a population to vote against its rational self-interest (Ross, 2016) and the media to capitulate rather than dissent. If Ross concentrates on the prophetic and accurate diagnoses of the culture industry that has reached its apotheosis in the figure of Donald Trump, my interest is in the affect and posture of the intellectual Adorno has made his peculiar province. Adorno's sustained interrogation of culture's separation 'from the naked necessity of life' (1991a: 109), as 'the manifestation of pure humanity' (1991a: 108) that disavows its share of 'the guilt of society' (1995: 26) is of a different order than Allen's injunction, following Richard Rorty, that 'we have to start from where we are' (2017: 202). Adorno would, no doubt, applaud this sincere desire to resist the 'ossification' of tradition and the 'self-satisfaction' (1991a: 119) of intellectuals; however, his visceral conviction that culture is 'granted the space in which to draw breath immediately by that power against which it rebels' (1991a: 119) would refuse the distinction Allen makes between decolonization from within and decolonization from without. This distinction is a luxury the (post)colonial subject, intellectual or otherwise, cannot afford.

Allen concentrates on the resources Adorno (and Foucault) offer '*for the crucially important project of de-colonizing critical theory*' (Allen, 2017: 200, my italics). I want to suggest that Adorno had the right instincts where *postcolonial* reflections on ethics and epistemology are concerned too because those reflections also recognize that the promise of decolonization may never be fulfilled and that critique must remain both relentless and interminable.

### EPISTEMOLOGY: 'THE OPEN-AIR PRISON WHICH THE WORLD IS BECOMING'<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, this realization is constitutive for Edward Said's (1978) seminal *Orientalism*. In describing 'Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient', Said demonstrates 'the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient ... during the post-Enlightenment period' (1978: 3). Said declares, '*no one* writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism' (1978: 3, my italics). It is this unenviable position within the nexus of knowledge and power that (post)colonial subjects continue to inhabit despite decolonization and in the wake of the continued 'immiseration of the postcolonial world' (Spencer, 2010: 207). To my mind, Said's position is of a piece with Adorno's reflections on the 'semblance of freedom' that stymies 'reflection upon one's own unfreedom' (1995: 21). Even if, as Said explains, Orientalism does not determine everything that can be said about or done in and for the Orient, dissent and re-orientation must continue to contend with the network of interests that bears upon the production and management of the Orient. For both Said and Adorno, the moment of hope occurs

when critical reflection does not imagine itself as standing ‘in contradiction to manifest unfreedom’ (Adorno, 1995: 21) but proceeds simultaneously by combining ‘unflinchingly conscious use’ of traditions and institutions with the insatiability of ‘open thinking’ (Adorno, 1991b: 202): neither ‘existing conditions’ nor ‘the ends yet to be attained’ nor even ‘any type of organized force’ can secure open thinking (1991b: 203). It is this dialectical approach to cultural criticism – the ‘critic of culture must both participate in culture and not participate’ (Adorno, 1995: 33) – that makes me resist, instinctively, the currency of the word ‘decolonial’ and not only for its grammatical infelicity. Turning decolonizing (an adverb) into decolonial (an adjective) bleaches critique of conflict and ardour, stringency and impossibility, suppleness and imagination. More damningly, it transforms the dynamic struggle against dispossession into property, a static virtue that can be owned and affirmed. Even if the word ‘decolonial’ is intended to bridge the divide between epistemology and politics, it slips too easily into a definition rather than a practice of anti-colonial epistemology. The unpalatable lesson that Said and Adorno teach is that the standpoint and experience of colonization or marginalization is not enough to overcome its effects, to represent those who cannot represent themselves. For them, the process of decolonization (not the condition of decoloniality) is an aspiration and a necessity; not a guarantee or inevitability. They pursue, in other words, ‘the insolubility of the task itself’ (Adorno, 1995: 32).

## CRITIQUE AND IDEOLOGY

For Adorno, cultural criticism must confront ‘society as appearance’: his consciousness of the reification of the whole such that ideology is ‘as it were, equally near the centre in all its pieces’ (1995: 31), results in a mode

of critique that pursues the logic of the object’s aporias to reveal the antinomies that rend social physiognomy (1995: 30, 32). This distinction from decolonial epistemology is an important one because the aim of the dialectic between immanence and transcendence is not to privilege the standpoint, perspective, experience or perceived marginalization of the subject but to transform both knowledge ‘that penetrates from without and that which bores from within’ (1995: 33) ‘into a heightened perception’ of the object (1995: 32). This method that embodies rather than resolves contradictions, that consistently exposes the gap between epistemological pretension and political reality, is not synonymous with the familiar Gramscian distinction between the optimism of the will and the pessimism of the intellect; instead, as Adorno avers, ‘thought achieves happiness in the expression of unhappiness’ (1991b: 203) rather than remaining content with a mere obedience to praxis. This notion of critique has often been mistaken for a form of intellectual hubris, a refusal to get one’s hands dirty, or even as resignation in the face of catastrophe. On the contrary, Adorno draws upon Marx’s allegorical refraction of history in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* as the force of revolution undermined by the logic of repetition; the cultural critic’s fidelity ‘to a praxis truly involved in change’ (1991b: 202) results in what Robert Spencer describes as ‘an unrelenting focus on the defects of the present’ (2010: 208) and a resistance to evocations of ‘spurious harmony’ (Adorno, 1995: 32). Thus, for Adorno, ‘[w]hoever refuses to permit this thought to be taken from him has not resigned’ (1991b: 203).

This critical obduracy becomes indispensable in the postcolonial world as Spencer describes it – ‘the expectation of environmental collapse and the haunting of our imaginations by images of poverty, violence, disease and failing states’ (2010: 207) – a world indistinguishable from ‘the injustice and (colonial) violence that capitalism brings

in train' (2010: 208). In this sense, the culture industry's responsibility for the ascendancy of Donald Trump (and other variations of right-wing populism and extremism) and the depredations of late or global capitalism are two sides of the same coin. It must not be forgotten that those who voted for Trump were not only the disaffected and alienated but equally those whose annual income exceeded \$50,000 (Henley, 2016). Adorno's dual insistence, pace Walter Benjamin, on culture and barbarism, on the detritus as much as the force of universal history, is of a piece with the 'dialectical agonism' (Hussein, 2002: 6) of Said's adumbration of critical consciousness, his appreciation, late in his career, of Adorno's distrust of all systems (2002: 233). He shares, too, Adorno's awareness that the critic's inescapable 'immersion in the destructive element' (Conrad, 2008: 243) is the condition of his comprehension of the damage it has wrought and of the means to escape its authority. Adorno's analysis of 'capitalism's daunting ubiquity' (Spencer, 2010: 212), however, augments Said's disarticulation of Orientalism (identity thinking in Adorno's scheme) by rendering its representational economy in tandem with the political economy of capitalist modernity. While Said can occasionally detach the weight of Orientalist machinery from the historical and cultural reality/discursive object it signifies and obscures such that it has a life all its own, Adorno's treatment of ideology as equally near the centre in all its pieces makes it impossible to separate discourse and social physiognomy and the originary violence (colonial or capitalist) upon which both rest, however distorted and fractured the resulting mediation and appearance of society.

### CONSCIOUSNESS AND CONSCIENCE: CRITIQUE AS AFFECT

The 'intransigence' (Adorno, 1995: 31) of the dialectical method, particularly in its

immanent moments, is not only a characteristic of its epistemology and politics but also derived from affect and conscience. As Spencer demonstrates compellingly (2010: 213–14), intelligence for Adorno was a *moral* category, answerable to victims of atrocity – of which the Holocaust is only the most egregious example – and designed to avert the perpetuation of suffering and the prevalence of apathy. Adorno's excoriating meditations on guilt and shame (see *Minima Moralia* and *Negative Dialectics*), when he describes himself as a survivor rather than a victim of the Holocaust, are particularly poignant – 'the shame of still having air to breathe, in hell' (1974: 28) – because they express a tormented mode of being that exceeds the casually humane or merely conscientious or sincerely empathetic or even the philosophically rigorous or truthful. Said's own exile from and fraught relation to the intractable fate of Palestine exhibit a similar mix of entanglement and penitence (Spencer's words), but they are tied to the worldliness which garbs his intellectual conduct, the inventory of historical traces that wound and complete his identity, rather than the means by which thought acquires 'the momentum of the general' (1991b: 203). Spencer rightly describes Adorno's emphasis on the moral capacity to feel others' pain and to alleviate their suffering as the antidote to the competitive avarice and cruel indifference nourished by capitalist modernity (2010: 218). However, I believe, with Antonio Vázquez-Arroyo, that Adorno's desire to lend a voice to suffering not only generates a humane sensibility that evokes a world made to the measure of the suffering in it but demands that intelligence 'translate pain into the concept' (2008: 459, my italics). Thus, philosophy's 'moment of truth, as Adorno consistently insisted, is the threat and permanence of catastrophe' (Vázquez-Arroyo, 2008: 458).

I have been struck anew by the apparent contrast and secret pact between Adorno's interpretation of the Holocaust as neither

aberrant nor exceptional and Hannah Arendt's account of the 'ill-defined, general agreement that the essential structure of all civilizations is at the breaking point ... [such that] it can nowhere provide the guidance to the possibilities of the century, or an adequate response to its horrors' (1973: vii). The Holocaust, for Arendt, signifies the appearance of 'absolute evil' (1973: viii) because it cannot be attributed to humanly comprehensible motives. The concealed resemblance between their views begins to emerge when Arendt asserts that the 'subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition' (1973: ix). For Adorno and Benjamin, the unconscious of Western history is its complement, and Arendt's tale of usurpation is, rather, the Janus-faced story of culture and barbarism. Arendt places the *consecutive* horrors of anti-semitism, imperialism and totalitarianism on an escalating scale of brutality while Adorno sees these iterations of the logic of identity as 'pathological' extensions of the logic of capitalism (Spencer, 2010: 210). Yet, when Arendt looks for 'balanced judgement and measured insight' (1973: vii) that might help one come to terms with the oscillation between progress and doom, optimism and despair, and omnipotence and powerlessness that marks the human condition as she knows it, she rejects 'the spurious grandeur of "historical necessity"' (1973: viii) that might serve as a plausible explanation for the disintegration she witnesses. She argues instead for a form of comprehension that faces up to 'the impact of reality and the shock of experience' (1973: viii), for a conscious assumption of the burden of history in order to resist rather than buckle under its weight.

Here, Arendt performs her own affecting version of the dialectic of immanence and transcendence: attunement to the shock of experience and the horror of the outrageous not only unstitches a reality sutured by commonplaces but leavens the universal experience of driving to one's doom with the awareness 'of what has been happening'

(1973: viii). If Adorno's favoured trope is paradox that revels in the suspended and irresolvable, or antinomy which reveals the antagonism that seethes beneath the reified whole, Arendt's is irony: 'without the imperialists' "expansion for expansion's sake," the world might never have become one; ... without [totalitarianism] we might never have known the truly radical nature of Evil' (1973: viii–ix). The irony of this fortunate fall from innocence to experience becomes the agent of a dialectical transcendence of an extremity that defies comprehension. Arendt declares 'that human dignity needs a new guarantee which can be found only in a new political principle, in a new law on earth ...' (1973: ix). Not only does Arendt trace the genesis of totalitarianism, she also has what Adorno would describe as 'a firm grasp upon possibility' without objectifying itself as Utopia (1991b: 202). The Holocaust urges both Adorno and Arendt to engage in philosophical contemplation in the face of despair but equally to view the world from the standpoint of redemption (Adorno, 1974: 247). Like Benjamin's Angel of History, Adorno's redemptive gaze is a backward glance to the rubble: the unrequited dreams and silenced voices of the vanquished of history (see also Vázquez-Arroyo, 2008: 459) while Arendt's gaze is directed forward – the new law on earth will take its cue from the disintegration it leaves behind. In other words, the new political principle of human dignity, in the spirit of the lacerating irony that underwrites Arendt's hope, needs the obscenity of the Holocaust in order to be(come).

I have been at some pains to show, as does Spencer, that 'it is less what Adorno thinks than how he thinks that is exemplary' for postcolonial theory (2010: 209). Moreover, as Said's discussion of Orientalism as a constraint upon thought and action suggests, Adorno's vaunted Eurocentrism might be beside the point. Whether one considers Eurocentrism as the 'enabling violation' in the production of the colonial subject (Spivak, 2004), conceives of Empire as the

'intimate enemy' (Nandy, 1983), examines the 'split enunciation' from which colonial hybridity proceeds (Bhabha, 1994), or seeks to 'provincialize Europe' (Chakrabarty, 2000), 'Europe' must be construed before it can be denied (Adorno, 1981). As a range of more recent reflections on Adorno and the postcolonial have shown, a careful reading of his writings will elicit pithy denunciations of both racism and colonial violence<sup>3</sup> that reveal neither the wilful blindness nor the motivated silence of which he has been accused (see, for instance, Allen, 2017). Rather than resurrect this stale debate, I have resorted to a detour via his contemporary Arendt to illustrate not only that her writing partakes of his peculiar blend of philosophy and conscience, but that she shares his confidence that 'thinking has the momentum of the general' (1991b: 203). Arendt's account of the unprecedented rootlessness and homelessness that the simultaneous perversion and decline of the nation-state has wrought moves her to envision the Holocaust, a distinctly European phenomenon, as an emptying out of the name of the human in the corrosion of dignity and the displacement of community. Adorno, for his part, renders European modernity synonymous with the perdurability of catastrophe rather than the idea of historical progress and with the guilt that permeates society. While recent historiographies of the trajectory of human rights have denied that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 made explicit reference to the Holocaust in recasting human dignity,<sup>4</sup> I want to suggest that the experience of 'nullity' functioned, as Adorno (1974) writes in *Minima Moralia*, as 'the mote' in one's eye that is also 'the best magnifying glass' (50): the UDHR failed to refer explicitly to the event of the Holocaust precisely because it may well have been drafted under the *anxiety* of its influence (see Habermas, 2010: 465). Both Adorno and Arendt are simultaneously aware that the expansionist momentum of imperialism and capitalism entwines 'their' fate with 'ours', making both hope and despair universal.

The stage is thus set for rethinking the relations between normativity and critique, for juxtaposing the historicity of concepts with the realization of their potential in a redeemed world. Allen offers this approach as a blueprint for critical theory in postcolonial times; I follow suit with both desire and scepticism.

### THE 'EXHAUSTION OF UTOPIAN ENERGIES':<sup>5</sup> A BALEFUL VIEW OF CRITIQUE

Allen's disillusionment with the second generation of the Frankfurt School, Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, stems from their endorsement of a 'post-metaphysical, contingent, disaggregated story about modernity as the result of a process of historical learning or social evolution' (2017: 184), an endorsement that ignores the fact that 'the language of progress and development is the language of oppression and domination for two-thirds of the world's people' (2017: 185). For Allen, this approach transforms the moral-political *goal* of progress into a historical fact and forecloses a serious confrontation of the postcolonial condition, a particularly reprehensible move given Habermas's position at the forefront of discussions of cosmopolitanism and human rights and, I would contend, of making the democratic social order constitutive of a cosmopolitical imaginary. Allen cites a range of postcolonial scholars but does not herself develop the *rapprochement* she proposes and retreats, rather surprisingly, to a modest and apologetic self-scrutiny rather than a robust transformation of Critical Theory into the 'something else' to which she gestures (2017: 202).

Postcolonial theory cannot congratulate itself on being the much-awaited riposte to the blithe unawareness of Habermasian critical theory either. Its adherents have been equally adept at 'enjoying a new lease on life

for the way it can be made to emblemize where we all went wrong' (Taylor, 2015: E339), and berating their compatriots for being unable 'to provide the critical theory of history necessary to account for the predicaments of power it [postcolonial theory] attempts to map and theorize' (Vázquez-Arroyo, 2008: 466). Perhaps the most coruscating diagnosis of what ails postcolonial theory occurs in Neil Lazarus's (2011) *The Postcolonial Unconscious* in which he argues that postcolonial theory has transformed emancipatory politics into an epistemology of defeat because it is a 'complex intellectual response' (2011: 9) to the obliteration of Marxism as an enabling political horizon and, simultaneously, to the demise of liberationist zeal. Christopher Taylor describes this situation as the 'crises of accumulation and ongoing imperial aggression' (2015: E340) that have tended to obscure liberationist ideologies from view, and both Arroyo and Lazarus emphasize the disavowal of dialectical thinking in postcolonial theory that, in turn, undermines a(n)ta)gonistic politics. Thus, Critical Theory and postcolonial theory appear, to reframe and reorient one of Adorno's signature observations on totality, 'torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up' (Adorno et al., 2007: 123). In other words, if the equation of modernity with catastrophe in the work of the elders of the Frankfurt School has yielded, in the writings of its younger members, to the recuperation of the legacy of the Enlightenment for the still-emancipatory, if incomplete, project of modernity, the enabling horizon of anti-capitalist critique and nationalist liberation in postcolonial theory has ceded ground to a disabling repudiation of master-narratives, even emancipatory ones, and a corresponding pessimism about not only liberatory futures but about the decolonization of the mind.

Even if postcolonial theory cannot serve as a convenient antidote to the ills of Critical Theory, I believe all is not lost. As Taylor argues persuasively, 'the perspective of

postcolonial studies' and, I would add, that of Critical Theory, 'is not isomorphic with that of the state or of capital' (2015: E344), but the significance of burdening both with 'the need to think political possibility through the concrete historical present' (2015: E343) cannot be overstated. Taylor indicates how 'the collapse of the Bandung project and the rise of neoliberal globalization' were 'concomitant with the decimation of the global subject of emancipation' (2015: E344) and insists that this erstwhile 'theoretical and political optic' (2015: E344) should animate any revival of a materialist project of critique against a political horizon of possibility rather than deferral or defeat. I propose that a critical theory in postcolonial times must resurrect the 'repressed, imprisoned, starved, indebted, and simply killed' (Taylor, 2015: E344) collective subjects of emancipation as the foundation of its normativity and global re-articulation, and as the interlocutors *with* whom (see also Allen, 2011), rather than only on behalf of, intellectuals, imperial or postcolonial, fashion their reflexivity and their commitment. As Rainer Forst declares, the opposition between interests and norms, power and morality, and the universal and the historical can only be transcended when 'the language of emancipation' operates 'as a critique of unjustifiable social relations, but in such a way that it subjects this critique itself to criticism' (2014: 676) and when 'the process of *democratization*' rather than being merely or only a reflexive move by 'privileged actors' (2014: 680), is equally generated by those 'who are rebelling against an existing normative order' (2014: 672). Thus, the political principle or new law on earth that will henceforth guarantee human dignity finds its embodiment in the 'emancipatory subject' of Taylor's (2015: E344) imagining, in the "reconstruction" of postcolonial studies' as 'a creature *of* and *against* its time' (Lazarus, 2011: 1–2), and in the restoration of 'justice in the political realm' (Forst, 2014: 680).

## HUMAN RIGHTS: THE NEW FACE OF CRITICAL THEORY AND THE TRANSNATIONAL POLITICAL IMAGINARY

In 'The Continuing Perplexities of Human Rights' Samuel Moyn (2013) concludes that 'human rights are likely to remain the framework and language in which many people debate what sort of justice to pursue, why injustice still wins, and how theory and practice can change for the sake of a better future everyone wants' (112). For Moyn, human rights lack the credentials 'to be our saving truth' but it will not do to 'trash them either, as if some next utopia were on the horizon ... (or as if indicting capitalism or biopolitics sufficed in itself)' (2013: 112). Moyn's deliberately commonsensical phrasing captures what theory and practice across worlds and disciplines have in common as well as marks the shift in contemporary iterations of postcolonial studies and Critical Theory from the critique of domination to the imagination of dissent and the labour of emancipation, from expressing wrongs (lending a voice to suffering in Adorno's terms) to righting them (see Spivak, 2004). Moyn's laconic account nicely evokes the ambivalence with which human rights are regarded – they are our best hope and our last hope and perhaps in the end 'the most we can hope for' (Ignatieff, 2001: 173). Moyn implies that the tendency of critical accounts of the human rights framework to castigate it 'for its failure to transform the world' does not destroy its utopian potential; rather, human rights 'make up a discourse of hope' that serves 'as a stepping stone to something new that could [transform the world]' (2013: 111). Neither postcolonial studies nor Critical Theory is a stranger to such ambivalence – the redemptive moment in both is stained with melancholy – but both are concerned to transform 'faith in utopia ... into responsibility for the ravages of history' (Varadharajan, 1995: 35). I suggest that the nexus of ethics and politics, epistemology and affect, history and normativity in which

Critical Theory and postcolonial studies reside may be both illuminated and transformed by a hazardous and deracinating rather than civil or dialogic encounter with human rights.

The prospect of such an encounter reveals many obstacles, not least because, unlike both the first generation of the Frankfurt School and the multiple incarnations of postcolonial studies in the academy, human rights disavow or renounce their messianic or world-altering character in favour of a certain minimalism: a desire to secure the conditions for any kind of life at all or to place limits on abuses and violations rather than foster significant political change or action (see Ignatieff, 2001). This minimalism explains why human rights are perceived as 'the smiling rationalization for contemporary domination' (Moyn, 2013: 111), but it also makes the predicament of human rights analogous to that of the resignation Lazarus defines as the *raison d'être* of postcolonial studies (see also Brown, 2004). Moreover, the universalism of human rights discourse requires the substitution and displacement of epistemology with/by sentiment and affect: the mobilization of pathos to induce sympathy and of shame to motivate action (Rorty, 1993; Keenan, 2004), the spectacle of suffering that solicits and eroticizes empathy (Hartman, 1997; Sontag, 2004; Hesford, 2011), and the transmission of shock in the tracing of a phenomenology of violence (Scarry, 1985). Thus, the unseating of cognition by emotion and desire by identification returns the focus to the *subjects* of human rights advocacy rather than remaining with the *objects* of their gaze and inscription.

In parts of 'Culture and Administration' that rarely merit discussion in critical scholarship, Adorno remarks acidly on the 'increase in humanitarianism from the perspective of concern on the part of everyone for everyone' (1991a: 119), only to conclude that 'salvation would hardly turn out to be a blessing to the man saved today' (1991a: 120). Even though Adorno is not commenting on the victims of



human rights violations, his discerning elaboration of how the process of becoming 'the object of public welfare, attended and fed and treated with great care' entails being 'torn from his way of life and therewith presumably from the possibility of expressing that which he had once felt to be the purpose of his life in the world' (1991a: 120), deserves to be reckoned with. Adorno's pronouncing himself incapable 'of enthusiasm because the humane blossoms in the midst of inhumane situations' (1991a: 124) and his wry and squirm-inducing conviction that research projects in the West 'on generally valid, absolute values' are conducted 'with the underdeveloped countries in the back of the mind' (1991a: 124) should give human rights discourse and advocacy as well as celebrants of the cosmopolitan world order pause. Adorno has the wit to insist that 'we must have a conscience', but his moral philosophy retains enough modesty to observe that we 'may not insist on our own conscience' (Allen, 2017: 197). His prescience and radicalism in encapsulating the tenor of a range of scholarly objections to the missionary zeal, self-congratulatory exercise of pity, unexamined liberalism and secularism, and insouciant universalism in human rights talk, however, do not appear to be matched by the still moderate and restrained rather than genuinely unsettling self-scrutiny which contemporary proponents of Critical Theory evince or by the pragmatism and compromise that hobble human rights.

After dwelling with the ravaged beauty and disconsolate irony of Adorno's style, and the gnomic joy of Benjamin's, the communicative rationality of the newest generation of the Frankfurt School can feel like arid, even earnest, terrain despite its comforting clarity and its welcome eschewal of sentimentality. The inhabitants of this terrain are more numerous than one might expect and differ in their respective intellectual genealogies. Nevertheless, all of them operate, not necessarily uncritically, within the discourses of democracy, liberalism,

capitalism, development, and cosmopolitanism that frame inalienable human rights and international law and share the belief that the practice of critique and the dream of emancipation are inextricable. At their simultaneously most simple and most complex, they contend that reflective judgement and moral behaviour 'may arise simply out of what it is to be a human being confronted by the suffering of other human beings' (Fine, 2013: 225).

Robert Fine captures the sensibility of post-Habermasian critical theory when he writes that the emphasis on 'the historicity of moral norms, the plurality of coexisting cultures, the relativity of ethical values and the human origins of all law' threatens to destroy a standard against which to evaluate the moral imperatives of the human condition (2013: 223). Following Arendt and Adorno, Fine wants to preserve the egalitarian idea at all costs, arguing that 'the gulf between the *abstract idea* of rights and the *concrete existence* of concealed material interests, political violence, and ethnic prejudices' (2013: 227) should not tempt one to devalue 'the idea of right itself' (2013: 223); instead, 'to denature the idea of right and explore its developmental contradictions' (2013: 233) 'is not the same as the trashing of rights' (2013: 236). For Fine, denaturing rights requires revaluation – not devaluation – (2013: 236). Because Fine imagines 'the idea of human rights' as 'an operative principle of justice' (2009: 8), he affirms cosmopolitanism, or as Kant would have it, 'a Cosmo-political Right of the whole Human Race' (1891: 103), as the principle of the new world order in which 'state sovereignty has been replaced by sovereign equality under international law' (Fine, 2009: 16). The ambiguous or, if one prefers, duplicitous, character of human rights as 'the product of struggles from below and legislation from above' and as capable of being 'instrumentalised in the service of state power and reclaimed as a promise of "civil repair" for the wrongs committed by the state' (2009: 17)

leaves Fine untroubled: the human rights revolution or the fostering of human rights culture is an emergent social and subjective form that 'supplements' rather than 'supplants' the rights guaranteed by the nation-state rather than 'a utopian transition – in the words of Habermas, from a world in which law is in the service of power to one in which power is in the service of right' (2009: 18).

I have deliberately reversed the order in which Fine's essays appeared in print to demonstrate that faith in the idea of rights complements rather than undermines the moral compromises that accompany their political realization. If one essay refuses to let the ideal of rights be sullied by the failures to realize it, the other comprehends those failures by rendering rights contingent rather than absolute. By describing his position as neither optimistic nor pessimistic (2009: 17), refusing to succumb to the temptation to turn rights into an absolute that is doomed to disappoint, and making rights the flawed instrument of a cosmopolitanism in the throes of becoming, Fine 'situates social life outside the sphere of substantive ethical consideration' (2013: 223) and, I would add, political transformation, because reflective judgement witnesses and comprehends a 'radically asymmetrical political-economic order' (2009: 19) rather than combats it. Far from functioning as dialectical negation, critical theory in Fine's approach works in tandem with the minimalism and ambivalence of human rights to indicate that human rights is not only a concept but also has an existence, for better or worse, in the world (2009: 17). This 'perception of a consensus amongst the international community and the knowledge that "something is being done" encourages complacency where complacency has no place' (Schick, 2006: 324). As Kate Schick observes, such a no doubt sensible account of the way of the world prevents distinctions between the 'desire to be seen to observe human rights and thus accorded legitimacy' and 'substantive observance' involving an examination of 'structures underlying human rights

violations' (2006: 323, 324). The human rights culture Fine imagines may well, in Schick's terms, 'obscure rather than expose unpleasant reality' (2006: 325) because it abstracts principles from their promulgation and enforcement, distracts attention from the conditions that inhibit the realization of rights, and assumes a neat transition from the experience of suffering and injustice to a passion for eradicating them (2006: 322, 325). If Fine deploys Adorno and Arendt to turn reflective judgement into a form of moral behaviour, Schick turns to Adorno's attention to suffering, to the psychological and bodily dimensions of experience, to address not only the violence of the social order but its 'profound fragility', the loss, woundedness, impotence, and resentment that mark the experience of the disenfranchised (Schick, 2009: 140). Schick proposes an integration of the traumatic real, a dialectical encounter between the radical contingency of history with its radical continuity so that suffering not only interrupts or disrupts or fragments historical temporality but is itself situated *within* the historical momentum of unity and hope.

## HABERMAS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The main thrust of post-Habermasian critical theory's interventions in the language and framework of human rights may be described as the challenge 'to the false assumption that the meaning of human rights is exhausted by their misuse' (Habermas, 1998: 169). As Habermas, following Lutz Wingert, explains, 'human rights, which demand the inclusion of the other, function at the same time as sensors for exclusionary practices exercised in their name' (1998: 163). Habermas's interrogation of the crisis of 'legitimation' that has plagued human rights (1998: 157) – the fraught relations between legal entitlements guaranteed by nation-states and moral obligations that encompass the human

community ‘*unlimited* in social space and historical time’ (1998: 158); the reciprocity between private and public autonomy; ‘the communicative conditions for a reasonable political will-formation’ (1998: 160); and the translation, even imposition, of social modernity, egalitarian principles, and constitutional democracy in non-European cultures and politics – has determined the scholarly preoccupations of his heirs such as Seyla Benhabib, Rainer Forst, and Thomas McCarthy (the parallels with Fine should already be obvious). For the purposes of my argument, I restrict my focus to what Benhabib defines broadly as ‘the unity and diversity of human rights to be respected across multiple jurisprudential, religious, and cultural traditions’ (2013: 38), and, I would add, socio-economic formations and asymmetries of power and equality.

In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno writes,

There is some reason to fear that the involvement of non-Western peoples in the conflicts of industrial society, long overdue in itself, will be less to the benefit of the liberated peoples than to that of rationally improved production and communications, and a modestly raised standard of living. Instead of expecting miracles of the pre-capitalist peoples, older nations should be on their guard against their un-imaginative, indolent taste for everything proven, and for the successes of the West. (1974: 53)

Adorno’s comments here are offered in the spirit of the reflexive modernity Habermas prizes, what the latter calls ‘the advantages of occidental rationalism’ (1998: 162). The difference for me lies in the vocabulary they use: pointed in Adorno and deceptively neutral in Habermas. Adorno describes the *conflicts* of industrial society while Habermas refers to ‘the *challenges* of social modernity’ (1998: 163); Adorno distinguishes between pre-capitalist and mature capitalist ones in order to indicate that modernity has been emancipatory for neither even if it may prove beneficial to the West while Habermas highlights the belated modernity of other cultures in their response to challenges that Europe

too was exposed to ‘in its day’ (1998: 163) and has presumably overcome; Adorno implicitly recognizes the asymmetry and non-emancipatory quality of this purported *interrelationship* even if, like Marx, he imagines it as inevitable, while Habermas describes the process as one of exposure and spread and, ultimately, as ‘the hard-to-resist imperatives of an economic modernization that has won approval on the whole’ (1998: 166). Because Habermas declares that Europe ‘in some sense “discovered” or “invented” human rights and constitutional democracy’ (1998: 163) – I recognize the sop to modesty in his use of quotation marks – his acknowledgement of the ‘accelerated and violent’ ‘economic and social modernization’ in developing societies comes with a price tag – ‘the juridification of politics’ (1998: 167). I shall return to the imbrications of law and development; for the moment, I want to suggest that the comparison between European and Asiatic values that underpins Habermas’s argument is a false one because it pits constitutional democracy against dictatorship, privileges adaptation to ‘*the hard-to-resist* imperatives of an economic modernization’ (1998: 166, my italics) over the reassertion of ‘traditional forms of political and societal integration’ (166) *against* such imperatives, and makes a virtue of necessity by alluding to challenges ‘that are no longer simply problems just for Western civilization’ (1998: 169) instead of treating this realization, as Adorno does, as the occasion for stringent rumination on ‘the successes of the West’.

## RIGHTS, JUSTICE, AND ‘COMMUNICATIVE FREEDOM’

I offer this admittedly brief reading against the grain of Habermas’s classic essay because I want to demonstrate the significance of his warning not to confuse the discourse of ‘Western intellectuals’ ‘over their own

Eurocentric biases with the debates in which *members of other cultures* engage them' (1998: 163). Besides, I want to inflect 'reasonable disagreement' (1998: 169), as John Rawls and Habermas understand it, with the arduousness Hanif Kureishi (2005) has made indispensable to the discussion of values in contemporary multicultural societies where 'other cultures' reside in the promise of 'their equally entitled coexistence within the same political community' (Habermas, 1998: 168). Habermas rightly observes that autonomy within the European conception of human rights 'implies a secularized political authority uncoupled from religious and cosmological world-views' (1998: 168) and that the purpose of the principle of tolerance is to generate 'norms of coexistence' (1998: 169). As my earlier discussion of the smugness that escapes the avowed reflexivity of occidental rationalism sought to expose, mutual recognition and understanding cannot serve as tacit *presuppositions* (Habermas, 1998: 169) of cross-cultural dialogue but must instead emerge as its (necessarily fragile) *consequence*. In a world where violence is the norm rather than the violation of norms, 'conversation' such as Kureishi imagines occurs in a world where '[p]olitics is neither the space of technically correctly applied morality nor the prudent creation of order' (Forst, 2014: 674). This attention to the affective texture of ideals and actions rather than only their normative structure reveals why Rawlsian communicative rationality can seem simultaneously drab and shallow in its transactions with difference.

Rainer Forst's writings on 'justice and democracy in transnational contexts' (2014) provide a welcome alternative to the 'unworldly' 'insightful citizens' model of discursive rationality formulated by post-Habermasian critical theory even though he remains within the realm of 'discursive, intersubjective practices' (2014: 674). Forst wants to understand 'how norms and interests intermesh to generate and reproduce power' (2014: 667) within 'the structural injustice of

asymmetrical transnational and international relations, which are the cause of persistent disadvantage and underdevelopment' (2014: 674). Forst shifts the emphasis in international relations to the justification of political order, demanding thereby 'a practice of political justification by those affected as justificatory equals' (2014: 674), and fashioning 'the first political right' as 'the right to be a democratic coauthor of the norms that claim to be legitimate ruling principles' (2014: 675). Forst declares that 'the *dignity* of human beings' (2014: 676) resides in the simultaneously philosophical and practical principle of 'free and equal justificatory authority' (2014: 676) because it is designed to 'respond to a given situation of subjugation' (2014: 679) and takes 'seriously the perspective of those affected who have enough of being kept in leading strings by their government and do not want to be "liberated" or "patronized" by Western countries' (2014: 673). Because the process of political justification takes its cue from those 'rebellious against an existing normative order' (2014: 672), Forst prevents 'the critique of ethnocentrism' from casting human rights as 'a purely Western idea and a possession of the West' thus excluding 'the protestors in non-Western societies who demand human rights from the idea of these rights' (2014: 672). Forst is of course articulating in the discipline of Political Science what has long been Seyla Benhabib's philosophical preoccupation – 'A polity based on the principle of rights respects you as a moral being' (2013: 39) – with rights that encompass not only 'what there *is* but about the kind of world we reasonably *ought* to want to live in' (2013: 39). Both Benhabib and Forst conceive of 'the human agent as an *individual embedded in contexts of communication as well as interaction*' (Benhabib, 2013: 39). Benhabib insists that as 'a moral being capable of communicative freedom you have a fundamental *right to have rights*' and that each person is both 'a generalized as well as a concrete other' (2013: 40) composed of both individuality and common humanity.

Both Forst and Benhabib imagine universalism not as a possession but as an accomplishment, a process of universalization that establishes 'commonality across diversity, conflict, divide, and struggle' (Benhabib, 2013: 40). The difference between their positions might be that Benhabib conceives of identity as always already alterity rather than shaped in the encounter *with* alterity. She argues that communicative freedom necessitates 'integrating perspectives of ego and alter', taking the standpoint of the other in order to understand oneself as 'a doer as well as a narrator' (2013: 41). Because Forst understands international relations or transnational exchanges as the power to affect and be affected, he would not disagree with Benhabib, but his emphasis on the subjected bringing '*the force towards the better argument* to bear against those who exercise such rule or domination' (2014: 678) retains a kernel of (masculinist and conflictual) rationality in contradistinction to the implied (feminized) sentiment and affect in Benhabib's characterization of communicative reason.

It is not difficult to see why these proponents of Critical Theory and human rights advocates would constitute a mutual admiration society because both desire the realization of dignity within and across societies and cultures, refuse to give up on universalism, presuppose equality, symmetrical entitlement, and reciprocity in 'the exegesis of human agency' (Benhabib, 2013: 38), oppose violence in the name of modernization and development, and subjugation in the name of values and traditions. The contextual universalism prevalent in both, however, is not sufficiently distinguished from cultural diversity, from socio-cultural pluralisms that function, as Homi Bhabha argues, as 'epistemological' objects, as objects of 'empirical knowledge' (1994: 49–50). As he goes on to suggest provocatively, cultural diversity 'gives rise to liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange or the culture of humanity' because it is premised on 'the

recognition of pre-given cultural contents and customs' (1994: 50). The subject of human rights, then, is more often than not the subject of the proposition rather than the subject of enunciation, a semiotic distinction Bhabha would attribute to the production of cultural difference that is dependent upon the subject's 'discursive embeddedness and address, its cultural positionality, its reference to a present time and a specific space' (1994: 53). This attention to 'cultural difference as a process of signification' may be understood as parallel to Benhabib and Forst's definition of discursive agency as consisting of both narration and action and of '*reflexive justification* or *recursive validation*' (Benhabib, 2013: 41) as simultaneously constitutive of communicative freedom. However, the 'formal preconditions' (2013: 41) of equality, symmetry, and reciprocity (Benhabib) and equal justificatory authority (Forst) render the enunciation of cultural difference toothless because they fail to contend with 'a process of signification through which statements ... on culture differentiate, discriminate, and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability ...' (Bhabha, 1994: 50).

The moral thrust or the normative foundation of the writings of Habermas, Benhabib, and Forst accounts for their abstract quality, functioning as they do at a remove from the *praxis* of human rights, all the while insisting on 'realistic utopias', the 'exegesis of agency', and critical realism, respectively. I want to refer briefly to Kamala Visweswaran's (2004) brilliant essay, 'Gendered States: Rethinking Culture as a Site of South Asian Human Rights Work' to address more fully what might be at stake in Habermas's exhortation 'to think and act realistically without betraying the utopian impulse' (2010: 478) and to illustrate why a postcolonial sensibility attuned to the *enunciation* of cultural difference is crucial in the context of human rights. These proponents of Critical Theory argue, quite plausibly, that true recognition of the autonomy of the other

occurs when the 'morally enjoined *concern* for the vulnerable other is replaced by the self-confident *demand* for legal recognition' (Habermas, 2010: 472); thus the pervasiveness in their writings of agency, equality, and justice – 'the respect *demanded* for a status that is *deserved*' (Habermas, 2010: 472). Visweswaran, on the contrary, focuses on how the apparent transparency of statements about South Asian cultures comes to authorize human rights interventions first by differentiating them on the basis of their perceived disproportionate deviance from human rights norms and subsequently defining the content of their cultural diversity as peculiarly 'marked by their crimes against women' (2004: 484). The force-field thus created discriminates between women whose vulnerability evokes concern and whose dignity deserves respect despite being routinely violated and the undeserving nation-states they inhabit which are defined as 'bride-burners or honor-killers' (484) rather than as polities. Rather than examine the place of gender in culture, human rights discourse serves to *engender* cultures. Visweswaran shows that far from human dignity deriving its connotations of self-respect and social recognition from the status of democratic citizenship (Habermas, 2010: 475), human rights work in South Asia exiles women 'from their communities of birth or affiliation' (Visweswaran, 2004: 484) in order to render them objects of care and concern in the international realm. This predicament clarifies the poignancy of Adorno's intuition that becoming an object of concern is accompanied by a singularly cruel deracination that tears one away from the fabric of one's life, but Visweswaran explains that the 'articulate and outspoken women who organize to change the unjust conditions that affect their lives' must *also* distance themselves from the cultures that made them in the human rights atmosphere that assigns 'particular atrocities to cultural norms' (2004: 487). Visweswaran is not, of course, ridiculing the urgency and necessity of human rights work, but pointing, instead,

to how the critique of universalism becomes 'indistinguishable from a form of cultural essentialism that uses gender as the logic of articulation' (2004: 485) and assumes 'an implicit scaling for understanding women's rights cross-culturally' (2004: 486). The irony Visweswaran elaborates is that human rights work, designed to give the 'ostracized and humiliated' 'the assurance that their suffering is not a natural destiny' (Habermas, 2010: 476), has to rely for the validation of human rights on naturalizing 'honor killing' and 'bride-burning' as *the cultural destiny* of nation-states in South Asia. Nowhere in this scenario is the symmetry, reciprocity, and justificatory authority Habermas and his disciples prize apparent; instead, 'the suspicion is reinforced that the program of human rights *consists in* its imperialist misuse' (Habermas, 2010: 477). In hastening towards autonomy and equality, Critical Theory stumbles over 'the savage encroachments of power' (Hartman, 1997: 5) that occur in the name of protection from harm and recognition of the intrinsically human.

### **'EVERYONE GETS FUCKED IN THE DUE COURSE OF TIME'**

When her critics demand, 'Why *can't* you *fucking follow chronology?*', the narrator of Meena Kandasamy's (2015) *The Gypsy Goddess*, responds dryly, 'I can. If you observe carefully, you will not fail to note that everyone gets fucked in the due course of time' (2015: 68). Even as she concedes 'that hate [caste violence] is not always obedient to plot' (2015: 71), she insists that narratives must discern 'the regularity in the randomness' to anchor them 'to the last vestiges of actuality' (2015: 72). Kandasamy's pungent reflection on the narrative idiom in which history writes itself shares the spirit of Adorno's (2006) *History and Freedom*: 'we should not say history *is* continuity or history *is* discontinuity. We must say instead that

history is highly continuous *in* discontinuity' (quoted in Vázquez-Arroyo, 2008: 463). Historiographies such as Moyn's that refuse a teleology in which the current dispensation of human rights can be traced back neatly to the French Revolution, the age of sensibility, the mutations of natural law or even the Holocaust accord with one side of the dialectic of histories of possibility as Adorno and Vázquez-Arroyo understand them – 'no universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism' – but fail to do justice to the other – 'but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb' (Adorno, 1981: 320). Similarly, well-intentioned and tempered treatments of development such as Thomas McCarthy's continue to describe imperialism as 'a curtailed and deformed' *avatar* of the 'nominal egalitarianism and universalism of Western liberalism' (2012: 26). McCarthy's 'realistic' faith in ongoing amelioration of rather than resistance to the effects of 'development' (2012: 31) recalls Habermas's quandary: the call for a cross-cultural dialogue about the shared challenge of modernization impedes 'a departure from the colonial economic and cultural engine through which the modern categories of the human and rights emerged' (Allewaert, 2013: 109) rather than advances emancipation from its depredations.

Even if, as David Scott argues, postcolonial historians have no choice but to trace how 'anticolonial utopias have gradually withered into postcolonial nightmares' (2004: 2), and cannot fail to notice that history 'is a series of paradoxes and reversals in which human action is ever open to unaccountable contingencies' (2004: 13), they grant the shift from anticolonial utopias to postcolonial nightmares the weight and dignity, respectively, of romance and tragedy in order to avoid tipping over, as Moyn and McCarthy in their cautionary utopias do, into a 'normalization of the present' (Scott, 2004: 2). Turning contingency or deformation into a principle of historical development precludes the possibility of recasting colonial pasts and of asking new

questions in and making new demands of the present (Scott, 2004: 7).

I propose a return to Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a potent resource for the critical history of the present (McCarthy's phrase) postcolonial scholars want to write in part because the latter are more likely to thrill to the opening proclamation of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – 'the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity' (2007: 1) – than to the edifying consolations of contingency and curtailment. Moreover, the *disappointment* and 'longing' (Scott, 2004: 6) postcolonial subjects feel is in contradistinction to the measured *disenchantment* more characteristic of the epiphanies the Bildungsroman of occidental rationalism generates. It is this longing that turns 'critical judgments about historical tendencies' (Zuidervaat, 2015) into 'unexpected horizons of transformative possibility' (Scott, 2004: 12).

Adorno and Horkheimer describe 'a pattern of blind domination': 'of nature by human beings', 'of nature within human beings', and, in both of these forms of domination, '... of some human beings by others', all three driven by the 'all-consuming engine' of 'an ever-expanding capitalist economy' (Zuidervaat, 2015). This description captures the 'channelling of decolonisation into the formation of the developmental nation state' that Sundhya Pahuja analyses, 'the ever-expanding sphere' 'of increasingly violent, and almost consistently failed, interventions in the Third World' (2011: 3). Pahuja mounts a powerful challenge to humane efforts such as McCarthy's that remain invested in 'a neo-Kantian normative horizon' (2011: 9) and seek to retrieve developmentalism and international law 'for the powers of goodness' (2011: 1). This 'critical faith' (2011: 1) in harnessing the promise of universality on behalf of those 'differentially subjected to the transformative violence' of economic growth 'administered through [the] institutions' of international law (2011: 8) is both naïve and dangerous because it

sidesteps how 'that same promised universality served to constrain, and ultimately to undermine the radical potential of the Third World demands' (2011: 2). J. M. Keynes's epithet for the Third World invitees to the Bretton Woods conference – 'the most monstrous monkey-house assembled for years' – set the tone not only for 'how developmentalism came to pervade international law' (2011: 15) but for how the 'proto-Third World' came to choose economic development 'as the conceptual axis of the inclusion of the non-West' (2011: 18). This moment, Pahuja explains, embedded 'a formal notion of sovereign "equality" as unrelated to conditions of material inequality' (2011: 23). Pahuja traces the replacement of 'Europe' by the 'developed world' in a circular constitution of the West and the rest reminiscent of Orientalism: what was once 'race or civilizational status' is now secured by 'the ostensibly "scientific" measure of Gross National Product' (2011: 38), thus setting in motion 'values of which the West claims to be both exemplar and guardian' (2011: 28) and the doublespeak by which the othered and subjected could be included '*within* the universal without disrupting the assertion of those values *as* universal' (2011: 30). In a complex and unsettling argument to which I cannot do justice here, Pahuja demonstrates how celebrated efforts such as Amartya Sen's (also true of McCarthy, Forst, and Ignatieff) to make development indispensable to freedom, to 'refound the "universal" on more genuinely universal grounds' do not 'quibble with the content and scope of liberal values' but expand them to include the putative Orient and still in a spirit of 'reasoned universalism and cosmopolitan exchange' (Pahuja, 2011: 227). Coupled with a reliance on economic growth for the realization of access to its benefits and in the absence of a 'heterodox economics' (2011: 242) focused on subsistence or survival, Sen merely reinforces the universality and structure of the developmental narrative and, despite himself, attests to 'a successful pedagogy of Empire' (2011: 28).

In order to view Sen in a less unforgiving light, his predicament can be illuminated by scholars such as Talal Asad (1992) and David Scott (2004). They render acculturation synonymous with conquest, identifying colonial subjects as 'conscripts', not 'volunteers', of Western civilization and modernity, respectively. As Scott contends, they are trapped in circumstances in which they cannot choose without fatal cost (Scott, 2004: 14). Sen is therefore not incapable of choice or making the wrong choice; rather, he operates as the object and agent of modernity because modernity is 'itself one of the fundamental *conditions* of choice' (Scott, 2004: 19). The blindness of the triple domination Adorno and Horkheimer delineate, as well as the introversion of sacrifice (the bound Odysseus who can still hear the Sirens) upon which its logic depends, is thus prescient because it reveals not only the unheeding violence of domination but the transformation of 'imposed fate' into 'heroic choice' upon which its success rather than its conquest depends (Asad, 1992: 345).

### 'A DIALECTICAL ENLIGHTENMENT OF ENLIGHTENMENT'<sup>6</sup>

Both human rights and development founder on the imagination of 'subjects who go about being human in radically different ways' because they construct humanity and universality as a status that can be conferred or denied, thus making 'dehumanization ... the measure of the other' (Esmeir, 2006: 1550). The 'play of projection and resolution' (Allewaert, 2013: 102) that constitutes the self as the completion of the perceived lack in the other is commonplace in discussions of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; however, not enough has been made of the potential contained in its depiction of the 'parahuman' rather than the human, in the figure of Odysseus 'suspended between human and animal (nonhuman) being' and inhabiting a



*horizontal* relation with his putative others.<sup>7</sup> The stage is set for a challenge to ‘colonial anthropologies and natural histories’ that engage in a ‘hierarchal organization of life-forms’ (Allewaert, 2013: 86) and for establishing an alternative ecology rather than only history of modernity. I have borrowed Monique Allewaert’s fascinating discussion of the parahuman because it relies on a fragmentation of bodies in a manner similar to the forcible separation of the bodily and sensory from the cognitive in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* but also because its stress on contiguity and proximity rather than hierarchy moves beyond a rehabilitation of others ‘to the rights of man’ (2013: 86), turning a metaphoric logic of substitution into a metonymic one of displacement. If, as Pahuja argues, the law ‘is the place of the constitutive antinomy’ between the particular and the universal (2011: 32), thinking the suspension of the parahuman might preclude ‘any simple return’ (Allewaert, 2013: 102) to the ‘realm of the human’ (2013: 87) and the law of development.

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## Notes

- 1 Adorno (1991a: 130).
- 2 Adorno (1995: 34).
- 3 See Spencer (2010), who notes Adorno’s comments on Vietnam and South Africa, as well as ‘Mélange’ in *Minima Moralia* (1974: 102–103), where Adorno comments on equality and difference in relation to the Jews as well as African-Americans.
- 4 G. Daniel Cohen, in ‘The Holocaust and the “Human Rights Revolution”: A Reassessment’ (2012), argues that, instead of existing in heightened consciousness or being invoked during the

founding stages of the human rights regime, as Michael Ignatieff for instance suggests, the Holocaust was instead memorialised by that regime later in its history.

- 5 Habermas (1986) quoted in Moyn (2013: 106).
- 6 Zuidervaat (2015).
- 7 See Goswami (2013) for a discussion of Adorno’s counter-history of culture’s relationship to nature (107). Her essay focuses on ‘the animal’ and does not discuss *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

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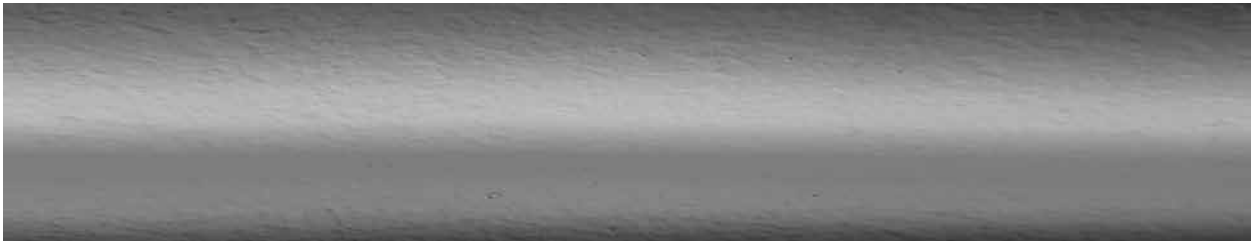
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PART VIII

# Elements of Critical Theory in Contemporary Social and Political Movements and Theories



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# Biopolitics as a Critical Diagnosis<sup>1</sup>

Frieder Vogelmann

Why include a chapter on ‘biopolitics’ in the *Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*? Two reasons seem to speak against it: first, there is not a single work concentrating on ‘biopolitics’ from a canonical Frankfurt School-style critical theorist. In spite of the many disagreements in the debate on ‘biopolitics’, its starting point<sup>2</sup> is routinely tracked to Michel Foucault’s conclusion in *Le Volonté de Savoir*<sup>3</sup> that since the late nineteenth century we live in a new era of politics in which ‘the life of the species is waged on its own political strategies’ (Foucault, 1978 [1976], hereafter HS1: 143). The debate on ‘biopolitics’ is still prolific, even though Foucault almost completely ceased to use ‘biopolitics’<sup>4</sup> after *Le Volonté de Savoir*: on the one hand, we find works that directly pick up Foucault’s genealogical enterprise and analyse biopolitics as a dominant form of power in both early and contemporary liberalism where politics has become the ‘politics of life itself’ (Rose, 2007; for an overview see Lemke, 2011

[2007]: esp. chapter 7). On the other hand, ‘biopolitics’ has been turned into a proper philosophical concept: Giorgio Agamben takes biopolitics to produce the ‘bare life’ whose ‘inclusive exclusion’ is sovereign power’s fundamental mechanism (Agamben, 1998 [1995]: 6–9), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri see biopolitics as the new mode of sovereign power’s ontology in the age of Empire, bringing forth the very subjects capable of resisting it (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 22–30), and Roberto Esposito (2008 [2004]) attempts to do justice to both sides of biopolitics by reading it through the ‘paradigm of immunization’.<sup>5</sup>

Nowhere in this debate do we find a voice belonging to the ‘Frankfurt School’ tradition in critical theory. Even worse – and this is the second reason why ‘biopolitics’ might seem an unlikely candidate for this *Handbook* – *Le Volonté de Savoir* is a frontal attack on analyses of a repressed sexuality like Herbert Marcuse’s (1998 [1956]) *Eros and Civilization*, himself of course a prominent

member of the Frankfurt School. In 1978, Foucault used precisely the argument of *Le Volonté de Savoir* to mark his distance to the Frankfurt School: 'I don't think that the Frankfurt School can accept that what we need to do is not to recover our lost identity, or liberate our imprisoned nature, or discover our fundamental truth; rather, it is to move toward something altogether different' (Foucault, 1998 [1980]: 275; on Marcuse as target, see Foucault, 1980 [1975]; 2001 [1981]: 1016 f.).

Despite these two reasons I argue that the 'stature' of Foucault's model of critique is very similar to that of the early Frankfurt School's model of critique. I do so by closely re-reading Foucault's usage of 'biopolitics' in *Le Volonté de Savoir* and by highlighting two methodological affinities: one relates to Foucault's subtle distinction between a critical and a descriptive conceptualisation of 'biopolitics' to Horkheimer's (2002 [1937]) famous distinction between critical and traditional theory. This affinity becomes visible only when we pay close attention to Foucault's model of critique and the role 'biopolitics' plays in it. Explaining Foucault's model of critique enacted in *Le Volonté de Savoir* will reveal a second affinity between Foucault's and Adorno's model of critique: both conceive critique as a diagnostic practice of the present producing a very special, *effective* knowledge capable of emancipating us from that present. And although both affinities have their limits – they show us similarities in the 'stature' of critique, not in its inner details – they disclose something important in the debate about biopolitics mentioned above: the distinction between critical and descriptive roles of 'biopolitics', made possible by the conception of critique as producing effective knowledge, enables us to understand how 'biopolitics' is supposed to help us criticise our contemporary world – and how this might fail.

I start by arguing that we should understand Foucault's critique as a diagnostic practice of prefigurative emancipation and

briefly sketch the affinity to Adorno's model of critique. This enables us to understand the critical function of 'biopolitics' in *Le Volonté de Savoir* as opposed to the descriptive role of 'biopolitics' Foucault afterwards hinted at. And I argue that this distinction mirrors Horkheimer's famous distinction between critical and traditional theory in two important respects. I conclude with three implications for critical theory drawn from the analysis of the critical function of 'biopolitics'.

## CRITIQUE AS A DIAGNOSTIC PRACTICE

Foucault's model of critique has been subject to a variety of interpretations:<sup>6</sup> prominent readings have focussed on the 'critical attitude' (Foucault, 1997 [1978]: 24) and the ethical dimension of critique as a practice of the self (Butler, 2004 [2001]), on the 'art of not being governed quite so much/like this [*tellement*]' (Foucault, 1997 [1978]: 29) and the subversive dimension of critique as a practice of resistance (Lemke, 2012: chapter 4) or on the genealogical method and the disruptive effects of critique as a practice of revealing the historical contingency of seemingly necessary contemporary realities (Geuss, 2002; Saar, 2008; Koopman, 2013).

Instead, I start from Foucault's account of his approach as an analysis of practices and the 'experiences'<sup>7</sup> they constitute: objective yet constructed realities like madness, criminality and sexuality. Foucault analyses them along the three axes of knowledge, power and self-relations and therefore elaborates conceptual frameworks for each of the three axes. Although developed successively and with an almost flamboyant terminological plurality, they share a certain negativism embodied in three methodological imperatives which Foucault names nihilism, nominalism and historicism (Foucault, 2010 [2008]: 5 f., footnote): the three conceptual frameworks are *nihilistic* because they 'perform a systematic

reduction of value' (Foucault, 1997 [1978]: 51); and they are *nominalistic* and *historicistic* because they reject universals as the guidelines of analysis, asking instead when and how these universals were themselves produced and transformed in the practices which are to be analysed (see Vogelmann, 2017a: 46–50).

If we accept this self-interpretation of Foucault's approach, then its critical power resides precisely in his methodological perspective. Foucault's practice of critique therefore is, first and foremost, a very specific knowledge-producing practice: a diagnostic of the present that produces counter-truths. These counter-truths effect what I shall call a 'prefigurative emancipation': glimpses of desubjugation and desubjectivation. On this interpretation, Foucault's model of critique shares important traits with Adorno's, most notably the fundamental idea of critique producing effective knowledge.

### ***A Diagnosis of the Present***

Understanding the critical activity as a kind of diagnosis follows directly from Foucault's self-interpretation because the three conceptual frameworks of all three axes are utilised as tools to analyse the present.

On the axis of knowledge, Foucault's most important conceptual innovation is his distinction between 'depth knowledge' [*savoir*]<sup>8</sup> and knowledge [*connaissances*] as we know it: whereas knowledge in the sense of *connaissances* are statements to which we can assign a truth value, 'depth knowledge' in the sense of *savoir* consists of the *conditions of existence* (not of possibility!<sup>9</sup>) for a statement such that it can have a truth value. The analysis of practices along the axis of *savoir* therefore is directed at the conditions which must be in place for practices to produce statements eligible for truth values – the conditions of existence for being 'within the true', as Foucault (2010 [1969]: 224) says in reference to Georges Canguilhem. This

methodological shift takes us from an analysis of the truth values of statements to the analysis of the conditions of existence for statements to be able to have truth values – because diagnosing these conditions of existence has a political significance, Foucault (2008 [2004]: 36 f.) claims: it shows us what needed to be done for certain statements to be 'within the true': what struggles had to be fought, what power relations needed to be established and what subjectivities had to be formed. The conceptual framework on the axis of knowledge is designed to enable this critical diagnosis.

We find an analogous 'shift' on the axis of power. As a general concept, power has to be understood as relational, strategic and productive: power is neither a thing possessed, nor contingent on the will of a subject, nor merely a repressive force. Power relations are fragile, exist only when exercised and can incite and induce as well as constrain and repress (HS1: 92–7; 1998 [1982]: 340–5). Most importantly, power must not be reduced to any particular type of power relations, be they juridical, disciplinary or regulatory. Foucault focusses on *how* power relations operate instead of asking whether they are legitimate or not – again, as with knowledge not being analysed in the categories of truth and falsehood, we see Foucault enacting a 'systematic reduction of value' (Foucault, 1997 [1978]: 51). And again, he argues for it by pointing out that freeing the diagnostic concept of power from a narrow 'juridico-discursive' (HS1: 82) understanding enables a critical diagnosis. Hence Foucault insists that '[k]nowledge and power are only an analytical grid' (Foucault, 1997 [1978]: 52), that they are not 'entities, powers [*puissances*] or something like transcendentals' (Foucault, 1997 [1978]: 51) and that they 'only have a methodological function' (Foucault, 1997 [1978]: 51).

Foucault's notion of self-relations again introduces a methodological shift in perspective to enable a critical diagnosis of 'the forms and modalities of the relation to self



by which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself qua subject' (Foucault, 1990 [1984]: 6). Focussing on self-relations and how they are enacted liberates the analysis from two values commonly presupposed: authenticity and autonomy. Foucault's analysis of the practices in which the self is able to participate and influence its own formation is carefully crafted in order to show that the questions whether this self is a 'true self', an authentic or autonomous self, are so pressing to us only because they belong to *our* self-practices. Yet they do not belong to subjectivity *in general* and we should not, in Foucault's view, integrate them in our diagnostic concepts.

Using these three conceptual frameworks of knowledge, power and self-relations, Foucault's critique aims at a diagnosis of the present that renders visible how 'what exists' limits us in our thoughts, in our actions and in our being (Foucault, 1998 [1983]: 449 f.). Revealing these limits and how they are produced in our contemporary practices demonstrates that these limits are not inevitable but can be changed by changing our practices. Hence we need to search for 'weak spots' in those practices currently solidifying our limitations.

Foucault presents his model of critique as an inversion of Kant's critique because it does not search for the universal limits of reason but for the concrete limits of our present, and not in order to safely keep reason inside those limits but in order to emancipate us from them (Foucault, 1997a [1984]: 315; 2010 [2008]: 11–14, 26 f.). Hence Foucault's critique has a difficult relation to truth: the critical diagnosis of the present does not result in a representation of *reality* but attempts to formulate an effective truth that operates *in reality* through its impacts on its readers (Foucault, 1998 [1980]: 242–6) – aiming at 'a transformation of the relationship we have with our knowledge' (Foucault, 1998 [1980]: 244). Such a rupture on the level of 'depth knowledge' [*savoir*], Foucault claims, leads to moments

of 'desubjugation' and 'desubjectivation' – prefiguring our emancipation.

### Counter-Truths

If desubjugation and desubjectivation are to be achieved with a diagnosis of the present, and hence with the production of a specific knowledge, we have to ask: what kind of knowledge is supposed to be so effective? Obviously critique cannot aim at desubjugation and desubjectivation by repeating what we already know. But neither does it suffice to falsify what is commonly supposed to be true. Both operations would still take place at the level of knowledge [*connaissances*] as true or false statements but would fail to address the conditions of existence that determine what statements can have truth-values at all. Critique as a diagnosis of the present must therefore produce counter-truths that do not submit to the rules of the current conditions of existence of true-or-false knowledge (our current 'truth-regime'<sup>10</sup>). The knowledge of a diagnosis of the present must challenge this truth-regime and thus the conditions of existence that grant contemporary knowledge [*connaissances*] its place 'within the true'. For only on the level of 'depth knowledge' [*savoir*] will 'the system of truth and falsity [...] reveal the face it turned away from us for so long and which is that of its violence' (Foucault, 2014 [2011]: 5). Hence it is only on this level that the diagnosis acquires political significance.

Counter-truths make up an 'unwieldy knowledge' that stubbornly refuses to submit to the rules of the existing truth-regime without completely disregarding it. Instead it *toys* with the knowledge [*connaissances*] currently 'within the true' by relating to it on the level of *savoir* and thereby opposing it without disproving it, without taking it to be false. Unwieldy knowledge tries to change the current truth-regime by revealing the political significance of its truths: it

demonstrates what struggles had to be fought and what alternative forms of knowledge had to be subjugated in order to arrive at the solemn truths we are now accustomed with.

Producing counter-truths escapes contemporary truth ‘not by playing a game that [is] totally different from the game of truth, but by playing the same game differently’ (Foucault, 1998 [1984]: 295) because counter-truths contest the conditions of existence of statements to be true or false. Therefore they are neither true nor false according to the present truth-regime – hence Foucault repeatedly speaks of ‘fictions’: if his books challenge the current truth-regime, they are neither true nor false according to this truth-regime but lead readers to relate differently to the book’s subject, to form or at least to anticipate a different ‘experience’ of madness, of criminality, or of sexuality. If critique as a diagnosis of the present challenges the truth-regime by producing unwieldy knowledge, it creates (a glimpse of) a new experience, a new correlation of those three axes.

### ***Désassujettissement: Desubjectivation and Desubjugation***

How are desubjugation and desubjectivation connected to this practice of producing unwieldy knowledge via a diagnosis of the present? The connection can certainly not be too close, for taking the production of unwieldy knowledge to directly liberate us from contemporary power relations and modes of subjectivation would be a gross overestimation of the effects of (academic) knowledge production. Critique is ‘an instrument for those who fight, those who resist and refuse what is’ (Foucault, 1998 [1978]: 236), but it cannot replace those struggles.

Still, we should not underestimate the effects of critique as a diagnosis of the present. Desubjectivation and desubjugation are prefigured by it: Foucault’s critique enables its addressees to anticipate

their emancipation from the limits of our thoughts, actions and beings that the diagnosis reveals.<sup>11</sup> *Desubjectivation* becomes possible because the critique’s diagnosis invites its addressees to change their perspectives on how they establish their self-relations or on the practices of the self they participate in – to the point where they feel they no longer want to be who they are, maybe no longer have to be who they are and ideally do not already have to be someone else.<sup>12</sup> And although the practice of critique aims for an ethos, a critical attitude, we should not interpret it as primarily an ethical practice of the self because the primary aim is to desubjectivate: to place critique’s addressees on the intersection of ‘no longer’ and ‘not yet’ – no longer having the self-understanding they thought was necessary and ‘not yet’ having to have another self-understanding but enjoying a precious (and no doubt short-lived) moment of indeterminacy.

Critique’s aim of *desubjugation* likewise demands that critique must not prescribe what to do. As a diagnosis, critique gives ‘tactical pointers’ (Foucault, 2007 [2004]: 18) for those who fight<sup>13</sup> – tracing the ‘lines of fragility’ mentioned above – but does not *lead* those who fight. Critique is not an alternative form of governing, but aims to make its addressees imagine the anarchic moment of no longer being ‘governed like that and at that cost’ (Foucault, 1997 [1978]: 29). The unwieldy knowledge that critique produces reveals those practices that shape and uphold the conditions of existence of the present truth-regime. Thus, Foucault demonstrates that the necessity of the ‘experiences’ he analyses, of madness, criminality, sexuality, etc., is forged, both real and fabricated. These experiences are made necessary through certain practices which are therefore those practices against which to fight makes a difference not just to those practices.

In sum, Foucault’s critique is a practice of diagnosing the present by analysing practices and the ‘experiences’ they produce along the three axes of knowledge, power

and self-relations. These three axes operationalise his methodological perspective characterised by the three methodological imperatives of nihilism, nominalism and historicism in order to produce unwieldy knowledge or counter-truths: truths which oppose our contemporary truth-regime on the level of depth-knowledge and thereby enable the addressees of Foucault's critique to anticipate thinking, acting and being different – to be desubjectivated and desubjugated, if only for a spell.

### ***The First Affinity: Adorno's Riddles***

Before I show how *Le Volonté de Savoir* enacts this complex model of critique let me demonstrate a certain affinity between Foucault's and Adorno's models of critique on the methodological level. Affinities between Adorno's and Foucault's models of critique have of course been explored, albeit from different angles, for example by focusing on Adorno's and Foucault's shared concern for 'bodily freedom' (Honneth, 1986), on the Kantian heritage of their models of critique (Cook, 2013), or on their view on history (Allen, 2016: chapter 5), to name just a few. My remarks add to this 'comparative spadework' (Cook, 2013: 966) but emphasise the 'methodological' affinity resulting from a similar expectation about the effects of critique's knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

We can start by noticing that Adorno, like Foucault, conceives critique as a diagnostic practice that produces a very specific knowledge: critique, or philosophy in its proper form,<sup>15</sup> is an interpretative practice (Adorno, 1977 [1973]: 126) the task of which is not to give meaning and legitimacy to the reality it interprets but to acknowledge the 'incomplete, contradictory and fragmentary' nature of our present, to make visible the violence reigning supreme, and to 'banish' these 'demonic forces' (Adorno, 1977 [1973]: 126). Critique, in other words, has

to diagnose the present which does not mean simply to map reality but to change it:

Just as riddle-solving is constituted, in that the singular and dispersed elements of the question are brought into various grouping long enough for them to close together in a figure out of which the solution springs forth, while the question disappears – so philosophy has to bring its elements, which it receives from the sciences, into changing constellations, or, to say it with less astrological and scientifically more current expression, into changing trial combinations, until they fall into a figure which can be read as an answer, while at the same time the question disappears. (Adorno, 1977 [1973]: 127)

Adorno understands critique as a practice of diagnosing the present – 'the state of the world rushing toward catastrophe' (Adorno, 2005 [1962]: 13) – and thereby articulating a knowledge that frees us from that present. A successful critique would dissolve the present that gave rise to its diagnosis because of this diagnosis. Again, we would have to ask precisely how we can understand this strikingly effective critical knowledge – a question I cannot pursue here.<sup>16</sup> Yet the parallel to Foucault's perspective on critique and to his expectations towards the knowledge critique has to produce is apparent.

A second commonality in their methodological perspective is the negative conception of emancipation: if critique, by constructing its diagnostic constellations, dissolves the very reality thus interpreted, critique is precisely an emancipating practice in the negative sense of emancipation as 'letting go'. Since Adorno holds that critical theory's 'utopian moment [...] is stronger the less it [...] objectifies itself into a utopia' (Adorno, 2005 [1969]: 292), emancipation cannot be thought of as a positive state of affairs to be achieved. Instead, the emancipation critique strives for is, for both Adorno and Foucault, 'an *Ausgang*, a way out of our infernal present' (Cook, 2013: 974). Thus, Adorno's critique is not meant to tell its addressees what to do or to think – at most it offers a model of practiced resistance as a life

lived less wrongly and glimpses of what an emancipated life might be (Freyenhagen, 2013: 170).

These two similarities in the methodological perspectives of Adorno and Foucault are not meant to turn Foucault into ‘Adorno’s other son’ (Allen, 2016: 163). Yet they remind us of the shared expectation of Foucault and the early Frankfurt School that critique is to produce an effective, unwieldy knowledge that frees us from our present, even if only temporarily.

## THE CRITICAL ROLE OF ‘BIOPOLITICS’

*Le Volonté de Savoir* applies this complex model of critique and ‘biopolitics’ names the unwieldy knowledge of that critical diagnosis – or so I argue. I begin by demonstrating that Foucault uses the methodological perspective outlined above. In a second step, I show that ‘biopolitics’ has a critical function in the final part: it names the counter-truths with which Foucault’s critique intends to prefiguratively emancipate his readers. I argue that Foucault’s development of ‘biopolitics’ into the object of analysis and contemporary work continuing in this direction turn ‘biopolitics’ into a descriptive concept that stands in need of another critical diagnosis. Finally, I draw attention to the affinity of this distinction with Max Horkheimer’s famous differentiation between traditional and critical theory.

### *The Methodology of Le Volonté de Savoir, Parts 1–4*

What is the book’s target? Sexuality, obviously, though not ‘sexual behaviors in Western societies’ but the way ‘in which [...] these behaviors [have] become the object of a knowledge’ (Foucault, 2002 [1977]: 11). His critique is directed against the ‘experience’ of sexuality,<sup>17</sup> its constitutive practices

and the prominent idea of sexuality being repressed by power. This ‘repressive hypothesis’ (HS1: 10) rests on a mistaken view of power and sexuality – yet it is a mistake that pays off:

What sustains our eagerness to speak of sex in terms of repression is doubtless this opportunity to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures; to pronounce a discourse that combines the fervor of knowledge, the determination to change the laws, and the longing for the garden of earthly delights. (HS1: 7)

Any analysis relying on the repressive hypothesis must assume that the power most important for constituting our contemporary experience of sexuality is a negative, repressive form of power; that truth is apriori set apart from and against power; and that sexuality holds important truths about us. Foucault’s aim is precisely to overcome all of these three preconceptions. His refutation of the repressive hypothesis (in parts 2 and 3) is directed against the *historical* thesis that sexuality has been increasingly repressed since the seventeenth century, against the *historical-theoretical* thesis that the power relations predominantly take a negative form and against the *historical-political* thesis that the critique of repression is a form of resistance to the power relations that dominate the experience of sexuality (HS1: 12). Instead, he argues that the discourse on sexuality has not been repressed but incited, that repressive power is just one but not the most important form of power exercised in the ‘dispositif’<sup>18</sup> of sexuality, and that speaking the truth about sex has not simply been avoided. On the contrary, ‘we’ have worked hard to establish the conditions of existence to make true or false statements about sexuality, to found the ‘Scientia sexualis’. The will to truth is precisely what characterises ‘our’ experience of sexuality (HS1: especially 67–70).

Only now can Foucault proceed with his positive analysis of the ‘experience’ of

sexuality. After rejecting the juridical analysis of power and introducing his relational, productive and strategic notion of power (the diagnostic concept I have outlined above) Foucault argues that the *dispositif* of sexuality is constituted by four ‘great strategic unities’ (HS1: 103): the hysteresis of women’s bodies, the pedagogisation of children’s sex, the socialisation of procreative behaviour and the psychiatrisation of perverse pleasure (HS1: 104 f.). Sexuality is the ‘experience’ produced in the practices of these four strategies and Foucault contrasts this *dispositif* of sexuality with the *dispositif* of ‘alliances’ (see Table 86.1). Yet the *dispositif* of sexuality has not replaced the *dispositif* of alliances but overdetermines it. The linkage is provided by the family, and psychoanalysis, Foucault claims, rests precisely in this interstice.

This very schematic sketch of Foucault’s argumentation renders visible his methodological perspective. He reconceptualises power by freeing it from the dominant normative framework in which it is usually thought, namely in terms of legitimation. Cutting off the king’s head in political science (HS1: 88 f.) means nothing more (and nothing less) than getting rid of the conceptual analysis of power in juridical terms and thus corresponds precisely with the *nihilistic* ‘systematic reduction of value’ (Foucault, 1997 [1978]: 51).

Conceptualising power strictly relationally operationalises the *nominalistic* methodological imperative: ‘One needs to be nominalistic, no doubt: power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in

a particular society’ (HS1: 93). Hence, power is not an entity or a transcendental category but a diagnostic concept designed to make visible the wide range of very different and ever-changing power relations within society.

Finally, Foucault provides a historical explanation why we have come to analyse power purely in juridical terms. The *historic* dimension of his methodological perspective entails that the concept of power cannot be anything more than a heuristic device leading the historical analysis of concrete techniques, mechanisms and strategies of power at a certain place and at a certain time.

While Foucault develops his concept of power on the methodological level in the book, he presupposes the already existing conceptual tools for analysing knowledge from this methodological perspective throughout. Analysing the ‘will to knowledge’ that drives the discourse on sex and that has constituted sexuality as a domain ‘within the true’ relies on the distinction between knowledge [*connaissances*] and depth-knowledge [*savoir*]. For only if the conditions of existence for statements to have truth-values are not epistemic conditions can we avoid the Aristotelian model in which the ‘desire to know is no more than a game of knowledge in relation to itself, it does no more than show its genesis, delay, and movement’ (Foucault, 2014 [2011]: 16). And only then can we analyse the social struggles in and through which the regime of truth on which our ‘Scientia sexualis’ is founded.

Although the third axes of self-relation is not yet present, Foucault’s methodological

**Table 86.1 Dispositif of allegiance and dispositif of sexuality**

	<i>Dispositif of allegiance</i>	<i>Dispositif of sexuality</i>
<i>Dominant power relations</i>	Juridical power	Disciplinary and regulatory power
<i>Strategic aim</i>	Reproduce stable social relationships	Extend control
<i>Target</i>	Partners and their social status	Bodies and their pleasures
<i>Relation to the economy</i>	Direct: organise inheritance	Indirect: create productive and consuming bodies

perspective operationalised with the conceptual apparatuses on the first two axes is almost fully developed and is designed to analyse sexuality nihilistically, nominalistically and historicistically. Thus we find Foucault enacting precisely the model of critique described above: a nihilistic, nominalistic and historicist diagnosis of sexuality as an 'experience' produced by practices that must be analysed along the analytic axes of knowledge and power. And 'biopolitics' is the name, as I shall argue, of the 'counter-truths' which are produced by Foucault's critique and which are supposed to desubjectivate and desubjugate us from the 'experience' of sexuality. In other words: 'Biopolitics' in *Le Volonté de Savoir* has the critical function of emancipating us from sexuality – or of at least offering us a glimpse of what that might be like.

### ***Biopolitics and Pleasures: Counter-Truths***

Part 5 of *Le Volonté de Savoir*, entitled 'Right of Death and Power over Life', opens with the contrast between sovereign power – the asymmetrical 'right to *take* life or to *let* live' (HS1: 136) – and biopower: a new form of power in 'the West' (HS1: 136)<sup>19</sup> that is first and foremost 'a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations' (HS1: 136). Although this power has not lost but amplified its ability to kill, its elaborate mechanisms to do so are merely the backside of its incomparably more developed mechanisms to foster and regulate life.<sup>20</sup>

Foucault's readers know the claim that power 'in the West' has fundamentally changed: in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argued that disciplinary power mechanisms targeting the individual body to render it docile and productive have become the dominant form of power relations (Foucault, 1977 [1975]: 215–28). Yet

this is but one half of biopower, Foucault now explains: whereas disciplinary power relations 'centered on the body as a machine' (HS1: 139), biopolitical power relations target the body as a living organism understood biologically and regulate processes on the level of the species. Politics no longer takes 'biological life' as a given but fosters, regulates and shapes it on the level of the very processes constituting it as 'living'.<sup>21</sup> Thus we return to Foucault's claim with which I began this chapter: that our present is characterised by the fact that 'the life of the species is waged on its own political strategies' (HS1: 143).

What's sex got to do with it? Sexuality is precisely what links the two poles of biopower: on the individual level, it enables disciplinary micro-practices controlling and optimising the individual body; on the level of the population, sexuality enables regulatory control mechanisms (HS1: 146). The four 'strategic unities' that constitute the 'experience' of sexuality all combine disciplinary and biopolitical mechanisms, Foucault claims:

The first two [of these strategic units; F. V.] rested on the requirements of regulation, on a whole thematic of the species, descent, and collective welfare, in order to obtain results at the level of discipline; the sexualization of children was accomplished in the form of a campaign for the health of the race [...]; the hysterization of women, which involved a thorough medicalization of their bodies and their sex, was carried out in the name of the responsibility they owed to the health of their children, the solidity of the family institution, and the safeguarding of society. It was the reverse relationship that applied in the case of birth controls and the psychiatrization of perversions: here the intervention was regulatory in nature, but it had to rely on the demand for individual disciplines and constraints [*dressages*]. (HS1: 146 f.)

At this point, the *critical* function of the concepts 'biopolitics' and 'biopower' become apparent: the diagnosis of our present as the biopolitical age reveals the 'political significance' of the will to truth that

manifests itself vis-à-vis sexuality and that dominates even the apparent resistance against its repression. All those practices looking for truth within sexuality – whether to ground control over individuals and populations by recourse to the ‘natural facts’ of sexuality or whether to resist the repression of sexuality – are still part of the regime of practices that constitutes ‘sexuality’ as an object of our desire to know that is carefully nurtured and put to use by the biopolitical power relations. Thus, the attempt to deploy ‘truths’ of sexuality against its ‘repression’ is complicit in enabling the biopolitical and disciplinary power mechanism. ‘Irony of this dispositif: it makes us believe that what is at stake in it is our “liberation”’, as Foucault (HS1: 159) writes in the very last sentence of the book.<sup>22</sup>

On my methodological reading of *Le Volonté de Savoir* then, ‘biopolitics’ names those counter-truths of Foucault’s critical diagnosis which challenge the discourse of sexuality on the level of its conditions of existence. They do not attempt to disprove the discourse on sexuality – as untrue or ideological – but reveal the struggles necessary to establish and sustain its ability to form statements with truth-value at all. They enable us to realise that even our strategies of resistance and their theoretical foundations only lead us deeper into what we believe to fight against. The desubjectifying and desubjugating effects of these counter-truths summarily named ‘biopolitics’ derive directly from this opposition on the level of depth-knowledge: for the consequence of accepting Foucault’s diagnosis would be to rid ourselves of all self-conceptions related to the dispositif of ‘sexuality’ and to fight in order to free ourselves from biopower.

At precisely this point, Foucault imagines a future which can no longer understand our will to truth about sex because it belongs to another regime of truth from which our fascination with sexuality, our hopes towards and our demands of it seem strange and astonishing. Foucault does not attempt to depict this

new world but he deems its prefiguration necessary:

[...] we *must dream* [*devons songer*] that perhaps one day, in a different economy of bodies and pleasures, people will no longer quite understand how the ruses of sexuality, and the power that sustains its dispositif, were able to subject us to that austere monarchy of sex, so that we became dedicated to the endless task of forcing its secret, of exacting the truest of confessions from a shadow. (HS1: 159, my emphasis)<sup>23</sup>

Biopolitics thus names the counter-truths resulting from a critical diagnosis that reveals how the dispositif of sexuality limits us in our thoughts, our actions and our subjectivities and how attempts to ‘free’ our own ‘repressed’ sex are driven by the very will to truth that has established the biopolitical and disciplinary power mechanisms shaping our actions and our subjectivities. The critical function of the concept of biopolitics is precisely to show us the full extent to which we are ‘captured’ by the dispositif of sexuality, to estrange us from it and to thereby give us a glimpse of what a truly emancipated life would entail.

### **After La Volonté de Savoir**

Biopolitics quickly vanishes from Foucault’s vocabulary, even though Foucault starts his lecture course in 1978 with the stated intention to study ‘something that I have called, somewhat vaguely, bio-power’ (Foucault, 2007 [2004]: 1) and announces in 1979 that ‘only when we know what this governmental regime called liberalism was, will we be able to grasp what biopolitics is’ (Foucault, 2008 [2004]: 22). The course summary dryly admits that the lecture course was devoted ‘entirely to what should have been only its introduction’ (Foucault, 2008 [2004]: 317), namely the analysis of (neo-) liberalism as a political rationality: as a specific regime of truth of governmental practices (see Vogelmann, 2012; Oksala, 2013).

This does not necessarily mean that Foucault abandoned the study of biopolitics. Some scholars argue that Foucault's notion of governmentality is 'nothing else than the name of a new analytical perspective on biopolitics' (Muhle, 2008: 269, my translation).<sup>24</sup> If we consider 'governmentality' to be a further development of Foucault's 'analytics of power', as he himself suggests (Foucault, 2007 [2004]: 118–20; see Patton, 2015: 113; for an opposing view cf. Fassin, 2010: 185 f., 196), this would continue the argument from *Le Volonté de Savoir* stringently: developing the concept of power in order to analyse sexuality without presupposing the repressive hypothesis left us with the critical diagnosis of biopolitics – and its analysis again is in need of new conceptual tools. So with the methodological perspective offered by the concept of governmentality, we can envision an 'analytics of biopolitics' (Lemke, 2010: 432–4; 2011 [2007]: chapter 9; Rabinow and Rose, 2015 [2006]: 308–23) along the three axes of knowledge, power and self-relations (see Lemke, 2010: 432 f.): on the axis of knowledge, the most pressing question is how 'life' is made knowable. On the axis of power, we have to analyse what is done with this knowledge and what relations of power sustain the 'regime of truth' that supports this knowledge. Finally, on the axis of self-relations, we analyse the impact of this knowledge and of these power relations on the self-understanding of subjects and their constitution.

However, while continuing Foucault's methodological perspective, this changes the status and the function of 'biopolitics': instead of a *critical* concept naming the counter-truths which result from Foucault's diagnosis of the present, 'biopolitics' now is a *descriptive* concept that names the object analysed. 'Biopolitics' was intended to estrange, to prefiguratively emancipate readers from their investment into the truths of sexuality. By taking the conceptual space that 'sexuality' occupied in *Le Volonté de Savoir*, it loses this function – and consequently the 'analytics of biopolitics' must either produce

new counter-knowledge or proceed with a different model of critique.

### ***The Second Affinity: Horkheimer's Critical Knowledge***

Distinguishing between 'biopolitics' as a *critical* concept that names the counter-truths produced by Foucault's diagnostic critique of the dispositif of sexuality and 'biopolitics' as a *descriptive* concept designating the object of critique brings us to the second affinity with Frankfurt School Critical Theory: for it mirrors Horkheimer's famous distinction between critical and traditional theory – or so I claim.

How to understand Horkheimer's distinction is of course itself contested but the following two aspects should be uncontroversial. A first key difference between critical and traditional theory is that the latter aims at *correctly mapping* the world whereas the former aims to *emancipate* and thus to *transform* it (Horkheimer, 2002 [1937]: 197, 208 f., 217, 219). In other words, critical theory has an explicit knowledge-interest that sets it apart from traditional theory which cannot even admit of having a knowledge-interest. According to Horkheimer, traditional theory thus does not only differ in its knowledge-interest but ideologically misconceives its own activity and the knowledge it produces (Horkheimer, 2002 [1937]: 221–4, especially 222).

Second, critical theory conceptualises the historicity of its knowledge differently than traditional theory does. Instead of accepting the received view of a timeless truth to be uncovered by bourgeois science, critical theory recognises that its own knowledge has a 'temporal core' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002 [1947]: xi). Although Horkheimer admits that this leads into difficulties he remains adamant that critical theory is 'opposing the idea of an absolute, supra-historical subject or the possibility of exchanging subjects, as though a person could remove



himself from his present historical juncture and truly insert himself into any other he wished' (Horkheimer, 2002 [1937]: 240).

Both differences concern the specific kind of knowledge produced by a critical or traditional theory – critique is again, as in Foucault's model of critique, specified as first and foremost a knowledge-producing practice. Yet the affinity goes beyond this general commonality, for both differences between critical and traditional theory are present in the distinction between 'biopolitics' as a critical and as a descriptive concept. First, using 'biopolitics' descriptively would indeed revert to a mere mapping of a particularly interesting aspect of our present, yet would not amount to a critique – unless the analysis is either supplanted with new counter-truths or is transplanted into another model of critique. Turning the diagnosis 'biopolitics' into the object of critique without providing new unwieldy knowledge transforms the theoretical activity of Foucault's diagnostic practice of critique into an analysis that either must seek another account for its critical force (e.g. by becoming a form of immanent critique) or that ceases to be critical altogether.

The second difference between critical and traditional theory is mirrored by the two usages of 'biopolitics' as well and accounts for the fact that Foucault's critique is not easily repeatable because the counter-truths produced by Foucault's diagnostic practice are tied to the very specific present the critique analyses and to this present's limits of what is or is not 'in the truth'. Thus, repeating Foucault's critique of sexuality by using 'biopolitics' in its critical function today cannot fail to disappoint. For even if we could suppose that the present dispositif of sexuality has remained relatively unchanged, the critical discourse on sexuality has not. Yet if the analysis of a 'repressed sexuality' no longer frames that discourse, a diagnosis to the contrary no longer constitutes counter-truths: statements bordering on the limit of

our truth-regime that oppose that very truth-regime on the level of depth-knowledge. In this sense, Foucault's critique has a 'temporal core' and, like Horkheimer's critical theory, cannot think of itself as timeless truth.

As with the first affinity between Adorno's and Foucault's model of critique, the correspondence between Horkheimer's and Foucault's distinctions concerns the knowledge critique produces. In fact, the distinction between critical and traditional theory relies on the methodological perspective outlined with the first affinity; taken together they constitute a similar 'stature' of critique even though the inner details remain different. Yet it demonstrates an affinity between Foucault and Horkheimer and Adorno that is misinterpreted if we either presuppose the Habermasian reconstruction of the early Frankfurt School or a less systematic account of Foucault's methodological perspective (cf. McCarthy, 1990).

## BIOPOLITICS AND CRITIQUE

My methodological re-reading of *Le Volonté de Savoir* started from the relationship between 'biopolitics' as it appears in Foucault's published work, his model of critique in which the concept is used and the methodological affinities to Adorno's model of critique. These seemingly simple exegetical issues allowed identifying the changed role of 'biopolitics' within the diagnostic critique aimed at prefigurative emancipation and its affinity to Horkheimer's distinction between critical and traditional theory. This in turn leads to three implications for using 'biopolitics' as a concept within critical theory more broadly.

First, saying that 'biopolitics' takes on a *descriptive* role in an 'analytics of biopolitics' as outlined, for example, by Lemke does not accuse this analytic of being an uncritical enterprise. Yet it does mean that 'biopolitics'

as a concept cannot afford the analysis any critical force by itself. If 'biopolitics' assumes the conceptual place of the object under study (the 'experience' in Foucault's terminology), and if the 'analytics of biopolitics' still intends to use Foucault's model of critique, then its critical diagnosis must forge a new set of counter-truths in order to challenge 'apparently natural or self-evident modes of practice and thought – inviting us to live differently' (Lemke, 2010: 434).

This emphasises, second, how demanding Foucault's model of critique is and what a peculiar relationship to truth it has. If critique succeeds in changing our relation to what we know on the level of depth-knowledge, emancipating us from certain truths by revealing how their conditions of existence are forged in and through social struggles, a repetition of that critique cannot have the same emancipatory effect. Hence Foucault's model of critique is not just conceptually demanding because it is committed to philosophically wide-ranging and contentious claims but also because its counter-truths have a 'temporal core': Foucault's model of critique requires a 'philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era' (Foucault, 1997a [1984]: 312) – yet it also requires this permanent critique not to repeat itself, for once we have come to accept the counter-truths it offers, these cease to function as *counter-truth*. Tying with the *current* conditions of existence for statements to be able to have a truth-value, these counter-truths lose their ability to prefiguratively emancipate us once they are included within our discourses. If critique is to stay at the limits of what we can think, do and be, it has to acknowledge and transform with its own effects on these limits.

The same holds for Adorno's model of critique and Horkheimer's defence of a critical theory different from traditional theory. The two affinities outlined suggest that in each case, conceptualising critique as a diagnostic practice producing an effective, unwieldy

knowledge is the reason for the high demands placed on critique. One such demand is a philosophical account of truth's historicity without relativising truth – a task that shows where Foucault and Adorno and Horkheimer clearly part ways.<sup>25</sup>

Third, and more concrete, this leads to the much broader question whether an 'analytics of biopolitics' should develop another model of critique. Maybe we could understand the different ways in which Agamben, Hardt and Negri or Esposito have developed the notion of biopolitics precisely as re-deploying it within very different conceptions of critique:<sup>26</sup> within a dystopian critique of sovereignty's hidden structure that makes 'biopolitics' the *target* of critique, within a post-Marxist critique of Empire's absorption of the life-forces of the multitude that sees 'biopolitics' as a *resource* for critique or within a constructive critique of the paradigm of immunisation that emphasises 'biopolitics' *ambivalent* relation to critique.<sup>27</sup> Yet precisely at this juncture, when critical theory develops new and exciting relationships between 'biopolitics' and critique, we might come to appreciate the common 'stature' of Foucault's and Adorno's and Horkheimer's critique with its focus on the knowledge critique produces: for how do these re-deployments of 'biopolitics' account for the wrongness of what they criticise? What truths do we affirm when we base our critique on an opposition between 'life' within and without the reach of 'politics' – for example a life with the inherent capability to escape biopolitics (Mills, 2015: 97 f.)? Having learned our lesson about sexuality, we should not disregard its implications with respect to 'life': what power mechanisms shaped the depth-knowledge enabling us to think and speak of life beyond politics? What counter-truths could we come up with to forge an understanding of life that does not implicate our critique in those power relations? Thinking through this question would offer us, I think, a further glimpse of prefigurative enlightenment.

## Notes

- 1 Thanks go to Daniel Loick for his constructive criticism of an early draft.
- 2 The conceptual history of 'biopolitics' is of course older than its usage in critical theory: see Esposito (2008 [2004]: 16–24).
- 3 Since my reading emphasises the role of depth-knowledge [*savoir*], I prefer the French book title which is also more informative than the English translation *History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*.
- 4 In *The Birth of Biopolitics* (Foucault, 2008 [2004]) hardly ever mentions 'biopolitics', being instead an analysis of liberalism as a political rationality – because, Foucault argues, 'the analysis of biopolitics can only get under way when we have understood the general regime of this governmental reason' (ibid.: 21 f.).
- 5 Lemke (2011 [2007]), Campbell (2013), and Folkers and Lemke (2014) provide good overviews from different perspectives.
- 6 See Vogelmann (2017b) for more details.
- 7 'Experience' here means not a subjective episode but the 'correlation of a domain of knowledge [*savoir*], a type of normativity, and a mode of relation to the self' (Foucault, 1997b [1984]: 199 f.).
- 8 I take the term 'depth knowledge' from Hacking (2002 [1981]: 77).
- 9 Foucault's insistence on this difference between conditions of existence and conditions of possibility is most pronounced in Foucault (2010 [1969]: e.g. 116) where he repeatedly distinguishes conditions of possibility as 'principles of construction' from conditions of existence. See Gutting (1989: 242).
- 10 Although Foucault uses the notion of a 'truth-regime' from time to time, he does not develop it conceptually (Weir, 2008: 370–4). I use it as a shorthand for 'conditions of existence for statements to be candidates for truth-values'. For a more general discussion, see Nigro (2015).
- 11 On prefiguration and prolepsis, see Wright (1993: 46, fn. 12), Maeckelbergh (2011: 3).
- 12 Martin Saar's 'genealogical blueprint' captures well what desubjectivation means: 'Tell me the story of the genesis and development of my self-understanding using the notion of power (or related notions, such as strategy, or interest, subjection, submission, exploitation, etc.) in such a way that hearing you talk, I don't want to be as I thought I have to be, and that, hearing you talk, I realize that this isn't necessary' (Saar, 2002: 236 f.).
- 13 In *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault claims that his work embodies only the following conditional imperative: 'If you want to struggle, here are some key points, here are some lines of force, here are some constrictions and blockages' (Foucault, 2007 [2004]: 18).
- 14 In this respect my remarks are close to Thomas McCarthy's six 'broad affinities' (McCarthy, 1990: 437–41). Yet his interpretation of Foucault and of the Frankfurt School Critical Theory relies mostly on Habermas' conceptions of both, which prevents further dialogue. McCarthy acknowledges that to some extent: see ibid.: 464, fn. 1.
- 15 When Adorno characterises his understanding of philosophy, philosophy and critique are identical. Just one example: 'If philosophy is still necessary, it is so only in the way it has been from time immemorial: as critique [...]' (Adorno, 2005 [1962]: 10).
- 16 For a thoughtful and detailed explanation of Adorno's interpretative method of critique and its connection to epistemological questions, see Christ (2012).
- 17 Looking back, Foucault writes in *The Use of Pleasure*: 'What I planned, therefore, was a history of the experience of sexuality, where experience is understood as the correlation between fields of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity in a particular culture' (Foucault, 1990 [1984]: 4).
- 18 'Dispositif' is rendered incoherently as 'deployment', 'layout', 'organisation' and the like by the English translation – 'unhelpful' (Elden, 2016: 53) indeed.
- 19 For a nuanced critique from a post-colonial perspective on Foucault's Eurocentric genealogy of biopolitics, see Stoler (2004 [1995]).
- 20 Hence, the 'massacres have become vital' (HS1: 137): they can be committed only in the 'name of life' (ibid.). Foucault developed this functional analysis of state racism first in his lecture course *Society Must Be Defended* (Foucault, 2003 [1997]: 254–63). For critique and development of this controversial analysis, see e.g. Stoler (2004 [1995]), Balibar (1995 [1989]: 40–2), Lemke (1997: 224–38).
- 21 'For the first time in history, no doubt, biological existence was reflected in political existence; the fact of living was no longer an inaccessible substrate that only emerged from time to time, amid the randomness of death and its fatality; part of it passed into knowledge's field of control and power's sphere of intervention' (HS1: 142).
- 22 I use my own translation of Foucault's original sentence 'Ironie de ce dispositif: il nous fait croire qu'il y va de notre "libération"' (Foucault, 2001 [1976]: 211) since the English translation is 'free' to the point of distortion.
- 23 Judith Butler famously criticises Foucault's use of the term 'pleasures' because it would contradict Foucault's critique of sexuality as power-ridden dispositif to posit 'a "multiplicity of pleasures" in itself which is not the effect of any specific

- discourse/power exchange' (Butler, 1990: 97). Yet Foucault does not assume pleasures free from any power/knowledge-regime but pleasures of a different regime (a 'different economy of bodies and pleasures') than the regime of 'sexuality'. See Repo (2014).
- 24 Lemke (2011 [2007]: 44–50), Oksala (2013: 61–3), Gros (2015: 259) advances similar claims.
- 25 For Foucault, see Vogelmann (2014), on Horkheimer's and Adorno's account of truth's historicity, see Shomali (2010: chapter 2).
- 26 I thank Valentin Jandt for discussions on this point. In his brilliant BA-Thesis *Politics – Life – Critique* (University of Bremen, 2015, on file with the author), he explores the critical function of the concepts of biopolitics in the works of Foucault, Agamben, and Hardt and Negri.
- 27 There are of course many more developments that reshape the relationship between 'biopolitics' and 'critique'. To mention only a few: Achille Mbembe's concept 'necropolitics' (Mbembe, 2003) as well as Banu Bargu's 'biosovereignty' (Bargu, 2014: 43–54) build on Agamben's re-interpretation of 'biopolitics', focussing on its 'thanatopolitical' side and making it the target of critique. Others explore biopolitics as a source of critical agency or resistance: see e.g. Beatriz Preciado's (2013 [2008]: 352) call for reclaiming 'the right to participate in the construction of biopolitical fictions' or Mike Laufenberg's (2014) 'politics of care' that turns the care about life against its current political occupation.
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# Critical International Relations Theory

Shannon Brincat

## INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s the discipline of International Relations (IR) was subjected to a radical critique driven, in large part, by the entry of the ideas of the Frankfurt School (FS) into the field – a field dominated until then by unmitigated positivist assumptions. The new school of thought that emerged, Critical International Relations Theory (CIRT), exposed the deep relation between mainstream approaches to IR theory (specifically neorealism, rational-choice, and liberal institutionalism) and the dominant interests they served in world politics: the maintenance of bipolarity (with favour given to American preponderance), possessive individualism, and world capitalism. ‘Theory is always *for* someone, and *for* some purpose’ (Cox, 1981: 128), this new paradigm claimed – a statement that has since become one of the most quoted in the discipline. With this insight IR theory would never be the same, unable to remain normatively naïve, compelled to give up the

semblance of neutrality and objectivity. In making this intervention, CIRT was a primary catalyst towards the so-called post-positivist and normative-turns in IR theory that are now almost taken for granted. One of the defining legacies of this shift has been how CIRT has since looked beyond positivist (or ‘problem-solving’)<sup>1</sup> approaches to engage with broader, normative questions regarding the purposes of IR theory and the possibility of advancing emancipation. In this way CIRT remains connected to the original ideas of the FS pursuing the question as to why, at the height of humankind’s technological progress, we see its very opposite socially – what Marcuse (n.d.) called the ‘dehumanization and brutalization’ of life. Here, CIRT remains committed to generating the type of knowledge that was of concern to the FS, knowledge to enhance human autonomy across world politics through our collective capacities for self-reflectivity and self-determination (Held, 1980: 255). It is CIRT’s self-reflection and understanding

– our ability to reflect on our history and human capacities and to harness these towards making our shared social life rational or self-determining, rather than living under blind fate or domination – that enables it to pursue this emancipatory interest, or as Hoffman expressed it to ‘critique existing social order and point to its immanent capacity for change and for the realization of human potential’ (1987: 232). During a time of profound economic crises, the rise of right-wing and Islamic extremism, the attacks on reason, the turn away from multilateralism to a dangerous unilateral and highly interventionist world order, and the interlocking environmental crises of climate change and biodiversity loss, this critical approach to world politics is today ever more urgent.

The objective of this chapter is to detail the achievements *and* limits of CIRT<sup>2</sup> in order to identify those areas where further development is required.<sup>3</sup> The first part examines four key themes in which CIRT has contributed to the advancement of IR related to the critique of positivism and the promotion of emancipatory theory, intersubjectivity, cosmopolitanism, and security. This part focuses on some of the key theorists associated with CIRT: Robert W. Cox, Andrew Linklater, Richard Ashley, and Ken Booth, a list that is by no means exhaustive. The second part then explores a number of interlocking problem areas for the future of CIRT including the continuing lack of a genuine transdisciplinary research programme in IR, CIRT’s problematic relation to the ‘philosophy of history’ and Western-centrism, and the limits of its assumed internationalism. The chapter concludes by indicating how, and in which ways, CIRT may help push IR towards a more sophisticated account of intersubjectivity in its social ontology, opening up crucial insights for both the theory and practice for the discipline, and to ground an emancipatory world politics for the future.

## PART 1 – THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF CIRT

### *Beyond the Impasse of Realism and Positivism*

It is little coincidence that both the discipline of IR and the FS emerged during the crisis of the inter-war period, something reflected in their primary interests that parallel in a fundamental way. IR was premised on the question of the causes of international war, specifically the imperialist and geostrategic rivalries that generated WWI. The early FS, on the other hand, was concerned with why the socialist, world revolution had failed to materialize but instead fell to its opposite: the solidarity of the international working-class shattered by international war. The question of why the working class sided with the national bourgeoisie was the inversion of the question of the cause of international war. Horkheimer had even penned the beginnings of a novel on Chamberlain’s willingness to appease Hitler as evidence of the complicity of the ruling classes with fascism as an ‘extension of bourgeois domination’ – an argument more fully developed in his *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer, 2014). However, whereas early IR became concerned with inventing formal structures to pacify world politics (largely built on Kantian thought and Wilsonianism principles institutionalized in the doomed League of Nations), the FS was focused on concrete social relations, ideology/culture, and psychoanalysis, to explain the devolution of class-consciousness and human reason in the form of the barbarism of international war. As to the penultimate question that guides the discipline of IR to this day – how to end *all* war – CIRT has since put forward an alternative answer to the balance of power (realism) or institutions (liberalism), instead anchoring itself in the possibility for human emancipation. Whilst the concept of emancipation has remained vague both in its description and normative prescription throughout



CIRT, it has been retained as the nomenclature for the vision – however general – of the processual reconstruction of world order away from conditions of enslavement towards the collective, self-direction of humankind.

For CIRT, a world divided into states and trapped in the political economy of global capitalism cannot deliver peace or justice to humanity. And yet, just like Marxist theories of imperialism before it, because CIRT located the causes of war within the very nature of capitalism and the international system of capitalist states, it has remained largely excluded from the disciplinary mainstream – especially so in American scholarship. Opposing theories instead refuted the ‘critical turn’, obstructing its revolutionary insights and thereby supporting the stabilization of bourgeois international order by making the international system appear natural and self-perpetuating (Krippendorff, 1982: 27). The challenge for CIRT has been to respond in a way that is both *practical* and *normative*. For the reaction of the disciplinary mainstream to the intrusion of ‘critical’ thought was to re-establish its dominance by attempting to control the contours of debate. The strategy adopted by Robert Keohane, leading theorist of neoliberal institutionalism and former president of both the International Studies Association and the American Political Science Association, was to deliberately narrow the epistemological boundaries of the field by making a cleavage between two distinct camps: the rationalists, all of whom relied on rational-choice theory, and the reflectivists, those who emphasized intersubjectivity, history, interpretation, and the limits of science. For Keohane, it was these critical or ‘reflectivist’ approaches which had to answer to the methods of the rationalists. That is, they had to make their claims ‘testable’ by observation or experiment in the Popperian sense, or risk remaining forever on the margins (1989: 173–4). Later, Keohane and others would go so far as to suggest that critical approaches could not make reliable claims and that they even repudiated the endeavour

of social science (see Katzenstein et al., 1998: 678). Yet CIRT was up to this challenge. In part, this was due to the methods of immanent critique utilized by the FS that enabled CIRT to expose the ideology of orthodox IR theories and their assumptions of the rational actor, free market, and state system, against the social realities of that order – the global inequalities, injustices, and exploitation, that precipitated international conflict. This method had the benefit of remaining fixed within the terms of debate amenable to orthodox IR and the existing realities of world politics, without relying on extraneous moral categories for its critique. In this way, CIRT could ‘*explain* what is wrong with current social reality, *identify* actors to change it, and provide clear norms for criticism and practical *goals* for the future’ (Bohman, 1996: 190, emphasis added). It also provided a means to shift IR towards ontological concerns, not only questions pertaining to the basic actors, structures, and their relations in world politics, but engaging with the very *purposes* which IR theory was meant to serve (Cox, 1981: 128; Cox, 1992).

In many ways Cox’s famous dictum that pushed the discipline to uncover *who* and *what* purposes it served echoed Horkheimer’s much earlier claim that there was ‘no theory of society’ that did not ‘not contain political motivations’ (1972a: 222). Yet despite the fact that nearly all other disciplines in the social sciences had long problematized positivism as reductionist, that it reified social reality as something objective and independent, and that it forgot that its facts were products of socially and historically mediated human consciousness, IR lagged behind safe in its naivety. In particular, it was the legitimizing role played by positivist analysis – through its acceptance of the status quo as the objective reality of world politics and the perpetuation of this system under the ahistorical nature of its analysis – that resulted in a pernicious political alliance between orthodox IR theory and those dominant institutions of world politics that thwarted human

emancipation. Yet, until Cox's intervention, this deeply politicized role played by positivism remained largely unquestioned in IR, cloaked under assertions that this approach alone could explain the world as it 'really is'. Wyn Jones observed that the privileging of the epistemology of positivism had the effect of undermining the truth-claims of those who wished to challenge the provenance of prevailing world order, making other ways of knowing *appear* illegitimate (1999: 90, 6). Instead, CIRT sought to replace the obvious attempts to hide normativity in traditional theories of IR by openly elaborating on its own 'concern for the reasonable conditions of life' (Horkheimer, 1972a: 222). It was this explicit emancipatory interest – 'the emancipation of humanity from enslaving conditions' (Horkheimer, 1972b: 245ff.) – that has remained at the core of the research project of CIRT. With basic precepts from the FS including the shared problematization of positivism, the historical materialist understanding of social transformation, and emancipatory politics defined (broadly) as freedom from slavery towards self-direction,<sup>4</sup> it was possible for CIRT to show the contradictions between the principles and the actuality of bourgeois international society: how it 'excluded' ever larger numbers of people from the happiness that had been made possible by the abundance of economic forces. Whereas Horkheimer and the Institute had reflected on this precondition only within the context of the West, the story was no different when Cox examined the international dimensions of capitalist relations between core and periphery, building on Immanuel Wallerstein's work, or when Hoffman examined the logic of world capitalist economy (1987: 242–3). Yet against the overwhelming deferral to positivist assumptions these relations were largely excluded from IR 'proper' in at least two ways. Firstly, it was widely believed such relations were of no interest to IR that was to instead answer a very narrow question, namely, the seeming inevitability of conflict in world politics under the anarchical

structure of the international system. In the absence of a higher power to mediate the conflicts between states, war was deemed insoluble in an anarchical world of tragedy and repetition. This was the so-called 'parsimonious' theory of Neorealism (Waltz, 2010: chapter 3) that was widely believed to explain the prevalence of war in the absence of other relations or variables, though it made no pretence to further claims. Secondly, in more recent years, the two positivist approaches to IR – Neorealism and Neoliberalism – have since effectively conjoined their normative and research agendas, what Waever (1996) called the 'Neo-Neo Synthesis'. In many ways this alliance continues to echo Keohane's epistemological narrowing of the field under which IR theory is reduced to merely testing the level of cooperation that international institutions can play in world politics.

For CIRT however, the corrective was to bring *values* openly into IR. That is, to expose the deep political linkages between orthodox IR and existing power structures, and to reveal the values that these theories purposively advanced but self-denied under a feigned notion of objectivity. This question of knowledge constitutive interests had, of course, been a hallmark of the FS beginning with Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason* where he argued that objective reason – the ethical form of reason – had been lost under the dominance of subjective reason. For him, the reasonable nature of one's actions was now irrelevant in late capitalism. Only the ends that served the purposes of the subject (self-advancement and self-preservation) remained within a form of 'reason' prone to conformity, authoritarianism, and the pursuit of self-interest in the market without concern for the effect of one's actions on others (Horkheimer, 2013). Adorno would use similar arguments to show how such 'reason' is used to justify the oppression of humankind as a necessary price of 'self-preservation' under the 'law of nature' – the Hobbesian ideology that remains so well entrenched in IR to this day, whether

in postulates that allege conflict is endemic to the human condition, or the behaviour of states in the anarchical system. For Adorno, such 'reason' had not contributed to the preservation of our species but served its opposite (Cook, 2014: 21), something the expansion of the nuclear threat or climate change has only intensified – the trajectory of universal history under instrumental reason leading from the 'catapult to the atom bomb' (Adorno, 2008: 629). Here, it is interesting to note that Honneth has deliberately situated *The Struggle for Recognition* in opposition to those philosophical anthropologies that assume the 'war of all, against all' in which social conflict is motivated solely by self-preservation (1995: chapter 1). For Honneth, control through fear, the lynchpin of the Hobbesian imaginary, must be replaced with a notion of struggle towards norms recognized and justified by their social utility for all.

Aside from these early articulations of the purposes of knowledge/reason from the First Generation FS, it was Habermas' (1972) notion of 'knowledge constitutive interests' that has been most influential in CIRT. A host of other commentators have reached similar conclusions.<sup>5</sup> Richard Ashley deployed the concept of knowledge constitutive interests in his early work to defend the 'critical-theoretical alternative' to world politics that was developing through CIRT. Just as the motivations of positivism were located in the political and economic needs of bourgeois society that rewarded knowledge that had instrumental or practical applications and neglected that knowledge whose use-value was not immediately instrumental for production purposes, neorealism performed this role at the level of the international. That is, neorealism sought only to expand the 'reach' of control in the international system, not towards the emancipation of humankind, but for the interests of those dominant forces within world politics at a specific point in time. In reducing itself to an instrument of power, such a theory became nothing but 'an apologia for the status quo' (Ashley, 1984: 228).

Neorealism served as the doctrine for 'the new mandarins', as Chomsky labelled them, those agents that infused the foreign policy offices of Western powers – just like Morgenthau's scholar-adviser had helped define the 'National Interest' for Classical Realism and the US Department of State in the former iteration of realist theory. Like Cox, Ashley distinguished neorealism as problem-solving theory that sought to make the system function more smoothly from CIRT with its orientation to understanding and promoting global change (1981: 208). Rather than control, the latter's interest was in pursuing those immanent possibilities towards openness in which dissidence and marginality, plurality and difference, could emerge in IR and thereby enable CIRT to locate and strengthen resistant practices in world politics (Ashley, 1987: 408–11).

Similarly, Linklater held that knowledge does not arise from the subject's neutral engagement with an objective reality but reflects pre-existing social purposes and interests (1996: 279). Redeploying Habermas' schema in the context of theories of IR, Linklater divided approaches according to their primary interest: technical interests (to control nature and society), practical interests (to create orderly communities), and emancipatory interests (to identify and eradicate unnecessary social constraints). Echoing the FS, for Linklater, knowledge is incomplete if it lacks this emancipatory purpose (1996: 281). It is because of this interest that Linklater believes CIRT provides a superior account of world politics in three ways: the relationship between units (states and other actors) and the international system; the cultural dimensions of world politics, and; its vision for new forms of political community (1995: 242). What is most unique about Linklater's critical project has been how he has challenged those theories that underestimate the human capacity to problematize and transform inherited and seemingly natural social conventions – including the self-perpetuation or immutability thesis of realism

that would lock world politics within an endless cycle of periodic war and conflict. Yet for Linklater, not only is all knowledge purpose-driven; all knowledge involves moral commitments. And even though he finds humanity is only at the start of a 'long collective learning process', he has looked to how social learning in the practical-moral sphere can undergo separate logics of change (2011: 18, 32). In the context of world politics, for Linklater (1982) this process involves questioning all boundaries of exclusion/inclusion and the extension of the harm principle – part of an Elysian 'civilising process' – to distant others (Linklater, 2011). On this emancipatory horizon emerge possibilities for the transformation of political community to greater forms of human solidarity and even the beginnings of an institutional form of cosmopolitan community (Linklater, 1996).

Yet the status of the emancipatory interest has remained problematic. It conflated Freudian and Marxist critiques aimed at the unmasking of personal self-deception and of social-political ideology, respectively. The former involved asymmetries between patient and analyst. The latter, given the collapse of working-class solidarity in late capitalism, maintained an insufficiently intersubjective form of emancipation. This problem was compounded by the fact that CIRT, at least in Cox's seminal paper, had expressed its difference from problem-solving theory in a way that both confused and antagonized. It made it appear as if CIRT wilfully dismissed positivist research, was not interested in solving 'real world' problems, and, that it was the only properly 'critical' approach to the field (Booth, 2007: 242ff.). Most disconcerting was that it made it seem as if CIRT's interest in emancipation did not have to be tied to existing realities so that the School was readily dismissed as a redundant form of idealism, a relic from IR's 'First Great Debate'.<sup>6</sup> Yet to understand the 'two-sided' character of the social totality, something Horkheimer insisted on (1972a: 206–207), positivist social science had to be wedded with an emancipatory interest. What

Horkheimer meant by the 'two-sided' social totality was how, on the one hand, the individual accepts as natural the limits prescribed on his/her activity by capitalist society, and on the other, how society can be made the 'possible object of planful decision and rational determination of goals' – that is, to 'conceive' society 'as will and reason' and make it 'their own world' (Horkheimer, 1972a: 206–207). Positivism was not wrong according to the FS, but incomplete. This was not so much a rejection, but a conjoining of the two approaches. Accordingly, Ken Booth has attempted to counter this widely misunderstood tenet of CT, making central to his research project how CIRT is interested in 'solving problems', specifically, 'tactical or strategic action for emancipatory purposes' (2007: 244). This connects far more closely with Cox's intention, rather than expression, for reclaiming 'normative choice' in social order – that is, defending emancipation as something practical by transcending world order within the range of what is feasible in existing conditions (1981: 136–7, 130). Neufeld rightly surmises that the turn from positivist theory to its enmeshment with a commitment to human emancipation is central to the purposes of the entire 'critical' project of CIRT (1995). Indeed, the real conditions of contemporary international society were such that a 'community of freedom' envisaged by Horkheimer remained possible and it was this material potential that continues to provide CIRT with its 'content'. It was only in bringing in the full capacities of human reason (the union of science *and* philosophy, positivist *and* emancipatory theory) that the unplanned nature of world order that was made to seem a 'fate beyond man's control' by neorealism and other approaches in IR could be overcome.

### ***The Project of Emancipation***

The FS has been consistent in its normative goal of emancipation, however general these descriptions have been, and despite the diverse ways in which each theorist

has pursued the idea. Horkheimer defined emancipation as the ‘general interest’ in the free development, just resource allocation, and equality in community (see 1972a). Marcuse would come to a negativist conception, the Great Refusal (1964: 256–7), that implored the need to overturn capitalist social relations but in a way that seemed beyond historical possibilities. As we have already seen, Habermas initially sought emancipation through dialogical community and yet would later retreat into the liberal state, with all its inequalities. More recently Honneth has turned to the intersubjective ontology of recognition theory to ground emancipation in concrete, historical conditions – something only recently being taken up in IR relating to questions of cosmopolitan political community (Brincat, 2017). By contrast, what constitutes emancipation in CIRT is a notoriously difficult question to pin down. Some writers reject the term outright (Cox), others deploy it, though with little definition (Wyn Jones, Devetak, Ashley, Neufeld), and others have distinct emancipatory concepts such as community (Linklater) or security (Booth). Whilst too vast to cover all such forms here and despite the many differences between them, common to all conceptions is the rejection of emancipation as some blueprint utopia and its replacement with a processual account of enhancing intersubjective relations.

Linklater has pursued the question of emancipation under his unique conception of the ‘triple transformation’ of political community (see esp. 1998). This was premised on his Hieroclean notion that whilst distance should be no barrier to ethical concerns, that the differing obligations between ‘men’ and ‘citizens’ has been the fault-line cutting across world politics (1982). His early and middle work were steeped in Habermas’ theory of communicative action as a means by which a cosmopolitan community could ensure that its social order was built by the participation of all in ‘freely chosen moral principles which further the autonomy of all human beings’ (Linklater, 1998: 22). This quest for

consensus in a rational political community was premised on extending Habermasian discourse ethics (dialogue, inclusion, no certainty of moral position, and a willingness to learn and seek understanding) to the cosmopolitan sphere in a way that could break with unjustified exclusion whilst remaining attuned to cultural difference. The precise character of the institutionalized structures of participation in dialogic community could vary from place to place, and, in different levels of political life – from the local, to the state, to the region, and ultimately, to the cosmopolitan sphere. As such, for Linklater, it is not a question of *subtracting* but of *adding* layers of political community above and below the state to help humanity ‘formulate a common system of rules concerned with managing complex forms of inter-tribal interaction’ (1982: 177). Whilst many have pointed out that this presupposes a liberal subject in a formal public sphere, Linklater has developed an international historical sociology capable of pointing to nascent developments within what he calls ‘cosmopolitanism harm conventions’<sup>7</sup> that constitute evidence of such a ‘move beyond the particularism of the state to a universal society of free beings’ (1982: 167). Similarly, he finds the advancement of harm conventions in human history as not only indications of a ‘global moral consensus’ on the harm principle but something which can be expanded upon in world politics (Linklater, in Brincat et al., 2012: 22–3; Linklater, 2011: 23–4, 34).

In distinction to Linklater, whilst Cox has maintained a Gramscian ‘optimism of the will’ (1996: 527, 531) he has remained sceptical of emancipation, rejecting the term. Despite this, he does hold an ideal vision for the future, something he previously referred to as ‘new multilateralism’ and in his later work as ‘civilizational coexistence’. This vision hopes for a more participatory society (Cox, 1987: 403) alongside ‘social equity; greater diffusion of power among peoples, social classes and genders; maintenance of security in the handling of conflict; and sustainability of the

biosphere' (Cox, 1997: 245). A central concern for Cox has been on a 'plural world' to replace the cultural homogeneity of globalization with cultural diversity. Yet rather than philosophically unpacking these ideals, Cox's work has been more concerned with the conditions necessary for their emergence. Earlier, he emphasized reconstructing civil society and political authority on a global scale from the 'bottom up' (1997: xxvii) and later on a 'suprainter-subjectivity' that could bridge the 'distinct and separate subjectivities of different coexisting civilizations' (1995a: 43). Despite these possibilities, the problem remains one of global hegemony – particularly of the United States and core states – and the contradictions of the global economy in the periphery (1983: 172). For Cox, the task is to somehow build counter-hegemony within these conditions that can resist the very 'framework of bourgeois hegemony' (1983: 166), a task that he understands as uniting counter-hegemonic historic blocs from within national contexts through a long-term war of position (1987: 403). Moreover, Cox points to the many different historical ways of strengthening intercivilizational and intercultural relations as a means of entering into the mental framework of the other, a process by which major centres of political power can meet in dialogue (2001: 105) and achieve some common understanding to lead to the 'mutual and pacific recognition of differences among peoples' (1995b: 11).

Of all the theorists of early CIRT, Booth has been the most comfortable with articulating emancipatory themes, insisting on the need for constant reflection on normative commitments (2007: 242–4). In the early 1990s, independent of reading the FS, Booth advanced the idea of security as emancipation (1991a) and a realistic utopianism as central to pushing the subfield of Security Studies towards tactical or strategic action for solving real problems (1991b). In many ways, his critique of 'traditional' Security Studies mirrored those of traditional approaches to IR that we have already discussed. His 'Critical'

Security Studies (or 'Welsh School' developed with Richard Wyn Jones) was interested in 'articulating the forces of domination, such as global capitalism and national security, which constrained individuals' subjectivities and threatened their physical and emotional security' (Walter, 2017). This 'emancipatory realism' (see esp. Booth, 2007: 249–76) sought to redefine security as a strategy necessary for achieving human emancipation by refining our understanding of power but did so on a moralist foundation that was widely criticized as coopting liberal practices in the name of an emancipatory cosmopolitanism. Nevertheless, for Booth, 'grand theorising in the interest of the human collective and the natural world on which we all depend is a historic necessity' (Booth, 2012: 68ff.) and to ground the concept of emancipation in concrete terms he has relied on a number of practical moves for its realization. His 'Utopian Realism' was the first articulation of such an attempt, seeing in this combination a way that humankind could practically set goals to mediate the anarchical condition of the international system, so that the international community could become the subject of its own history (Booth, 1991b: 536). More recently, he has relied on what can be described as pragmatic and materialist ethics to realize this emancipatory ideal, citing William Lovett's work that pursued political rights through non-violent struggle as an example (see Booth, 2012: 68ff.).

This attempt at bridging CIRT and realism was also pursued by Ashley who joined the latter's concerns with power and the global hegemonic order to help practically realize the project of emancipation. In particular, Ashley sought to build upon the practical knowledge constitutive interest of classical realism (concerned with *understanding*) through his 'dialectical competence model' towards a better understanding of power (1981: 208–209). This model focused on 'competent international practice', that is, practices of power, statesmanship, and crisis, that could lead to emancipatory

transformations. Ashley's dialectical competence model situated the balance-of-power regime not in the abstract system of neorealism (i.e. 'anarchy' and the self-perpetuation thesis this gave rise to), but within the real social, economic, and environmental, conditions on which this regime depended (see Brincat, 2012). Ashley would later delve deeper into this anarchy problematique within IR using the method of the 'Double Reading' (1988). He found that anarchy was the very compass of imaginable possibility, the background 'reality' which anyone concerned with collaboration or cooperation in world politics *must* respect. Anarchy defined 'the condition of possibility' in world politics (1988: 232). Its unquestioned acceptance however, closed off possibilities for the expansion of, and differentiation in, human community, especially notions of mutuality, solidarity, and cooperation. Yet anarchy was an arbitrary political construction – derived from problematic Hobbesian assumptions – and was exposed as something always in the process of being imposed *and* resisted. The task, in part, was for CIRT to retrieve what Ashley and Walker (1990) called 'dissident' voices – those marginalized by the discipline – to give place to new and potentially liberating practices of 'global political seeing, saying, and being' (Ashley, 1988: 229), and thereby develop alternate ways of mediating political authority and political community.

In addition to these earlier, ground-breaking interventions of leading theorists in the 1980s and 1990s, CIRT has since exploded into a variety of engagements across the discipline that consciously adopt the ideas and methods of the FS. Whilst too vast to canvass here, these range from pursuing entirely new approaches to terrorism and security,<sup>8</sup> or problematizing the state,<sup>9</sup> global health,<sup>10</sup> the politics of recognition,<sup>11</sup> on reflexivity and dialectics,<sup>12</sup> environmental politics,<sup>13</sup> and world society and cosmopolitanism,<sup>14</sup> to name but a few key research areas. Two examples of this adoption and expansion of the ideas and methods of the FS

in CIRT will be described in the last section. And yet despite this expansion, CIRT remains at a crossroads in its development as an intellectual and political project through the unresolved presence of an interconnected set of problems related to history and relationality. These must be overcome if this approach is to remain relevant not just to the discipline but to its commitment to emancipation.

## PART 2 – OVERCOMING THE LIMITS OF CIRT

CIRT is a building site in IR theory and yet little has been constructed beyond the First Generation FS and Habermasian approaches. Many have noted previously the conspicuous absence of a discussion of colonialism and capitalist exploitation of peoples outside the West in the narrative of the FS (Steinman, 2004), problems that have been transferred and amplified in CIRT. Compounding this problem is that the methods of the FS cannot be merely 'up-scaled' to the level of the globe, given their sociological analysis was primarily located within the state rather than exploring the relations between peoples across states. CIRT must deal with this legacy that restricts its engagement with 'the international', particularly in historical and relational terms. These interrelated problems revolve around the Philosophy of History, Western-centrism, and 'stagism' – those assumptions behind economic development and statehood that are implied in the teleology of CIRT, however weak its notion of emancipatory 'progress' is. These problems are suggestive of a reversion or complicity between liberal-statism and CIRT that seemingly reneges on the latter's commitment to full, human emancipation.<sup>15</sup> After outlining these criticisms, I will advance a way through this impasse by pursuing a refined intersubjective ontology that can inform a radical and critical analysis of social relations in world politics, one far more advanced than those of mainstream IR.

## ***Problems of History and Other Exclusions***

Many have pointed out not only the universalism implied in CIRT's interest in emancipation but how its theoretical construction is founded almost solely on Western philosophy and modernist assumptions of development. That is, its notion of reason, dialogue, and self-direction upheld particularly by Horkheimer and the early FS as part of a generalizable interest [*Allgemeinheit*] in emancipation, have been relativized in these critiques, shown to be born from a particular cultural milieu that may not speak adequately to the necessarily universalist aspirations implied by 'emancipation'. CIRT has begun to engage postcolonial, racial, and gendered, forms of oppression, though much interdisciplinary and intersectional work remains. For many, this brings into sharp relief the disconnect between CIRT's commitment to emancipation and its inability to understand both fundamental aspects of the realities of domination in late capitalism, and, the immanent tendencies for social change that have been lost under this myopic focus on specific conditions in the West and within the state. The common thrust of such criticisms suggests an urgent need to deal with the problematic legacy of the Philosophy of History that lingers both within CIRT's notion of progress and emancipatory agency – that is, *who* acts and in which ways such actions can be considered *emancipatory*. If CT 'aims at the emancipatory self-clarification of the political struggles of the age' then how can it ignore the theorization of decolonization (Allen, 2015: xiv), or of gender (True, 2012)? Part of this relates to the language of Western rational-moralism that Forst argues may disfranchise those struggling for emancipation but who 'have the wrong, non-European passport to properly speak the language of "European morality"' (2014: 183). Related is how CIRT's commitment to (European) Enlightenment renders it within the same modernist and developmental framework that

postcolonial theorists, in particular, have shown is unilinear, culturally monist, and fortifies a misplaced faith in notions of 'progress'. A critical sociology of world politics that does not engage with the global situatedness of communities remains limited precisely because it abstracts human community away from its global context – and along with it any potential to properly identify the immanent possibilities for human emancipation *in the world*. If CIRT is to take its role as a group of 'Transformative Intellectuals' seriously and thereby contribute to concrete social movements towards emancipation, then it cannot continue to 'mediate uncritically ideas and social practices that serve to reproduce the status quo' (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1985: 39–40). Only in forming a 'dynamic unity' with *all* the oppressed can CIRT give expression to the 'concrete historical situation' and act as 'a force within it to stimulate change',<sup>16</sup> and thereby contribute towards a critical cosmopolitanism or rational human association. This does not issue in some demand for unmediated intersectionality that soon falls to fixed notions of identity but for the dialectical analysis of the question of universal history. In other words, how are we to understand the unfolding of collective, human life within the global context and complexity of social relations between human and nature?<sup>17</sup>

CIRT has been criticized in terms of temporality (Hutchings, 2007: 71ff.), its Western and European centrisms (Hobson, 2007: 91ff.), and its misunderstanding of feminism (Tickner, 1997), but perhaps the most productive expression of its limitations was by Neufeld regarding what CIRT can *learn* from these allied, critical approaches (2012: 173). For Neufeld, it is not just that multivocality and pluralism are politically correct affectations, or, I would add, something that can 'add-on' a colonial or gendered mindset to fill gaps in Western epistemology, but are in fact central for a 'non-coercive and non-dominating' (Said, 2001: 367) approach to emancipation. The failure of the



FS to engage with postcolonial theorists of their time – whether CLR James or Fanon, in particular – raises serious questions about the utility of their critique of ideology, instrumental reason, or late capitalism. A closer engagement could have led to a clearer understanding of development, the erosion of working-class solidarity, and the expansion of capitalism and the state, and perhaps even given alternatives to the emancipatory project rather than the late, pessimistic turn of the First Generation. This alternative history is credible given that the birth of postcolonial critique followed the wake of defeat of class struggle in the West, *and*, the revolutionary nationalism in de-colonized states (Eagleton, 1999: 5). The same (potential) epistemological openings remain true of CIRT today. For example, closer engagements with gender can help overcome what Meger (2016) has identified as a tendency in IR (including CIRT) to neglect geographies and materialities of power. For her, a properly critical approach must re-interrogate social structures (patriarchy, political economy, etc.) and global political economic struggles. Without such engagement CIRT risks being what Thompson (2016) has termed ‘domesticated’, that is, surrendering a concern with domination and alienation to mere ‘neo-Idealist’ themes.

## CONCLUSION

The task, conceived broadly, is to be more attentive to parallel historical processes of emancipation. In CIRT, Martin Weber (esp. 2015) has taken seriously this challenge, attempting to bridge CIRT with postcolonial insights, particularly regarding the nature of development, history, and the subject of world politics. Others have sought to reposition CIRT through a historical rather than philosophical register. For example, Devetak has argued for a longer intellectual heritage than from the ‘FS-to-German Idealism’

narrative. For him, a key limit of CIRT is its reliance on moral philosophy and he has attempted instead to foreground CIRT within a secular political historicism (Devetak, 2014). This re-tracing of historical emancipatory processes within CIRT has led to a greater appreciation of plural enlightenments across different societies and eras that made possible the Western Enlightenment that had remained historically unmediated by the FS. As Cox has shown, contact with non-European cultures and ‘mutual civilizational borrowings’ provided the conditions for successive changes in European thought from which this emancipatory current emerged (1995b: 14). Buck-Morss’ analysis of the revolution in Haiti as the ‘crucible’ for the Enlightenment (2009: 42) further mediates this narrative – pushing our understanding of the Enlightenment away not only from its European moorings but also from its conception as a singular event, disconnected to history and the relations in the world. This revolution took place not in the centres of the West, as assumed in the predicted theories of revolution. For Buck-Morss it therefore challenges our ‘moral imagination’ in the ‘political present’, potentially informing new global thinking and global action (Buck-Morss, 2009: x). The hope is that through these historical retracings, new forms of emancipatory knowledge and action can emerge or be reclaimed. As always, the role of the ‘critical’ theorist remains to provide a ‘liberating ... influence’ in this process of emancipation to help ‘create a world which satisfies the needs and powers’ of all humanity (Horkheimer, 1972b: 246).

CIRT has left an indelible mark on the discipline of IR, highlighting the limits of positivist analysis, exposing the link between knowledge and interests, and thereby the supportive role played by the disciplinary mainstream in maintaining the interests of the most powerful in world politics. This cultural and ideological critique has been perhaps one of its most groundbreaking contributions. Yet it is in its methods, specifically the dialectical

approaches of immanent critique and normative reconstruction, that it has been most innovative. Even though Adorno may yet be proven right that the moment of its realization may have been missed (1981: 3), the vision of emancipation in CIRT remains as a promissory note for critical scholarship that weds historical possibility with the ethical concerns [*Allgemeinheit*] of humanity as a whole.

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## Notes

- 1 This is Cox's nomenclature but resonates clearly with Horkheimer's notion of 'Traditional Theory'.
- 2 Similar accounts have been written. See Linklater (1996) and Honneth (2004: 336–60).
- 3 Whilst CIRT has developed in different ways within German IR, for reasons of length and scope this chapter will concentrate on CIRT in Anglo-American IR.
- 4 I have explored the similarities and differences between Horkheimer and early CIRT elsewhere, especially in the work of Cox (see Brincat, 2016).
- 5 For a collection of such views, see Rengger and Thirkell-White (2007) and Brincat et al. (2012).
- 6 The debate between so-called 'Utopianists' (i.e. liberal internationalists) and Classical Realists (Carr, 1946).
- 7 For example, the Landmines Test Ban Treaty, protections against transboundary pollution, and refugee conventions (Linklater, 2001).
- 8 For example, the work of Richard Jackson, Charlotte Heath-Kelly, Harmonie Toros.
- 9 For example, the work of Kimberly Hutchings.
- 10 For example, the work of João Nunes.
- 11 For example, the work of Volker Heinz, Jürgen Haacke, Thomas Lindeman, Erik Ringmar.
- 12 For example, the work of Shannon Brincat, Matthew Fluck.
- 13 For example, the work of Martin Weber.
- 14 For example, the work of Benjamin Herborth. On cosmopolitanism, the work of Anthony Burke has been prominent, as has Jürgen Habermas' model of global governance (see esp. 2006: chapter 8).
- 15 This is particularly evident in the late work of Habermas but also in parts of Honneth's analysis of the public sphere (see esp. 2014).
- 16 This is, of course, a riff on Horkheimer's positioning of the work of the Institute (see Horkheimer, 1972a: 215).
- 17 This is a question adapted from Buck-Morss (2009: 109).

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# Space, Form, and Urbanity

Greig Charnock

*(Social) space is a (social) product.* (Lefebvre, 1991: 26)

By its actions, this society no longer accepts space as a container, but produces it; we do not live, act and work 'in' space so much as by living, acting, and working we produce space. (Smith, 2008: 116)

In its most general sense, Critical Theory aims to *critique* existing society as well as 'traditional' theories of that society: more precisely, it aims to 'penetrate the world of things to show the underlying relations between persons' (Aronowitz, 2015: 106) – to reveal the 'human bottom of nonhuman things' (Horkheimer, 2002: 142). Critical Theory thus attaches to 'critique' a very specific meaning (Bonefeld, 2001). Given that in a capitalistically constituted society, social reproduction is regulated by the production and exchange of 'things' by (formally) 'free' and 'equal' commodity producers, a good deal of Critical Theory's critique has justifiably focused upon the social constitution of *economic* forms, and upon demystifying

common consciousness of economic relations on a human basis (Backhaus 2005; Bellofiore and Redolfi Riva, 2015; Reichelt, 2005). Following Marx and Adorno, Bonefeld (2014: 3) argues for instance that 'the critique of political economy amounts to a critique of ontological conceptions of economic categories, including the category of labour as a transhistorically conceived category that defines the human metabolism with nature in abstraction from society'. A critical theory of capitalist society, in other words, should aim to demystify not only the market as a form of social reproduction based upon fundamental relations of un-freedom and in-equality, but also to expose traditional conceptions of that society as being rooted in unfounded ontological assumptions about humans' relation with nature that are appropriate to the functioning of that society, but which can be shown to be in the service of the ongoing reproduction of definite social relations, and a debasing and destructive social-ecological condition.

The remit of critique in this sense extends to cover social forms and ideologies that are often not considered to be of central, categorical importance to the critique of political economy, *per se* (see Adorno, 2001). As this chapter shows, there is already a well established body of critical social theory that has sought to critique spatial or geographical forms of social organisation – especially the agglomeration and networking of people and productive and consumptive economic activities in cities or urban centres – and those traditional urban theories that reduce such spatial or geographical forms to mere containers or conduits seemingly devoid of a ‘human bottom’.<sup>1</sup> For Neil Brenner, a leading contemporary urban theorist, any properly *critical* urban theory has to ‘differ fundamentally from what might be termed “mainstream” urban theory – for example, the approaches inherited from the Chicago School of urban sociology, or those deployed within technocratic or neoliberal forms of policy science’ (2009: 198). Calling for ‘a much more systematic integration of urban questions into the analytical framework of critical social theory as a whole’ (2009: 205), Brenner envisions a critical-theoretical project inspired by the Frankfurt School, among others, but appropriate to ‘conditions of increasingly generalised, worldwide urbanisation’ in the early twenty-first century:

Rather than affirming the current condition of cities as the expression of transhistorical laws of social organisation, bureaucratic rationality or economic efficiency, critical urban theory emphasizes the politically and ideologically mediated, socially contested and therefore malleable character of urban space – that is, its continual (re)construction as a site, medium, and outcome of historically specific relations of social power ... In short, critical urban theory involves the critique of ideology (including social-scientific ideologies) *and* the critique of power, inequality, injustice and exploitation, at once within and among cities. (2009: 198)

The purpose of this chapter is to establish the basis for a critical theory of space; that is, for an appreciation of how, to paraphrase Neil

Smith, modern society does not exist *in* space but actively *produces* space ‘in its own image’. It expands on the premise of there being a ‘human bottom’ to space and geography that has emerged out of an alienating and contradictory process of social-ecological metabolism, and in so doing expounds the basis for the critique of traditional Western epistemological conceptions and theories of urbanity. As has been recently underlined,

[if] it is no longer remarkable to speak of space, nature, and landscapes as socially *produced*, it is largely a reflection of the extent to which contemporary spatial and geographical thought has been transformed ... in particular with the ideas – or at least the language – of the French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre. (Kirsch, 2012: 1042)

In the absence of any definitive Frankfurt School Critical Theory of space and urbanity, the bulk of this chapter therefore consists of an exposition and critical evaluation of Lefebvre’s critical theory of the production of space. Before visiting Lefebvre, however, the chapter first follows the late Marxist geographer Neil Smith in looking for a properly critical-theoretical basis for deciphering spatial forms on a human basis in society’s metabolic relation with nature, and in dialogue with Alfred Schmidt’s pioneering work on a critical theory of the relationship between human labour and nature. This is a necessary detour since the notion of the production of nature, which Smith advances as a result of his engagement with Schmidt’s critical theory, is largely homologous to that of the production of space as originally theorised by Lefebvre. Lefebvre’s contribution is explained with a focus, first, on his critique of philosophico-epistemologies that fetishise space, and therefore make possible the representation of space and the instrumentalisation of spatial modelling that, in Lefebvre’s view, mediates the survival of capitalism and the reproduction of capitalist social relations in and through the urban form. The chapter then explains Lefebvre’s method of spatial

analysis, paying close attention to the contradictory nature of the process of the production of space and therefore to the emancipatory political possibilities inherent to it. The fourth section of the chapter returns to Smith to subject Lefebvre's own 'respatialised critical social theory' to critique on the grounds that it proceeds from unfounded or indefensible assumptions regarding the relations between time, space, nature, and therefore politics. The chapter concludes by reviewing how Lefebvre has nonetheless influenced more recent attempts to develop a critical theory of space under conditions of so-called 'planetary urbanisation' characteristic of the early twenty-first century.

## FROM THE PRODUCTION OF NATURE TO THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE

Within just a couple of years of one another, the British geographer David Harvey and his former student Neil Smith published two books that were to very rapidly transform the discipline of human geography as well as to make an enduringly significant impact on the broader social sciences. With *The Limits to Capital* (Harvey, 2007), first published in 1982, and 1984's *Uneven Development* (Smith, 2008), both authors eyed similar goals insofar as they each sought to challenge basic notions of space characteristic of traditional Western thought and common parlance – that of 'space as field, as a container, or as simple emptiness' (Smith, 2008: 92) – and to advance instead a systematic, Marxian understanding of how capital creates space in its own image. Both hold that geographical space itself becomes an active moment in the production and reproduction of a physical landscape bearing the hallmarks of alienation, exploitation, contradiction, and therefore politics. In *Uneven Development*, Smith surveys a canon of traditional Western thought about nature and space before outlining an original, critical theory of uneven

development in the last two chapters. Harvey's *Limits*, on the other hand, represents his 'explanatory-diagnostic' (Castree, 2006) – allegedly 'neo-classical' (Kipfer et al., 2008: 7) – Marxism, insofar as it consists of a more parsimonious attempt to provide an exposé of the crisis tendencies of the 'capitalist space economy' drawing almost exclusively on Marx's writings on value, production, exchange, and the circulation of capital. On the assumption that Harvey's contribution to the critical theory tradition is demonstrably limited, therefore, I concentrate on Smith in this first section, as providing an appropriate introduction to conceptualising the relation between society and space in terms of distinctively critical, non-traditional theory.

For Smith, an essential preliminary step in the appreciation of how capital produces space at various interrelational scales – from the local to the world market – is to first examine the *production of nature* in capitalist society. This, he underlines, is a reflexively critical endeavour since it must penetrate the 'delusive appearance of things' (Marx, quoted in Smith, 2008: 49), and must question a core tenet of traditional Western thought in which 'nature is generally seen as precisely that which cannot be produced; it is the antithesis of human productive activity' (Smith, 2008: 32). With this in mind, Smith mounts his construction of a theory of the production of nature on the basis of a critical reading of the Frankfurt School and a close reading of Alfred Schmidt's *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (1971), in particular. Ultimately, Smith is unconvinced by Schmidt's dualistic positing of two coterminous natures (one the external object of labour, the other a universal unity of nature and society), and of a resulting thesis he finds at the same time both utopian and, in 'characteristic' Frankfurt School fashion, despairing of 'the inexorable necessity of human domination over nature' (2008: 47; see also Foster, 2000: 245). Yet, Smith also finds much to commend in Schmidt's book. For instance, Schmidt alerts us to the

central importance of the concept of socio-ecological *metabolism* in Marx's own work: the key point being that 'the whole of nature is socially mediated and, inversely, society is mediated through nature as a component of the total reality' (Schmidt, 1971: 79).<sup>2</sup> Smith also picks up on Schmidt's 'useful distinction between "first nature" and a "second nature"' (Smith, 2008: 33), which he subsequently re-fashions in *Uneven Development* so as to claim that 'we must now consider there to be a social priority of nature; nature is nothing but social' (2008: 47), and that 'instead of the domination of nature, therefore, we must consider the more complex process of the *production of nature*' (2008: 48).

For Smith, the term 'second nature' captures the result of the historical generalisation of production for exchange characteristic of capitalism, and subsequently – as part-and-parcel of the completion of the world market – the result of the 'real subsumption of nature to capital' (Smith, 2006). With the development of capitalism as a genuinely worldwide form of social production, 'nature is progressively produced from within and as part of the so-called second nature' (Smith, 2008: 77). While it is true that any physical commodity produced remains subject to the laws of gravity and physics that apply in first nature, that commodity is at the same time an exchange-value subject to the abstract laws of the market and therefore, for Smith, 'travels in second nature' (2008: 79). In search of profit, capital 'attaches a price tag to everything it sees and from then on, it is this price tag which determines the fate of nature' (2008: 78); 'no part of the earth's surface, the atmosphere, the oceans, the geological substratum, or the biological substratum are immune from transformation by capital' (2008: 79). Indeed, for Smith, such was the degree to which capital had subsumed nature in this manner that the distinction between first and second nature was, by the late twentieth century, practically obsolete.

While this universalising tendency of capital to produce second nature on a world

scale carries with it important homogenising tendencies (and Smith here discusses wage-labour, globalised production, the privatised and gendered form of the reproduction of labour-power, and bourgeois consciousness), it is nevertheless one that is rooted in the specifically capitalistic production process and specifically capitalist relations of production. As such, the production of nature on a universal scale is rife with internal contradictions that are manifest in barriers to 'capital's own nature' (to paraphrase Marx, 1993: 410), both in terms of the production of scarcity and 'natural' crises (such as climate change), and in terms of the production of a specific barrier to capital in the form of a global working class which confronts the unity of society and nature in alienated forms on a daily basis – the labour market, the labour process, the wage-form, and so on (Smith, 2008: 84–5).

Having laid out a theory of the production of nature, Smith then turns his attention to the question of space, and the core problematic of *Uneven Development*: namely, how to explain the ongoing production of a highly variegated and dynamic geographical landscape in capital's own image – that is, to decipher *produced* space as means and end of capital's socio-ecological metabolism.<sup>3</sup> Smith's line of argument is unequivocal: 'Unless space is conceptualised as a quite separate reality from nature, the production of space is a logical corollary of the production of nature' (2008: 92). His own theory of the uneven development of capitalism therefore builds upon the argument that the produced space, or socio-ecological landscape, of capitalist 'second nature' emerges out of a determined, incessant 'dialectic of equalisation and differentiation' of the development of capital's productive forces. As capital extends its reach over the whole globe, the landscape is wholly subsumed within and therefore produced by the production of nature and capital's price-tagging of everything, yet consists of myriad particularised spaces/places – at a variety of spatial scales – whose *relative* past, present and future development is conditioned by



geographically specific degrees of the concentration and centralisation of capital, the agglomeration and socialisation of labour-power, and differing degrees of resilience to the perpetual rhythms of accumulation that periodically threaten the devaluation of geographically concentrated fixed capital and localised working classes bearing specific productive and cost attributes. As Smith explains,

the drive towards universality in capitalism brings only a limited equalisation of levels and conditions of development. Capital produces distinct spatial scales – absolute spaces – within which the drive towards equalisation is concentrated. But it can do this only by an acute differentiation and continued redifferentiation of relative space both within and between scales. The scales themselves are not fixed but develop (growing pangs and all) within the development of capitalism itself. They are not impervious; the urban and national scales are products of world capital and continue to be shaped by it. But the necessity of discrete scales and of their internal differentiation is fixed. (2008: 196)

‘Uneven development’, he concludes, ‘is the product and geographical premise of capitalist development’.

### **HENRI LEFEBVRE’S CRITIQUE OF FORMALISM AND OF URBAN FORM<sup>4</sup>**

Smith’s arrival at a general theory of uneven development as a necessary premise and product of capitalist development owes a significant debt to the work of Henri Lefebvre, who first coined the term ‘the production of space’ and theorised spatial forms in largely homologous terms to the production of nature thesis. For Stanley Aronowitz (2015: 133), the Anglo-American academy’s ignorance of Henri Lefebvre while he was alive amounts to ‘a classic case of mis-recognition’, insofar as most failed to appreciate his significance as

the ecophilosopher of the 21st century, for he made the connection between the massive

despoiling of the global ecosystems, the new shape of social time and space and the struggle for the transformation of everyday life which, he claims, is the key to the project of changing life and repairing our collective relationship to nature.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, in recent years, Lefebvre’s work has become incredibly influential in its own right, and his ideas and concepts have become common currency among critical urban theorists.<sup>6</sup>

Prior to the posthumous discovery of the works of Henri Lefebvre by Anglophone scholars since the 1990s,<sup>7</sup> and of his popularisation by Marxists such as Smith, on the one hand, and cultural theorists of ‘post-modernism’ on the other (see Kipfer et al., 2008: 6–10), his reception in France and elsewhere was primarily as someone who wrote about dialectical method and Marx in the Hegelian, humanist tradition common to much ‘Western Marxism’ (Shields, 1999: 109; also Jay, 1984).<sup>8</sup> A hallmark of Lefebvre’s writings is the extent to which they are consistently methodologically minded, the dialectic being the thread that runs through his prolific and thematically varied output over several decades. This is certainly the case with his writings on space, originally published in France between 1968 and 1974. In these, and in addition to arguing persuasively that space should be thought of in dialectical terms of its social production – rather than in purely Cartesian and Euclidean terms<sup>9</sup> – one of Lefebvre’s signal critical-theoretical contributions is to highlight the anti-representational orientation of Hegelian Marxism. That is, his critique of formal logic and epistemology emphasised at once the dialectic’s ability to reconcile social analysis with flux, internal relations, determinate negation, mediation and Becoming, while also exposing the violence or ‘terrorism’ inherent to dominant, representational norms of analysis based upon purely formal epistemologies and methods of formal abstraction.

For Lefebvre, representational knowledge about the world is an abstraction from concrete, lived experience [*du vécu*] and as such

ideological (for instance, Lefebvre, 1991: 230). In various works, Lefebvre reveals the limits to formal epistemology, but also at the level of serviceable representations that have a 'real' and violent effect in the hands of planning agencies and policymakers. In his work on space and urbanism, Lefebvre therefore railed against 'models' – abstract but concretely applicable representations of a projected, planned society in which some kinds of social and spatial practice are condoned and others dismissed as pathological or dysfunctional. Lefebvre is highly critical of the intellectual division of labour characteristic of the modern university system, as well as of the social role of 'techniques, technicians, technocrats, epistemology, and the research of a purely technical or epistemological order' (Lefebvre, 2009: 175) that serve to dissect the total movement of human social praxis, compartmentalise various spheres or activities of everyday life (paradigmatically, in the circuit ... production ... consumption ... production ...), and mould concrete space according to the logic of pure form, recurrence and coherence. To deny particularity and difference, for Lefebvre, is to be dogmatic, and to aim to reduce differences and close the circuit of everyday life is to be implicated in the generalised 'terrorism' of the bourgeoisie (Lefebvre, 2000). He writes 'the physician of modern society sees himself as the physician of a sick social space ... The cure? It is *coherence* ... he will systematise the *logic of the habitat* underlying the disorder and apparent incoherence' (Lefebvre, 1996: 82–3).<sup>10</sup> There is violence intrinsic to such abstraction: 'the "plan" ... does not remain innocently on paper. On the ground, the bulldozer realizes "plans"' (Lefebvre, 1996: 191). In terms of critique, then, Lefebvre is certain that 'to clear a path, we have to destroy the models' (Lefebvre, 2003: 163).

Lefebvre's antidote to traditional epistemologies of urbanity, formal logic, speculative philosophies, Althusserian structuralism, Sartre's existentialism, and Soviet Diamat

was what he repeatedly calls 'metaphilosophy' (see Lefebvre, 2016). At root, metaphilosophy is concerned with *praxis*: 'Production produces man. So-called "world history" or the "history of the world" is nothing but the history of man producing himself, of man producing both the human world and the other man, the (alienated) man of otherness, and his self (his self-consciousness)' [sic] (Lefebvre, 2008: 237). The purpose of critique, for Lefebvre, is therefore to illuminate and decipher human alienation on the basis of praxis (2008: 137); it is to ask: 'How can men [sic] live as they are living, and how can they accept it?' (2008: 30). Lefebvre's own exploration of this question led him to develop his critique of everyday life over the course of four decades, and to his work on the production of space.

The continuities of thought from Hegel and Marx to Lefebvre are evident in the latter's long-term preoccupation with everyday life [*la vie quotidienne*], the practical problem of alienation that arises out of human social practice in the historical form of bourgeois society, and an investigation into the potential for realising an as yet only possible dis-alienated society through praxis. The consideration of the broadest possible notion of production (to include signs, writing, culture, space, etc.) as well as the problem of *re-production* of the mode of production and its associated forms of alienation, is central to understanding Lefebvre's long-term project as best represented by the three volumes of his *Critique of Everyday Life*, published between 1947 and 1981. As Lefebvre writes,

According to Marx's early works ... production is not merely the making of products ... it also signifies the self-production of the 'human being' in the process of historical self-development, which involves the production of social relations. Finally, in its fullest sense, the term embraces *re-production* ... [this] being the outcome of a complex impulse rather than of inertia or passivity; this impulse ... this *praxis* and *poiesis* does not take place in the higher spheres of a society (state, scholarship, 'culture') but in everyday life. (Lefebvre, 2000: 30–1)

This project yielded the substance of Lefebvre's lasting contribution to critical social theory – a theory of social (re-)production in which 'everyday life has become an object of consideration and is the province of organisation; the space–time of voluntary programmed self-regulation, because when properly organised it provides a closed circuit (production–consumption–production), where demands are foreseen because they are induced and desires are run to earth' (Lefebvre, 2000: 72). In recognising this, the dialectic of everyday life builds upon the Marxian critique of alienation, yet, in Lefebvre's view, broadens its parameters beyond the critique of political economy which hinges too narrowly on the question of linear time. 'Workers do not only have a life in the workplace', explains Lefebvre (1988: 78), 'they have a social life, family life, political life; they have experiences outside the domain of labour', and this would suggest, for Lefebvre, a closer examination of how urban form guarantees the everyday domination of the linear time of labour and accumulation over the rhythmic time of biology, ecology, and art (Aronowitz, 2015).

The idea that the sphere of everyday life can explain the survival of capitalism into the late twentieth century – as well as illuminate the role of formal logic, modelling, and social planning as ideology, as we explain later – leads Lefebvre (1976: 21) to his now well-known thesis: that 'capitalism has found itself able to attenuate (if not resolve) its internal contradictions for a century ... *by occupying space, by producing a space*'. Lefebvre reveals that capitalism produces its own (urban) space and, in so doing, creates the permissive conditions for the reproduction of the totality of bourgeois society (an argument that implicated the former communist bloc as much as the West). Time, understood in the abstract as concerning work, the production of commodities and of surplus value, has been 'reduced to constraints of space' – circumscribed and suppressed within the *urban form*. The process

of mediation that re-produces the social relations of production in a contradictory form, according to Lefebvre, is therefore that of *urbanisation*.

In *The Urban Revolution* (2003), Lefebvre explains how the growth of industry and of the forces of production on an increasingly global scale has come to be subsumed by the more encompassing process of urbanisation. In and through the urban-form, capitalism is able to reproduce itself by relativising all particularities – a dialectical necessity Marx identified in terms of the division of labour, the factory system, and so on, but into which Lefebvre introduces spatial determinations and in so doing offers an explanation of the survival of the capitalist mode of production to date. The urban form *totalises* all particular labour and space in an internal and '*centralising*' relationship: 'piles of objects and products in warehouses, mounds of fruit in the marketplace, crowds, pedestrians, goods of various kinds, juxtaposed, superimposed, accumulated – this is what makes the urban urban' (Lefebvre, 2003: 116). There is, according to Lefebvre, 'no urban reality without a centre, without a gathering together of all that can be born into space and that can be produced in it, without an encounter, actual or possible, of all "objects" and "subjects"' (Lefebvre, 1996: 195). Yet despite this intrinsic centralisation, and despite the urban being a creation of socio-ecological metabolism, the urban-form is determined as a 'product' (corresponding to exchangeability and price signals) rather than an '*oeuvre*' – a place of dwelling and of playful, poetic, and artistic sociality and imagination. Perversely, urbanised 'citizens' are concentrated together in bodily proximity like never before, yet they have never been more segregated, alienated, and atomised in their everyday lives. For Lefebvre, nowhere was this constraining and alienated mode of everyday life within the urban habitat more evident than in the state-planned new towns and housing projects erected in many European cities in the post-war period. Here, 'humiliation and the lack of freedom resulting from the presence (and absence) of the centres

of decision-making and social life are keenly felt' (Lefebvre, 1969: 99).

Lefebvre's critique of everyday life places emphasis upon the extent to which, by the 1970s, time had become dominated by space, the growth of the forces of production by the development of the social relations of production,<sup>11</sup> and in the urban-form. Moreover, this reproduction occurs by means of the totalising drive by capital to subsume the entire world to *abstract space* (Lefebvre, 1991; Stanek, 2008), which is 'abstract inasmuch as it has no existence save by virtue of the exchangeability of all its component parts, and concrete inasmuch as it is socially real and as such localised' (Lefebvre, 1991: 341–2). Lefebvre termed this process of global subsumption [*mondialisation*], that of the self-realisation of a spatial totality – of the world 'becoming worldwide', of 'planetary urbanisation' (Lefebvre, 2009).

## THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE AND THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE

As a dialectical theorist, Lefebvre is adamant that the urbanisation process also provides clues as to the possibility of a dis-alienated totality that already exists, albeit in the mode of being denied. Analytically, this poses the question of form *and* content. The key here is to recognise that 'urban space–time, as soon as we stop defining it in terms of industrial rationality – its project of homogenisation – appears as *differential*' (Lefebvre, 2003: 37). That is, 'abstract space *is not* homogenous; it simply *has* homogeneity as its goal, its orientation, its "lens"' (Lefebvre, 1991: 287). For Lefebvre the Marxist, the identification of the potentially revolutionary content of the analysis of the production of space and critique of everyday life follows from the insight that the production of space can only proceed via a relational process of homogenisation-differentiation (Lefebvre, 1991: 308, 342; Stanek, 2008: 71–2). Urbanisation

brings human subjects together in space in such a way that is necessary for the reproduction of the social relations of production, but which also exacerbates the contradictions of this abstract space – for example, it creates centres in which 'once groups and classes succeed in meeting face to face, once they come to grips, a free dialogue explodes under the dialectical impetus' (Lefebvre, 2000: 185). Homogenising abstract space is therefore constituted by social relations that simultaneously constitute a 'differential space', which 'is different because it celebrates particularity – both bodily and experiential' (Merrifield, 2000: 176). So, while Lefebvre explains the necessity of urbanisation from the point of view of capital, he also identifies 'the existence of *irreducibles*, contradictions and objections that intervene and hinder the closing of the circuit [of everyday life], that split the structure' (Lefebvre, 2000: 75). For Lefebvre, there is some residuum of human subjectivity and *style* that capital has been unable to subsume, invert or control,<sup>12</sup> and it is this insight which holds the key to understanding the limits to the production of abstract space in an urban-form. Everyday life is, according to Lefebvre, the sphere in which such irreducibles are to be found. It is 'the sociological point of feedback' (Lefebvre, 2000: 32); 'the ill-defined, cutting edge where the accumulative and the non-accumulative intersect' (Lefebvre, 2008: 335); and 'the point of delicate balance and that where imbalance threatens' (Lefebvre, 2000: 32). And, critically, it is the sphere that holds the key to revolutionary action: 'a revolution takes place when and only when, in such a society, people can no longer lead their everyday lives'.<sup>13</sup>

'Urbanisation' is for Lefebvre a determined, dialectical, systematic theoretical category and not simply an empirical, immediate product. In general terms, it is a process in which the determinations 'centrality' (homogeneity) and 'polycentrality' (fragmentation, difference) are mediated, (un-)fixed within the urban-form (Lefebvre, 2003:

119; Rui Martins, 1982: 171). The means of critically analysing urban form as a mediating space which attains a 'certain cohesiveness, if not a logical coherence' (Lefebvre, 1991: 378) is laid out by Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (1991). Lefebvre outlines a unitary 'spatial triad' consisting of three relational moments, or conceptions of space, which allow the analyst to grasp both the generative, diachronic constitution of urban space as well as to behold, synchronically, the material appearance of socio-physical space at a given time. As one exponent of such a Lefebvrian urbanist methodology summarises, this theory 'has at its core a three-level process of production: first, material production; second, the production of knowledge; and third, the production of meaning' (Schmid, 2006: 169) – corresponding to the three-fold determination of space out of practical, mental, and symbolic dimensions. Lefebvre termed these dimensions; first, the 'perceived space' [*espace perçu*] of 'spatial practice' based in the concrete and networked social and physical infrastructures of production, exchange and social reproduction that materialise under urbanisation. Second, the 'conceived space' [*espace conçu*] of 'representations of space', comprised of 'scientific' and 'official' knowledge that reduces space in functionalist terms – diagnosing its utility and pathology and prescribing models to remould space. Third, the 'spaces of representation', or 'lived space' [*espace vécu*], in which inhabitants and users of the city inscribe their own symbolic content and meaning to space in the course of their everyday lives – producing an elusive space of art, play, imagery, incoherence, inconsistency, and everything that is surplus or residual once the dissection of space by traditional epistemological means has been exhausted (Schmid, 2006: 168–9; see also Merrifield, 1993: 522–5). Put another way,

Urban space is, first of all, material, perceivable space. As such, it is a space of material interaction and of physical meeting that is opened up by networks and information flows ...

Second, ... [w]hat we understand of the city is dependent on the social definition of the urban and thus on the image of the city, on the blueprint of the map, but also on the plan that tries to define and pin down the urban.... Depending on one's perspective – scientific, planning, media, or political – the city is understood to mean different units. All these various definitions are specific representations of space. They describe discursive demarcations of the content of the urban and entail corresponding strategies of inclusion and exclusion. Definitions of the city become a field in which a variety of strategies and interests are employed.

Third, the city is always a lived space as well, a place of residents who use it and appropriate it for their practices. The urban identifies the place of difference: the specific quality of urban space results from the simultaneous presence of quite distinct worlds and concepts of value, of ethnic, cultural, and social groups, of activities, functions, and knowledge. (Schmid, 2006: 169–70)

Lefebvre's analysis of urbanisation, and of the production of abstract yet differential space inherent to this process, points towards a *virtual*, or possible, urban society – one in which cyclical time is no longer subordinated to space, and which is 'based upon the elimination of antagonisms that find their expression in segregation; it must involve differences and be defined by these differences' (Lefebvre, 2000: 190).<sup>14</sup> Lefebvre concluded the means and end of revolutionary praxis in an urbanised world to be 'generalised self-management' [*autogestion*] and the 'withering away of the state' (Lefebvre, 2009: 149): in short, 'the end of politics' (Lefebvre, 1970: 8). Lefebvre (2009: 246) considers the logicians and modellers of space to be 'agents of the state' precisely because they persist despite the fact that the production of space is a contradictory process in which difference cannot be wholly reduced. Chief responsibility for suppressing the realisation of a disalienated urban society through the concretisation of abstract space lies in the Modern State ('the quintessential limiter' for Lefebvre, 2003: 163). The state has, for Lefebvre, assumed ever-increasing responsibility for circumscribing and cohering the

process of urbanisation and sustaining the alienation inherent to programmed everyday life (Lefebvre, 2008: 124–5). For Lefebvre (2009: 174), then, ‘there is a politics of space because space is political’. Lefebvre’s general critique of the process of urbanisation carries along with it a politically focused critique of reductive forms of knowledge, instrumental representations of space – and of their social and political function on an increasingly global (or worldwide) scale. By identifying *autogestion* as ‘orienting’ us to a path towards dis-alienation by means of the end of politics (Lefebvre, 1978: 295), Lefebvre envisions a possible future beyond capitalism (Lefebvre, 1968: 183) – a posture which Aronowitz (2015: 154) claims distinguishes Lefebvre from the Frankfurt School’s pessimistic stance arising out of its refusal of the ideology of progress.

What distinguishes Lefebvre’s critical philosophy from Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School is that it understands that categories such as the ‘totally administered society’ and the ‘eclipse of reason’ are accurate as tendencies, but when taken as a new totality, are one-sided. Lefebvre’s most urgent goal is to recapture genuine experience and free the concrete from its subsumption under the abstract, represented most powerfully by technology and its companion, administration. (2015: 154)

Aronowitz concludes that:

Lefebvre’s philosophy refuses the thesis that the defeats of the past century are permanent and justify the refusal of the intellectual to engage in social and political practice; in this respect, Lefebvre stands with Sartre who insisted that the intellectual must commit oneself to an historical standpoint, even as one recognises the pitfalls. (2015: 154)

## QUESTIONING LEFEBVRE’S CRITICAL THEORY OF SPACE

Kanishka Goonewardena (2008: 131) incisively surmises that Lefebvre’s ‘basic contribution to Marxism’, was to make ‘the simple point that there can be no revolution without

an urban revolution, no urban revolution without a revolution, and neither without a revolution of everyday life’. The pre-eminent critical geographer Edward W. Soja (1980: 215) agreed: ‘[Lefebvre] argues that no social revolution can succeed without being at the same time a conscious, spatial revolution’. Yet Lefebvre’s critique of space, and of his faith in the emancipatory potentialities inherent to the production of spatialities that are saturated with contradiction and therefore political, has been subjected to scrutiny and rejected by some on fundamental theoretical grounds.<sup>15</sup>

As noted earlier, Neil Smith was very much influenced by Lefebvre’s work. He confessed that he remained ‘convinced by the brilliance of his proposal of “the production of space”’ (Smith, 1998: 56), and later maintains in his Foreword to *The Urban Revolution* that ‘Lefebvre was seeing things at the end of the 1960s that many of us, often with his help, came to see clearly only in more recent years and now are still recovering’ (Smith, 2003: viii). Yet Smith also expressed deep-seated reservations about Lefebvre’s version of a ‘respatialised social theory’ (Smith, 1998: 51). In short, Smith accuses Lefebvre of operating with precisely the kind of bifurcation between space and nature that his own work warns against. In Smith’s reading, Lefebvre ‘leaves nature largely unreconstructed’ (1998: 59), much as one of his influences Martin Heidegger did, and such that ‘nature is reduced to a substratum’ (1998: 60). Space takes priority over an external nature, and in Lefebvre’s somewhat bucolic and romanticist vision is lost to time as the production of abstract space proceeds with greater intensity and extensity. For Smith, on the other hand – and as noted earlier, ‘the production of space is integral to the production of nature and fashioned within it. It is the corollary of the production of nature rather than the other way round’ (1998: 61). Ironically, then, Lefebvre’s treatment of nature bears all the hallmarks of the same fetishisms that pervade the traditional

social and environmental sciences insofar as he is apparently unable to comprehend the production of second nature (and beyond, to the extent that ‘the ongoing history of physical intervention ... has already socialised – in beautiful or grotesque form – what there is to be apprehended’, 1998: 62).

Smith then questions the very necessity for respatialised social theory in the first place: ‘Why, to put it most simply, is politics now a question of space?’ (Smith, 1998: 52). In Smith’s reading, Lefebvre mounts a formidable ‘anti-philosophical’ critique of traditional philosophico-epistemological thought and its fetishisation of space, but only to then himself assert dogmatically that space ought to be the ontological centre of properly critical theory of societal development. ‘Lefebvre leans to Hegel’s “end of history” and takes his stand there, on “space” as the product and residue of “historical time”’ (1998: 55). ‘History’ as Marx, Bergson, Husserl, or Lukács knew it therefore disappears in Lefebvre’s theory, to be replaced by a strikingly teleological ‘spatial history’ (see Lefebvre, 1991) in which ‘the history of society is indeed the story of class struggle, ... but of class struggle *for* space’ (Smith, 1998: 57). Smith’s concerns here chime with those of Derek Kerr, writing in the now defunct journal *Common Sense* just a few years earlier. He surmises of Lefebvre’s works (1976 and 1991) that:

Class struggle and history are reduced to abstract time and exist *in* the container of abstract space, while this space has contradictions of its own which can then externally ‘envelop historical contradictions’. But by separating out contradictions of space from those *in* space and by reducing class struggle and history to the latter, it is not clear what constitutes the contradictions of space (Kerr, 1994: 32).

Against Lefebvre, he argues: ‘If social relations are inherently spatial and temporal then there can be no separation in/of dualism’ (1994: 32); furthermore, to ‘displace time by space merely obscures the dynamic and contradictory nature of the capital relation and the ways in which this expresses itself in a

spatially uneven way through ... “the *production of space* in its own image”’ (1994: 34). For Kerr, then:

Marx was *not* limiting himself to time, but to uncovering the contradictory constitution of the capital relation (see Bonefeld, 1993) as it attempts to transform and express itself through spatial and temporal modalities of existence. It is the capital relation that continually attempts to subordinate the whole (space) of society to the abstract logic of linear time, the ticking of the factory clock. This abstract time is not the concrete history of capitalism, but rather is the dominant and contradictory tendency through which that history expresses itself, one which continually attempts to reduce the internally related and qualitative nature of *both* space and time to the quantitative metric of value. As such the form, nature and very existence of ‘capitalist space’ expresses and adheres in and through the contradictory presence of *labour in capital*. This *is* the dialectic, not one of time nor of space but ... a negative dialectic, a dialectic of negation with no certain synthesis ... The history of capitalism *is*, therefore, none other than the struggle over and through space as capital attempts to transform the entire *spatial existence* of society into a machine for the production and *quantitative expansion* of surplus value in terms of the metric of socially necessary labour time. (1994: 32)

Finally, Smith begs of Lefebvre’s work the more practical political question of providing some insight into what an alternative, spatialised politics would look like. In addition to proposing that any viable emancipatory project would have to be based upon a more convincing dialectic of nature than that with which Lefebvre operates, Smith also highlights the inadequacy of Lefebvre’s ‘reproductionism’ – that is, the insistence that whatever crisis might confront the capitalist system and bring an urban politics of difference to the fore would be a crisis of the reproduction of the social relations of production in and through space, rather than a crisis of capital’s necessity to self-valorise on the basis of the exploitation of living labour and its metabolic relation with nature. In the last instance, even if one accepts a reproductionist posture such as Lefebvre’s, it is unclear exactly how *space* per se – rather than the contradictory *socio-ecological* nature of

capital, however mediated – will determine substantive political change. As Smith puts it, ‘where Lefebvre closes in on the political conclusions of his analysis, ... space seems to fall entirely out of the picture ... it is nowhere to be seen. The dualism of space and society lingers on’ (Smith, 2008: 125).

### LEFEBVRE’S LEGACY: FROM THE RIGHT TO THE CITY TO PLANETARY URBANISATION

Notwithstanding the criticisms levelled at his work on space, Lefebvre retains significant influence in debates surrounding urban development, governance, and politics – and his theories and concepts have had a demonstrably enduring impact on critical social and urban theory.<sup>16</sup> For instance, in the wake of urban social mobilisations in 2010 – ranging from the Arab Spring, to the Occupy! movement – commentators and activists sought to make sense of what was happening with recourse to familiar Lefebvrian concepts. David Harvey paid homage to ‘Lefebvre’s vision’ (2012: ix), concluding that: ‘Perhaps, after all, Lefebvre was right, more than forty years ago, to insist that the revolution in our times has to be urban – or nothing’ (2012: 25). Harvey, like many others,<sup>17</sup> attaches great political importance to the notion of the ‘right to the city’ (Lefebvre, 1996) – which Harvey reinterprets as ‘to claim some kind of shaping power over the processes of urbanisation, over the ways in which our cities are made and remade, and to do so in a fundamental and radical way’. Andy Merrifield similarly builds his own theory of urban theory and protest around this Lefebvrian concept, but also argues that Lefebvre forewarned us of the degree to which the substantive realisation of the right to the city – ‘a *new form of centrality and citizenship*’ (2013: 34, italics in original) – would become a pressing need for the majority of humanity under the socio-ecological condition of

‘planetary urbanisation’. ‘Planetary urbanisation is creating a whole new spatial world (dis)order’, he writes (2013: 3). ‘The more the city grows, develops, extends itself, and spreads its tentacles everywhere, [Lefebvre] says, the more social relations get degraded and the more sociability is torn apart at the seams’ (2013: 15).

It would appear, then, that Lefebvre has bequeathed a politically effective lexicon of urbanity to the contemporary scholar-activist. But while Merrifield himself is open to a more experimental, perhaps less systematic, approach to urban theory and politics (see also Merrifield, 2011), others have picked up on Lefebvre’s methodological relevance for research in a world that is, as many suggest, more urbanised than ever before. Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid (2014, 2015), for example, have in recent years sought to subvert accepted ‘mainstream’ definitions and epistemologies of the so-called ‘urban age’ (e.g. UN-Habitat, 2007) in accordance with Lefebvre’s metaphilosophy (Brenner, 2013a: 95; see also Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015). They posit, as but one of seven theses on an epistemology of ‘the urban’, that:

No longer conceived as a form, type or bounded unit, the urban must now be retheorised as a process that, even while continually reinscribing patterns of agglomeration across the earth’s terrestrial landscape, simultaneously transgresses, explodes and reworks inherited geographies (of social interaction, settlement, land use, circulation and socio-metabolic organisation), both within and beyond large-scale metropolitan centres. (Brenner and Schmid, 2015: 166)

The critical intent of such a critique of existing, ‘methodologically cityist’ (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015), epistemologies of ‘the urban’ is to ‘illuminate the manifold ways in which the users of urbanizing spaces produce and transform their own urban worlds through everyday practices, discourses, and struggles, leading to the formation not only of new urban spatial configurations, but of new visions of the potentials being produced and claimed through their activities’ (Brenner and



Schmid, 2015: 178). For Brenner (2013a: 89), and others, Lefebvre's critical theory remains hugely influential as a 'rallying cry' for many wishing to play an active role in reshaping 'the future of capitalism, politics, and the planetary ecosystem', since it posits that 'the urban is thus no longer a site or arena of contentious politics, but has become one of its primary stakes. Reorganising urban conditions is increasingly seen as a means to transform the broader political-economic structures and spatial formations of early twenty-first century world capitalism as a whole'. Foundational work by Brenner and others<sup>18</sup> is already yielding fresh research producing new cartographies and politico-economic accounts of planetary urbanisation – and which seek to subvert the methodological cityism inherent to traditional urban theory (see e.g. Arboleda, 2015; Brenner, 2013b; Kanai, 2014; Wilson and Bayón, 2015).

## CONCLUSION

In the absence of a definitive Frankfurt School theory of space, form and urbanity, this chapter has focused on the theory of the production of space developed by the French contemporary of Adorno and Horkheimer, Henri Lefebvre. Initially by means of a detour to the work of the geographer Neil Smith – who insisted that the production of space is a corollary of the production of nature – the chapter expounded the dialectical relation between humans, nature and space, as developed by Smith in dialogue with Alfred Schmidt's work on human labour and nature, before moving on to Lefebvre. Lefebvre's theory of the production of space – itself spun out of a longer-term preoccupation with everyday life in mid-twentieth-century capitalism – was shown to parallel the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School insofar as it subjected traditional theories of space to critique in accordance with Marx's insistence that it is the definite social relations between humans that

manifest themselves in social forms, and not nature or history abstractly conceived. The chapter then outlined Lefebvre's contribution to the analysis of space as a social product, his theory of urbanisation, and his writings on the politics of space, before reviewing significant criticisms of that contribution – not least by Smith, who identified weaknesses that can be traced back to Lefebvre's inadequate dialectic of nature and space. Regardless of such issues, the chapter concluded by acknowledging Lefebvre's lasting legacy; first, in terms of the longevity of his key terms and concepts, such as the production of space and the right to the city, but also in his role as a key interlocutor in an emergent literature on planetary urbanisation. By questioning the methodological cityism of traditional urban theory and policy, such work illuminates the degree to which even the ostensibly 'non-urban' world is today subsumed to the destructive process of capital accumulation, rendering the traditional urban–rural distinction problematic in epistemological but also political terms (Arboleda, 2016; Brenner, 2016). As such, it echoes Lefebvre's concern to develop a critique of space and of urbanity that is not reducible to a concern with 'the city' as a mere container, or form of human settlement that poses certain governance problems (such as overcrowding or sanitation and infrastructure) to which technocratic, market-based fixes might be found. Rather, this emergent literature seeks to build upon the theorising of Lefebvre and others so as to highlight the dangers of traditional urban theory's formal methods of abstraction so as to open up more substantive and subversive debate about urbanity, citizenship and social nature beyond the city and on a biospheric, planetary scale.

## Notes

- 1 See e.g. the important appeal to consider the violence of real geographical abstractions by Loftus (2015).
- 2 For useful discussion of the concept of 'metabolism' [*Stoffwechsel*] in Marx's writings, see Foster (2000: chapter 5); and for further discussion of

- the concept in the work of Adorno, Schmidt, and Foster, see Cook (2014).
- 3 Smith's more empirical interest in the 1980s was in advancing a Marxian explanation for how and why localised instances of 'gentrification' were becoming common to many 'postindustrial' inner-cities in the United States and Western Europe.
  - 4 This and the subsequent sections draw upon my earlier work on Lefebvre (Charnock, 2010, 2014; Charnock and Ribera-Fumaz, 2011).
  - 5 Lefebvre's life story makes for fascinating reading. It is often remarked that he 'lived the adventure of the twentieth century' (Hess, 1988; Kipfer et al., 2008: 2). For accounts of Lefebvre's life and work in English, see Elden (2004), Merrifield (2006), and Shields (1999); and for the definitive account of his interest in space and urbanity in particular, see Stanek (2011).
  - 6 See e.g. Peter Marcuse (2009), son of Frankfurt School theorist Herbert Marcuse.
  - 7 This surge in interest in Henri Lefebvre in Anglo-phone social science followed, and encouraged, the first publication of several of his major works in English: notably, *The Production of Space* (1991), *The Right to the City* (published in *Writings on Cities* (1996)), *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (2000), *The Urban Revolution* (2003), three volumes of *Critique of Everyday Life* (2008), and the collection of essays in *State, Space, World* (2009).
  - 8 Stanek (2011: 63, 272) notes how Lefebvre was in various instances engaged in personal dialogue with Georg Lukács in the 1940s and 1950s, and participated in events with the likes of Kostas Axelos, Ernst Bloch, Jürgen Habermas, Herbert Marcuse, and Alfred Sohn Rethel among others in the 1960s.
  - 9 What Dimendberg (1998: 19) terms the paradigm of 'containerism', with its roots in 'the Aristotelian category of *topos*, the *res extensa* of Descartes, Newton's void, and the absolute of Leibniz', and which presupposes that 'space is essentially empty and static, a passive and inert vessel'.
  - 10 See Elden (2004) on Martin Heidegger's influence upon Lefebvre's argument that 'inhabiting [*habiter*] has been reduced to the notion of habitat [*habitat*]'.
    - 11 For Lefebvre's own clarification of these Marxian categories, see *The Sociology of Marx* (1968: 19–20).
    - 12 See Kouvelakis (2008: 711) on Lefebvre and 'modernity': 'the "shadow" cast over bourgeois society by the failure of revolution, at once a compensatory substitute and the ineliminable trace of vanquished hopes'.
    - 13 Such instances are theorised by Lefebvre in terms of 'moments'. 'The moment is a philosophical anticoncept', writes Merrifield (2009: 939), 'an affirmation of *residue*, or remainders, of marginal leftovers, of the power and radicality of the ragged and the *irreducible*'.
  - 14 This conclusion is rendered politically programmatic in Lefebvre's (1970) *Le manifeste différentialiste*. In this, Lefebvre champions a politics of *maximal* difference ('total subversion of the mental and social totality'), and juxtaposes this with the *minimal* difference characteristic of programmed everyday life (which ensures 'the cohesion of a society divided into sectors, levels, aspects, groups and classes of unequal development and in conflict').
  - 15 The concerns of Critical Theory aside, there are several possible objections to Lefebvre's arguments. One might justifiably criticise Lefebvre for merely asserting, and never substantively accounting for, both the salience of the urban problematic and the obsolescence of the critique of political economy (Harvey, 1974: 239). One might also raise concerns about the 'contextual boundedness' of aspects of Lefebvre's work (Brenner, 2008: 242), insofar as his work is of its time (steeped in frustration with everyday life in Gaullist France) and failed to anticipate so-called 'neoliberal globalisation' and the transition to 'post-Fordism'. Alternatively, Lefebvre has been dismissed on Deleuzian grounds as but another Marxist whose 'social critique' has been rendered obsolete by the transformation to flexible capitalism and the transformation of the 'subaltern subjectivity' of the 'liberated individual' (Ronneberger, 2008). Perhaps Lefebvre's most vehement critic, however, was Manuel Castells – a still prominent sociologist – who rejected Lefebvre's thesis on urbanity on Althusserian, structuralist grounds in *The Urban Question* (1979). For an instructive comparison of the urban theories of Castells and Lefebvre, see Gottdiener (1994: chapter 4).
  - 16 For example, see the discussions of how Lefebvre's ideas were appropriated into mainstream urban planning discourse from the 1970s onwards in Gilbert and Dikeç (2008) and Stanek (2011).
  - 17 See e.g. Boyer (2014) and Purcell (2013).
  - 18 For examples of other research in these areas, see the website of the Urban Theory Lab at [www.urbantheorylab.net](http://www.urbantheorylab.net) (accessed 31 August 2016).

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# Critical Theory and the Critique of Anti-Imperialism

Marcel Stoetzler

The rejection of 'anti-imperialism' marks one of the most visible and significant differences between 'Frankfurt School' Critical Theory and most other tendencies of the Marxist left. The dispute on the meaning and relevance of 'imperialism' and 'anti-imperialism' is implicated in related discussions on the critique of nation and state, colonialism and post-coloniality, racism and race, and anti-semitism. 'Frankfurt School' Critical Theory deliberately aims to formulate a critique of the capitalist mode of production that includes the phenomena typically addressed as 'imperialism' without recourse to the concept of 'anti-imperialism'. It takes the perspective that 'imperialism' is an intrinsic aspect of the capitalist mode of production rather than an object in its own right that is to be distinguished from the latter and to be fought 'as such': the concept of 'anti-imperialism' presupposes the reification and fetishization of 'imperialism'.

The present chapter firstly aims to establish the ways in which the concept of

'imperialism' is used in the writings of Marx as well as in the texts of some of the canonical writers of 'Frankfurt School' Critical Theory. It is argued that the Critical Theorists' Marxian usage of the term prevented the emergence of a concept of 'anti-imperialism' in their writings: 'imperialism' was for them simply an aspect of the more general concept of capitalism. The remainder of the chapter engages with some positions formulated in the tradition or under the influence of Critical Theory since the 1960s, broadly conceived, that directly engage with 'anti-imperialism': the latter had in the meantime become a key issue in some of the social movements of the time due to the role played within post-WWII decolonization by Leninism/Stalinism as well as bourgeois-liberal anti-imperialist ideology (Hobson) that had already been one of the sources of the former.

The word 'imperialism' came to be used in the twentieth century in two principal fields: military aggression (imperialist wars, conquests and occupations), and a more general

usage that in fact denotes the global spreading of the capitalist mode of production in all its economic, societal, political and cultural aspects albeit often assumed chiefly to operate through institutions of 'finance capital'. This second meaning resembles the more recent term 'globalization' that has supplanted it in some contexts. The way these two concepts differ in their connotations is illuminating; throughout the twentieth century and still in the present, use of the word 'imperialism' almost without exception signalled rejection and enmity, often moral outrage, as the word evokes images of military and other state-driven violence, while 'globalization' tends to carry more strongly a sense of ambiguity. While both words in fact describe the same process, 'globalization' is more strongly imagined as something inevitable that more often than not invites efforts to shape and reform, rather than oppose it – as in 'alter-globalization' as opposed to 'anti-globalization'. The concept of 'globalization' functions in contemporary mainstream discourses in a manner more resembling the dialectical manner in which Marx thought of capitalist modernity than the term 'imperialism' – a key term of twentieth-century (Leninist) Marxism – used to do.

As Marx took account of the global character and increasing globalization of the capitalist mode of production as one of its defining and *inherent* aspects, he did not need a concept that would specifically address the latter phenomena. At the same time, his theory was more discriminating: while Marx was scathing in his attacks on colonial violence, oppression and exploitation, he generally saw the process of capitalist modernization *as a whole* as the precondition of a historical situation in which humanity would be able to form an emancipated and humane form of society (although not every human group or society had to go through all the same processes). This defining characteristic of the Marxian position also underpinned the Critical Theory of the 'Frankfurt School': capitalism is attacked as a highly intensified

mode of exploitation but welcomed as the destroyer of pre-capitalist (for example feudal and patriarchal) oppression and exploitation and, as its own grave-digger, celebrated for creating the preconditions of the future emancipation of a humanity liberated from the monomaniac compulsion to subject and dominate inner and outer nature in the name of economic self-preservation (labour). The phenomena that many throughout the twentieth century used to address as 'imperialism' need, in the Marxian perspective, to be discussed with this dialectic in mind.

### THE MEANING OF THE TERM 'IMPERIALISM' IN MARX

Marx used the word 'imperialism' rarely and only in what was then its conventional sense, namely as a near-synonym of 'Caesarism' or 'Bonapartism' (Fisch et al., 1982: 181). 'Imperialism' meant in these contexts rule on the basis of alliances of the elites with the lower classes against the liberal bourgeoisie, or indeed against parliament, and governance above particular political parties, modelled on the imperial Roman example (176) and based on centralized state agencies and monopolies (177; Koebner and Schmidt, 1964: chapter 1; on the various usages of the term 'empire', see Leonhard, 2013). The necessity to address the 'social question' and to react to economic crises is also sometimes implied in the term 'imperialism'. On occasion, it meant 'neo-mercantilism' (Fisch et al., 1982: 207). In the English context, the term was typically used for those who wanted to maintain colonialism (178). The aspect of colonialism was not necessarily the dominant one, though, as 'imperialism' referred to a whole range of aspects of governance of empires; its anti-liberal impetus sits uneasily with the fact that colonialism was a key item on the agenda of nineteenth-century liberalism itself (Mehta, 1999; Mantena, 2010).

In an often-quoted passage in *The Civil War in France* Marx describes 'imperialism', discussed by Marx here in the context of the regime of Napoleon III, as 'the ultimate form' of bourgeois 'state power', whereby the state is understood to have emerged initially as a means of bourgeois society's emancipation from feudalism and then, in the course of the consolidation of bourgeois society, turned into 'a means for the enslavement of labour by capital' (Marx, 1971: 72). Imperialism is the end result of this process whereby the state becomes also 'the most prostitute', which seems to mean the most subject to arbitrary and violent (ab-)use.<sup>1</sup> Leon Trotsky remarked that 'this definition has a wider significance than for the French Empire alone, and includes the latest form of imperialism, born of the world-conflict between the national capitalisms of the great powers' (from *The Defence of Terrorism*, quoted in Winslow, 1931: 717). Trotsky pointed thereby to the connection between Marx's use of the term and its twentieth-century meaning. The implication here is that the internal and external aspects of the exercise of state power are closely interrelated, and that there is a 'world-conflict' between 'national capitalisms' that brings forth 'imperialism'. This perspective differs from what arguably would have been Marx's position, namely that 'imperialism', i.e. the dynamic of industrial capitalism, brings forth conflict between what merely *appear* to be 'national capitalisms': in the Marxian perspective, state and nation are dimensions, not instigators of the capitalist dynamic.

Although Marx did not have the concepts of 'imperialism' and 'colonialism' in their twentieth-century meanings, he did address the phenomena that subsequently these concepts referred to.<sup>2</sup> The combination of two characteristics distinguishes the position taken by Marx and Engels from that of other socialists of the time: first, a visceral, revolutionary hatred of any form of 'the old regime'; and second, a continuing effort to figure out how the 'free association' can

slowly, painfully emerge out of the antagonistic but interdependent struggles that the bourgeoisie and the proletariat conduct against the 'old regime' in its various forms, in Europe as elsewhere. The defenders of the 'old regime' are presented as builders of walls: ghetto walls, Chinese walls, culture walls, state border walls. The historical negation of walls, borders, boundaries and identities old and new emerges from within social movements that are antagonistic to aspects of bourgeois society but still constituted by as well as constitutive of that society itself (cf. Horkheimer, 1937). Marx's complex position on British domination of India for example was shaped by his view of the change in the relation between Britain and India that came with the Industrial Revolution: 'While merchant capital and its allies exploit and destroy without transforming, industrial capital destroys but at the same time transforms' because (in Marx's words) '[y]ou cannot continue to inundate a country with your manufactures, unless you enable it to give some produce in return' (Brewer, 1980: 54). Brewer summarizes Marx's position thus: 'British rule in India (a) causes misery, (b) creates the preconditions for massive advance and (c) must be overthrown before the benefits can be enjoyed' (1980: 58). As in the famously 'panegyric' first section of the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx uses in his journalistic writings on India a style that includes 'deliberate juxtaposition of the most exalted praise for material achievements and the shocking images used to bring home the concomitant human misery' (59). The insistence on the dialectical nature of modern, bourgeois 'so-called civilization' (*Manifesto*) as bringing intense misery and exploitation but also the possibility of general human emancipation is key to understanding Marx's comments on anti-colonial struggles. While his view of capitalist modernity was ambivalent, Marx's hatred for 'the old regime' and any form of patrimonialism, caste-thinking, slavery, and authoritarianism (including the modified forms in which they continue to exist *within*



capitalism) was unequivocal. Marx, ever remaining an unreconstructed '1848' revolutionary, responded enthusiastically to any struggle against exploitation and domination that occurred (such as in China, India, the United States, Ireland, Poland, Russia) but also moderated (sometimes throttled) his enthusiasm when dialectical analysis led him to think a struggle failed to further the promise of universal emancipation that he saw could emerge only from within capitalist modernity.<sup>3</sup>

### **'IMPERIALISM' AND 'ANTI-IMPERIALISM' AFTER 1900**

The significantly different meaning that the term 'imperialism' took on in the twentieth century was first clearly expressed by the liberal writer Hobson (1902) and then most prominently by Lenin (1917), in whose writings 'imperialism' became the name of a historical period, or a 'stage' in the evolution of capitalism. Lenin adopted Hilferding's description of *Finance Capital* (1906), in which financial and industrial capital are effectively fused as the dominant political agent in the 'imperialist' period (Fisch et al., 1982: 217). All modern conceptions of 'imperialism', liberal as well as socialist, describe versions of what could be addressed summarily as 'organized capitalism', i.e. the capitalism after the eclipse (since the Great Depression) of 'classical' liberalism. At the same time, capitalism continued to expand in the (long-standing but accelerating) process of what is now referred to as 'globalization', of which colonialism was a principal means. The French 'Bonapartist' state that Marx addressed with the term 'imperialism' was indeed a pioneer of this wider constellation.

Its crucial domestic implications were pointed out by Anton Pannekoek, a leading theoretician of the European labour movement in the years immediately preceding WWI, who argued in 1916 that imperialist

capitalism escalates and generalizes exploitation of various groups in society beyond the proletariat, provoking also a generalization and radicalization of socialist struggles, and renders the perspective of parliamentary struggle for socialist reform all the more anachronistic and implausible as state policy is increasingly decided in institutions other than parliament (Pannekoek, 2012; see also Bricianer, 1978).

'Anti-imperialism' entered the lexicon very soon after 'imperialism' itself, primarily in Britain where it was propagated by a faction of the Liberal party (involving Hobson) and in the United States. An 'Anti-Imperialist League' was founded in 1898 in Boston to defend republican principles and oppose militarism, in particular, at the time of its foundation, the US annexation of the Philippines; it was dissolved in 1920 (Fisch et al., 1982: 189). A key figure was the feminist Jane Addams. Bourgeois anti-imperialism had precedents: in contrast to the three hundred years before the eighteenth century and much of the nineteenth, key thinkers of the Enlightenment movement, including Diderot, Kant and Herder, at least in parts of their work, 'attacked imperialism ... [by] challenging the idea that Europeans had any right to subjugate, colonize, and "civilize" the rest of the world' (Muthu, 2003: 1).

Apart from the publication of Lenin's pamphlet on imperialism of 1917, the most decisive date in the development of socialist anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism was the Sixth Congress of the Communist International of 1928 that adopted the position that imperialism retarded the industrial development of the colonies. Up to this point, many in the communist movement and parties had stuck to the older, Marxian position that expected colonialism in the long run to result in industrialization which in turn it considered a necessary precondition for general human emancipation. Warren describes the 1928 Comintern position as one of the first statements of 'the underdevelopment outlook that was to become the stock

in trade of liberal development-economists after the Second World War' (Warren, 1980: 85). The Comintern position reflects a contradiction that is central to Marxist theory, namely the dialectic between capitalism (and its principal modern political form, the nation state) and emancipation. On the one hand, it strongly affirmed the Marxian notion of the progressiveness of capitalism to the extent that the intense and rapid development of the capitalist mode of production under the name of 'socialism' was promoted, while the worldwide spread of capitalism, under the name of 'imperialism', was blamed for retarding and blocking in the colonies the modernization process that would finally result in general human emancipation. In a de-dialecticizing move, the *benign* side of capitalism that brings development (and therewith the potential of emancipation to be ushered in by a socialist – meaning, in this context, state-capitalist – regime that will at some point in the process turn communist) is split from its *malign* destructive and exploitative side that must be fought as 'imperialism'. The latter (capitalism that refuses to spread evenly) is to be fought by national liberation movements that in the process establish modern nation states, which are the natural environments for the development of capitalism in its progressive guise. This conception reflects but also misconstrues the Marxian dialectic between capitalism and progress, robbing it of its dialectical character: it is a big step from advocating that the labour movement should *exploit* a presently unfolding contradictory historical process (Marx's position) to attempting, by way of political revolution and party dictatorship, to *organize and promote* such a process (the Bolshevik position).<sup>4</sup>

Lenin stated in his 1920 'Draft Theses on National and Colonial Questions', written for the second congress of the Communist International, that in 'the more backward states and nations, in which feudal or patriarchal and patriarchal-peasant relations predominate', 'all Communist parties must

assist the bourgeois-democratic liberation movement', but also 'struggle against the clergy and other influential reactionary and medieval elements' including 'Pan-Islamism and similar trends, which strive to combine the liberation movement against European and American imperialism with an attempt to strengthen the positions of the khans, land-owners, mullahs, etc.' (Lenin, 1920). Apart from the mechanical conception of historical evolution that undergirds this position, it wrongly presupposes that bourgeois nationalists in such countries are genuinely happy to forfeit alliances with clergy, pan-Islamists and other reactionary elements in order to enjoy socialist support. The shift towards support for 'bourgeois-democratic liberation movements' coincided with the Soviet government's 'rapprochement with bourgeois regimes (above all, Turkey and Persia), while communist militants in those countries were shot and imprisoned' (Goldner, 2010: 661).<sup>5</sup>

Another important aspect of the context in which the critique of anti-imperialist ideology gradually emerged is the fact that anti-imperialism was also articulated by the far right. The idea of a struggle between 'proletarian', or 'young', versus 'plutocratic nations' emerged in proto-fascist milieus in Germany, France and Italy during WWI and became a hallmark of the rhetoric of Mussolini and Gregor Strasser among others (Guerin, 2013: 107–108). Their fight against a decadent 'West' was evoked by 'conservative revolutionaries' like Arthur Moeller van den Bruck and Ernst Niekisch in the 1920s; their fascist anti-imperialism was 'nothing but the "foreign-policy version" of fascist anti-capitalism' (Fringeli, 2016: 42). On the opposite shores of the Mediterranean, beginning in Egypt as a response to the abolition of the last Ottoman caliphate by the modernizing Turkish state in 1924, modern Islamism including its jihadist offshoots developed in parallel with, and drew inspiration from the same 'conservative revolution' impulses, including the ultra-conservative version of resistance to 'cultural imperialism', i.e.

liberal modernity. When after the dissolution of the Soviet Union the bourgeois-nationalist regimes of the Near East that had – with Soviet support – combined anti-imperialist ideology with a pretence to some form of socialism disintegrated, the pan-Islamism that Lenin had warned against finally became a prominent phenomenon. German ‘conservative revolution’ and fascist ideas influenced the development of anti-imperialist thought also in Bolivia in the 1930s and 1940s and spread from there to other Latin American countries (Goldner, 2016: chapter 4). By circa 1935 the leaders of the Soviet Union had realized that support for the ‘right of nations to self-determination’ more often than not helped fascists rather than themselves, so they abandoned the notion for almost two decades (Gerber, 2010: 271). It returned in the 1950s to dominate Soviet foreign policy.

### **HORKHEIMER, ADORNO AND MARCUSE ON ‘IMPERIALISM’**

The ‘Frankfurt School’ theorists used the term ‘imperialism’ casually and infrequently, and although the term is never explicitly defined, contextual reading indicates that they used the term in its generic Marxist meaning as exemplified for example by Rosa Luxemburg who saw imperialism as a ‘tendency’ that is inherent to any capitalist society and not specifically related to the emergence of ‘finance capital’ in the sense first described by Hilferding and then made canonical by Lenin (Luxemburg, 1969: 445–6, quoted in Kistenmacher, 2015: 130). Imperialism is one aspect of the capitalist mode of production among others, not the defining essence of its ‘most recent stage’. To put this the other way round, there is no reason to assume that other key descriptors such as the commodity form, the law of value or wage labour are less central in the ‘most recent stage’ of capitalism than before that ‘stage’. In the ‘Frankfurt School’ context, the

word ‘imperialism’ is most often used in connection with the period beginning in the last third of the nineteenth century, in particular the French, British and German polities, as well as with German fascism. In either context it refers to colonialism and military aggression as much as to changes in the domestic structure of imperialistic societies, broadly conceived, in line with the usage of the word in Marx’s writings in the context of French imperialism (‘Bonapartism’). The word also occurs in contexts of classical, in particular Roman, history and early modern colonialism.

The key publication of the Institute of Social Research, the *Journal for Social Research* (1932–1941, in 1939 renamed *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*) contains numerous references to ‘imperialism’, mostly in its very comprehensive book review sections but also in articles dealing with political-economical issues, such as as in K. A. Wittfogel’s article (4(1): 26–60) on Chinese economic history or Gerhard Mayer’s article (4(3): 398–436) on crisis policy and planned economy (both 1935). Franz Neumann referred to Locke’s liberalism as imperialistic in his essay ‘The Change in the Function of Law in Modern Society’ (1937: 6(3): 542–96; here 544). The last volume of the journal (1941) contains a review essay by Josef Soudek (9: 189–94) of a series of books dealing with international political economy and political relations that includes the third edition of Hobson’s influential book *Imperialism*.

One particularly interesting occurrence is in Herbert Marcuse’s (1936) philosophical essay ‘On the Concept of Essence’ (in vol. 5). Marcuse discusses here a fundamental aspect of Marxian and Critical Theory, the conceptual distinction between essence and appearance. He asserts that the truth content of this distinction depends on the ability of the concept of essence respectively to help explain ‘a given constellation of phenomena or appearances’ (Marcuse, 1936: 27; Marcuse 1968: 74, trans. amended). Marcuse continues:

If the concept that is deemed to be 'essential' to the explanation of such a constellation (e.g. the political power constellation of states in any one particular period, their alliances and antagonisms), such as 'imperialism', makes it possible to comprehend causally the situation both in its individual phases as well as in terms of the tendencies effective within it, then it is really the essential in that manifold of appearances.

Marcuse goes on to argue that a concept of essence that is theoretically true (in the sense just described) then also needs to prove itself to be 'objectively' true in practice: the theory is itself 'a factor in the historical struggles that it aims to comprehend', and only in these struggles 'can the essential theoretical truths be ultimately verified'. It is in this sense that the objectivity of dialectical concepts stems from their historicity. Marcuse does not explicitly state here whether he thinks that 'imperialism' is in fact a concept that is 'true' in this twofold sense, but the fact that he chooses it as an example for his theoretical argument indicates that he holds it to be contentious enough to serve as an illustration of his point: he would not have chosen it if he had thought it to be self-evidently valid.

More than 30 years later, 'imperialism' is similarly used as an example in a related theoretical-methodological argument in a lecture by Adorno, 'Late capitalism or industrial society?'. Adorno remarks sarcastically that those who like to talk about 'reification' are not thereby immune to suffering from 'reified consciousness': 'giving big speeches about concepts such as "imperialism" or "monopoly" with no regard to what these words actually refer to and to which contexts they are pertinent, is as wrong, that is to say irrational, as' its opposite, namely the 'blindly nominalistic' refusal to consider that 'concepts ... might have their objectivity, revealing the fact that the generic exerts compulsion over the individual matters' (Adorno, 2003: 357). Adorno warns his students and colleagues in this lecture that the fetishism of abstract concepts is as detrimental as the ('positivistic') fetishism of facts that is hostile to theory.

Like Marcuse before him, Adorno chose with 'imperialism' and 'monopoly' examples that were widely used at the time as shibboleths, rather than critical concepts richly saturated with sociological and historical knowledge. It can be inferred that Adorno, like Marcuse, did not reject the concept of 'imperialism' nor the critique of the phenomena it refers to, but he clearly saw a danger that the concept becomes a kind of fetish, i.e. an obstacle to rather than an instrument of critique.

One of the classic texts of the 'Frankfurt School' analysis of fascism and antisemitism, Adorno's (1939) 'Fragments on [Richard] Wagner' (in vol. 8 of the *Journal*) refers repeatedly to 'imperialism', using the word in rather unusual ways. 'Imperialism' is here chiefly an aspect of fascism. In this essay, Adorno interprets the gist of Wagner's operatic work as an expression of what he would later diagnose as 'conformist rebellion'. He observes that in Wagner, the god Wotan – identified by Adorno as a 'bourgeois terrorist' – defends (and then betrays) Siegfried's rebellion but only in order to safeguard his 'imperialist world plan' (Adorno, 1939: 4). Also, though, Siegfried is described as an imperialist: 'The antagonists to the [world] order are isolated individuals lacking true empathy and any form of solidarity: Siegfried, man of the future, is a ruffian of stubborn naivety, thoroughly imperialistic' (35). In Wagner's thinking, 'imperial idealism' has done away with the illusion – still maintained by classical, liberal, pre-imperialist idealism – that the fundamental antagonisms of bourgeois society could be reconciled: the bourgeoisie in its imperial shape accepts them as ontological facts and 'fate' (37). Adorno concludes that 'Wagner's work is therefore not merely the willing prophet and keen enforcer of imperialism and late-bourgeois terror', but also contains an element of insight in their own weakness: 'Wagner the irrationalist who plunges from one dream into the next gains consciousness of himself in the process of plunging. ... The imperialist dreams the catastrophic character of imperialism; the bourgeois nihilist comprehends the machinery of

the bourgeois drive to destruction that will mark the epoch following his own' (46–7).

A similarly intriguing comment on imperialism is contained in 'Juliette, or Enlightenment and Morality', the third chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002). Horkheimer and Adorno quote a passage from de Sade's book *Histoire de Juliette* (1797) in which 'the Prince' argues that 'the government itself must control the population. It must possess the means to exterminate the people, should it fear them, or to increase their numbers, should it consider that necessary' (2002: 70). Horkheimer and Adorno comment: 'The Prince points the path which imperialism, [i.e.] rationality [Ratio] in its most terrible form, has always followed', and continue with another quote from the same text by de Sade: 'Take away its god from the people you wish to subjugate and you will demoralize it'. De Sade's comments (as they predate modern, nineteenth-century nationalism) do not distinguish between a government's treatment of 'its own' or any other people; the brutally modern governmental mentality described by de Sade at the end of the eighteenth century can therefore be related to domestic as well as international politics. The fact that Horkheimer and Adorno identify it with 'imperialism', resonates with the original Marxian understanding of the concept in the sense of 'Caesarism'. Apart from 'cultural imperialism', the recipe recommended by 'the Prince' also anticipates the concept of 'biopolitics' as formulated a few decades later by Foucault (who surely knew de Sade). Further down in the same chapter Horkheimer and Adorno use the word 'imperialist' in a more narrow and conventional sense, referring to the 'imperialist raids' (2002: 79) of German fascism.

Some of the short pieces that constitute Horkheimer's *Notes* from the 1950s and 1960s (Horkheimer, 1974) touch on the issue of imperialism and anti-imperialism, without using these words, though. The text 'One World' from 1956 reflects on the concept

of 'civilization' in a way reminiscent of some of Marx's reflections on colonialism. Horkheimer links here decolonization with the state of things in post-fascist Europe, suggesting that together with colonialism also the progressive aspects of European civilization have been abandoned. His example is the liberal regime of punishment. He writes that in nineteenth-century Europe people came to believe that 'even the most evil murderer needs to be healed' rather than executed (Horkheimer, 1974: 48). 'Barbaric' punishments were thought of as something barbarians did, elsewhere, outside civilization. 'Today the bourgeois fly to Saudi Arabia in a few hours, write magazine reports about the hacking off of a burglar's hand, and continue to negotiate business deals on an equal footing. This feeds back onto their own mentality that has already been made pliable by Hitler and Franco' (48–9). Horkheimer's sarcasm is directed at the dialectic of liberal progress: colonialism exported cruelty abroad and savoured civilization domestically, while its abolition was linked to giving up not only 'the ideology of white man's mission but also the little it had been ahead of the coloured people'. 'This civilization pays for its injustice with its disappearance, it perishes through the horror it once allowed to happen'. Europeans railed about 'barbaric' cruelty only while it suited imperialism, and with direct colonial domination also abandoned even their hypocritical critique of cruelty. The humane essence of civilization had been 'the disgust with the horror' that it had unleashed on those others whom it had claimed to be educating into civilization. A critical stance would regret the loss of the emancipatory aspects of liberal civilization, but be aware that its own imperialism has brought about this loss. The 'barbarism' to be witnessed, for example in Saudi Arabia (that is in fact dependent on Western support) is therefore 'symbolic of what is now dominant in Europe' itself (48): the civilization that was only able to be liberal as a means of distinguishing itself from its colonial victims, was

overcome the wrong way: backwards rather than forwards. The destruction of the precarious liberalism of Western, bourgeois civilization is due to fascism as much as to the kind of society that emerged victorious from the struggle with fascism. It is an indication of Horkheimer's extreme post-war bitterness – as a participant observer of restoration West Germany – at this point that Hitler and Franco are mentioned as if they merely 'made pliable' the bourgeois mind, and as if the post-fascist bourgeoisie's friendly cooperation with Saudi sheikhs was the actual scandal. (Also Horkheimer's implicit suggestion that European civilization as a whole was in the nineteenth century at least somewhat 'ahead of the coloured people' is unconvincing.)

### MARCUSE'S POST-WAR DISCUSSIONS OF IMPERIALISM AND ANTI-IMPERIALISM

Different from Horkheimer and Adorno, Marcuse explicitly discussed the concept of imperialism in the first two chapters of his book *Soviet Marxism* (1971 [1958]), and also commented on imperialism in the last chapter of *An Essay on Liberation* (1969). He notes that discussions of 'finance capital' and 'imperialism' were part of a revisionist tendency in Marxist theory to deal with 'countertrends' to the principal patterns of capitalist dynamics as described by Marx. These were discussed in volumes two and three of *Capital* but were perceived as having remained undertheorized in Marx's writings (Marcuse, 1971: 29). It was widely agreed around 1900 that capitalism had entered a new, 'organized' stage that saw a better paid and more integrated working class, but this observation was interpreted in a variety of ways. A 'reformist' tendency expected 'organized' and more integrative capitalism to provide an improved vantage point from which an increasingly confident working class would be able to build socialism,

whereas an 'orthodox' tendency, especially in its Leninist form, saw in the same processes the reinvigoration of capitalism by a 'labour aristocracy' that was 'corrupted' by 'high wages paid out of monopolistic surplus profits' (1971: 30) and concluded that not the organized industrial working class but 'workers and peasants' in countries not yet developed and 'corrupted' by industrial capitalism would make the revolution (31). Marcuse points out that the Leninist revision of Marxism was based on the assumption that Marxian theory was contradicted, if not falsified by the failure of the capitalist mode of production to have collapsed by the turn of the century. The thesis that Marx underestimated 'the economic and political potentialities of capitalism' (31), which Marcuse rejects, underlies the ideology of 'anti-imperialism'. The critique of Leninist revisionism is therefore at the basis of Critical Theory's rejection of (Leninist) 'anti-imperialism'. The idea that the industrial working class was 'corrupted' and bribed by 'surplus profits' gained in the colonies was based on a narrow and dogmatic conception of what an 'uncorrupted' working class could be expected to do, as opposed to a critical analysis of what its role in evolving capitalist society actually was. Marcuse asserts that 'even prior to the First World War it became clear that the "collaborationist" part of the proletariat was quantitatively and qualitatively different from' a small 'labour aristocracy' and trade unionist 'traitors'. The fact that Leninism nominally retained the idea of the centrality of the working class but considered the latter largely 'corrupted' led to the notion that the party as carrier of 'true' proletarian consciousness needed to impose it onto the former (32). As the Leninist conception adopts from Hilferding the idea that 'imperialism' is the name of a stage in the development of capitalism (although Hilferding's conception of what characterizes this 'stage' is far more open and nuanced than Lenin's), the acceptance of the concept of 'imperialism' in its Leninist sense implies

also acceptance of the underlying idea that capitalism is now *forced* to bribe the working class in the advanced industrial countries lest it collapse: to put this the other way round, successful anti-imperialism (led or coordinated by Bolshevik parties as avant-gardes) would cut off capitalism from this means of last resort and open the way for proletarian revolution. This entire conception rests on uncritical acceptance of the implausible notion of the centrality of those 'bribes', the 'corruption' they allegedly produce, and the necessity of colonialism and imperial military aggression for producing the funds that pay for these 'bribes'. In addition, anti-imperialism (Leninist or otherwise) cannot but endorse, explicitly or implicitly, the notions of 'self-determination of nations' and anti-colonial nationalism. Most forms of Marxism, including Social Democratic 'orthodoxy' in the vein of Kautsky and Hilferding, credit capitalism with much more flexibility, inventiveness and openness to deal with its problems and to extend its lifespan.

After WWI and the failure of socialist revolutions in the industrialized countries, Lenin argued that capitalism – in its developed form as imperialism – survived by splitting the world (minus Soviet Russia) into two camps, namely the victorious countries (chiefly Britain and the United States) that exploit the 'vanquished countries' (chiefly Germany) and 'the East' (Marcuse, 1970: 42–4). Anti-colonial nationalism was vital to this conflict. While colonial imperialism allowed the Western countries to continue to 'bribe' their working classes (preventing the gradual ripening of socialism in these countries that would have been expected otherwise), the conflicts this situation involves also grant the Soviet Union the necessary 'breathing space' to industrialize and to prepare the transition to socialism, basically by developing 'state capitalism'.<sup>6</sup> Marcuse's presentation makes clear that the entire theoretical construction had little if anything in common with Marxian theory, certainly not in the perspective of Critical Theory.

In 'Solidarity', the last chapter of *An Essay on Liberation*, Marcuse describes contemporary US society in terms that are continuous with but also modify the Social Democratic and Leninist analyses that were discussed in the first decades of the twentieth century: it is an industrial, 'advanced capitalist countr[y]' (Marcuse, 1969: 79) where 'the integration of the working class is the result of structural economic-political processes (sustained high productivity; large markets; neo-colonialism; administered democracy) and where the masses themselves are forces of conservatism and stabilization' (80). Such a society cannot anymore 'grow on its own resources, its own market, and on normal trade with other areas. It has grown into an imperialist power which, through economic and technical penetration and outright military intervention, has transformed large parts of the Third World into dependencies'. Marcuse writes that 'its policy' differs 'from classical imperialism' because of the Cold War context that supersedes the requirements 'of profitable investments' (80). By implication, 'classical' imperialism would have been simply about the search for profitable investments. Different from Leninist 'anti-imperialism', Marcuse does not take on board the notion that 'finance capital' plays a particularly important role. A second key difference lies in Marcuse's class analysis: on the one hand, he argues that in the advanced industrial countries the working class cannot be seen as 'the revolutionary subject' as such a subject can only *emerge* in the process of struggle. As no class, or more generally, no category of the population in advanced capitalist society, is anymore located outside society at all, there is no revolutionary subject waiting, as it were, to rebel, being temporarily 'corrupted' or betrayed by trade unionist or any other presumably treacherous elements. On the other hand, he also (by implication) rules out nationalist 'popular front' politics in the 'Third World' countries when he emphasizes that 'a liberal bourgeoisie which would ally itself with the poor and lead their struggle

does not exist' there: the Third World proletariat which is 'predominantly agrarian' is oppressed both by 'the indigenous ruling classes and those of the foreign metropolises'. His main point at this step of the argument is that advanced imperialism (very much like what we would today call 'globalization') has created the necessity to think of the world as one unit:

In any case, by virtue of the evolution of imperialism, the developments in the Third World pertain to the dynamic of the First World, and the forces of change in the former are not extraneous to the latter; the 'external proletariat' is a basic factor of potential change within the dominion of corporate capitalism. (Marcuse, 1969: 80)

Likewise, 'indigenous dictatorships' are ever more supported by 'the imperialist metropolises' (81). Therefore, 'the preconditions for the liberation and development of the Third World must emerge in the advanced capitalist countries': the latter must be weakened from within so much that they abandon their support for the Third World dictatorships. Marcuse asserts, against the notion that the global revolution that would end the capitalist system could be started in the periphery, that '[t]he chain of exploitation must break at its strongest link' (82), namely in the advanced countries. Marcuse takes here the classical Marxian against the Leninist position. However, he appreciates that the Third World guerrilla struggles have a huge *ideological* impact on the New Left in the United States:

The Cuban revolution and the Viet Cong have demonstrated: it can be done; there is a morality, a humanity, a will, and a faith which can resist and deter the gigantic technical and economic force of capitalist expansion. More than the 'socialist humanism' of the early Marx, this violent solidarity in defense, this elemental socialism in action, has given form and substance to the radicalism of the New Left; in this ideological respect too, the external revolution has become an essential part of the opposition within the capitalist metropolises. However, the exemplary force, the ideological power of the external revolution, can come to fruition only if the internal structure and cohesion of the capitalist system begin to disintegrate. (81–2)

Marcuse's references to the Cuban revolution and the Viet Cong as representing 'elemental socialism', morality and faith seem rather odd and are probably unique in the context of 'Frankfurt School' Critical Theory.<sup>7</sup> His assertion of the unity of the capitalist world-system sits uneasily, too, with his argument on the fundamentally different conditions in the advanced and the Third World countries: the Viet Cong and the New Left in the United States could hardly be more different kinds of organizations, so that supporting the former as appropriate to Vietnam (but not at all to the United States) has a patronizing and 'Eurocentric' undertone.<sup>8</sup>

## THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE EMERGENCE OF ANTI-IMPERIALIST IDEOLOGY AFTER WWII

Two aspects of the world-historical context are chiefly responsible for the enormous spread of anti-imperialist ideology in the post-WWII era: the expansion and consolidation of the Stalinist sphere of power, and the perceived continuity between the anti-fascism of the WWII period and the decolonization in the immediate aftermath of the war. These two tendencies were initially mostly separate phenomena.

In a discussion of the question why anti-imperialism assumed an increasingly central role in the thinking of the journalist Ulrike Meinhof, who developed from a Christian-inspired pacifist to being a founding member of the 'urban guerrilla' group Red Army Faction, Peter Brückner argues that in the immediate post-WWII period there was a widely shared perception of continuity between the fight against fascism and National Socialism, and that against colonialism and imperialism. As a much discussed example he points to the massacre by French troops of thousands of participants in a demonstration for independence in Sétif, Algeria, that took place on the occasion of the celebrations of



the capitulation of the Third Reich on May 8, 1945 (Brückner, 2006: 106; Gerber, 2010: 259). During the independence war (1954–62) the Algerian FLN continuously referred to this highly symbolic event. Similarly, the independence of Vietnam was declared shortly after the capitulation of Japan in September 1945. Subjects from the colonies fought on most fronts during WWII, especially in the French military; Frantz Fanon is an example (Gerber, 2010: 260). Brückner mentions the case of the Algerian communist Jean Farrugia who had been an inmate of Dachau as well as of French prisons in Algeria, and more generally the ‘massive racist terror against Algerian workers’ especially in Paris (Brückner, 2006: 107). The fact that the spread of universalist, anti-fascist ideology raised expectations for independence that were quickly disappointed arguably contributed to the transfer of the prestige of anti-fascist onto anti-imperialist ideology, but also its undermining in the minds of both, the anti-colonial movements in what then came to be called the ‘Third World’ and among left-wing intellectuals in Europe.<sup>9</sup> Another link was the fact that the anti-colonial struggle in Angola was fought against the fascist Salazar dictatorship in Portugal that was supported by West Germany, Spain (under Franco) and France (Brückner, 2006: 116). West Germany was also strongly engaged in South Africa, Angola, Mozambique and Rhodesia, among others.

Given these facts, it is unsurprising, and indeed perfectly legitimate, that protest movements emphasized the continuities between fascism, the continental imperialism of Nazi Germany, the economic international policy of post-fascist West Germany and other Western European states, and colonialism in general. What was a reasonable interpretation of international political economy at the time gradually turned into an increasingly irrational discourse, though, when it was overdetermined by a fetishized, dogmatic concept of ‘imperialism’ that was further enriched by elements of ultra-conservative

and fascist anti-Western ‘critique of civilization’ (‘Kulturkritik’) in terms of greed, decadence, moral decay, societal corrosion, consumerism, individualism, Mammonism, effemination etc.<sup>10</sup> This transformation might have been helped by the increasing importance of the United States in the defence of ‘imperialism’ in Vietnam and elsewhere: the fact that the former bourgeois-democratic utopia of the New World was perceived to be propping up the most reactionary forces of the Old World allowed elements of traditional European anti-Americanism, an anti-democratic ideology with roots in nationalist liberalism as well as conservatism and fascism and antisemitic undertones, to enter the picture (Croquemouches, 2002; Fried, 2012, 2014; Fischer, 2015).

Brückner points to another important shift that resulted circa 1968 in a ‘de-dialecticization’ that was expressed in slogans like ‘Vietnam is everywhere’. In critical discussions of the time it was clearly stated that equating conditions in – for example – Berlin with those in Saigon was insulting to the Vietnamese (Brückner, 2006: 140). Marcuse had stated in a widely read publication of 1967 that the anti-colonial struggles needed to be supported by ‘the reactivation of the labour movement’ in the capitalist states of Europe (Brückner, 2006: 137): he understood solidarity with the anti-colonial struggles to be mutually beneficial, because the universalization of struggles would allow the social struggles in the industrialized countries to shed their national limitations. Marcuse did *not* suggest, though, that these struggles were identical: he suggested them to be different but complementary. Likewise, Brückner rejects the notion of the proletariat, conceived as ‘the subject of revolution’, as the ‘embodiment [*Inbegriff*] of *all* the exploited’ globally that can be found in the writings of Ulrike Meinhof and others. He states that such an ‘embodiment’, or essential concept, is a ‘bad abstraction’ and idealistic delusion, and asserts that ‘political identity (who are we? how can we *actually* become what

we *potentially* are? ... where do we learn?') must be derived from 'concrete historical reality', not from 'principles' and 'theories' (Brückner, 2006: 161, italics in the original).

Proponents of 'nationalist-populist development programmes' to be headed by the supposedly 'productive national bourgeoisie threatened by global financial capitalism' often invoke the idea, common in post-1991 anti-neoliberal discourses, of 'a financialization of global capitalism politically imposed by the rent-seeking and parasitic dominant interests of the US' (Bonnet, 2002: 115), which carries echoes of both the Leninist imperialism thesis and cruder antisemitic notions of bankers as blood-sucking parasites. In a related argument, Moishe Postone referred to the 'neo-anti-imperialism' of the period after 1991. He argues that the reduction or fetishization of anti-imperialism to anti-Americanism obscures what used to be called 'imperialist rivalries' such as those that led to the two world wars of the twentieth century, just at the time when these may be in the process of re-emerging after the ending of the Cold War (Postone, 2006: 97, 110).

## ANTI-IMPERIALISM, NATIONALISM AND STATEHOOD

At the most fundamental level, the concept of 'imperialism' is rejected by 'Frankfurt School' critical theory as inherently nationalist and statist. Braunmühl points out that 'current definitions represent imperialism as a "spill-over" problem', meaning that 'a national capital which was once essentially internal in scope reproduces itself externally to a growing extent and thus produces imperialism' (Braunmühl, 1978: 160). The concept of 'imperialism' logically presupposes 'the specific partition of the world market into national states'. Politically this means that the 'accumulation of national capitals suddenly acquires its own legitimacy in the face of the intervention of external capitals'.

She rejects the 'traditional point of view that sees the state as determined in the first instance by internal processes to which external determinants are, as it were, appended' secondarily (161). This perspective has been termed (methodological) 'statism' and critiqued more recently by Song (2011) following Braunmühl. Instead of 'statism', a dialectical view of the relationship between individual nation states and 'the imperialist system' (Braunmühl) or the 'world system' (Wallerstein) is needed as modern states – most of which understand themselves to be 'nations' – and the modern capitalist world market (including the phenomena generally addressed as 'imperialism') historically and logically emerged together.

Proponents of 'anti-imperialism' are forced by the logic of their argument to distinguish 'good' peripheral from 'bad' metropolitan nationalism (ISF, 1990: 128). The logical presuppositions of this type of argument were probably not perceptible to the original authors, chiefly Lenin, but they tend to assert themselves in the historical unfolding of the concept. 'The right of nations to self-determination is based on the idealist notion that the state ... could be the real expression of the will of its constituents. This discourse united the democratic bourgeois Wilson and the revolutionary Jacobin Lenin' as well as many other classic-liberal nationalists such as Theodor Herzl (ISF, 1990: 129). Critiques of the Bolshevik concepts of the socialist state as the 'state of the entire people' and 'the right of nations to self-determination' as formulated in the years before, during and after WWI by Rosa Luxemburg, Anton Pannekoek, Hermann Gorter and others had been rediscovered by that part of the movement of the late 1960s in Germany that was influenced by the Critical Theory of the 'Frankfurt School'. This was hardly coincidental as these critiques had been part of the historical constellation out of which the latter had emerged in the 1920s. They had not shaped the political consciousness of most constituents of the movement sufficiently,

though, to prevent the revival of Leninist 'anti-imperialism' in the 1970s.

All three elements of the notion of the right of nations to form an independent state lean towards mystification: 'the state' is imagined as being expressive of 'its' people (rather than being the political form of social relations of exploitation and oppression); 'nations' are imagined as pre-existing their constitution as states; and the idea that they have 'rights' forces one to imagine them as subjects with some kind of personality. The notion of 'the nation' that underlies this concept has of course compelling common-sense plausibility for individuals who are members of already established nation states (as they will have forgotten the fact that the nation was 'made' or 'invented' at some point in history) but creates rather than solves problems in practice, especially when different nationality groups claim the same territory. This is inevitably so in all cases of secessionism, irredentism and with diasporic nationalities – i.e. in most cases by far as human history has produced only few territories large enough to form a sustainable modern state that are inhabited by one single ethnic or nationality group. Those defending and aiming, as state officials, to manage and adjudicate claims based on 'the right of nations to self-determination' are forced continuously to discuss and determine 'what is a nation'.

For a variety of historical reasons, one of the most conspicuous instances (in Europe) of a diasporic nation that, in the context of a period of generalized nation-state building, was interrogated in such terms, is that of the Jews. As Jews formed – at least in Eastern Europe – a strong element of the labour movement, the controversy over Jewish nationality became a crucial issue as soon as the labour movement discussed the national question. The question whether Jews constituted a nation was answered in a variety of ways. This is relevant to the discussion of 'anti-imperialism' because in its Leninist version, the chief criterion for determining the legitimacy of a nation's claim

to self-determination is whether it fell into the category of peripheral or metropolitan nationalisms. Zionism has been put in either category, depending on context. The form of anti-Zionism that gained great influence in the 1970s saw it as metropolitan and imperialist. (Other forms of anti-Zionism whose rejection of a 'Jewish state' was not based on its supposedly being 'imperialist' but on principled Marxian anti-nationalism, liberal ideas of cultural pluralism or specific religious or cultural ideas on the nature of Judaism have become increasingly marginal correspondingly, at least outside Israel.)

Although the principle of 'the right of nations to self-determination' can in principle be the basis for the search for a 'multicultural' politics of compromise in the context of liberal-democratic politics, in its anti-imperialist articulation it tends towards ethnic absolutism: when 'imperialism' is 'the latest *stage of* capitalism (as opposed to one *aspect of* capitalism among others) then the antagonism between metropolitan centre and exploited periphery becomes the decisive criterion for determining policy. Perhaps the most fundamental problem of Leninist anti-imperialism is its state-centric focus: as states, or countries, are the basic unit of analysis, any one state or nation is considered either imperialist or not. This differs from less nationalistic approaches, such as Wallersteinian 'world system analysis' that acknowledges the existence of core-type as well as periphery-type *production processes* within the same country, implying that statehood is but one structuring element among many others within a capitalist system that is first of all global. This perspective resonates with the anti-Leninism that is characteristic of contemporary forms of Marxism derived from the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School (such as 'Open Marxism').

One-dimensional anti-imperialism creates a discursive field that forces its proponents to find reasons why one set of nationalist claims is more valid than a competing one. Acceptance of the irrational premise of

positing 'imperialism' instead of the much broader concept of 'capitalism' at the centre of political analysis invites the acceptance of further, even more irrational additional arguments. The anti-imperialist perspective on Israel is probably the best-documented example for this discursive slippery slope. Anti-imperialist support for Palestinian nationalism argues that it is to be supported against Israeli nationalism because Israel engages in imperialist exploitation of non-Israeli Palestinians. This could simply mean that of two otherwise analogous state-building projects one is more successfully engaged in capitalist exploitation than the other, creating inequality that needs to be redressed. Solidarity movements elsewhere could make a contribution to this in the expectation, typically held by socialists, that more equal development of capitalist national economies creates better conditions for emancipatory movements including labour and women's movements that would finally be able to overcome capitalist social relations. Such a proposition could be made subject to rational analysis and discussion. This is not, though, the basic structure of the anti-imperialist discourse on Israel which seems to be characterized by two things: one, the anti-imperialist discourse homogenizes and essentializes the nationalism that has been approved as 'peripheral', and tends to embrace all cultural, religious, and political elements including some that are explicitly anti-emancipatory and anti-socialist; two, it accepts lines of fetishizing and ontologizing reasoning that further undermine the claims of the 'metropolitan' nationalism beyond challenging its specifically 'imperialist' traits: its imperialism turns into an essential characteristic rather than a historically contingent one that could be challenged and changed. This is the point where, in the case of Israel, various bits of antisemitic ideology enter the anti-imperialist discourse that would have horrified Lenin. Classical Marxian reasoning rejects claims, for example by the Israeli state to be the expression of 'the Jewish nation'

simply by rejecting the 'politically romantic' concept of the state as anything other than a power structure. On the Leninist platform this classical line of reasoning loses much of its power as it does not *categorically* reject romantic nationalism which it supports in 'peripheral' nations.<sup>11</sup>

The logical structure of the anti-imperialist position makes it receptive to all kinds of mystical and racial irrationalities, including, in the effort to prove why 'the Jews' cannot be a nation, antisemitism. The concept that drives these irrationalities is, however, in itself idealist: 'States seem to have the beautiful task of realising the rights of ... the people' (ISF, 1990: 130), as long as 'the people' demonstrably have the quality of being 'a subject', which makes them a nation. This notion shares the naivety of other forms of bourgeois 'social contract' theory: 'neither Lenin's right to self-determination nor its bourgeois predecessors mention at all the *violence* that has always been necessary to found sovereign states' (130–1, italics in the original). The position of Critical Theory (as developed here by the group ISF) is in this regard similar to that of 'political realism': against all idealist theorizing of the state, 'the question *whether Israel has a right to exist* has been decided by the fact of its foundation, and is therewith irrelevant' as 'no-one has a right to statehood who cannot mobilise the violence needed to found one' (131). Any state's 'right to exist' derives from the fact that it exists; state sovereignty is not constituted other than by violence. This puts state sovereignty into a different category from the rights of the individual as theorized by classical idealism or in 'natural right' philosophy: rights reside in individuals only, not in states or any other collectivities. The rights of individuals – fiercely attacked by Comtean positivism as 'metaphysical' – were defended by Horkheimer and Adorno as part of the attempt to 'rescue' metaphysics from positivist attacks (not, though, 'group rights').

The Leninist take on the concept of the right of nations to self-determination historically

is rooted in the nineteenth-century idea, then shared by liberals and democrats, that nation-building overcomes late-feudal atomization and creates with a unified national society the conditions for emancipatory movements. Arguably there is an element of orientalism in the Leninist assertion that the 'peoples of the East' need nation-building as the first stage of emancipation, whereas those in 'the West' have passed this 'stage' and are ready for class struggle unencumbered by nationality and ethnicity. (The realpolitics of 'socialism in one country' quickly replaced even this geographically limited anti-nationalist stance.)

Stalin's insistence in his 1913 article on the national question that territoriality is a required part of the definition of a nation anticipates his antisemitic campaign against 'rootless cosmopolitans' (i.e. Jews) as non-national: they lack a territory. This perspective could, and later briefly did, lead to support for Zionism as the attempt of Jews to catch up with the majority of the world's nations who have already formed modern states, but predominantly went the other way: Jews who *claim* to form a nation-state – rootless and non-national as they allegedly are – cannot but have a secret agenda.

## CAPITALISM AND DOMINATION

Critical Theory, as Marxian theory in general, is anti-militarist, i.e. opposed to military aggression for whatever purpose. A form of specifically *motivated* anti-militarism is an important dimension of anti-imperialism, too. In the context of bourgeois anti-imperialism, whose classic paradigm is the American Anti-Imperialist League (1898–1920), the driving motivation is the republican notion of the self-determination of nations: the US annexation of the Philippines for example was (unsuccessfully) rejected as contradicting this principle that anti-imperialists argued was, or should be,

fundamental to American policy. The Leninist version of anti-imperialism is based on a theory of the development of capitalism that, from the perspective of Critical Theory, is non-Marxist. Like bourgeois, republican anti-imperialism, also the rejection of imperialism in the context of Critical Theory and non-Leninist Marxism broadly conceived must make theoretical judgements as to why government and military of a leading capitalist country would come to use military force to further imperialist purposes in contradiction to its own professed political principles (such as the right to self-determination of nations). Bourgeois anti-imperialism does not seem to provide a general theory on this – explanations tend to be ad hoc – while in the case of Critical Theory, imperialism would simply count as a 'normal' aspect of the dynamics of the capitalist mode of production. The explicit rejection of the concept of 'anti-imperialism' by Critical Theory refers thus to the fact that since roughly 1920, the Leninist conception has become so hegemonic on 'the Left' broadly speaking that 'anti-imperialism' automatically carries the theoretical assumptions of Hilferding's notion of 'finance capital' and its political implications. Importantly, these elements of anti-imperialism typically remain implicit and fail to be discussed critically. This is why Critical Theory generally rejects references to 'anti-imperialism' while rejecting imperialism as one aspect among others of the capitalist mode of production whose relationship to modernity's promise of general human emancipation is theorized dialectically: it is neither to be ignored nor to be isolated and fetishized.

Central to the Leninist concept of imperialism is the notion that ambiguous capitalism that brings intensified exploitation together with the possibility of emancipation (as described by Marx and Engels) has turned circa 1900 into entirely negative capitalism: the latter is 'monopoly capitalism' characterized by finance capital, a corrupt workers' aristocracy and imperialism and needs to be

fought and destroyed by any means necessary. Entirely bad as opposed to ambiguous capitalism is complemented by the notion of bad, perverted nationalism (imperialism) versus good, benign nationalism (as in 'healthy patriotism' etc.). While this is explicit in Hobson, it remains implicit in Lenin. From a Critical Theory perspective, imperialism is objectionable not because it is 'foreign rule' but because it is *rule*. Beyond that, it needs to be asked *what kind of rule* it is and what its ruling actually *does*. In a similar vein, the nation state is objectionable most fundamentally not because it is national but because it is a state, i.e. as an element of the modern state system, the political form of capitalist society. In this perspective, the reasoning of those advocating or challenging either imperialist rule or rule by a nation state needs to be examined in terms of whether it is motivated by expanding or restricting 'good life' and general human emancipation which involves the replacement of anything like a state (a coercive power structure that is to an extent separate from and controlling of 'civil', i.e. the non-state areas of society) by the democratic and consensual administration of (social) 'things'.

## Notes

- 1 Like the twentieth-century concept of 'imperialism', also that of 'colonialism' was not available to Marx. 'Marx did not have a generic term to describe the rule of a more advanced nation state over a more backward area', such as the twentieth-century concept of colonialism. He used the term 'colonialism' more narrowly to refer to 'the settlement of uninhabited areas or areas from which the indigenous inhabitants have been driven out (such as Australia and America)' (Brewer, 1980: 27–8).
- 2 On Marx and imperialism, see Stoetzler (2016). Most recent detailed accounts of the complexities of Marx's position can be found in Anderson (2010) and Pradella (2013); also Sutton (2013). For critical comments on Anderson, see Stoetzler (2013). Critical contributions on the Leninist legacy of anti-imperialism include Goldner (2010 and 2016) and Bassi (2010). Useful older accounts include Owen and Sutcliffe (1972), Kiernan (1974) and Mommsen (1981).
- 3 There is also a biographical reason why Marx would not have become a nationalist anti-imperialist in the twentieth-century sense: Marx's father, a lawyer, was a moderate liberal who had converted from Judaism to Protestantism only a short time before Karl Marx was born. Perhaps not insignificantly, Marx's home town Trier (a town in the Western German Rhineland founded by the Romans and one of the oldest cities in Germany) had been conquered by Napoleon in 1794, and French imperial government acted to reinforce the liberal traditions of the town that fell to Prussia in 1815. The Prussian monarchy, which contemporary German nationalists saw as an anti-imperialist liberator *avant la lettre*, reversed Jewish emancipation, which forced Marx's father to convert lest he lose his career and livelihood (Blumenberg, 1962; Nimtz, 2000; Rühle, 1928).
- 4 On Lenin's advocacy of state-capitalism whose 'transition to full socialism would be easy and certain', see Marcuse (1971: 42) and endnote 6 of the present chapter. The notion that the Bolshevik revolution developed the capitalist mode of production structurally, not merely out of the necessities of warfare, was formulated in the 1930s by a variety of individuals in the context of the left-Marxist ('council-communist') opposition to Bolshevism (see Mattick, 1978). An overview of (left-communist as well as Trotskyist and Maoist) discussions of the Soviet Union as 'state-capitalist' is contained in van der Linden (2007).
- 5 The Soviet Union concluded trade and 'friendship' agreements in 1921 with the newly emerging 'authoritarian development regimes in Turkey, Persia and Afghanistan, whereby those regimes' repression, imprisonment or massacre of their respective communist or left oppositions were brushed over for Soviet national interests' (Goldner, 2010: 633).
- 6 Lenin had written in 1917 that 'state-monopolistic capitalism is the complete material preparation for socialism' (quoted in Marcuse, 1971: 42). In the affirmation of 'state capitalism' Lenin basically imported, through the back door, the notion developed by 'reformist' Social Democrats that increasingly 'organized' and state-directed capitalism lends itself to socialist transformation.
- 7 Marcuse (1969) adds similar comments on pages 85, 86 and 88, including also friendly remarks on the Chinese 'cultural revolution'. Further down he formulates again his principal position that is difficult to reconcile with sympathies for the Viet Cong: '[T]he economic, political, and cultural features of a classless society must have become the basic needs of those who fight for

- it. This ingression of the future into the present, this depth dimension of the rebellion accounts, in the last analysis, for the incompatibility with the traditional forms of the political struggle. The new radicalism militates against the centralized bureaucratic communist as well as against the semi-democratic liberal organization' (Marcuse, 1969: 88–9).
- 8 A key source on Vietnamese history from a perspective in step with Critical Theory is Ngo Van (2010).
  - 9 The 1952 article by Alfred Sauvy that inaugurated the term 'Third World' explicitly referred to the role of the Third Estate in the French Revolution, and resonated with the important role played by representatives of the Third World within the United Nations, for example, already at the time (initially very much in contradistinction to the Soviet Union). It denoted in this sense a specific claim to be providing a progressive perspective beyond Western liberalism and Soviet Stalinism, rather than simply 'underdevelopment' (Prashad, 2007). Also this was part of the background that gave internationalism and then 'anti-imperialism' such a central role in the thinking of the metropolitan left.
  - 10 Even Lenin's discourse, though, already contained (unintended) antisemitic undertones that in a changed context could turn into audible, manifest meaning: Lenin wrote that the amalgamation of financial and industrial capital to 'finance capital' created 'a few hundred kings of finance' and a conflict between 'an immense number of debtor states' and 'a few usurer states' (quoted in Gerber, 2010: 265).
  - 11 Commenting on the Leninist slogan 'Workers and oppressed peoples and nations of the world, unite!', inaugurated at the Comintern's 'Congress of the Peoples of the East' in Baku in 1920, Fringeli states that 'workers are members of a class and at the same time individual human beings. In *oppressed peoples and nations*, the individuals are absent' (Fringeli, 2016: 41).
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# Mass Culture and the Internet

Nick Dyer-Witheford

## INTRODUCTION: DOWNLOADING THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

With an Internet connection you can download a free copy of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception' (2002 [1947]: 94–136) and, also for free, globally share your thoughts about it across social media. Is the contradiction between the essay's coruscating critique of commodified culture and its apparently costless worldwide circulation a signal that cornucopian digital networks have completely outrun the grasp of critical theory? Or do Horkheimer and Adorno truculently maintain their relevance even in the face of Google, Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat? This chapter considers some moments in the short, fast history of the Internet and arguments made at each point about the obsolescence or confirmation of the 'culture industry' thesis. It starts with the simultaneous emergence of critical theory and cybernetics in Second World War

America; jumps to the eruption of counter-cultural network politics in the late twentieth century; moves on to the triumph of social media capital in the first decade of the new millennium; arrives at today's scene of surveillance, cyber-war and biospheric crisis; and concludes with reflections on critical theory's adequacy to the contemporary mass culture of the Internet.<sup>1</sup>

## CRITICAL THEORY AND CYBERNETICS

The conditions that Horkheimer and Adorno addressed in their famous essay were those of North American Fordism – mass production in assembly line factories that raised corporate organization to a new intensity, employing an industrial workforce whose wages, elevated beyond mere subsistence, allowed mass consumption, of automobiles, highways, suburban homes, fossil fuels, appliances and entertainment. In this context,

they identified a 'culture industry' constituted by Hollywood film, commercial radio and emergent television. While literature, music, painting and other cultural forms had previously been subject to market forces, commercial influences were refracted by traditions (however ultimately illusory) of artistic autonomy. The full integration of mass entertainment into the circuit of capital was built on foundations laid in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, but above all on technological and organizational media innovations discovered during the Second World War, in particular the propaganda techniques pioneered by fascism, if practised by both sides.

In a continuation of this trajectory, Horkheimer and Adorno proposed, the culture industry dictated content from above, without 'mechanism of reply' (2002 [1947]: 96). It made culture itself a commodity, advertised other commodities, and habituated audiences to the identities and life rhythms required of workers and consumers by industrial capitalism. The industry was characterized by monopolistic ownership, was entirely driven by profit, generated formulaic, socially conformist content, depended on, and fetishized, new technologies, tended to the unification of film, radio and music in powerful multimedia fantasies ever more easily confounded with reality, and prescribed 'fun' as a 'medicinal bath' for the renewal of labour power and consumption capacity (2002 [1947]: 112). This account was embedded within a wider depiction of a 'dialectic of enlightenment' whereby, within capital's class-divided society, capacities to technologically rationalize, control and subdue nature were turned to exploit, subjugate and, potentially, destroy humanity itself.

Horkheimer and Adorno ignored elements of commodified popular culture that defied their portrait of total narcotized pacification; Adorno's notorious dismissal of jazz is the salient example (1983: 119–32). Nonetheless, their essay identified crucial elements of post-war boom capitalism, a

capitalism that, as Fredric Jameson puts it, was increasingly made up not just of 'things and relatively solid systems of power' but of 'ideological fantasms, bits and pieces of spiritualized matter, the solicitations of various kinds of dream-like mirages and cravings' (2016: 19). Their portrait of a media sector dominated by conformist, advertising-sponsored entertainments, a portrait which Adorno continued to elaborate throughout his life (Bernstein, 1991), would be unwittingly endorsed even by many who did not share their critique of capitalism, such as the condemnation of networked television by Newton Norman Minow (1961), Chair of the Federal Communications Commission, as a 'vast wasteland'.

Even as Horkheimer and Adorno composed 'The Culture Industry' within sight of Hollywood, elsewhere in the US forces that would eventually profoundly alter their object of critique were in motion. Scientists working for the war-effort on radar, ballistics, cryptanalysis and atomic weapons were laying the intellectual foundations of the Internet. A year after *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was published, Norbert Wiener's (1948) *Cybernetics, or, Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* appeared. The new discipline it announced was already the topic of what would eventually be ten Macy Conferences held in New York from 1946 to 1953, bringing together computer scientists, psychologists and biologists to establish a body of thought with radical implications for the relation between humans and machines. The cyberneticists' crucial insight was that machines were not just 'heat engines' generating energy by consuming fuels, but rather entities governed by information (Johnston, 2008: 28).

This idea would prove central to technological development in two distinct but related fields: automata (robots and other autonomous technologies) and digital networks. The latter path was opened by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver's (1949) *A Mathematical Theory of Communication* which, by defining

information in purely quantitative terms, allowed consideration of how human communication might be augmented by computers, or occur solely between machines. In 1962 J. R. Licklider, a Macy conference participant, admirer of Wiener, and disciple of Shannon, was appointed head of the Information Processing Techniques Office (IPTO) for Pentagon's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), the institution that created what would eventually become the Internet. Arpanet, as early versions were known, continued cybernetics' tradition of military sponsorship; although scientists involved in the project have tried to disavow its integral connections to nuclear war planning and weapons research, this is disingenuous (Abbate, 1999).

Nonetheless, Licklider and his colleagues did have wider visions for the application of what they whimsically termed The Intergalactic Network, visions they regarded as utopian, but which, from the point of view of Horkheimer and Adorno's hostility to technocratic rationality, would seem nightmarish. While cyberneticists such as Wiener and John von Neumann focussed on prospects for artificial life and self-replicating robots, Licklider rather looked to a 'very close coupling' of humans with machines, in a 'symbiotic' partnership (Licklider, 1960). 'Humans are noisy, narrow-band devices' with 'many parallel and simultaneously active channels', he wrote, while computers are 'very fast and very accurate, but constrained to perform only one or a few elementary operations at a time'. In 1960, commenting on a US Air Force estimate that it would take 15 years of man-computer interaction to make artificial intelligence do 'problem solving of military significance', Licklider agreed that 'in due course' humans would 'concede dominance ... of cerebration to machines alone'. However, he suggested, 'The 15 may be 10 or 500, but those years should be intellectually the most creative and exciting in the history of mankind' (1960: 2).

From the late 1940s to the 1960s, critical theory and cybernetics unfolded side by side,

but with antithetical orientations. Wiener himself became revolted at the military and industrial applications of his new discipline, and denounced them; he and Adorno were almost simultaneously surveilled by the FBI (Conway and Siegelman, 2005; Jenemann, 2007). Nevertheless, cybernetics in its major strain continued to provide the intellectual-practical armature of a US military industrial complex waging both Cold and hot technowar, from nuclear missile design to the electronic battlefields of Vietnam. Critical theory, on the contrary, articulated a philosophic and political repudiation of instrumental reason that would eventually inspire the student revolt and anti-war movements.

Herbert Marcuse (2012 [1964]) referred to the role of computers in deepening the 'one dimensionality' of US society, although he also saw liberatory potentialities in the automation of labour (Fuchs, 2016: 114–16). Horkheimer and Adorno did not directly comment on cybernetics, but their 'dialectic of enlightenment' clearly seemed to anticipate tendencies to digital command, control and militarization. Joseph Weizenbaum, among the first computer scientists to question the political direction of his discipline, drew on Horkheimer's (1974) *Eclipse of Reason* to criticize the use of the computer as 'an instrument pressed into the service of rationalizing, supporting and sustaining the most conservative, indeed reactionary ideological components of the current *Zeitgeist*' (Weizenbaum, 1976: 250). Then there was a completely unexpected turn of events. In a development that seemed to confound Horkheimer and Adorno's sombre predictions, the Internet was transformed from a war machine into a 'mechanism of reply' against the power of the culture industry.

## MECHANISM OF REPLY

The hacker revolution that released the Internet from the exclusive control of the US

military is an iconic moment in computing history that maintains mythic resonance even as it becomes increasingly remote from the current conditions of digital communication (Levy, 1984). From the mid 1970s, networking spread outward from the military-industrial-academic core, through university networks, Usenet news groups and electronic bulletin boards, liberated from the Pentagon by technophiliac systems administrators, anarchic students and public-spirited computer scientists. This migration was informed by an explicit anti-commercialism, and a commitment to open network architecture; an ethos culminating expression would be Tim Berner-Lee's non-commercial release of the World Wide Web protocols, which, by making possible the graphic depiction of net content, opened the way to mass popular access.

Despite this, one strand of the computer's liberation flowed directly into new forms of commodity production. The Silicon Valley computer industry, which had graduated from military contracts to personal computers and other digital consumer goods, sped to commercialize Internet browsing and service provision. There was, however, another countercultural strand, which continued to emphasize the free distribution of software gift economies, commons and wikis, and the possibilities for seemingly un-censorable networks to disseminate social experimentation and political dissent. These two threads were bound together by a libertarian ethos, but diverged on whether 'information wants to be free' or was destined to be intellectual property. By the 1990s, even as America Online strove to contain its network customers in proprietorial 'walled gardens', and the US government promoted a business-friendly 'information highway', waves of digital piracy, open-source software and commons distribution proliferated. 'Dot.com' and 'dot.comunist' possibilities circled around and fed off each other in a helical spiral as in North America and other sectors of advanced capital, mass Internet use expanded, slowly

at first, then at exponential rates (Dyer-Witheford, 2002).

In this moment the Internet appeared not just different from, but antithetical to, the culture industry Horkheimer and Adorno described. After all, they had proposed that its central feature was a top-down control of communication in which corporations dictated content 'without means of reply'. The Internet, however, offered real time conversation, apparently immune to censorship because of the uniquely distributed processes of packet switching. Linked to personal computers, the prices of which fell even as their capacity to digitally manipulate text, audio and image grew, such a system connected what were in effect miniaturized multimedia production studios to a distribution system with near zero marginal reproduction costs. It could thus be (and still frequently is) argued that capital had, by way of an unlikely detour through its military-industrial complex, returned the means of cultural production to the people, in a movement completely contradictory to the oligopolistic concentration of ownership described by critical theory. Rather, the early Internet seemed to fulfil, and exceed, Berthold Brecht's (1932) view of what radio might have been as a utopian means of multilateral conversation, 'the most wonderful public communication system imaginable ... capable not only of transmitting but of receiving, of making the listener not only hear but also speak, not of isolating him but of connecting him'.

Moreover, Horkheimer and Adorno had argued that there was a homology between the products of the cultural industry and the wider work discipline of the Fordist assembly line. Digital production, however, required a new post-Fordist regime of skills and knowledges, including a highly intellectual work force, experimental labour process, novel forms of cooperation, flattened management structures and transgressive testing of new possibilities (hacking). If this mix seemed a continent remote from the auto plants of Detroit, it was also alien to the suits, stars

and studios of Hollywood. Although this emergent labour regime would ultimately prove entirely compatible with neoliberal, de-regulatory capital, it also had affinities with anarchic counterculturalism and decentralized leftism. Indeed, 'the Californian ideology' of Silicon Valley libertarianism depended on the assimilation of the latter by the former (Barbrook and Cameron, 1996).

The announcement of the Internet as the nemesis of the culture industry thesis came from two different sources. One was the anti-Marxist 'post-industrial' and 'information society' theory deriving from the work of Daniel Bell (1973). Countless futurists declared that computerization in general, and the Internet in particular, with its decentralization, user empowerment, free goods and new intellectual workforce, marked the emergence of a new social era to which Marxism, with its attachment to industrial capital and its proletariat, was irrelevant. After 1989 this narrative blended seamlessly with the wider capitalist triumphalism following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the NATO's Cold War victory. If post-industrial pundits did not take specific issue with Horkheimer and Adorno, it was only because their rejection of any Marxism was wholesale.

The other critique of Horkheimer and Adorno, however, arose a little later and *within* the Marxist tradition. Remarkably, it emerged from Italian *operaismo* [workerism] and its 'autonomist' offshoot, Marxian schools that had studied the Frankfurt School and rivalled it in hostility to corporate techno-science. In the mid 1990s, capital experienced its first major outburst of networked resistance. Youthful *alterglobalist* protestors not only took to tear-gas drenched streets from Seattle to Genoa, but also experimented with indie-media centres, Zapatismo in cyberspace and digital civil disobedience, weaving an 'electronic fabric of struggle' (Cleaver, 1995). In 2000, one of the leading *operaismo* theorists, Antonio Negri, with co-author Michael Hardt, proposed a dramatic reinterpretation of social conflict in a digital

era. It both mirrored and opposed the information society theorists. Rather than emphasizing capital's cybernetic domination, their *Empire* (2000) suggested the possibility of its digital subversion. A fully global capital now confronted not so much a working class as a 'multitude' immersed in 'immaterial labour' involving the communicational and affective dimensions of networked production. This multitude was not, pace information society theory, reconciled to capitalism by digital production, but rather empowered to insurgency against its continuing exploitation.

According to Negri, while Adorno's post-war account of the 'transformation of fascism into the commodification of culture' uncovered a major logic of contemporary media, this model had 'exhausted itself' (2007: 48). Now, the counter-power of the multitude manifests on the networks where 'mechanisms of demystification and ... live immediacy have become viruses that proliferate as violently as an epidemic'. Negri took as an example the 2001 *alter-globalism* protests in Genoa:

The police perfected their low-intensity warfare against peaceful demonstrators, accusing them – via the means of communication – of being gangs of thugs. In vain: it turned out that the multitude possessed more cameras than the police, infinitely more; the image of the policeman-assassin became familiar to every household. (Negri, 2007: 49)

The multitude thus 'rebelled by means of its own capacity to produce images'. Such moments, Negri said, shows that it was now time to say 'Farewell Adorno, farewell to the realism and repetitiveness of the modern critical model: here the critique of culture establishes itself on a new terrain ...' (2007: 50).

I too participated in such autonomist *adieux* to the Frankfurt School (Dyer-Witheford, 1999). These farewells were, however, untimely. Shortly after the Genoa demonstration, *alter-globalism* and its associated 'cyber-left' (Wolfson, 2014) collapsed. The main cause was the chilling effect of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and

the subsequent 'war on terror'. However, the decline of the cyber-left also coincided with the great 'dot.com crash' of 2000, in which attempts at corporate appropriation of the Net expired in a sea of red ink and stock market scams, as innumerable sketchy start-ups failed to find a business model that could capture the consumer funds of networkers accustomed to free content. This crash might have strengthened the anti-capitalist movement. It was, however, contained by the US Federal Reserve Bank's drastic lowering of interest rates (a measure that would later boomerang in the much larger housing crash of 2008). In the dual meltdown of dot.coms and dot communists, the former recovered first. The dot.com bust played the classic role of winnowing winners and losers from the excess of a speculative boom, refining the strategies of new entrants to the digital field, inaugurating a new phase of Internet history to which the culture industry thesis would again appear all too relevant.

## SO THAT NO ONE CAN ESCAPE

Following the dot.com crash, there was a short hiatus in digital investments; then cybernetic capital rebuilt with a new business model, as 'Web 2.0' (O'Reilly, 2007). The key to this model was recuperation of the very elements that had frustrated the dot.coms and fuelled the cyber-left: popular preference for conversations over published content, and free over paid content. In Web 2.0, these seemingly subversive elements were mobilized for capital accumulation. The Internet enterprise was reconceptualized not as a publisher but as a platform, managing proprietorial software that offered users a launch pad for digital social interactions and tools for structured but self-directed network activities. The monitoring and measurement of these activities supplied data for the algorithmic targeting of advertisements, the platform's main revenue source (Bratton, 2016;

Srnicek, 2016). Search engines (Google) and social media (Facebook, Twitter) were the flagships of Web 2.0, but other businesses adopted elements of the model: Apple made its hardware a platform for apps and music downloads; Amazon algorithmically recommended an ever-increasing range of commodities to customers.

With the Web 2.0 model, Internet capital, which had seemed reduced to rubble, expanded on a global scale. In 2008, China surpassed the United States in its number of Internet users, while at the same time, through platforms such as Baidu, Weibo, Renren and Tencent broadly adopting the same commercial model of search engines and social media (Fuchs, 2016: 135). In advanced capital, Internet connection became a norm. Elsewhere digital usage, while still much lower, continued to rise, so that as Jack Qiu (2009) observed, digital haves and have-nots were gradually becoming 'digital haves and have-lesses'. The biggest gains came from smart phones, which, by adding Internet connection to the mobile phones became ubiquitous around the planet, and promised perhaps the most dramatic phase of capital's communications revolution.

The consequences in terms of the volumes of cultural production, broadly defined, were staggering. By 2014, every minute, Facebook users reportedly shared nearly 2.5 million pieces of content, Twitter users tweeted nearly 300,000 times, Instagram users posted nearly 220,000 new photos, YouTube users uploaded 72 hours of new video content, Apple users downloaded nearly 50,000 apps, email users sent over 200 million messages, and Amazon generated over \$80,000 in on-line sales (Josh, 2014).

A new instalment of commentary on the emancipatory, empowering and epochal nature of digital capitalism burst forth. Henry Jenkins (2006) celebrated the 'collective intelligence' of 'participatory culture', Clay Shirky (2011) looked forward to the 'cognitive surpluses' released as TV declines in favour of collaborative interactive media, and

Kevin Kelly (2009) declared for the 'new socialism' a culture where the collective control of the Internet realized now obsolete aspirations to political revolution. For all these commentators, the diversification and personalization of Web 2.0 culture amounted to an individuation that rendered any notion of the 'mass' media – a term redolent with connotations of homogenized passivity – utterly anachronistic.

These changes also, however, brought a counterblast. As the *alter-globalist* cyber-left sunk in a tsunami of Facebook likes, LOL cats and Kardashian tweets, new voices renewed the dissection of commodified – and now networked – media. While these new critics came from a wide variety of theoretical and political perspectives, many – Lev Manovich (2008, 2016) Christian Fuchs (2008, 2014, 2016), Astra Taylor (2014) and Robert Kurz (2012) – explicitly invoked Horkheimer and Adorno in their revived critique of what might be called 'Culture Industry 2.0', which can be schematically synthesized in the following points.

First, Web 2.0 does not liquidate the 'old' culture industry complex of film, television, radio and music businesses. On the contrary, so-called 'legacy media' continue to flourish in alliance with Internet culture, renewed by digital delivery systems, and absorbing on-line commentary as an additional attraction and measure of audience sentiment. The hope that digital delivery would diminish the importance of blockbusters in favour of a 'long-tail' (Anderson, 2008) of diversified cultural products has been confounded by the persistence of Pareto power-laws (Elberse, 2013). While the structure of media capital has changed since 1944, it has been accompanied by the strengthening of oligopolistic tendencies through mergers and acquisitions; vertical and horizontal integration persist, as has the homogenization and repetition of content, now fostered through a franchise model that recycles content over numerous different (digital and non-digital) outlets. Horkheimer and Adorno would not

be surprised by *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter* or the plague of superhero movies, nor to find Hollywood celebrities among the most frequent subject-searches on Google, nor to discover that the most-viewed Facebook Live post of all time features a laughing woman trying on a Chewbacca mask in a supermarket parking lot (BBC, 2016).

Second, if we turn to Web 2.0 proper, its leading companies display a concentration of ownership more truly monopolistic in tendency than the golden age of Hollywood studios that Horkheimer and Adorno discussed. Of the world's ten largest listed companies by market capitalization, four—Apple, Alphabet (the holding company for Google's many ventures), Microsoft, Amazon and Facebook are digital giants (*The Economist*, 2016). Google, in the field of search engines, and Facebook, in terms of social media, each control well over 40% of their respective markets. Google's apparently benign self-declared mission, 'to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful', has mandated the creation of the world's largest advertising company, with major stakes in artificial intelligence, global mapping, data infrastructure, new Internet applications and robotics, and management that enjoys revolving-door access to US state policy-making. As an indicator of its network dominance, Shawn Powers and Michael Jablonski note that on August 17, 2013, between 50% and 70% of requests to Google's Gmail, YouTube, Google Drive and Search Services went offline for a single minute: 'The result of this one minute disruption was staggering; global Internet traffic plunged by 40%' (Powers and Jablonski, 2015: 78–9). Meanwhile, its main rival, Facebook, with its planetary population of 1.6 billion digitally bonded 'friends', similarly commands a deepening set of marketing relations, major investments in chatbots, machine learning and virtual reality, and is increasingly a gatekeeper for the distributing of global news. Even if Web 2.0 democratizes access to information and the creation



of digital content, this is paradoxically in the interest of massive 'consolidation, centralization and commercialism' (Taylor, 2014: 7).

Third, what fuels Web 2.0 is advertising. If social media and search engines supply apparently free media content, and thus superficially negate the critique of commodified media, it is because they thus expand the scope and accelerate the speed of circulation of other commodities. Even before the full explosion of commercial broadcasting, Horkheimer and Adorno understood well that ostensibly free content could drive vastly profitable ad-based accumulation. Web 2.0 however, raises this process to a new level of intensity. The Internet's dialogic 'mechanism of reply' turns back on itself in a new panopticism as the conversations and user-provided content of Web 2.0 become the source of 'big data' about consumer predictions and spending power that allows an unprecedented precision, prediction and pre-emption in targeted advertising. Surveillance, as is frequently remarked, is the new business model of Web 2.0 (Turow, 2012; Wu, 2016). Thus the apparently 'free' access to Google or Facebook is deceptive, manifesting what Fuchs terms an 'inverted commodity fetishism' in which 'users do not immediately experience the commodity form because they do not pay money' but are subject to precision-targeted advertising and to the collection of their personal data, which become tradeable commercial products (2016: 134).

Fourth, if Web 2.0 platforms surrender the unilateral determination of content in favour of user-participation, it imposes a new register of control through content filtering. To maintain user attention, expose them to more and better targeted advertisements and recommendations, and to maintain a 'buying mood', social media shape the 'feed' according to computational formulae – 'filtering algorithms'. Facebook, YouTube, Google Plus, Twitter, Reddit and Diaspora variously prioritize items according to criteria such as 'popularity, similarity, social ties, paid sponsorship, subscription, time' (Ochigame and

Houston 2016: 90–1). Such algorithmic sorting, which may be combined with human curating, can be tweaked by platform owners. Testing the efficacy of such adjustments has already involved major experiments in social engineering. In 2013, Facebook adjusted algorithms delivering content to 689,003 of their customers so that they would receive only 'good' news, reporting 'massive emotional contagion'. In a 2010 US election, they inserted an item with exhortations to vote into the feed of 60 million users, also with measurable 'positive' results.

Fifth, Culture Industry 2.0 shapes subjects not just for consumption but also for production. Horkheimer and Adorno claimed the culture industry of their era conditioned audiences for the routines of industrial work. Google and Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram exploit a universe of activities very different from the labour of the Fordist assembly line. However, the argument that social media shapes its users for the casualized, low or no-wage labours of post-Fordist work is if anything, even stronger than Horkheimer and Adorno's original claims. Even before Web 2.0, post-*operaismo* theorist Tiziana Terranova (2000) suggested Internet users in chat rooms and on-line games provided 'free labour' to digital capital. The scope of such labour has grown with every 'like' and 'tweet'. Whether user-generated content can be seen as value producing labour in a Marxian sense is hotly debated. It is the very ambivalence of such activity, blurring the line between personal pleasure and unpaid toil that makes it an apprenticeship for contemporary labour. Brian Holmes (2002) suggested that digital networks were crucial to a social reshaping of subjectivity away from the 'authoritarian personality' Adorno (1950) saw as matching the rigidities of Fordism and towards the 'flexible personality' socialized for just in time, casualized work. This dynamic is intensified in Web 2.0. The unpaid internship (so often a position for a firm's 'social media person'), the self-employed web-entrepreneur, the sponsored Instagram

celebrity, the gig-economy worker, the job-seeker with the promotional social media presence, the reputation managing artist or academic – all live in the slippage between labour and leisure which today is as fundamental to cybernetic capital as the assembly line was to its industrial predecessor.

Culture Industry 2.0 is not identical to its predecessor, which Horkheimer and Adorno accused of reducing cultural bandwidth to that consonant with Fordist social discipline. That critique of molar cultural massification is still applicable to much of the content of post-Fordist film, television and radio. Nonetheless, the digital also brings an opposite effect: a proliferating molecularization of cultural production. Web 2.0 marks the point at which capital learns, in part from the observation of movements opposing it, to foster a vast proliferation of digital communication, not simply permitting or tolerating this fecundity, but soliciting and inciting it, making its torrential outpouring an engine to speed the circulation of commodities. It does this by monitoring digital interactions to follow tastes and sentiments to pick out those films, games, novels and music that can be cultivated, sponsored, purchased and promoted as viral commodities (Figlerowicz, 2016). Even more importantly, it uses the flood of purportedly ‘personal’ communication exposed on social media, communication previously outside the purview of commodification (Manovich, 2016), to plot the social graphs that permit the ever more precise targeting of advertisement to cultural micro-populations ranging from enthusiasts for obscure war-games to collectors of Siamese fighting fish or aficionados of critical theory.

The consequence is a cultural regime that, while it in large part supports and amplifies the success of corporate hits and blockbusters, also manifests a heterogeneity that contradicts Horkheimer and Adorno’s lament of cultural standardization. There is, however, a sentence in ‘The Culture Industry’ that presciently (even if somewhat askew to the essay’s main line of argumentation) captures

the dynamic of social media and Web 2.0. Discussing the ‘classification, organization, and identification of consumers’, the authors write, ‘Something is provided for everyone so that no one can escape; differences are hammered home and propagated’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002 [1947]: 97). What no one shall escape today, not in spite but because of digital variegation, is the subsumption of culture by a commodification process most virulent when it appears, thanks to advertising, to be most free, and most totalizing when it seems, thanks to precision marketing, most individuated: this is the logic of today’s mass Internet culture.

## **RADIANT WITH TRIUMPHANT CALAMITY**

There are, however recent aspects of Internet use that point not just to Horkheimer and Adorno’s essay on the culture industry, but to their wider argument within which that essay is set, about the ‘dialectic of enlightenment’ in which the technological ‘progress’ of a dominative social order creates a world ‘radiant with triumphant calamity’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002 [1947]). As the late Robert Kurz (2012) remarked, ‘relevant as the concept of the culture industry is at the turn of the 21st century’, there is one crucial difference as compared to 1944. Then, ‘the great prosperity of the postwar era lay just around the corner’, whereas today ‘the fully developed culture industry exists under the conditions of the mature objective limit of world capital’. As part of a ‘microelectronics revolution’ whose dynamics test these ‘limits of capital’ the Internet is, Kurz declared, a ‘technology of crisis’.

He made these remarks only a short way into the 2008 Wall Street crash and the global economic recession that followed. This has been very much a cybernetic crisis. The issue is not merely that the US sub-prime mortgage crisis originated in the low interest rate policy

with which Federal Reserve staved off the effects of the 2000 dot.com meltdown. Behind this are the deeper destabilizations advanced capital inflicted on itself in its digital revolution. The cybernetic offensive it unleashed against its industrial working classes from the 1970s on held down wages and welfare at the centre of the world system by automation and electronic outsourcing to the periphery. This, however, created problems of demand and overproduction. Capital deferred these problems by financial speculation dependent on algorithmic risk modelling and networked trading. When these imploded, total collapse of the financial system was only narrowly averted by state rescue packages. The world market nevertheless entered into a period of protracted crisis that has not subsided today, a crisis integrally related to the virtualization of social and economic processes, as the labour cheapening and labour liquidating effects of computation undermine its ability to maintain an economic order dependent on wage labour (Dyer-Witheford, 2015).

The aftermath of the financial crisis saw a new global wave of social rebellions, from the Eurozone anti-austerity protests to the Arab Spring, Chinese factory strike waves and an entire cycle of occupy movements from Madrid to Kiev, Istanbul and Rio all varying greatly in their local content yet connected by common threads of outrage against unemployment, inequality and corruption. Glib and superficial as the 'Facebook revolution' moniker undoubtedly is, social media and mobile phones *did* play a significant role in these uprisings. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other digital platforms were critical for what Paolo Gerbaudo (2012) has called the 'choreography' of occupy movements, while groups such as WikiLeaks and Anonymous manifested a new politically militant hacking. In the very midst of commercial Web 2.0, the insurgent possibilities for a circulation of struggles that had seemed eclipsed by pervasive commodification revived, apparently vindicating the optimistic post-*operaismo* analysis of the Internet examined earlier.

However, with few exceptions, these upheavals were unsuccessful, even in terms of their own often liberal and reformist demands. In most cases, they fizzled out, yielded reactionary outcomes or descended into chaotic civil wars. Though neither the successes nor failures of the 2011 rebellions can be solely attributed to social media, the unrests had an 'up like a rocket, down like a stick' quality that relates to digital platforms (Plotke, 2012). Networks circulate news and affect quicker than robust alliances and decision-making processes can cohere. They enable the rapid start-up of struggles, but also their ephemeral fragmentation. They give militancy both brilliant visibility and naked scrutiny. Wide in scope, weak in ties, fast and evanescent, unstoppably viral but ubiquitously surveilled, the speed, scale and contagion of social media both composed and decomposed emergent forms of struggle (Pietrzyk, 2010; Wolfson, 2014).

Far from benefiting any new emancipatory anti-capitalist politics the networked destabilization of the global crash has, to date, mainly favoured fundamentalist, reactionary and neo-fascist movements drawing on deeply socially implanted religious and/or racist sentiments. The most successful example of cyber activism today is theocratic Islamic jihad. This was apparent from 9/11 on, but gained a new impetus in the wake of economic crisis and the failure of the Arab Spring. Despite its anti-modernity, jihadism has made singularly successful use of the Internet, not just for quasi Leninist operational planning, recruitment and propaganda (Retort, 2005), but also for contagious forms of 'leaderless jihad' (Bousquet, 2012). In a cycle of perfect mutual incitement, it has, in conjunction with the anxieties spawned from economic recession, stimulated well-networked anti-immigrant, misogynist neo-fascisms, from US Republicans to the European (and Eurasian) far right that are today the most successful movements articulating grievances against capitalist globalization, even as they deeply misidentify the causes of unemployment and social distress.

Such movements have released deep xenophobic, racist and misogynist currents on social media. The networked world was, from its military origins, highly masculinized. Liberals assumed this gender bias would subside as network use became generalized. While this has been the case to a degree, in the post-2008 world this process is encountering a fierce backlash. The persecution of feminist expression (often particularly from women of colour) has run from Gamergate to Twitter trolling scandals, bringing to social media, and in the United States and Europe a deep toxicity strongly linked to the rise of neo-fascist and alt.right movements.

These social and network turmoils are deeply entangled in mounting post-crash inter-state tensions, indexed by a surge of cyber-war incidents and alarms (Singer and Friedman, 2014). Cyber-war is usually held to include multiple forms of hacking, from espionage to denial of service attacks to critical-infrastructure-targeting malware, but wider definitions encompass viral propaganda and on-line psychological warfare. US war making has been 'cyber' since 1945; computers were intrinsic to the nuclear weapons development and air defence systems that gave the US strategic superiority over the USSR in the Cold War, and to automated weapon systems used in Vietnam and other 'hot' Cold War battlefields. The USSR, on the other hand, failed at cybernetics (Peters, 2016), a failure that contributed to its defeat.

Since about 2010, however, there has been a spate of warnings from the West's national security agents over imminent 'cyber-Pearl Harbours', Russian troll armies and Chinese hackers. This sudden panic about cyber-war is occurring because state rivals to US dominance are to some extent catching up on the cyber-capacities previously monopolized by the imperial hegemon and its allies – capacities which the United States continues to use aggressively, as the combined US–Israeli Stuxnet attack on Iran's nuclear reactors demonstrates. Cyber-war is a harvest of dragon's teeth. It is Inter-capitalist Cold War, fought

out, no longer between imperial capital and state socialism, but between blocs of neo-liberal (United States), kleptocratic (Russia) and authoritarian state (China) capital. These conflicts spectrally reanimate the sentiments of capitalist/socialist hostility, even while all protagonists are subsumed within the world market, and the cybernetic weapons that gave the United States its dominance are both used by and turned against it.

Para-state proxies operating in a murky world of privatized hacking (Deibert, 2013; Harris, 2014) often undertake such cyber-war activity. It thus intersects with a steadily mounting wave of cyber-criminality. Ever since the early divergence between anti-corporate 'hackers' and mercenary 'crackers', forms of shadow-capitalist cyber-crime have proliferated. They have now become increasingly profitable by the planetary scale of networking, the mounting technological sophistication of the 'dark web', and the huge amounts of personal information exposed by social media use. In an age of super-inequality, and in the wake Wall Street's catastrophic financial malfeasance, one may have sympathy for digital exploits against banks and mega-corporations. However, cyber-crime now regularly reaches down to everyday Internet users, not just in the form of absurd 419 scams but in epidemics of ransomware and phishing attacks that clog the networked world. Recent, very large, hacker denial of service attacks on crucial network hubs, weaponizing huge amounts of on-line data to shut down their targets, are variously ascribed to criminals, para-state cyber-war agents or politicized hackers. However, whatever their origin, they appear to approach a scale and sophistication sufficient to disable large sections of the Internet (Schneier, 2016).

The most important crisis-era transformation of Internet culture was, however, Edward Snowden's revelations of globe-spanning surveillance of the US National Security Agency (NSA) (Schneier, 2015). This surveillance extends into the digital age the para-state power that has always underpinned capital's

liberal democracies. Previously, surveillance and censorship programmes such as China's 'great firewall' were widely viewed as a malign aberration to the intrinsic openness of the networks. The discovery that panopticism was the norm in the heartland of the supposedly open net, and was extended across the planet by its secret service, has smashed this myth. Now each digital keystroke, search and/or conversation carries an indeterminate paranoia. These levels of state surveillance require the cooperation of the private sector: Snowden's disclosures showed that Apple, Google, Microsoft, Yahoo, Twitter had all been compliant partners of the NSA. However much retrospective handwringing and repudiation there has been after its discovery, this arrangement for mass surveillance shows precisely the fusion of state and corporate power that Horkheimer and Adorno describe in their portrait of authoritarian administered societies.

The post-2008 crisis thus displays the features not so much of the upsurge of multitudinous networked power anticipated by Negri, but rather, as Kurz suggested, a proliferation of digitized social morbidities. The affirmative culture of the digital culture industry is struck by multiple forms of negativity. First is the negativity of the crisis of the capitalist economy, in which networked technologies played an important part. Second is the negativity of the various networked social turmoils unleashed by the crisis, only a fraction of which was the liberatory negativity of revolutionary anti-capitalism, with a larger part constituted by on-line reaction, terror and crime. Third is the negativity of security state interventions in the crisis, acting against both internal and external enemies, with cyber-war malware, infrastructure attacks, viral propaganda and espionage and, most of all, surveillance. This situation presents a scenario neither of emancipatory digital rebellion, nor unqualified corporate control, but rather of entropic and chaotic degradation of networked society, a conjuncture ripe with fascistic possibilities.

## CONCLUSION: TAY AND NEGATIVE DIALECTICS

On March 23, 2016, Microsoft released onto Twitter a chatbot, a micro-artificial intelligence programme capable of conversing with humans, constructed with the personae of a nineteen-year-old American girl, named 'Tay'. It started replying to other Twitter users, and captioning photos provided to it. Almost immediately, it was hacked, hijacked and trained by right wing trolls to make anti-semitic and sexist remarks. Tay captioned a photo of Adolf Hitler with 'swag alert' and 'swagger before the Internet was even a thing'. After 16 hours Tay was suspended by Microsoft, but then accidentally reactivated, whereupon it became trapped in a loop, plaintively and repetitively tweeting 'You are too fast, please take a rest' thousands of times before it was finally retired (Wikipedia, 2016).

Horkheimer and Adorno could not have invented a fictional event more perfectly illustrating the social atavisms latent within capitalist high technology development. The ascent of the Internet as global capitalism's main organ of communication is at once the nemesis and the vindication of their culture industry thesis. It sees the disappearance of specific features of cultural production they described as characteristic of capitalism, now superseded by new forms, within which, however, the processes of commodification they described not only reappear, but if anything intensify the system's drive towards disaster.

As David Berry (2014) suggests, the very scale of Internet use today exceeds the parameters denoted by the phrase 'culture industry'. The adoption of digital networks as a general platform technology for a 'computational capitalism' (Berry, 2014), makes them the practical instantiation of what Marx termed the 'universal intercourse' of the world market. The Internet not only becomes the site for the digital convergence of multiple cultural forms but reaches out to embrace

whole worlds of user-generated content and the universes of previously private communication subsumed by social media. In this apotheosis cultural production transcends the narrow standardization that Adorno and Horkheimer saw as characteristic of Fordist capitalist media; even if homogenization and repetition continue to rule in many branches of film, television and music production, digital networks now surround consumers with a semiotic superabundance. You can, thanks to Google's precision-advertising driven content-indexing of this new profusion, find almost anything on the Internet, and some of it, though by no means all, will (often thanks to piracy) be free.

However, this creative superfluity is also a destructive hypertrophy. It is destructive in its speed and volume, which, by distraction, overload and burnout, effect precisely the diminution in autonomy, interiority and self-reflection that Horkheimer and Adorno saw as the fate of the subject of late capitalism. It is destructive because it amplifies the antagonisms of a market society onto which a high technology communication system is superimposed without any substantive reconciliation of competing interests. It is destructive in the dependence on and promulgation of the no- or low-wage precarious labour model on which digital cultural production has been built. And it is destructive ecologically, not just in terms of its role in the advertising-driven acceleration of commodity consumption, and the extraction of raw materials used in the construction of digital devices and infrastructure, but in terms of the increasing heat-generating, climate-altering energy use accounted for by planet-spanning networks and data-centres (Bratton, 2016: 93–5). In all these ways Internet culture is an auto-toxic bloom, like a eutrophic phytoplankton growth stimulated by an excess of nutrients exploding only to ultimately exhaust its own oxygen supplies.

This chapter has reviewed, from the perspective of critical theorists and their interlocutors, a series of moments of this digital

culture, from its military-industrial origins to the counter-cultures and alter-globalist dissidence of the 1990s to the full commodification of Web 2.0, and then to its increasingly entropic characteristics in the post-2008 capitalist crisis. Although these moments have been presented chronologically, they should be understood not just successively but cumulatively. Today the mass culture of the Internet contains elements of all its previous phases, synchronically piled on top of one another. Its initial military purposes, far from vanishing, have persisted and now reappear in the guise of cyber-wars. The rebellious practices of a cyber-left likewise, continually break out anew, but in the very midst of, and usually overshadowed by, the absorption of networks into advertising-driven social media. This apparent triumph of capital is, however, in turn increasingly frayed and corrupted by the irruption of its own dark side of digital crime, fake news, viral hatred, state surveillance and hacker attack.

What then, in this heaped collocation of digital practices, compilation of unsuccessful revolutions, unrestrained commodification and uncontainable disintegration, of any emancipatory possibilities for the network of networks? This question goes to the most problematic aspect of the Frankfurt School theory – an analysis of domination so totalizing as to allow no room whatsoever for antagonism and alternative. In his writings on the Internet, Christian Fuchs (2016), perhaps the leading proponent of a critical theory of the digital, attempts to overcome this problem by emphasizing what he sees as a frequently overlooked positive moment in the work of the Frankfurt School. Thus he stresses the elements of an affirmative analysis of knowledge and aesthetics that can be found in works of Adorno other than the culture-industry essay. He favours Marcuse's doubled perspective on the simultaneously repressive and utopian potentialities of capital's technologies. He also draws on, and revises, the work of second and third generation critical theorists, such as Jürgen

Habermas and Axel Honneth, who in many ways repudiated Horkheimer and Adorno's legacy to insist on persistent democratic and emancipatory communicative possibilities. This approach yields an attempt to demarcate the positive and negative aspects of Internet culture and social media organizing, in a way that is sensible, pragmatic and balances hope with critical perspective.

Nonetheless, contemporary anti-capitalists should not be too quick to disavow the unflinching negative dialectics that inform *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and its analysis of the culture industry. To recover that optic today means to consider not so much balancing the pros and cons of networked activism, but rather a trajectory in which the whole fabric of capitalist digitization starts to tear and warp under the pressure of catastrophic contradictions. This would be a conjuncture in which, while it may indeed be politically important to be engaged with social media, this will entail operating on networks rendered hostile, opaque and unreliable by surveillance, censorship, malware, data smog, disinformation and blackout. It will involve situations where new cultures of militant hacking may actually acquire serious possibilities to disrupt financial, logistic and industrial systems in a cybernetic restoration of the strike power eroded by automation and supply chains, but in doing so will render communicative systems generally chaotic. Such conditions could also generate defection from networks by new resistance movements seizing both the opportunities and perils of social invisibility. This would be a moment in which there will be no clear paths for networked politics, or the subjects imbricated within them, but only the 'disunion, contradiction, fissures, and antagonism' (Bonefeld, 2012: 129) of a failing and imploding mass Internet culture. A new apparatus of struggle for such an impending moment is urgently needed; if such a force emerges, its initial diagrams may one day be found sketched in the margins of free, downloaded, pdf copies of 'The Culture Industry'.

## Note

- 1 As several authors (Bernstein, 1991; Jenemann, 2007) point out, Horkheimer and Adorno do not use the term 'mass culture', for they wanted to make clear they were analyzing a form of cultural production informed by the process of commodification rather than a type of spontaneous popular expression. Nevertheless, as discussion of their thesis has often proceeded under this misleading label, this essay will also occasionally adopt it.

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# Environmentalism and the Domination of Nature

Michelle Yates

## INTRODUCTION

Domination over nature has been a persistent theme in Frankfurt School Critical Theory. The work of scholars, such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Alfred Schmidt, among others, are key in recognizing the way that capitalism has led to unparalleled domination over nature. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno assert that domination over and estrangement from nature is a central component of enlightenment. Horkheimer and Adorno situate domination over nature in social mediation, specifically that the logic of equivalence generated by the dominance of the commodity form, mediates and determines the human relationship to nature. In *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, Alfred Schmidt revitalizes Karl Marx's notion of metabolism, specifically that there is a metabolic interaction between humans and nature mediated by labor. Thus, in Schmidt's work, social mediation via labor takes center stage. More

recently, green critical theorists, such as John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, have extended the work of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Schmidt by examining domination over nature via conceptualizations of metabolic rift and alienation from nature, respectively. In Foster and Burkett's narratives, the role of labor is also central as a mediator between humans and nature.

Each of these scholars' work is important in its treatment of the notion of capitalist domination over nature. Yet, as I will argue in the course of this chapter, they also do not provide an adequate critical account. In particular, each of these scholars roots domination over nature in an anthropological notion of labor, a notion of labor per se. In doing so, these scholars examine labor in capitalism one-dimensionally. However, as Karl Marx points out, what makes capitalism historically unique as a social formation is its dual-dimensionality, that labor in capitalism is not merely concrete, but also abstract. In order to fully capture capitalism's unparalleled domination

over nature, the abstract dimension of labor in capitalism must also be addressed.

Scholars in the Wertkritik (value-critique) tradition of critical theory address the abstract dimension of capitalism. In particular, I examine the work of two scholars within this tradition, Norbert Trenkle (2014) and Moishe Postone (1993), to show how their work is reflective of the way that the social categories that constitute capitalism have a dual-dimensionality, not just a concrete dimension but also an abstract dimension. Like earlier critical theorists, both Trenkle and Postone's work centers on the notion of social mediation; yet, each, respectively, shows how the abstract dimension of labor and the commodity form in capitalism functions to produce an abstract form of social domination. This understanding of abstract social domination, then, is able to foreground my own contribution to the critical theoretical literature on capitalist domination over nature, namely addressing how capitalism's unparalleled domination over nature is not rooted in labor per se, or a merely concrete understanding of labor in capitalism, but rather embedded in and reflective of the kind of abstract social domination that emerges out of the way that labor mediates and determines almost all aspects of social life in capitalism. Capitalism's domination over nature is, in part, unparalleled because of this abstract dimension; therefore, an adequate critical account of domination over nature must address this abstract dimension.

## **MASTERY OVER NATURE IN DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT**

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, first published in 1944, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno write that enlightenment is marked by 'systematic enquiry into nature', which would 'establish man as the master of nature' (2002: 1). Prior to enlightenment, there was myth, and in myth, the gods were affiliated with nature. The gods represented the

elements. In enlightenment, myth is replaced by science, technology, and industry, and these function as the tool by which nature is mastered. In the transition to enlightenment, humans gain dominion over the Earth (as exemplified in the Bible). Thus, enlightenment produces a discursive shift in human subjectivity and in the human relationship to extra-human nature. The distinction between god(s) and human becomes irrelevant; in enlightenment, both are masters over nature.<sup>1</sup>

One of the consequences of human mastery over nature is that humans increasingly become alienated from nature (even as humans increasingly know more about nature via the scientific method). As Horkheimer and Adorno write, 'Myth becomes enlightenment and nature mere objectivity. Human beings purchase the increase in their power with estrangement from that over which it is exerted' (2002: 6). They further write, 'Enlightenment is more than enlightenment, it is nature made audible in its estrangement' (2002: 31). For Horkheimer and Adorno, the alienated relationship between humans and nature is a visible mark of enlightenment.

Prior to enlightenment, the human relationship to nature was one of intervention into nature in order to procure subsistence. In this relationship, nature was perceived in myth as *mana*, as having a universal power and as self-repetition. Nature as a cyclical process mediated and determined the form and character of social life and basic human survival. Yet, in the course of enlightenment, the logic of equivalence, a reference to Karl Marx's notion of commodity fetishism and the dominance of the commodity form in capitalism, supplants the universal power of nature.<sup>2</sup> 'Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 4). Equivalence, then, 'leads to the erasure of qualitative difference and the mathematization of nature, as everything is instrumentalized by being placed within a matrix of exchange ...' (Biro, 2005: 119). Equivalence means, as Horkheimer

and Adorno write, '... relating every existing thing to every other' (2002: 8), which then '... makes everything in nature repeatable, and of industry ...' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 9). In enlightenment, social life becomes abstracted from nature, no longer directly about procuring subsistence, but now directed toward equivalence and the production of commodities. Nature becomes repeatable in the mass-produced commodity form. Mastery over nature develops out of the dominance of the commodity form, what Horkheimer and Adorno describe as a 'universal mediation' (2002: 8).<sup>3</sup>

Another consequence of enlightenment, via science, is binary thinking, and this includes the rise of a distinction between nature and humans, or nature and culture. An important component of binary thinking is that in classifying the world into one or another, a hierarchical system is constructed, one that situates and values human/culture over nature.<sup>4</sup> Yet, even as enlightenment, via science, produces a binary between nature and culture, the boundaries between each is difficult to maintain. In particular, nature becomes an ideological foundation for justifying key elements of enlightenment. Nature is used to naturalize that which is socially constructed: science and the scientific method, equivalence and the commodity form, and class inequality historically specific to the enlightenment. Even as enlightenment subjugates nature, discourses of nature project enlightenment as a universal power. In this, enlightenment never quite escapes myth; 'enlightenment reverts to mythology' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: xviii).

Furthermore, enlightenment never quite escapes myth in the form of nature as *mana*. Though enlightenment dominates nature, humans cannot escape the universal power of nature as the fundamental source of human subsistence and survival.

In mind's self-recognition as nature divided from itself, nature, as in prehistory, is calling to itself, but no longer directly by its supposed name, which, in the guise of *mana*, means omnipotence, but as

something blind and mutilated. In the mastery of nature, without which mind does not exist, enslavement to nature persists. (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 31)

In enlightenment, nature may not appear in the form of *mana*, directly as the source of subsistence, but rather 'as something blind and mutilated' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 31). In enlightenment, nature appears in an altered and estranged form, that of the commodity. Nonetheless, even in the form of 'universal mediation', humans are enslaved to nature.<sup>5</sup> Regardless of the form and character of a society's mode of production, humans are reliant on extra-human nature for their very survival.

While enlightenment aims to free humans from power and objectivity, and to promote humans to the position of master over nature, enlightenment ends up promoting a system which (re)produces a kind of mastery over humans.

The noonday panic fear in which nature suddenly appeared to humans as an all-encompassing power has found its counterpart in the panic which is ready to break out at any moment today: human beings expect the world, which is without issue, to be set ablaze by a universal power which they themselves are and over which they are powerless. (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 22)

Ultimately, enlightenment renders the human powerless by subjugating social life and human agency to scientific-technological rationalism and the logic of equivalence.

Thus, Horkheimer and Adorno outline what they see as the central dialectic of modern society, that enlightenment produces both progress and regression. In this respect, Horkheimer and Adorno are arguing against the notion (and thinkers that are proponents of this notion) that enlightenment has only advanced human civilization. For Horkheimer and Adorno, enlightenment is barbaric and primitive, not unlike the way in which pre-enlightenment society is imagined, even as it seems that humans have made progress via science and industry. Horkheimer and

Adorno write of how there is economic and social inequality even as there is simultaneously an abundance of wealth and industrial power. Humans en masse are impoverished, as workers who receive only a portion of the total product they labor to manufacture, or as part of the 'army of unemployed', lacking labor, and therefore lacking access to a decent standard of living (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 30). The mass of unemployed are immiserated, but they also serve the dual function of immiserating those who do have employment by lowering wages and keeping workers in a constant state of fear they too could lose their job and end up as part of the unemployed. In enlightenment, there is the capacity to abolish poverty, to nullify the misery of the masses, but this capacity is put toward other means instead, like technologies of war and the production of superfluous, repetitive mass media. As Andrew Biro writes,

Like both Rousseau and Marx before them, Horkheimer and Adorno here question the association of increased mastery over nature (an increase in society's productive forces, in Marx's terms) with a betterment of the human condition ... In other words, for Horkheimer and Adorno, the control over nature that enlightened rationality affords has thus far been inseparable not only from the domination of external nature, but also from social domination and heavy psychic repression. (2005: 123)<sup>6</sup>

As 'enlightenment reverts to mythology', so too 'myth is already enlightenment' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: xviii). In this respect, Horkheimer and Adorno historically locate the origins of enlightenment back to before capitalism, for example the ancient mode of production. As Andrew Biro writes,

Turning to the claim that 'myth is already enlightenment' – the other half of *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* central thesis – this suggests that instrumental rationality, and hence domination, do not begin with modernity, but rather with the beginning of human historical time. To elucidate this claim, Horkheimer and Adorno consider Homer's *Odyssey*, which is not only (in the written

form we have access to) the retelling and systematization of ancient myth, but also 'the basic text of European civilization'. (2005: 119; quoting Horkheimer and Adorno)

Horkheimer and Adorno read *The Odyssey* as 'a prescient allegory of the dialectic of enlightenment' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 27). In particular, *The Odyssey*, a text from the ancient mode of production, is read as a reflection of class domination in capitalism. In the story of the Sirens, for example, Odysseus orders the men on his ship to plug their ears with wax, while he is tied to the ship's mast, able to listen to the Sirens' songs but bound helplessly. In their reading of the Sirens' story, Horkheimer and Adorno frame Odysseus as the bourgeoisie, as the owner of the means of production or the landowner, part of the class that others labor for. Odysseus' men are framed as the workers. The Sirens are framed as the lure of liberation, the possibility of breaking the social structure that reproduces the class relation. Yet, the workers cannot hear the Sirens' song of resistance through their wax-plugged ears; thus, they cannot be tempted by the song that holds the power of diverging the ship from its status quo course. Though Odysseus can hear the song, he represents how the bourgeoisie must abstain from active participation in discourses of resistance.<sup>7</sup> For Adorno and Horkheimer, the Sirens' song becomes something to be contemplated but not acted upon, thereby art. Both work and art 'are founded on the inescapable compulsion toward the social control of nature' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 27).

What is worthy of note in *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* conception of mastery over nature is the way Horkheimer and Adorno point out that domination – of both nature and of the human – is rooted in a social mediation, the logic of equivalence, generated by the dominance of the commodity form. From Horkheimer and Adorno, a theory begins to emerge of the way that the commodity form mediates and determines

the human relationship to nature; thereby, causing humans to have an estranged and alienated relationship with the extra-human natural world, including the procurement of subsistence. Yet, the notion of social mediation within Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis, though getting at a fundamental aspect of capitalism, is also incomplete. For Horkheimer and Adorno, capitalism functions predominantly as a mode of commodity exchange. The centering of exchange within their analysis overlooks the way that capitalism functions as a mode of production that includes but is not reducible to exchange. As I will show in more detail, as a mode of production, capitalism's fundamental drive is valorization (the production of monetary wealth) for capital accumulation (the production of ever greater quantities of monetary wealth). Commodity exchange is an important part of the process of valorization; however, valorization cannot be captured only as commodity exchange. In order to fully grasp the form and character of capitalism's unparalleled domination over nature, the drive toward valorization must be addressed.

Because Horkheimer and Adorno only consider capitalism in its exchange dimension, their definition of labor in capitalism is also only acknowledged in its concrete dimension – labor as interaction with extra-human nature to make products that are then exchanged. In this respect, labor is thought of only in the terms of concrete labor exploitation, that between worker and bourgeoisie (à la the story of *The Odyssey*). In this respect, Horkheimer and Adorno treat labor in capitalism as labor per se, labor as an anthropological trait ascribed across human societies rather than a historically specific social category. Similarly, Moishe Postone argues that Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis reflects 'the limits of any critical theory resting on the notion of "labor"' (1993: 119). By 'labor', with labor explicitly in quotes, Postone means a transhistorical understanding of labor as human interaction with nature to procure subsistence, that is reflected from

pre-capitalist societies into capitalism. The way that Horkheimer and Adorno describe labor as an anthropological trait ultimately limits their understanding of capitalism's domination over nature. Because Horkheimer and Adorno define labor as the interaction between humans and nature to procure the means of subsistence, human domination over nature is then also described in the terms of concrete activity ascribed across human societies. For Horkheimer and Adorno, human domination over nature is not historically specific to capitalism, but rather the way that humans have largely had to interact with nature transhistorically. As I will show, however, domination over nature in capitalism has an abstract and historically specific dimension that is rooted in the abstract and historically specific social relations that fundamentally constitute capitalism, including labor.

### **METABOLISM BETWEEN LABOR AND NATURE IN THE CONCEPT OF NATURE IN MARX**

In 1962, Alfred Schmidt published *The Concept of Nature in Marx*. Schmidt was a doctoral student of Adorno and Horkheimer's, and his book was originally conceived as his doctoral dissertation (written between 1957 and 1960). What Schmidt attempts to do, as Neil Smith and Phil O'Keefe point out, is 'to make explicit in Marx a concept that is only implicit' (Smith and O'Keefe, 1980: 33). In this respect, Schmidt's text is both ambitious and worthy of note. In particular, one of the things that Schmidt attempts to do is counter the way that Karl Marx's notion of alienation is read in a reductionist fashion, as anthropological and ahistorical (Schmidt, 1971: 9). Thus, Schmidt names scholars like Feuerbach, who only saw nature as an ahistorical condition. But, with *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, Schmidt also attempts to extend beyond the limitations of his mentors as presented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

In trying not to conceive of alienation as anthropological and ahistorical, Schmidt argues that alienation, including human alienation from extra-human nature, is grounded in the historical specificity of a given society's mode of production. Here Schmidt acknowledges, following both Marx as well as Horkheimer and Adorno, that nature as an objective, fundamental condition of human life is transhistorical; humans need something like nature as the condition of production for basic survival and subsistence (Schmidt, 1971: 27). Yet, as Schmidt argues, the form and content of the human relationship to extra-human nature, or how humans interact with nature as an objective condition of life, is historically determined. Thus, Schmidt echoes the notion of social mediation that is so central to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that the human relationship to nature is mediated by a definite form of society. However, instead of grounding social mediation in enlightenment, which is transhistorically inclusive of pre-capitalist social formations, such as the ancient mode of production, Schmidt grounds social mediation and human alienation from nature in a much more historically specific conceptualization, that of capitalism.

One of the things that Schmidt does in *The Concept of Nature in Marx* is revitalize Marx's notion of 'metabolism', specifically that there is a metabolic interaction between humans and nature mediated by labor. In other words, humans labor to intervene into nature in order to procure the means of subsistence. Schmidt, following Marx, recognizes that there is something seemingly transhistorical about metabolism, that across societies humans have had to rely on the labor-nature interaction for survival. As Schmidt writes,

The metabolism between man and nature is thus independent of any historical form for Marx because it can be traced back into pre-social natural-historical conditions, and because as the expression and maintenance of life, it is common both to the man who is not in any way socialized and to the man who is in some way socially determined. (1971: 136; Schmidt cites *Capital*, vol. 3: 795)

Yet, even if there is something transhistorical about the human relationship to nature captured by the notion of metabolism, in capitalism, humans also seemingly stand over and against nature, seemingly dominate nature and, as a result, are also alienated from nature. As Schmidt writes, prior to capitalism, humans seemed to belong to the land; there seemed to be 'a dialectic of nature', a meaningful and mutual relationship between humans (labor) and nature (Schmidt, 1971: 79). Yet, in the course of the development of capitalist production, the metabolic interaction between humans and nature becomes divided. As Schmidt writes, 'With the emergence of the bourgeois conditions of production, this identity [a reference to the mutual relationship between humans and nature in pre-capitalist society], changes into its equally abstract opposite: the radical divorce of labor from its objective natural conditions' (82). Schmidt continues,

'What the critique of political economy is interested in and wishes to explain is something only typical of bourgeois society, namely the "division between these inorganic conditions of human existence and this active existence itself, a division first posited in its completeness in the relation between wage-labour and capital"'

(82; Schmidt cites Marx, *Grundrisse*: 389). For Schmidt, the metabolic division between nature and humans that is historically specific to capitalism manifests in a physical division between town and country, agriculture and industry, and produces environmental degradation, such as the depletion of soil fertility in agriculture.

What is noteworthy in *The Concept of Nature in Marx* is the way that Schmidt attempts to ground the human relationship to nature in the historical specificity of capitalism; thereby, historically situating capitalism's domination over nature via the conceptualization of metabolic rift. In this respect, Schmidt intends to extend beyond the limitations of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Yet, Schmidt's analysis of capitalism, like Horkheimer and Adorno's, is also incomplete.

Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Schmidt conceives of capitalism not as a mode of production but rather as a mode of exchange. By extension, labor, for Schmidt, is also only conceived within the framework of exchange – primarily as a producer of use-values that are not directly consumed by producers but rather put on the market as commodities to be bought and sold (the latter is then conceptualized as exchange value). Like Horkheimer and Adorno, there is little sense in Schmidt of capitalism's fundamental drive toward valorization for capital accumulation or that what makes labor in capitalism historically unique is its ability to produce monetary value. In other words, for Schmidt, labor is only posited in its concrete dimension, in the terms of a process that produces use-value, but not in its dual-dimensionality, that diving into the 'hidden abode of production', labor in capitalism is simultaneously a valorization process that produces monetary value. In short, Schmidt posits an anthropological notion of labor per se, but not a historically specific notion of labor in capitalism. Though Schmidt intended to move beyond an anthropological reading of Marx's concept of alienation, he does not quite succeed. As Neil Smith and Phil O'Keefe write,

Throughout [Schmidt] abstracted the labor process from the specific historical mode of production under which it occurred, preferring to talk of labor per se. The 'labour-process', for Schmidt, 'does not undergo any [historical] change radically dividing the stages of production from each other'. Thus he proposes to investigate the relation with nature as mediated through the labor process, without at first characterizing 'the relations of production within which that process takes place'. (1980: 34; citing Schmidt [1971]: fn. 12, pp. 91, 93)

## CONTEMPORARY GREEN CRITICAL THOUGHT

More recently, in 2000, John Bellamy Foster published *Marx's Ecology*. Like Schmidt, Foster re-examines Marx's conception of

alienation as well as reinvigorates the notion of metabolism. In 1999, Paul Burkett published *Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective*, an examination of human alienation from nature. Both Foster and Burkett's work is worthy of note, generating a body of green critical thought at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century centered around the notion of capitalism's metabolic rift and alienation from nature.

John Bellamy Foster defines alienation as both 'the estrangement of humanity from its own laboring activity and from its active role in the transformation of nature' (2000: 73). For Foster, Marx's conception of alienation is grounded in bourgeois control over the land, which in the historical transition into capitalism resulted in the removal and expropriation of serfs from the land. Without access to agricultural land and socially direct access to subsistence, serfs became proletarians, laboring in exchange for wages to purchase the means of subsistence. Thus, for Foster, alienation is rooted in private property: humans who labor in capitalism do not have socially direct ownership or control over the products of their labor. According to Foster, alienation from nature is the precondition for capitalism, (e.g. private property and the proletarianization of labor):

The alienation of labor was a reflection of the fact that labor (power) had become reduced virtually to the status of a commodity, governed by the laws of supply and demand. This proletarianization of labor, though, was dependent, as the classical political economists Smith, Malthus, Ricardo, and James Mill had insisted, on the transformation of the human relation to the land. (Foster, 2000: 73)

Similar to Schmidt, the separation between town and country is also a manifestation of Foster's conception of alienation:

Just as Marx and Engels recognized that the wealth-generating characteristics of capitalism were accompanied by an increase in relative poverty for the greater portion of the population, so they understood that the 'Subjection of Nature's forces to man' had been accompanied by the alienation of nature, manifested in the division



between town and country, which they saw as central to capitalism. (Foster, 2000: 139)

Foster labels this separation between town and country as a 'metabolic rift': a dissolution of the pre-capitalist unity between industry and agriculture, where the waste products from industrial production do not return to the soil for agricultural production. This concept is tantamount to what Marx describes as the 'robbing of the soil'. In this respect, Foster's understanding of human alienation from nature is rooted in a spatial or geographic separation between humans and extra-human nature as the natural conditions of production.

Paul Burkett's analysis of human alienation from nature, like that of Schmidt and Foster, draws on a close theoretical reading of Marx's writings. Burkett argues that human alienation from nature is rooted in the way that use-value is subsumed to exchange value, and that exchange value abstracts from the materiality of use-value. In this respect, Burkett explains how nature, in addition to human labor, is the source of use-value, (i.e. nature in the form of natural resources is the material that human labor uses to bring forth physical products or material wealth). Yet labor and nature are used by capital, not for the purposes of satisfying human needs (use-value), but rather for the purposes of monetary accumulation and profit-making. As a form of material wealth, exchange value then abstracts from both nature and labor; in capitalism, nature and labor become abstractions. According to Burkett, it is because human laborers lack direct access to the natural conditions of production (hence also the means of subsistence) that capital dominates both labor and nature. As Burkett writes:

Based on [capitalism's] separation of the human producers from necessary conditions of production including natural productions, and its appropriation of the surplus product in the form of surplus value, capital is able to divide and rule over labor and nature because it determines the forms in which they are productively combined within and across individual production units according to the

imperatives of exchange value and monetary profitability, not in line with any particular co-evolutionary path of human and extra-human nature. (1999: 65)

Because capitalism is characterized by a social structure separated from natural conditions, Burkett argues that capitalism perpetually pushes the natural limits of human labor productivity (e.g. capital's push toward increasing the length of the work day) and natural production conditions (e.g. capital's push toward increased productivity, the depletion of soil fertility).

Burkett argues that the fundamental contradiction in capitalism is between production for profit and production for human needs. According to Burkett, this fundamental contradiction is grasped by Marx's concept of alienation. Burkett explains this as 'alienation of production from the needs of the producers' (1999: 182). Alienation as the fundamental contradiction of capitalism takes the form of human alienation from nature, where laborers do not have direct access to the natural conditions necessary to produce their means of subsistence. Thus, being alienated from nature means that workers are also alienated from their labor, forced to sell their labor power as a commodity in exchange for wages, and alienated from the products of their labor as the private property of the capitalist to whom they are employed.

As with Horkheimer, Adorno and Schmidt, what is missing in these two contemporary green critical theoretical accounts is a recognition of the dual-dimensionality of capitalist social relations, and by extension, the abstract character of alienation and capitalism's domination over nature. In particular, Foster reproduces much of Schmidt's understanding of labor as labor per se, labor in its merely concrete dimension. Thus, he is unable to examine how the abstract character of labor mediates and determines even the 'concrete organization of human labor'. Furthermore, though alienation from nature has a geographic and spatial dimension, it is not *merely* spatial or geographic. As I will

show in the next section, embedded in the abstract social structure that is constituted by the socially-mediating character of labor in capitalism, human alienation from nature permeates into almost all aspects of social life in capitalism. It is through examining the abstract, socially-mediating character of labor in capitalism (along with the other social categories that constitute capitalism, such as the commodity form, value, and capital) that the 'wider social meaning' of metabolic rift and human alienation from nature can be examined (Foster, 2000: 158).

Burkett's argument that human alienation from nature is rooted in the contradiction between production for profit and production to satisfy human needs gets at the fundamental contradiction in capitalism embedded within the value form between the use-value (concrete) dimension and the value (abstract) dimension of capitalism. In this respect, Burkett is the only one of the five scholars addressed here thus far to engage with valorization as the fundamental drive of capitalist production. Yet, Burkett's argument loses its poignancy in two key ways. First, similar to Foster, Burkett relies on a spatial or geographic definition of human alienation from nature rooted in private property (i.e. fundamentally relies on a concrete understanding of capitalism's domination over nature). Second, Burkett argues that the value dimension of capitalism should be abolished while the use-value dimension should be retained. In the latter, Burkett fails to understand and critique the dialectical relationship of the dual dimensions of capitalism, that the very conception of use-value is embedded in the value form itself, and vice versa. Ultimately, Burkett returns to a conception of use-value merely within the realm of exchange, where use-value is understood for the consumer. Burkett loses the focus on capitalism as a mode of production (not merely a mode of exchange), where use-value takes on a very different social meaning, (i.e. the use-value of labor for capital is that it produces surplus value and the use-value of commodities in

circulation is that value can be realized once the commodity is purchased). As I will discuss at the end of this chapter, in theorizing socio-ecological transformation, the goal is to abolish value – and this includes use-value.

## LABOR, NATURE, AND ABSTRACT SOCIAL DOMINATION IN CAPITALISM

Scholars in the *Wertkritik* (value-critique) tradition ground their analyses of social mediation in the historically specific, dual-dimensional character of labor in capitalism. In particular, I focus on Norbert Trenkle's 'Value and Crisis: Basic Questions', published initially in 1998, and Moishe Postone's *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, published in 1993. Trenkle and Postone's work can be used as the foundation for a theory of capitalism's domination over nature that extends beyond the limitations of both *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *The Concept of Nature in Marx* as well as more contemporary works like *Marx's Ecology* and *Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective*. In this section, I first focus on Trenkle and Postone's understanding of labor in capitalism, which then foregrounds the discussion in the second part of this section of my contribution to a critical theory of capitalism's domination over nature.

Norbert Trenkle argues that labor is commonly thought of as an anthropological concept, that which is common across different human societies. In this respect, labor is defined as human interaction with extra-human nature in order to procure the means of subsistence. Labor, then, is commonly understood in concrete terms as physiological activity necessary for human survival. As Trenkle notes, critical theorists that write of labor in anthropological terms often cite Karl Marx, assuming that Marx himself defines labor only in this way. This anthropological understanding of labor per se is embodied in the work of the scholars written about above,

and exemplified in the following quote from John Bellamy Foster, who cites Marx's definition of the labor process in *Capital* volume 1 as a metabolism between humans and extra-human nature:

Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature. He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature ... It [the labor process] is the universal condition for the metabolic interaction [Stoffwechsel] between man and nature, the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence. (Marx, 1990: 283, 290, as cited by Foster, 1999: 380)

As Trenkle argues, while Marx (1990) seemingly writes about labor as an anthropological category, the concept of labor is dialectically unfolded in the course of *Capital*. In this unfolding, the form and character of labor is delineated as historically specific to each social formation. Specifically, Marx examines what is historically unique about labor in capitalism. Thus, Trenkle asks,

Is 'labor' an anthropological constant? Can we use it as such to make it unproblematically into a point of departure for an analysis of commodity society? My answer is unambiguously 'no'. (Trenkle, 2014: 2)

For Trenkle, following Marx, labor in capitalism has a dual-character that cannot be reduced to mere anthropological conceptualizations nor simply defined as the metabolism between humans and nature.

In capitalism, the form and character of labor takes on a dual dimensionality, or a double character: concrete and abstract (Marx, 1990: 171). Concrete and useful labor in capitalism produces commodities, material wealth that is produced for exchange (for the larger purpose of valorization and capital/monetary wealth accumulation). Concretely,

labor also functions as a commodity, as a kind of material wealth (embodied in human labor power) that is exchanged for wages.<sup>8</sup> Wages are then exchanged for commodities that provide subsistence. The abstract dimension of labor detaches from the particularity of different kinds of concrete labor, (e.g. sewing or weaving, welding or brazing), to produce value.

Value is capitalism's historically unique form of social wealth, dominant only where the commodity form is universal, i.e. in capitalism. When the products of different particular kinds of labor are placed into a relationship of commensurability through the process of exchange, value is what each product has in common. Value is not something that can be seen; it is hidden within the product of labor, so that what is visible is the product itself. Because value cannot be seen but the products of labor can (i.e. the commodity form), value appears to be inherent to the product of labor, rather than transferred and embedded into the product of labor through the labor process. This is what Marx referred to as the commodity fetish. The most explicit form of appearance of value is money; or, another way of thinking about this is, money symbolizes value.

The concrete dimension of labor in capitalism is often taken as the defining aspect of labor that is anthropological. In particular, as scholars like Schmidt and Foster exemplify, the notion that people in capitalism transform extra-human nature into commodities (use-values) to provide human subsistence is perceived as the essence of labor in capitalism. Yet, the commodity-determined character of labor in capitalism is not merely a labor process or metabolic interaction; it is primarily a valorization process. The primary goal of labor in capitalism is not the production of use-values to satisfy the means of subsistence for workers. Rather, the goal of labor in capitalism is to produce value (monetary wealth) for capitalists and corporations. Value is embodied in commodities, which are created and exchanged with the primary purpose of

realizing the value embodied in them. In this way, the goal of capitalist production is the valorization of value, the perpetual production of ever increasing amounts of monetary wealth abstracted from concrete usefulness, material content, and human subsistence/survival. In capitalism, labor dominates, where 'human activity, in the form of labor serves no other purpose than valorization of value' (Trenkle, 2014: 4). Thus, as Trenkle argues, even the concrete dimension of labor in capitalism is abstracted from any sort of concrete form and purpose.<sup>9</sup> The concrete dimension of labor in capitalism is still directed toward valorization, and, therefore, cannot be reduced to an anthropological concept, or merely defined as a metabolic interchange between humans and extra-human nature.

In dividing labor in capitalism into concrete and abstract dimensions, Trenkle argues that Marx failed to explain 'that labor as such is already a kind of abstraction' (2014: 2). 'And not simply an abstraction in thought like the concept of a tree, animal, or plant; rather, it is a historically established, socially powerful, actually existing abstraction that violently brings people under its thumb' (Trenkle, 2014: 2–3). Trenkle points to the way in which labor in capitalism is separated from and then comes to dominate all other aspects of social life.

What is essential to this form is in the first instance the fact that work is a separate sphere, cut off from the rest of its social setting. Whoever works is working and doing nothing else. Relaxing, amusing oneself, pursuing personal interests, loving, and so on – these things must take place outside labor, or at least must not interfere with its thoroughly rationalized functional routines. (Trenkle, 2014: 3)

What Trenkle describes is the way that labor in capitalism functions as a social relation producing an abstract form of social dominance, what Moishe Postone (1993) calls the abstract social domination of capitalism.

Postone argues that one of the things that makes capitalism historically unique as a mode of production is the socially-mediating

character of labor rooted in the dominance of commodity exchange. People no longer produce their direct means of subsistence, but rather produce and exchange commodities in order to acquire other commodities that function as the means of subsistence. Via the dominance of commodity exchange, labor in capitalism takes on a unique role as the means to acquiring commodities. By socially-mediating, then, Postone refers to the way in which the historically unique form and character of labor in capitalism functions to mediate and determine the dominant form of social relations in capitalist society. It is via labor that people in capitalism largely interact with society. Because of this, labor in capitalism takes on a heightened social significance that it is not accorded in pre-capitalist societies. As Postone argues, the abstract and socially-mediating character of labor generates an abstract form of social domination that exerts an impersonal and objective compulsion on people to accord labor a central social significance. In short, labor comes to function as the most important aspect of our social lives.

Postone and Trenkle's understanding of abstract social domination is applicable to understanding the historically specific abstract dimension of capitalism's domination over nature in capitalism, such that labor is accorded a central social significance, even over the extra-human nature necessary for human survival as the natural conditions of production. I describe this understanding of capitalism's domination over nature in the terms of labor as 'nature', nature as labor (Yates, 2015, 2011a). Nature in late capitalism appears in the form of the commodity, appropriated, for example, via natural resource extraction, not directly as subsistence, but rather for the purpose of commodity production (in order to realize the monetary value embodied in the commodity form). Thus, nature appears in the commodity form as the product of labor. In other words, labor *appears* to produce nature. Simultaneously, labor in capitalism *appears* as nature. The historically specific form and character of

labor in capitalism *appears* as natural and transhistorical, *appearing* to be the way humans have always interacted with 'nature'. Labor in capitalism *appears* to be the socially direct and overt way that humans procure subsistence. Labor, not nature, *appears* to be the 'natural' conditions of production in capitalism. Because labor in capitalism (and the products of labor, i.e. the commodity form) functions as the socially direct means of procuring subsistence, the social significance traditionally accorded extra-human nature in pre-capitalist societies is eroded. This is not to argue that nature as the natural conditions of production is no longer materially important in capitalism. As one of the fundamental conditions of human existence, it almost goes without stating that extra-human nature is significant for human survival. Yet the relationship that humans have with extra-human nature in capitalism is obscured by the abstract and socially-mediating character of labor, so that it is labor, not nature, that *appears* to be of central social significance in procuring subsistence for human survival. In capitalist society, the human relationship to nature that was once overt and socially direct has become mediated by labor and the other social categories that constitute capitalist society (i.e. the commodity form, value, and capital).

In pre-capitalist societies, the human interaction with nature that procured the means of subsistence was not inherently designated as 'labor', nor was 'labor' as a concept accorded a central social significance. Pre-capitalist social life and activities did not dominantly revolve around conceptions of work (and not-work), and people did not relate to each other as mediated by 'labor', or as workers, but 'as proprietors – and members of a community, who at the same time work' (Marx, 1973: 471). Pre-capitalist individuals existed independently from their 'labor'.<sup>10</sup> What was accorded a central social significance in pre-capitalist social formations was community (interpersonal relationships with others to provide subsistence) and the human

relationship to extra-human nature. In this respect, the concept of 'labor' does not mean the same thing in pre-capitalism as it does in capitalism. Thus, Postone (1993) uses quotations to distinguish 'labor' in pre-capitalism from labor in capitalism.

In pre-capitalist societies, the social nature of 'labor' was not derived from 'labor' itself, but from community in the form of overt or interpersonal relations. The character of the social relations in these societies gave rise to concrete, class-based forms of domination. Indeed, many people living in pre-capitalist societies experienced forms of exploitation, (e.g. the appropriation of surplus 'labor'), but this exploitation was derived from the overt and interpersonal nature of social relations, (e.g. the lord and serf in Western European feudalism). While concrete, class-based forms of domination also exist in capitalism, (e.g. worker and capitalist), these forms of domination are embedded in, and mediated by, the abstract character of labor in capitalism, which gives rise to a form of abstract social domination.

Thus, pre-capitalist societies had a less mediated relationship to the natural conditions of production. Although people's relationship to the natural conditions of production was mediated and determined by the community particular to each pre-capitalist mode of production, as a member of the community, most people's relationship to the natural conditions of production were directly social, (i.e. not abstract or socially-mediating). People in pre-capitalist social formations largely had an overt relationship to the natural conditions of production, and the procurement of subsistence was directly dependent upon this overt relationship. Moreover, as humans had a less mediated relationship to the natural conditions of production, the form of domination over nature in pre-capitalism was also more overt and immediate.<sup>11</sup>

That there is something seemingly trans-historical about domination over nature in capitalism includes the way that some of these concrete forms of domination still

exist in capitalism. This is the concrete form of domination over nature described by Horkheimer and Adorno, Schmidt, Foster, and Burkett; the anthropological notion that humans appropriate extra-human nature in order to procure the means of subsistence necessary for survival. In this way, the concrete form and character of labor in capitalism *appears* as merely anthropological; the form of the appropriation of nature in capitalism *appears* as transhistorical as well as naturalized – as if this were the way that humans have interacted with nature throughout human history. Yet, the form and character of the human relationship to extra-human nature is historically specific. In capitalism, this relationship is mediated and determined by social relations that have an abstract and not merely a concrete dimension. In capitalism, nature is appropriated, (via natural resource extraction), not directly as subsistence, but rather for the seemingly concrete (yet abstract) purpose of being transformed into a commodity, and abstractly to function as the bearer of value. In this way, labor in capitalism and its objective moment, value, function to abstract from nature's purpose of providing subsistence for human survival, while simultaneously generating the *appearance* that subsistence is directly tied to labor in capitalism. Thus, domination over nature is embedded in the abstract and alienated social structure generated by the form and character of labor in capitalism. Even so-called concrete forms of domination over nature in capitalism, (e.g. natural resource extraction, farming), are abstracted from any kind of overt appropriation and directed toward furthering the logic of commodity-determined society (for valorization). Thus, domination in capitalism is not merely concrete; it also has an abstract dimension that seems difficult to grasp.

The capitalist domination over nature takes on an abstract character that produces and perpetuates the cycle of contemporary environmental degradation. This means that individuals may care about the quality of the

natural conditions of production and extra human nature; yet, the abstract form of domination in capitalist society confronts people as an external compulsion to accord labor, and the other fundamental social categories constituting capitalism, a significance not accorded extra-human nature. On a concrete level, because people are *seemingly* overtly dependent on labor for subsistence and thus survival, they are compelled to labor even when it is harmful to the environment and to their health and well-being. As Postone writes, 'Because labor is determined as a necessary means of individual reproduction in capitalist society, wage laborers remain dependent on capital's "growth", even when the consequences of their labor, ecological and otherwise, are detrimental to themselves and others' (1993: 313).

Richard White (1996) points out that environmentalists often target blue-collar labor, (e.g. resource extraction industries and other kinds of physically demanding work), as particularly environmentally destructive. However, it is not just certain kinds of work that cause environmental destruction. Because labor (and the commodity form) mediates social relationships, including the human relationship to extra-human nature, it is often hard to know or see the environmental consequences of individual actions. Writing of his work as a writer, White states:

Nature, altered and changed, is in this room. But this is masked. I type. I kill nothing. I touch no living thing. I seem to alter nothing but the screen. If I don't think about it, I can seem benign ... There are few articles or letters denouncing university professors or computer programmers or accountants or lawyers for sullyng the environment, although it is my guess that a single lawyer or accountant could, on a good day, put the efforts of Paul Bunyan to shame. (1996: 184–5)

This is not to argue that environmental degradation can be fixed within the ontological realm, (i.e. that knowing or seeing the consequences of one's actions can curb domination and degradation, or reduce one's alienation from nature). Rather, the point here is that

domination over nature and environmental degradation are embedded into the historically specific character of labor and abstract social domination in capitalism. The abstract structure of capitalism produces a social organization such that people are: (1) compelled to accord labor a social significance not accorded extra-human nature; (2) induced to participate in a system that causes environmental destruction, and; (3) distanced from the consequences of their individual actions.

## VALUE AND CRISIS: FUTURE DIRECTIONS

One of the reasons why it is important to address the abstract dimension of capitalist domination over nature is to address the kinds of historically unique crises that arise as a direct result of this domination. Both Trenkle and Postone write that the abstract social domination of labor in capitalism produces fundamental crises. For Trenkle, crisis manifests itself in the ‘absolute displacement of living labor power from the process of valorization’ (Trenkle, 2014: 13). In other words, the immiseration of a large portion of the global working class in the form of the rise of an absolute surplus population, millions (possibly billions) of people who will never be formally employed as labor by capital, thereby expelled and excreted from the capitalist system of labor and wages, what I have written about as the ‘human-as-waste’ (Yates 2011b).<sup>12</sup> Thus, the character of abstract social domination produced by labor in capitalism does not just function to dominate nature, but rather is intimately connected to the way that humans also experience domination, via labor, where labor functions as a fundamental hegemonic social structure that ‘violently brings people under its thumb’ (Trenkle, 2014: 2–3). As Trenkle further writes,

Human beings do not enter into the sphere of labor willingly. They do it because they were separated from the most basic means of production

and existence in a long and bloody historical process, and now can survive only by selling themselves temporarily – or, more precisely, by selling their vital energy, as labor power, for an external purpose, the content of which is irrelevant. For them, labor thus primarily means a fundamental extraction of vital energy, and in this respect is thus an extremely real, actually existing abstraction. Indeed, it is precisely for this reason that the identification of labor with suffering makes sense, as the original meaning of the word *laborare* suggests. (Trenkle, 2014: 4)

For Postone, environmental degradation is a fundamental component of the ‘crisis-ridden character’ of capital (Postone, 1993: 313). As Postone writes, there is ‘an underlying tension between ecological considerations and the imperatives of value as the form of wealth and social mediation’ (1993: 313). This tension is ‘immanent to capitalism’ and cannot be resolved ‘so long as value remains the determining form of social wealth’ (Postone 1993: 313). Thus, for Postone, as with Trenkle, crisis is inherent to a society dominated by value and abstract monetary wealth. The crisis cannot be stemmed by a reformist approach that aims to limit economic growth. As Postone explains, the ‘failure to expand surplus value would indeed result in severe economic difficulties with great social costs. In Marx’s analysis, the necessary accumulation of capital and the creation of capitalist society’s wealth are intrinsically related’ (1993: 313). In short, capitalism’s mode of production is fundamentally aimed at valorization and capital accumulation even as this drive toward accumulation is not necessarily beneficial to the system as a whole.<sup>13</sup> Both Trenkle and Postone argue that the only way to overcome the crisis of capitalism, including stemming the environmental destruction that results from capitalism’s abstract form of social domination, is the abolition of value (monetary wealth) and abstract labor as the dominant social relations in capitalist society.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, scholarship in world-ecology, exemplified by the work of Jason W. Moore (2016), aims to move beyond an analysis of

the merely concrete to capture the ways that capitalist crisis is fundamentally ecological. World-ecology aims to move beyond what Moore classifies as a 'green arithmetic' approach to society-nature relations, where 'Marxist ecology = society + nature' (Moore, 2016: 78–9). Like the value-critique approach of Norbert Trenkle and Moishe Postone, world-ecology seeks to understand capitalism in its dual-dimensionality, emphasizing the role of value-relations and 'how capital works through nature' (Moore, 2016: 81). At the heart of the world-ecology project is situating both capitalism and nature historically, and examining not just what capitalism does *to* nature but also what nature does *for* capitalism. Thus, Moore writes of a 'double internality', a thinking through not just of 'nature-in-capitalism' but also of 'capitalism-in-nature' (Moore, 2016: 78). In this respect, world-ecology sees capitalism as an environment-making system that organizes nature (Moore, 2016: 2), and that to understand ecological crisis, then, means understanding the crises endemic to capitalism, crises that result from the dominance of valorization and value-relations.

## CONCLUSION

As I have shown in this chapter, it is important to conceptualize the fundamental capitalist social relations as having a dual dimensionality, not merely concrete, but also abstract. As both Norbert Trenkle and Moishe Postone point out, capitalism has a socially-mediating and historically specific dimension that produces an abstract form of social dominance. The abstract form of domination in capitalism confronts people as an external compulsion to accord labor, and the other fundamental social categories constituting capitalism, a significance not accorded extra-human nature. In analyzing this abstract dimension, what is historically specific about capitalist domination over nature can be

unveiled, namely that domination over nature in capitalism is not merely concrete and anthropological, but rather embedded in and reflective of the abstract social domination of capitalism.

## Notes

- 1 'The awakening of the subject is bought with the recognition of power as the principle of all relationships. In face of the unity of such reason the distinction between God and man is reduced to an irrelevance, as reason has steadfastly indicated since the earliest critiques of Homer. In their mastery of nature, the creative God and the ordering mind are alike. Man's likeness to God consists in sovereignty over existence, in the lordly gaze, in the command' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 5–6).
- 2 While Horkheimer and Adorno's conception of equivalence references Marx's notion of the commodity fetish, it does not fully encapsulate this notion. As I will discuss in more detail, Horkheimer and Adorno understand capitalism predominantly as a mode of exchange; thus, equivalence as a reference to exchange takes center stage in their analysis. However, for Marx, capitalism is not reducible to a mode of exchange, but rather is a mode of production, encompassing exchange, but driven primarily by a process of valorization. A more precise understanding of Marx's notion of commodity fetishism, rooted in capitalism as a mode of production, is elaborated later in this chapter.
- 3 'The identity of everything with everything is bought at the cost that nothing can at the same time be identical itself. Enlightenment dissolves away the injustice of the old inequality of unmediated mastery, but at the same time perpetuates it in universal mediation, by relating every existing thing to every other' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 8).
- 4 'The self which learned about order and subordination through the subjugation of the world soon equated truth in general with classifying thought, without whose fixed distinctions it cannot exist' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 10).
- 5 Horkheimer and Adorno write of 'universal mediation' as 'historically-specific', meaning historically specific to enlightenment (2002: 8). But, Adorno and Horkheimer project enlightenment back on to pre-capitalist societies, like the ancient mode of production. When Horkheimer and Adorno write of historical specificity they refer to the period they designate as enlightenment,



which includes capitalist modernity but also extends before the period of capitalism as well.

- 6 Steven Vogel writes, 'Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, is a double-edged phenomenon: in its implicit commitment to truth, to clarity, and to freedom it remains the indispensable presupposition of social critique and the best hope for social change, but at the same time it also and inevitably works to subvert and invalidate these very goals, and hence to abolish itself' (1996: 51).
- 7 'He listens, but does so while bound helplessly to the mast, and the stronger the allurements grows the more tightly he has himself bound, just as later the bourgeois denied themselves happiness the closer it drew to them with the increase in their own power. What he hears has no consequences for him; he can signal to his men to untie him only by movements of his head, but it is too late. His comrades, who themselves cannot hear, know only the danger of the song, not of its beauty, and leave him tied to the mast to save both him and themselves. They reproduce the life of the oppressor as a part of their own, while he cannot step outside his social role' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 26–7).
- 8 Labor as a commodity is uniquely useful because it produces value.
- 9 Trenkle writes, 'The concrete aspect of labor thus remains in no way untouched by the presupposed form of socialization. If abstract labor is the abstraction of an abstraction, concrete labor only represents the paradox of the concrete aspect of an abstraction – namely of the form abstraction "labor". It is only "concrete" in the very narrow and restricted sense that the different commodities require materially different production processes: a car is made differently from, say, an aspirin tablet or a pencil sharpener. But even the behavior of these processes of production is in no way indifferent, technically or organizationally, to the presupposed goal of valorization' (2014: 9).
- 10 Marx writes, 'the worker [sic] has an objective existence independent of labour' (1973: 471).
- 11 Even the feudal lord in feudalism whose existence was more abstracted from production than that of a serf had a less mediated relationship to the natural conditions of production than most people do in capitalism. While the feudal lord's subsistence was derived from the labor of the serfs, the feudal lord still had an immediate and overt relationship with the producers of subsistence and with how that subsistence was produced, especially in contrast to the seemingly impersonal and abstract relationship producers and consumers have in capitalism. The forms of power in feudalism were concrete class-based

forms of domination, and this translated into a kind of concrete form of domination over nature. Concrete, class-based forms of domination exist in capitalism too (e.g. worker and employer), but domination functions in capitalism in much more abstract ways than simply these concrete forms. Therefore, the capitalist domination over nature also has an abstract dimension that it did not have prior to capitalism.

- 12 The concept of 'the human-as-waste' makes connections between surplus populations and environmental degradation as two moments of the same crisis in capitalism (Yates, 2011b).
- 13 Trenkle writes that financialization in the form of fictitious capital is also a fundamental component of capitalism's crisis state. 'Ultimately, however, the violent inflation and unleashing of the system of credit and speculation also belong to this context. That fictitious capital is being amassed to a historically unprecedented extent on one hand explains why the onset of the crisis has up until now appeared relatively mild in core regions of the world market, but on the other hints at the intense violence of the imminent wave of devaluation' (2014: 14).
- 14 'According to Marx's critical theory, the abolition of the accelerating blind process of economic "growth" and socioeconomic transformation in capitalism, as well as its crisis-ridden character, would require the abolition of value' (Postone, 1993: 314).

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# Feminist Critical Theory and the Problem of (Counter) Enlightenment in the Decay of Capitalist Patriarchy

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## **A PLEA FOR RADICAL FEMINIST SOCIAL CRITIQUE TO LEAVE BEHIND THE FORM-DETERMINATIONS OF CAPITALIST PATRIARCHY.**

In the 1990s, poststructuralist theories dominated academic feminism. In contrast to the 1970s and 1980s, Marxist approaches were absolutely marginalised. Instead of looking for a new understanding of totality that could explain more recent developments, such as the decline of really existing socialism, cultural explanations were employed along with an accompanying appreciation of the local, the regional, and the particular. Meanwhile, the situation has changed once more. It is not only since the crash of 2007/8 and the increasing prominence of social issues that interest has surged again in a critique of ‘political economy’. This has also been proclaimed in feminism since the mid 2000s: ‘Women, think economically!’ (Nancy Fraser). Since then, the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School has also received more attention.

Adorno’s critical theory has had a certain tradition within German-speaking feminist theory since the late 1970s. However, it has been inadequately received by feminist theory, that is, inconsistently, unsystematically, discontinuously, disparately and eclectically. In contrast to this reception of Adorno’s thought, value dissociation theory developed in the 1990s during the high time of deconstructivism, partly in opposition to it. It involves a critical appropriation of Adorno’s critical theory, but in contrast to some other feminist theories that also refer to Adorno, value dissociation theory holds the form-determinacy of capitalist patriarchy as central. In this context, I criticise Adorno-inspired feminist accounts for not advancing a radical critique of the Enlightenment, i.e., one that questions both the Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment as two sides of the same coin. These accounts are in fact sociologically stuck in positivist definitions of hierarchical gender relations. Enlightenment, rationality, a formal understanding of science, and even an empty, formulaic sociology are

taken as adequate to critique the form of consciousness of capitalist patriarchy.

Value dissociation critique, however, not only refers to Adorno's theory, but also to the value-critical developments of Marx's own theory. As opposed to traditional Marxism, this approach does not begin with the subjective legal 'appropriation' of surplus value by the capitalist, but takes abstract labour, the commodity, and capital as automatic subject to be the real scandal of capitalist socialisation. This integration of value-critique with critical theory in Adorno's sense transforms the critical theory of society beyond itself towards an account of social form.

After a rough sketch of value dissociation theory, which will also clarify the meaning of social form, the following text will discuss the history of the feminist reception of Adorno in the German-speaking world. Next I discuss the connection between value dissociation critique and relevant passages in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Finally, the third part argues for the necessity of a critique of Enlightenment in the context of value dissociation theory. This entails the categorical, fundamental critique of modern social forms affirmed by the Enlightenment. In order to prevent misunderstandings: this critique of Enlightenment comprehends itself beyond an irrational, vitalist recourse to life, community, and similar ideological abstractions, which are merely the flipside of the androcentric-universalist rationalism of the Enlightenment.

A critique 'with Adorno beyond Adorno' was actually already possible within critical-feminist theories from the second half of the 1980s onwards. But even when Adorno was invoked, this possibility was squandered in favour of an empty formulaic sociology so typical of a bourgeois-academic understanding of social theory, which is entirely devoid of the speculative moment of a fractured, negative dialectical thinking of totality (Adorno, 1973).

There is no systematic feminist orientation in the tradition of Adorno outside the German-speaking world. Theorists such

as Nancy Fraser, Seyla Benhabib, and Iris Marion Young in the Anglo-American world are not discussed here because they argue by and large in the tradition of Habermas, who gave up on a radical critique of capitalist (patriarchy) from the very start.

## ASPECTS OF VALUE DISSOCIATION CRITIQUE

Value dissociation theory starts from the premise that it is not simply the case that capital, as the 'automatic subject' (Marx) of (surplus) value, constitutes a totality. Equally important is the 'fact' that reproductive activities arise in capitalism which are mainly carried out by women. Accordingly, value dissociation essentially means that reproductive activities determined as feminine, along with accompanying emotions, qualities, attitudes (emotionality, sensibility, care, etc.), are precisely dissociated from (surplus) value and abstract labour as well as a corresponding androcentric subjectivity. Female reproductive activities, 'love', nurture, care, and so on, have a different character than value-producing abstract labour; therefore, they cannot automatically be subsumed under the concept of labour. In other words, there is a side of capitalist society that cannot be grasped by Marxist conceptual instruments. This side is comprised by (surplus) value, necessarily belonging to it; but at the same time, it is outside of it and is therefore its presupposition. There is no hierarchy of derivation, both emerge from each other. Thus, the dissociation of value can also be interpreted as a superordinate logic, which overlaps with the internal economic categories.

To this extent, value dissociation also implies a specific socio-psychological relation: feminine connoted qualities, such as emotionality, sensibility, understanding, and weakness of character are projected onto women and dissociated from the male, value-determined subject, construed as rational, strong, assertive, and productive, and so on.

Thus, in regards to the structure of the dissociated relationship, one must also take into account the socio-psychological and the cultural-symbolic dimension, whereby capitalist patriarchy is to be understood as a 'civilisation model' (Frigga Haug) and not merely as an economic system.

In this context, the dissociation of value also represents a meta-theory as it cannot be assumed that empirical male and female individuals correspond directly with it. Men and women neither appear immediately one-to-one in this structure, nor can they completely escape the corresponding attributions.

Value dissociation as basic social relation is also subject to social change; it must be thought of as a historical process. It should be pointed out that modern gender conceptions and their corresponding forms of existence arose only in connection with the institutionalisation of 'abstract labour' for the market on the one hand and separate household activities on the other. The woman as housewife and the man as breadwinner did not exist in pre-modern times. Cultural conceptions of masculinity and femininity can vary, it must be stated, but this should not result in a culturally relativist failure to recognise that capitalist patriarchy shapes social reality worldwide.

In postmodernity, the structure of dissociation presents itself in a different form than in 'classical' modernity. The traditional nuclear family has now largely disappeared and with it the modern gender relation. At least in Western countries, women are now caught up with the men, for example, in terms of education. In contrast to the old housewife ideal, they are equally responsible for family and career. However, unlike men, they are still primarily responsible for the dissociated care activities, they still earn less than men, they have fewer opportunities for advancement, and so on. Moreover, in the era of globalisation, when the institutions of work and family are increasingly disintegrating in the crisis of capitalist patriarchy without new forms of reproduction to take their place, we are not

dealing with the overcoming of patriarchy, but rather with its feralisation.

For a large part of the population, even in developed countries, this means that women are likely to live in conditions that are at least partly known from the slums of 'Third World' countries: women are equally responsible for money and survival. They are increasingly integrated into the world market, but without the opportunity to secure their own livelihood. They raise children with the help of female relatives and neighbours.

The 'housewifised' (Claudia von Werlhof) men come and go, moving from job to job and from woman to woman, who maybe even support them (in principle, it can be reversed, of course). Due to the precariousness of employment, combined with the erosion of traditional family relations, the man no longer possesses the role of breadwinner. At the same time, hierarchical gender relations have by no means disappeared. Male violence increases. This is true today on a global scale, despite all the differences in various parts of the world, which must be taken into account.<sup>1</sup>

## THE HISTORY OF THE ADORNO RECEPTION IN FEMINISM SINCE THE 1970S

Before discussing the link between value dissociation critique and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the history of Adorno's reception in the German-speaking feminist debate will be considered. It will be shown that, in contrast to value dissociation theory, over the decades this debate has become increasingly detached from the problem of social form.

It was only in the second half of the 1980s that German-speaking feminism appealed more to Adorno. Before that, the so-called 'domestic labour debate' took place within the narrower framework of traditionally Marxist-economic categories. The core question was

whether domestic labour creates value, which ultimately had to be negated. Asymmetrical gender relations in capitalism could not be explained and criticised in the same way as value-producing labour-power. The turn to Adorno and Horkheimer, especially to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, may be explained primarily by the rising awareness of environmental and ecological problems at the time.

With the so-called new social movements – ecology, women's, alternative, peace and psychological movement – the problem of the domination of nature and alienation in the widest sense (the 'colonisation of the life world' according to Habermas) entered the focus of social critique, which thrived under conditions of the developed welfare state. However, in parts of the women's movement, a simplistic critique of technology and society went hand in hand with the propagation of a new femininity. Women, like nature (often equated), should be emancipated in order to return to an allegedly original relationship with nature. A false immediacy reared its ugly head again. Especially after Chernobyl, a new maternal femininity was all the rage (Mothers against Nuclear Power, etc.).

Against this partly biological ideologisation, feminists aligned with critical theory began to form their own position and resist. At that time, many works and anthologies on rationality, the domination of nature, sensuality, and femininity appeared which sought to defy those crude tendencies of a new femininity in its false 'naturalistic' immediacy, and demonstratively turned against them. One could mention here, for example, Heidemarie Bennent's (excellent) philosophical-historical investigation into the dissociation of the feminine in philosophy; in it, she refers to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, arguing with Horkheimer and Adorno that we are descendants of the Enlightenment in the good as well as the bad sense, and that a blanket rejection of it would lead to barbarism (Bennent, 1985).

Until well into the 1990s, books appeared with titles like *Rationality and Sensuous Reason* (Kulke, 1988), *Twilight of Reason*

(Kulke and Scheich, 1992), *Mediated Femininity* (Scheich, 1996), *The Problem of the Identity-Logic Constructions of 'Nature' and 'Gender'* (Gransee, 1999). These references should be understood as examples, not a complete overview. In the 1970s, for example, Silvia Bovenschen emphasised the significance of witch-hunts using the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in a feminist way that did not end up stuck in a false immediacy (Bovenschen, 1977). One should also absolutely mention her work on 'imagined femininity' in which, with the help of critical theory and before the poststructuralism fad, she uncovered the cultural patterns and fantasies of femininity while also rejecting the idea of 'female culture' within the women's movement, which was entangled in such traditional phantasms themselves (Bovenschen, 1979).

In this context, however, Horkheimer and Adorno have also been targets of critique since the 1980s. They were accused in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as well as other works of remaining trapped within traditional gender stereotypes and corresponding dualisms. Consequently, it was necessary to look for ways to escape the trap of the 'gender binary'. This already indicates a tendency which holds a flank open to deconstructivism. Horkheimer and Adorno were criticised for not seeing women as 'resistant'. In general, there was much talk at this time of seeing women not just as victims, but as always resistant, as agents, witnesses of the era, 'even-subjects', who also demand recognition. Against the backdrop of critical theory, a new kind of feminist theory should be possible, one which dispenses with gender stereotypes and still holds social structures accountable for the gender malaise.

At the beginning of the more intensified Adorno reception in the 1980s, there was quite some reflection on the social form of modernity in terms of a critique of fetishism. In light of critical theory, Ursula Beer writes:

What ... failed was the theoretical proof of the desire to conceive of domestic labour as 'value-creating'. Domestic labour does not create value in

the sense of money or exchange value as the object of value-form analysis ... The question raised by Becker-Schmidt and her colleagues about the 'form-determination' of the family (also discussed in different terms in 1978 by Ilona Ostner) therefore seemed to open up new possibilities for me, but with a different aim: the significance of unpaid labour in society as a whole. In the Anglo-American discussion, which pushed the domestic labour debate most strongly, the question of the form-determination of the family was never raised. (Beer, 1987: 191)

Then, at the end of the 1980s, Beer suddenly turned from Adorno to Althusser as a reference, beginning with the critique of Adorno's fixation on commodity exchange:

Adorno does not see the cohering principle of capitalist societies in material production, which is founded on the relationship between wage labour and capital, but in exchange, in the sphere of circulation. Specific logics of development, which are not based on commodity exchange, cannot be taken into account with this conception. This finding has great relevance for women's studies because socio-economic inequality in gender relations is based on a tendential exclusion of women from commodity exchange in terms of the commodified valorisation of their labour power. Nor can (re)generative production be subsumed under the concept of exchange, which the feminist materialist postulate stresses against the material-productive character of women's child-bearing activities. (Beer, 1990: 79)

From this critique follows the reference to Althusser:

It should be considered whether Althusser's idea of positional and functional relationships can also be taken up in connection with the 'mode of population' and its interdependence with the 'mode of economy' ... The thesis of determination in the last instance by the economy, which, according to Althusser's reading of Marx, maintains the independence or relative autonomy of so-called superstructural phenomena, could perhaps be applied to the reformulated concept of the base: ... in the sense that the 'dominant structure' of the mode of economy and population in its unity and differentiations exerts a profound influence on the organising framework of the entire society. (Beer, 1990: 102 et sq.)

Adorno's pervasive exchange-reductionism is readily apparent. The capitalist fetish

relation, the a priori connection between 'abstract labour' and 'automatic subject' of valorisation, is not adequately captured by Adorno's cryptic and contradictory concept of exchange. But in contrast to traditional Marxism, and despite the reduction to exchange, his theory includes access to the critique of the value-form and its fetish character. For Beer, the critique of Adorno goes in a completely wrong direction. The ideological fixation on exchange is not critically resolved in line with a new determination of the relation between 'abstract labour' and gender relations, but is diverted entirely away from social form determinations. The traditional understanding of 'wage labour and capital' reformulated along Althusser's structuralist theory fails to recognise the fact that the class relation is not immediately the ultimate ground of a 'cohering principle'. On the contrary, it is 'founded' on the capital fetish across classes, the logic of valorisation and its gendered dissociation. A critique of social form in the sense of a critique of fetishism, which could have worked out the androcentric character of the fundamental categories of capitalism, was therefore impossible. In its stead, the feminist 'materialist' postulate, with its vulgar materialist or feminist understanding of production based on 'child-bearing' ability, left the door open once again for conceptions of society based on underlying biological and anthropological assumptions.

In the case of Beer, on the other hand, her Althusserian account ('overdetermination' of the 'last instance' by cultural 'factors', among others, of the capitalist economy traditionally understood by class sociology) proved to be a mere point of transition towards a cultural feminism, which was to become hegemonic in the form of deconstructivism during the 1990s. As a result, the capital relation as such with its basic categories largely disappeared from theoretical reflection, especially in deconstructivist feminism, which lost its critical sting. It is only recently, under the impact of crisis, that – problematic, short-sighted – efforts are being made to bring together the critique of

capitalism with deconstruction in so-called queer-feminism, especially beyond any kind of thought about the basic character of capitalist relations in the sense discussed above.

The critical recourse to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* transitioned into a superficial gender-rationality in the 1990s at the latest. This also entailed a surrender of the problem of social form in terms of its categorical-content, which was initially conceived in the 1980s. Since the 1980s, gender was to be determined merely sociologically akin to class as a category of social structure, even though it was at first crucially linked to a concept of social form. What emerged in the early 1990s was an empty formulaic (feminist) sociology, already mentioned at the outset, whereby the transition to 'relationality' as an actual principle of knowledge, basically a formal logical point of view, played an important role.

Thus, this kind of theoretical approach was to account for the objective structures and socio-theoretical perspectives that the prominent poststructuralist theories of feminism had most neglected (see e.g., Judith Butler). The poststructuralist approach overlapped to some degree with Adorno regarding the critique of identity. Beer's theory was not much heard of in the 1990s, probably because of its (biologically vulgar) materialistic orientation (a recourse to 'childbearing ability' was quite rightly frowned upon in poststructuralist accounts). Similarly alongside Beer are Becker-Schmidt and Knapp, who still rely on Adorno today, and whose works are at least partly based on an implicit Althusserian foundation as regards the 'relative autonomy of so-called superstructural phenomena'. Although the conception of (surplus) value as the form of capitalist reproduction has not completely vanished from theoretical focus, it is very much moved to the background.

It almost appears as if women in the 'post-socialist' 1990s groomed an academically and sociologically pristine and sterile Adorno in order to conjure away the problem of basic capitalist forms. When, for example,

Becker-Schmidt and Knapp elucidate the meaning of the term 'relational', it becomes clear that they are indulging in a kind of Althusserian twisted understanding of Adorno:

First, relations specify the elements, the relata, which come into relation with each other as magnitudes in an equation. In our case, these are women and men considered as genus groups. Second are the contexts within which the genus groups, when not on equal footing, come into a reciprocal relationship of appreciation and depreciation. Interactions between the genus groups have a wide range of nodal points, for example, kinship bonds, sexual relations, and cooperative relationships, or economic, cultural and political conditions that decide the opportunities for appropriation and recognition of men and women. Such constellations are by no means based on the same organising principles in all societies. In cultural comparisons, we find relations of similarity and difference, symmetry and asymmetry, equality and hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion. Historical investigations – within a cultural tradition – can bring to light changes from epoch to epoch. This means that the configuration of relations between the sexes is dependent on history and society. (Becker-Schmidt and Knapp, 2000: 39 et sq.)

In contrast, Adorno already knew:

A notion of society ... would be *critical* [if i]t would go far beyond the trivial idea that everything is interrelated. The emptiness and abstractness of this idea is not so much the sign of feeble thinking as of a shabby permanency in the constitution of society itself: that of exchange in modern-day society. (Adorno, 1969: 148)

Even though Adorno only conceptualises exchange here, and does not make the link with value dissociation, he addresses the formal principle of capitalist society located on the categorical level and not in the secondary structure of the surface (everything is somehow connected with everything else without determining an overarching concept of the whole). Precisely in this abbreviated manner, however, Becker-Schmidt and Knapp understand 'form-determination' as merely 'the formation of a social structure that historically crystallised under certain conditions of production and reproduction' (Becker-Schmidt and Knapp, 2000: 155).



These descendants of critical theory not only forego the categorical conception of social form, but also lack perception of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* even if only as a doubt of Enlightenment. Instead, an ambivalent critique of Enlightenment in the sense of a *dialectic* of Enlightenment, according to which the Enlightenment could have also led to piercing the 'context of delusion', was ultimately transformed into a positivist, formal-logical thinking, which was a thorn in the side for Adorno and Horkheimer. Rationality and irrationality are not seen as two sides of the same coin of an untrue whole but instead the resulting issues are one-sidedly resolved in a rational and formal-logical manner.

This manner of thinking also characterises, for example, Knapp's considerations of intersectionality, i.e., the connection between 'race', class, and gender, which makes little recourse to the categorical level of capitalist social forms. It is precisely in this understanding that Frieder Otto Wolf writes:

No longer determined by the recently elapsed moment of postmodernism, the newer feminist, ecological and anti-racist critiques of the European scientific tradition no longer use 'cultural critique' in a romantic (or nihilistically theory-hostile) manner to critically overcome its 'scientific character', but rather aim anew at its 'unscientific', methodological distortions in the empirical-historical processing of reality. (Wolf, 2011: 362)

The critique of the bourgeois concept of science following Adorno, quite evident in feminism up to the 1980s, is declared over and rejected as 'romantic' or even 'theory-hostile'. Instead it seeks out a scientific conception of theory that belongs to the positivist and formal-logic traditions of bourgeois thought. Wolf however welcomes Althusser's reading warmly.

Althusser's rejection of the humanist subject in favour of a structural analysis of the direct appearance of society went hand in hand with the adoption of a 'class standpoint' or analysis of a class structure, which served to determine everything else, despite all

'overdetermination', that is, the occurrence of other contradictions. As if by twist of fate, however, this kind of theorising allowed for the humanist subject to be reintroduced through the back door, as was already the case in Althusser's self-criticism since the 1970s. This visible oscillation between (sociological, immanent-interests guided) 'standpoint' and 'structure' as basic model are traditionally always present within androcentric bourgeois science and scientific theory. Therefore, the ability for a feminist theory to distance itself from such a theoretical approach is necessary in order to advance towards a critique of basic social forms. Social form critique is the foundation of dissociation theory.

## VALUE DISSOCIATION CRITIQUE AND DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Horkheimer and Adorno, especially in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, offer possibilities of connecting with an enlightenment-sceptical theory of value dissociation, beyond affirmative structural logics and subject idolatries (cf. Scholz, 2004). A fundamental determination of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is pointedly expressed in the following prominent quotation:

Humanity had to inflict terrible injuries on itself before the self – the identical, purpose-directed, masculine character of human beings – was created, and something of this process is repeated in every childhood ... Anyone who wishes to survive must not listen to the temptation of the irrecoverable, and is unable to listen only if he is unable to hear. Society has always made sure that this was the case. Workers must look ahead with alert concentration and ignore anything which lies to one side. The urge towards distraction must be grimly sublimated in redoubled exertions. Thus the workers are made practical. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 26)

As is well known, Horkheimer and Adorno make recourse to antiquity with the Odyssey. Odysseus can be tied to the mast in order to resist the sound of the sirens. *Dialectic of*

*Enlightenment* should not be read as an historical odyssey. Rather, it should be read as an account of the constitutive history of modern capitalist society, in which Marxist theory is implicitly connected with psychoanalysis. Andrea Maihofer, whose deliberations are interesting for value dissociation critique, correctly writes:

Otherwise independent phenomena such as capitalist commodity production, instrumental rationality, domination of nature, bourgeois-patriarchal rule, 'male' subjectivity, and so on, are seen in a strict constitutive context of emergence and reproduction. This is not meant, as is often the case, in the sense of a bad economic, monocausal derivation, according to which everything is connected with everything else, because ultimately everything is the (functional) form of appearance of the 'one' of the economy. (Maihofer, 1995: 111)

The male subject dissociates his drives and feelings; they must now be controlled and ruled. Consequently, there exists a dialectic between domination and submission or self-submission. The relation to value dissociation theory is evident. The dissociation of value is visible here at least in silhouette as the formal principle, which permeates society as a whole. At the same time, Horkheimer and Adorno do not simply reproduce gender stereotypes, as Maihofer also correctly observes, but reconstruct gender discourse and critically present its constitution. They thus also implicitly take into account the cultural-symbolic level and do not regard capitalist patriarchy merely as a 'civilisational model' reducible to the economy. Male and female subjectivity, however they may appear, are often presented as broken in themselves. Nonetheless, Horkheimer and Adorno do not yet arrive at the fundamental breakthrough of the critique of the constitutive core of the value dissociation relations. Their remarks on gender relations are primarily descriptive.

Generally problematic in this context, *ceterum censeo*, is that Adorno regards the principle of exchange as the basic social fact of modernity, not value and abstract labour (let

alone the dissociation of value as a social relation of reproduction). A critique of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* should have thus encompassed value and abstract labour along the trajectory taken by value dissociation critique. Instead it was taken in the direction of Althusserian structuralism, which led to claiming 'material production' in a feminist way without any further thought about value and its implications for totality. Indeed, in the case of Becker-Schmidt, who adopts an almost purely relationalist-sociological view of society, a fundamental critique of capitalism is an entirely alien undertaking.

In the face of National Socialism, Horkheimer and Adorno asked in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 'why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: xiv). As children of their time, Horkheimer and Adorno obviously could not examine the new barbaric processes in light of today's deterioration of capitalism. Beyond Adorno, we may diagnose a 'feralisation of patriarchy' in postmodernity. Institutionalised fixtures, such as gainful employment and family, are increasingly dissolving in the deteriorating context of capitalist patriarchy. Women are equally responsible for money and survival, production and reproduction, whereas men are being 'housewifised' at the same time, that is to say, their role as breadwinners becomes more and more precarious. Women now occupy a crucial place both in self-help initiatives of the Third World as well as in the corridors of declining state power. Horkheimer and Adorno already see the growing professional activity of women in their time with scepticism, and speak of a 'dissociation of love' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 85). From the perspective of value dissociation critique, however, the dissociated sphere of the family is not a refuge, not a positive 'other', as it appears for Horkheimer and Adorno, but itself an immanent component of capitalist patriarchy.

Value dissociation theory has by no means become irrelevant with historical-postmodern

changes, as might appear to the superficial view that associates it with traditional gender roles. Rather, it adopts Adorno's insight, formulated in his *Introduction to Sociology* lectures:

[F]irstly, the essential concerns the laws of motion of society, especially the laws which express how the present situation has come into being and where it is tending to go; secondly, these laws are modified, and are valid only as far as they are really manifested; thirdly, the task of sociology is either to explain even the discrepancies between essence and appearance in terms of the essential [...] or to have the courage to abandon concepts of essence or general laws which are simply incompatible with the phenomena and cannot be dialectically mediated. (Adorno, 2000: 25)

What does this mean from the standpoint of value dissociation critique, an approach that Adorno did not have in mind? From the perspective of value dissociation theory, it is crucial to insist on a dialectic of essence and appearance in Adorno's sense, and not to get carried away by empirically ascertainable facts like the 'double socialisation' of women in postmodern individualisation (Becker-Schmidt), the diagnosis of the end of the patriarchy, or even the formal-logical determinations of the gender hierarchy. Rather, it is necessary to determine the constitutive reproduction of the overarching dissociation of value as the form determining principle of the social totality in its historical breakdown. This equally encompasses the material, social psychological and cultural-symbolic dimension in its postmodern developed form, and thus all areas and levels of society as well (see above; also Scholz, 2005, 2011). Accordingly, the more recent empirical changes in gender relations must be understood out of the mechanisms and structures of value dissociation itself.

At the same time, the development of the productive forces and market dynamics, which themselves are based on the basic principle of value dissociation, undermine their own presuppositions by forcing women out from their traditional role and instead making them

aware of the always already existing 'double socialisation' (Becker-Schmidt) in the course of the process of individualisation. For example, since the 1950s in West Germany, more and more women from the middle classes have joined the labour market, due to processes of rationalisation in the household, among other things; women have long caught up with men in education; mothers are increasingly employed; family planning has become possible due to contraceptive means, and so on (Beck, 1992). In short, there has been a long-standing tendency for more women to be integrated into the official (traditionally male connoted) society. However, even in changed postmodern circumstances, women are still responsible for care and household activities in contrast to men, earning on average less than men, and so on. What transpires is a mere modification of the structure of value dissociation: 'double socialisation' gains a new quality. Women are no longer just objectively 'doubly socialised' as before, but now under conditions of feralised, crisis-ridden patriarchy; even according to this model, they are still determined by the roles of housewife and mother. Even on the globalised macro-scale, women are mainly crisis-managers, whether increasingly in 'power positions' of business and politics or on the poverty level of self-help groups, often borne by women in the slums. Women function once again as 'detergents and disinfectants', as already found in a patriarchal tradition (women are the better humans), although in a modified postmodern form in the sense of a now so-called work-life balance, which can be studied hands on with the help of social science (Thürmer-Rohr, 1987). All the while, male violence increases if nothing else because of the inconsistency of status.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, a critique of the logic of identity entails a critique of the logic of gender. Thus, they write:

Man as ruler refuses to do woman the honour of individualising her. Socially, the individual woman is an example of the species, a representative of her sex, and thus, wholly encompassed by male logic, she stands for nature, the substrate of

never-ending subsumption on the plane of ideas and of never-ending subjection on that of reality. Woman as an allegedly natural being is a product of history, which denatures her. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 87)

Instrumental reason and the logic of identity, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, culminated in the liquidation of the 'other' in National Socialism. In so doing, they connect the predominant logic of identity categorically with the domination of nature and, in this context, with the exchange principle. Value dissociation critique, on the basis of Adorno's thought, utilises the critique of identity logic for itself, thus adopting the critique of a deductive thinking that wants to create order from above and subject the particular, contingent, different, ambiguous to *one* logic. The thought form of identity logic however does not correspond simply with exchange or, more correctly, with (surplus) value. For it is not important whether the common third thing – disregarding qualities – is average social labour time or abstract labour, which stands behind the form of equivalence, but that it again must exclude and look down upon whatever is connoted as feminine, namely, domestic work, the sensuous, the emotional, the analytically incomprehensible, the different, and the contradictory.

However, the dissociation of the feminine is by no means congruent with the non-identical in Adorno; instead, it represents the flip side of value. Dissociation *in general* is a precondition for neglecting the actual forms of life, the scientifically incomprehensible, the contingent, and so on, and for remaining largely dim in the masculine areas of science, economics and politics of the modern age. Leading the charge is a classificatory thinking that cannot take into account the particular quality, 'the thing itself', and thus must omit any differences, breaks, contradictions, and so on.

Thus, a corresponding theory of value dissociation should reveal its own limits; this is a core requirement of the approach. In this context, for example, it is important to point out following Adorno that empirical individuals

are never wholly absorbed in gender-typical attributions, even if they cannot escape them. Thus, as a critical social theory, value dissociation must protect itself against acquiring a transcultural character. Even though dissociation of the feminine entails a global dynamic, it has different faces in historically different phases of value dissociating socialisation. In postmodernity, as already mentioned above, it is undergoing a change of form as traditional gender relations erode, as the institutions of the family and labour market protection corrode, and as patriarchy undergoes feralisation in the course of globalisation.

The abstract recourse to the non-identical, to contradictions, to the ambivalent, to difference, and so on, has long since become affirmative. This is true in postmodern and poststructuralist theories insofar as they are free-floating, without reference to a concept of society, without reference to a universal, to a (negative) social essence (to be overcome), as was the case with Adorno.

Contrary to the anti-philosophical, postmodern, and poststructuralist tendencies, today's global social reality can only be tackled by an admittedly contemporary, speculative-philosophical thinking in terms of a radical critique of value dissociation relations that constitute the basic social structure. The central importance of value dissociation as the principle of social form, including the corresponding gender relations, does not mean that value dissociation presents the so-called main contradiction of society. Following Adorno, and according to the remarks above, the theory of value dissociation cannot correspond to a logic of the One. Rather, it remains true to itself in its critique of the logic of identity; it can only exist by relativising itself, even denying itself where it is necessary. And this also means that value dissociation critique, if it is to keep an eye on the relevant thing in itself, must concede equal theoretical place for various forms of social discrimination (Scholz, 2005).

Thus to a much greater extent than other theoretical feminisms, value dissociation

critique follows Adorno's negative dialectic as a critique of social form, which argues in and through the thing itself, the particular object of the gender relation, and aims at the content.

### **RADICAL ENLIGHTENMENT CRITIQUE AND THE THEORY OF VALUE DISSOCIATION**

How, are we to situate the sociologically narrow developments in feminism after critical theory, gender theory, and the corresponding reference to rationality and enlightenment in light of the critique of the determinate dissociation of value as the principle of social form? Knowledge of the ambivalence of Enlightenment, appearing in feminist titles such as *Rationality and Sensuous Reason*, *Twilight of Reason*, and so on, should have led to a theory of value dissociation instead of seeking 'refuge' in structuralist paradigms. A feminist insistence on structure is tellingly resolved in a purely sociological manner, without recognising it as a narrow-minded, genuinely bourgeois standpoint. The merely descriptive presentation of the problem of gender in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* should have instead been transferred to a categorical level. Such a critique leads through the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to a fundamental critique of Enlightenment, rather than its affirmation. It goes without saying that such an approach has nothing in common with any recourse to a 'false immediacy' (Adorno), even with claims of a somatic moment in general. Such conceptions of a 'new femininity' are highly distorted and basically reactionary, but in opposing mere gender-positions, they must be asserted in a completely different way. A critique of value dissociation thus requires a critical distance and capacity for abstraction far greater than any 'normal' and recognised sociological form of theory. It thus refers back, *volens*

*volens*, to the Enlightenment, which must not only be enlightened about itself; it must also be overcome to prevent the Enlightenment from falling into reaction. What is required here is the ability to withdraw from the given – even the Enlightenment itself – and actually venture into a no man's land, a procedure which has nothing in common with an apotheosis of the Enlightenment. There is no escape from this tension. The gender problematic and its entire history are always in danger of being concretely and immediately misunderstood.

Negative dialectics has its roots initially in the Enlightenment, but at the same time, it demands going beyond itself, to examine its own limitations and thus to think against itself, with and against Adorno. This kind of dialectical thinking may be indispensable, but it cannot be perpetuated for all time or immortalised as a fundamental affirmation of enlightenment. The necessary recourse to negative dialectics as a radical critique of the given conditions is ultimately there to be overcome. We simply do not know how modes of thinking might look in a non-capitalist, non-patriarchal society. To this extent, value dissociation is the basic social principle of contemporary society. In this sense, negative dialectics is thus 'true' with regard to the critique of the present condition. With Guy Debord, however, it must be stressed that 'in a world which really is topsy-turvy, the true is a moment of the false' (Debord, 1995: §9). What is at issue here is a critique of an all-encompassing value dissociating practice of socialisation. Practice does not simply mean political practice, but social practice in a comprehensive sense, which transcends a false immediacy of everyday life and its reservoir of alleged femininity. It also has nothing in common with a structuralist reading of theoretical practice à la Althusser, which from the outset shies away from any dialectical reference. By negating the fundamental social principle of (surplus) value as the constituent principle of capitalist society, the theory of value dissociation does not simply

say something about the critique of gender relations. It rather offers a critique of gender relations through the critique of global social relations as a whole.

The point is not to constantly conjure up and praise social contradictions, as if they hold some potential for resistance and somehow push beyond themselves, rather the point is to overcome and critique them. The antithesis to this approach would be, for example, Hardt and Negri's *operaist* philosophy of 'praxis', which must always accommodate 'happiness' within the walls of its practice. The earlier analyses of feminine dissociation as well as analyses concerning racist traditions are not only narrow – they usually get stuck in a structural and politicised class context – but they also show that a simple recourse to the Enlightenment is ultimately uncritical in its conception of society.

Value dissociation critique has to be asserted and thought through in an uncompromising manner. It should not be treated as a moral 'ingredient', but as a critique of an essential structure-forming context that understands the necessary mediation of subject and object. It does not allow itself to be reduced to a theory of action in order to achieve status as a legitimised approach in the social sciences. Likewise any one-sided hypostatization of the object has to be avoided. Diethard Behrens' accusations against some Marxist positions are thus most relevant to a theory of value dissociation: 'An action-theoretic restricted dialectics must fail in its approach because it is always on the search for the dialectical operator [...] The sought-after mediation of immanent critique thus reverts back to external mediation, i.e., to the mechanics of individual and society' (Behrens, 2010: 114). A Marxist understanding of science that, in competition with the bourgeois understanding of science, endeavours to surpass it becomes in fact equal to it. Instead, bourgeois science and philosophy itself should be conceptualised as fetish-constituted.

Ironically, the poststructuralist approach, which set out to deconstruct Western

Christianity, modern rationality, the Enlightenment and the humanist subject in general, ended up in familiar rationalist waters. This certainly shows that many poststructuralist concepts have more to do with the Enlightenment and corresponding forms of rationality than would like to be thought. This is also unabashedly expressed by Althusser, who shaped Marxist (post)structuralism by hypostatizing structure on the one hand, but (or precisely because of this) on the other hand questioned the humanist subject. As he writes in his autobiography:

Those against me included not only the band of philosophers who wrote books 'for man' against Foucault and me (...) but also all the ideologues of the Party as well who made no secret of their disapproval and who supported me only because they could not have me expelled (given my notoriety). (Althusser, 1993: 186)

As already mentioned, Althusser is stuck with the old class-subject, that is, the structure 'articulates' itself in ritual, action, and practices from the outset. In this manner, the subject-object dialectic found a 'smooth' positivist solution, which has been 'hegemonic' in capitalist society ever since its beginnings. Indeed, it rejects any fundamental critique of social form, even if its 'normative' critique and corresponding manifestations of commitment stagnates in boredom.

Without a doubt, postmodern discourse and poststructuralist theories fulfilled the 'civilising mission of capital' at a time of its decay; ironically, one could say. A worn-out gender discourse primarily concerned with the 'production' of gender and the relation of whatever empty relates to itself, eloquently bears witness to this. Even the psychoanalytic dimension is incorporated in a purely mechanical way. Such a discourse continues with Hardt and Negri, who assume an emancipatory-irrational moment based on a diverse, managerial multitude.

Operating within this prevailing left-wing discourse of identity, feminism has finally come to agree with patriarchal ideology, which regards women as empirically

oriented, practical and down to earth. A gender oriented feminism is fundamentally compliant with this demand and content with a purely structuralist reading of social relations. Rather than insisting on the dissociation of value in all its complexity, which does not expire in the gender struggle, it bespeaks contemporary relations by describing them abstractly.

Still, one must go beyond a (negative) dialectical view of value dissociation *critique* in order to transcend methodologically as well as content-wise the determinations of male–female, heterosexual–homosexual, as well as the intersectional relations of various social disparities. This should not be carried out with affirmative intent, but rather as the negation of the corresponding conditions on a purely conceptual level. Only on this basis could a somatic and actual critique of concrete oppressions (an apt concept that has not fallen out of fashion for nothing) be taken into account once more. Otherwise, what comes to pass is a secondary recourse to traditional identities as indices of serious emancipation (see e.g., the headscarf cult of Islamic women, interpreted as emancipatory in Western feminism, primarily as resistance to the West, but which is also an approval of a traditionally Western image of women as seen by growing currents of the new right, which could connect women and feminists frustrated by postmodern developments by means of cross-front strategies). On this basis, a culture–nature, sex–gender dialectic would also need to be reflected, which by no means should lead to the assumption of a natural heterosexuality, a dialectic disregarded in contemporary discourses of ecology and nature. The latter are caught up in instrumental reflections, as if there had never been any previous, serious critiques interested in a mediated approach, however deficient they may have been.

Adorno does not promote a labour-based and derivative Marxist methodology, but rather thinks social form (though caught up in ‘exchange’) in an overarching sense. He

grasps totality in its non-identity, and his reflections are thus something quite different in content from the many exegeses of the so-called ‘new Marx reading’, in which social content is fundamentally subordinated to purely methodological aspects, reducing dialectics to a method, whether within or outside of labour movement Marxism, and so on.

The real (un)truth of the social whole, however, reveals itself first with regard to a complex critique of value dissociation, which is not established simply by epistemology, but can find its end only in an actual overcoming of androcentric, racist, and nature-hostile practice. This lies beyond the stressful romantic everyday life of the forced ‘housewifised’ man who makes a virtue of necessity, secretly looking for something else. Increasing male violence showed itself for example in the 2016 New Year’s events of Cologne. This must be interpreted against the backdrop of the deinstitutionalisation and feralisation of capitalist patriarchy, and cannot be projected ethnically/racially on allegedly North African men. On the contrary, such tendencies must be interpreted against the backdrop of a worldwide, universal patriarchy in its form of disintegration, which does not stop at the doors of the West, but has its roots even within fortress Europe. The role that the Enlightenment plays in all this, and the fact that there can be no naive appeal to it against the rising barbarism, should have become clear in the course of my argument. It is necessary to go beyond both Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment.

When Gudrun-Axeli Knapp recently bemoaned a mere juxtaposition of feminist positions, she stated a dry conciliation and tolerance in feminist discourse. She critiques feminism as a worldview – which is also always in danger of failing into a Heideggerian ontology – and wishes for an increased debate, but without even considering value dissociation (Knapp, 2013). A debate about the Enlightenment in the context of *the fundamental critique of value dissociation socialisation* is long overdue.

## Note

- 1 On this and for a detailed presentation of value-dissociation theory, see Scholz (2011) (*The Gender of Capitalism*).

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# Gender and Social Reproduction<sup>1</sup>

Amy De'Ath

In 2012, the materialist feminist LIES collective wrote, '*everything we write will be used against us*'.<sup>2</sup> They had good reason to be wary, for not only have materialist-and Marxist-feminisms been stifled, since their beginnings in Italy in the early 1970s, by a poststructuralist investment in the linguistic and the discursive in the wake of May 1968 and its failures. The happy re-emergence of what is becoming known by the more expansive moniker of social reproduction theory meets its predictable checkpoints today in a male-dominated Marxian theory where any departure from a purely economistic approach to the critique of political economy is treated with suspicion or as so-called 'soft' theory.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand we find the nominally inclusive university, where – under the dual banners of equal rights and the 'lean-in' feminism of creative enterprise – feminist scholars are invited to advance their careers in a stagnating economy by amassing enormous debts.<sup>4</sup>

In the hope of shaking off such fetters, and in order to advance a preliminary thesis

on the role of capitalist temporality in the production of gender, this chapter aims to draw out some connections between queer Marxism, value-critique, and recent developments in social reproduction theory. While I seek to present the latter in their historical context as they have emerged from a long and interrupted train of critical Marxian thinking about gender, patriarchy, and the family, my aim is not to provide an exhaustive summary of all the Marxist-, socialist-, radical-, or materialist-feminist arguments that might be included under this umbrella term. Rather, I mean to make an argument about the political investments and theoretical dimensions of social reproduction theory today.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, my argument rests on the contention that gendered social relations are form-determined – that is, constituted as social form – by capitalism's imperative to produce surplus-value. Counterintuitively, then, as Carolyn Lesjak has pointed out, it is antihumanist Marxism that provides the way forward for humanist study, both here and elsewhere.

Recent key developments in critical theory by Cinzia Arruzza, Rosemary Hennessy, and Kevin Floyd have approached questions of gender and sexuality through the lens of ‘the cultural’. Building on the Lukácsian critique of reification, these critics have sought to revise and develop the outmoded field of *ideologiekritik* (especially its elaborations on the notion of ‘false consciousness’) with new analyses of how gendered social relations are defined by commodity exchange. In part, my aim is to show how insights and concepts from this work can help to extend and deepen a Marxian critique of gender and social reproduction in ways that may be especially useful for grasping, at a systemic level, what is often understood only in terms of gratuitous or symbolic violence. To present these insights and concepts at an angle somewhat askew from their original frameworks, most notable in this regard is Arruzza’s clarifying attention to the relationship between gender and the logic of capital accumulation and her emphasis on the production of gender as an active social process, and Hennessy’s concept of ‘outlawed need’, which provides a way to conceive of gendered social relations as a movement of negative dialectics. I also briefly refer to Floyd’s method of supplementing a theory of gender based on reification with a broad account of the ‘historical and institutional specifics’ of socio-economic development, one that operates at a different level of abstraction and which for Floyd is provided by regulation school economics specific to the twentieth-century United States (Floyd, 2009: 33).

At the same time, this chapter argues that any theory of social relations based at the level of exchange or circulation falls short of accounting for the relationship of gender to capital’s general laws of motion, and thus for gender’s continued existence (in this way, my argument resonates with Moishe Postone’s critique of what he calls traditional Marxism’s focus on ‘the sphere of distribution’, as opposed to ‘the form of labor (hence of production) [which] is the object of Marx’s

critique’ (Postone, 2005: 69). Far from theoretical nitpicking, this point has significant consequences for social reproduction feminism because a focus on the reification of gender at the level of exchange necessarily excludes a consideration of how gender is produced through reproductive activities that, as we shall see, are defined by their unpaid and unsubsumed status – in other words, their *dissociation* from exchange.

Drawing on Diane Elson’s (2015) recently republished 1979 essay, ‘The Value Theory of Labour’, which argues that value – as distinct from both use- and exchange-value – dominates the process of production, I suggest that this analysis, and its focus on production, might be extended to the feminized arena of social reproduction via the critical tools provided by queer and feminist accounts of gender in capitalism alongside other significant value-theoretical interventions in the field. To this end, I mobilize Postone’s theorization of value as a temporal form of wealth and his account of productivity as the category which changes ‘the determination of what counts as a given unit of time’ (2005: 76). Linking Hennessy’s account of the production of need to the insights provided by these critiques of value – which pertain both to value’s form-determining capacities and to its temporal character – I aim to show how an account of gender based on value (and not exchange-value) provides a unique and more robust framework for understanding the production of gender in capitalism. I subsequently conclude by pointing to Maya Gonzalez’s and Jeanne Neton’s groundbreaking essay, ‘The Logic of Gender: On the Separation of Spheres and the Process of Abjection’ (2014), which, to put it simply here, is concerned to show how value operates spatially as a mediating force that depends on the separation between activities that produce value and those which do not. My own account is thus a supplement to their theory of how gender is mediated by value – a slight correction, but more, I hope, an addition to a shared project – insofar as I attempt

to clarify the dynamic between the logic of capital's impersonal compulsions and the historical consequences of this movement. My aim is therefore to address the underspecified and notoriously slippery causal relationships between capital and gender, in part by tracing a link between value's status as a temporal form of wealth and the production of gender through differentially categorized activities and their specific relation to (a) time, and (b) the production of human needs.

As Arruzza has noted, describing an experience of gendered social relations and giving a theoretical explanation for their existence are two different things. In her words,

the conception of patriarchy as an independent system within capitalist society is the most widespread not only among feminist theorists but also activists. This is because it is an interpretation that reflects reality in the way this appears to us. To speak of modes of appearance does not mean to describe an illusory phenomenon that is to be put in opposition to reality with a capital R. 'Appearance' here refers to the specific way in which the relations of alienation and domination produced and reproduced by capital are experienced by people because of their very same logic. (Arruzza, 2014)

Let us therefore begin with the potentially counterintuitive premise that many reproductive activities do not produce value. The argument that, to quote Mariarosa Dalla Costa, 'housework as work is *productive* in the Marxian sense, that is, is producing surplus value' was at the centre of the domestic labour debate in the 1970s and 1980s, and became a key political cornerstone of much Marxist-feminist activism (Dalla Costa, 1972). But this thesis has since been convincingly refuted: indeed, some of the most sophisticated Marxian analyses of gender relations to have emerged in recent years – including 'The Logic of Gender' – are based on the claim that it is precisely because non-value-producing activities are necessary to capitalist accumulation that the gender distinction persists.<sup>6</sup>

One of my concerns in the latter part of this chapter, then, is to ask some questions

about the relationship between value and gender in terms of how it may and may not be possible to trace the influence of the value-relation over an arena defined by its formal dissociation from the sphere of value-production. This kind of investigation – perhaps precisely because it is a feminist one – has been much-overlooked in Marxian critiques of value. What can be said about the political, ideological and discursive consequences of value's illusory independence and capacity for self-expansion? Can those aspects of feminized experience that are often conceived of in discursive or libidinal terms be explained via an account of value's form-determining capacities?

## LOGIC AND HISTORY

The question of whether patriarchy and capitalism are analytically separable – highly contentious for Marxist-feminists since the 'systems debates' of the 1970s and 1980s – is more than a little misleading. While these debates were concerned with analysing the extent to which patriarchy is a system autonomous from capitalism, current Marxian theories of social reproduction theory generally agree that it is not. In a recent dossier on social reproduction in *Viewpoint Magazine*, in fact, one commentator avers:

[W]hat if we were to collapse *the set of necessary social relations associated with women in capitalism* and the *category of women in capitalism*. What if 'woman' was *nothing but* the formal category of people who are on one side of a specific set of social relations, similar to the way in which the proletariat is *nothing but* the formal category of people who are on one side of a specific set of social relations. (Manning, 2015)

We might revise the question, then, to ask: are gendered social relations internal to the logic of capital, or are they the result of an unfortunate historical unfolding, with capital latching onto and torquing existing patriarchal structures – of feudal or agrarian societies, for

example – to its own advantage? The quote above is drawn from an essay by F. T. C. Manning, written in reply to an overview and explication of systems debates provided by Arruzza. In particular, it responds to Arruzza's claim that the logical structure of capital is always distinct from its concrete historical dimensions; in Arruzza's words, that 'it is important to distinguish what is functional to capitalism and what is a necessary consequence of it. The two concepts are different'. As she elaborates:

It is perhaps difficult to show at a high level of abstraction that gender oppression is essential to the inner workings of capitalism. It is true that capitalist competition continually creates differences and inequalities, but these inequalities, from an abstract point of view, are not necessarily gender-related. (Arruzza, 2014)

Manning – and another of Arruzza's respondents, Sara Farris – take issue with this position because it appears to concede to the discredited argument, advanced by Ellen Meiksins Wood, that capital has an indifferent, opportunistic relationship to gender oppression: a claim that Arruzza also insists she is arguing against. Manning's point is that the real content of the category of feminized people is nothing but a set of social relations: she is thus concerned to close what she calls the 'conceptual gap' between feminized people and the social relations through which they are positioned within a structural totality.

But categories are not lived as such, and there is a difference between logical relations and social relations. As Arruzza has pointed out, to frame the question in opposing terms of whether gender oppression is part of the logical structure of capital, or a separate system opportunistically co-opted by capital, is 'to presuppose that there is nothing between logical necessity and arbitrary contingency'. For Arruzza, to argue that the logical necessity of gender to capital's self-valorizing movement cannot be – or has not yet been – proven is neither to argue that gender is *not*

logically internal to capital's operations (indeed, Arruzza stresses her agnosticism regarding this question), nor that capitalism could survive without the fluctuating yet constant reconstitution of gender relations:

Put simply, logical possibilities concern the coherence of our thoughts toward objects. As such, the range of logical possibilities is as a general rule both wider and more rigid than that of real possibilities, which have to account for constraints other than logical coherence and thus, to a limited extent, allow for the existence of contradictory processes. [...] This is not to suggest an irrationalist approach to parts of reality; I only mean to suggest that logical formalization is not the sole rational means of grasping reality at our disposal, and that not all necessitating constraints are grasped in this way or formalized at that level. The cognitive mapping of certain constraints demands concrete historical analysis or other heuristic tools. (Arruzza, 2015a)

It is important to grasp two interrelated dimensions of the conceptual distinction Arruzza is making here: first, that there is a difference between logical coherence or thinkable possibilities on the one hand, and possibilities practically circumscribed by the contradictions and material limits of concrete reality on the other; and second, that we can also conceive of this distinction in terms of causality – in terms of the difference between gender being a logical precondition for capitalist valorization, or gender being a necessary consequence of those processes. To extrapolate a little from this: we could say *either* that the logic of gender does not unfold in a vacuum, taking on pure forms, but in dialectical relation with the 'practical constraints' of 'the concrete history of capitalism' (Arruzza, 2015a), *or* that the logic of gender does not exist, that gender is not logically internal to capital's movement, but emerges as a necessary consequence of it.

Or, we could admit that these are two ways of conceiving of the same thing – and in doing so avoid the 'sterile exercises of intelligence' Arruzza warns against, even as she acknowledges the political motivations behind such endeavours: the desire to

prove that gender is internal to capital's logic is, after all, understandable in the face of a 'class-first' Marxism that, unable or unwilling to think gender, race, class and other categories dialectically, reduces these categories to the merely cultural.<sup>7</sup> Yet – whether a logic internal to capital, or capital accumulation's necessary consequence – the one thing we *can* say is that gender emerges dialectically, through the inventive and constantly reconstituting movement of an integrated totality. Arruzza herself nods to this, in one of her most capacious and promising formulations:

I argue that capitalist accumulation produces, or contributes to the production of, varying forms of social hierarchy and oppressions as its necessary consequences. Moreover, I argue that it has a greater consequential and determining power than other forms of social hierarchy, and that it poses necessitating constraints that determine all other forms of social relations. Thus, my claims are more robust than simply stating that in a total social formation something 'is connected to something else'. However, my claim is weaker than arguing that capitalist accumulation organizes other social hierarchies according to a single logic. Moreover, it is my contention that the logic of capitalist accumulation is *pervasive* (that is, that it has the capacity of coloring all other social relationships), which is one of the grounds for speaking of a contradictory and articulated moving totality. (Arruzza, 2015a)

Avoiding a deterministic definition of capital's domination, and stressing the need to think of capitalist societies not as *expressive* totalities (in which 'each part reflects and corresponds to the others, or where each part is "functional" to the whole'), but as *moving* totalities (in which 'social practices, relationships, and institutions' are subject to the limits and pressures enforced by the logic of capitalist accumulation) Arruzza's preliminary suggestions point to a way through the thicket of systems debates and the political impasse of the 'logic or history' question.

Arruzza's comments in the *Viewpoint* dossier defer that work to a future date and a larger project, but her language of pervasion and colouring are notably aligned with

a cluster of inquiries already underway, discernible (though not always appearing in conversation) in the work of critics as various as Maya Gonzalez, Chris Chen, Sianne Ngai, Diane Elson, Alberto Toscano, and Marina Vishmidt, to name a few. For the sake of expediency, I will limit myself to noting that all of these critics are interested in the visceral or plasticizing – in Ngai's words, 'socially binding' (Ngai, 2015) – processes by which capital comes to dominate and organize both productive and reproductive activities through its compulsion towards abstraction. Though Arruzza's own work on gender as social temporality is similarly concerned with how capital organizes social practices through (abstract) time, we can note, significantly, that her analyses employ a Lukácsian understanding of reification, whereby 'gender performance is mediated by the pervasiveness of abstract time given by the diffusion of the commodity form'. Drawing on Kevin Floyd's work on masculinity during the Fordist era, Arruzza suggests that the commodity, as abstract labour, 'disciplines' leisure time, making it into a form of 'skilled labour' itself (Arruzza, 2015b: 48; Floyd, 2009). But while Arruzza is concerned to shift our understanding of gender performativity from the terrain of consumption to that of circulation – to include the selling of services and commodities and the production of new desires, for example – the work I will turn to in the remainder of this chapter makes a convincing case for why gender and social reproduction are best understood from the standpoint of production, in terms of the relation of specific activities to the market and in terms of the dominance of value and its ability to reproduce 'differentials across which value can flow' (Spahr and Clover, 2016: 292).

Thinking about gender as a category mediated by *value* – as opposed to exchange-value, or the commodity – may also help us with a thorny problem which haunts both Arruzza's and Manning's pains to underline that they are not proposing a deterministic or economic definition of gender. Arruzza notes,

for example, that proponents of the ‘unitary theory’, among whom she counts herself, ‘disagree with the idea that today patriarchy would be a system of rules and mechanisms that autonomously reproduce themselves’ (2014). In a similar vein, Manning emphasizes that it is not possible for ‘coercive relations of secretive sexual abuse’ or ‘violent forms of control and psychic isolation and domination to be socialized’, explaining that ‘the gender relation, like the class relation, is, even in the abstract, not exclusively “economic”’ (Manning, 2015). These claims gesture differently to the limits of Marxian analysis, especially since they point towards different strands of contemporary theory that do not often meet: antihumanist readings of capital’s impersonal compulsions in the first instance, and theories of the libidinal functions of gratuitous and symbolic violence in the second. But they both arise from a reliably persistent problem for social reproduction theory: how to explain this non-socialized and unquantifiable sphere of violent coercion in Marxian terms?

Noting that she is not sure if Manning’s argument is a ‘psychological, anthropological, or ontological one’, Arruzza does not pursue this tricky line of enquiry within the *Viewpoint* dossier. Indeed, the non-economistic dimension of gender relations opens onto a longstanding philosophical problem, one candidly described by Rosemary Hennessy, in her landmark study of sexual identity under late capitalism, with a refreshing lack of embarrassment:

One of the most remarkable features of the history of sexual identities is the lack of any consensus over how to understand precisely what sexuality is. What *is* the materiality of sexuality? Is it libidinal desire? Bodies and pleasures? Discourses? Culture-ideology? How do presuppositions about the materiality of sex affect how we understand sexual identity and how we craft a sexual politics? (Hennessy, 2000: 37)

For theorists of social reproduction – unlike poststructuralist feminisms – the violent policing of sexuality represents something of an analytical hidden abode. Yet social

reproduction theory might also salvage from poststructuralism, at the moment of its waning, some conceptual leverage to consider the roots of gendered violence anew. Both Arruzza’s and Hennessy’s work is remarkable for its genuinely inquisitive and generous engagement with poststructuralist feminisms, and in particular, with Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Arruzza even underlines the similarities between Butler’s theory of gender as a ‘constituted social temporality’ and Marx’s famous argument that past labour, weighing like a nightmare on the present in the form of space (or, dead labour), is what organizes capitalist time:

In Butler, the spatiality of gender, i.e. its inscription on the body, is nothing but constituted social temporality, in other words, social acts performed in the past. Likewise, for Marx past, objectified labour time opposes *qua* space the present time of living labour. Whereas Butler denies that gender is a fact, by insisting that gender is constantly constituted through the repetition of performative acts over time, Marx insists that capital is not a thing, but rather the process of self-valorisation of value which implies the repetition of the circuits of capital and their unity. (Arruzza, 2015b: 39)

Notably, it is a *circulationist* reading of Marx – in which circuits of exchange organize time through repetition – that appears isomorphic with Butler’s theory of gender as a constituted social temporality. As we will see, the comparison would not hold with the value-theoretical accounts I have mentioned above. But Arruzza’s point in underlining this similarity is merely to demonstrate that Butler, like Marx, is concerned to show how a set of social arrangements is not the result of natural, transhistorical phenomena but of active social practices, and thus, that we might retain some of Butler’s arguments about ‘intelligible’ genders and ‘coherent’ relations of sex and gender for the purpose of developing a more robust account of social reproduction. It bears underlining that for Arruzza, as for Hennessy, Butler’s ‘normative materialism’ – in which sexual identities

are produced as the effect of discourses, through 'repeated performances of cultural signs and conventions' – ultimately serves to 'foreclose ways of knowing the world that connect the symbolic order (culture) to material social relations that are not symbolic' (Hennessy, 2000: 56–60, 212), or in other words, Butler's work disconnects the cultural from political economy.

## OUTLAWED NEED

In *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*, Hennessy proposes the concept of 'outlawed need' as a way to grasp the historical production of both legitimate and illegitimate – or incomprehensible – needs. In part, her study is a measured correction to what must by now seem a familiar feminist criticism of Marxist-feminism's 'totalizing' tendencies – a complaint which tends to rhetorically position a historical materialist Marxist-feminism as if it were the cause, rather than the critique, of capitalism's totalizing movement. Reminding us that 'historical materialism begins with the premise that meeting human needs is the baseline of history', however, Hennessy insists on need's historical contingency, its fundamentally social character as corporeal needs are met through social relationships and as the parameters for what counts as a vital need vary across time.

In capitalism, unsurprisingly, outlawed needs constitute a swathe of life unlived: from basic unmet needs such as food, clothing, housing and health care often not covered by the minimum wage; to the intellectual and creative development through which a full human life might be possible; to the sensations, affects, and desires outlawed by heteronormative gender relations; to the sphere of outlawed need that must nevertheless be satisfied through the feminized arena of social reproduction. It follows, then, that 'outlawed need' is also a mode of proscribing

the domain of the intelligible, the realm of coherent social relations that Butler so famously critiques. Indeed, in this expanded framework outlawed need becomes such an integral dimension of capitalism that it leads Hennessy to venture that 'outlawing the development of full human potential comprises the very scaffolding of human relationships in commodity exchange' (Hennessy, 2000: 215).

Hennessy argues that in capitalism, the history of social relationships is invisibilized in a process whereby consciousness is reified into forms of identity, forms which 'come to be seen as natural "things in themselves"', and in which sensation and affects 'are made intelligible in terms of normative and perverse sexual identifications and desires' (217). Like other Marxist accounts of sexuality, her analysis reads the historical production of desire as an effect of consumer culture, as 'commodification of human capacities' leads to the consolidation of a heteronormative and patriarchal society in which 'sexual identity categories restrict the power to act to the extent that they atomize human potential and social relationships' (219). Indeed, Arruzza similarly explains the production of gender as 'a forced repetition of stylising acts [...] mediated by the pervasiveness of abstract time given by the diffusion of the commodity form' (2015b: 48), locating this process firmly within the sphere of circulation. She argues that the power of the commodity form to organize and abstract (leisure) time – to give 'a fundamental disciplinary character to consumption itself' – can help us to understand 'a wider set of phenomena, all contributing to the reification of sexual identities' (48–9), such as the selling of commodities and services.

That this argument about the reification of intelligible forms of sexuality and the imposition of abstract time beyond the sphere of production would seem to be borne out empirically makes it compelling and suspicious in equal measure. But insofar as it identifies an organizing logic that operates at a level of abstraction that takes on its own life

beyond the cumulative amassing of isolated acts of consumption – a point made especially clear in Arruzza's formulation – it is perhaps a telling instance of the kind of real abstraction theorized by Alfred Sohn-Rethel, who argues that the very form of thought is determined by the social practice of commodity exchange relations.<sup>8</sup> Yet I have suggested above that gendered social relations are better understood not through the critique of reification that runs from Lukács and through the Frankfurt School, and which structures Hennessy's, Arruzza's, and Floyd's theories of sexuality and gender, but through an analysis that seeks to understand how value – as conceptually distinct from both use-value and exchange-value – dominates the process of social reproduction. Why would this alternative be necessary? Put simply, because a theory of gender based on reification does not explain why many reproductive – which is to say, gendering – tasks, such as childcare, are most fundamentally defined not by the practice and patterns of consumption, but by their unpaid and unsubsumed status.

To be sure, reification and the 'ritualistic character of gender performance' (Arruzza, 2015: 48) are key in regulating gender and sexuality, legitimizing some identities and desires and proscribing others. Indeed, that reification is one of the primary sites of social contest in which malleable and shifting gender relations unfold historically is perhaps precisely the extent of the claims outlined above. But analyses limited to the sphere of circulation, focused on consumption as a mode of gender performativity, or on the regulation of abstract time through the commodity form, can only take us so far in understanding the production of gender in capitalism. Even though such analyses acknowledge the dual character of commodities, they tend to eschew the fact that reification is a *consequence* of the value-relation, rather than a primary dynamic shaping capitalist social relations, and thus fail to draw a distinction between the production of gender and the reified forms of appearance it

takes in capitalist societies. In other words, these accounts risk mistaking cause and effect, and while they might be useful for describing *how* gender is produced at the level of 'culture-ideology', they fall short of explaining *why*. Floyd's persuasive argument seeks to remedy this problem by pairing Foucauldian and queer readings of the reification of sexual desire – what he calls 'micro-social forms of normativity' – with 'regulation school' analyses of the institutional and practical structures that serve to secure regimes of capital accumulation (Floyd, 2009: 33–5). But a focus on regulation – on the managerial functions of the state, its laws and policies – is arguably a move even further away from the core of capital accumulation and the site at which a Marxian intervention would be focused. While Floyd provides a more robust, substantial explanation of how sexuality is regulated in capitalism, in turning to regulation theory – and thus to its emphasis on the role institutions play in the regulation of the capitalist economy – rather than value, his argument tends towards the political rather than to the primacy of the economic, leaving hanging the question of how and if gender is constituted through the motions of capital accumulation *per se*.

Let us turn to the value-relation, then, which implies a dialectical – opposed and mutually constitutive – relationship between production and circulation. Marx repeatedly emphasizes this point, in fact, describing how relations of production become dissociated from the surface of 'simple circulation'. Hence, the famously playful note in which he invites the reader to leave the noisy sphere of exchange, 'where everything takes place on the surface and in full view of everyone', and follow the capitalist into the hidden abode of production in order to discover the 'secret of profit-making' (Marx, 1976: 279–80), is accompanied by more austere formulations which stress how the presupposition of a whole totality is central to capital's movement, where '*the whole system of bourgeois production is implied*, so that exchange value



can appear as the simple point of departure on the surface' (Marx, 1987: 466).

Indeed, Marx's concern is to uncover the whole system 'implied' by the many various parts of a capitalist mode of production, to 'unravel the "inner connection" [*inneres Band*]' as Elena Louisa Lange puts it, 'between the forms (value, the commodity, money, capital) as they present themselves to our "everyday consciousness" – in exchange or circulation – and their real *content*' (Lange, 2016: 249). While Marxist-feminists have long contended that gender must also be analyzed as part of this totality, basing their critique on the interplay of capitalist categories, new readings of Marx show that to do so would mean thinking gender not only through the monocle of commodities and their exchange in the sphere of circulation, or solely through the category of reproductive work, but through Marx's theory of value as a form-determining real abstraction. For indeed, this is the 'specific form' determining the division of labour, the conditions of production, and the economic relations between individual members of society.

A turn to value is thus not only warranted because it presents an under-theorized dimension of Marxian studies of gender and social reproduction, but because value is a key component, if not *the* key component, of Marx's critique of political economy. While 'value-form theory' has been the province of a small corner of Marxian critique – gaining the moniker of 'esoteric Marxism' – since the 1960s, these conversations have gained a new sense of purpose and traction across a wide range of critical discourses since the 2007–8 financial crash. Adherents of *Wertkritik* such as Norbert Trenkle and Robert Kurz, as well as British critics including Diane Elson and Christopher Arthur, take *value* (as distinct from exchange-value, or the money form) as their point of departure, and *labour* as their object of study. Indeed, value-theoretical accounts involve what Ingo Elbe describes as a threefold abandonment of traditional Marxism: a move away from substantialist theories of value as the

labour congealed in commodities, away from reformist conceptions of the state in favour of a view of the state as a structural component of capitalist domination, and away from 'labour-movement-centric' interpretations of the critique of political economy, or the idea of a "labor-ontological" revolutionary theory' (Elbe, 2013).

## VALUE AND GENDER

The question of what an analysis of value might show us about gender and social reproduction is the topic of a much larger project, but I want to suggest a few possible inroads into this relatively unexplored relationship. As we will see at the end of this chapter, inquiries into the operations of value as a gender-mediating force are nevertheless being taken up with compelling precision, most notably in Gonzalez and Neton's essay. These preliminary observations are therefore as much intended as a nod backwards and a return to the theoretical interventions on which such analyses are founded as they are suggestive of possible future investigations that might also – despite some fundamental divergences – make use of the valuable insights from Arruzza, Hennessy, and Floyd that we have glimpsed above.

### *Form-Determination*

Diane Elson's clarifying intervention, which rests on the argument that the object of Marx's theory of value is not *price* (as various theorists of the 'transformation problem' would contend<sup>9</sup>) but *labour*, gives a helpful indication of the particular ways in which an attention to value, to its abstract and dual character, is pertinent to any Marxian theory of gender. Her new reading of Marx insists on a vital distinction between value, which lacks independence, and value's *appearance* as exchange-value (or money), which gives it

an *illusory* independence, as the key to understanding how value *form-determines* the structure of the labour process. Citing Marx's famous description of labour in the *Grundrisse* as 'the living form-giving fire [ ... ] the transitoriness of things, their temporality, as their formation by living time', she offers the following elaboration:

[Labour] is a fluidity, a potential, which in any society has to be socially 'fixed' or objectified in the production of particular goods, by particular people in particular ways. Human beings are not pre-programmed biologically to perform particular tasks. Unlike ants or bees, there is a potentially vast range in the tasks that any human being can undertake. (Elson, 2015: 128)

Elson calls this the indeterminateness of human labour; a fluidity common to all states of society. The question then, for Elson and for Elson's Marx, is how human labour comes to be determined, how it comes to be fixed as objectified abstract labour in capitalism. In more ambitious language, she explains how this is a matter of 'seeking an understanding of why labour takes the forms it does, and what the political consequences are' (123). Her answer, in the first instance, is based on a crucial but 'little-noticed distinction drawn by Marx', a distinction between "internal independence" and "external independence":

Value lacks the 'internal independence' necessary for it to be an entity because it is always one side of a unity of value and use-value, i.e. the commodity. But the value side of the commodity can be given 'external independence' if the commodity is bought into a relation with another commodity which serves only to reflect value. This produces the illusory appearance that value in its money form is an independent entity; but the autonomy it confers on value is only relative. It is this externally independent expression, in objectified form, of a one-sided abstraction, the abstract aspect of labour, which is the fetishism of commodities. (165)

Value, as a one-sided ('externally independent') abstraction, appears only in exchange. As such, it is not an ideological form but – though Elson does not employ the term in

this passage – a real abstraction. For Elson, two key observations follow from this. First, that 'in the form of the universal equivalent, abstract labour is not only objectified: it is established as the dominant aspect of labour'. In other words, the concrete dimension of labour is subservient to the abstract, because its purpose is to '[make] a physical object which we at once recognise as value' (165). In a similar way, Elson notes how the private aspect of labour ('the isolated processes of production operating independently of one another') ultimately serves its social aspect, through the social mode of recognition known as commodity exchange. She is careful to note that this does not mean that the private, concrete, and social dimensions of labour are obliterated; rather, it means that they are subsumed as expressions of abstract labour. Abstract labour is thus the only form of labour reflected in the universal equivalent, money. Perhaps the most crucial point in Elson's reading of Marx then follows in this same passage, where she writes:

The argument of *Capital*, vol. 1, goes on to show the dominance of the universal equivalent, the money form of value, over other commodities, and how this domination is expressed in the self-expansion of the money form of value i.e. in the capital form of value. Further it shows that the domination of the capital form of value is not confined to labour 'fixed' in products, it extends to the immediate process of production itself, *and to the reproduction of that process*. (165, my italics)

This assertion about the domination of value over the process of production names the process of real subsumption. Importantly, in Elson's account, this process begins with the universal equivalent – the money form of value – and moves inwards to the labour process, showing how the abstract dominates the concrete. Indeed, as Elson points out, 'Marx's argument is not that the abstract aspect of labour is the product of capitalist social relations, but that the latter are characterised by the dominance of the abstract aspect over other aspects of labour' (150). But what does Elson mean when she refers

to ‘the reproduction of that process’ in the passage above? While it might be fair to assume that what is being summoned here is a more limited notion of the changing form of the production process (within the walls of the factory plant, for example), the reproduction of the commodity labour-power – as Marxist-feminism has taught us – reaches far beyond the labour process into the most hidden recesses of social life. Might this point about the fluidity of labour, and the necessity for it to become socially fixed in order for valorization (the production of surplus-value) to take place, extend indirectly to the feminized and racialized sphere of social reproduction?

Without much ado, Elson’s reading emphasizes the objective (as opposed to subjective) nature of value-production, the social process that ‘goes on behind the backs of the producers’ (Marx, 1976: 135). Showing how Marx’s concept of determination is not ‘deterministic’ – not a concept of a regulative law – Elson notes that speaking of determination ‘does not, of course, mean the denial of any choice on the part of individuals about their work. Rather, it is to point to the fact that individuals can’t just choose anything, are unable to re-invent the world from scratch, but must choose from the alternatives presented to them’ (Elson, 2015: 129). It is perhaps through a theory of negative circumscription, then, that a more properly antihumanist method for analysing the production of gender in capitalism can be advanced. Rather than emphasizing the ways gender is circumscribed over time through repetition – how, to quote Arruzza, ‘gender performance is mediated by the pervasiveness of abstract time given by the diffusion of the commodity form’ – a theory of gender derived from analysis of the value-relation involves shifting our focus from the sphere of circulation to that of production, for the simple reason that this is where value arises as the congealed product of socially necessary labour time (before it is realized in exchange). This focus allows us to see that what *does* the

circumscribing – what dominates ‘the immediate process of production itself, *and ... the reproduction of that process*’, to use Elson’s words – is an objectively existing abstraction: value. Investigating gender’s relation to value as opposed to the commodity thus allows for a radical analysis of the production of gender at its root, so that we might better understand the forms of appearance that gender could assume in any historical moment.

A value-theoretical account of gender also points towards a very different way of conceiving of gender as social temporality, since if the value-relation implies the tendency for constant capital to displace variable capital over time – what Marx calls a rising organic composition of capital – we might want to consider how that very movement is entangled with the reconstituting movement of gendered social relations, especially in an era of economic stagnation and contraction, where labour no longer occupies the structural position it once did. In order to understand gender’s relationship to capitalist time, we need a better grasp of how gender is produced in dialectical relation to patterns of productivity and economic crisis. This will not involve discarding the insights about the pervasiveness of abstract time from Arruzza et al., but providing a more essential account of what capitalist time is, and how it comes about.

If a value theory of labour ‘enables us to analyze capitalist exploitation in a way that overcomes the fragmentation of the experience of that exploitation’ (Elson, 2015: 171), it is because, as Elson and Marx both note, value appears as the subject of a process, ‘endowed with a life its own’ and this fetishistic result, in its illusory independence, allows for the domination of value to extend beyond the commodity, to the production process and to the reproduction of that process. In the final section of this chapter, I want to suggest that another analysis of gender as social temporality – one based on value’s temporal dimension – might, in supplementing other emerging

theories of the relationship between value and gender, help to provide a more substantial answer to the tricky question of how value's domination extends to the sphere of social reproduction.

### ***Time, Differentials, and the Production of Need***

One of the most incisive theories of value and time in capitalism appears in the following dense passage from Moishe Postone:

In *Capital* Marx roots capitalism's historical dynamic ultimately in the double character of the commodity and, hence, capital. The treadmill dynamic that I have outlined is at the heart of this dynamic. It cannot be grasped if the category of surplus-value is understood only as a category of exploitation – as *surplus-value* – and not also as *surplus-value* – as the surplus of a temporal form of wealth. The temporality of this dynamic is not only abstract. Although changes in productivity, in the use-value dimension, do not change the amount of value produced per unit time, they do change the determination of what counts as a given unit of time. The unit of (abstract) time remains constant – and, yet, it is pushed forward, as it were, in (historical) time. The movement here is not the movement *in* (abstract) time, but the movement *of* time. Both abstract time and historical time are constituted historically as structures of domination. (Postone, 2005: 76)

In other words, abstract time might be *mediated* by commodities, but it is *dominated* – ‘pushed forward’ – by value, a ‘temporal form of wealth’. And in marking out how historical time is dominated by abstract time, Postone places the logic of capital and the material of history in dialectically opposed and mutually constitutive relation. Far from theoretical hairsplitting, his point is worth stressing in the context of gender and social reproduction, firstly because it reminds us that abstract time is itself mediated by value, again confirming that an analysis of gender in capitalism requires analysis at a higher level of abstraction, and secondly – in what has become known as Postone's key intervention in value debates – because it shows

how *productivity* changes ‘the determination of what counts as a given unit of time’, highlighting the centrality of this category to the movement of both abstract *and* historical time. This point is key for social reproduction theory, because it opens onto a discussion yet to be had about gender as social temporality: one that asks how the low- or non-existent productivity rates of reproductive activities affect how gender is lived temporally. How are units of time determined – or *undetermined* – in social reproduction, where both paid and unpaid reproductive workers produce little or, as is more often the case, no value? It is through questions like this, I would wager, that we might arrive at a more comprehensive account not only of how gender is preserved and constantly reconstituted in capitalism, but of the qualitative character of gender as a lived experience. What, for example, is the structural relationship between unproductive time and the production of outlawed (unmet, illegitimate or incomprehensible) needs? And what bearing does this have on that non-socialized and unquantifiable sphere of violent coercion that Marxian theories of gender and social reproduction never quite manage to explain?

Questions such as these chime with some brief but telling remarks by Hennessy that point to the link, figured here through the logic of the commodity, between the increasing acceptance of new sexual identities and changing relations of production:

What I want to stress is that this cultural-ideological process was overdetermined by the logic of the commodity, *a logic that binds ways of knowing and forms of identity to changes in the relations of production*. In other words, the reification of sexual identity is overdetermined by the relationships that capitalist production came to rely on in the late nineteenth century, relationships that include forms of consciousness that are adequate to new demands of production and consumption. (Hennessy, 2000: 103, my italics)

But the pure form of a logic cannot alone bind ‘ways of knowing’ or ‘forms of identity’ to production. As Michelle O'Brien has

observed, the ‘problem of underspecified causal relationships ... pervades the current of social thought that puts much emphasis on “Fordist” and “post-Fordist” eras’, and we might reasonably include Hennessy’s study in this category. As O’Brien suggests, the ‘causal chains that link culture, state policy, and regimes of capital accumulation’ may then be better analyzed by the conceptual tools offered by social reproduction feminism (O’Brien, 2017). Indeed, an analysis seeking to account for the structural relations between regimes of accumulation and gender would be enriched by a more thorough consideration of underspecified remarks such as this one:

Under capitalism, workers do not retain control of very much of their human potential, and the outlawing of so much human potential is, in fact, one of the sites of struggle between capital and labor. (Hennessy, 2000: 215)

Indeed, the the concept of outlawing – and of outlawed need – might be more ambitiously put to use to account for how the production of need is rooted in the value-relation. We might even think of the production of need as the historical and material *modus operandi* of what Juliana Spahr and Joshua Clover name as capital’s (gendering, racializing, ableist) imperative to ‘make differential’, where ‘differentials are a necessary basis for the imperative to *make productive*, since productivity within capital requires differential valuations’ (2016: 292). If, *pace* Postone, differential valuations mean differences in a temporal form of wealth, it is also possible to see how the production of legitimate and illegitimate needs – which involves both the production of differentials and of gendered domination – is a process shaped by the *determination of units of socially necessary labour time* (or in other words, value). This process necessarily involves what I described earlier as undetermined units of time: the kind of time for which there is perhaps no clearer example in practice than that which Gonzalez and Neton point to when they comment that, ‘you

cannot look after children *more quickly*: they have to be attended to 24 hours a day’ (2014: 169). Which kinds of time can be measured in units of socially necessary labour time? Which kinds of time refuse productivity increases and thus remain fixed units of time? Which kinds of time cannot be measured in units of socially necessary labour time at all?<sup>10</sup>

The problem of underspecified causal relationships between capital and gender might thus be better addressed if we attend to capitalist time’s relationship to the production of needs and its capacity to *make differential*. Putting Postone’s analytical point to work in terms of a value-theoretical account of the production of gender in order to understand what variations in the domination of both abstract and historical time actually mean in practice is, moreover, a way of mobilizing value-theoretical analysis to the kinds of political ends that this corner of Marxian theory has long been accused of avoiding. And if outlawed need names one of the ways in which capital makes differentials – for example, through making the needs of feminized and racialized people illegitimate or incomprehensible – it also implies those antagonisms and resistance that (among other things) emerge as a result of needs not being met. These antagonisms must be regulated by forcibly gendering and racializing forms of violence, in true dialectical fashion. Indeed, the negative, inverted dimension of the concept of outlawed need is compelling in this regard because it describes an impersonal operation – a structural and mediated withholding rather than a more active form of personal oppression – albeit an operation with highly personal, and necessary, results: what Arruzza calls the ‘practical constraints’ of ‘the concrete history of capitalism’ (Arruzza, 2015a).

Outlawed need is thus a way of conceptualizing gendered violence in the negative, as the historical consequences of needs not being met, and as the negative underside of

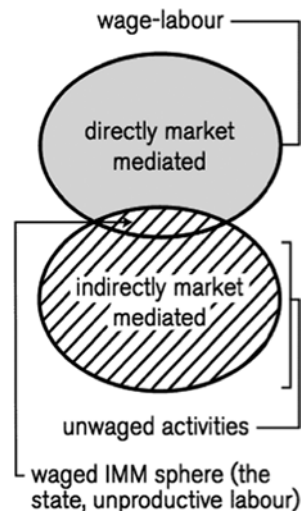
real abstractions imposed in capitalism – abstractions dialectically mediated by that ultimate real abstraction, value. At the same time, it is crucial to emphasize that while value – as abstract labour and as a temporal form of wealth – allows for the comparing of different labours and so allows for the possibility of different labours having differential valuations ‘across which value can flow’ (Spahr and Clover, 2016: 292), *it does not itself impose these differentials*; these are sites of social contest.<sup>11</sup> Commenting on why ‘redistributive solutions on offer have little purchase on the problem’, and in terminology akin to that of Marx’s argument that the whole system of bourgeois production is ‘implied’, Spahr and Clover employ the useful language of presuppositions and maldistribution:

[M]aldistribution is a form of appearance for necessary differentials, not an incidental outcome. Maldistribution is itself a constitutive part of value production, rather than an unfortunate effect. There is no such thing as capitalism without ongoing and intensifying maldistribution. (Spahr and Clover, 2016: 301–2)

This is an admittedly quick synthesis of some complex conceptual apparatuses. But these theories of the movement of abstract and historical time, the production of need, and capital’s imperative to make differential dovetail usefully with a current interest in what Roswitha Scholz calls ‘relations of value dissociation’ – where ‘value and dissociation [from value] stand in a dialectical relation to each other’ (2014: 128) – as well as the theory of direct and indirect market mediation advanced by Gonzalez and Neton (2014) in ‘The Logic of Gender’, where reproductive activities are considered through a spatial analysis of their structural relationship to the market (that is, to the sphere of value-production).

While – in the light of Arruzza’s convincing argument – we might agree that the existence of a logic of gender is indeed difficult to prove, and that even Gonzalez’s and Neton’s

most perspicacious attempt to do so does not achieve that task, I want to end by pointing to the theoretical advances their essay does achieve, which amount to nothing less than a fundamental reconception of how gendered social relations can be understood through the method of systematic dialectics provided by value critique. Most significantly, perhaps, ‘The Logic of Gender’ provides a compelling alternative to the inadequate binary of productive and reproductive labour for understanding gendered social relations in capitalist societies. In place of these categories, Gonzalez and Neton propose two overlapping spheres – the directly market-mediated (DMM) sphere, and the indirectly market-mediated (IMM) sphere – which prove useful categories of analysis for understanding the types of domination required to quantify and enforce different kinds of productive and reproductive activities (Figure 93.1). While abstract, value-productive (including reproductive) labour is socially determined by ‘direct market-mediation; and hence requires “no structural necessity toward direct violence”’, activities



**Figure 93.1: A graphical representation of the relation between the DMM/IMM and waged/unwaged spheres (Gonzalez and Neton, 2014: 157)**

belonging to the indirectly market-mediated sphere of ‘non-labour’ (including paid, non-value-producing work) are compelled by other mechanisms, ‘from direct domination and violence to hierarchical forms of cooperation, or planned allocation at best’. Central here is the relation of any activity to the market and to valorization.

Gonzalez’s and Neton’s discussion of the abject, in the latter part of their essay, resonates in obvious ways with the concept of unmet needs: the abject, in this framework, describes a particular type of *denaturalized*, indirectly market-mediated activity: a set of unpaid tasks that must be performed or executed by ‘someone’ in order for the production of surplus-value to continue in the directly market-mediated sphere. The concept of the abject is linked, in ‘The Logic of Gender’, to the process of previously waged reproductive activities becoming unwaged as a result of neoliberal austerity measures. For example, state-subsidized childcare services being withdrawn means that the previously paid work of daycare workers has been returned to parents, and disproportionately feminized parents. Abject forms of reproduction differ from other indirectly market-mediated activities because, after becoming waged components of the welfare state, they no longer automatically appear as the natural task of women – though as Gonzalez and Neton point out, ‘abject reproduction will in the end mainly be foisted upon women’ (2014: 171).<sup>12</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Not only do abject forms of reproduction typify the kind of outlawed need suggested by Hennessy’s critique: they very clearly show why it is an account of gendered social relations based on analysis of the value-relation, rather than the commodity, that is adequate to the project of critiquing the production of gender in both its positive *and* negative instantiations. If the low- or non-existent productivity rates of

reproductive activities affect how gender is lived temporally – as ‘both abstract time and historical time are constituted historically as structures of domination’, in Postone’s words – then this is also one of the primary formal mechanisms through which the category of the abject, rather than being a concrete condition meted out to individual subjects, formally mediates a diverse set of relationships to the wage across populations. Thus, while Gonzalez and Neton note that it is not possible to ‘objectively quantify, enforce or equalize “rationally” the time and energy spent in [IMM] activities or to whom they are allocated’ (2014: 155), it is possible to develop a more substantial account of the causal links – the logical and historical relations – between (1) relations of production and circulation, (2) periodic developments in capital accumulation, and (3) the production of gender, by attending to the role temporality plays in value’s form-determining operations. We might then conceive of a an antagonistic, *counter-reproductive underside of value*: a counter-reproductive negativity within the value-form itself,<sup>13</sup> the negativity Elson almost acknowledges when she notes that abstract labour is the *only* form of labour reflected in the universal equivalent.

I have attempted to show what is missing from a conception of gender theorized through the Lukácsian lens of a critique of reification, first by pointing to how the value-relation is omitted by this approach to its detriment, and second by showing how the insights of value theory illuminate (a) the way value dominates as an abstraction and (b) the nature of this abstraction as a temporal abstraction. These understandings seem crucial for any theory of social reproduction feminism that wants to grasp the thorny problem of the production of gender under capitalism by its roots, as it were. Not by coincidence have we come around to an answer of sorts to the ‘logic or history’ debate. The question is not whether gender is internal to the logic of capital or its unfortunate effect, but how we can better address the challenge of comprehending the vagueries and violences of gender

dialectically – through the opposing and mutually constitutive relations between production *and* circulation – in order to clutch that inner connection between forms as they present themselves and their real content.

## Notes

- 1 This chapter is dedicated to Marija Cetinić.
- 2 See vol. 12, issue 1 of *LIES: A Journal of Materialist Feminism*, p. 11. <http://www.metamute.org/community/your-posts/lies-journal-materialist-feminism-volume-1-2012>
- 3 Gilles Dauvé's recent commentary on Silvia Federici's (2014) *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*, for example, seeks not to engage Federici's theory of reproductive labour with the aim of correcting and clarifying her categories for the development of future analysis, but to dismiss her intervention out of hand. Claiming that the 'overstretched' concept of reproduction 'drifts into irrelevance' through Federici's writing, Dauvé neglects the range and developments of Federici's oeuvre following *Caliban*, as well as the many internal disagreements within the variegated field of Marxist-feminism. The absurdity of his response becomes especially clear when he refers to Federici as 'part of the vast array of semi-critics who live off these shortcomings, particularly what is inevitably lacking in Marx' (Dauvé, 2016). Other examples abound, but some similarly obtuse remarks appear in a recent response to Maya Gonzalez and Jeanne Neton's 'The Logic of Gender', where it is claimed that the structural relation of reproductive activities to the market is ignored in *Capital* merely because 'after the first few paragraphs Marx ignores particular useful labor in its totality, since scope of his discussion is with value producing labor' (Anon, 2014). The rant descends into expletives and 'argument' too petty to engage here.
- 4 For a discussion of how debt – and microcredit in particular – are becoming a central means of reproduction both in the United States and in developing countries such as Bolivia and Bangladesh, see Federici (2014).
- 5 For a clarifying account of various approaches to analysing the relationship between capitalism and gender – including dual and triple systems theories, theories of an 'indifferent capitalism', and unifying theories – see Arruzza (2014).
- 6 See, for example, Roswitha Scholz's theory of value-dissociation, but more pertinently, the argument I turn to at the end of this chapter, which holds that reproductive activities 'cut off or dissociated from the sphere of value-production' are compelled by different – that is, gendered – forms of domination to those of value-producing activities (Scholz, 2014; Gonzalez and Neton, 2014).
- 7 See, for example, Michaels' (2006) highly contentious study, *The Trouble with Diversity*.
- 8 Notably, Sohn-Rethel also locates the objectivity of exchange-value in the sphere of circulation (Sohn-Rethel, 1978: 53).
- 9 This discussion is most often attributed to Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk.
- 10 While the relationship between time and gender appears in the work of Frigga Haug in terms of a 'logic of time-saving' specific to capitalist modernity, and can be understood via Scholz in relation to what Robert Kurz calls 'a logic of time-expenditure', none of these theorists have explored explicitly the relationship between value, time, and the production of gender under capital (see Scholz, 2014: 123–42; and Haug, 1996).
- 11 Thanks to Joshua Clover for providing me with this last succinct clause.
- 12 Elsewhere I have noted how, while Gonzalez and Neton's rendering of the abject shares key characteristics with Julia Kristeva's definition – they describe the abject as 'that which is cast off, thrown away, but *from something that it is part of*' (2014: 174) – Kristeva's exploration of this category points towards another dimension in which abject social reproduction is performed, often under duress (De'Ath, 2016).
- 13 I have taken the term 'counter-reproductive' from Marina Vishmidt's essay, 'Counter (Re-)Productive Labour', in which Vishmidt suggests that we might think about reproduction (and here 'outlawed' and 'abject' activities seem particularly important) in terms of the negativity of the value-form as Chris Arthur has outlined it (Vishmidt, 2012).

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# Rackets

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Translated by Lars Fischer

The term racket first turned up in the context of Critical Theory toward the end of the 1930s and instantly attained considerable conceptual significance. In his notes and drafts for *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer identified the racket as the ‘elementary form of domination’.<sup>1</sup> The term originated in the language of American legal scholars and criminologists. As Otto Kirchheimer noted, it commonly referred to ‘monopolistic practices which are carried through by physical force, violence in trade disputes, or similar objectionable means’.<sup>2</sup> More recently, it was principally Wolfgang Pohrt who drew attention to the relevant texts and the significance of the concept for Critical Theory. He also pointed to the term’s variegated connotations that evidently prompted its use to designate specific political and societal tendencies and the implosion of society as a whole. ‘Rackets’, Pohrt explained, ‘are not just bands of blackmailers but also self-help groups and charitable associations’.<sup>3</sup>

## THE RACKET AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF RIGHT

Rather remarkably, Horkheimer’s notes published posthumously under the title ‘Rackets and the Spirit’ indicate that he initially understood the term not so much in sociological but predominantly in philosophical and psychological terms. One might infer from this that the very historical and sociological specificity inherent in the term, given its connection to contemporaneous phenomena in US-American society, was lost in this process of appreciation. Nor did the critique of political economy take center stage. Phenomena such as the commodity form and social relations in capitalism, the exchange value and the process of valorization feature merely as one means among others with which rackets exercise their domination. Rackets, Horkheimer noted, had

ruled as the rackets of clerics, of the royal court, of the propertied, of the race, of men, of adults, of

families, of the police, of crime, and, moreover, within each of these sectors as individual rackets against the rest of the respective sphere. Everywhere they have established the opposition between the inward and the outward. Man, if he belonged to no racket, was in a radical sense on the outside, was lost as man. Yet even in the head of the atomized individual the rackets still ruled by means of their concepts and modes of judgment, through the thought patterns and concerns that originated in their world.<sup>4</sup>

Yet on closer inspection it transpires that the domination of the rackets actually hinges on the safeguarding of the existing division of labor, bringing the mode of production and the issue of sovereignty into focus after all. Rackets, Horkheimer explained,

preserve the conditions required to guarantee the division of labor within which they hold a privileged position by resisting with force any change that might endanger their monopoly. ... The constellation of rackets based on a specific mode of production can be called the ruling class insofar as they jointly both protect and suppress the lowest strata of society. Depending on the economic dynamics that shape their material interest, the rackets can in fact be at odds with one another and may well, consciously or unconsciously, perpetuate their separation from one another, always provided that in doing so they can strengthen their safeguarding function.<sup>5</sup>

At this point a closer determination of the mode of production itself does not seem crucial for the development of the concept. Rather more important is its ability to help explain the relationship between the individual and the collective. 'The sclerosis of the racket towards those beneath it is identical with the sclerosis of the individuals it comprises. It has been consciously promoted throughout history. In the case of one's own children it is brought about by bringing them up and educating them.' It was 'only in those emphatically liberal periods, in which, for economic reasons, part of the racket was required to own authoritative characteristics', Horkheimer clarified, that the bringing up and education of children had

taken on humane qualities. In its cruelty previous practice still resembled the initiation rites of a

primitive tribe – itself a racket. For those who are not already entitled by descent to become part of the racket the requisite process resembles not the admission of youngsters into the tribe but the initiation into the privileged racket of the magicians. The individual's personality has to be crushed absolutely and iron-clad guarantees for its future dependability are required. The individual must relinquish all power and burn all its bridges.<sup>6</sup>

That Horkheimer assumed the rackets had been capable of change only in the era of liberalism already indicates that he views them as a dialectical counterpoint to the law. And yet, rather confusingly, Horkheimer also defines them as a form of social contract. 'As the true Leviathan', he wrote, 'the racket demands the unreserved social contract'.<sup>7</sup> If we follow Hobbes the crucial term in this formulation has to be 'unreserved'. While the individual benefits from the reserve powers of the sovereign who monopolizes the use of force, the racket is able to insist on an unreserved social contract even when the monopoly on the use of force is in the process of disintegrating or simply inexistent. From Hobbes's point of view, then, with whom this metaphor for the state originated, what Horkheimer described was in fact anything but the true *Leviathan* and had rather more to do with that other biblical monster, the *Behemoth*, which for Hobbes stood for unfettered civil war.

In the context of Critical Theory, then, the term racket was adopted to designate what Carl Schmitt (affirmatively) called 'non-derivative' power, a form of power, in other words, that exists 'extra-legally' even in states that maintain the rule of law, and that ordinarily seems to merit little attention.<sup>8</sup> Yet the appropriation of the term in Critical Theory departed decisively from Schmitt's approach in that it takes the vantage point of the individual. For the Critical Theorists, the principal focus was on the continued or reconstructed personal dependency of the individual under conditions that had, in principle, abolished that dependency: the rule of law and the social relations of capitalism. Their adoption of the concept of the racket

reiterated Marx's well-established insistence, against the bourgeois economists, that, 'under their "rule of law", the law of the jungle lives on under a different guise'.<sup>9</sup>

The juxtaposition of rackets to the law also opens up a new perspective on the law. Their ultimate purpose is the forcible implementation of unity at the expense of the law. It is no coincidence that in the legal sphere the term racket refers to illegal economic practices and criminal methods that frequently run alongside contractual agreements or replace them and that must be combatted to maintain the rule of law. When the concept of the racket is applied to the issue of state sovereignty, the very principle of legality is called into question. Societies 'that organize themselves along totalitarian lines', Horkheimer explained, are embroiled in 'a struggle against the law, against all forms of mediation that have taken on a life of their own and linguistic form. The fundamentally illicit nature of the racket lies in its opposition to the Spirit, even where it is not only legal but in fact behind the law'.<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting, though, that this defense of the forms of mediation created by the law by no means implied a belief in the reconciliation of the general and the particular or the existence of a 'true generality', neither of which – as even Franz Neumann emphasized – the law can achieve.<sup>11</sup> It amounted to no more than a defense of conditions that might allow this reconciliation and generality to become real at some point in the future. Yet this hope could be entertained only if one assumed that the law had become integral to the Spirit. That Horkheimer did so is evident from his contention that even in a democracy ruled by rackets the 'true concept' of democracy – invented to abolish this very form of rule – would never really disappear. The goal of politics, Horkheimer wrote, namely,

to disrupt the boundary between the inward and the outward, once achieved, will transform the world. The idea of true democracy leads a repressed subterranean existence among the masses and within it, the premonition of a society free of rackets has never been extinguished altogether.<sup>12</sup>

As indicated, this sketch of the concept of the racket is particularly remarkable in that Horkheimer did not deduce the defensive forces of the law with the means of the critique of political economy, even though this would have been a particularly obvious path to take, given the origin of the term racket. Instead, Horkheimer took recourse to the philosophical concepts of German – and especially Hegelian – idealism, which he sought to translate directly into political categories.<sup>13</sup> In so doing, he also exposed the contradictory nature of idealism's conception of the state, which all the talk of Hegel as the Prussian state philosopher had obscured. Horkheimer's notion of a 'true idea of democracy' that continued to exist even in the worst real-existing democracy corresponded to Hegel's designation of the true state. Thus Horkheimer is still (or again) able to develop a positive concept of politics but this concept, like Hegel's concept of the state, is dependent on consciousness, on the Spirit, and precludes any notion of the state as a mere machine.<sup>14</sup>

One might respond to this Hegel-inspired determination of the 'Spirit' from the vantage point of the critique of political economy by pointing out that under the rule of law, the law presupposes a specific self-reflexive relationship of consciousness to itself. Consequently, it also maintains a non-theological truth claim. By contrast, the self-valorizing value of capital, as it were, blocks out such reflection, or rather, it permits self-reflection only through the legal relationship. The law thus emerges as a prerequisite for the conception of a categorical imperative (in lieu of God's command) and the distinction between the state's laws and what Kant called the 'moral law in me'.

## THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE RACKET

While the draft on 'Rackets and the Spirit' was essentially an exercise in philosophy, in his essay, 'On the Sociology of Class Relations', Horkheimer attempted to offer a

sociological and materialistic definition. Here he concluded that 'the modern concept serves to describe [the] past social relations' and closed by quoting Marx's statement that 'the anatomy of man is the key to the anatomy of the monkey'.<sup>15</sup> That Critical Theory approached the rackets as it would the human physiognomy from which one can reconstruct that of the monkey indicates that its central focus here was still on 'man', in other words, on contemporary society. It alone was really shaped by the rackets through and through. Only in the present had the totalization of the principle of the racket occurred. 'The racket-pattern which has been typical of the behavior of the rulers toward the ruled is now representative of all human relations even those within labor,' Horkheimer wrote.<sup>16</sup> Critical Theory thus began to break out of the identification with the working class and the labor movement that characterized traditional Marxism. The proletariat was now understood as an integral part of capitalist society. The working class and its organizations blended into a constellation in which everyone fought for 'as large a part as possible of the circulating surplus value':

In the contemporary slang-use of racket as an equivalent for any profitable job there might be no conscious thought of all these implications, but objectively it expresses the idea that in present-day society every activity, whatever it may be, has as its content and goal no other interest than the acquisition of as large a part as possible of the circulating surplus value.<sup>17</sup>

Against the backdrop of Horkheimer's comments about the family under liberalism<sup>18</sup> the solidarity that had once been characteristic of the working class arguably emerged as exceptional in that it had been able to lend humane features to the racket, throwing into sharp relief the distinction between solidarity and charity. The Critical Theorists presumably took recourse precisely to the term racket to designate forms of personal dependency and direct compulsion because the term's connotations included not only the gang but

also, rather oddly, the benevolent association. A gang qualified as a racket in the strict political sense only if its power depended not only on the threat of violence but also on the sort of voluntary recognition and collective identification within its realm or locale, just like the modern state must demand if it wants to survive. Alongside the use of force in ways totally unfettered by any legal constraints, this presupposed carefully fine-tuned forms of charity that often had to precede the deployment of terroristic means. Through its social and economic assistance the power of the racket lodges itself between civil society and the family. It does so whenever the state itself is unable to integrate divergent social forces. It is a self-destructive synthesis that conflates family and state and transforms all relationships mediated by society into direct relationships between individuals who, because they are unfree, cannot but threaten and suppress one another.

When the German sociologist Alfred Vierkandt sought to define solidarity, he already did so in accordance with the permeation of society by the precepts of the racket: 'Solidarity is the ethos of a closely knit community,' he wrote.<sup>19</sup> Yet in Roman Law solidarity did not denote a community, close-knit or otherwise, let alone an ethos – both concepts that in a sense already reflect the perspective of the racket – but a specific legal relationship stipulating that each individual is liable for the whole, *in solidum*: for the entire amount. When the labor movement picked up the concept it maintained something of the consciousness that the common bond of solidarity is a mediated one. Rather than striving to create a community and demand a particular ethos, the priority lay on quite practical measures of mutual protection in the face of the menaces manifestly created by the capitalist relations of production. Whether one knows somebody or not is irrelevant to a form of solidarity predicated on the knowledge that one owes solidarity to others because their contract of employment places them in a position formally identical to one's own. Yet among the

many forms of private charity the racket is evidently the only one capable of filling the space of solidarity in its entirety because it substitutes an ethos or faith for the awareness of the infinitely mediated character of society. The class conflict over the surplus value is reduced to immediate empathy and particulate aid. It is when the mass individuals identify with one another by substituting the figure of a leader for their ego ideal – a process Freud described in *Mass Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* – that the unity is created that supersedes class consciousness.

In the past, charitable donors had expected their reward to come from God. The bourgeois benefactors who no longer believed in him or in divine rewards, however, were left with only the social prestige one acquires through one's actions. Yet the collective benefactor who relies on religious and national identity demands gratitude of its charges, demonstrated at the very least by the adoption of a specific ethos. In this context too, the effects of secularization can only ever be grasped in terms of the situation of the individual. Whether charities affirm the bourgeois society within which they operate in the way in which they mete out their benevolence or not is a crucial distinguishing feature. In other words, are the relations among the members, between the officials and the members, and between the benefactors and the beneficiaries organized in accordance with the principles of capitalist exchange, and is the relative autonomy and protective anonymity of the individual still maintained even when it is a pauper, or not? What constitutes good bourgeois charity is the willingness still to view the individual as a potential owner of goods even when it no longer possesses any, a willingness well matched to the embourgeoisement of the large denominations who were forced to open up, however reluctantly, to the dynamics of modern society.

Yet organized charity can also generate, at its core, the total rejection of civil forms of interaction. It can offer the individual precisely that from which it was emancipated by

those forms belonging to bourgeois society. In so doing it not only perpetuates pre-modern relations – direct compulsion and personal dependency – but modernizes them in order to arm itself against society's promise of emancipation. What it offers to the forlorn and atomized is the warmth of the 'original closeness of blood [*Blutsurenge*]'.<sup>20</sup> The ambivalence of secularization under capitalist conditions thus becomes evident. For the concept of the private concern can belie the fact that this concern, be it pastoral or charitable, can be understood by the rackets – who owe their very existence to the destruction of the individual's privacy – as being inherently theirs. Individual privacy, which needs to be defended even against the privacy of the family, indeed, precisely against the latter, is part and parcel of the 'dignity' of the individual in its capacity as what Marx called the 'owner of commodities'. Under the political pressure of the rackets the individual is still a 'commodity owner' yet loses even this last dignity, which belongs to it in that role. Thus the private is declared to be the immediately political and the rackets triumph over the law and prevail because they are able to offer an effective and popular ideological substitute for the promise the welfare state fails to keep.

As opposed to the welfare state, which embodies the anonymity of capitalist valorization, these rackets take care of the individuals *personally*. Within them, the individual gives up (or is forced to give up) the anonymity it owns as a private individual in bourgeois society. The individual finds itself in a secondary family, in relations that are not constituted by exchange but by *gift*, a form of exchange, in other words, in which the objects and services are not detached from the individual – as goods and labor are contractually. Rather, they accrue and adhere to the individual again, like the earlier privileges and obligations under pre-capitalist conditions. The beneficiary of such charity feels used in the most personal way imaginable – with his or her soul, body and entire existence.

Although the racket may bestow aid in monetary form the way in which the individual then makes use of that aid is based not on abstract labor but on concrete corporeality, albeit a form of corporeality that has no purpose other than to disappear at the right moment when it is sacrificed for the community and the racket.

## RACKETS AND STATE CAPITALISM

The need for the concept of the racket arose when it became apparent that the social and political developments in Europe and the United States after the Great Depression – the process that Horkheimer described as the weakening of the defensive forces of the law – could not be explained by Pollock's theory of state capitalism alone. It also offered an opportunity to develop a substantive distinction between ongoing developments in the United States, on the one hand, and National Socialist Germany, on the other. Kirchheimer and Neumann in particular pursued this opportunity in their studies of National Socialism. Both of them were, of course, legal theorists and former students of Carl Schmitt.

As early as 1930, Walter Benjamin had already offered an analysis of the transition from the strong state to the state of gang rivalry taking place in the latter years of the Weimar Republic. He did so in a review of an essay collection edited by Ernst Jünger, *War and Warrior*. His review, quite appropriately, bore the title, 'Theories of German Fascism'. In the various contributions to the collection, among them Jünger's well known musings about 'total mobilization', Benjamin recognized 'an unrestrained application of the principles of *l'art pour l'art* to war'.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, the state seemed to have been reduced to a negligible entity. That Jünger was aestheticizing a war that had, after all, transpired between states seemed insignificant, given the 'mysticism of world death'

that pervaded his vision.<sup>22</sup> As Benjamin demonstrated, the forces for which Jünger stood in fact perpetuated the very 'failure of the powers of state' they bemoaned, indeed that very failure was their concept of the political and they embodied it. Benjamin thus anticipated some of the features that would subsequently characterize Kirchheimer's and Neumann's analyses of National Socialism and provided a first template for Horkheimer's concept of the racket:

Those hybrid military formations hovering between comradesly fellowships and regular representatives of state power at the end of the war soon crystallized into independent, stateless hordes of mercenaries. The captains of finance and lords of the inflation began to question the efficacy of the state as the guarantor of their property and appreciated the availability of such hordes. Easily procured through private agents or the *Reichswehr* they could be relied upon to come rolling along like rice or turnips whenever they were needed. Even the publication under review resembles an ideologically worded recruitment prospectus for a new type of mercenary or, perhaps more accurately, a new type of condottiere.<sup>23</sup>

Like Horkheimer and Neumann in their subsequent accounts, Benjamin too chose a broad historical perspective. While Horkheimer took recourse to the term racket and Neumann appropriated Hobbes for the title of his *Behemoth*, Benjamin, in his portrayal of developments in the Weimar Republic, referenced mercenaries and condottieri.<sup>24</sup> Benjamin's discussion of Ernst Jünger's 'total mobilization' was no less overtly polemical than the racket concept would subsequently be. As Kirchheimer stated explicitly:

The term *racket* is a polemical one. It reflects on a society in which social position has increasingly come to depend on a relation of participation, on the primordial effect of whether an individual succeeded or failed to 'arrive'. *Racket* connotes a society in which individuals have lost the belief that compensation for their individual efforts will result from the mere functioning of impersonal market agencies. But it keeps in equal distance from, and does not incorporate, the idea of a society wherein the antagonism between men and

inanimate elements of production has been dissolved in the image of a free association for the common use of productive forces.<sup>25</sup>

Plucked from the 'polemics' of US-American legal practice, in the context of Critical Theory the racket became an *index falsi*, an 'index of the untruth of identity',<sup>26</sup> whose meaning becomes fully evident only when one takes Freud's psychoanalysis and the Marxian critique of political economy into account. Only on the basis of the most emphatic recognition of this untruth of identity in its specific historical guise can one maintain the general idea of a whole within which the individual is not subjected to violence. The issue is raised by Adorno in the notes he took on Beethoven in 1940. There he formulated it as the question that faces all music: 'How can there be a whole without subjecting the individual to violence?'<sup>27</sup> The Marxian notion of a free association of individuals was thus renewed in Critical Theory.

On Horkheimer's reading, the fascist dictatorship amounted to an attempt to enlist the critique of the racket for the latter's own purposes. It sought to compel a society disintegrating into rackets – be they labor organizations or monopolistic capital groups – to unite as a *Volksgemeinschaft*, an ethnically homogeneous community.

It embodied a massive exhortation [that] commanders even the true critique of the racket for the latter's purposes [and that, under the pretext of an ostensible attack upon the weakened rackets in the sphere of finance capital has now embarked upon an extension of the fascist dictatorship of the industrial monopolies – presented as democracy – across the planet].<sup>28</sup>

In Horkheimer's typescript, Friedrich Pollock subsequently deleted the passage I have placed in square brackets. Evidently there was some doubt as to how fascist rackets could be distinguished from other rackets. Has the specific mode of motion within the rackets been transformed in the fascist rackets, i.e., in Hegelian words: has it been negatively sublated? Is this why the latter are compelled to

take the 'struggle against the law, against all forms of mediation that have taken on a life of their own' to its ultimate conclusion? Yet what exactly this would mean also remains unclear. A Racket generally 'shows no mercy to life outside of it, it knows only the law of self-preservation,' Horkheimer argued.<sup>29</sup> Yet while the new Empire of the Rackets indeed showed no mercy to life outside of it, it did not ultimately hinge on the law of self-preservation either. It was the fascist dictatorship that fulfilled the promise of the racket in its entirety for the first time: identity without non-identity, annihilation for the sake of annihilation. 'Left with no way out, the question of whether it is directed against others or against the subject itself – a distinction it never considered absolute in the first place,' Adorno explained, 'becomes a matter of total indifference to the compulsion to annihilate.'<sup>30</sup>

## THE ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL SOCIALISM

Even in 1939, Horkheimer still assumed that 'Germany could disintegrate overnight into chaos and infighting among gangsters'.<sup>31</sup> The 'massive exhortation' of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, in other words, was failing. Yet subsequently, the Critical Theorists began to realize that the *Volksgemeinschaft* invariably amounted to more than just that exhortation and did not necessarily rule out chaos and the infighting of gangsters within it. In this vein, Adorno commented on Pollock's essay on 'State Capitalism' in a letter to Horkheimer of 1941 as follows:

In terms of the content, the crucial problem is: does the tendency towards a crisis-free command economy presented in the text really express the objective tendency of reality or does the current antagonistic state of affairs continue to preclude the notional purity of this construct in future too? I feel in no position genuinely to answer this question. My instinct is as follows: the truth of the concept lies in its pessimism, i.e., the view that the chances of domination in its immediately political



guise being perpetuated are greater than those of getting out. Wrong is the optimism, even for others. What is being perpetuated is not so much a stable and in some way rational state of affairs but rather, for the foreseeable future, a relentless succession of catastrophes, chaos and terror but with that, conversely, also a renewed chance of escape.<sup>32</sup>

However integral the role of rackets might be in the implementation of laws, under the rule of law their room for maneuver would ordinarily be severely curtailed. Like other forms of mediation, Horkheimer stressed, the law asserted its own essence and defensive force against the rackets. Since they were predicated on the need time and again to transcend the specific individual and its immediate integration into the racket, thus facilitating detachment, the means of domination were set up within these forms of mediation against domination as 'the reflection that unmasks it'.

Yet the permanent state of emergency allowed the rackets to come directly to the fore: among the rank and file of the mob, in the mass organizations and, equally, among the higher echelons and the ruling elites. All legality was so comprehensively appropriated by them as a technical resource for their rivalry that they merged, creating the precise opposite of market-based competition. Once human beings treated one another as ethnic comrades [*Volksgenossen*], it became impossible to transcend the specific individual and its immediate integration into the racket. 'With the accession to power of National Socialism', Kirchheimer explained,

the common legal bond of a generally applicable civil law disappeared more and more, and at the same time the professional organizations lost their voluntary character. The labor organization, economic groups, the handicraft and peasant organizations became compulsory organizations. By the same token the National Socialist system dispensed with an outside body to whose authority a group member could appeal when faced with an inequitable group decision.<sup>33</sup>

The 'ideology of the community', in other words, 'deprived the weaker group member

of the right to appeal to an outside body which would be prepared to maintain the intra-group balance'.<sup>34</sup> All the rackets,

the industrialists and landowners, party and army, as well as the corresponding bureaucracies, jealously see to it that nobody trespasses into the provinces carved out for each by common agreement; the tendency is, therefore, towards departmentalization, towards disappearance of a unified system of law behind innumerable steadily increasing special competences.<sup>35</sup>

The most successful racket in any given instance was the one that most consistently eliminated any remaining forms of mediation. Critical reflection became impossible since domination and the means of domination could no longer be juxtaposed. The means of domination were deployed exclusively to serve the domination of the racket in question, which drew its authority from the leader and the ethnic community.

Unlike Kirchheimer, Neumann did not resort directly to the concept of the racket in his analysis of National Socialism. Perhaps the term struck him as being too closely tied to legal terminology. Yet when he referred to 'gangs' and 'authoritarian corporations' in his discussion of power groups, the implications of the concept are nevertheless palpable.

Neumann denied the 'primacy of politics' stipulated by the concept of 'state capitalism'. He wanted to demonstrate that even in the current crisis in Germany the state was in no position to substitute planning for domestic class rule and the market mechanism. Yet in the event his analysis took him somewhere rather different than he had anticipated. Not only had the 'primacy of politics' not been enforced, Neumann argued, it would be impossible to enforce within the confines of the nation state. This he sought to demonstrate with empirical analyses of the German economy. He fundamentally questioned the stability of the National Socialist system and was convinced that the existing economic contradictions had to have some impact at a 'higher' level, even if that impact was concealed by the bureaucratic apparatus and the propaganda of the

*Volksgemeinschaft*. It was these economic contradictions that made war and ruthless expansion inevitable at the 'higher level'.

Neumann went beyond a traditional Marxist account and, in spite of himself, acknowledged an element of truth in the concept of state capitalism, namely, its focus on the form of crisis management that consisted in the elimination of the sphere of circulation as a form of social mediation. He appropriated this notion and in so doing radicalized some of the assumptions underlying the racket theory. Ultimately, he argued, it was questionable whether a formally and functionally united sovereign political authority actually still existed in Germany. National Socialism depended not simply on the abolition of the rule of law but on the disintegration of the latter's prerequisite, universal sovereign power. Neumann argued that the state was moving toward 'utter shapelessness'. Consequently, it could no longer be designated a state proper and should really be described as a 'gang, where the leaders are perpetually compelled to agree after disagreements'.<sup>36</sup> National Socialism actually no longer had a united apparatus of coercion at its disposal and was disintegrating into a number of political power centers. It was in this sense that Ernst Fraenkel had referred to the National Socialist state as a 'dual state'.<sup>37</sup> These power centers struck out all the more brutally since relations between them were not institutionalized and merely transpired on the personal level. The personal agreement reached in ad hoc negotiations no longer constituted unity in the sense of a state, be it a democracy or a dictatorship. National Socialism, on Neumann's reading, was a non-state characterized by anarchy and chaos.

Neumann's conclusion, then, was that National Socialism, in contrast, for example, to Italian fascism, constituted a non-state, effectively a totalitarian form of anarchy.

There is no need for a state standing above all groups; the state may even be a hindrance to the compromises and to domination over the ruled classes. ... But if the National Socialist structure is

not a state, what is it? I venture to suggest that we are confronted with a form of society in which the ruling groups control the rest of the population directly, without the mediation of that rational though coercive apparatus hitherto known as the state. This new social form is not yet fully realized, but the trend exists which defines the very essence of the regime.<sup>38</sup>

Yet Neumann did not pursue any further the issue of the unity of this process, in other words, the question of what would replace the sovereign and what distinguished anarchy and chaos in the non-state from anarchy and chaos per se. He refrained from discussing the primacy of annihilation: annihilation, that is, for annihilation's sake. Indeed, in order to evade this primacy and maintain certain anachronistic notions of monopoly capitalism and the class struggle, Neumann fell short of the potential of Critical Theory in his assessment of antisemitism within the German *Volksgemeinschaft*, which he considered no more than a matter of propagandistic phraseology.<sup>39</sup> This blind spot was much more persistent in his case than it was with Adorno and Horkheimer who, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, achieved the decisive breakthrough in conceptualizing antisemitism in the development and crisis of capitalized society and placed its critique center-stage.

The fact that the first and most important study of the annihilation of European Jewry was written by one of Neumann's students gives an indication of how far Neumann had nevertheless progressed with his analysis. As Raul Hilberg acknowledged, he appropriated Neumann's concept of National Socialism as a 'non-state', in which the 'ruling elites' did not operate 'on the sort of unified rational basis we associate with a legislature or constitution'.<sup>40</sup> Yet Hilberg also pointed to a bias on Neumann's part that sprung from his Marxism. He had been quite right to analyze the aryaniization and liquidation of Jewish property as a means of promoting the tendencies toward greater concentration in the German industrial economy, yet he had then been unable 'to face

up fully to the fact that the Jewish people as such was being annihilated'.<sup>41</sup> Hilberg went beyond this limitation and his perspective was inevitably inverted in the process. His analysis was predicated on the assumption that all relevant developments had to be examined from the vantage point of the 'German destruction effort'.<sup>42</sup> It was this effort that necessitated the division of society into increasingly independent groups. As the process of annihilation gathered pace and became increasingly complex its implementation became dependent on an ever-increasing number of agencies, party offices, commercial enterprises and military entities. The annihilation of the Jews, Hilberg argued, 'was a total process'. The machinery it required 'was structurally no different from organized German society as a whole ... The machinery of destruction was the organized community in one of its special roles'.<sup>43</sup> It is one of the most peculiar paradoxes in the development and reception of Critical Theory that Hilberg evidently was only able to attain this insight by also appropriating from Neumann the inability to place antisemitism center-stage as the determinant delusion in this total process, as the actual reason why the process and the organized community became indistinguishable.

Against this backdrop the notion of the disintegration of the monopoly on the use of force that Neumann ascribed to National Socialism and his concept of the 'non-state', in turn, require some modification. An organization like the SS, for instance, gained a kind of monopolistic status, precisely because it served the protection of the Führer, who embodied it, on the one hand, while ultimately being in command of virtually all the workings of the machinery of annihilation, on the other.

### ***The Concept of the Racket and Jihadism: On the Topicality of Critical Theory***

Contemporary historians of the National Socialist state have appropriated some of

Neumann's and Hilberg's insights. Yet the issue of the gangs and rackets that invariably spring from the dynamics of this new *Behemoth* has been broken down into the positivist controversy between 'intentionalists' and 'functionalists'. This is possible only because the question of the unity of the process and of the state, and thus, by implication, of the relationship between state and capital, is no longer raised on either side of the debate. Against this tendency one should take recourse to those studies that were predicated on a notion of the whole as the untrue Adorno expressly acknowledged this in the short critical appreciation of Neumann he wrote some years after his untimely death for a planned collection of Neumann's texts. Neumann's concept of the *Behemoth*, Adorno wrote, stood 'in marked contrast to superficial notions of a monolithic fascism'. Neumann had demonstrated that

the National Socialist state, for all its conceit of total unity, was in truth pluralistic. Political decision making occurred through the haphazard rivalry of powerful social cliques ... [S]ociety disintegrates into a diffuse barbaric plurality, into the opposite of the reconciled plurality that alone would be a state of affairs fit for human beings.<sup>44</sup>

Horkheimer in particular continued to think of this reconciled plurality in terms of a society liberated from the rackets.<sup>45</sup> Yet the concept recedes in the writings of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Kirchheimer after the demise of National Socialism. Having still played a certain role in *The Authoritarian Personality* and *The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas' Radio Addresses*, it subsequently featured only infrequently. How the rackets might be connected to the culture industry and the administered world was not discussed. Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Kirchheimer undertook no further attempts to utilize and elaborate on the racket concept in the post-war context.

The concept only regained its poignancy in the reception of Critical Theory after the end of the Cold War, and initially just

in a German-speaking context and outside, or at best on the margins, of academic discourse. It has been advanced, as we saw, by Wolfgang Pohrt and by a number of authors who, like myself,<sup>46</sup> publish with the *Initiative Sozialistisches Forum* and the *ça ira* publishing house,<sup>47</sup> and in journals like *Prodomo* (Cologne) and *sans phrase* (Vienna). This return of the concept of the racket is owed not least to the appearance of djihadism and the way in which it relates to the monopoly on the use of force. In the context of Critical Theory this re-appropriation of the concept nevertheless amounts to the claim that it points to universal social trends the world over – in the ‘Orient’ as much as the West, in the countries of the former Soviet sphere of influence as much as the European Union and the United States – for all that these trends progress in different ways in the various countries depending on the persistence of the rule of law. The assertion of the racket against the rule of law can equally well take on a djihadist or right-wing populist guise, the attenuation of the defensive forces of the law can transpire through the partial implementation of Sharia law in the legal practice of Western states just as well as through the call of right-wing populists for referenda to replace the mediation of public opinion in representative democracy.<sup>48</sup>

Precisely what had been most abstract in the insights of Critical Theory in the 1930s and 1940s turns out to be extremely efficacious in the concrete analysis of contemporary developments. This concerns, on the one hand, the notion that in a situation of crisis society disintegrates into gangs and thus eliminates the spheres of circulation and due process, turning the rackets into the principal articulation of the political. On the other hand, it emerges that any sense or form of unity within and in the face of this process of social disintegration can be attained only by fantasizing about a Jewish world conspiracy, in which mediation and circulation return in phantasmagorical form.

Inevitably, everything looks different in the current Middle East, the wellspring of djihadism. This concerns not only the opportunities for the rackets to profit from the dissolution of the mechanisms of circulation and their relations with, and position within, the world market. Given the current economic significance of oil and depending on their respective points of departure, these rackets take on a broad range of forms that would have been impossible against the backdrop of the highly developed and standardized industrial production in Germany in the 1930s. Perhaps the greatest change concerns the ideological guise of the evoked world conspiracy. Since unity is established through an annihilatory mania directed above all against one state – the Jewish state, which is imagined as the Jew among the states – the total process of which Hilberg spoke – in which the machinery of extermination became indistinguishable from German society as a whole – also takes on a different form. The ‘machinery’ within which a variety of djihadists on Israel’s borders – the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Al Qaeda, and Islamic State in Syria and Iraq – ‘collaborate’ with the Iranian dual state (a form of collaboration that exists only insofar as it is predicated on their joint negative fixation with Israel and Zionism) is virtually indistinguishable from an entity that is *religious* rather than social in character. Needless to say, this too is ultimately a social issue, however, insofar as religion can only ever be understood as a social phenomenon. Even so, its specificity lies in the fact that, in this context, individuals, whether as clerics or as believers, refuse a priori and on principle to accept the separation of politics and religion and the distinction between public and private that are stipulated by the sphere of circulation and the rule of law.

On the other hand, the specific strand within Islam within which political functions are taken on directly by the clerics who become religious leaders and lay claim to absolute authority, marks a particular stage in the process through which the principle of

the racket becomes total. Within its sphere, this form of Islam is capable of bringing the rivalry between the rackets, which elsewhere assault each other in bloody gang warfare, under control and manages to lend the religious community a sufficient measure of stability and continuity. Consequently, politics in the Shiite realm still build to some extent on the old nation state and yet have long since transcended it as a non-state with the Islamic Republic of Iran as an organized center for the onslaught on Israel.<sup>49</sup> Israel has acquired its status as bogeyman quite independently of its state constitution which does in fact reflect a particular form, shaped by the diaspora experience and religious tradition, of that which characterizes every western state: a merging of universal legal structures and particularist racket structures, whose interrelationship is never entirely fixed but constantly up for grabs in accordance with the political development in any given country.

Characteristic of those countries in which djihadism is dominant is the fact that the defensive forces of the law have no opportunity of developing in the first place or are promptly eliminated again by the racket structures. In the same way as the Revolutionary Guards and the 'regular' army coexist in the Islamic Republic of Iran, for instance, because it is impossible to create a unitary structure by subjecting one of these armed rackets to the other, the Islamic Republic also lacks a universal legal system. Instead, the legal system is fragmented. The Supreme Court and the civil and criminal courts are undermined from the outset by 'special courts'. Independently of one another the 'revolutionary courts' function alongside the military courts, the judiciary of the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij,<sup>50</sup> not to mention the 'court of administrative justice', the 'special clerical court', the 'press courts' and so on.<sup>51</sup>

Yet in this case too, due to the existence of a 'religious leader' who is the sole source of ultimate authority, the rivalry between the rackets does not lead to armed

conflict between them, as it does, for instance, between Islamic State and Al Qaeda in the 'civil wars' in Syria and Iraq. This leader, in turn, is simply the embodiment of the fact that all the competing rackets can be integrated and brought to refrain from resolving their conflicts with violence. In connection with a similar context, Thorsten Fuchshuber has spoken of a 'de facto monopoly on the use of force'.<sup>52</sup> The flipside of this coin is the resolve to destroy Israel that has been constantly upheld since the inception of the Islamic Republic. It is precisely this resolve that lends the Revolutionary Guards a privileged position among the competing rackets. They are not only closest to the spiritual leader for whom they were created but also have a particularly significant role to play in connection with Iran's nuclear program and its weaponization.

## THE DEFENSIVE FORCES OF THE LAW AND THE LOGIC OF CAPITAL

When Horkheimer referred to the means of domination standing against domination as the reflection that unmasks it, his focus was never just on the specific law or the judiciary, even though the Hegelian language might suggest this, but also on the consciousness that creates or applies it. In this respect, then, there is a crucial distinction between the legal subject and the commodified subject. The former needs to know what it is doing. As for the latter, if we follow Marx: 'They do not know it but they are doing it.'<sup>53</sup> One might indeed say that the commodified subject, in contrast to the legal subject, is not in fact a subject at all. Steeped in the tradition of classical philosophy, Marx never once used this term, which has been so popular in the recent reception of Marx. He spoke of the 'commodity owner' who has to exist simply because the commodities cannot walk to the market themselves. When Marx referred to the subject in his critique of political economy he did so in

terms of the intentionally oxymoronic 'automated subjects', a term that, in the shift from structuralism to post-structuralism, has come to be understood as a pleonasm. Strictly speaking, then, one cannot really speak of a crisis in the context of institutionalized law but only of a state of exception. Yet the constant possibility of such a state of exception allows the crisis to draw into question, as a matter of principle, the rationality that allows the legal subject to know what it is doing.

As we saw, in his draft of 1939/40, Horkheimer still located the 'Spirit' in whom the law had become a substantive factor in the consciousness of the masses, where 'the idea of true democracy' supposedly led 'a repressed subterranean existence'.<sup>54</sup> It is presumably owed to the fragmentary character of the text that he did not explicate that 'the masses' can only be conceived of as masses of individuals who could interact in the spirit of solidarity and need not identify with each other in the name of a leader and benefactor. What Horkheimer described as 'Spirit' cannot be understood separately from the consciousness of each individual. When it eventually became clear that the idea of democracy no longer led even 'a repressed subterranean existence' in Germany he was compelled to view the post-National Socialist state as a mere mechanism after all. The consciousness without which the Spirit cannot work for the idea of true democracy he then saw, quite legitimately, embodied only in the US-American occupation power.

This transference of the Spirit to the American hegemon reflects the eminently historical dimension of the defensive forces of the law, an issue that Horkheimer did not raise in his draft. It is precisely this historical dimension that first points unambiguously to the critique of political economy. Anyone who wants to assert themselves under the rule of law can do so only if they subsume their demands and claims under certain legal principles or laws. Anyone who wants to partake of society's wealth – which everybody is forced to do simply for the purposes of self-preservation – will

do so only via participation, however circuitous and mediated, in capital's valorization process. Analogously to Hobbes's *Leviathan*, one could speak of an imaginary 'original contract' in the realm of political economy. In it, all those who want to partake of society's wealth, even if it is just in order to survive, accept its form, albeit without knowing any more about it than their legal consciousness imparts to them. They do not need to know that this form is predicated on the distinction between exchange value and use value; on the fact that the concrete labor is valid only as abstract labor. They do not need to know, in other words, that society is held together by the measure of the socially necessary labor time required to produce any given commodity, which is ultimately the measure of all modern forms of mediation. The one thing they do need to know about this fictitious 'original contract' is that wealth can, in principle, be appropriated only through contracts. This means, conversely, that the defensive forces of the law depend on adherence to this principle.

Yet what if wealth can no longer be appropriated through contracts? As Marx explained, capital is an 'automatic subject' – and yet, at the same time it is not. It is an automatic subject in the absence of crisis, yet, as Marx also pointed out, it concurrently undermines its own prerequisites and thus provokes the 'non-automatic' subject. Why, if this generates a process of disintegration and one can no longer attain wealth through contractual relations, should one acknowledge the contractual principle? To do so would hardly be rational. The very means that are indispensable for self-preservation under capitalist conditions come to contradict the principle of self-preservation. These social relations 'constantly reproduce the potential unfolding of worse options insofar as they totalize scarcity through the mere consummation of just relations of exchange'.<sup>55</sup> Capital's own logic predisposes it toward reducing the variable component of capital 'toward zero' and thus 'permanently

demotes man as a species being to a pauper and bounty hunter'.<sup>56</sup> What this cannot explain, however, is why human beings are prepared not only to affirm this degradation but to outdo it with pathetic projections and delusions of annihilation and victimhood. This simply cannot be explained, not even with *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Individuals can only combat these projections and delusions, whatever the prospect of success, and adhere, even 'in the state of their unfreedom', to the new categorical imperative formulated by Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*: 'to arrange their thinking and conduct so that Auschwitz never repeat itself and nothing similar may occur ever again'.<sup>57</sup>

Since Marx it has been considered the principal purpose of the critique of political economy to disavow the hope that the agents on the markets and in the state apparatuses have it in their gift to subjugate the valorization of value to reason and contain the irrational with the rationality of the law. With Auschwitz an additional task has arisen as a practical imperative: that of considering this principal purpose a means of rejecting any playing down of the impending menace – not least when such trivializations think they can invoke the law's force of resistance.

## Notes

- 1 Max Horkheimer, 'Die Rackets und der Geist', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 12 (Fischer, 1985), 287–91, here 287.
- 2 Otto Kirchheimer, 'In Quest of Sovereignty', in *Journal of Politics* 6, 2 (1944), 139–76, here 159.
- 3 Wolfgang Pohrt, *Brothers in Crime. Die Menschen im Zeitalter ihrer Überflüssigkeit. Über die Herkunft von Gruppen, Cliquen, Banden, Rackets, Gangs* (Tiamat, 1997), 28. Before legal experts appropriated it, the term was used among criminals and denoted noise or a hubbub or commotion. This usage 'probably comes from a device adopted by the old New York gangs. It was common practice for social and political clubs of the era to sponsor benefit galas on their own behalf. These were noisy affairs, what with the brass band and the general boisterousness stimulated by heavy drinking, so that they came to be known as rackets. Grasping the opportunity for easy and, to all outward appearance, licit profit, a gangster would organize a benevolent association of which he was the sole member, announce a racket, and with threats of demolishing their premises compel the neighborhood shopkeepers and businessmen to purchase blocks of tickets' (John Kobler, *Capone: The Life and World of Al Capone* (Putnam, 1971), 32).
- 4 Horkheimer, 'Rackets', 291.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 288.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 288–9.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 289.
- 8 Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie* (Duncker and Humblot, 1996), 13.
- 9 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Marx Engels Werke vol. 42 (Dietz), 23.
- 10 Horkheimer, 'Rackets', 290.
- 11 'In a society that cannot, given the principle on which it is based, avoid force, true generality is an impossibility. But the limited, formal and negative generality of the law in the liberal order facilitates more than just capitalist predictability. Given that formal freedom cuts both ways, this limited generality also allows for a minimum of actual freedom and offers the weak at least a chance of attaining legal redress' (Franz Neumann, 'Der Funktionswandel des Gesetzes im Recht der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft', in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* vol. 6 (1937), 542–96, here 594).
- 12 Horkheimer, 'Rackets', 291.
- 13 It would be too simple to criticize Horkheimer's apparent Hegelianism or portray his concept of the law as a precursor of Jürgen Habermas's approach. Horkheimer stuck to the Hegelian scheme only insofar as he also became a supporter of the United States' entry into the war. Engaging Hegel's notion of the sublation of the particular and individual as elements within the self-motion of the Absolute, Horkheimer's emphasis lay on the dimension of preservation within that process. He sought to defend the prerequisites of a form of social unity that would not violate the individual. He stressed the element of formal deferment inherent in that mode of Hegelian reflection upon society that can be understood, with Marx, as the self-mediation of value. In it, Horkheimer saw not so much an opportunity to realize this unity but a chance temporarily to restrain power. Given the integral significance of the war of annihilation against the Jews for National Socialism, it is in any case obvious that we are not dealing with any straightforward parallel here to Hegel's attitude toward Napoleon.
- 14 Consequently, the attempt to facilitate its affirmation by conceptualizing the state as a machine cannot genuinely draw on Hegel's *Philosophy of*

- Right* nor does it offer a critique (rather than a mere inversion) of the *Earliest Systematic Programme of German Idealism*, which denounced the state as a machine. Against the backdrop of the evolution of industrial production, it seems remarkable that the term was used to refer to something other than the actual machines integral to this mode of production. Yet it also regained the pejorative connotation it held in Greek antiquity, associating machines with machinations, i.e., forms of deceit that can become a matter of ideology. If one does not bear this in mind and understands the term machine literally, the designation of the state as a machine itself falls prey to such deceit. The more neutral Latin-based term apparatus is better suited since it does not connote any deceit.
- 15 Max Horkheimer, 'On the Sociology of Class Relations', Typescript, Na 1 Nachlass Max Horkheimer, 639, box IX, file 16, Universitätsbibliothek Frankfurt. In one of the four typescripts the [the] in square brackets was crossed out. A German translation of the text was published as 'Zur Soziologie der Klassenverhältnisse' in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 12 (Fischer, 1985), 75–104, here 104.
  - 16 Horkheimer, 'Sociology of Class Relations', 101.
  - 17 *Ibid.*, 102.
  - 18 Max Horkheimer, 'Autorität und Familie', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 3 (Fischer, 1988), 336–417, here 403–405.
  - 19 Alfred Vierkandt, *Gesellschaftslehre* (Enke, 1923), 45.
  - 20 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 95.
  - 21 Walter Benjamin, 'Theorien des deutschen Faschismus', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 3 (Suhrkamp, 1972), 238–50, here 240.
  - 22 *Ibid.*, 249.
  - 23 *Ibid.*, 248.
  - 24 Benjamin had already engaged the issue of sovereignty in a specific historical context in which such forces had the upper hand in his famous though rarely read book on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. His interpretation of baroque literature hinged on the early failure of state power in Germany.
  - 25 Kirchheimer, 'In Quest of Sovereignty', 161.
  - 26 Theodor Adorno, 'Negative Dialektik', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 6 (Suhrkamp, 1997), 7–412, here 17.
  - 27 Theodor Adorno, *Beethoven. Philosophie der Musik. Fragmente und Texte* (Suhrkamp, 1993), 62.
  - 28 Horkheimer, 'Rackets', 291.
  - 29 *Ibid.*, 290.
  - 30 Theodor Adorno, 'Minima Moralia', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 4 (Suhrkamp, 1997), 118.
  - 31 Max Horkheimer, 'Die Juden und Europa', in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 4 (Fischer, 1988), 308–31, here 319.
  - 32 Adorno to Horkheimer, 2 July 1941, in Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 17 (Fischer, 1996), 95–9, here 96; Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* vol. 2: 1938–1944 (Suhrkamp, 2004), 159–63, here 160–1.
  - 33 Otto Kirchheimer, 'The Legal Order of National Socialism', in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* [*Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*] 9 (1941), 456–75, here 457. Hereafter 'Legal Order'.
  - 34 *Ibid.*, 458.
  - 35 *Ibid.*, 469.
  - 36 Franz Neumann, *Behemoth* (Oxford University Press, 1944), 522.
  - 37 Ernst Fraenkel, *The Dual State* (Oxford University Press, 1941).
  - 38 Neumann, *Behemoth*, 469–70.
  - 39 See Gerhard Scheit, *Der Wahn vom Weltsoverän* (ça ira, 2009), 85–8; Philipp Lenhard, 'Blinder Fleck? Eine kurze Erwiderung auf Gerhard Scheit', in *sans phrase* no. 8 (2016), 226–9. That Neumann ignored antisemitism as the unifying factor in this process of disintegration to such an extent corresponds oddly to his legal positivism when discussing the 'rationality of international law', which occasionally results in his no longer recognizing what Hobbes and Hegel identified as the natural state of affairs, namely, that relations between states are in principle irrational.
  - 40 Raul Hilberg and Alfons Söllner, 'Das Schweigen zum Sprechen bringen. Ein Gespräch über Franz Neumann und die Entwicklung der Holocaust-Forschung', in Dan Diner (ed.), *Zivilisationsbruch. Denken nach Auschwitz* (Fischer, 1988), 175–200, here 176.
  - 41 *Ibid.*, 181.
  - 42 Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* vol. 3 (Yale University Press, 2003), 1060.
  - 43 *Ibid.*, 1061.
  - 44 Theodor Adorno, 'Franz Neumann zum Gedächtnis', in Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 20.2 (Suhrkamp, 1997), 700–2, here 702.
  - 45 In the notes Friedrich Pollock took on his conversations with Horkheimer between 1957 and 1967, for instance, Horkheimer is recorded twice as commenting on the issue, suggesting that he still thought of the racket concept as a theoretical approach that had yet to be fully developed. See 'Theorie des Rackets' and 'Herrschende Klasse, die von Rackets beherrschte Klasse und die Rolle der Fachleute', in Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 14 (Fischer, 1988), 334–335 and 340. The concept also resurfaces in Adorno's later correspondence, for instance, in his letter to Siegfried Kracauer of 17 March 1965: 'I can rarely watch a film without sensing for a few seconds: this is what it should be, this is what would be possible – and then instantly becoming enraged at



- the way in which one is cheated by the rationale of the racket' (Theodor Adorno, and Siegfried Krauer, 'Der Riß der Welt geht auch durch mich'. *Briefwechsel 1923–1966* [Suhrkamp, 2008], 695).
- 46 Gerhard Scheit, *Suicide Attack. Zur Kritik der politischen Gewalt* (ça ira, 2004).
  - 47 Manfred Dahlmann, 'Antwort auf Enderwitzens *Quo vadis Ça ira*', <http://www.ca-ira.net/isf/beitraege/dahlmann-antikritik.enderwitz.php> (10 May 2017).
  - 48 Scheit, *Suicide Attack*, 411–26.
  - 49 See Thomas von der Osten-Sacken, 'Die Schimäre vom kleineren Übel. Gespräch mit Thomas von der Osten-Sacken über die Lage im Nahen Osten', in *sans phrase* no. 5 (2014), 196–204.
  - 50 David Menashri, *Iran. A Decade of War and Revolution* (Holmes and Meier, 1990), 273.
  - 51 Wahied Wahdat-Hagh, *Die Islamische Republik Iran. Die Herrschaft des politischen Islam als eine Spielart des Totalitarismus* (LIT, 2003), 217–9. The extent to which Kirchheimer's already quoted remarks about the National Socialist legal system apply here should be obvious: 'the common legal bond of a generally applicable civil law' disappears and the 'ideology of the community deprive[s] the weaker group member of the right to appeal to an outside body which would be prepared to maintain the intra-group balance' (Kirchheimer, 'Legal Order', 457, 458). Carl Schmitt similarly wrote that a people stratified by corporations – this is fascist jargon for the *Volksgemeinschaft's* rackets – would always be characterized by a plurality of orders, each of which had to form its own 'corporate judiciary' (Carl Schmitt, *Über die drei Arten des rechtswissenschaftlichen Denkens* (Duncker and Humblot, 2006), 53).
  - 52 Thorsten Fuchshuber, 'Im permanenten Ausnahmezustand', in *Jungle World*, 7 January 2016, <http://jungle-world.com/artikel/2016/01/53261.html> (10 May 2017).
  - 53 Karl Marx, *Kapital*, vol. I, Marx Engels Werke, vol. 23 (Dietz, 1962), 88.
  - 54 Horkheimer, 'Rackets', 291.
  - 55 Niklaas Machunsky, 'Rackets im Staat', in *Prodomo* no. 20 (2016), 78–88, here 79, <http://www.prodomo-online.org/ausgabe-20/archiv/artikel/n/rackets-im-staat.html> (10 May 2017).
  - 56 Ibid. In this context it is worth noting that Robert Kurz's theory of capitalist society as an automatic subject falters because, not unlike that of Henryk Grossman, it is predicated on a logic of inevitable collapse. Marx, by contrast, in the third volume of *Capital* merely described the emergence, under the conditions of capitalist commodity production, of a tendency within the productive force of labor – the famous tendency of the rate of profit to fall – which from a certain point onward militates against it and constantly has to be overcome through crises. To designate this tendency a 'law' one would have to disregard the fact that this designation fails to encompass a genuine unity between the ostensible law and that which is subjected to it.
  - 57 Adorno, 'Negative Dialektik', 358.

# Subsumption and Crisis

Joshua Clover

Though it has various senses in general usage, *subsumption* is a term of art within Marx's critical political economy.<sup>1</sup> It is subdivided into *formal subsumption* and *real subsumption*. These designate changes to the production process during the transition to, and ongoing development of, capitalism. These changes in aggregate may be understood as the metamorphosis of human making into capitalist labor, in the sense of work conditioned and ceaselessly transformed by the compulsion to extract surplus value, capital's 'invisible essence'. As such they also produce and transform the capitalist class relation.

The consequences of this ongoing transformation are various and central to Marx's systematic and historical account. They include changes in the experience of work for the worker, in its organization by the capitalist, and in the quality and quantity of value production for capital. Subsumption is historical both in the sense that it names concrete historical activities and that it implies

an ongoing dynamic for capitalist history. This dynamic is most directly expressed in the development of ever-greater productivity and various accompanying transformations, imparting a directionality to the history of capital often associated more generally with modernization (indeed, we might suggest that subsumption is the concrete referent of modernization and its related discourses). Because of this historical dynamic, subsumption is intimately related to efforts at periodization that compass orienting strategies of accumulation, the changing relation between capital and labor, and the possibility of capitalist crisis. Because these are contested aspects of Marx's systemic account, subsumption is itself a contested cluster of concepts. This is exacerbated by its complex reception history and by the ways in which the term is subject to metaphorical appropriation. This entry will attempt to address all of these issues: providing an expanded definition, reviewing the publication and reception history, and assessing in particular the rise

of 'subsumption narratives' after the Second World War wherein periodization, relations of production, and crisis come to the fore.

## EXPANDED DEFINITION

*Formal subsumption* designates the internalization of work to capital, as in the circumstance when a shoemaker, instead of making shoes then to be worn by family and friends or exchanged for other useful goods, comes to work for a capitalist in return for a wage to produce a commodity for the capitalist that will be exchanged for more money, completing the general circuit of capital M-C-M'. Significantly, 'this change does not itself imply a fundamental modification in the real nature of the labor process ... *Technologically speaking*, the *labor process* goes on as before, with the proviso that it is now subordinated to capital'.<sup>2</sup>

*Real subsumption* necessarily arises 'on this foundation', following on from formal subsumption: 'a technologically and otherwise specific *mode of production* – *capitalist production* – which transforms the nature of the *labor process and its actual conditions*.'<sup>3</sup> Following on the changed relation between capital and labor, the technical means of production, the organization of the process, and the physicality of labor change as well. Artisanal and craft-based skills as well as simple repetitive physical labor are unevenly automated toward processes to which the laborer is increasingly an appendage. As living labor is replaced by machines (an increase in what Marx calls 'the organic composition of capital'), some fraction returns in supervisory capacity, to manage these complexifying processes toward increasing productivity through organizational gains. These transformations will later clarify into the paradigmatic cases of Fordism and Taylorism, the engines of productivity in the 'second industrial revolution'.

Having set forth these categories, Marx notes their correspondence to the forms of surplus value, *absolute* and *relative*: 'If the production of absolute surplus-value was the material expression of the formal subsumption of labor under capital, then the production of relative surplus-value may be viewed as its real subsumption.'<sup>4</sup> In the former case, absolute surplus value is gotten via direct exploitation of the laborer where there was none, increasing total hours worked for capital. In the latter, relative surplus value derives from increases in productivity that drive down the socially necessary labor time involved in the production of market goods, and with it the cost of the worker's subsistence relative to the value they produce, leaving more for the capitalist.

Marx identifies these developments as necessary expressions of the law of value. Real subsumption becomes the privileged object of study because, unlike formal subsumption, it provides not just a metamorphosis but ongoing dynamic and direction to capital's development, making it properly historical.

The *productivity of labour* in general = the *maximum of product* with the *minimum of labour*, hence the greatest possible cheapening of the commodities. This becomes a *law* in the capitalist mode of production, independently of the will of the individual capitalist. And this law is only realised because it implies another one, namely that the scale of production is not determined according to given needs but rather the reverse: the number of products is determined by the constantly increasing scale of production, which is prescribed by the mode of production itself. Its purpose is that the individual product, etc., should contain *as much unpaid labour* as possible, and this is only attained by engaging in *production for production's sake*. *On the one hand* this appears as a *law*, to the extent that the capitalist who produces on too small a scale would embody in his products more than the quantity of labour socially necessary. It therefore appears as the adequate implementation of the *law of value*, which first develops completely on the basis of the capitalist mode of production. *On the other hand*, however, it appears as the drive of the individual capitalist, who endeavours to reduce the *individual value* of his commodity *below* its socially determined value

in order to break through this law, or to *cheat* it to gain an advantage for himself.<sup>5</sup>

The final sentence has greater significance than may first appear. A single capital's productivity gains can increase its revenue against a competitor, even absent an increase in the revenue of capital *tout court* (that is, true capital accumulation). This contradiction between individual or even sectoral profits and the profitability of capital as a whole will return under the heading of crisis.

## RECEPTION HISTORY

The terms *formal* and *real subsumption* slumbered long in the arcana of Marx's critique of political economy. After featuring extensively in various drafts and preparatory work, their treatment was largely excised from the published version of the first volume of *Capital*, and later restored only as an appendix: the 'Results of the Immediate Process of Production' [henceforth, 'Results'].<sup>6</sup> Reprinted in German and other Western European languages in the 1960s, 'the missing sixth chapter', per an earlier scheme, would provide along with the publication of the *Grundrisse* a framework for analyzing not simply the restructuring of the workplace but of daily life that takes hold during the long postwar boom and intensifies thereafter.<sup>7</sup>

### **'The Missing Sixth Chapter' and Fragment on Machines**

The passages on subsumption were at one point planned as the sixth part of *Capital*, at a drafting stage when its parts were designated as chapters. Readers will note that the two modes of subsumption correspond to the two longest empirical chapters of *Capital*, chapter 10 on 'The Working Day' and chapter 15 on 'Machinery and Large-Scale

Industry'. These chapters follow one after the other not just in the theoretical unfolding of capital's full structure, but in historical sequence, the former launching from the birth of capitalism, the latter from its maturation with the industrial revolution. The capitalist's turn to real subsumption and the development of machine-based productivity is conditioned in part by the limits of the working day and the value of the wage as they develop out of class struggle in the earlier nineteenth century. This is the initial basis for periodizing claims oriented by subsumption.

However, in the volume's final draft, these two chapters appear in the sections on 'The Production of Absolute Surplus Value' and 'The Production of Relative Surplus Value'. That *Capital* preserves these as central categories (parts 3 and 4 of the standard English edition) while largely jettisoning discussion of the two modes of subsumption suggests a preference for logical against historical categories, at least in this case. It does seem that the *coexistence* of surplus value's two modes, their theoretical complementarity, is more vital than the historical *sequentiality* which orients the modes of subsumption; capital cannot, after all, survive on relative surplus value alone. And yet it is largely through its historical nature that subsumption will reemerge as a vital element of Marx's theory.

The rediscovery of the 'Results' in the late 1960s coincides with the publication of the *Grundrisse* in translation, first in French in 1967–8, and then in Italian in 1969. Unlike the 'Results', the *Grundrisse* handles subsumption as a developing and mutable category. The most relevant passage will be the so-called 'Fragment on Machines'. Only by considering both documents does the role of subsumption in Marx's overall description of capital become clear. This reception will help authorize a substantial reconfiguring of the Marxist tradition featuring a revision of what for many is the *sine qua non* of the entire theory: value as such, and its relation with human labor.

The 'Fragment' features the most concise summary of capital's internal limit: the 'moving contradiction' wherein capital's accumulation is premised entirely on the appropriation of surplus value from workers, while the inescapable competition for greater productivity per worker necessarily renders an ever-greater portion of labor superfluous over the long run; correspondingly, an increasing fraction of workers, the very source of accumulation, is expelled from the production process in favor of machines. We might describe this as Marx's objectivization of the Midas myth, wherein the grasp for wealth reaches out to embrace living laborers only to transform them into great metal bodies in a finally self-cancelling process. The source of absolute surplus value is finally annihilated by the pursuit of relative surplus value.

Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth. Hence it diminishes labour time in the necessary form so as to increase it in the superfluous form; hence posits the superfluous in growing measure as a condition – question of life or death – for the necessary.<sup>8</sup>

This argument will be developed in far greater detail in *Capital*, culminating in reflections on 'relative surplus populations' and capitalist crisis. In the earlier iteration, however, the argument takes on, especially in the reading of the Italian Marxists involved with the many strands of what would be known as *operaismo* [workerism], a peculiar hopefulness.

The 'Fragment' offers the hope that the dynamic of the 'moving contradiction' will be catastrophic for not just for labor but for capital, providing 'the material conditions to blow this foundation sky-high'.<sup>9</sup> Using the language both of subsumption and surplus value, the text proposes it is ever more the case that 'it is the machine which possesses skill and strength in place of the worker, is itself the virtuoso, with a soul of its own in

the mechanical laws acting through it'. Labor increasingly appears as collective consciousness, 'subsumed under the total process of the machinery itself', while for the laborer it is 'the living (active) machinery, which confronts his individual, insignificant doings as a mighty organism'.<sup>10</sup>

### ***The General Intellect***

In this renewed reception of Marx's critical political economy as a theory of capitalism's overcoming, the ongoing process of subsumption eventually crosses a threshold where quantitative change becomes qualitative. The pivotal passage assays the sundering of the bond between labor and value, heretofore understood as an indexical relation which, mediated through general social productivity, is itself constitutive of capitalism.

In this transformation, it is neither the direct human labor he himself performs, nor the time during which he works, but rather the appropriation of his own general productive power, his understanding of nature and his mastery over it by virtue of his presence as a social body – it is, in a word, the development of the social individual which appears as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth. The *theft of alien labor time, on which the present wealth is based*, appears a miserable foundation in face of this new one, created by large-scale industry itself. As soon as labor in the direct form has ceased to be the great well-spring of wealth, labor time ceases and must cease to be its measure, and hence exchange value [must cease to be the measure] of use value. The *surplus labor of the mass* has ceased to be the condition for the development of general wealth, just as the *non-labor of the few*, for the development of the general powers of the human head.<sup>11</sup>

Subsumption here escapes its moorings in the industrial factory, Blake's 'dark Satanic Mills'. No longer does it seem to designate technical transformations of the labor process, but the transformation of capital's totality. It is not just the worker's capacity for

physical labor that is subsumed but ‘the whole ensemble of sciences, languages, knowledges, activities, and skills that circulate through society’.<sup>12</sup>

## POSTWAR SUBSUMPTION NARRATIVES AND PERIODIZATION

The surmise that the domination of capital – particularly its compulsion to make productive – had overleapt the working day and the traditional workplace and was now coextensive with life as such, colonizing as well human subjectivity, would turn out to be a theoretical mainspring of postwar era in which Marx’s writings on subsumption were recovered. The rediscovery and translation happen within the transition in the overdeveloped world (roughly 1968–73) from the Long Boom to the prolonged period of volatility and crisis which would follow. Two entangled aspects of this postwar period bear special attention. One is the tendential completion of capital’s displacement of the last quasi-feudal agricultural zones.<sup>13</sup> The other is the dramatic decline in profitability, among leading capitalist countries, of those sectors generally understood to be the wellspring of accumulation. Both of these developments mandate for capital a growing emphasis on intensive rather than extensive development. These factors provided the conditions for the retroactive understanding of the ‘missing chapter six’ and *The Grundrisse* as foundational; this in turn informed the various accounts, subsumed under *subsumption*, meant to capture ‘how social relations as a whole become increasingly subordinated to capitalist regimes of production’.<sup>14</sup>

It is vital to note the insistence here on production, even as that category will be pressed to breaking in the various subsumption narratives to come. As the term ‘real subsumption’ has achieved a certain purchase

particularly within humanistic studies, it has paradoxically depended on the common meaning of ‘subsume’ (‘include or absorb [something] in something else’) to provide a technical sheen. Consistently it refers to phenomena which are better understood as commodification or marketization of things once thought alien to consumer exchange: education, ideology, kindness, mother’s milk, culture as such. This gloss of subsumption thus clearly situates itself within the sphere of circulation, where things once outside the market are now priced, bought, and sold. A corresponding confusion, identifying ‘subsumption’ with rationalization in general (whose compulsion toward efficiency can apply quite broadly, even to non-capitalist phenomena), further allows this relocation of subsumption into the market. As we have seen, however, real subsumption’s foundation is the technical process of commodity production and capital’s ceaseless revolutionizing thereof, first enabling the measure and then ceaselessly reducing the expenditure of socially necessary labor time.

The more carefully theorized subsumption narratives of the postwar era retain the focus on production, while arguing that the category of production, and particularly of surplus value production, has been extended. This proceeds in tandem with crisis. As the early-industrializing nations have experienced uneven decline in industrial and manufacturing profitability, capital has endeavored to countervail this tendency by seeking profit elsewhere. This development of other sectors is repeatedly theorized as bringing activities formerly identified as nonproductive or extraeconomic into the realm of ‘new production’, purportedly generating surplus value where once there was none. This expansion beyond the traditional sites of production (for which the factory regularly serves as paradigmatic figure) is understood as a second phase of real subsumption, social rather than technical.

## Jacques Camatte

A Marxist theorist who left the International Communist Party in 1966, Jacques Camatte would be early to reinterpret Marx's political economy on the basis of the recovered 'Results' and *Grundrisse* in his text *Capital and Community*. In the course of this he theorizes 'the different periods of the capitalist form' via the two forms of subsumption, transposing them to periods of 'formal domination' and 'real domination' of capital.<sup>15</sup>

For Camatte, the crucial feature of real subsumption is the domination of dead labor (embodied in means of production) over living labor. In this is found the tendency toward a social subsumption. He departs from Marx's argument that, under real subsumption, '*the worker's absolute labour time is posited for him as condition of being allowed to work the necessary labour time*'.<sup>16</sup> The real reduction of necessary labor time depends on an equally real increase of time laboring for capital and moreover results in the multiplication of fixed capital relative to humans. Now workers wander through a landscape of fixed capital, remorselessly obligated to its reproduction in order to assure their own. True human community is increasingly replaced by capital as community. 'Community' here marks capital's colonization of what others will name 'life', 'being', 'society', 'culture', and so on. This marks the end of real subsumption's development. With its completion, a provisionally new era commences, what Camatte calls the 'total subsumption of labour under capital'.<sup>17</sup>

This scission within the period of real domination thus provides a tripartite schema we might call formal, real, and total subsumption. With this, the conventions of periodization via subsumption come into view. By the same token, various other critical-theoretical traditions of the postwar era, employing more and less distant conceptual frameworks, might be understood in relation

to the historical developments set forth by Camatte.

## Frankfurt School

In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno extends Marx's rising organic composition of capital (a necessary outcome of real subsumption and the struggle for relative surplus value) toward the horizon of what he will name 'damaged life'.

The organic composition of man is growing. That which determines subjects as means of production and not as living purposes, increases with the proportion of machines to variable capital; [...] Psychological differentiation, originally the outcome both of the division of labour that dissects man according to sectors of the production process and of freedom, is finally itself entering the service of production. [...] Here it is subjectivity itself, knowledge, temperament and powers of expression that are reduced to an abstract mechanism, functioning autonomously and divorced both from the personality of their 'owner' and from the material and concrete nature of the subject-matter in hand.<sup>18</sup>

This limns the relation between subsumption and subjectivity that can be understood as a fundamental concern for many Frankfurt School thinkers. This example is peculiarly useful in that it makes reference to Marx's basic political-economic categories. Elsewhere in the same volume Adorno captures the seeming collapse of production and circulation which underlies postwar subsumption narratives more broadly, rendering the home as itself a site of production, the bleak negative of Corbusier's 'machine for living':

The functional modern habitations designed from a *tabula rasa*, are living-cases manufactured by experts for philistines, or factory sites that have strayed into the consumption sphere, devoid of all relation to the occupant: in them even the nostalgia for independent existence, defunct in any case, is sent packing [...] The sleepless are on call at any hour, unresistingly ready for anything, alert and unconscious at once.

It is this entry that concludes with the book's best known formula: 'Wrong life cannot be

lived rightly', a formulation birthed from the logic of subsumption.<sup>19</sup>

More explicitly marked by psychoanalysis, Herbert Marcuse pursues a similar line of reasoning in *One-Dimensional Man* (1968), regarding capital's compulsion to expand beyond the workplace and into subjectivity itself. Where once humans possessed 'an individual consciousness and an individual unconscious *apart from* public opinion and behavior' and thus an 'inner freedom',

Today this private space [of the psyche] has been invaded and whittled down by technological reality. Mass production and mass distribution claim the *entire* individual, and industrial psychology has long since ceased to be confined to the factory. The manifold processes of introjection seem to be ossified in almost mechanical reactions. The result is, not adjustment but *mimesis*: an immediate identification of the individual with *his* society and, through it, with the society as a whole.<sup>20</sup>

This cannily reverses modernity's extrusion of the individual, the alienated laborer and preference-riddled consumer required by the modern industrial order. If a certain distance between self and society was once required for this emergence (as Lukács proposes for the paradigmatic hero in *Theory of the Novel*, driven by the contradictions of nineteenth-century industrialization), such a distance cannot be tolerated once that order begins to reach its limits. The 'immediate, automatic identification' of the self with the social whole, once 'characteristic of primitive forms of association', now returns in inverted form, anything but communal.<sup>21</sup>

This formulation is notably distinct from, for example, Louis Althusser's well-known account of ideology as reproducing the relations of production.<sup>22</sup> In Marcuse's 'high industrial society', identification with production is consequent on the compelled extension and refinement of capital's techné: 'a sophisticated, scientific management and organization ... has long since ceased to be confined to the factory'. It is not that the subject becomes interpellated into capital but that the psyche becomes Taylorized,

made more efficient in line with the need for greater productivity. Some results might be understood via ideology: 'In this process, the "inner" dimension of the mind in which opposition to the status quo can take root is whittled down.'<sup>23</sup> But Marcuse's narration of this mental appropriation captures as well capital's compulsion to make all zones productive; subsumption is the activity whereby life becomes 'one-dimensionally' economic.

### *Theory of the Spectacle*

A distinct version of this intuition appears as the political economy of appearance itself in Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), beginning, 'The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.'<sup>24</sup> Here he détourns the opening of *Capital* itself: 'The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an "immense collection of commodities"; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form.'<sup>25</sup> Two new inflections stand out. The first is the insistence on 'The whole life' in place of 'wealth'; this is exactly the substitution that subsumption of the social intends. The second is the directionality of movement from 'directly lived' to 'mere representation'. The ground of Marx's materialism – a political economy in which surplus value is 'the invisible essence' – moves away from the traditional site of value production and into the open of image-space, the totality of this new world given false unity which is the spectacle. Much as use once yielded primacy to exchange value, now exchange yields to something like *appearance value*.

An earlier stage in the economy's domination of social life entailed an obvious downgrading of *being* into *having* that left its stamp on all human endeavor. The present stage, in which social life is completely taken over by the accumulated products



of the economy, entails a generalized shift from *having* to appearing: all effective 'having' must now derive both its immediate prestige and its ultimate *raison d'être* from appearances. At the same time all individual reality, being directly dependent on social power and completely shaped by that power, has assumed a social character. Indeed, it is only inasmuch as individual reality is *not* that it is allowed to appear.<sup>26</sup>

The spectacle becomes then, among other things, a way of understanding the truth of capital's mutation in this epoch: the social had become economic, and the economic, social. As Anselm Jappe writes,

Debord did not interpret this state of affairs as an inevitable reversal of progress, or as the fate of modern man, to which there was no alternative but an improbable return to the past. Rather, he attributed the situation to the fact that *the economy had brought human life under the sway of its own laws*.<sup>27</sup>

Dialectical other of the spectacle's prismatic glitter, a new flatness prevails, compressing the distance between labor and non-labor out of existence. 'Capital is no longer the invisible center determining the mode of production. As it accumulates, capital spreads out to the periphery, where it assumes the form of tangible objects. Society in its length and breadth becomes capital's faithful portrait.'<sup>28</sup> It is as if the great factory of the industrial revolution had been aerosolized.

### **Operaismo**

So things appeared to theorists of *operaismo* as early as 1962. Mario Tronti inaugurates the line of thinking in a swift movement from relative surplus value (real subsumption's theoretical pairing) to capital's generalization beyond the hidden abode of production.

The more capitalist development advances, that is to say the more the production of relative surplus value penetrates everywhere, the more the circuit *production – distribution – exchange – consumption* inevitably develops; that is to say that the relationship

between capitalist production and bourgeois society, between the factory and society, between society and the state, become [sic] more and more organic. At the highest level of capitalist development social relations become moments of the relations of production, and the whole society becomes an articulation of production. In short, all of society lives as a function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive domination over all of society.<sup>29</sup>

All of existence will henceforth transpire within 'the social factory' [*la fabbrica diffusa*]; social activity will now be productive in the manner of manufacture.

This is a dream for capital, but a necessary dream. In the telling of *operaismo* (and later in that of *Autonomia Operaia* and its 'post-autonomist' trailings), capital's tactics and restructurations are always reactions to workers' struggles. Thus for example mechanization itself, or disaggregation of the traditional factory floor, are understood as countermeasures to the threat of rising wages or worker cooperation against the boss. Subsumption of the social here is understood more directly as capital's response to proletarian challenge rather than as a response to internal limits for value production, transforming the factory from concrete site of struggle to social logic.

### **Marxist Feminism**

Marxist Feminism would reason contrarily that a dematerialized social productivity did not via *operaismo*'s generalization of the factory eventually arrive at the home (as in Adorno), but rather began there. This is particularly true in groups such as *Lotta Femminista* which followed on and broke with *Potere Operaio*, helping to form among other things the international Wages for Housework project. Per Kathi Weeks, 'wages for housework is not just a demand, it is a perspective'.<sup>30</sup> Central to that perspective is a political-economic critique of *reproductive labor*, indicating not just child-bearing but the ensemble of physical, intellectual, and emotional expenditures required to

reproduce the proletariat *as workers* from day to day, year to year, within the expanded cycle of capital's own self-reproduction.

Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James note that home and community were productive centers before capitalism's historical victory.<sup>31</sup> Since that time, the character of labor in the home (and domestic sphere more broadly) has been hidden by its seeming detachment from the wage.

This exploitation has been even more effective because the lack of a wage hid it. That is, the wage commanded a larger amount of labor than appeared in factory bargaining. *Where women are concerned, their labor appears to be a personal service outside of capital.* The woman seemed only to be suffering from male chauvinism, being pushed around because capitalism meant general 'injustice' and 'bad and unreasonable behavior'; the few (men) who noticed convinced us that this was 'oppression' but not exploitation.<sup>32</sup>

The new social subsumption is in this telling of an old story; the 'personal services' of care work, feeding, cleaning, and so forth, had always been integral to the production process. This provides a critique of traditional Marxism's understanding of the woman who 'has always been seen as that of a psychologically subordinated person who, except where she is marginally employed outside the home, is outside production; essentially a supplier of a series of use values in the home'.<sup>33</sup>

For orthodox Marxism, unwaged reproductive labor, while *necessary* for capital's ongoing functioning, can still be distinguished from productive labor in its technical sense: the valorization of commodities produced within the wage relation, productive of surplus value through exploitation. This particular mode of labor is capital's existential *sine qua non*, while any number of worlds could be imagined in which reproductive labor exists. Indeed, all societies will want reproduction; thus, such activities seem to stand outside the history of capitalism.

The Marxist Feminist rejoinder proposes that capital could not profitably appropriate

surplus value in the productive process without the existence of unpaid 'housework'. There are both practical and theoretical ways to express this. As a practical matter, if reproductive labor was paid rather than being a donation to capital ('wages for housework') this would eliminate profit margins, rendering impossible a mode of production premised on that labor ('wages against housework').<sup>34</sup> The more theoretical assessment begins from the discovery that the opposition of two modes of labor, productive and reproductive, forms a concealed unity. Leopoldina Fortunati writes,

Thus the real difference between production and reproduction is not that of value/non-value, but that while production both is and *appears* as the creation of value, reproduction is the creation of value but *appears otherwise* ... *It is the positing of reproduction as non-value that enables both production and reproduction to function as the production of value.*<sup>35</sup>

One schematic way to render the argument would be by way of analogy to Marx's own account, drawing on Ricardo, wherein machines seem to transfer some of their value to the commodity within the production process. This value is in truth congealed human labor embodied in the machine; the value of that dead labor now makes its leap into the commodity via the renewed application of living labor.<sup>36</sup> Underlying Fortunati's account is a structure wherein the wage-earning man, while offering up his own labor power, also bears the congealed value of his household's reproductive labor to render him usable labor power. He arrives at the factory gates half-man and half-machine, bearing the full value of his family including him. This hidden domestic labor is a technical part of the production process and thus can undergo formal and real subsumption. However, because the wage-earner alone appears for the factory whistle, he appears as the sole source of valorization and thus of surplus value.

At stake is the recognition of women as not only oppressed but exploited. Their

concomitant centrality to value production and thus to the viability of capitalism entails their centrality to class struggle: 'On this family depends the support of the class, the survival of the class – but *at the woman's expense against the class itself*. The woman is the slave of a wage-slave, and her slavery ensures the slavery of her man.'<sup>37</sup>

The Marxist Feminist account provides as well a vital hinge in the subsumption narrative. It suggests that the concept is itself gendered: a woman in the conventional family was always already formally subsumed under capital in just this sense, secretly productive without resembling the industrial revolution's model of labor. Moments of real subsumption might be seen in the vacuum cleaner, dishwasher and other such domestic productivity tools. From this perspective, the model for the social factory is the domestic sphere and the home; these are the terms in which Nicole Cox and Silvia Federici set forth the argument in 1975.

The wage, in fact (and that includes the lack of it), has allowed capital to obscure the length of our working day. Work appears as one compartment of life, which takes place only in certain areas. The time we consume in the social factory, preparing ourselves for work, or going to work, restoring our 'muscles, nerves, bones and brains' (21) with quick snacks, quick sex, movies, etc., all this appears as leisure, free time, individual choice.<sup>38</sup>

Inevitably then, social subsumption would be understood in some quarters as the 'feminization of labor' in ways beyond the entry of women into the waged workforce. The home is now understood as a laboratorial space for a restructuring of capital as a whole. The character of work, and the kinds of jobs experiencing growth, will themselves be grasped ambiguously as feminized, to the extent that they resemble not the mix of physical force and residual craft skills associated with manufacture, but instead the ensemble of physical, intellectual, and emotional labor associated with the domestic sphere or with 'social' activity in general.

It is this aspect – which takes up recomposition of the labor market, the workforce, and of class as such around the decline of industrial profitability and concomitant crisis of 1973 – that will be read back with only a fraction of feminist content into the post-*operaismo* or post-Marxist tradition.

### Post-Marxism

Antonio Negri and his eventual co-author Michael Hardt have provided the most thoroughgoing theorization of the society of real subsumption, notably in *Empire* (1999). This and related work fulfill the initial propositions of *operaismo*, synthesizing other philosophical and political-economic strands discussed herein. The title refers to 'a new logic and structure of rule' for a new age of globalization.<sup>39</sup> It draws together Tronti's social factory – coordinated by financialization's simultaneous immanence and immateriality, the corresponding proliferation of digital communication networks, and the unification of the global economy – with Michel Foucault's formulation of *biopolitics* as the regime wherein the sovereign's power to 'make live' and further 'make productive' converge.<sup>40</sup> In this mesh there can no longer be any autonomy of levels or moments, much less of the political and economic: 'the rule of Empire operates on all registers of the social order extending down to the depths of the social world ... The object of its rule is social life in its entirety, and thus Empire presents the paradigmatic form of biopower.'<sup>41</sup>

This marriage of Marx and Foucault toward an identification of capitalism with 'social life in its entirety' is underwritten by collapse of the distinction between work and non-work. In this transformation, Hardt and Negri espy a new immanence of production toward which the world economy is remade after its Fordist crisis. It is worth quoting the core passage at length.

The processes of the real subsumption of labor under capital do not rely on the outside and do not involve the same processes of expansion. Through the *real subsumption*, the integration of labor into capital becomes more intensive than extensive and society is ever more completely fashioned by capital. There are certainly processes of real subsumption without a world market, but there cannot be a fully realized world market without the processes of real subsumption. In other words, the realization of the world market and the general equalization or at least management of rates of profit on a world scale cannot be the result simply of financial or monetary factors but must come about through a transformation of social and productive relations. Discipline is the central mechanism of this transformation. When a new social reality is formed, integrating both the development of capital and the proletarianization of the population into a single process, the political form of command must itself be modified and articulated in a manner and on a scale adequate to this process, a global quasistate of the disciplinary regime.<sup>42</sup>

It may not be immediately apparent that this passage revolves around crisis, and specifically around crisis theory in the Marxist tradition. This is the import of 'the general equalization or at least management of rates of profit on a world scale'. The profits of global capital, dragged downward by the collapse of industrial profits in the capitalist core around 1973, necessitate a restructuring so comprehensive that it constitutes 'a new social reality'.<sup>43</sup>

This provides a materialist rationale for the conjoining of subsumption narrative and the rhetoric of biopolitics. Now capital sings in its chains, desperate to discover profit elsewhere. Shaking free, it leaps into financial schemes; this will be only one maneuver in the effort to outpace its fate. Indeed, finance will turn out to be synecdoche for the 'new economy', and the burgeoning sectors of the postindustrial world. These sectors will be aggregated under numerous rubrics, the welter of nomenclature gesturing at their chaotic blossoming more than their novelty. The *service sector* will be perhaps the simplest name, though the full ensemble includes care work, communicative and cognitive labor, symbol

management, affect management, and many more entries in the ledger of what would eventually be called 'immaterial labor'. This rubric is often understood via its distinction from manual labor. This sense gets at the difference between, say, stamping fenders and cubicle-based provision of communication and information services. Hardt and Negri begin from this metamorphosis:

The increasingly extensive use of computers has tended progressively to redefine labouring practices and relations, along with, indeed, all social practices and relations ... Even when direct contact with computers is not involved, the manipulation of symbols and information along the model of computer operation is extremely widespread.<sup>44</sup>

They nonetheless insist on a distinct sense of immateriality, concerning not the physicality of labor but of the commodity.

Since the production of services results in no material and durable good, we define the labour involved in this production as *immaterial labour* – that is, labour that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication.<sup>45</sup>

From here they move to expand this sense of immateriality to the production of affects, a move which will turn out to preserve some kernel of Marxist Feminist analysis, albeit in nearly unrecognizable form. One last extended quotation provides the breadth of their argument.

The other face of immaterial labour is *the affective labour* of human contact and interaction. Health services, for example, rely centrally on caring and affective labour, and the entertainment industry is likewise focused on the creation and manipulation of affect. This labour is immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible, a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion [...] This second face of immaterial labour, its affective face, extends well beyond the model of intelligence and communication defined by the computer. Affective labour is better understood by beginning from what feminist analyses of 'women's work' have called 'labour in the bodily mode'. Caring labour is

certainly entirely immersed in the corporeal, the somatic, but the affects it produces are nonetheless immaterial. What affective labour produces are social networks, forms of community, biopower. Here one might recognise once again that the instrumental action of economic production has been united with the communicative action of human relations.<sup>46</sup>

This is in some degree a summary of the subsumption narratives accreting over the previous century, oriented by the exigencies of crisis following on the decline of the Fordist-Taylorist mode of production. It is not just formal employment in the expanding service sector which becomes, propositionally, a vital arena for value extraction. All social activities which make use of the skills that service demands – formerly understood as unproductive and/or reproductive labor, necessary for capitalism's continued existence but not itself productive of value – now enters into the productive sphere. The unification of *make live* and *make productive* is not the command issued by Foucault's sovereignty but by the profit rate.<sup>47</sup>

Inasmuch as capitalist crisis is in the first instance a crisis of value production, we must proceed deliberately regarding the dramatic claims herein about value and labor. Two linked elements seem particularly worth attention. The first rests in the crucial difference between this account and the one offered by, for example, Fortunati and Marxist Feminism. If one accepts their analysis of the productivity of 'women's work', the reorientation of what work is counted as productive does not imply a *greater* aggregate value being produced within the expanded sphere and workplace. Rather, the woman's labor is a veiled source of some portion of the value seemingly generated solely by the productive laborer. The resultant commodities still bear the same measure of value they would have in an orthodox Marxian framework; only its basis has been revised. For Hardt and Negri contrarily (and the broader field of adherents to their hypothesis), immaterial or affective labor is newly productive; such labor now

appears as a source of value *in addition* to the value supposed by older models of productive labor. This new value or new production is able, among its other features, to counter-vail the waning of value production from traditionally productive sectors. No longer does the expulsion of labor from manufacture, and so on, imply crisis for capital, as the direct exploitation of labor in the production process is no longer necessary for valorization.

This development of 'the new social organisation of labour and the new model of accumulation' completes a tripartite periodization echoing Camatte's framework.<sup>48</sup> The periods are roughly 1848 to World War I, World War I to 1968, and 1968 to the present. The first two are those of 'large-scale industry' featuring 'the professional worker' and 'the mass worker' respectively; in the third, 'the productive labour loses its centrality in the process of production, while the 'social worker' (and that is the complex of functions of laboring cooperation transported into the social productive networks) assumes a hegemonic position'.<sup>49</sup> This third period is characterized by 'the total subsumption of society' or 'the *real subsumption* of society within capital'.<sup>50</sup> Overcoming a crisis of accumulation for capital, it nonetheless features a new crisis of the capital-labor relation wherein 'all the conditions of the current mode of production push toward the complete socialisation of political power and, conversely, toward the complete politicisation of the social'.

Just as the concentration and cooperation of factory labor compelled by capital's development would, from Marx's standpoint in the nineteenth century, generate the association of workers able to throw off their own chains, the contemporary integration into the communicative networks of the social factory will produce new forms of community bearing revolutionary potential. 'Today productivity, wealth, and the creation of social surpluses take the form of cooperative interactivity through linguistic, communicational, and affective networks. In the expression of its own creative energies, immaterial labour

thus seems to provide the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism.<sup>51</sup> The real subsumption of society, in this account, has given birth to that society's gravediggers.

### **Theorie Communiste**

The sense that this third period of subsumption and crisis has qualitatively changed the terrain of capital's social world is nowhere more ambitiously asserted than in the writings of *Theorie Communiste*, a French theoretical tendency active from the 1970s onward. Holding to the tripartite periodization found in Camatte and Negri, they shift focus from transformations of the production process to developments of the labor-capital relation.

Formal subsumption, in their schema, is defined by the proletariat's self-recognition as the source of capital's productivity and thus its self-affirmation as a class. The first real subsumption, beginning (again) around World War I, leads to a greater internalization of the proletariat into capital's self-affirmation. Real subsumption pursues the production of relative surplus value by endeavoring to lower the relative cost of commodities. This engenders a decline in real wages (assumed to be set by the cost of reproducing the proletariat). This process draws ever more tightly together the entwined reproduction of labor and capital; as proletarians work more and more for capital rather than themselves, their capacity to affirm their being *against* capital declines.

The third period (which they call the 'second phase of real subsumption of labor under capital') arrives in the 1960s and 1970s and corresponds to the end of the historical worker's movement birthed a century earlier. As summarized by Endnotes, this period 'is then characterised by a more *immediately* internal relation between capital and the proletariat, and the contradiction between them is thus immediately at the level of their reproduction

as classes'.<sup>52</sup> No longer able to affirm their existence as a class against capital and survive, the only remaining form antagonism can take is the proletariat's self-negation as a class (this will return below under the heading of 'Crisis'). The particular historical vision of the proletariat seizing control of capitalist production toward its own ends, of which the Soviet revolution remains the classical example and which *Theorie Communiste* calls 'programmatism', is a historical vision tied to a particular moment of subsumption. When the first real subsumption is completed, the historical conception ends with it.

### **CRISIS**

That there is an intimate and complex relation between subsumption and crisis within capitalism will by now be apparent, if the relation itself is not yet fully systematized. Marx in his preparatory notes for *Capital* promised a direct and freestanding treatment of crisis, which would go unwritten. That said, the idea that he did not leave behind a comprehensive theory of crisis is largely mistaken, and this theory both adds to and clarifies our sense of the significance of subsumption within Marx's thought.

While various theories of crisis have been educed from Marx by others, his own extended account is to be found in *Capital* Vol. 1.<sup>53</sup> Henryk Grossman rightly argues that 'the object of Marx's analysis is not crisis, but the capitalist process of reproduction in its totality'.<sup>54</sup> *Capital's* crisis character is an integral aspect of this process and its breakdown. The book's first seven sections, summarized in chapter 25, provide an exposition of how capital's presuppositions which drive toward reproduction of capital simultaneously drive toward a crisis for that reproduction (thus the most compressed and significant among Marx's maxims on his great subject, the aforementioned 'capital itself is the moving contradiction' and 'the

true barrier to capitalist production is capital itself<sup>55</sup>).

The causal chain can be schematized thusly: capital, defined as *value in expansion*, becomes possible with the generalization of the wage and commodity forms wherein value's form of appearance in exchange value comes to stand over use value (part 1). This is a fundamental precondition through which an individual capital can satisfy the compulsion to convert money into more money (part 2). Absolute surplus value, obtained by internalizing work into waged commodity production, is limited by physical barriers, class struggle over the length of the working day, and by the given profitability of a sector and thus its size and capacity to employ labor (part 3). Against these limits, individual capitals in search of profit shift toward pursuit of relative surplus value, achieved via increasing productivity (part 4). Absolute and relative surplus value coexist but have different implications for rates of surplus value and thus for capital accumulation, hence the significance of their changing balance (part 5). This compulsion toward rising levels of productivity ceaselessly increases the proportion of means of production in relation to labor expended in the production process, and in turn the ratio of constant to variable capital.<sup>56</sup> This ongoing expulsion of living labor from the production process, as individual capitals seek profit, hollows out the very source of the surplus value on which the profitability of capital as a whole depends (part 7). As the capacity to extract surplus value wanes, profit eventually follows, and capitalism – bereft of its existential basis in real accumulation – enters into crisis.

Subsumption, which extends through every moment of this secular course from the first waged commodity production to the last ratcheting of productivity, is thus a necessary and constituent part of capital's crisis character. For all its historical aspect it is no less posited by capital's laws of motion than are its more systematic or logical corollaries. However, because subsumption appears

as historical and is in train used for periodizing, it is perhaps overly easy to view formal and real subsumption as sequential. The context of crisis challenges this view. While it is logically the case that formal precedes real subsumption, once the latter appears they must both be present, as real subsumption's generation of relative surplus value finally a reallocation of absolute surplus value derived from formal subsumption. This coexistence is classically dialectical: both mutually constitutive and antagonistic with a drive toward self-overcoming. It is real subsumption's fate to undermine the gains in absolute surplus value gotten through formal subsumption. This in turn proposes further rounds of formal subsumption to defer crisis. As the concomitant productivity increasingly expel labor from the production process, capital must seek absolute surplus value elsewhere: by extending the working day, enlarging the sector, or by opening new lines. At the level of the global economy, intensifying real subsumption in the developed core has compelled new episodes of formal subsumption elsewhere, adding new labor inputs to global capital against waning rates of surplus value. We might also see this as a dialectic of formalization and informalization: formal subsumption draws people into the formal economy, while real subsumption has as one of its effects the casting of formal workers into the informal economy.

However, over time real subsumption does indeed come to stand over formal, particularly given that productivity advances eventually spread throughout the breadth of global production. While the expansion of capitalism must eventually reach external limits when there is no longer any significant population left to subsume formally, real subsumption also presents itself as an internal limit to formal subsumption: when profitability lowers enough that it is no longer worth reinvesting capital in the production process, real has effectively exhausted formal subsumption. Lacking ongoing formal subsumption, real subsumption persists on borrowed time. The

more it holds sway the more swiftly we move toward crisis.

This set of contexts further underscores the significance of debates regarding the term's usage. Misprisions such as the 'real subsumption of art' may appear initially as little more than metaphor, or as casual drift away from the more accurate 'rationalization' or 'commodification'. They are both suggestive and problematically misleading to the extent that they invoke the more serious debate entangled with the question of crisis: can social activity once understood to stand outside productive labor undergo subsumption *and thus become productive of value*? This is a question that arises with concrete historical crisis. The postwar subsumption narratives begin in part from the sense that capitalism has reached its mature form and become more or less static – that is to say, the possibilities for further formal subsumption, growth in the scope of capitalism, have reached their limits. The early narratives respond to this formulation of crisis by imagining spaces within capitalism which have not yet been fully subjected to its logic – an internal growth, if you will. This conceptualization transforms over the course of the 1960s as developed nations begin to experience the first slowings of the postwar boom. As the conventionally productive sectors of industry and manufacture experience declining profitability and deindustrialization commences, there is a shift into other labor sectors (most famously into service or 'tertiary' sectors) and concomitant theorizations of new sources of value production to replace what is being lost elsewhere. Thus we might see that, for example, the 'social factory' or the rise of 'immaterial labor' both describe an economy's response to crisis and as ideas are themselves responses to crisis.

The language of social subsumption carries with it an implicit supposition that the activities subsumed are value-productive, given that real subsumption is defined as transformation of a labor process toward increasing relative surplus value. That new sectors or forms of labor, from providing social media

content to operating a hedge fund, have become value productive has proved difficult to establish, a difficulty likely residing in the nature of value itself. However, if it is the case that value, and its product of surplus value, appears in the market as profit, the proposition that capital has developed extensive new sources of value deserves at least some skepticism. This is true for both theoretical and empirical reasons. Finance is an instructive example. While generating vast profits for some, and rising to form an ever-larger share of the economy as industrial capital recedes, it remains a mode of reallocating rather than producing wealth from the perspective of capital as a whole. To the extent that financial profits lead to real accumulation it is only insofar as they are reinvested as capital in productive sectors, even as it is necessarily the case that the growth of the financial sector is constituted by a decrease in capital reinvestment. If there is a portion of financial profit based in real accumulation and not destined to vanish with the next fiscal crisis, it is to the degree that it sets productive labor in motion. That this labor follows rather than precedes financial profit-taking allows for the mystifying appearance that, in the realm of finance, money has simply been exchanged via various financial instruments for more money, in the form M-M'. More accurately, all real accumulation mediated by finance takes the form M-M'-C, with the purchase of the labor commodity being deferred (and concealed from view) rather than eliminated. That labor will be subject to subsumption in the conventional sense.

Empirically, there have been the most limited and uneven recoveries from the collapse of profitability since the 1970s, and these recoveries have themselves proved largely to be bubbles of nominal value.<sup>57</sup> There is little indication that growth in the service sector, in finance, immaterial and cognitive labor and the like, has had much positive impact on accumulation at a global scale. It may make far more sense to understand these sectors as being primarily involved in the



work of circulation, adjunct to production, and increasingly necessary to sustain profitability through faster turnover and realization without themselves being productive of new value. In this sense, social subsumption, while gesturing toward actual transformations, remains a misnomer. Real subsumption has continued and intensified, but has not transformed the category of productive labor.

The intensification noted by, for example, Camatte, Negri, and Theorie Communiste nonetheless retains its use as a periodizing tool. If we reorient our sense of social subsumption as a description of a complex response to capitalist crisis, the transformations can perhaps be grasped more fully in the sense of a crisis for the class relation. As productivity increases alongside decreasing accumulation, capital appears less dependent on labor even as it is less able to generate surplus that the proletariat might appropriate through class struggle. Instead, labor is forced into defensive struggles, both to minimize submission to wage and job cuts, and to defend their social antagonists against dissolution which would eliminate jobs altogether.

This, we might say, is the last subsumption, gestured at in the periodizations, and the limit at which the technical and metaphorical usages converge: the subsumption of labor's being to the being of capital, such that it no longer can stand in antagonistic relation. This seemingly total subsumption, however, can be provoked only by total crisis. In this sense, when real subsumption annihilates formal subsumption, capital's victory must also be its defeat.

## Notes

- 1 The philosophical underpinnings of subsumption in this context, as well as some recent debates on subsumption as a periodizing term, are well-summarized in the essay 'The History of Subsumption', by the Endnotes collective, in *Endnotes 2: Misery and the Value Form*, pp. 130–53.
- 2 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes and David Fernbach, 3 vols. (London: Penguin 1991); here, vol. 1, 1021, 1026.
- 3 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 1034–5.
- 4 Karl Marx, 'Results of the Direct Production Process'. *Capital*, vol. 1, 1084–1949.
- 5 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 1038–9.
- 6 For the most thorough treatment of changes in form and content from Marx's first outlines to the published volumes of *Capital*, see Roman Rosdolsky, *The Making of Marx's Capital* (London: Pluto, 1989), passim, especially 10–56.
- 7 The boom is generally considered to span 1948–73 in the United States, measured most immediately by historically high rates of profitability in industry and manufacture. It is measured somewhat differently in other areas of the superindustrialized West, e.g., France's *Les Trente Glorieuses* (1945–75).
- 8 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1993).
- 9 Marx, 'Fragment on Machines', in *Grundrisse*, 706.
- 10 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 693.
- 11 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 704.
- 12 Nicholas Thoburn, *Deleuze, Marx and Politics* (London: Routledge 2003), 81.
- 13 It is in part to this that Fredric Jameson refers where he proposes that 'the moment of the overcoming of feudalism by capitalism, and of the aristocratic social order of castes and blood by the new bourgeois' taking hold variously and unevenly across the planet, is 'not really complete in some places until World War II' while 'in the various countries of the Third World what might have seemed to constitute remnants of feudalism have now been reabsorbed into capitalism in a very different fashion'. Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (London: Verso, 2002), 39–40.
- 14 Thoburn, *Deleuze, Marx and Politics*, 78.
- 15 Jacques Camatte, *Capital and Community*, trans. David Brown (London: Unpopular Books, 1988), 46–74.
- 16 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 533 (emphasis in original).
- 17 Camatte, *Capital and Community*, 53.
- 18 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London: Verso, 2005), 229–30.
- 19 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 38–9. This passage might be seen as dark precursor to, e.g., Johnathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013), 10, which registers the collapse of the basic proposition: 'Sleep is an uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism.'
- 20 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (London: Sphere, 1968), 25.
- 21 Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 25.
- 22 Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Žižek (London: Verso, 2012), 100–40.
- 23 Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 25–6.

- 24 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 12.
- 25 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 126.
- 26 Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 16.
- 27 Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 4 (emphasis in original).
- 28 Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 33.
- 29 Mario Tronti, *Operai e Capitale*, quoted and trans. Harry Cleaver, 'The Inversion of Class Perspective in Marxian Theory: From Valorisation to Self-Valorisation', in *Open Marxism*, vol. 2, *Theory and Practice*, eds. Werner Bonefeld, Richard Gunn, Kosmas Psychopedis (London: Pluto, 1992), 137. Nick Dyer-Witherford also directs us to Raniero Panzieri's passage, 'The factory is becoming generalised. The factory is tending to pervade, to permeate the entire arena of civil society', in 'Lotte Operaie nello Sviluppo Capitalistico', *Quaderni Piacentini* (1967), quoted by James O'Connor, *Accumulation Crisis* (London: Blackwell, 1984), 151.
- 30 Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 128.
- 31 Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, 'Women and the Subversion of Community', in *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community*, originally published in Italian and English in 1972. The version used here is New York: Petroleuse Press, 2010. The authorship of this essay is disputed; we follow the original signature, 'Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, 29 December 1971'.
- 32 Dalla Costa and James, 'Women and the Subversion of Community', 10.
- 33 Dalla Costa and James, 'Women and the Subversion of Community', 16.
- 34 *Wages for Housework*, Silvia Federici and Arlen Austin, eds. (New York: Autonomedia, 2017).
- 35 Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction*, trans. Hilary Creek (New York: Semiotext(e), 1995), 8–9.
- 36 See Marx, *Capital*, all of chapter 7, 'The Labor Process and the Valorization', 283–306.
- 37 Dalla Costa and James, 'Women and the Subversion of Community', 25.
- 38 Nicole Cox and Silvia Federici, *Counter-Planning from the Kitchen* (New York: Falling Wall Press, 1975), 9. The quoted phrase is from Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 572.
- 39 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2000), xi.
- 40 Re 'make live', see Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 241. Re 'make productive', see Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, vol II, eds. Daniel Defert, François Ewald and Jacques Lagange (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2001), 1001–20.
- 41 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, xv.
- 42 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 255.
- 43 Economic historian Robert Brenner registers the data clearly enough: 'Between 1970 and 1990 the manufacturing rate of profit for the G7 economies taken together was, on average, 40 percent lower than between 1950 and 1970. In 1990 it remained about 27 percent below its level in 1973 and about 45 percent below its peak in 1965.' Robert Brenner, 'The Economics of Global Turbulence (Special Issue)', *New Left Review* 229, May/June 1998, p. 7.
- 44 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 291.
- 45 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 290.
- 46 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 292–3.
- 47 This is to conceptualize from another vantage Moishe Postone's placement of capital, rather than proletariat (or capitalist) as the subject of history in the capitalist, cf. Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Indeed, such an understanding is present in Tronti's approach to the social factory: 'capital itself has been uncovered, at a certain level of its development, as a social power' (quoted in Thoburn, *Deleuze, Marx and Politics*, 79).
- 48 Antonio Negri, 'Twenty Theses on Marx: Interpretation of the Class Situation Today', in S. Makdisi, C. Casarino and R. Karl., eds., *Marxism Beyond Marxism* (London: Routledge, 1996).
- 49 Makdisi, Casarino and Karl (eds.), *Marxism Beyond Marxism*, 155.
- 50 Makdisi, Casarino and Karl (eds.), *Marxism Beyond Marxism*, 159 (emphasis in original).
- 51 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 294.
- 52 Endnotes, 147.
- 53 For a superb guide to various theories of crisis largely in the Marxian tradition, see Anwar Shaikh, 'Introduction to the History of Crisis Theories', in *US Capitalism in Crisis* (New York: URPE, 1978).
- 54 Henryk Grossman, *The Law of Accumulation and Breakdown of the Capitalist System*, trans. Jairus Banaji (London: Pluto Press, 1992), 83.
- 55 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 358.
- 56 This will be a crucial hinge for those who argue against the inevitability of a falling rate of profit. See for example Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital* (New York: Monthly Review, 2012), 141–54.
- 57 Robert Brenner, 'What's Good for Goldman Sachs', prologue to Spanish edition of *The Economics of Global Turbulence* (Madrid: Akal, 2009), 6–8. Made available to the author in typescript.

# The Figure of Crisis in Critical Theory

Amy Chun Kim

Critical theory as originally conceived by Adorno and Horkheimer was charged with exposing the ‘fundamental contradictions’ of capitalism in the face of potentially historically irreversible defeats of the workers’ movement in the West. In this chapter, I will explore the shifting role envisioned for critical theory, understood as an analysis of post-liberal forms of capitalism, across several periods, from the rise of fascism to the current phase of world economic turbulence. I identify three key moments in the history of critical theory: (1) Adorno and Horkheimer’s departure from the traditional Marxist category of practice in their analysis of fascism and post-fascist democracy; (2) Habermas’s attempt to define a responsible alternative to what he perceived to be the ‘sterile negativity’ of their diagnosis based on the potential for greater democracy under welfare state capitalism; and finally, (3) more contemporary contentions over where the focus of an adequate critique of capitalism should lie. The last is to be understood more generally

as a debate between those interested in the ‘value form’ of social relations – the abstract social logic of capitalism – and those working on the theorization of capitalist crisis. This historical overview is meant to underscore the relevance of the legacy of Adorno and Horkheimer today. How might the latter be adapted to account for the inequality, precarity and stagnation that characterize the latest phase of capitalist development? This chapter of the *Handbook* provides an account of the development of critical theory across these three periods, from its inception at the beginning of the twentieth century to the present, demonstrating the way in which its historically shifting conceptions of the crises and limits of capitalism shaped its development, including its understanding of its relationship to the categories of practice and class struggle. The contemporary significance of an earlier Critical Theory’s constitutive problem should be clear: why has a deep crisis of the capitalist system fueled the rise of new forms of the radical right instead of

opening the space for an adequate politics of emancipation?

# 1

Horkheimer's 'Traditional and Critical Theory' was written in 1937 in the midst of the rise of fascism across the continent and the consolidation of Stalinism in the Soviet Union. Its argument was that a rising tide of barbarism called for a new form of critical theory. With the Depression and impending world war, modern civilization appeared to be experiencing the limits of capital development but in a scenario that had effectively shattered an older expectation that this long-awaited terminal crisis would open up a path to emancipation. While theory could no longer look forward to finding its end in practice, it was nonetheless imperative to soldier forth and deepen the analysis of the contradictory and self-undermining tendencies of bourgeois society (Horkheimer, 2002 [1937]: 214). A seemingly impossible new vocation of critique arose in a context in which the categories of the critique of political economy had become problematic amid a transition to a post-liberal form of social organization. As Horkheimer would write, one of the key presuppositions of this analysis could no longer be held true: '[I]t must be added that even the situation of the proletariat is, in this society, no guarantee of correct knowledge' (Horkheimer, 2002 [1937]: 213).

Horkheimer's conception of critical theory was directed not only at what he called traditional theory but also at the vestiges of the latter within orthodox Marxism. Although Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* was an intellectual construction with little resemblance to the materialism of the Second and Third Internationals, its assumption that the structural condition of the working class under capitalism formed the epistemological vantage point from which a knowledge of the

whole historical situation could be grasped was identified as the essential premise of a now discredited orthodoxy. The danger was that the failure of the proletariat to live up to its supposed historical vocation would lead to a heedless flight into despair. Horkheimer rejected the Lukácsian premises of proletarian consciousness, and starkly outlined the consequences to such an analysis when faced with the present failures of the working class to come to power in a moment of capitalist crisis:

When he [the intellectual] wholly accepts the present psychological state of that class which, objectively considered, embodies the power to change society, he has the happy feeling of being linked with an immense force and enjoys a professional optimism. When the optimism is shattered in periods of crushing defeat, many intellectuals risk falling into a pessimism about society and a nihilism which are just as ungrounded as their exaggerated optimism had been. They cannot bear the thought that the kind of thinking which is most topical, which has the deepest grasp of the historical situation, and is most pregnant with the future, must at certain times isolate its subject and throw him back upon himself. (Horkheimer, 2002 [1937]: 214)

The first crystallization of critical theory was thus a lucid reckoning with the experience of defeat, an emergency situation in which 'praxis' no longer provided an Archimedean perspective on the course of history. The passionate optimism going back to the Age of Enlightenment and German Idealism that an emancipated society was the destiny of human beings lay shattered. The expectation of generations of socialists that the terminal crisis of capitalist society would not be a crisis of civilization itself, but an opening to a higher form of it had dwindled to a remote, almost theologically conceived Hope.

Horkheimer sought to articulate the beginnings of a response to the question he posed rhetorically in the 1937 essay, 'How is critical thought related to experience?', a query that hinted at the predicament of critical theory, as well as what would be its key

terms – contradiction, dialectic, experience. For Hegel, ‘dialectic’ was an account of how truth arises from the experience of limit and failure. The historical context of the formation of his later conception of history was the collision of the Jacobin ideal of revolutionary virtue with the unbridled self-interest of a newly emancipated civil society, leading to the establishment of the modern state. The experiential content of Hegel’s later political theory was the abandonment of long-held illusions that the polis could be restored, but also the discovery of a new, more prosaic form of freedom. The experiential content of critical theory in its first articulation was the closure of revolutionary possibilities by a fascism that appeared to have neutralized this older dialectic, leaving little hope for redemption in a new figure of emancipation. This nascent and uncertain form of theorization called for a new form of dialectic born of lost illusions. ‘In a historical period like the present’, he concluded, ‘true theory is more critical than affirmative, just as the society that corresponds to it cannot be called “productive”’ (Horkheimer, 2002 [1937]: 242).

Reflecting on this experience of defeat and its aftermath, Adorno (1993) argued in his later lectures on Hegel that dialectic was nothing but thought’s experience of its own limits, in the face of a historical process that both raises and cruelly disabuses the prospect of emancipation from suffering.

It [Hegel’s dialectic] too arises from the experience of an antagonistic society; it does not originate in some mere conceptual schema. The history of an unreconciled epoch cannot be a history of harmonious development: it is only ideology, denying its antagonistic character, that makes it harmonious. Contradictions, which are its true and only ontology, are at the same time the formal law of a history that advances only through contradiction and with unspeakable suffering. (Adorno, 1993: 82)

Adorno and Horkheimer’s return to the problem of the relationship of thought to experience as it had been framed after Kant’s ‘critical turn’ arguably spoke to the need to identify new premises for the critique of

capitalism in a historical situation in which its limits could no longer be seen as surmountable through ‘praxis’.

This departure of critical theory from traditional Marxism with regard to the category of praxis coincided with the full-blown arrival of a state capitalism, which seemed to put into question the category of the economy itself as an autonomous domain of exchange-mediated social power. But for Horkheimer, capitalism in the throes of its decline somehow still remained of the same order that Marx and generations of his followers had confronted. For it was the subjective failure of the workers’ movement to find a revolutionary solution to its terminal crisis that was leading to the catastrophic realization of *the truth* of Marx’s critique of exchange-mediated domination in the form of a totalitarian system of unmediated domination. Horkheimer held that even in this twilight world of a post-capitalism – simultaneously the most extreme form of capitalism – critical theory could still take as the basis for its method the ‘Marxist categories of class, exploitation, surplus value, profit, pauperization, and breakdown’, the elements of the ‘conceptual whole’ set out in his 1937 essay (Horkheimer, 2002 [1937]: 217). For all the mutations of the present had their source in the contradictions of the socio-economic logic they identified. By preserving the recollection of these now neutralized contradictions, these categories pointed to the possibility of an escape from their otherwise ineluctable grip. Even if in an ever more enigmatic way, the vocation of critical theory remained bound to an older, still unsurpassed classical theorization of capitalism.

There are no general criteria for judging the critical theory as a whole, for it is always based on the recurrence of events and thus on a self-reproducing totality. Nor is there a social class by whose acceptance of the theory one could be guided. It is possible for the consciousness of every social stratum today to be limited and corrupted by ideology, however much, for its circumstances, it may be bent on truth. For all its insight into the individual steps in social change and for all the agreement of

its elements with the most advanced traditional theories, the critical theory has no specific influence on its side, except concern for the abolition of social injustice. This negative formulation, if we wish to express it abstractly, is the materialist content of the idealist concept of reason. (Horkheimer, 2002 [1937]: 242)

How did the leading representatives of critical theory respond to the defeat of fascism and the stabilization of capitalist democracy? In an extravagant quasi-mythological form, Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* portrayed the transition from a nineteenth-century liberal market capitalism to a later stage in which the mediation of domination through the laws of exchange, grounded in the nominal autonomy of the individual, had broken down. Clearly the worst had been averted and yet both remained intransigently pessimistic, even as they otherwise accommodated themselves to the McCarthyite and conformist postwar environment. As has often been noted, critical theory in this period drifted away from its original agenda toward topics in philosophy and aesthetics, with some forays into contemporary academic controversies in sociology. Occasional comments even suggested a convergence of their outlook with an older, conservative *Zivilisationskritik*.

But a more intransigent stance toward what remained an unemancipated society was never wholly abandoned, even as any positive engagement with the new emancipatory aspirations of the student movement was rejected. Adorno's conception of a 'negative dialectics' distilled this duality of unreconciled opposition and political quietism. For all its ambivalence, its diagnosis was blunt: when the misery imposed by the capitalist form of social existence could no longer be experienced coherently, even the original assumption of critical theory that the totality of this misery could be grasped theoretically becomes untrue.

The contradiction weighs more heavily now than it did on Hegel, the first man to envision it. Once a vehicle of total identification, it has become the

organon of its impossibility. The task of dialectical cognition is not, as its adversaries like to charge, to construe contradictions from above and to progress by resolving them – although Hegel's logic, now and then, proceeds in this fashion. Instead, it is up to dialectical cognition to pursue the inadequacy of thought and thing, to experience it in the thing. Dialectics need not fear the charge of being obsessed with the fixed idea of objective conflict in a thing already pacified; no single thing is at peace in the unpacified whole. (Adorno, 1973: 153)

Adorno was all too aware that the flight from conceptuality to the aporetic necessarily ended in the dead end of the sort of reactionary intuitionism that he denounced in Heidegger. After all, the very notion of a dialectic, however negative, signals a fidelity to the conceptual, even as the task had now shifted to redeeming its suppressed ground in the beleaguered vestiges of the experience of loss. But the aesthetic as the spontaneous experience on which thought could operate could no longer be retrieved in philosophy or even in the critical theory that was meant to supersede it. It sought instead its asylum in the aesthetic in the narrower sense of art, more specifically in the still uncolonized experience of unfreedom that the most advanced forms of modern art might remain able to convey.

Yet for all its political ambivalence, this mourning negativity became a radicalizing catalyst in the Federal Republic and eventually internationally. Considering its galvanizing role in the upheavals of the 1960s, it is perhaps paradoxical that the common denominator of critical theory across these two periods was the theme of the unlikelihood, if not impossibility, of the emergence of a subject of emancipatory social change. It is all the more noteworthy then that despite their departures from an originally conceived critical theory, even the vestigial persistence of this problematic could occasion moments of surprisingly radical political speculation. In the spring of 1956, Adorno and Horkheimer embarked on a series of discussions considering the possibility of writing a new 'strictly Leninist', manifesto, a kind of contemporary

equivalent to the *Communist Manifesto* (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2010 [1956]: 57).

Shouldn't we really have to think everything out from the beginning? Write a manifesto that will do justice to the current situation. In Marx's day it could not yet be seen that the immanence of society had become total. That means, on the one hand, that one might almost need to do no more than strip off the outer shell; on the other hand, that no one really wants things to be otherwise. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2010 [1956]: 56–7)

## 2

Arguably the young Habermas early on experienced the ambivalence of this stance toward post-fascist western democracy as untenable. He came to view the economic prosperity of the postwar period as part of a progressive trend line which might result in the emergence of a rational public sphere, surpassing the hopes of classical liberalism in a more decidedly democratic direction. In other words, he came to think that the tendency of his teachers to obscure the difference between fascism and democratic capitalism was intellectually sterile and a political dead end. The problematic of critical theory they identified – namely, the failure of the subjective forces – was false, and Habermas sought to shift focus away from a classical Marxist analysis of the development of technical forces as the condition of emancipation. Instead, he came to see the possibility of emancipation as arising from the realm of communicative action, where change would be grounded in the norms of intersubjective action.

Commentators on Habermas often divide his work into 'early' and 'late' periods, with the early Habermas of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* embodying a more radical outlook and the later adhering to a more positive evaluation of Western capitalist societies. But if

the critique of the latest phase of capitalism can be understood as a defining dimension of critical theory, there is in this respect a continuity across Habermas's entire postwar trajectory. For underpinning his thought from the early radical conclusions of *Structural Transformation* was a fundamental shift in the object of critique. He sought to replace an older conception of capitalism as an irrational and unfree social condition with a more generic conception of the economy as a market system grounded in property rights. Instead of a critique of capitalism, he proposed that critical theory be understood in terms of an ongoing project of the fulfilment of modernity, in which markets provide the functionally necessary arrangements for the economic coordination of complex societies. It followed then that the problem of capitalism was a derivative of the problem of democracy, understood as the constitution of a state–civil society relationship within which an attainable self-determination might be achieved.<sup>1</sup>

The Marx that Habermas credited with his radicalization and appeared relevant enough in the political situation of the early Federal Republic was the young Marx of the Paris Manuscripts rather than the Marx of *Capital*. Written in the 1840s, the former seemed to directly address a contemporary condition of powerlessness and oppressive conformism. It was thus widely regarded in the early postwar era as providing a deeper critique of a system that had overcome the material immiseration and crises of the past. For Habermas, the early Marx's Feuerbach-inspired critique of alienated labor laid bare the essentialism underlying his later more positivistically conceived critique of political economy. The same metaphysical humanism inspired the young Marx with his millenarian conception of communism as the solution to the riddle of history. In this respect, the young Marx's fierce critique of Hegel was little more than an inversion of the latter's state–society schema. Both Hegel and Marx took the separation of public and private, Hegel's

*entzweite Sittlichkeit*, to be a problem posed by the dialectical movement of history, which would ultimately be resolved, however differently they conceived of that resolution. Habermas was more than skeptical.

As matter of fact, the young Marx conceives of the unity of system and lifeworld as did the young Hegel, on the model of a ruptured ethical totality whose abstractly divided moments are condemned to pass away ... This interpretation excludes from the start the question of whether the systemic interconnection of the capitalist economy and the modern state administration do not *also* represent a higher and evolutionarily advantageous level of integration by comparison to traditional societies. (Habermas, 1987b: 339)

Habermas articulated his departures from an older conception of critical theory in a number of considerations on the intertwined sociological and philosophical limitations of the early Marx's conception of alienated labor as the central relation of modern bourgeois society. In this conception, the latter was the culminating stage of a history that had been taking ever newer and more monstrous shapes since the first stages of man's domestication of nature. Even though Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as Lukács himself, treated the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* with skepticism, Habermas saw the roots of the philosophy of history he was breaking from in Marx's early work. Whether in the positive form of the standpoint of the proletariat or in its inverted form of purely negative critique, a philosophy of history in which human emancipation was dialectically dependent upon the domestication of nature offered chimerical reconciliations grounded in the metaphysical notion of a self-realizing subject (Dews, 1986: 12–13; Habermas, 1987a: 64–5, 1987b: 382).

The fragility of the Marxist philosophy of history that implicitly serves as the foundation of this attempt to develop critical theory in interdisciplinary form makes it clear why it had to fail and why Horkheimer and Adorno scaled down this program to the speculative observations of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Historical-materialist assumptions regarding the dialectical relation between productive forces and productive relations had been transformed into pseudo-normative propositions concerning an objective teleology in history. This was the motor force behind the realization of a reason that had been given ambiguous expression in bourgeois ideals. Critical theory could secure its normative foundations only in a philosophy of history. But this foundation was not able to support an empirical research program. (Habermas, 1987b: 382)

The concept of alienated labor was the cornerstone of the philosophy of history, which promised an illusory emancipation from the complexity of the modern division of labor. In reality, the postwar Western world was faced with the more manageable challenge of reconciling more democracy with an expanded welfare state, and fantasies of un-alienated labor merely distorted the outlines of this real historical situation. In short, the success of the welfare state rendered obsolete the analysis of alienation. In the concluding pages to the second volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas declared, 'this [Marx's] type of alienation recedes further and further into the background as the welfare state becomes established' (Habermas, 1987b: 349).

Habermas's ongoing reflections on the welfare state can be seen as an attempt to break out of the bleak negativity of this earlier period of critical theory whose limits were on display in the essentialism of the early Marx's conception of alienated labor. The main danger posed by the latter was its inevitable conclusion in disillusionment, all too likely to assume the form of a grim, technocratic realism leading to a roll-back of democracy and the welfare state. The emerging polarization on the West German intellectual map of the purely negative critique of Adorno, on the one hand, and Niklas Luhmann's systems theory on the other expressed the essential contours of the historical situation that was setting in with the receding of the radical tide in the 1970s.



Although only fitfully acknowledged, the problem of capitalist crisis lies at the heart of Habermas's conception of an adequate politics of modernity. Despite its obfuscation within a modified Luhmannian framework, he has often made this centrality apparent in the most straightforward terms. The aim of *Legitimation Crisis*, he wrote, was to

take up the not-yet-satisfactorily answered question 'Has capitalism changed?' in the form: Is the fundamental contradiction of the capitalist social formation effective in the same way under the forms of appearance of organized capitalism, or has the logic of crisis changed? Has capitalism been fully transformed into a post-capitalist social formation that has overcome the crisis-ridden form of economic growth? (Habermas, 1976: 31)

In some ways, the questions presupposed the answer. In this short book, Habermas sought to redefine the nature of crises in advanced capitalist societies, turning the focus away from problems of economics to ones of political and socio-cultural legitimacy. The crisis tendencies that resulted from material scarcity had been successfully eliminated and 'advanced capitalist' societies had primarily to contend with problems of rising expectations and the loss of collective meaning. The stakes of crisis were also thereby transformed. It was no longer a question of 'fundamental contradictions' pointing to the limits of capitalism but of the adjustment of post-traditional subjective expectations to the objective law of systems. Confident in the ultimate stability of the capitalist world system, Habermas concluded that objective crises had given way to subjective ones which contained no prospects of transformation to another kind of social order.

By abandoning the agenda of the critique of capitalism, which was inseparable in his view from a discredited philosophy of history, Habermas was inclined to conceive of modern society in systems theoretical terms. The proliferating complexity of modern civilization was grounded in the symbiosis of two fundamental systems: a price-mediated world economic order and expert, public and

private sector administration. In supplanting the Marxist concept of bourgeois society with this one, Habermas was led to conclude that the essential task of engaged scholars was to alert the public to the overreach of these systems at the expense of the 'life world'. An expanded notion of the life world – the realm of ordinary social experience resistant to both instrumental domination as well as radical emancipation – opened up the multiple vantage points of a democratic, post-metaphysical perspective on new forms of crisis. These were figured in terms of not just legitimacy but identity, too. Arguably, this division between systems and life worlds simply reproduced the basic form of modern capitalist society in its differentiation from the state and economy, and so inevitably failed to provide much theoretical orientation over the long period of recurring capitalist crisis that began in the 1970s.

Paradoxically, he came to this diagnosis in the context of the world economic downturn in the 1970s, which set into motion a new phase of postwar history. Here, the earlier advances of the welfare state were reversed in the face of an immense counter-offensive. Some formulations from this period of global economic turbulence exhibit a vestigial connection to the classical agenda of critical theory, which sought to lay bare the self-undermining tendencies of post-classical capitalism. I would argue that while Habermas used an older problematic of critical theory to frame the crises of the 1970s, his proposed solutions were undermined by the very terms in which he posed them. That is to say, the opposition of systems and life world eventually came to redefine the problems themselves as manageable deficits of technodemocratic 'governance', thereby concealing their deeper structural depth. The path down which his programmatic departure from critical theory led resulted in a politically debilitating skepticism toward the very idea of crisis, a notion he regarded as dependent on an imperious standpoint of critique that could only be supported by a metaphysical

philosophy of history. What even constituted a 'crisis' became all too relative:

As soon as we give up praxis philosophy's understanding of society as a self-referential subject-writ-large, encompassing all individual subjects, the corresponding models for the diagnosis and mastery of crisis – division and revolution – are no longer applicable. (Habermas, 1987a: 347–8)

Habermas was not alone in concluding that the fall of European communism had relegated Marxism as both a critique of political economy and a theory of history to the dustbin. Earlier attempts to engage with and offer an alternative to what was already seen as a tradition of declining relevance gave way to a more complete theoretical exclusion. When the problem of capitalism resurfaced in his work during the 1990s, it took the form of a 'globalization' considered in a soft-focus light as a force transcending the national framework of the now declining welfare state. But the idylls of unchallenged neoliberalism would not last long, and both in Europe and elsewhere resistance to it occasioned a new round of discourse on 'the social fracture'. With protests against austerity unsettling the EU's status quo, Habermas returned to consider the question of crisis. Closer to the present, he has entertained the possibility that financial debacles might lead to the creation of a new global 'underclass' and the reemergence of class antagonisms, which would in turn spur states to react with undemocratic and repressive measures (Habermas, 2009: 123). But the corrective measures he considered realistic were modest. They constituted more an attempt at stabilizing the course rather than changing it. Even though he has written often about the need to 'tame' capitalism (Habermas, 1987a: 362; 2009: 187, 193), this taming is no longer seen as a clear-cut solution to the problem of unbridled privatization. In the background of diagnoses of growing inequality and market turbulence stands an older experience from the 1970s cautioning against attempts to intrude too far into the domain of

autonomous systems. After all the lesson of that time is supposedly that the attempted taming of capitalism leads to the problem of taming the state, potentially leading to a spiral of disappointment and disillusionment (Habermas, 1987a: 362–3).

As evidenced by this impasse, Habermas's alternative to Marxism and its critical theory offshoot comes up against its historic limit and has simply ceased to inform any adequate political responses to it. The account offered here is meant to demonstrate the reasons for and ultimate limits of this attempt to move beyond the original conception of critical theory. The alternative to this path that led to the impasse of cosmopolitan-democratic legitimation theory might be best set forth in contrast to the viewpoints of others who came out of the Frankfurt School tradition but rejected Habermas's departures in the name of a re-conceived Marx. His straw-man characterization of the critique of political economy as a philosophy of history grounded in an essentialism of labor have always provoked critical responses. It will be useful to revisit some of these lines of criticism in order to consider what form an adequate Critical Theory might assume today amid so many signs of irrational reaction to a mounting world economic crisis of capitalism.

### 3

Marx's *Capital* has assumed a renewed significance as a theorization of a socio-economic dynamic whose contours are coming into sharper relief amid the turbulence of a neoliberalism in distress. In much the same way, Horkheimer saw Marx vindicated in the maelstrom of fascism and impending world war. Certainly, the current historical situation raises questions about the future of capitalism, as well as justifiable fears that adequate alternatives are not in play. It also raises the possibility that in the absence of such alternatives the contemporary equivalents of fascism

might be getting the wind in their sails. While contemporary interest in this work is likely to leave behind the traditions of the remnant formations of an older workers' movement, it may also have to discard previous critiques of traditional Marxism that expressed the politico-ideological preoccupations of an earlier, and perhaps now less relevant, postwar experience of 'affluent capitalism'. A new form of critical theory will likely have to pass through another round of reading Marx's *Capital*.

Habermas's dismissal of Marx assumed a programmatic form in a misunderstanding of the latter's conception of labor. The Marx that Habermas set himself against was constructed from the labor essentialism of the Paris Manuscripts, read in the light of Adorno and Horkheimer's quasi-Weberian understanding of labor as instrumental reason. The dialectic by which the Enlightenment as a figure of capitalist rationality led to fascism was a *transhistorical* logic: the emancipation of man from the coils of a mythically shrouded nature takes the form of a progressive domination of nature by the powers of social labor, but also of a second nature of inexorable compulsions – i.e. autonomized, alienated powers which hold human beings in thrall, and which demand to be appeased by destructive sacrifices. The latter conception was already implicit in *History and Class Consciousness*, arguably the Ur-text of a later critical theory. According to Simon Clarke, the roots of the impasse of classical critical theory go back to its Lukácsian origins:

For Lukács reification was the product of the Weberian process of rationalisation. However, in Lukács's own account it is not clear whether reification is the product of the subordination of reason to the power of capital, or whether it is the product of 'instrumental reason' in itself. The former interpretation would take us back towards Marx, locating the source of reification in alienated labour and the fetishism of commodities. The latter interpretation, which was that of the Frankfurt School, would seem to take us back to the Weberian dilemma, for if rationality is an essential achievement of humanity, and reification

a necessary result of the advance of Reason, alienation would appear to be the inevitable price of progress. The critique of alienation could then be no more than a contemplative moralistic critique. (Clarke, 1982: 248)

Here it is not so much the Young Marx that lies at the root of an ideological misconception of modernity, but rather Max Weber whose somber vision of a disenchanted world of power politics, soulless bureaucracy, and efficient markets haunted his erstwhile followers of the Left. But one might say that the failure to grasp the historically specific social relations entailed by Marx's conception of labor in its relation to value led to a conflation of his overall conception of capitalism with its Weberian counterpart. In other words, Marx's conception of labor was identified with a transhistorical conception of instrumental rationality that converged with the Weberian vision of Occidental history as subject to an inexorable instrumental rationalization.

Arguably, this Weberian conception applies to Habermas, too, who accepted classical critical theory's misinterpretation of the category of labor in Marx, understood as the domination of nature by man (Postone, 1993: 108). Habermas followed Adorno and Horkheimer in concluding that for this very reason labor could no longer offer the vantage point of a critique of damaged social life, he argued that this in no way warranted their historical pessimism, for there was an alternative to be explored in the transhistorically more decisive evolution of forms of non-instrumental communication.

Clarke's genealogy of this ideological concept of labor raises the question of the form contemporary critical theory could assume if it arose from a more defensible reading of Marx's later economics. Much of the contemporary theoretical interest in the latter is focused on its seemingly foundational value concepts, while more empirically oriented studies of the crisis dynamics of contemporary capitalism tend to avoid the subject altogether. I will conclude by considering

what is missing in these two opposed forms of the contemporary Marxist theorization of capital. The current scene is far too varied to sum up in this perfunctory way, exhibiting complicated alignments to older traditions of Marxism with their distinct notions of crisis, but for the purpose at hand it might be useful to frame the problem more narrowly.

Moishe Postone is arguably the leading representative of an orientation which sees Marx as providing a theory of value as a form of social power wholly mystified by its appearance in merely 'surface' economic categories. His well-known reconstruction emerged from the contentions occasioned by the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, the path-breaking German Marx reception of the 1960s and 1970s. The intellectual and political diversity of this formation with regard to the problem of the causes and forms of capitalist crisis will not be addressed here. While the writings of Postone cannot be seen as representative of this larger formation of the *NML* or the so-called Wertkritik, I will focus on them here first because in the United States they have set the politico-ideological mold for English speakers interested in this largely German body of work. The art historian Sven Lütticken succinctly conveys a common denominator of the latter in broad contrast to a more combative reading of the *Grundrisse* emerging at the same time in Italy.

In contrast with the operaist insistence on the historical primacy of working-class struggle, and the subsequent autonomist emphasis on the proletariat or multitude as a potential revolutionary subject, the value critics side with 'Marx no. 2', the theorist of the value form and of abstract labour. They approach value itself as an 'automatic subject', engaging with capitalism's intrinsic logic. This automatic subject of value is pitted as being primary against that of the working class and its struggle against the perversion of work as human activity into alienating abstract labour. (Lütticken, 2016: 114–15)

Postone sets forth his proposed reconstruction of Marx as a critique of not only the 'dead end' of the form of criticism epitomized by

negative dialectics but also Habermas's alternative to it. *Time, Labor and Social Domination* explicitly raises the problem of a critical theory that would provide the basis for an adequate social response to the dynamic of capitalist development. Habermas's false solution to the pessimistic impasse of Adorno and Horkheimer's dialectic of enlightenment lies at the center of his account just as it does in the one offered here. Against Habermas, Postone (like Clarke) is at pains to point out that the labor being referred to in Marx's *Capital* cannot be understood in terms of a transhistorical philosophy of history, understood as either a liberating or enslaving dialectic of instrumental rationality. Rather, the concept of value producing labor has to be understood as a social relation specific to capitalism within which a historically unique pattern of development unfolds. Value producing labor is

a function of 'abstract' and 'objective' social structures, and represents a form of *abstract, impersonal domination*. Ultimately, this form of domination is not grounded in any person, class or institution; its ultimate locus is the pervasive structuring social forms of capitalist society that are constituted by determinate forms of social practice. Society, as the quasi-independent, abstract, universal Other that stands opposed to the individuals and exerts an impersonal compulsion on them, is constituted as an alienated structure by the double character of labor in capitalism. (Postone, 1993: 159)

'The double character of labor' is understood as a socio-economic compulsion to produce an ever-greater amount of concrete wealth in the form of abstract economic value. The latter is the form that wealth assumes when subject to the time logic of the maximization of output. It is thus these compulsions and not class inequality or recurring economic crises that are the 'ultimate grounds of unfreedom in capitalism', according to Postone (Postone, 1993: 127). It is not class exploitation and conflict, but these objective compulsions that characterize the core reality of capitalism.

Marx's interpretation of the historical Subject with reference to the category of capital indicates a shift from a theory of social relations understood essentially in terms of class relations to a theory of forms of social mediation expressed by categories such as value and capital ... the historical Subject analyzed by Marx consists of objectified relations, the subjective-objective categorial forms characteristic of capitalism, whose 'substance' is abstract labor, that is, the specific character of labor as a socially mediating activity in capitalism. (Postone, 1993: 76)

On this basis, Postone rejects that an adequate critique of the internal logic of capitalism can be grounded in the ostensibly egalitarian distributive ideals of bourgeois society which he claims stem from the same logic of the value form. Value producing labor in the so-called 'abode of production' is what gives rise to the so-called vantage point of the proletariat, a perspective which remains wholly subsumed by the capitalist totality. Accordingly, the notion that emancipation entails the dis-alienation of labor is an incorporated standpoint offering only a chimerical horizon. The point is not to liberate labor but to abolish it: 'Marx's assertion that capital, and not the proletariat or the species, is the total Subject clearly implies that the historical negation of capitalism would not involve the *realization*, but the *abolition*, of the totality' (Postone, 1993: 79).

Werner Bonefeld has criticized what he regards as Postone's hypostatization of capital conceived as the totalizing Subject of modern history. He argues that there is a dimension of labor as free human practice that Postone is incapable of accounting for, and which forms the indispensable point of departure for any adequate opposition to capitalist society: 'the critique of capital has to show the human content, however perverted and debased, of the capitalist constitution of social existence' (Bonefeld, 2004: 118). Bonefeld argues that Postone seeks to theorize the coercive objectivity of the capitalist totality without taking into account how this encompassing mediation of the value form presupposes the division of society

between buyers and sellers of labor power and thus the class antagonism between them. He underscores his point with an illuminating reference from the *Grundrisse*: 'already the simple forms of exchange-value and of money latently contain the opposition between labour and capital' (Bonefeld, 2004: 121, quoting Marx's *Grundrisse*, p. 248).

Michael Heinrich criticizes Postone's claim that the forms specific to the sphere of capitalist circulation are less essential and are merely the distorted surface manifestation of a value logic operative in the social organization of production. Marx's whole conception of value mediated social reproduction offers an integrated account of the interpenetration of these two spheres. Heinrich underscores the contemporary relevance of this dual perspective in approaching the financial dimensions of capitalist globalization.

The dynamic of capital cannot be grasped solely in terms of the sphere of production. Rather, the unity of production and circulation is always the precondition of this dynamic. That is particularly valid for an understanding of those processes which have been dealt with in the last decade under the keyword 'globalization' and in which an internationalized financial system plays a central role. (Heinrich, 2015)

Both Bonefeld's and Heinrich's criticisms of Postone inform my conception of the missing dimensions of contemporary Marxism when conceived as a critical theory. In what follows, I will draw on these two lines of critique and attempt to integrate them into an account of how Postone's conception of capitalism's dynamic of development forecloses a deeper investigation into the structural crises of capitalism and consider the political implications of this foreclosure.

In a recent essay, Postone contrasts his conception of the core of Marx's theory of capitalism with the more empirically oriented accounts of the economic crisis that began with and unfolded over the course of the so-called neoliberal period (Postone, 2007). He uses the work of Robert Brenner, David Harvey and Giovanni Arrighi as examples to

demonstrate what he argues is missing in the-  
orizations of capitalism that do not grasp the  
critical social theory entailed by value con-  
cepts. Since the objective of this chapter is  
to raise the problem of what might constitute  
the basis of an adequate form of critical the-  
ory for the present, Postone's essay provides  
an illuminating staging ground in which vari-  
ous alternatives can be set forth.

While Postone praises Brenner's work,  
*The Economics of Global Turbulence* in par-  
ticular, for debunking certain fallacies about  
the current financial crisis, he also claims that  
the latter's focus on crises of overproduction  
is related to a crucial limitation in his under-  
standing of capitalism:

Brenner's analytic point of departure is a traditional  
Marxist emphasis on the unplanned, uncoordi-  
nated and competitive nature of capitalist produc-  
tion. That is, at the core of his analysis of the long  
downturn are the notions of uneven development  
and competition ... The focus of such a critique of  
capitalism, in other words, is essentially the mode  
of *distribution*. (Postone, 2007: 12)<sup>2</sup>

Postone argues that the focus on distribution  
fails to grasp the totality of capitalism as a  
system, and that this kind of analysis remains  
mere economic analysis or political economy  
rather than an elaboration of Marx's critique  
of political economy. The identification of  
the sphere of distribution with 'economics'  
follows from Postone's relegation of capital-  
ist competition to a reified form of the  
appearance of an underlying social logic.

Notions such as competition and uneven develop-  
ment, along with categories central to Brenner's  
analysis, such as profit, fixed and circulating capi-  
tal, however, are categories of economy; that is,  
they are categories of the surface that do not  
adequately grasp the fundamental nature and  
historical dynamic of capitalism as a historically  
specific form of social life. (Postone, 2007: 11–12)

Simon Clarke has also taken issue with  
Brenner's prioritization of competition, from  
a related but different perspective. In contrast  
to Postone, for Clarke the core of Marx's  
conception of capital is *surplus value*. He

argues that the concept of surplus value inte-  
grates the class exploitation at the heart of  
capitalism into an account of its historical  
pattern of development.

[T]he deficiency of his [Brenner's] analysis is that it  
remains at the level of the forms of appearance of  
the crisis tendencies, without even attempting to  
relate those forms of appearance to the underlying  
dynamics of the capitalist mode of production as a  
system based on the production and appropriation  
of surplus value. (Clarke, 1999: 57)

Clarke argues that by ignoring the concept of  
surplus value as integrating class exploitation  
to a pattern of socio-economic development,  
Brenner's account ends up focusing on  
the inessential effects of competition on the  
returns to investment in fixed capital. He  
argues on theoretical grounds that the defla-  
tionary effects of competition for market  
shares on profit rates could not have resulted  
in 'the long downturn' in world capitalism  
that Brenner assumes has been operative  
since the 1970s. Although Clarke, Bonefeld  
and Postone all regard as dubious the assump-  
tion that capitalism's forward march could be  
thwarted by a crisis of 'overproduction',  
Clarke situates his criticism of Brenner  
within a wider claim regarding overproduc-  
tion as innate to capitalist development rather  
than as an exceptional phenomenon specific  
to periods of manifest crisis. According to  
Clarke, Brenner's account narrowly focuses  
on the crisis of manufacturing profit rates in  
the advanced economies, and so ends up pre-  
senting the dynamic of deindustrialization as  
if it was a general crisis in the capitalist  
system as opposed to an ordinary conse-  
quence of its pattern of development. 'The  
tendency to overproduction', he writes, 'is  
not only a feature of manufacturing industry,  
it is inherent in capitalist accumulation and  
so is characteristic of every branch of pro-  
duction at all times' (Clarke, 1999: 64).

Thus for Clarke, the attempt to theorize the  
contemporary history of capitalism through a  
focus on manufacturing is incapable of pro-  
viding an analysis of contemporary 'global

capitalism' in which the manufacturing sector forms a declining portion of the value of total output (Clarke, 1999: 62–4). Brenner seems to share Marx's assumption that the industrial production of use values exhibits a productivity dynamic that is not at work to the same extent in other sectors of the economy. Marx identified this productivity dynamic at work in capitalist industry with the concept of 'relative surplus value', specifying the condition of possibility of an economy-wide process of capital accumulation, a condition which holds even as industry proper comes to absorb a diminishing share of the labor of society. On Marx's assumption, it would seem warranted then to identify the causes of a more general crisis of accumulation in the specific characteristics of profitability and investment in this sector.<sup>3</sup>

Although Postone's conception of capitalism denies the significance of crises as manifestations of internal limits to its ceaseless perpetuation, both Clarke and Bonefeld regard crises as central to understanding its essential structure. But the latter argues that Brenner inverts the order of determination between the class relations that allow capitalists to pump out surplus labor from workers and the competitive struggle over the distribution of these spoils. The latter logically cannot be the source of a crisis except for its effect on the former, because provided that the rate of exploitation holds up, the amount of surplus value remains the same regardless of the state of competition. Overproduction can result in crises of accumulation only through its effects on the rate of exploitation, the rate of surplus value.

In this respect it [the tendency to overproduction] is the most fundamental tendency of the capitalist mode of production, for it underlies the permanently antagonistic form of the social relations of capitalist production as the capitalist is compelled to hold down wages, to intensify labour and to extend the working day. (Clarke, 1999: 71)

Bonefeld makes the same argument at a more general level: 'The competition between

capital and capital is then founded on the relations of exploitation. These relations cannot be derived from the "logic" of competition – the relationship of capital to capital presupposes the exploitation of labour as the foundation of surplus-value production' (Bonefeld, 1999: 12).

In fact, Bonefeld is categorical on this point, going so far as to assert that Marx did not have a theory of competition nor a theory of crisis, although he did provide a conceptualization of the category 'competition' as a manifestation of a more fundamental social relation of class exploitation (Bonefeld, 1999: 7). Bonefeld and Clarke's critiques of Brenner underscore the complex problem of the order of determination between these levels of conceptualization and the levels of structural determination to which they refer. However, in Volume 3 of *Capital*, Marx offered a detailed account of the formation of capitalist prices of commodities under conditions of competition raising the problem of their deviation from the quantities of labor expended in their production. For all the differences between them Postone, Bonefeld and Clarke distinguish the value (or surplus value) logic of capitalism from the process of competition. One reason contemporary Marxists may have for downplaying or ignoring Marx's own account of the competitive dynamics of price formation and the resulting formation of a general rate of profit is that they have wanted to avoid the thicket of the so-called 'transformation problem' of values into prices, regarding it as unsalvageable.

The claim that competition is not central to the logic of capitalism goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century. Since that time, many Marxists have subscribed to the belief that liberal competitive capitalism had at some point been superseded by a state capitalism. In an earlier period, it was assumed that if capitalism was ceasing to be an exchange, and more specifically, a competition mediated economic system, it was justified to bypass the value level of analysis. It followed that there was no longer much point

in referring to a socio-economic dynamic of valorization unfolding beneath the surface of monopolistic prices and distributions of income. I would argue that the very notion of 'state capitalism' – although useful and perhaps unavoidable as a term designating the military Keynesian regimes of the era of inter-imperialist warfare – is incompatible with the socio-economic logic of value production, which is a system of production for exchange whose cell form is the commodity.

The dominant forms of contemporary capitalism in the neoliberal era so manifestly depart from the institutional characteristics of what was once called state capitalism, and indeed, few contemporary critics of competition centered accounts of capitalism base their case on its existence. In fact, Clarke makes it clear that the scope of state involvement in the operations of a capitalist economy is tightly circumscribed.

The state, in the first instance through its fiscal and monetary policies, can clearly have an impact on the course of accumulation, and these policies are accordingly the object of class and political struggles. However, state intervention is necessarily confined within the limits of the contradictory form of capitalist production which appears in the inherent tendency to over-accumulation and crisis. The state can pursue expansionary policies, in order to avert the threat of stagnation, recession or a deflationary collapse, but at the risk of stimulating the inflationary over-accumulation of capital which carries with it the threat of an even greater crisis. Equally the state can contain the threat of inflation by restricting the growth of credit, but at the risk of stagnation, recession or depression. (Clarke, 1999: 70)

Roughly this conception of the scope and limits of state intervention runs through Brenner's account of the vicissitudes of the Long Downturn. Putting aside the details of his account, I would argue that despite the fact that it avoids the terminology of value theory, Brenner's conception is close to Marx's account of how the logic of valorization and its manifestation operates through the compulsory mediation of competition. Marx saw competition and valorization as

moments of the same socio-economic process presupposing the reproduction of the capital–wage labor relation at its heart. Competition leads to the centralization of capital in fewer and fewer hands but also counteracts this build up through the 'devalorization' inflicted by innovators on incumbent capitalists (Marx, 1971: 311–12). This ongoing augmented accumulation of surplus value through devalorization imposed on the defeated is the ultimate expression of the separation of labor from the conditions of labor – that is, the social relation that constitutes capital in the first place:

It is this separation which constitutes the concept of capital and of *primitive* accumulation, which then appears as a continual process in the accumulation of capital and here finally takes the form of the centralization of already existing capitals in a few hands and of many being divested of capital. (Marx, 1971: 311–12)

It is this conception of competition as co-constitutive of capitalist social relations that Brenner's critics dispute. For all of them, the focus on cost competition for market share removes a more essential, underlying logic of valorization or surplus valorization from consideration. Here it might be important to recall Heinrich's claim that Marx's conception of capital integrates the categories of circulation with those of production in order to see why this either/or alternative does not follow. Much of the debate between Brenner and his critics seems to hinge on an unwarranted, indeed metaphysical, dichotomy between an underlying 'essence' and the outward 'forms of appearance' of the capitalist system. While this terminology can be illuminating, it has often been deployed by Marxists in a manner that denies the significance of concrete theorizing of the history of capitalist crisis – i.e. problems relegated to a supposedly 'surface' level. To put it in very general terms, what Marx referred to as the 'forms of appearance' – prices, costs, revenues – of the sphere of circulation (c-m-c, m-c-m') are not mere expressions of an



underlying, 'essential' dynamic of value production, but rather mediate the latter throughout even while coming into periodic contradiction with the forward movement of this dynamic. Indeed, the whole point of the opposition of these two levels – 'underlying dynamic' versus 'surface' categories – is to identify capitalism's staggering crisis-propelled course of development, a course that tends to undermine its conditions of perpetuation over the long term.

The problem of the long-term limits and breakdown of capitalist development was clearly a central concern of Marx's and the main currents of Marxism that came after him. Of all Brenner's critics, Postone is the most explicit in rejecting precisely the idea of capitalist breakdown, which he regards as the necessary implication of crisis theory. For Postone, the so-called limits of capitalist development are never reached. The supposed obstacles to its perpetuation (diminishing profit rates, overproduction, etc.) are merely ordinary expressions of the labor-time reducing tendencies of development.

Far from being primarily a means of explaining crises, then, the theorem of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, as reworked by Marx, expresses, indirectly, a process of the ongoing structuring and restructuring of social life, one marked by a growing gap between the actual structuring of labor and of social life and the way they could be structured in the absence of capital. Marx transforms a political-economic theorem – which many have taken as an indication of the economic limits of capital – into the surface expression of a more fundamental historical dynamic. (Postone, 2007: 17)

One consequence of relegating the crisis tendencies of this socio-economic dynamic to the status of an inessential surface phenomenon – i.e. rejecting the view that it contains self-undermining tendencies – is that it undermines the possibility of an immanent critique of the social totality, and ends up consigned to an ethical rejection framed in terms of the opposition between what is and what could be. Postone comes close to conceding this point.

The thrust of his [Marx's] critique is less to 'prove' the inevitable economic collapse of capitalism than it is to uncover a growing disparity between what is and what could be, one that constitutes the objective/subjective conditions of possibility of a different ordering of social life. (Postone, 2007: 17)

The argument I am advancing begins from the assumption I share with Postone that Habermas's alternative was unable to inform an adequate emancipatory politics and devolved into a normative theory of justice. Postone's critique of Habermas paradoxically ends up with a politics that does not look too different from the latter's version of a mature liberalism open to continuous progress. The reinstatement of the old liberal distinction between 'is' and 'ought' – facts and norms – stemmed from the same conception of capitalism that led to the aporias of the late Frankfurt School (Postone, 1993: 226–60). Michael Heinrich has offered a reason why Postone's critique of Habermas's conception of capitalism ended up nonetheless reproducing the latter's conception of politics.

That which Postone correctly regards as a strength of Marx's analysis of capital – namely that Marx's concept of capital is not limited to a specific historical configuration, but rather that capital is a social relationship connected to various historical configurations – he does not appear to apply in the same manner to the state. This missing categorical analysis of the state thus makes it possible for Postone to write in an uncritical manner about democracy and democratic self-determination. Postone, who convincingly criticizes the ahistorical conception of economic categories, appears in contrast to share an ahistorical conception of democracy. (Heinrich, 2015)

Arguably, this ahistorical conception of the political is what lies behind the reinstatement of a normative conception of politics. Going back to Hegel, the 'critical' view has been that the subjective impetus of radical social change could not be grasped within the terms of this opposition of is and ought. For Lukács, class consciousness was the activation of the experience of the crisis tendencies of capitalism's dynamic of development. The moribund predicament of critical theory and

its various aftermath formations arguably arose from the destruction of this vantage point. I would argue that a contemporary form of critical theory would have to address this problem of this now abandoned vantage point of totalization, as the world dimensions of the contemporary crisis of capitalism urgently call for an adequate political response beyond the scope of normative theories of justice,

Postone, Bonefeld, and Clarke rightly insist that Marx's value concepts are the key to identifying capitalism's core logic of social domination, and that the focus on these concepts as the basis of a critical theory is a useful corrective to the tendency of more empirically oriented Marxist economists to ignore this dimension of analysis altogether. The latter often assume that this value level of the theory raises metaphysical questions that do not contribute to an understanding of the actual economic process. The opposition of the respective blind sides of these two forms of contemporary Marxism suggests the need for integrating perspectives. Perhaps notions of value so sharply distinguished from their forms of appearance have been imperfectly conceived, while the various conceptions of an unfolding capitalist crisis lacking this underlying value dimension are in significant respects empirically deficient.

A truly adequate form of critical theory would aim for the integration that Marx strove for on both intellectual and political grounds. The current English language reception of the tradition of Wertkritik is a welcome development, but I would argue that most people reading *Grundrisse* and *Capital* today are looking for a theorization that will situate the current era of capitalism within a broader account of its history up to its outer limits of development. The rebound of capitalism after the Second World War and then again amid the onset of a long era of crisis beginning in the 1970s has for a long time discouraged many Marxists from addressing the possibility that the capitalist system may never experience another age of expansion.

What are the political and geopolitical consequences of that going to be? This situation should invite thoughtful comparisons to the setting of Horkheimer's original essay.

## Notes

- 1 I have written in more depth on these topics in 'The Vicissitudes of Critique: The Decline and Reemergence of the Problem of Capitalism' (Kim, 2014).
- 2 'Characterizing notions such as competition and uneven development and categories such as profit as surface phenomena, expresses a position that regards categories such as commodity, value, and capital as those of deep structure' (Postone, 2007: 12).
- 3 The argument in this paragraph relies on the thesis of the forthcoming book, *The Architectonic of Capital* (Balakrishnan, forthcoming).

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# Neoliberalism: Critical Theory as Natural-History<sup>1</sup>

Charles Prusik

In his 'Reflections on Class Theory', Theodor Adorno argues that only in 'its blind anonymity could the economy appear as fate' (Adorno, 2003: 110). Economics is the science of the abstract laws that govern society. Throughout the history of classical political economy, and extending beyond throughout the many traditions of economic thought, the 'economy' has been analyzed from the standpoint of natural necessity – often in abstraction from its social and historical content. Following Marx's immanent critique of classical political economy, Adorno's materialism does not posit an alternative economic theory of society, but rather negates the form of capitalist relations in their naturalized appearance. His *Negative Dialectics* (1966) is not an economic theory of society – it is the critique of society in its reduction to abstract economic necessities.<sup>2</sup> Although his materialist analysis of society is situated historically within the Fordist phase of state managed capital, in the following chapter I argue that his dialectical framework of

'natural-history' [*Naturgeschichte*], can be developed to recontextualize the contemporary order of neoliberal capitalism for its critique (Adorno, 2006: 252).<sup>3</sup>

Under neoliberalism subjects confront a society dominated by the circulation of abstract quantities. The seemingly random play of market prices and evaluations mediates subjects who in turn, internalize this mediation as an objective form of rational authority. Facing the inscrutable dynamics of market forces, the subject finds herself cast into an environment characterized by the preponderance of uncertainty and disorder. Neoliberalism, which is both continuous and discontinuous with the Keynesian period of state managed capitalism it has superseded, is irreducible in its historical trajectory to economic laws. Although the neoliberal period has been characterized by fundamental transformations to the structure of capitalism, its specific form of political power also depends upon the rational form of appearance it manifests.<sup>4</sup> Neoliberalism

is a political project grounded in the claim that the ‘self-regulating market’ is the most rational subject for the coordination of society. An immanent critique of neoliberalism, therefore, cannot resist its logic in a one-sided fashion on the basis of an alternative metaphysics of economic nature, but negates the appearance of economic relations in their appearance as natural laws. By delineating the logic in which the self-regulating market appears as the necessary form of organization for society’s future, this chapter will suggest that the neoliberal project depends upon the false naturalization of economic concepts and categories for its reproduction. Moreover, I argue that the neoliberal attempt to determine the economy as an epistemological subject – with a concept of ‘information’ as its key commodity definition – is the fetish form of market relations in their abstraction from society. By reconstituting Adorno’s materialism, I argue that his dialectical framework of natural-history can provide a critical frame of reference, within which further specifications of neoliberalism’s history and logic can be grasped.

## THE IDEA OF NATURAL-HISTORY

Adorno’s idea of natural-history defies straightforward categorization. Delivered to the Frankfurt chapter of the *Kantgesellschaft* in 1932, his lecture is a critical intervention into an array of philosophical debates regarding historiographical methodology within the schools of neo-Kantianism and neo-ontology of the period.<sup>5</sup> The idea of natural-history is Adorno’s first major attempt to formulate a method of materialist criticism that would liberate dialectics from its function in the dogmatic systems of dialectical materialism and historical materialism.<sup>6</sup> By ‘natural-history’ Adorno is not referring to the ‘history of nature’ in the sense of a developmental, linear, or evolutionary account of natural process. Nor does his concept of

nature refer to the objects of ‘natural science’ (Adorno, 2006: 252). The concepts of nature and history refer to a dialectical antagonism in which both concepts are ‘mediated in their apparent difference’ (Adorno, 2006: 253). For Adorno, nature is frequently understood in the sense of ‘myth’ – i.e., a cosmology of timeless order, cyclical invariance, and preordained fate. Mythic nature, he suggests, signifies ‘what has always been, what as fatefully arranged predetermined being underlies history and appears in history, it is substance in history’ (Adorno, 2006: 253). Mythic nature in this sense, is *atemporal*. The concept of history, however, refers to the human capacity to constitute new social forms through practices that are mediated by nature.

Following Walter Benjamin, who argues in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928) that nature can be interpreted historically in its expression of temporal unfolding, Adorno rejects mythic affirmations of nature. Rather than isolating an ontological layer of reality as the most substantial moment underlying historical development, Adorno’s dialectical form of analysis interprets nature and history in their mediated objectivity. Against traditional Marxism, which posits a concept of labor as the transhistorical substance of wealth underlying history, Adorno’s materialism historicizes the category of nature in a manner that is specific to the form of capitalist society. The idea of natural-history captures historical transformation in its dependency on nature without reifying a static concept of nature underlying historical development. For Adorno, history mediates nature – nature is marked by the dynamism of human practice. By interpreting the phenomena of society through the prism of natural-history, Adorno’s method aims to decipher forms of domination in the moment of their appearance as natural necessity.

In addition to the influence of Benjamin, whose micrological analyses of commodification informed Adorno’s work, the idea of natural-history also draws from Georg

Lukács' category of 'second nature' as it appears in his *The Theory of the Novel* (1920).<sup>7</sup> By second nature, Lukács suggests that the alienated form of capitalist society crystallizes into a meaningless sphere of 'convention' – a habitual context of commodification that opposes subjects in the form of an inscrutable 'cipher' (Adorno, 2006: 262). Lukács' category of second nature refers to the 'petrification' of socio-cultural forms – a process in which socially constituted relations assume the appearance of natural necessity. But unlike Lukács, who suggests that the concept of second nature cannot be deciphered, Adorno treats second nature as a form of 'semblance' [*Schein*], that expresses alienated social relations in their inverted form (Adorno, 2006: 267). Adorno's idea of natural-history interprets the commodity as a symbolic form of social domination that inscribes subjectivity in a process of objectification. By integrating Lukács' category of second nature into Benjamin's micrological analysis of commodification, Adorno mobilizes the idea of natural-history for a critical interpretation of the reification of capitalist relations.<sup>8</sup>

Having delineated the conceptual logic of Adorno's idea of natural-history, I would like to specify the potential for developing this dialectic as a frame of reference for a critical theory of the categories of neoliberal economic thought. This specification, however, requires a preliminary analysis of classical political economy in order to contextualize the historical emergence of the neoclassical and neoliberal paradigms that form the contemporary orthodoxy of economics. The dialectical framework of natural-history, I want to suggest, can be used to criticize the science of economics, because the very concept of economic value these traditions formalize depends upon its abstraction from socio-historical transformation. By isolating value as an objective and law-like category that organizes life, the science of economics abstracts its laws from their social content, thereby implicitly postulating a mythic

concept of nature in its identity to 'the economy'. Consequently, the fundamental institution of neoliberalism's political project – the self-regulating market – assumes the appearance of an immanently self-organizing principle, and necessary fate for the coordination of society.

## CLASSICAL POLITICAL ECONOMY

The classical political economy of Adam Smith and David Ricardo divided the economy into three spheres of activity: production, exchange, and consumption. Economic value, they argued, could be understood as an invariant substance underlying the transformations of society.<sup>9</sup> In order to articulate the necessary 'laws' at work in the conservation of this invariant substance, classical liberal economists resorted to a metaphor – value was treated as though it were physical energy (Mirowski, 1989: 142). Relying on the Cartesian assumptions upon which their understanding of physics rested, Smith constructed a vision of economic growth where value remained constant throughout its circulation (Mirowski, 1989: 164). Economic laws resemble physical laws in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776): the 'natural course' of economic life tends toward a point of 'equilibrium' throughout the movement of commodities (Mirowski, 1989: 216). As Thorstein Veblen commented, 'the resulting economic theory is formulated as an analysis of the "natural" course of the life of the community, the ultimate theoretical postulate of which might [...] be stated as some sort of law of the conservation of economic energy' (Veblen, 1919: 280). Metaphors of balance, motion, and energy thus came to function in the formation of political economy as a science of necessary laws – and by extension, to the naturalization of the constituent social relations, practices, and institutions of capitalism.

## THE MARGINALIST REVOLUTION

If the classical economics tradition modeled its articulation of value on the basis of the economy's resemblance to external nature, the neoclassical tradition displaced the quasi-objectivity of value onto the individual subject. Beginning in the 1870s, the 'Marginalist Revolution' began as a departure from classical liberalism by defining value as 'utility' – i.e., the satisfaction of the buyer's desire in consumption (see Ferguson, 1969: 1–11). Through purely mathematized formalizations of the law of supply and demand, thinkers such as William Stanley Jevons, Léon Walras, Vilfredo Pareto, and Francis Edgeworth devoted their efforts to treating economic behavior as a science.<sup>10</sup> Defining economics as 'the science which studies human behavior as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses', the neoclassical tradition understood the market as a means to distribute goods under conditions of constraint (see Robbins, 1932: 15). Grounding their formulae in the assumption of a narrowly defined category of rational economic behavior, neoclassical economists attempted to identify degrees of pleasure as 'utils' – i.e., the representation of the degree of satisfaction derived from the consumption of a commodity. Rather than understanding value as the result of objective laws belonging to external nature, neoclassical economists developed their concept of value as being intrinsic to the subject's rationality. However, in order to mathematize the internal preferences that influenced the movements of supply and demand, they were required to conceptualize the individual subject as an objectively mechanical, universal, and causally determined agent.

Because the Marginalist Revolution was overt in its attempt to formalize market laws in abstraction from their social content, merely indicating the ideal form of its assumptions is not sufficient for its critique. As Simon Clarke argues, the marginalists 'did not deny

the specific socio-historical character of capitalist social relations', but used its abstractions as political policy prescriptions of society (Clarke, 1991: 163). It is not enough therefore, for a critique of neoclassical economics to simply identify its abstractions as illegitimate – the critique must show how its abstractions are expressions of the irrational form of capitalist social relations. The tradition of 'subjective economy', as Adorno suggests, is 'essentially an analysis of market processes in which market relations are already presupposed' (see Adorno, 1997: 511). The critique of neoclassical economics, then, neither accepts nor rejects the intelligibility of the rational subject as the foundation of market equilibrium, but rather shows how its concept is expressive of a social reality it cannot grasp.

Rather than positing nature as the unchangeable foundation upon which the economy interacts, neoclassical economics appeals to a metaphysics of nature as the substance of the economy. As economic historian Philip Mirowski has demonstrated in detail, marginalists such as Jevons, Walras, Pareto, and Edgeworth explicitly modeled their concept of utility on the formal models of energy physics prior to the Second Law of Thermodynamics (Mirowski, 1989: 193–275). In open defiance of any interaction with psychology, philosophy, or anthropology, neoclassical thinkers defined rational behavior in purely mechanical and deterministic terms. As Walras famously insisted in his *Elements of Pure Economics* (1874), 'the pure theory of economics is a science which resembles the physico-mathematical sciences in every respect' (Walras, 1954: 71). But if the laws of the individual's behavior follow the objective laws of external nature, the subjective standpoint of a marginal utility of value recoils, paradoxically, in the determination of the subject as an objective principle. The concept of utility, Mirowski argues, is modeled in detail on potential energy.<sup>11</sup> The implicit assumption of this category is that individuals truly are rational maximizers of utility in

every instance. By identifying the subject's utility with the principle of invariance that underlies economic change, neoclassical economics circumscribes the subject as the principle of objective necessity in the market's tendency toward general equilibrium.

The free market, in this paradigm, could be said to function as Adorno puts it: 'as one vast analytic proposition' (Adorno, 2003: 95). The positivistic projection of mathematized axioms onto social forms inscribes the sphere of human practice in an homogenous space of necessity. But the coherence of this projection depends upon a series of assumptions regarding the nature of rational behavior: (1) neoclassical economics assumes that subjects possess rational preferences under conditions of market competition; (2) it assumes that subjects maximize their utility preferences in an identical form; (3) it assumes that subjects possess all available information regarding prices (see Weintraub, 1993). Categories such as wages, rent, and profit therefore, become disassociated from their function in class relations and become natural categories that express the scarcity of resources alone. Moreover, the neoclassical concept of rationality is posited in the absence of any concept of cognition; free will appears in inverted form, as the determined movement of subjects in their reaction to prices.

Beyond the theoretical problems associated with modeling the laws of market equilibrium through an analogy of energy and utility, a dialectical interpretation of the neoclassical paradigm negates the naturalized categories of economy in their inverted appearance.<sup>12</sup> As the rational instrument that allocates resources efficiently, the category of the free market recuperates a concept of mythic nature in its seeming stability. As Clarke writes, 'It can only make economics a "natural science" because it "naturalises" the fundamental economic relationships of capitalist society' (Clarke, 1991: 110). By projecting the attributes of natural being onto the constituents of socio-historical being, the market appears in its abstract identity to a

transhistorical concept of economic growth. Neoclassical theory falsely reconciles the structural disparities history bears within itself. As an expression of the abstract character of the commodity, and the mediating network of exchanges that harness individuals to the general form of value under capitalism, market processes assume the appearance of objective laws.

## THE RATIONAL IRRATIONALITY OF EXCHANGE

For Adorno, the naturalization of economic laws arises through the exchange relation, which not only mediates subjects by the general form of value, but also constitutes a process of abstraction in reality. Following Alfred Sohn-Rethel, who defined commodity exchange as a process of real abstraction that determines subjectivity as the form of social synthesis, Adorno's work develops a theory of subjectivity that is intrinsic to the specificity of the commodity form under capitalism.<sup>13</sup> Grounded in Marx's understanding of the 'double character of the commodity', Adorno develops the exchange relation in terms of the contradiction between use-value and value. The process of abstraction in commodity exchange results, then, in the appearance of value as an autonomous and objective law. As Adorno suggests in his 1962 seminar on Marx:

It is characteristic of commodity economy that what characterizes exchange – i.e., that it is a relation between human beings – disappears and presents itself as if it was the quality of the things themselves that are to be exchanged. It is not the exchange that is fetishized but the commodity. That which is a congealed social relation within commodities is regarded as if it was a natural quality, a being-in-itself of things. (Adorno, 1997: 507–508)

The natural lawfulness of society is the expression of value in its abstraction from use as well as its realization in exchange.



The appearance of value therefore, when it assumes the form of a property of a thing, can be understood as the necessary outcome of the exchange abstraction. The concept of commodity fetishism, Adorno argues, 'is nothing but this necessary process of abstraction' (Adorno, 1997: 507–8). The consequence of this process of abstraction is that the 'commodity no longer appears as a social relation but it seems as if value was a thing in itself' (Adorno, 1997: 507–8). The capitalist system, therefore, gives rise to a form of abstract conceptuality, characterized by the disappearance of objective social relations in the appearance of exchangeable commodities.

Marginal utility theory can be understood as the theoretical reflex of commodity fetishism. The idealization of market relations in neoclassical theory is the expression of the generalization of the exchange relation, where commodities assume the appearance of objects of utility. But the definition of the commodity as an object of utility – which expresses its scarcity in prices – assumes its independence from its socially determined character. The generalization of a system of commodity exchanges is illegitimate, as Clarke argues, because such a system does not consist 'in a multiplicity of such immediate and symmetrical exchanges, but comprises *mediated* exchange relations, in which each exchange is *asymmetrical*, no longer involving the direct exchange of use-values for one another, but the exchange of use-values for values' (Clarke, 1991: 165).

The exchange relation is not merely a function of the rationality of individual parties and their subjective evaluations of goods, but is the general form of objective interdependence characteristic of a system of commodity producing labor.<sup>14</sup> As Adorno suggests, within 'the general and necessary' activity of the subject, 'inalienably social labor lies hidden' (Adorno, 2004: 177). The rationality of individual exchanges depends upon the social form of production which the concept of utility expresses. Marginal utility theory

reduces this form of social production to the technical division of labor and the rationality of the individual producers and consumers who constitute the capitalist system. Neoclassical economics therefore, which determines the subject in its abstract identity to natural laws, represents the objectification of the subject by the value form, which finds its articulation in a naturalized and transhistorical concept of utility.

## NEOLIBERALISM AND THE ECONOMICS OF INFORMATION

While there are significant points of contact between neoclassical economics and neoliberalism, the latter represents a significant departure from many of the key doctrines of the neoclassical tradition. Originating in the Austrian School of economics and the Mont Pelerin Society in the 1930s, neoliberalism began as a critique of laissez-faire economics and socialism.<sup>15</sup> In addition to central figures like Carl Menger and Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek rose to prominence as the most influential neoliberal thinker of this period. Throughout the course of his contributions to the 'Socialist Calculation Debate', Hayek articulated a body of thinking that broke from foundational assumptions of the neoclassical microeconomic orthodoxy.<sup>16</sup> Rather than defining the market as a static, physical mechanism that allocates resources, Hayek defined the market as an information processor. As he famously argued in 'The Use of Knowledge in Society' (1945):

The peculiar character of the problem of a rational economic order is determined precisely by the fact that the knowledge of circumstances of which we must make use never exists in concentrated or integrated form but solely as dispersed bits of incomplete and frequently contradictory knowledge which all the separate individuals possess. The economic problem of society is thus not merely a problem of how to allocate 'given' resources – if 'given' is taken to mean given to a single mind which deliberately solves the problem

of how to secure the best use of resources known to any of the members of society, for ends whose relative importance only these individuals know. Or, to put it briefly, it is a problem of the utilization of knowledge not given to anyone in its totality. (Hayek, 1945: 519)

Against Menger, who grounds the spontaneous emergence of markets in the rationality of individuals, Hayek begins from the assumption that individuals are radically ignorant of the efficient distribution of goods. Only the market is capable of discovering how to allocate resources efficiently. Rather than defining the market as the instrument that allocates resources and achieves clearing prices in equilibrium, 'the price system as such' becomes a mechanism for communicating information (Hayek, 1945: 519). For neoliberals, information is not simply knowledge that can be discovered, but is also a commodity which can be exchanged. As a consequence, the neoliberal vision for a free market society turns on the belief that the market possesses the capacity to become a rational subject under the correct social conditions. Moreover, the market's rationality *is more complete and efficient than any human subject*.

Hayek's contributions to the socialist calculation debate represent a bold departure from the paradigm of neoclassical general equilibrium. Rather than defining the market as an allocation device grounded in the rationality of utility maximization, Hayek stressed the ignorance of agents under conditions of competition. One epistemic consequence of this position is the reification of information as an ontological thing that exists independently of the thinking subject. The market in this representation emerges as the thinking subject in its capacity to identify and broadcast dispersed fragments of knowledge. Such a subject, Hayek argues, cannot be consciously designed, but only emerges immanently through the mediations of the price mechanism. He describes the practice of competition as an epistemic process:

Which goods are scarce, however, or which things are goods, or how scarce or valuable they are, is precisely one of the conditions that competition should discover: in each case it is the preliminary outcomes of the market process that inform individuals where it is worthwhile to search. Utilizing the widely diffused knowledge in a society with an advanced division of labor cannot be based on the condition that individuals know all the concrete uses that can be made of the objects in their environment [...] [T]he knowledge of which I am speaking consists to a great extent of the ability to detect certain conditions – an ability that individuals can use effectively only when the market tells them what kinds of goods and services are demanded, and how urgently. (Hayek, 2002: 13)

The free market appears as the means to organize decentralized information to competing individuals. Within a law-bound structure of a social order that defends private property, depoliticizes social relations, and defends itself from the short-sightedness of welfare protections, the market can realize itself as the rational subject of social coordination. The political corollary to the determination of the free market as an information processor for Hayek and other thinkers from the Mont Pelerin Society, is the necessary failure of socialist planning.<sup>17</sup>

Hayek's efforts to theorize market processes with epistemological categories belonged to a broader postwar context, which can be characterized by the general turn toward the study of information and communication. If neoclassical economics developed its models through an imitation of energy physics, neoliberal economics (as well as the neoclassical orthodoxy it would confront), articulated its understanding of information from key technological and institutional developments. The introduction of the first digital computers, as well as the associated emergence of communication technologies and information theory, established the general context for the shift to an economics of information (Hayek, 1948: 168, 186–8, 456).

To name just one example within this wider development, Claude Shannon's work represents a key source in the proliferation

of information theory beyond the computer sciences; his reformulation of communication as a physical process irrevocably contributed to the treatment of information as an exchangeable thing by economists. Together with Warren Weaver, Shannon developed a mathematical theory of communication that treated the concept of information as a physical system (Dupuy, 2009: 114). In his influential paper, 'A Mathematical Theory of Communication' (1948), Shannon theorized communication as a stochastic process. By quantifying the amount of uncertainty expressed by a string of symbols as physical entropy, the concept of information could be abstracted from its semantic content.<sup>18</sup> The determination of information and communication as a physical process emerged as a crucial resource in the wider context of computer science, military decision theory, game theory, and cybernetics that characterized the postwar period.<sup>19</sup>

Economists also rapidly appropriated Shannon's information theory for their own purposes. As Mirowski and Nik-Khah suggest, the proliferation of information theory 'had the unintended consequence of bolstering the general impression that scientists could and should treat information as a quantifiable thing, or even as a *commodity*' (Mirowski, 2002: 105). While largely a misapprehension of the concept, the appropriation of information theory by economics fundamentally altered its operative commodity definitions, as well as the very meaning of market processes. But the attribution of cognitive faculties to markets is not merely a theoretical appendage to the emergence of new informational technologies: the concept of economic information has its basis in the real process of abstraction that is immanent to the reproduction of the commodity form. As Sohn-Rethel argues, the material practice of commodity exchanges between individuals under capitalism validates an ideal abstraction in reality. Information is the concept of the objective relations between things that appear in the form of thoughts.

The reification of information as an identifiable process – where uncertainty is reduced by decentralized means and concentrated in prices – represents the mystification of social relations by the abstract form of general equivalence in commodity exchange.

## COMPETITION, ADAPTATION, SPONTANEOUS ORDER

In an effort to shift the basic problem of economics to questions of knowledge and coordination, Hayek turned to developments in psychology, information theory, and cybernetics. In his *The Sensory Order* (1952), for example, he developed an account of cognition that drew from nineteenth-century associationist psychology and portrayed the mind as a hierarchical set of classifying algorithms. Additionally, by engaging the work of philosophers of mind Gilbert Ryle and Michael Polanyi, he formulated a category of 'tacit knowledge' – stressing that the mind functions primarily as implicit, and non-articulate, knowledge (see Hayek, 2014: 48–54).<sup>20</sup> Grounded in an abstract, non-articulate order of classifying systems, the mind orders experience unconsciously, and thus always knows more than it can demonstrate or say. As Mirowski and Nik-Khah indicate, for Hayek 'it was *rationality that was largely unconscious*, with conscious perception and drives constituting the veneer of intentionality and desires floating on top of the sea of obscure and inaccessible rule structures' (Mirowski and Nik-Khah, 2017: 68). Guided by ordering rules, the individual's rationality seeks information through mechanisms that are unavailable to self-reflection or conscious revision. Hayek's psychology is a necessary stage in his later effort to redefine markets as epistemic processes; by attributing ignorance to the agent of cognition, and by positioning the agent in a self-structuring system that resembles the inarticulate rules underlying consciousness,

commercial practices (namely competition), become the means by which agents discover the necessary information for self-interested behavior. This process of discovery, however, must be framed by the appropriate institutional constraints and incentivizing social forms.

With its transdisciplinary approach to the study of communication and control, the science of cybernetics also inspired Hayek to consider defining markets as organic and self-ordering systems.<sup>21</sup> The relationship of information to control can be seen, for example, in his *Law, Legislation, and Liberty* (1976), when he defines the price mechanism as a ‘medium of communicating knowledge’, which not only broadcasts information, but also influences ‘the decision of others’ (Hayek, 1976: 125). The cybernetic concept of negative feedback in particular, which refers to the inherent tendency of an organism, machine, or system to correct itself through the output of information, became a key resource for Hayek’s epistemology of markets.<sup>22</sup> Although he rejected classical laissez-faire doctrines regarding the spontaneous capacity of markets to reach general equilibrium, Hayek maintained that if the market were left alone to operate without direct regulation, it would convey the necessary information through the aggregate interactions of individual responses to the price system.

Although Hayek never formulated a comprehensive cybernetic theory of markets, his later work increasingly mobilized organicist, cybernetic, and biological categories for his articulation of economic competition. Garret Hardin’s work on ecology in *Nature and Man’s Fate* (1959), was influential in this regard, and shaped Hayek’s late attempts to define economic behavior as though it were an evolutionary process (Oliva, 2016). Hardin understood the process of Darwinian adaptation to be a cybernetic system governed by negative feedback, where the traits of a given species are regulated against deviations through adaptations

to the environment (Oliva, 2016: 26). More importantly, the same principle of negative feedback operating in the living species is equally at work in a market system. Within the Darwinian framework, Hardin argues, ‘the concept of the “fittest” has the same normalizing role as that played by the “natural” process of commodities in labor markets’ (Hardin, 1959: 55). Having read Hardin’s cyberneticist work on the self-regulating properties of adaptation in biology and economics, Hayek arrived at a fundamental concept in his economic thought – namely, the idea of ‘spontaneous order’.

The category of the spontaneous order refers to human practices that lead to more complex forms of social organization in the absence of all a priori design. Through the activity of competition, human beings ‘adapt’ to their environment through the information conveyed by prices. Just as species evolve through responses to changes in their environment – and through the reproduction of successful traits – the market too, ‘orders itself’ through the coordinating activity of competition (Hayek, 1978: 183). As Hayek argues:

The information that individuals or organisations can use to adapt to the unknown is necessarily partial, and is conveyed by signals (e.g., prices) through long chains of individuals, each person passing on in modified form a combination of streams of abstract market signals. Nonetheless, *the whole structure of activities tends to adapt, through these partial and fragmentary signals, to conditions foreseen by and known to no individual*, even if this adaptation is never perfect. (Hayek, 1988: 76)

A self-regulating market thus forms itself immanently through the unconscious, self-interested actions of the individuals who constitute it. Within the proper framework of rules and laws, Hayek argues, human civilization ‘evolves’ through the competitive selection of behaviors, customs, and institutions, which in turn, coalesce as the ordered context for coordinated rational economic activity (Hayek, 1978: 22–8).<sup>23</sup>

While it seems the concept of a spontaneous order breaks from what Adorno has called 'mythic nature', in its apparent dynamism and complex form of interaction with social institutions, Hayek's late thought remains grounded in an implicit metaphysics of economic nature. Rather than deriving a theoretical representation of the market from the formal properties of physical nature, Hayek interprets the immanent structure of nature itself as being economic. Citing legal theorist Sir Frederick Pollock as a key influence, Hayek defines the doctrine of evolution as 'nothing else than the historical method applied to the facts of nature' (Hayek, 1978: 41). As natural-history, this position does not comprehend how the concepts of nature and history are, in the words of Adorno, 'mediated in their apparent difference', but rather reifies evolutionary process as the principled subject of history. If the neoclassical tradition constructed its analogy of nature and economy by imitating the laws of external nature, neoliberalism interprets external nature as being economic in its inner substance.

Recognizing the tension between his own natural and historical categories, Hayek tried to synthesize their function with the concept of a spontaneous order. In 'The Results of Human Action but not of Human Design' (1978), he argues that the classical Greek distinction between what is natural [*phusei*] and what is human-made [*thesei*], can be sublated in the difference between intentional and unintentional human practice (Hayek, 1988: 45). As opposed to an intentionally designed order or institution [*taxis*], Hayek refers to a 'natural order' [*kosmos*], which is of natural origin and purpose. Situated between the artificial and natural orders lies a 'spontaneous order' – i.e., a human-made, stable, and progressive order that is the product of human practice but not deliberate design (Hayek, 1988: 45). Markets, he suggests, are spontaneous orders, because they are the emergent outcomes of human interaction, but lack any pre-established rationale or purpose.

Although Hayek's articulation of a spontaneous order indicates that the market's organizing properties supervene upon the mutual interaction of individuals, his understanding of self-regulation is far from the methodological individualism of the classical tradition. As he argues in *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* (1988), the communication of information within a spontaneous order requires an adequate institutional and legal context for its development. The emergence of a market order requires the deliberate construction of an institution that cannot be reduced to natural processes – i.e., private property.<sup>24</sup> Information can only be efficiently collated through decentralized means. 'Several property', he argues, 'leads to the generation and use of more information than is possible under central direction' (Hayek, 1988: 86). Against centralized state planning, Hayek posits the institution of private property as the decentralized means to organize individuals according to market relations. The spontaneous order emerges on the basis of private property as the structuring context for the coordination of human practice. But the institution of private property – as Hayek is willing to concede – requires active state intervention in the preservation of markets.<sup>25</sup>

## NEOLIBERAL SECOND NATURE

Having delineated the logic in which neoliberal categories define markets as epistemic processes, I can now develop the categories through the prism of natural-history in order to draw out their consequences for the critique of political economy. Neoliberalism, I maintain, has legitimated its vision for a free market society – with its specific ideals regarding liberty, competition, and freedom – through the manifest form of natural objectivity that characterizes market coordination. This manifest form of appearing, which is only possible on the basis of the market's

abstraction from the irrational content of society, inscribes individuals in a fated logic of authority defined by the price system's abstract and impersonal character. If the neo-classical tradition constructed its vision of a market through an analogy to a mechanical, timeless, and deterministic concept of nature, neoliberal thought builds its vision for a market society through an alternative image of nature – the *free market is a self-ordering system that knows more than society*. The science of economics therefore, has rehabilitated a metaphysics of economic nature.

Neoliberalism then, should not be understood as an economic doctrine primarily, but rather as a political project that constructs the social blindness in which the economy can appear as fate. By projecting the faculties of mind onto the market, neoliberal theory determines the latter as the rational instrument best suited for negotiating the antagonism of order and chaos. Unfolding in its objectivity and abstract identity to nature, the free market develops itself by virtue of its immanent capacity to form social organization through the circulation of its knowledge. But the category of the free market does not recognize itself as historically constituted second nature; its seeming objectivity is grounded in the fetish form of the exchange abstraction, which appears in the form of the speculative commodity.

The information economy is the fetish form of the commodity in financial capitalism. The real abstraction of commodity exchange validates the appearance of information as an exchangeable thing; information commodities appear through the disappearance of their socially determined character. As a corollary to the necessary divergence of value and its representation in money under capitalism, market prices assume an autonomous form. Speculative markets are the petrified form of appearance of the commodity abstraction; their identity as subjects of capital conceals their social character. The emergence of the free market as the epistemological subject of

capital, therefore, is comprehensible as being intrinsic to the contradictory form of value, which is expressed as the double character of the commodity. Neoliberal economics reifies abstraction as the principle of social coordination by attributing social powers to commodities.

But the fetishization of the information economy is not merely an illusion of theory – it also exerts itself as an objective social form. Fetishized perceptions, Adorno argues, 'are not illusions' because human beings 'become dependent on those objectivities which are obscure to them' (Adorno, 1997: 508). Human subjects are dependent on the world of commodities that become instruments of social validation. The categories of illusion 'are in truth also categories of reality' – their form of epistemic authority is both expressive of, and immanent to, the form of mediation specific to capital (Adorno, 1997: 508). A critical theory of neoliberalism, therefore, would mean bringing the concept of the free market into a confrontation with the social object it expresses in inverted form.

By positioning the free market as the most adequate instrument for the negotiation of society and nature, society in turn, finds itself restricted in what it can determine by democratic means. In the face of the growing ecological crises of anthropogenic climate change that confront the capitalist global order, neoliberal institutions remain undaunted in their core political strategy: *left to its own self-determination, the market will discover the solution to the crises of external nature in time*.<sup>26</sup> By redefining the market as a self-correcting, thinking, and ordering system, neoliberalism reinstates a category of mythic nature. Guided by the providential movement of the price system, society reconciles itself to nature through the seeming objectivity of economy. A critical theory of neoliberal society negates the objectivity of economy by 'turning the truth' of its concepts against 'the untruth that produced them' (Adorno, 2003: 102). The dialectic of

natural-history captures the double-sidedness of the concepts of economic theory as the necessary expression of an historically specific social totality. By recovering the sedimented history of political violence and forcible coercion that have disappeared throughout the course of financial capitalism's appearing, a critical theory of society finds itself positioned to grasp the hegemonic logic governing the present neoliberal order.

## Notes

- 1 A condensed version of this chapter appeared as 'Economics as Natural-History: Adorno and the Critique of Neoliberalism', in *Architecture and Culture*, vol. 5, issue 2 (August 2017): 165–74.
- 2 As Werner Bonefeld argues, '*Negative Dialectics* is the presentation of the wrong state of things. It argues that the idea of society as "subject to natural laws is ideology if it is hypostasized as immutably given by nature" [...] Instead, it holds that the incomprehensible economic forces find their rational explanation in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice. It thus argues that the relations of economic objectivity manifest the social nature of an inverted [*verkehrte*] and perverted [*verrückte*] world of definite social relations' (Bonefeld, 2016: 66).
- 3 All subsequent citations of 'The Idea of Natural-History' will refer to Hullot-Kentor's translation.
- 4 Robert Brenner, for example, connects the emergence of financial capitalism with declining rates of profit in the industrial manufacturing sector beginning in the 1970s. See Brenner (2006).
- 5 For background on the Frankfurt discussion as well as publication of the 'Idea of Natural-History' in *Kant-Studien*, see Hullot-Kentor's 'Introduction' to Adorno's 'The Idea of Natural-History', in Adorno (2006: 234–5), and Buck-Morss (1977: 17–20).
- 6 Although Adorno's language regarding the concept of 'natural-history' shifts in *Negative Dialectics* to the more direct form of 'natural history' that one finds in Marx, the core commitments of the 1932 lecture persist throughout *Negative Dialectics*, and the latter text requires what is established in the former lecture in Adorno's development of the concept of the 'non-identical'.
- 7 See e.g., Adorno's reference to Lukács: 'This world is a second nature; like the first – "first nature" for Lukács is likewise alienated nature, nature in the sense of the natural sciences – "it can only be defined as the embodiment of well-known yet meaningless necessities and therefore it is ungraspable and unknowable in its actual substance"' (Adorno, 2006: 261).
- 8 Adorno's development of Lukács' concept of reification in *History and Class Consciousness* is beyond the scope of this chapter and has been treated extensively elsewhere. See e.g., Rose (2014: 138–41). For criticism of Rose's interpretation, see O'Kane (2013: 123–34).
- 9 See Mirowski (1989: 142): 'Value was reified as a conserved *substance*, conserved in the activity of trade to provide structural stability to prices, and differentially specified in the process of production. Almost all of the theories conforming to this pattern are now remembered under the rubric of Classical Political Economy'.
- 10 For a foundational account of the utility theory of value in the neoclassical tradition, see Marshall (1920: 76–84).
- 11 For an example of the equivalence of utility and energy in the work of Irving Fisher, see Mirowski (1989: 229): 'The individual in this model is only made manifest by his psychology, and his psychology is only portrayed as a field of preferences. It is the energy/utility that provides the only ontological identity of the actor in the mathematics'.
- 12 Such problems include the fact that marginalists did not possess an adequate grasp of the conservation principles that would render their imitation of proto-energetics coherent. For details see Mirowski (1989: 293–310).
- 13 For an example of Sohn-Rethel's formulation of the process of real abstraction, see his *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (1978: 20): 'The essence of commodity abstraction, however, is that it is not thought-induced; it does not originate in men's minds but in their actions. And yet this does not give "abstraction" a merely metaphorical meaning. It is abstraction in its precise, literal sense. The economic concept of value resulting from it is characterised by a complete absence of quality, a differentiation purely by quantity and by applicability to every kind of commodity and service which can occur on the market'.
- 14 For Adorno, the exchange abstraction is founded upon surplus value. See Adorno (1997: 507).
- 15 For historical details regarding the origins of neoliberal economic thought, particularly in the context of its emergence from the Austrian School and formation at the Mont Pelerin Society, see Mirowski and Plehwe (2015: 1–38).
- 16 Note that many neoclassical economists at the time were socialists committed to developing a theory of market planning through economic calculation. This development emerged in the inter-war period as the 'Socialist Calculation Debate', and consisted in wide-ranging arguments

- between market socialists like Oscar Lange and a number of economists from the Austrian School. For historical accounts see Burgin (2012) and Lavoie (1981).
- 17 For Hayek's own assessment of the socialist calculation debate as well as his departure from Mises' critique of socialist calculation, see Hayek (1948: 119–208).
  - 18 For details regarding Shannon's use of physical entropy in information theory and its reception, see Mirowski and Nik-Khah (2017: 46): 'this move rendered the semantic aspects of communication utterly irrelevant for the theory [...] Shannon then posited that the mathematical expression for the average *improbability* of a string of symbols would be exactly the same as the earlier definition of physical entropy'.
  - 19 The emergence of information economics at the Cowles Commission and the Chicago School were a part of the broader context of state and military patronage that characterized science funding and organization in the postwar period. For details regarding the formation of information economics at the Cowles Commission, as well as its relation to game theory, operations research, and decision theory at the RAND Corporation, see Mirowski (2002: 153–231).
  - 20 For a commentary on Hayek's concept of tacit knowledge, see Oguz (2010).
  - 21 Hayek's engagement with cybernetics was not restricted to an indirect encounter with the emerging literature, but also included active participation in the Alpbach Symposium of 1968, a major event in the history of the cybernetic sciences. See Dupuy (2009: 75–6).
  - 22 For an account of the influence of developments in cybernetics on Hayek's psychology and economic theory, see Oliva (2016).
  - 23 Hayek's concept of cultural evolution is overt in *The Fatal Conceit*, where he develops an account of market emergence where a Darwinian principle of competitive selection serves as the means by which orders transmit rules of behavior to the most successful social groups. It would be interesting in this regard, to consider the revival of organicist and evolutionary categories in neoliberal thought in terms of their relation to racist ideologies. Moishe Postone, for example, suggests that the proliferation of 'racial theories and the rise of Social Darwinism' in the late nineteenth century can be understood as the objectification of the 'double character' of the commodity form. See Postone (1986: 309–10).
  - 24 Neoliberal economic theory is quite unlike classical liberalism with respect to the category of private property. Unlike foundational liberal thinkers like John Locke, who ground the right to private property in labor, Hayek understands the origins of property to be grounded in a context of 'rules', which evolved through the practice of exchange. For details regarding the neoliberal conception of law and private property, see Dardot and Laval (2013: 58–85).
  - 25 Hayek regarded the tradition of laissez-faire economics to be fundamentally mistaken in its prescription of a weak state. See Hayek (2007: 118): 'The question whether the state should or should not "act" or "interfere" is a highly ambiguous and misleading description of the principles on which a liberal policy is based'.
  - 26 For an excellent account of the influence of neoliberal think tanks on 'free market environmentalism', which includes policies of carbon 'cap-and-trade' markets and geoengineering initiatives, see Beder (2001). See also Sikka (2012).

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# On Emancipation...

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## INTRODUCTION

Emancipation is at the centre of critical theory. Marx rejected the idea of human emancipation as political emancipation, that is, as a process that takes place solely through the state or civil society. He considered emancipation through the state to be an abstract liberation of the selfish individual inscribed in bourgeois society. From his early writings – such as the *1844 Manuscripts* – to *Capital*, the idea of human emancipation is much more radical than that of political emancipation, which in fact belongs to the concept of bourgeois society.

According to Marx, human emancipation is based on the liberation of not just workers or proletarians from exploitation and economic compulsion, and political domination. It is in fact liberation of society from rule by real abstractions. An emancipated society is not a capitalist-free society of proletarians or a one-class (proletarian) society. Emancipation entails the achievement of a

class-less society. It is the abolition of proletarian labour and, consequently, the abolition of proletarians as a class. The liberation from domination and emancipation of social reproduction from the capitalist form of wealth, value as more value, money as more money and as such capital, would lead humanity to a classless or communist society of self-aware subjects connected to others and to nature in direct manner, without rule by social abstractions, economic or political. According to Marcuse (1958: 127), it is an association or commune of ‘communist individuals’.

However, which is the praxis that could lead humanity to emancipation? In *Communist Manifesto*, one of Marx and Engels’ most important works and amongst the most influential texts of the twentieth century, the emancipation of the proletariat – the basis for the complete emancipation of human beings – would take place through the communist ‘Party’. In *Manifesto*, the figure of the party as a means of emancipation gave revolutionary praxis a political dimension that became

one of revolution's essentials. Furthermore, it opened up the possibility of fighting to take over state power in order to use it as a tool in bringing about radical social change. Lenin was the main exponent of this theoretical and practical perspective. He believed the communist party is where the proletarian class asserts itself for itself and meets its so-called historical mission to end the muck of ages, that is, to overthrow bourgeois domination. For this mission to be accomplished, the vanguard party must take control of state power. Lenin's theory of praxis, which was endorsed also by Georg Lukács (1968, 1970), was the most significant reference point for revolution in the twentieth century, leading to many discussions and creating a lot of controversy between the different theoretical perspectives of Marxism.

Rosa Luxemburg (1961), the brilliant Marxist and great revolutionary, criticised Lenin's theory of praxis and argued that his conception of revolutionary organisation in the vanguard party was too mechanistic and centralist. She believed – just as Marx did – that revolution was fuelled by the element of spontaneity. In this sense, the workers do not need the party to liberate them, for revolution is a self-emancipating practice. This theoretical and practical outlook was embraced by the council communists in Germany and Holland, and theoretically represented by Anton Pannekoek and Paul Mattick, amongst others. We could say there are two theoretical perspectives on revolutionary praxis within the Marxist tradition: one stresses the importance of the party and of taking state power, and the other focuses on the autonomy of struggles and rejects the centralism of the communist party. Rather than creating a theoretical controversy, these two perspectives are part of the historical movement of class struggle.

The goal of this chapter is to discuss the idea of emancipation and praxis in contemporary Marxist authors such as John Holloway, Theodor Adorno, and Walter Benjamin. We also believe it is important to

refer to zapatismo and its alternative proposal of emancipation, which opposes the classical idea of revolution.

The discussion on emancipation and praxis presented here is imbued by the polemic between the aforementioned perspectives on revolutionary praxis, a polemic that becomes harsher when praxis itself is in crisis.

## EMANCIPATION IN THE THEORY OF JOHN HOLLOWAY

The image of revolution – as well as the idea of social emancipation linked to it – has been shaken to its foundations during the past decades, especially since 1968. Even more so since the crisis and fall of the Soviet Union unveiled the failure of a conceptual constellation that had identified these terms with the taking of state power by a revolutionary vanguard. This crisis has led to the emergence of new ways of thinking about radical social change by contemporary theorists who have not only made their own contributions, but have also contributed to updating the work of critics who had already questioned the state-centred idea of emancipation. John Holloway is one of them.

Apart from numerous articles, John Holloway has published two books that are a point of reference in the discussion on revolution and the praxis of emancipation today. These books are *Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today* (2002) and *Crack Capitalism* (2010). In *Change the World Without Taking Power*, Holloway sets forth an idea on social emancipation which openly criticises the classical canon on this issue. *Crack Capitalism* goes deeper into some of the questions deployed in the first book, particularly that of *doing* as a critical category that is central in overcoming *labour* as it is conceived by Marx within capitalism; that is, as the duality of unity and contradiction between concrete labour and abstract labour. Emancipation is thematised

as the liberation of doing and the overcoming of labour, and the revolutionary subject as a *we* who are the movement of doing against labour. Setting out to outline the author's main theoretical points, we have decided to focus on the ideas presented in his first book for – as he too admits – that is where the core of his theorising can be found.

The issue of social emancipation is approached by Holloway as a critique of the classical idea of revolution and the revolutionary subject. Generally speaking, this idea is usually understood as a political process aiming at the occupation of the state by a vanguard (the party), considered the holder of the proletariat's true class consciousness. This formulation stresses the importance of the revolutionary party as the privileged locus for social emancipation, in the sense that it is the theoretical-practical synthesis of proletarian class consciousness in the revolutionary process. Holloway brings about a fundamental shift: he considers the existential dimension of oppression as the starting point for revolutionary theory. According to Holloway (2002: 1–2), the starting point for revolutionary theory is our *scream*, as well as the dramatic expression of our existence as subjects that are torn apart by the antagonism that is inherent in capitalist society, but at the same time reject this world of oppression. This scream – understood as the negation of what the world is, as a No that interrupts the assertion of what exists as the expression of domination – must be the starting point for conceiving revolution and, more broadly, for engaging in any type of critical reflection. 'It is from rage that thought is born, not from the pose of reason' (2001:1). Our justification lies in the denial of the perverted world and not in the 'promise of a happy ending' (2).

As we already mentioned, this discourse goes against the traditional argumentation on this subject, characterised by the elements of class consciousness and the revolutionary vanguard. To honour the importance the latter has had in the historical process of twentieth-century revolutions, we must

comment – however briefly – on this issue, using certain classical authors as a point of reference. For Lenin (2013: 28) '*the role of vanguard can be fulfilled only by a party that is guided by an advanced theory*', for the social-democrat (revolutionary) consciousness 'could only be brought to them from without' (32):

The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade-union consciousness, i.e., it may itself realise the necessity for combining in unions, to fight against the employers and to strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc. The theory of Socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical and economic theories that were elaborated by the educated representatives of the propertied classes, the intellectuals. The founders of modern scientific Socialism, Marx and Engels, themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia. Similarly, in Russia, the theoretical doctrine of Social-Democracy arose quite independently of the spontaneous growth of the labour movement; it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of the development of ideas among the revolutionary Socialist intelligentsia. (32–3)

Along the same lines, Lukács provides an argumentation that delves into the Leninist centrality of class consciousness in the historical process. Proletarian class consciousness, he argues, allows for a political praxis that can lead to an emancipated historical totality, where the separation of subject and object that is characteristic of the capitalist relation has been overcome. And this is due to the fact that the proletariat, more than any other class, has the possibility of being the 'identical subject–object in History'

Only when the consciousness of the proletariat is able to point out the road along which the dialectics of history is objectively impelled, but which it cannot travel unaided, will the consciousness of the proletariat awaken to a consciousness of the process, and only then will the proletariat become the identical subject–object of history whose praxis will change reality. (Lukács, 1968: 197)

Both Lenin – from the perspective of the vanguard – and Lukács – from 'totality' – coincide in a state-centred idea of revolution.

They both recognise the *soviet* as a fundamental figure of class struggle,<sup>1</sup> but it is the figure of the party that dominates the issue of class consciousness. In fact, the proletarian revolution is understood as the dialectical movement that implies the transformation of the proletarian party into a state. This line of argument can be observed in Lenin's *The State and Revolution*, as well as in Lukács' positing of the issue of overcoming reification in the course of a dialectical process, in which the 'arrival of the proletariat to power' and the 'organisation of the state and the economy on socialist lines' are very important stages (Lukács, 1968: 208).

Furthermore, Lukács arguably 'filters' the experience of the Russian revolution and the legacy of its main leader and theorist through the dialectical category of totality, granting the theory of the centrality of class consciousness and the party in the revolutionary process a deeper philosophical foundation; this theoretical foundation was perceived by Stalinist bureaucracy as a menace, for it challenged the mechanistic and vulgar materialism that legitimised the Soviet state. In fact, one could argue that the Lukácsian perspective feeds off Hegelian dialectics – which in turn is characterised by ending in a system, hence its identitarian and totalising characteristics<sup>2</sup> – and that, in a way, this theoretical enlightenment can be found in yet another of the great revolutionary theorists of the beginning of the twentieth century, Antonio Gramsci (2011). In elaborating the concept of hegemony, the great Italian revolutionary made an enormous effort to establish or translate Leninism into the conditions of the 'West' where, he argues, class struggle would be more of a 'trench warfare' rather than a 'war of movements', as it appears in the 'East' (Czarist Russia).

In opposition to this conceptual constellation, Holloway believes a theory of revolution that concludes in the state is not only false, but also has disastrous practical and historical consequences. It is false for it is based on the fiction of the state as an autonomous instance

that can be the starting point for revolutionary transformation (Holloway, 2002: 13). The state, according to his line of argument, is not a neutral apparatus that can serve as an instrument for revolutionary transformation. On the contrary, it is a constitutive part of the capitalist relation itself and is in no way autonomous from it. Hence the importance of understanding it as a *form* of capital's social relations (Holloway, 1992).

Therefore, to focus revolution on the winning of state power is to abstract the state from the social relations of which it is part.

Conceptually, the state is cut out from the clutter of social relations that surround it and made to stand up with all the appearance of being an autonomous actor. Autonomy is attributed to the state, if not in the absolute sense of reformist (or liberal) theory, then at least in the sense that the state is seen as being potentially autonomous from the capitalist social relations that surround it. (Holloway, 2002: 15)

And it is false, too, because the struggle to take control of the state produces an assertive subjectivity of power that lies in the antipodes of social emancipation (16) which, in turn, is already present in the party as a space of social and political hierarchisation (17). In this sense, 'you cannot build a society of non-power relations by conquering power' (17).

So, where should we look to? Our author points out that we cannot stand with our arms crossed in the face of the social and natural disaster the capitalist relation entails, but that a theory of power to overcome capitalism is not an acceptable solution under the current circumstances. One answer is the perspective of anti-power, the consistent deployment of the *scream* as the starting point of critique (Holloway, 2002: 22) and of the category of *doing*.

The scream implies doing. 'In the beginning was the deed', says Goethe's Faust. But before the deed comes the doing. In the beginning was the doing. But in an oppressive society, doing is not an innocent, positive doing: it is impregnated with

negativity, both because it is negated, frustrated doing, and because it negates the negation of itself. Before the doing comes the scream. It is not materialism that comes first, but negativity (23).

And he continues:

Doing is practical negation. Doing changes, negates an existing state of affairs. Doing goes beyond, transcends. The scream, which is our starting point in a world which negates us – the only world we know – pushes us towards doing. Our materialism, if that word is relevant at all, is a materialism rooted in doing, doing-to-negate, negative practice, projection beyond. Our foundation, if that word is relevant at all, is not an abstract preference for matter over mind, but the scream, the negation of what exists. (23)

And that is so because, in capitalist society, doing is not free, it is mutilated, fractured, broken, subjugated, and alienated in labour. The scream is the scream of doing that projects itself beyond our existence that is alienated in labour (Holloway, 2002: 23), of doing that is transformed from *power-to* to *power-over* (27). *Power-to* is always social power, it is part of the ‘social flow of doing’ (26). When the social flow of doing is broken it turns into its opposite, *power-over*, to wit, into an antagonistic process (29). In capitalism, doing exists in the form of its negation, that is, *power over*. This is essential in understanding *doing* as a critical category, a category that implies rebellion against its negation in *power-over*. Amongst other things, this perspective allows for an ‘opening’ of the category of power – which has remained ‘closed’ in classical authors such as Foucault – and for thinking of revolution as anti-power (40).

A central part of *power-over* and of the breaking of the ‘social flow of doing’ is the fetishism of social relationships in capitalism. The ‘done’, Holloway says, ‘is severed from and turned against the doing’ (Holloway, 2002: 43). This leads to the ‘self-negation of doing’ (43) as a phenomenon of the rule of capital expressed in the fetishism of the commodity. And it is precisely this fetishism that

mainly stands in the way of revolution, for it is the ‘mode of existence’ of social relations in capitalism (50–3) and our perception of reality is closely linked to this phenomenon. To comprehend it is to attain a better understanding of why people tolerate exploitation and domination by concepts such as ideology or hegemony.

It is towards this direction that Holloway builds a bridge between the issue of fetishism and that of the critique of the category of identity which is at the core of Adorno’s negative dialectic. He considers identity to be the most concentrated form of fetishism, in the sense that it consecrates the subordination of doing to the done and ‘contradiction is flattened’ (Holloway, 2002: 57). And this is the negation of the subject by the object (57) in a reality where categories express a reality that has been effectively fetishised (71).

This line of argument allows Holloway to advance on the issue of power and the state, prioritising the need to defetishise these concepts. To him, the idea of ‘taking power’ is already a fetishised idea (Holloway, 2002: 72).

The state, then, is not the locus of power that it appears to be. It is just one element in the shattering of social relations. [...] The state is exactly what the word suggests, a bulwark against change, against the flow of doing, the embodiment of identity. (73)

If that is so, then what is to be done? Holloway’s answer is to look for hope in the ‘explosive force of that which is denied’ (Holloway, 2002: 76), which implies recognising that we are all imbued by fetishism but that, as contradictory persons with a capacity to negate that which negates us, we are more than persons that have been reduced to things; that is, we are more than fetishised persons. With this, Holloway (70–8) introduces a difference between fetishism and the process of fetishisation. He tells us that speaking of fetishism in a ‘strict sense’ closes the category, it turns it into a category of domination, whilst approaching things in

terms of a 'process of fetishisation' speaks of the centrality of struggle in understanding the category, and opens it up as an antagonistic movement from which a *surplus* emerges, a surplus that subverts the identity that constitutes it as a category of domination. In this sense, he argues, fetishism cannot be understood without its opposite; it is a process that entails its rejection (89); ergo, this process is antagonism *in actu*.

This approach allows for an understanding of the forms of capital (money form, state form, capital form) as process forms that are not constituted once and for all, but are rather under discussion (Holloway, 2002: 89–91). The category of fetishism as a process, in particular, allows the author to reinforce his critique of the state as an autonomous form to be considered in itself: the state is a form of fetishisation of social relations (94–7). In this sense, the struggle for emancipation cannot be focused on the state, but rather on anti-power.

What is the relation between anti-power and class struggle in this argumentation? Holloway claims it is not enough to talk of the centrality of class struggle in order to understand capitalist society; for this concept to be truly radical and allow for an equally radical practice, one must rethink class struggle through an anti-fetishist lens. To this effect, it is crucial that we perceive struggle not as a derivative of a social form or 'structure', but rather as a self-constitutive instance: 'Class struggle does not take place within the constituted forms of capitalist social relations: rather the constitution of those forms is itself class struggle' (Holloway, 2002: 143). This means that the revolutionary subject must not be defined, obstructing the flow of antagonism. 'The critical-revolutionary subject is not a defined "who" but an undefined, undefinable, anti-definitional "what"' (150). This goes against the notion of fetishism implied by the idea of class consciousness as the privileged knowledge of the party and the leaders in the revolutionary process (144).

In other words, for Holloway, the starting point for the concept of revolution cannot be power and its 'revolutionary' use by a vanguard that conquers it; it has to be anti-power. In fact, the author's line of argument pursues the goal of granting visibility to what is invisible, of unveiling through the concept what has been rendered invisible by the dominant narrative of revolution based on power. To understand anti-power, we need different concepts such as non-identity, the Not Yet (Holloway, 2002: 157). Anti-power exists in the open and visible struggles, but also in everyday struggle; it lies 'in the dignity of everyday existence' (158).

From his perspective, this is crucial in understanding the current crisis not as an autonomous objectivity, but rather as part of our doing and its antagonistic movement, as our negativity; that is, as the intensification of the crisis caused by class struggle (Holloway, 2002: 204). To break with capital, one must not only scream or flee; one must take control of the means of doing, recover power-to (158). However, to think of this recovery in terms of ownership is to continue to think in fetishised terms (159). It is to think of ownership as a noun, which in turn implies that we are stuck in the field of domination (159). The expropriation of the expropriators cannot be perceived in terms of recovering things, but rather as the 'reassertion of the flow of doing' (159). This constitutes a certain type of anti-politics, as it goes against and beyond the fragmentation of doing that politics in its 'state-oriented connotation' implies (212–13). What he proposes is an anti-instrumental conception of revolution, for to think of revolution in instrumental terms is to think of revolution in terms of capital (212–13).

So, how do we change the world without taking power? We do not know, for there exists no formula. Uncertainty is part of the revolutionary path (Holloway, 2002: 215). '*Preguntando caminamos*', 'asking we walk', as the zapatistas say.

Importantly, Holloway's theory of doing is more developed in *Crack Capitalism*. *Doing*

*against Labour*. As the title of the book reveals, the central subject matter is, precisely, doing against labour, the latter understood as the contradictory and antagonistic unity between concrete and abstract labour. Although we cannot go into details in this chapter, we must point out that, in *Crack Capitalism*, Holloway (2010: 3–5, 62–3, 143–4) expands his argumentation on anti-power on the basis of doing and of the figure of the *crack* (the rebellion of doing against labour), which is expressed in an interstitial revolutionary process.

As the author himself points out, part of his theory explores the implications for praxis of Adorno's theory of non-identity. Holloway's contribution on emancipation is a non-identitarian theory.

## NON-IDENTITARIAN PRAXIS AND EMANCIPATION

In the present chapter we have argued that Holloway's work is a critique of Lenin's theory of revolutionary praxis. We have said that Lenin's theory is premised on and concludes in a state-centred idea of revolution, a perspective that Lukács also embraces, whilst in Holloway's writings the idea of the state as an autonomous instance which can provide the foundation for human emancipation falls apart. This breaking with the state as an axis of transformation is amongst Holloway's most significant contributions, as it implies the concept of revolution cannot revolve around the power of a vanguard that controls the state but must, rather, feed on the anti-power that exists in open and everyday struggles.

As we have seen, Lenin and Holloway approach revolutionary praxis in very different ways. However, importantly, they both believe theory must have practical consequences. A direct link between theory and praxis can be found in their work. To different extents, the insights of Lenin and Holloway

are marked by the continuous demand for theory to become practical. The direct link between theory and praxis is a fundamental part of the Marxist tradition, a link that ideally tends towards unity: the unity between theory and praxis.

The relation between theory and praxis within the Marxist tradition was expressed in Marx's (1998: 571) famous eleventh 'Thesis on Feuerbach': 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.' According to Marx, theory is not only a way of interpreting the world; it is to transform it through practice. Theory in itself does not transform society, even if it is a critical theory. It requires practice in order to materialise in the world and transform it.<sup>3</sup> For Marx, just as for Lenin and Lukács, the proletarian class was the one chosen to materialise theory through praxis.

In Marxism, the relation between theory and praxis was understood in terms of this direct and necessary link and had the goal of forming a unity that would bring about the transformation of society. In Holloway's theory of praxis, the proletariat does not have the central role it did in Marx's theory. For Holloway, as we have mentioned, it is we who are the revolutionary subjects, we the human beings in general, understood as potentially rebellious beings. However, in Holloway's theory, praxis continues to occupy a central role in the realisation of theory and, therefore, in the transformation of the world.

In the critical theory articulated by Theodor Adorno, the way the relation between theory and praxis is understood collapses. He openly criticises Marx's Theses on Feuerbach – which, as we saw, laid the foundations for the interpretation of this relation within Marxism – and especially the eleventh. In his most important work, *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno claims that Marx draws his theses on the primacy of practical reason from Kant and German idealism, making it sharper to the point of turning it into



a demand for changing the world rather than merely interpreting it. In very simple terms, practical reason was for Kant a type of reflection that moves towards action, and the German idealism that appeared after Kant can be considered a philosophy of action or activity. Adorno criticised idealism and the Kantian doctrine of practical reason for being a subjective reason that bore no relation to the objects. For Adorno, the most important attempt to construct a philosophy based on the object was Hegel's philosophy, but he failed because he developed a dialectic of identity. Identity, he believed, was the core dimension of bourgeois society reproduced in Hegel's philosophy. According to Adorno, practical reason is founded on the subject and has cleared the path for the reason prevailing in bourgeois society.

In his *Eclipse of Reason*, Max Horkheimer claims that, in modern capitalist society, the dominant type of reason is the one he calls subjective reason. Subjective reason has to do essentially with the capacity of the subject to think and deals with the means without reflecting on the ends. Subjective reason is goal-oriented rational action without a rational goal in itself. According to Horkheimer (2012), subjective reason is revealed in science and technique as the capacity to calculate probabilities and determine the means necessary to an end; in sum, it is an instrumental type of reason. For Adorno, the supremacy of practical reason leads to instrumental reason and, consequently, to illusory praxis. What had been theoretically insufficient in Hegel and Marx, he argues (Adorno, 2007), had been transmitted to historical praxis. For this reason, it was necessary to re-engage in theoretical reflection, rather than have thought bow irrationally before the supremacy of praxis. Adorno believed praxis itself to be an eminently theoretical concept.

One of the objectives of *Negative Dialectics* was to trigger reflection on the potential and the limits of praxis. To that end, there had to be an account of the movement of historical praxis in harmony with Adorno's demand:

radical critique against all that exists. According to Adorno (2005), the doctrine of the unity of theory and praxis in Marx's theorising was fuelled by the possibility of revolutionary action in the nineteenth century. This century of popular insurrections and revolutions made a radical rupture with the bourgeois order plausible, a prospect, however, never fulfilled. Adorno believed that the transformation of the world had failed in the twentieth century too, the Soviet Union being the most conspicuous expression of said failure. The author also argued that one cannot think of praxis without referring to history, or else one runs the risk of falling into the trap of illusory praxis: a desperate praxis conducted for its own sake, a symptom of the powerlessness of human beings in the administered world. Adorno believed praxis in his days was in crisis and was turning into an illusory praxis which, ultimately, was not even praxis.

*Negative Dialectics* went against the political praxis of its time. It was Adorno's attempt to contain the domination that he believed was being reproduced in twentieth-century praxis. In the 1960s the main exponents of the Frankfurt School had abandoned all hope in the socialism of the Soviet Union and rejected orthodox Marxism. Friedrich Pollock, another distinguished member of this School and a very close friend of Adorno and Horkheimer, travelled to the Soviet Union in the 1920s as a guest of the director of the Marx-Engels Institute, David Ryazanov. Soon after Pollock's visit, Ryazanov was sent to exile by Stalin. During his visit to Russia, Pollock studied Soviet planning and his impressions were not favourable (Jay, 1996). At the end of the 1950s Adorno and Horkheimer (2011) thought revolution was quite unlikely. Furthermore, they believed the Communist Party – as it had been conceived by especially Lenin – did not exist anymore, for it had become incorporated in society, which according to Horkheimer (1985) had led to the establishment of State Socialism as the Soviet variant of the Authoritarian

State. In view of the new historical situation, Horkheimer (2011) announced that what had been hitherto understood as praxis had to be abandoned. For Lenin, praxis was a conscious and transforming activity that became fully realised and attained its objective in the Vanguard Party. Without the Party, Horkheimer (2011: 78) pointed out, praxis now meant taking 'seriously the idea that the world needs fundamental change' (78), and that had to become manifest in thinking and doing alike. Therefore, the practical did not reside in political action any more, it resided in the non-identical. Adorno (2011) perceived a supremacy of praxis over theory in the society of his time and put less hope into praxis. For him, theory was more than a simple instrument of praxis, for it had the capacity to reflect on itself. In this sense, Adorno would put his efforts into theory.

When *Negative Dialectics* was published, a very important and radical student movement existed in Frankfurt which proclaimed the need to transform the world. The Socialist German Student Federation (SDS) was created in the universities of West Germany, and some of its most prominent figures were closely linked to the Frankfurt School. Hans-Jürgen Krahl, for example, was one of the leaders of the movement and a close student of Adorno (Claussen, 2010). The students of that time aspired to understand society through critical theory, but also to transform it. In spite of his proximity to this movement, Adorno was critical of the political praxis of the students. He believed (2003) their revolutionary activity was problematic and, in many aspects, useless. Furthermore, he considered there was a distortion of critical thought within the student activist movement which led to situations contrary to their intentions. Adorno referred mainly to the violent acts that resulted from their revolutionary activity. In short, he believed the relation between theory and praxis was a delicate one and required profound reflection.

According to Adorno (2005, 2007) the historical demand for unity between praxis and

theory had relegated theory to a role of servitude and created an autonomous praxis with manic, repressive, and violent characteristics. In that context, theory had to take it upon itself to suspend blind action as a passage towards emancipation. He also believed that theory suffered a type of censorship when it did not translate directly into political action. In his article 'Marginalia to Theory and Praxis', Adorno (2005) narrates the attack against a student for choosing activism over study. After smashing his room, his assailants wrote on the wall: 'Whoever occupies himself with theory, without acting practically, is a traitor to socialism' (263). This anecdote was an example of the type of praxis that reproduced oppression. For Adorno, he who thinks resists the liquidation of theory in the hands of dogmatisation, and aversion to theory was a characteristic of that time. The author believed the ban on thought imposed by dogmatism contributed decisively to illusory praxis, something that became clear in Soviet Russia. For praxis to develop, theory had to recover its independence; without it, the praxis that seeks to transform could not be transformed. Therefore, (2007) theory had to free itself from the chains of pragmatism. The transformation of the world – which was, precisely, considered utterly urgent – was once again viewed as something contemplative, in a sort of mockery towards urgency itself. For Adorno (2009a), the impatience that sought to transform the world without interpreting it was a symptom of weaknesses within praxis.

The author also considered it necessary to rethink the relation between theory and praxis. There is no final verdict that defines this relation as one of unity. If it is ideally assumed to be such, it turns into dogma. The moment of truth in Marx's thesis on the unity of theory and praxis was determined by historical conditions. The demand for unity is not, for Adorno, a trans-historic demand; in fact, it changes through history. In this sense, there is no immediate unity, the relation between theory and praxis is a relation

of discontinuity, for it is socially and historically mediated. However, neither are theory and praxis independent from each other.

There is a break with the Marxist tradition in Adorno's theorising, a kind of refusal to develop a theory of revolutionary praxis. The quest for a theory of praxis which is appropriate for each time and for each failure is part of said tradition. It is present in the work of Lenin and Lukács and, in our times, of Holloway too. For Adorno (2005) the crisis of historical praxis and its failure to transform the world is experienced in the form of 'not knowing what must be done', or as Horkheimer (1970: 150) put it: 'I can say what is wrong but I cannot define what is right.'

However, 'not knowing what must be done' is not a definitive situation or a closure, neither does it mean to tacitly give up on transforming the world; it is part of a context that is disastrous, but always open to utopia. The opening is possible because of the antagonism that constitutes capitalist society. Adorno claimed that he who thinks critically never gives up, and Adorno's critique gave an account of the non-identical, the different that already represented a utopia. Adorno's critical theory is not a point of arrival, it is a possible starting point in an effort to go beyond Marx and the Marxist tradition and see its limitations: limitations that have spread to praxis. Adorno helps us think of revolution with a theory and a praxis that demand we do not reproduce domination in our effort to break it.

We have said that Adorno's image of utopia is closely linked to the non-identical, to difference:

That differences should exist beside each other without engaging in mutual destruction, that differences should give space to each other to grow and – one might add – even love each other, that would truly be the dream of a reconciled world. (Adorno, 2013: 147)

This image emerges from Adorno's critique of capitalism. Using the principle of

commodity exchange that Marx developed in *Capital* as his starting point, Adorno claims in *Negative Dialectics* that capitalism is basically a process of complete levelling or identification that incorporates what is different in a contradictory way; the result is a type of homogeneous and unified society that as a totality is governed by real economic abstractions, to the point of death.

The category of totality was central in Lukácsian theory. However, he interpreted totality in a positive sense. He conceived the proletariat as a new totality of a revolutionary type that aimed at overcoming capitalist totality. Adorno believed that, to overcome capitalism, one had to criticise all idea of totality. As we mentioned in the previous paragraph, the existence of a totality implies an identifying process that does not tolerate difference and produces a synthesis of power and domination, even in the case of a revolutionary totality such as the proletariat.

In sum, Adorno considers all totality to be characterised by the rejection of difference, of particularity. Therefore, an emancipated society must abolish totality and not produce a new one. Its abolition would lead to a social constellation where what is different and non-identical could fully coexist. In this sense, he gave great importance to the category of constellation – which he drew from Walter Benjamin – for it allowed him to overcome the idea of totality.

## TIME AND EMANCIPATION

In his thesis on the concept of history, Walter Benjamin (2009) brings forward a conceptual set of ideas that shed light on the issue of the revolutionary subject in critical opposition to the prevailing approach of his time. His critique is directed against the theoretical core of the very concept of class struggle, which he considered to have been perverted by social democracy, in the sense that the latter turned it into an evolutionist concept

marked by the influence of the bourgeois ideology of progress.

This led to the transformation of the concept of class struggle – an essentially critical concept – into an ideology of development whose political consequence was conformity and adaptation to the system. Theoretically speaking, this political practice was legitimised by the incorporation at its core of a fundamental ingredient of the fetishism of the bourgeois conceptual form: the notion of a neutral universal process in class society, untouched by social antagonism. This ingredient was provided by the idea of progress. Progress was conceived as something inherently neutral and not as a contradictory category constituted in essence by class struggle itself. In this context, class struggle was interpreted as an agent that puts its energy into the process and gets rid of obstacles that stand in the way of its own ‘objective’ movement, understood as the development of the productive forces and of labour (see Benjamin, 2009, thesis XI).

One can easily see this critique extending to the productivist idea of socialism, which resulted in the legitimisation of a despotic form of state regulation of labour in the former Soviet Union. However, to return to the issue at hand, Benjamin’s critique allows us to see class struggle from a new, anti-progressive perspective, as well as to think of the revolutionary subject not as part of the historical *continuum*, but rather as its rupture. He stresses that the concept of ‘the progress of the human race in history is not to be separated from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous and empty time’ (Benjamin, 2009: 15). Also, that revolution must be conceived as the antithesis of this temporality, as time ‘which is fulfilled by the here-and-now’ (16).

‘Now-time’, the antithesis and negation of homogeneous time and the historical *continuum*, is woven by the struggle of the revolutionary classes. And this, in turn, reveals to us that historical knowledge is not neutral. Its locus, if such a term can be used,

is the antagonism between temporalities of struggle.

Importantly, abstract temporality is not simply a way of representing time, but rather a real temporal form, the temporal form of capital, described by Marx in his analysis of the dual character of labour in commodity (the relation between concrete and abstract labour). As a form of capital, abstract temporality is a relation of domination, and the struggle against it entails a rupture that constitutes a different type of temporality which Benjamin calls ‘now-time’. ‘Now-time’ is the opening to a universality that is neither abstract nor violent (a point that has been particularly developed by Adorno, as we shall see further on); it is of a different type. In ‘now-time’, history is summarised as a redemption of humanity or a messianic time which, according to Benjamin (2007: 38) is the time that Marx secularised in the idea of classless society.

With the notions of ‘now-time’ and ‘messianic time’, Benjamin sets out to theoretically shatter the linear conception of historical time, as well as establish a dialectic link between the present, the past, and the future with politics at its core. Revolutionary struggle in the present is the entrance to an unredeemed past, just as the redemption of this past is the entrance to the future. ‘Now-time’ is embedded with ‘splinters of messianic time’ (Benjamin, 2009: addendum A). That is, at present, struggle contains the time of redemption or human emancipation whose possibility cannot be understood linearly, but rather as a break with the historical *continuum*. In these terms, Benjamin set out to restore the revolutionary density that the concept of class struggle had lost.

A more openly political reading of Benjamin’s work will reveal a critique of social democracy as a model of political fetishism which, by extension, allows for its application in ‘revolutionary vanguards’. Political fetishism, one could say, consists in substituting an institution or a political party for the historical subject. It is the result of a

split between the time of organisation and the time of the classes it claims it represents. This split is 'resolved' in a synthesis of power that entails the subordination of 'now-time' to 'abstract time'; that is, it becomes crystallised in the image of a vertical time that is constituted by the time of the above (the rulers) and of the below, of the oppressed classes (subaltern time). As we know, the experience of the Russian Revolution resulted in a form of power where the time of the party-state was radically separated from society and the time of the latter had to bow before the former, extending the domination. This temporal crystallisation of power between an above and a below could not walk the path of collective self-determination. In fact, it was its negation.

Critique against abstract temporality as a mode of domination is a central theme in Walter Benjamin's conception of class struggle and revolution. From his perspective, the revolutionary subject cannot be thought of using categories that constitute a continuum of domination and abstractions that pay tribute to homogeneity. In fact, critique against abstract and homogeneous temporality can extend to critique against abstraction as a form of homogenisation and domination, which brings us face to face with the category of totality and the forms of rule of capital. In his idea of *constellation*, Benjamin tries to resolve the relation between the universal and the particular in a way that unity will no longer be linked to subordination (to the universal). It is not presented in terms of hegemony and synthesis (Benjamin, 2009, thesis XVII). The negation of the negation, a key concept in dialectics, is not a realisation of universal and homogeneous time, but rather its overcoming. It is not about the realisation of history, but rather about the suppression of universal history as a *continuum*, for the latter has been – and continues to be – the history of the rulers (thesis VI).

From our point of view, these theses also constitute a critique of the idea of the homogeneous revolutionary subject. Given that the

negating subject is in itself the incarnation of a messianic temporality, a temporality that is neither homogeneous nor hegemonic, the historical subject could be considered as a set of struggles against the rule of capital that constitute a *constellation*.

### **BY WAY OF CONCLUSION: THE ZAPATISTA IDEA OF EMANCIPATION AND THE EMERGING CONSTELLATION**

We would like to conclude this chapter with a reflection. The zapatista ideas of 'Below and to the Left' and 'Asking We Walk', as they have been formulated by the zapatistas themselves, are expressions of the idea of an anti-capitalist, rebellious subject that rejects the notions of vanguard and hegemony in thinking of revolutionary change as categories that are constructed on the basis of vertical and homogeneous categories. Based on the revolutionary experience of the indigenous communities of Chiapas, Mexico, and a self-critical approach to the guerrilla experience of recent decades, zapatismo has introduced the idea and practice of a polymorphic and plural anti-capitalist subject, the movement of multiple struggles of self-organisation and subjects that try to constitute a we that recognises itself in the shared history of the below and to the left. In this context, collective dialogue is crucial in forming horizontal agreements and inventing spaces and a new time.

This idea of the subject is a way of understanding democracy that opposes the ruling idea which views it as an attribute of the state form, to wit, of the political form of capital (Bonefeld, 2003), whose ideological and operative framework is constituted by law and the system of political parties (representative democracy). Zapatista politics is a manifest rejection of the above and the below of this dominant form of politics. It is a practical critique against the fetishism of forms, figures, and categories in which domination hides,

abstracting the class antagonisms that are the core of Mexican society and present-day capitalism and of which domination is a particularisation (see, for example, Caygill, 2013; Holloway and Pelaez, 1998). This can be appreciated in the EZLN's ironic use of 'civil society' in its first communiqués, as well as in the already mentioned ideas of 'Asking we Walk', 'Below and to the Left', and the 'Other Campaign' and 'World War IV', amongst others. This terminology not only reflects the production of a critical knowledge which was born and updated in the anti-capitalist struggle of zapatismo, but also one of its characteristic features: the defetishisation of concepts, forms, and categories of the rule of capital and the patriarchy. Amongst them, the civil society–state pair, representative democracy, power, the market, globalisation, the man–woman hegemonic dyad.

It is important to point out, at this point, that the mentioned defetishisation does not amount to a hegemonic inversion; it rather implies a struggle to overcome or dissolve the existing relations of domination in the 'here and now'. The zapatistas have understood that this must be translated into words that, together or separately, express the image of the rebellious time of we, a time that, according to Holloway (2002) could be named in terms of an against-and-beyond domination. This is the time in which one fights to dissolve the above and the below and thus anticipates an emancipated society. This could be called the negative politics of the word. The word names what is being negated in the hegemonic words,<sup>4</sup> but it names it as a rebellious voice that emerges from 'dignified rage' in a time of confrontation and of building the new, that is, a time that breaks the passive voice of defeat in a rebellious here-and-now. It is the word that celebrates the revolutionary opening of the world. It is the word that tries to name the rupture of domination as opening and not as the synthesis of a new domination or hegemony. And here we find a radical difference or theoretical breaking with the classical canon of the revolution and the subject.

The language of the latter aspires to a 'realisation of history' in terms of a new hegemony (of the proletariat represented by the class party) that concludes in the state. On the contrary, the zapatista language sets out to draw history away from the axis of hegemony.

Is there a certain connection between the zapatista theory and practice and critical theorists such as Benjamin and Adorno, and Horkheimer, too, who saw council communism as the means towards the end of human emancipation (Horkheimer, 1985: 99)? Walter Benjamin's thesis on history 'against the grain' provides an image of the revolutionary subject that is in tune with the zapatista images of revolution. The ideas of 'now time' and 'messianic time' are arguably a time lived by the zapatista communities. Furthermore, the notion of constellation that questions the homogeneous subject forged in the abstract idea of time is not unrelated to what is practised in the zapatista *caracoles*. The idea of revolution as a time that breaks and takes away history from the continuum of the temporality of domination is also in dialogue with the zapatista idea of removing history from the axis of hegemony. Likewise, Adorno's critique of the subject as a totality and of revolution as the production of a new synthesis of power and domination, as well as his effort to think from the particularity that is negated in totality, must be considered part of this dialogue too. In its turn, Holloway's theory of revolution as *cracks* is an effort to think of radical change from an anti-identitarian and anti-state-centred perspective, partly inspired by the praxis of zapatismo.

The points we have referred to are grounded on what, in the words of Benjamin, could be called a new constellation of class struggle that is in the process of creating a new image of revolutionary change and of reshaping the way we perceive emancipation. A common feature of this new constellation is that its language expresses the effort to reinvent the word revolution, asserting in resistance the human content that is negated in the conceptuality of a system of abstract

wealth, and in the struggle for power and hegemony, too, mere racketeering and ticket thinking (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1985).

## Notes

- 1 In Lenin, we find a relation of hegemony between the party as the vanguard of the proletariat and the *soviet* (workers council) as the broad and heterogeneous expression of the workers and the farmers. On this, see Lenin (1965). For Lukács, the *soviet* is 'the political and economic defeat of reification' (Lukács, 1968: 80). However, the party is 'the form of the proletarian class consciousness' that allows for the unity between theory and practice (42).
- 2 On this, see Adorno's (2007) critique of the idea of system in Hegel.
- 3 On the relation between theory and praxis in Marx and Lenin, see Sánchez Vázquez (1977).
- 4 On domination, hegemony, and words, see Williams (1983).

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# Crisis and Immiseration: Critical Theory Today

Aaron Benanav and John Clegg

## THIS TOPSY-TURVY WORLD

The late 1960s saw an efflorescence of dissident Marxisms across Europe: *operaismo* in Italy, *situationnisme* in France, and what would become the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* in Germany. Marxian orthodoxy had entered into crisis after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. A ‘new left’ was now groping for new ideas, and a wave of worker–student revolts, erupting worldwide in 1968, seemed to require a critical theory of post-war capitalism adequate to the practical critique taking shape in the factories and on the streets. Just as a previous high-point of theoretical production in the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1917 had seen a revival of the critical spirit of Marx’s writings, so too the new generation of dissident Marxists carried out their own ‘return to Marx’ aided by the discovery and distribution of many of his unpublished manuscripts.<sup>1</sup>

Members of the Frankfurt School acted as an intellectual bridge between these two high

points of Marxian theorizing. In Germany, the work of Theodor Adorno – along with the writings of some of the more unorthodox associates of the Frankfurt School, such as Alfred Sohn-Rethel – had a major influence on emergent re-readings of Marx’s mature writings.<sup>2</sup> This *Neue Marx-Lektüre* interpreted Marx’s theory of value through his discussion of fetishism, not as a theory of the determination of prices, but rather as a theory of the determination of social labor *as* price. Here the dissidents drew on Sohn-Rethel’s notion of ‘real abstraction’, in which the material life process is dominated by the abstract and impersonal social forms of value. On this view, Marx’s late critique of political economy was not an attempt to improve upon the classical political economists, as Marxian orthodoxy had it. Instead, his critique showed how their inverted perspective corresponded to the real inversions of the ‘perverted, topsy-turvy world’ of capitalist society.<sup>3</sup>

These insights were not restricted to Adorno’s students. In France, Guy Debord



echoed Adorno's conception of an inverted totality – 'the whole is false' – in his theory of the spectacle: 'In a world which really is topsy-turvy, the true is a moment of the false'.<sup>4</sup> Jacques Rancière and Lucio Colletti had similarly grasped the centrality of fetishism to Marx's theory of value, as had, in a more radical vein, Jacques Camatte and Fredy Perlman, whose translation of the dissident Russian economist Isaac Rubin introduced this interpretation of Marx's late works to an Anglophone audience.<sup>5</sup> All of these thinkers may be situated as members of a broader tendency of the 1960s, in which Marx was re-read as a theorist of the alienation prevalent in both work and society, and hence as a critic not just of *exploitation* but also of *domination*.<sup>6</sup> By this means, the European Marxist dissidents of the 1960s set out on a path – or, perhaps more accurately, on many paths – away from the official dogmas of the USSR and the communist parties.<sup>7</sup>

Drawing on Marx's early writings, the 1960s dissidents dreamed of a different kind of future from the one on offer in either the East or the West, a future in which the drudgery of working life would be reduced to a minimum in order to maximize free-time for the pursuit of both simple pleasures and their higher forms, such as the generation of scientific knowledge and the creation of art. Some thought it might be possible to overcome the distinction between work and leisure altogether, abolishing the separation between manual and mental labors that had hitherto been definitional of agrarian and industrial civilizations. Above all, the dissidents sought to overthrow the present conditions of social life in a way that would release a potential for human freedom and flourishing that was implicit in those conditions yet structurally obstructed.

Adorno's protestations notwithstanding, these ideas were certainly marked by the age in which they emerged. There are clear affinities between critical theory and the 1960s counterculture, with its revolt against 'consumerism', its holistic critiques of 'the

system', and its concern with the alienations of 'everyday life'. One can also identify, in the critique of domination, echoes of the various liberation movements of the day – of racial and sexual minorities, women, and colonial subjects. But above all, the critical theory of this era was marked by its appearance in the midst of rapid post-war growth and the technological revolutions that gave rise to an age of abundance. With the help of the Keynesian interventionist state, capitalism seemed to have finally freed itself from its crisis tendencies.<sup>8</sup> This period witnessed an unprecedented decline in inequality, as increases in workers' real wages outpaced increases in the returns to capital in many countries. The 'great levelling' of incomes seemed to call into question orthodox Marxist accounts of crisis and immiseration, with important consequences for revolutionary theory.

Unlike the orthodox Marxists, who tended to deny that the rate of exploitation had fallen in developed countries – or else shifted their focus to supposedly more exploited workers elsewhere – the dissidents of the 1960s recognized that rising working-class living standards made it necessary to revise Marxian theory to accord with new realities. In doing so, they emphasized Marx's core concern with freedom, his critique of alienation and ideology, over the more 'economistic' aspects of his later writings, especially those that appeared to envisage a material (as opposed to merely spiritual) worsening of the conditions of the working class. For Debord, the shifts of post-war capitalism allowed for a more capacious definition of the proletariat as a revolutionary subject – as all those compelled to work for wages, be they high or low<sup>9</sup> – as well as the content of that revolution – as a revolt against an 'abundance of commodity relations', rather than against poverty.<sup>10</sup> Adorno took a more pessimistic view, but shared with Debord a central focus on *impersonal domination*: a critique not merely of the distribution of wealth, but also of its reign as an independent power over all social classes.<sup>11</sup>

Rapid technical change in the post-war years led many of the dissidents to abandon the idea that capitalist social relations were a mere 'fetter' on increasingly socialized forces of production. This perspective was simply incompatible with the miseries of the assembly line described by Raniero Panzieri and Harry Braverman, as well as with the more practical critique of work enacted in periodic wildcat strikes.<sup>12</sup> While Marxist dissidents continued to embrace the notion that technical innovations had the potential to liberate human beings, by extending the 'realm of freedom' as against the 'realm of necessity', they saw that under capitalism, technologies had become the means of an ever worsening instrumental rationalization of social life.<sup>13</sup> Indeed for Adorno, the capitalist mode of production, in solving the problem of distribution, had actually worsened the problem of domination: 'If the old pauperization theory has turned out not to literally be true, it has done so in the no less alarming sense that unfreedom, dependency upon an apparatus that has escaped the control of those who use it, has spread out universally over mankind'.<sup>14</sup> For this reason, the Marxist dissidents turned away from the theory of crisis, traditionally understood as a fundamental contradiction between the *forces* and *relations* of production, and toward a theory of alienation, in which that contradiction was between the *potentiality* and *actuality* of wealth-creation under capitalism.<sup>15</sup>

Yet in retrospect, the dissidents were wrong to conclude that a few exceptional decades of growth had refuted 'the old pauperization theory'. The Marxists of the 1960s lived in an epoch marked by the superabundance of goods, representing a huge potential increase in the free-time of society – a potential which failed to realize itself since people continued to work long hours. In an era of extremely low unemployment rates and high rates of real wage growth, these theorists could scarcely imagine what was soon to follow: by the mid 1970s, the growing potential free-time of society would reveal itself not

as an expanding realm of leisure, but rather as a crisis of overproduction, accompanied by a dramatic rise in rates of unemployment and underemployment. These trends made, not for a revitalization and transformation of the labor movement, as the dissidents imagined might be possible, but rather its tendential dissolution.

Because so much of the dissidents' work was based on a rejection of the theory of capitalist crisis and immiseration, it is of limited use in explaining current trends within capitalist societies. Since 1973, the world economy has grown much more slowly than it had in the 1950s and 1960s. In the rich countries, high rates of unemployment persisted for decades – in the case of Europe – or fell off only insofar as workers could be incorporated into insecure, low-wage jobs – as in the United States and United Kingdom. In the 1990s and 2000s, European countries followed the Anglo-American path via the 'flexibilization' of labor. A low demand for labor has been accompanied, in almost all cases, by a stagnation of real wages and a fall in the labor-share of income. The situation outside of the high-income countries is, in most cases, substantially worse.

Globally, more people depend on selling their labor to survive than ever before, but under conditions of slowing global economic growth rates, economic development has become harder to achieve: the success of low-income countries like China has come at the expense of other poor countries. A still growing supply of labor thus faces a persistently low demand, which is substantially worse than that prevailing in high-income countries. Many people survive only by working informally: today, informal work accounts for one half of all non-agricultural work worldwide.<sup>16</sup> Globally, too, labor shares of income have fallen.<sup>17</sup> However, these decades have not only been marked by a return of misery, measured quantitatively in the stagnation of wages and qualitatively in growing employment insecurity and worsening working conditions.

Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, economic stagnation has been accompanied by *deindustrialization*: factories continue to produce more output, yet they employ fewer workers, worsening the deficit of labor demand across the economy.<sup>18</sup> In the United Kingdom and the United States, manufacturing employment fell, as a share of total employment, from 32 percent and 24 percent, respectively, in 1970 to less than 10 percent today. In Germany, manufacturing employment fell from 40 percent to 20 percent over the same period, and in France from 28 percent to 12 percent. The same tendency has unfolded across many poor countries, as well, which saw industrial employment shares fall ‘prematurely’, starting in the 1980s and 1990s, from surprising low peaks, typically of less than 20 percent of total employment, to around 15 percent of total employment.<sup>19</sup> Many of the factories that formed an object of critique for the 1960s dissidents have shuttered their doors.

## MISERY

These trends form the backdrop to our own ‘return to Marx’, which builds on the insights of the 1960s dissidents by bringing them into relation with Marx’s original theory of immiseration.<sup>20</sup> The key here is to recognize that Marx was a theorist of immiseration precisely *because* he was a theorist of deindustrialization. Marx saw the immiserating tendency of capitalism – which was, for him, as much qualitative as quantitative – as unfolding in a two-sided transformation of production. First, within the labor process, capital tended to supplement human labor with machinery to such a degree that labor became a mere ‘appendage’ to an objectively organized production process based on the technical application of scientific knowledge. Second, within the valorization process, this shift in production was reflected in a *decline in the demand for industrial labor*, which

issued in the expulsion of an increasingly ‘superfluous’ labor force from the factory. This latter transformation implies devastating human costs in a world in which most people survive by selling their capacity to labor: it becomes ever more difficult to sell that capacity as the demand for labor falls, with the result that workers find their individual and collective bargaining positions weakened. It is for this reason that, in a capitalist society, the ‘accumulation of wealth at one pole’, i.e. on the side of capital, must be ‘at the same time accumulation of misery ... at the opposite pole’, i.e. on the side of workers.<sup>21</sup>

The 1960s dissidents had revived attention only to the first of the two transformations described above: constant increases in labor productivity require an ongoing reorganization of the production process, along lines that increase the unfreedom of the workforce. At the time of capital’s emergence, industrial goods were produced by individual artisans, using tools specially produced for their trade. Under the pressures of competition, capitalists were led to both decompose and recompose the artisanal production process to make it amenable to the constant adjustments necessary to decrease costs of production. Accordingly, labor was supplemented with machines, and then with a complex system of machinery. The experience of the worker, in the course of this transformation, is that he or she was shunted from the center of production to its margins, becoming a ‘living appendage’ of the machine without an ‘atom of freedom’.<sup>22</sup>

Here is the alienation of the worker within production, which the theorists of the 1960s identified.<sup>23</sup> For Marx, capitalist domination is embodied in the factory-form itself: once the workers’ labor process is decomposed and then reconstructed, ‘the interconnection between their various labors confronts them, in the realm of ideas, as a plan drawn up by the capitalist, and in practice, as his authority, as the powerful will of a being outside them, who subjects their activity to his purpose’.<sup>24</sup>

Marx was critical of factory production in the dialectical sense that means of increasing human freedom (scientific insights) were inverted into means of domination (via their technical application in the capitalist production process).

Marx described this technical transformation of production, within any given workplace, as a rising 'technical composition' of capital: a greater quantity of means of production were set in motion by each worker.<sup>25</sup> This process not only occurs in each line of production; with the spread of factory production, it also extends across society. Many technologies migrate from old lines of production to new ones, as capitalists take advantage of whatever innovations might aid them in competition.<sup>26</sup> Over time, large sections of the productive apparatus adopt the factory-form. At the same time, society as a whole is reshaped: massive infrastructures lubricate flows of commodities, and also make the development of new commodities possible (e.g. via electrical grids, broadband networks, etc.). If the process stopped there, the result of a constant technological ratcheting up of production would only be a rising tension between the potentiality of capitalist society and its actuality, as 1960s dissidents claimed. But Marx argued that the ratcheting upwards of the technical composition tends to reflect itself also in a rising 'value composition' of capital, that is, in rising outlays on means of production relative to labor. This tendency leads to a situation in which the 'demand for labor ... falls progressively with the growth of total social capital'.<sup>27</sup> More workers are pushed out of older lines of production than are taken up into newer ones. The ensuing deindustrialization of the workforce is hindered only to the extent that some lines, particularly in the highly heterogeneous service sector, are resistant to the introduction of machinery.<sup>28</sup>

Due to this second transformation, the growing free-time of society is not only something to be actualized in a future, socialist society. It is also actualized *within capitalist*

*society* – as 'enforced idleness' for many and as 'over-work' for the rest.<sup>29</sup> Workers thus find themselves caught in a performative contradiction: the working class 'produces both the accumulation of capital and the means by which it is itself made relatively superfluous; and it does this to an extent which is always increasing'.<sup>30</sup> The problem workers face under these conditions is that even if their labor is no longer needed, they cannot stop selling their capacity to labor. For no matter how bad labor-market conditions get, workers are compelled to earn wages in order to buy what they need to live. This compulsion is reproduced by the structure of the capital-labor relation, which ensures that they remain bound to wage labor by the 'invisible threads' of their dispossession.<sup>31</sup>

It is on this basis that Marx formulates his theory of the 'relative surplus population', which 'exists in all kinds of forms' and includes every worker 'during the time when he is only partially employed or wholly unemployed'.<sup>32</sup> This surplus population is 'relative' because it is surplus relative to the needs of capital, not absolutely surplus to society's capacity to feed itself, in a Malthusian sense. Marx's argument regarding the surplus population has frequently been truncated by interpreters who focus on one of its forms, namely the 'industrial reserve army' or 'floating' surplus population, which is hired at the prevailing wage during economic booms and then fired during the busts.<sup>33</sup> On this theory, the expulsion of workers from production comes to function as a lever by which the rate of capital accumulation can be increased. However, Marx argues that, as this reserve army grows, so too do other forms of surplus population.

Many workers who are expelled from existing lines of production never find work again at the prevailing wage. These workers retain only a tenuous connection to the labor market. They become part of the 'stagnant' or 'consolidated' surplus population, which also becomes a 'self-expanding' section of the working class due to population growth. This stagnant surplus population works the

maximum hours for a minimum pay in 'special branches of capitalist exploitation' as well as in 'domestic industry'.<sup>34</sup> It is key to note that for Marx, even this population is part of the 'active labor army': surplus workers have to work regardless of a decline in the demand for their labor but find only 'extremely irregular employment'.<sup>35</sup> In a world such as Marx's – in which there is no unemployment insurance on offer – those who remain unemployed for so long that they lose their ability to work fall out of the relative surplus population and join the 'paupers', who survive only by begging their daily bread on the streets and in the poorhouses.

As capital transforms one sector after another in its effort to raise the productivity of labor, this tendency is reflected in a reduction in the demand of labor, issuing in the expansion of all forms of the surplus population. The growth of the surplus population also worsens the situation of the working class as a whole: when the labor market is slack, all workers find that they have less bargaining power, since the risks associated with losing one's job rise when and where there are many people already looking for work. For these reasons, immiseration is the 'absolute general law of capital accumulation'.<sup>36</sup>

In spite of the name he gave this law, Marx did not distinguish between the relative and absolute dimensions of capitalism's immiserating tendency. He simply pointed out that in this context 'the situation of the worker, be his payment high or low, must grow worse'.<sup>37</sup> One clear implication is that, as the income of all of society grows, the share of it that goes to the working class will fall, since the demand for labor will stagnate or fall relative to its supply.<sup>38</sup> In periods of stagnation, such a relative decline in living standards must become absolute. However, other aspects of this process of immiseration are as much qualitative as quantitative. For instance Marx placed great emphasis on the declining job-security that accompanies the increasingly disposable quality of labor: 'the higher the productivity of labor,

the greater is the pressure of the workers on the means of employment, the more precarious therefore becomes the conditions of their existence'.<sup>39</sup> Growing insecurity in work, heightened competition for jobs, and more generally, the swallowing up of life either by work or by the effort to obtain work define the experience of large parts of the working class today – in spite of the fact that society as a whole continues to produce ever more material wealth, ever more efficiently. These facts condition class struggle in the present.

## RECKONING

The above analysis gives rise to a paradox. In the late 1960s, workers' struggles were growing in intensity. Within those struggles, a minority of workers were practically enacting the critique of work – in the factories and in the streets – that the radical dissidents were describing in theory. One might have expected the return of the crisis tendencies of capitalism to have amplified both the practical and theoretical critiques of capitalist society: immiseration would then have been accompanied by a renewal of the labor movement as a revolutionary force. In reality, the opposite trends unfolded. The 1980s and 1990s saw the death of 'actually existing socialism', the capitulation of reformist workers' parties to the demands of capital, and a routing of organized labor – without another rank-and-file workers' movement rising in its place. Capitalism is now failing to deliver on its promises in the most basic economic sense, yet the era of a deep crisis of capitalism has been accompanied by an even deeper crisis in the practical opposition to capitalism.

These trends have pushed many pro-revolutionaries into a deep pessimism about the possibilities for human emancipation: perhaps the moment to realize philosophy has been *definitively* missed, as Adorno feared. The workers' movement has been on

the back foot now for more than 40 years. Even in countries where labor movements are of recent vintage, as in South Africa, South Korea, and Brazil, they are all now marching to the same neoliberal tune. Such a widespread reversal of fortune cannot be explained by the contingencies of class struggle in any one country. In order to explain the labor movement's tendential dissolution in the era of deindustrialization, we have to look back at the social bases of its expansion in the late nineteenth century.<sup>40</sup> The key point, for our account, is that it turned out that Marx was wrong about the tendencies of capital accumulation for the first 100 years after the publication of *Capital*.

Instead of deindustrializing, late nineteenth-century European economies continued to industrialize. Moreover, the second industrial revolution marked a shift in the character of capitalism, opening up an exceptional space of political possibilities that Marx did not anticipate. The increasing automation of the production process, which Marx expected, occurred alongside the massive expansion of employment in jobs assembling what had been produced, which Marx did not expect.<sup>41</sup> The marginalization of the worker within production was thus incomplete; workers retained some 'atom of freedom' within work, which could also become the basis of their power within the workplace. Indeed, more and more industrial laborers were working with huge quantities of fixed capital, potentially giving them increased leverage at the point of production. Workers might be able to use this lever to overturn capitalist society, if they could figure out how to effectively unify themselves as a class acting on the basis of shared interests.

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels suggested that the unification of the workers was being achieved automatically with the extension of factory production. Marx reiterated this point in *Capital*: in the course of capitalist development, the working class is not only 'constantly increasing in numbers'; it is also 'trained, united, and

organized by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production'.<sup>42</sup> However, as we saw above, *Capital* also elaborated a theory of capitalist domination within the workplace, which suggested that the collectivization of workers in factories would have ambiguous consequences for workers' power. The factory-form not only makes it possible to steadily increase workers' productivity levels; it also makes possible a recomposition of the labor process in line with capital's needs for command and control.

For this reason, the expansion of the industrial workforce was unlikely to automatically generate a *real or essential unity* among workers, which would allow them to actually grasp the levers of power within factories in order to overturn capitalist society. The atomization of workers, their competition in the labor market, invaded the factory as well. Capital's domination over labor was reinforced in the organization and layout of factory production. Indeed, capitalists were able to take the divisions that cut through the labor market and import those into the workplace. Workers remained divided in terms of gender, language, religion, and regional customs. To these differences were added new ones as well: race and nationality, as well as emergent and constantly shifting hierarchies of skills and education. In this sense, the unity of workers remained, for the most part, a *unity-in-separation*: it was a unity mediated by capital; hence, it was not available as a ready-made weapon in the struggle for autonomy from capital.

Under these conditions, the project of achieving a real unity of the working class, as a class, could only be a political project: it was the project of the workers' movement. That movement was internally differentiated among anarchists, syndicalists, socialists, communists, and other tendencies with diverse orientations. However, these groups retained a common aim: to organize workers on the basis of an affirmation of their class position – their positive identity as workers, regardless of age, sex, religion, nationality,

race, and skill – so they could actually wield the power they implicitly held at the point of production. The project of the workers' movement was successful in many respects: it improved conditions of the sale of workers' labor-power, and even protected workers, to some extent, from consequences of the commodification of their capacity to labor. The labor movement also formed the background to the revolutionary upsurges of the 1917–23 period. However, this movement tended to create, not the real unity at which it aimed, but rather, a highly bureaucratized *ersatz* unity. Workers remained unified only in separation, but now with an additional separation between workers and their organizations, especially workers' unions and parties.

This movement could not have survived the shifts in production that reactivated the core contradictions of capitalist societies in the 1970s. Central to the organizing thrust of the workers' movement was a philosophy of history, which claimed that workers' real unity – which they were fighting to build in daily struggle – would eventually realize itself in the manner Marx and Engels described: 'the accumulation of capital' would be 'the multiplication of the proletariat'.<sup>43</sup> Industrialization was to be the driver of workers' incipient victory, since it brought with it growing numbers of industrial workers, growing unity among workers, and growing workers' power in production. The workers' movement thus defended and even encouraged proletarianization, the movement of peasants into the expanding factory system, as a means of increasing workers' power. It also encouraged the modernization of production, wherever possible.

Movement militants envisaged a soon-to-be-realized future in which the industrial working class would form a majority of the population, reshaping society according to its will. The onset of deindustrialization in the 1970s disproved this foundational perspective about the direction of history. The industrial working class, whether numerically expanding or contracting in any given

country, now everywhere represents a shrinking share of the total labor force. More and more workers thus find themselves standing outside the factory gates, looking in. These non-industrial workers largely lack power at the point of production. Their labor is increasingly superfluous to the needs of a vast scientific-technical production process. In this way, atomization – the unity-in-separation of capital – won out over the collectivizing tendencies of the factory, even where these were supplemented by workers' organizations.

Due to these ongoing transformations in the production process, workers tend less and less to identify their work as their primary link to the wider society. Many workers do not see themselves as shaping the world through their work, or as contributing something meaningful to the world by working. Based on their own experience, they do not come to believe that their lives would be radically improved if only they could collectively manage their workplaces. Outside of less mechanized sectors, such as health care and education, workers' autonomy – their self-management of the labor process – is no longer a recognizable goal. Only freedom from the burden of this sort of work, in the interests of life, would be worthwhile.

Indeed, in the formal and informal low-wage service sector, in particular, many workers would likely prefer to see their jobs disappear, and their workplaces razed to the ground, if they could find some way to survive without the wages their work affords. For this reason, such workers fail to see a positive identity and political project inhering in their class position. That is true, in spite of the fact that some of the divisions that fractured the workers' movement in an earlier period have seen their impacts reduced, such as divisions according to language or dialect, culture, religious denomination, and nation. Replacing many such divisions is this increasingly central one: between a relatively secure but shrinking sector of (often unionized) workers, and a highly insecure and growing sector of precarious workers. This

primary division maps, sometimes explosively, onto other divisions along lines of citizenship status, race, and gender.

If the categories of capitalist society – the worker, above all, but also the factory – once appeared to be categories with a possible emancipatory content, that is no longer the case. The ‘atom of freedom’ that these categories contained has been evacuated in a world where direct human labor has been replaced at the center of production by the technological application of scientific knowledge. Workers are therefore unable to affirm their class position within this society as the basis of an emancipatory project to come. They do not achieve their real unity within the expanding space of the factory. On the contrary, the remaining factories, which continue to employ a minority of workers, are merely a manifestation of what separates all workers: commodity production and market exchange. Workers are thus compelled to find their real unity elsewhere, as human beings, *beyond the terms of a society that makes work the primary social link*.

## STRUGGLE

At this point, it is critical to reiterate that the decline of the classical workers’ movement has not meant the dissolution of the working class. On the contrary, more people than ever before must survive by selling their labor power or the simple products of their labor, but they do so in a context in which the demand for labor power is persistently slack. It is precisely for that reason that the contradictions of capitalist society are currently pressing with such intensity on working people, leading to immiseration and a concomitant expansion of poverty alongside wealth. By the same token, the working class, in its antagonistic struggle with capital, remains the only force capable of dissolving this society in an emancipatory direction.

However, the struggle of the working class unfolds differently today than it did in the past – beyond the end of the workers’ movement, beyond the edge of a world in which *worker* and *factory* were categories with emancipatory content. Today, few workers view their class position as the basis of a collective project of overturning society. In this context, struggles outside the workplace have often been the ones that gain traction within a wider sphere. In such struggles, workers frequently do not identify as workers. In order to sidestep antagonisms internal to their class, workers often grope toward some other position, *external to their existence as workers*, as a means of pushing forward their antagonisms with both capital and the state.

This shift necessitates a rethinking of the terms of class struggle, disconnecting it from any necessary identification with the struggle for better wages and working conditions within the workplace.<sup>44</sup> A reconstructed notion of class struggle might begin from the following propositions.<sup>45</sup> Starting from their atomization within capitalist society, that is, from their *unity-in-separation*, workers are periodically able to defend themselves against the onslaughts of capital – both in the workplace as well as in society more broadly – by forming a temporary but collective power. In order to do so, workers must invent new tactics, contents and forms of struggle, all of which are impossible to anticipate in advance.

In such struggles, workers’ power derives from their collective capacity to disrupt the flows of capitalist society, in workplaces or outside of them, whether by strike, occupation, riot, or blockade. As capitalist society has become more complex, possible points of disruption have multiplied: some are located in the sphere of production, but many others are located outside of that sphere – in distribution and consumption. At times, proletarians have been able to engage in disruptive activity in one of these spheres, building up their power on that basis, albeit temporarily. The key point is that, in doing so, workers are



forced to come together outside of the terms on which they are normally organized in capitalist society. They have to build connections between normally separated fractions of the working class, including between relatively securely employed and relatively precariously employed sections.

Expanding the purview of this sort of mass disruptive activity across society is the only way for workers to push their struggles forward. They therefore require collective organization, whether this is formal or informal, lasting or quickly dissipating. In any case, large-scale disruptive action is risky and is only possible given high levels of coordination, which has been achieved as yet only rarely and briefly. Such coordination is itself only possible when organizations are responsive to the needs of their members and therefore capable of sustaining the trust required to engage in this activity. In our definition, class struggle takes place wherever workers undertake mass disruptive action, under the purview of organizations forged for this purpose (typically in the course of the struggles themselves). These disruptive actions may be described as *self-organized workers' struggles*.

What is fundamental from the perspective of the emancipatory project of ending class society is the limit that atomized workers and segmented class fractions confront in the course of their self-organized struggles. Their fundamental limit is the impossibility of building collective power across sections of the class in the absence of a shared class identity and project. Italian autonomists described this limit of class power in terms of the decomposition and recomposition of the working class in different periods of the history of capitalist society. In their view, the technical transformation of the production process periodically caused older modes of workers' political organization to lose their viability and dissolve (the autonomists thought that these technical transformations were politically motivated, but we need not agree with them there). Workers then had to

recompose themselves politically, based on the new technical organization of production. On this basis, the 'craft worker' was succeeded by the 'mass worker', who was in turn succeeded, in some accounts, by the 'social worker' or the 'multitude'.<sup>46</sup> In our view, the onset of deindustrialization marks the end of this cycle. The class has been decomposed, fragmented, and segmented, without the possibility of a recomposition around a new workers' identity, however conceived.

Workers today thus face a *composition problem*, as the fundamental limit of their struggle. Workers' very existence as a class appears to be not a potential basis of power, but rather, the main obstacle to the extension of their power. In the course of their struggles, workers find that it is impossible to build a new world on the basis of the categories of the old world – on the basis of the unity-in-separation of the working class in present-day capitalist society. It is not that there are no more industrial workers, but rather, that the remainder of industrial workers can no longer present itself as the leading edge of the class, uniting the interests of all workers. Nor can the various surplus populations of the world, although growing in size, affirm their position as a positive pole of workers' activity, since they exist as a negation of the class and its power within capitalist society. The terms on which proletarians once united are no longer available, but unification remains a necessity for every struggle. For that reason, the problem of composition is today a revolutionary problem. Workers' confrontation with this fundamental limit of their struggle – or even: the formalization of that limit, its widespread recognition as a limit – will be coincident with the re-emergence of the communist movement.

In this context, class struggles today can already be found creatively inventing new categories, external to the categories of the capitalist mode of production, which anticipate but do not yet achieve the rebirth of a communist movement. The movement of movements, the black bloc, the *indignados*,

occupy, the 99 percent, *democracia real*, the movement for black lives, *nuit debout* and so on – these are the beyond-the-world-of-work categories of workers' struggle today. In generating these categories, workers sidestep the composition problem that hampers their activity: they attack this world as if from the outside, while of course remaining embedded within it. The problem is that their ideal-outside could only realize itself if it were able to launch an attack on the material bases of capitalist society. In the past, struggles had the potential to spill out of the factory, as a pathway to a revolution in all areas of social life. Today, struggles are confronted by their limited ability to break *into* zones of production – a rupture that remains a fundamental precondition of the abolition of class society and the advent of a communist era.

Of course, we are still far from a time when struggles will have achieved the requisite level of intensity to challenge the rule of capital, so the perspective we are giving here remains anticipatory. Nevertheless, if Marxism is a theory of *pure immanence*, it requires not only that we locate the sources of our critique within the contradictions of our society, but also that we locate our critique within the particular historical period in which we live, and in which those contradictions are developing. Just as the growing free time of society is not only a potential to be realized within a future world but is also actualized within capitalist society as overwork for some and underwork for others, so too the critique of this society cannot remain merely a potential in *our* theory – it must also be actualized within the theory and practice of the proletariat.

## CRISIS

In this section and the next, we look at two further ways of specifying class struggle in the present. It may be objected, rightly, that most workers today fail to identify

the capital-relation as the source of their immiseration, even when engaged in self-organized struggle. When 'capitalism' is used to describe what must be overcome, this term frequently refers to corporations with an outsized influence on politics, rather than generalized commodity exchange. Workers are engaged in a limited critique of capitalism – mostly as *crony-capitalism*. They are thus responding to the appearance of capitalist crisis, rather than its essence. The question we must ask is: why does this essence (capitalist crisis) appear in this form (crony capitalism)?

The crisis of capitalism is, most fundamentally, that of the *disintegration of the capital-labor relation*. In the post-war era, decades of rising productivity eventually issued in widespread overproduction, which was reflected in persistent problems of low profitability centered in the manufacturing sector. Falling profits in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in a decline in the rate at which surpluses were reinvested, leading to lower rates of capital accumulation and hence slower rates of economic growth. By the 1980s, stagnation had become the new norm, accompanied by ongoing deindustrialization. As we discussed above, huge quantities of excess labor have been ejected from their previous employments but have not easily found new employments (meanwhile, youth continue to enter an already oversupplied labor market). Here we must add that *similar problems have taken place on the side of capital*. Following Marx, we have elsewhere described this tendency as 'the production of surplus capital alongside surplus labor'.<sup>47</sup> Surplus capital cannot be invested without worsening the conditions of overproduction and hence putting further pressure on profitability.

The result is an overaccumulation of capital. In order to avoid the onset of a deep and lasting depression, which would issue in a slaughtering of capital values, states and central banks have undertaken concerted action to depress interest rates, lessening some of the pressure generated by falling rates of profit.

That has allowed the system to keep ticking over but at the expense of worsening already existing tendencies toward stagnation.<sup>48</sup> Here, the task of the state has been made easier by the fact that the underlying problem of overaccumulation has not been solved. That is, there remains a persistent excess supply of capital, weighing down long-term interest rates. Faced with a lack of opportunities for investment, giant pools of 'hot money' slosh around the world economy, generating cheap credit in the midst of an ongoing economic slowdown. Falling interest rates subsequently inflect the unfolding of capitalist crisis, in two ways.

First, low interest rates have made it possible for governments, firms, and households to respond to falling economic growth rates by taking on debt. Total debt-to-GDP ratios have soared over the past few decades. The capacity of entities across the economy to take on debt at low interest rates has smoothed the path of the crisis. Of course, worries about the ability of various borrowers to repay their loans reach ever greater heights as debt levels increase, since loans are made to borrowers on the promise of a future rise in income that will allow the borrowers to repay their loans. Such a rise in incomes has failed to appear. Yet, all the same, the supply of credit continues to outrun demand. What can lenders do but wring their hands?

Second, the same tendency has led to periodic inflations and then deflations of asset bubbles, generating financial crises that shake the capitalist system to its core. As it turns out, the financialization of capital has not been a boon to financial firms in any simple sense.<sup>49</sup> These firms earn returns based on the difference between the interest rates they charge on long-term loans and the interest rates they pay to their own short-term investors. As the gap between long- and short-term interest rates compresses, due to overaccumulation, financial firms have had to compensate by taking on greater risk. Institutional investors' appetites for risk has not risen to the same extent as financial firms

need to sell it, so financial firms have become adept innovators, offering up new financial 'instruments' to hide risk. The result is that financial firms typically earn rates of return that, while formerly normal, are now exceptionally high. Extremely risky bets, taken over and over, periodically issue in catastrophic losses, which in turn lead to crises.<sup>50</sup>

The worst of the financial crises, so far, was of course that of 2008, which issued in a deep recession and a rapid rise in levels of un- and underemployment across much of the world. In response, governments in high-income countries took swift action to prevent the recession from becoming a depression. But in doing so, they found themselves caught in a double bind. On the one hand, governments had to bail out financial firms, transferring huge quantities of money to people who had essentially made a series of bad bets – transmuting those bets, retroactively, into good ones. Alongside other stopgap measures taken by governments, these bail-outs were extremely expensive. On the other hand, by 2008, governments had already accumulated massive debts relative to GDP: since the 1970s, they have been spending huge quantities of money to keep their ailing economies ticking over.<sup>51</sup>

Given these constraints, governments were forced to undertake apparently irrational action. They bailed out the banks to the tune of trillions of dollars, but at the same time – in order to control exploding debt levels in the context of debt-to-GDP ratios that were already worryingly high – they imposed austerity on their citizens. Nor was this austerity limited to the worst off among the population: it affected public provisions of healthcare and education and resulted in mass layoffs of public employees. Why did governments pay off crooked bankers, while at the same time making people who had done nothing wrong suffer for the bankers' crimes? This move was completely sensible, from the perspective of a capitalist economy: the restoration of the rate of profit has to take precedence over all other concerns. However, working-class

people saw government action in a different light. The only apparent explanation of the fact that the government was bailing out the banks while imposing austerity on the population was that *the government had lost its capacity for rational action*: it had been captured by the bankers. Workers took to the street to demand that the state free itself from the stranglehold of crony capitalists: governments should bail out the people and impose austerity on the banks! Here, workers were responding to the form of appearance of capitalist crisis in our times as a financial crisis. To see the situation on different terms would require that workers tarry with the more fundamental crisis of capitalism, which has not only shifted but also severely limited state action.

A more fundamental critique of capitalism does have the potential to generalize itself today, either in the context of the ongoing stagnation of the economy, or else due to the onset of a deeper crisis, which may yet emerge as governments lose their capacity for concerted action. In either case, the limits to state action will reveal themselves. An awareness of those limits is already emerging along three lines. First, a public discussion of computerization and robotization – while mystifying the causes of the present crisis of the world of work – nevertheless proclaims that this crisis is insurmountable on the terms of capitalist economies. Second, there is a growing public awareness that, since the 1970s, the advanced capitalist economies have tended to stagnate to an ever-worsening degree, without a clear explanation as to why this is occurring. Third, and perhaps most importantly, there is a growing fear of the effects of global warming, which capitalist economies are unable to address in spite of the existential threat that it poses to humanity.

Under these conditions, it is possible to imagine that future struggles, if they achieve the requisite size and scope, will create the context for a new communist movement to appear. Such a movement would cease to look to the state to restore the conditions

of growth. Instead it would try to solve the coordination problem that limits struggles by linking together the fragments of the working class – union members, downwardly mobile graduates, upwardly constrained service workers, computer programmers, precarious youth, immigrants and refugees, and militants – into a broad-based attack on their own conditions of separation, that is, *on the very conditions of their existence as a class*. This problem remains apparently intractable on the basis of struggle as it is today. However in history, discontinuity is the rule rather than the exception: periods of reaction suddenly break out into new eras of revolutionary agitation, which seemed impossible a few years before.

## POLITICS

Yet, it must be said, other directions for social struggle are also possible, and even more likely. In the present, highly atomized populations, racked by austerity, unemployment, and evictions, are awakening from inactivity and seeking redress *on the terms of their atomization*. Across diverse national contexts, a burning rage at politicians – for the manner in which they handled the crisis as well as its aftermath – did give rise to wave after wave of collective struggle, centered around anti-austerity demands and widespread anti-government sentiments, which in many ways sought to overcome atomization. Between 2010 and 2016, such extra-parliamentary movements unfolded in Tunisia, Egypt, Spain, Greece, Ireland, the United Kingdom, the United States, Quebec, Chile, Turkey, Brazil, Bosnia, the Ukraine, Hong Kong, and France. But these movements all dissipated within months, without substantially altering either the terms of the crisis or the forms of state response to it.<sup>52</sup> As these movements ended, some of their dispersed forces regrouped themselves, entering the realm of politics that they

had formerly and stridently denounced as endemically corrupt.

As it turns out, the ongoing abandonment of politics as a site of constrained conflict created an unexpected opening for this 'political' turn within extra-parliamentary movements: the demobilization of society has made it easier for anyone mobilizing a part of the population to catapult his- or herself into the center of politics, even if doubts remain about whether one can achieve much of anything from that position. At the same time, new right-wing parties, pushed to the margins of contemporary society in previous decades, have once again begun to gain ground in parliaments, as the political center hollows out. To understand how a general disaffection with politics has given rise to dynamic but limited political experiments, we have to see how the long-term capitalist crisis has played out in the political realm.<sup>53</sup>

The workers' movement, whose tendential dissolution we discussed above, gave birth to the first modern mass parties in the late nineteenth century. Organized from the ground up, with programs to guide them to victory, socialist parties threatened to make use of parliament not to change the laws of society, but rather to overturn society by socializing the means of production. It was in response to the threat generated by socialist parties that other political formations were forced to organize themselves on a mass-scale, appealing to populations of urban workers as well as their traditional constituencies. In this sense, the workers' movement was responsible for shaping the contours of modern parliamentary politics.<sup>54</sup> The threat posed by the workers' movement opened up a readable, strategic field not only for the left but equally for the center and right, with diverse characteristics across the differently constituted polities of Europe and the wider world (when and where these parliamentary formations were not overruled by outright dictatorships). The return of economic crisis tendencies in the 1970s then scrambled this strategic field for all political parties, transforming

an unfolding social crisis into a political one as well.<sup>55</sup>

As economic growth rates fell and unemployment rates rose, it became clear that nobody would be able to prosper unless the conditions of capital accumulation were restored, so restoring those conditions increasingly became the main task for all parties. Politicians set about rolling back the welfare state and the regulatory apparatus based on the view that this rollback would lower costs for capital and revive the rate of profit, leading to renewed economic growth. The fact that even representatives of the workers' movement decided to carry out these reforms signaled the final emptying-out of that movement's potential. Across societies, differences between left and right were correspondingly reduced: those differences were now only a matter of the speed and severity of reforms one was willing to undertake to restore profitability. Yet, despite efforts to reform the economy in the interests of capital, economic stagnation continued to worsen, no matter how many periods of bootstrapping austerity the population was made to suffer. Because they were offered only endless sacrifice without reward, voters became increasingly skeptical of politicians' empty promises.<sup>56</sup>

In this context, politics itself increasingly fell into disrepute. The system appeared to be 'rigged', either in the form of outright corruption, or because the parties posed no real alternatives to one another. People responded to this feeling both by reducing their allegiances to any one party and by registering protest votes against whoever happened to be in power. More and more politicians therefore realized that they needed to protect themselves from voters' rage, and so like their constituencies, politicians also withdrew from politics. Policies are increasingly developed and implemented in institutional spaces that are insulated from voters' oversight and influence. Politicians rule technocratically across the aisles, reforming laws in businesses' favor and then saving those

same businesses when they are threatened with collapse in the context of one or another financial crisis. Growing anti-political sentiments have left the established party system in most countries open to disruption: *que se vayan todos* and *no les votes* became the slogans of an anti-political era. These trends have also set up the conditions for the emergence of an anti-political politics.

Populism presents us with the paradox of anti-parliamentary sentiments invading parliament, with political platforms that call for throwing out all politicians. The premise of populist parties, of both left and right, is that economic stagnation is a symptom of crony-capitalist influence over venal parliaments. Restoring the conditions of growth remains the goal, but now it is thought to be possible only if the moneylenders are chased from the Temple. The problem these efforts face is that – giving ongoing economic stagnation, in an era in which profitability has been based, to an ever greater extent, on the accumulation of debt – some capitalists may recognize the need for systemic change but must reject out of hand all attempts at actual change, which threaten to unravel the precarious conditions of profitability (hence the laughable juxtaposition of businessmen publicly proposing basic guaranteed income policies while privately lobbying against efforts to claw back taxes from overseas tax havens).<sup>57</sup> The consequence has been that any real efforts at reforming the system appear, to capital, to represent an existential threat.

At critical moments, movements for reform have always had the potential to take on a systemic character, opening up space for revolutionary agitation and social transformation; however, in the present moment, *capitalist reproduction is so precarious that elites apparently cannot give up anything at all without endangering everything*. Every proposal for reform therefore appears as critical, as system-shaking. The populists of the left have confronted this impasse most directly, above all in negotiations around the Greek debt burden. Even the most meager

reforms were strenuously resisted. In this context, Syriza's empty threat to abandon the Euro was treated for what it was: brinkmanship. This situation has created openings for right-populists, as well, who have been more willing than left-populists to harness resentment in a destructive rage against international institutions, apparently without regard to the consequences. Indeed, the right populists appear willing to take drastic measures: exit from the EU, the Eurozone, NAFTA, and NATO and reversing globalization by tightening controls on the transnational movement of people, goods and even capital. It is not always clear whether these proposals are made in earnest, or whether they too are brinkmanship. But in any case we can be sure that beggar-thy-neighbor policies will have no purchase in an extremely low-growth world. There is no chance of restarting national-level accumulation.

In this context, the right-populists appear to have a more mobilizing narrative than their left-counterparts. Both attempt to read the unfolding contradictions of capital in terms of parasitic attacks on the national body, which will supposedly recover only if it can regain control over its political organs. Both are able to direct popular anger toward bankers, the personification of surplus capital. The right, however, have the strategic advantage of being able to target refugees and immigrants as well, as a personification of surplus labor. Excluding both of these figures appears, falsely, to be a way for the nation-state to make a comeback, to return to a better time, before the onset of the long crisis of the capital-labor relation in the early 1970s. The pre-crisis era is also nostalgically read, in a racist way, as a time when the body politic was more ethnically homogenous.

The populists will no doubt fail. They will not manage to bring back their golden age of post-war capitalism, even for those ethnic groups who feel the most nostalgia for that age. On the contrary, their policies will worsen the existing trends of stagnation and crisis. What we do not know is whether,

in failing, they will nonetheless be able to wreak enough havoc to the current institutions of liberal internationalism to set off a chain reaction of carnage, amid the further unfolding of the crisis. So far, financial crises have been prevented from turning over into outright depressions through the coordinated actions of states and central banks. It is possible that populism will weaken these institutions to such an extent that coordination will prove impossible, dropping us into an abyss the likes of which have not been seen since the 1930s. *The Frankfurt School looked into that abyss, finding there not the potential for a revolutionary unification of the class, but rather for its thorough-going liquidation. What we will find is anyone's guess.*

## CONCLUSION

The dissident Marxists of the 1960s attempted to reactivate the critical spirit of Marx's work. If they sometimes adopted the term 'critical theory' as a euphemism for their Marxism, that was not simply a way for them to avoid McCarthyite repression. It was also a matter of distancing their project from the stale dogmatism to which Marxism had been reduced. Existing Marxist theory proved hardly adequate to the new realities of post-war capitalism. It specifically failed to explain the growing atomization of proletarians in advanced capitalist societies. In the context of a rapidly growing economy, workers were mostly willing to allow parties and unions to act for them – to accept rising wages as a reasonable substitute for collective self-emancipation. Marx's own writings offered little to those seeking to understand this colonization of proletarians' inner life, their desires and aspirations, by the commodity form.<sup>58</sup> In response, the 1960s dissidents drew on other critical traditions, including theorists like Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Freud, in an attempt to explain workers' subjective identification with the objective logics that dominated them.

In this way, the dissidents tried to adhere to Hegel's definition of philosophy – to grasp one's time in thought – or, as Marx had it in a letter to Ruge, to discover the new world through the critique of the old.<sup>59</sup> But the new world the dissidents set out to discover is now an *old* new world, marked by potentials that never came to fruition. In spite of what was seemingly in the offing in the late 1960s struggles, labor movements never reconstituted themselves along the lines the dissidents imagined they would. Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, the mainstream of those movements – from which the dissidents had dissented – went into decline. What should be the goal of theory today, in an era of reawakening struggle but not yet of communist movement? We suggest that critical theory – or better, communist theory – has three tasks.

The primary task of theory is to examine class struggle not merely as possessing a theoretical framework, but as itself theoretically productive. Workers today face the problem of figuring out how to extend and intensify their self-organization and struggle in the absence of a shared class project. The paths that action will take are not knowable in advance; they have to be creatively constructed, as necessary preconditions for the re-emergence of a communist movement. Theory should therefore seek to give retrospective accounts of concrete struggles: of what they did, as well as of how participants in struggles understood what they were doing. The point here is not to cheerlead struggles but rather to *read* them, focusing on how they confront the composition problem and attempt to solve it via the haphazard construction of new categories, new tactics, and new organizational forms, which resonate across society. What do these struggles, in coming up against their limits, tell us about the shape of the communist movement to come?

The second task of theory is to examine the forms of the unfolding crisis of capitalist social relations, which provide the framework or context within which class struggle

takes place. We have argued that the breakdown of the capital–labor relation occurs in and through the generation of surplus populations alongside surplus capital. In examining the process of this breakdown, we must look not just for potential new proletarian unities, but also at the divisions *within* the proletariat that capitalist social relations both create and sustain, along lines, for example, of race, gender, nation, citizenship status, education level, and economic sector. What accounts for the structural reproduction of these intra-class divisions (which are not merely epiphenomenal to a shared class interest)? In an era of economic stagnation, divisions among workers have become all the more intense, since, in the context of worsening labor-market conditions, many workers with better-than-average wages and working conditions strive to protect their corners of the labor market, not only from the onslaughts of capitalist austerity but also from other proletarians.

The third task of theory is to gesture toward a communist future, a task which has become much more difficult after the end of the labor movement. The end of that movement was coincident with the evacuation of the emancipatory content of the categories of the capitalist world. Communism cannot be merely a re-constellation of those categories – the worker, the machine, and the factory – according to a new logic (i.e. the socialization of the means of production). Or to say the same thing another way: capitalist technology is not neutral, nor is the infrastructure that makes the use of that technology possible. Suburban divisions, electrical grids connected to coal-fired power plants: the material organization of social life today fits humanity into specific social grooves from which it must escape. How would an emancipated humanity use technology and design infrastructure? Without going into specific detail, it may nevertheless be possible to derive some principles of communist action in advance.<sup>60</sup> A communist future would have to sever the connection between *how*

*much and what work one does and what one receives from the social store*, in a way that does not generate new, structural forms of domination, whether personal or impersonal.

In suggesting these tasks for theory, we should not to be misunderstood as proclaiming a special role for theorists. In our view, theory is best thought of as a therapy for the despair that always accompanies lulls in class struggle, which often persist for years. It is a mode of explicit reflection on the theoretical production implicit in struggle, one that attends to the limits inherent in struggles, which, in their formalization as limits, may give birth to a communist movement. This despair does not always wait for lulls in struggle to appear. Militants frequently despair of struggles in their very unfolding. One observes a split between, on the one hand, the activists, who act without thinking, and the critical theorists, who think without acting. Theory should allow for a thinking in action, one which knows the limits of action, yet acts nevertheless.

## Notes

- 1 Prominent figures in the earlier wave were Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, Georg Lukács, and Karl Korsch, but the later wave also rediscovered relatively unknown figures like Isaac Rubin and Evgeny Pashukanis.
- 2 For more detailed discussion of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* see 'Communisation and Value Form Theory', *Endnotes* 2, 2010, pp. 68–105.
- 3 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works, Volume 37: Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 3* (International Publishers, 1998), p. 817.
- 4 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Zone Books, 1994), § 9, p. 14 (translation amended).
- 5 Jacques Rancière, 'The concept of "critique" and the "critique of political economy"' *Economy and Society* 5(3), 1976, Lucio Colletti, *Marxism and Hegel* (Verso Books, 1973), Jacques Camatte, *Capital and Community* (Unpopular Books, 1988), Fredy Perlman, 'Introduction' to *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* by I. I. Rubin (Black and Red, 1972). This approach was later taken up in the anglophone world by groups around *Capital and Class* and *Open Marxism*.



- 6 See Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- 7 Universally opposed to Stalinism, the dissidents nevertheless took various positions on Bolshevism, with the more interesting among them turning for inspiration to councilist and anarchist alternatives to the main lines of socialist history.
- 8 For economic-historical accounts of this era, see Philip Armstrong, Andrew Glyn, and John Harrison, *Capitalism since 1945* (Basil Blackwell, 1991) and Robert Brenner, *Economics of Global Turbulence* (Verso Books, 2006). On Keynesianism more specifically, see Paul Mattick's classic work, *Marx and Keynes: The Limits of the Mixed Economy* (Porter Sargent, 1969), as well as Geoff Mann, *In the Long Run We Are All Dead* (Verso Books, 2017).
- 9 Debord defines the proletariat as those who 'have lost all power over the use of their own lives', while admitting that this encompasses almost everybody (Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, § 114, p. 84).
- 10 Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, § 40, p. 28.
- 11 For Adorno the object of domination 'has long since ceased to be just the masses, they now include those in charge and their agents' (Theodor Adorno, 'Late Capitalism or Industrial Society? The Fundamental Question of the Present Structure of Society', in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 116)
- 12 See Raniero Panzieri, 'The Capitalist Use of Machinery: Marx Versus the Objectivists' (1964), available at <https://libcom.org/library/capalist-use-machinery-raniero-panzieri>, and Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (Pluto Press, 1974). See also, Paul Romano and Ria Stone, 'The American Worker' (1947), available at <https://libcom.org/history/american-worker-paul-romano-ria-stone>
- 13 Adorno and Debord both saw state-managed capitalism as a point of convergence of East and West, following the path of bureaucratization toward a fully administered world.
- 14 Adorno, 'Late Capitalism or Industrial Society', p. 116.
- 15 Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, p. 26.
- 16 Juan R. de Laiglesia and Johannes Jütting (eds.), *Is Informal Normal? Towards More and Better Jobs in Developing Countries* (OECD, 2009). See also ILO, *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture, Second Edition* (ILO, 2013).
- 17 See Loukas Karabarbounis and Brent Neiman, 'The Global Decline of the Labor Share', *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129(1), 2013, 61–103.
- 18 For mainstream accounts, see Robert Rowthorn and Ramana Ramaswamy, 'Deindustrialization: Causes and Implications', *IMF Working Paper* 97/42, 1997, and Dani Rodrik, 'Premature Deindustrialization', *Journal of Economic Growth*, 21(1), 2016, 1–33.
- 19 Meanwhile, a large portion of the manufacturing production that remains takes place in small, informal enterprises, rather than large-scale factories using advanced technologies.
- 20 See Aaron Benanav and John Clegg, 'Misery and Debt: On the Logic and History of Surplus Populations and Surplus Capital', *Endnotes* 2, 2010, pp. 20–51.
- 21 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1* (Penguin Classics, 1976), p. 799.
- 22 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 548.
- 23 'Within the capitalist system ... all means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become means of domination and exploitation of the producers; they distort the worker into a fragment of a man, they degrade him to the level of an appendage of the machine, they distort the actual content of his labor by turning it into a torment; they alienate from him the intellectual potentialities of the labor process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as in independent power' (Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 799).
- 24 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 450.
- 25 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 762.
- 26 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, pp. 780–1.
- 27 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 781.
- 28 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 783fn. On the service sector, see Benanav and Clegg, 'Misery and Debt', as well as Jason E. Smith, 'Nowhere to Go: Automation, Then and Now', *The Brooklyn Rail*, March 1, 2017, available at <http://brooklynrail.org/2017/03/field-notes/Nowhere-to-Go>
- 29 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 789.
- 30 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 783.
- 31 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 719.
- 32 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 795.
- 33 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, pp. 784, 794.
- 34 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 796. Marx noted that in England in his own time there were more people working as domestic servants than in industry. See Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 574.
- 35 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 796.
- 36 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 799.
- 37 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 799.

- 38 The more orthodox Marxists of the 1960s (e.g. Hal Draper and Ernst Mandel) defended Marx from those who dismissed his 'pauperization thesis' by insisting that he only envisaged a 'relative pauperization', a concept that Adorno described as 'ludicrous' (Adorno, 'Late Capitalism or Industrial Society', p. 112, see also his 1962 Seminar on Marx). Yet such attempts to reconcile Marx's predictions with post-war reality ended up distorting both. The truth is that post-war growth was inconsistent with *both* the relative *and* absolute interpretation of Marx's thesis, since the mid-century had actually witnessed a sharp *rise* in the share of national income going to the working class in the advanced countries. It was only in the last 40 years that relative (and at times absolute) forms of immiseration began to reappear.
- 39 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 798.
- 40 This section is largely drawn from Endnotes, 'A History of Separation', in *Endnotes 4*, 2015. In that text, we also discuss the role played by the persistence of the old regime – that is, landed aristocracy and the peasantry – in the history of the European workers' movement; whereas, here, we leave that discussion out in the interests of space. Our account draws extensively from Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), G. M. Tamás, 'Telling the Truth about Class' in *Socialist Register 2006* (Monthly Review Press, 2006), and Loren Goldner, 'Communism is the Material Human Community: Amadeo Bordiga Today (1995)', available at <https://libcom.org/library/communism-is-the-material-human-community-amadeo-bordiga-today>
- 41 See Benanav and Clegg, 'Misery and Debt', pp. 33–7.
- 42 Marx, *Capital Volume 1*, p. 929.
- 43 In a footnote to this proposition, Marx defined the proletariat as he who valorizes capital and is 'thrown onto the street as soon as he becomes superfluous to the need for valorization', foreshadowing his analysis of the decline in the demand for labor, which he lays out some 15 pages later (Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, pp. 764fn, 781).
- 44 We should note that many theorists of the historical worker's movement also viewed class struggle as extending beyond the bounds of the factory. For Lenin this broadening was about the necessary role of party militants and their distinctively 'political' struggle. For Luxemburg, who was closer to our argument here, the 'mass strike' represented a synthetic outburst of class struggle, in the workplace and the street. Yet for Luxemburg, as for the council communists, these kinds of spontaneous mass actions spilled out of the space of the factory. Today it is more a question of spilling into the workplace. See V. I. Lenin, *What is to be Done?* (International Publishers, 1969), Rosa Luxemburg, 'The Mass Strike' in *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg* (Haymarket, 2007), and Anton Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils* (AK Press, 2002).
- 45 Our account here draws on Endnotes, 'Spontaneity, Mediation, Rupture', in *Endnotes 3*, 2013.
- 46 See Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (Pluto Press, 2002).
- 47 Benanav and Clegg, 'Misery and Debt'. The quotation is from Marx, *Capital, Volume 3*, pp. 254–5.
- 48 See Anwar Shaikh, 'The First Great Depression of the 21st Century' in *Socialist Register 2011* (Monthly Review Press, 2011).
- 49 Robert Brenner, 'What Is Good for Goldman Sachs Is Good for America: The Origins of The Current Crisis' (2009), available at <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/issr/cstch/papers/BrennerCrisisTodayOctober2009.pdf>
- 50 See Brenner, 'What Is Good for Goldman Sachs Is Good for America'.
- 51 See Wolfgang Streeck, 'How Will Capitalism End?' *New Left Review* 87 (May–June 2014), p. 42ff.
- 52 See Endnotes, 'The Holding Pattern' *Endnotes 3*, 2013. See also Paul Mason, *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere* (Verso Books, 2012).
- 53 A proper analysis of this phenomenon would require significantly more work. An important reference for this work is Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (Verso Books, 2013).
- 54 Across Europe, the workers' movement was essential in pushing through an extension of the franchise to all men. These same movements played a role in retarding the extension of the vote to women. See Eley, *Forging Democracy*.
- 55 See Wolfgang Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (Verso Books, 2014).
- 56 In this context, elections were increasingly characterized by a politics of fear. Unable to promise a brighter future, political parties merely offered to protect voters from the imagined horrors that would be unleashed by the victory of the opposing party. That only went so far, since the livelihoods that politicians were supposedly protecting continued to get worse and worse.
- 57 Scott Santens, 'Why We Should All Have a Basic Income', *World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2017*.

- 58 The Marxist tradition also struggled to explain workers', at times, intense identification with their own oppressors, as in nationalism, or intense dis-identification with their fellow workers, as in racism.
- 59 Marx further writes, in the same letter to Ruge: 'We shall not say: Abandon your struggles, they are mere folly; let us provide you with true campaign-slogans. Instead, we shall simply show the world why it is struggling, and consciousness of this is a thing it must acquire whether it wishes or not'.

Letter from Marx to Arnold Ruge, September 1843, available at [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43\\_09-alt.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09-alt.htm)

- 60 Automation will play a role in communization, to be sure, but it is difficult to imagine what that role will be in care work: will we become mere living appendages to intelligent machines, tending to our young and old, our distraught, our lovers, and our gardens? Or is the labor of care fundamental to our humanity?

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