

Critical Theory

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Due to an expansion in its usage, the term "critical theory" has become increasingly ambiguous. Among other things, it currently refers to certain types of literary, race, and gender theory, what has come to be known as "cultural critique," more generally, and the body of work produced by those thinkers associated with Frankfurt University's Institute for Social Research, or what is more commonly known as "the Frankfurt School." It is critical theory in this last sense that is the subject of this chapter, and, more precisely, the critical theory of the so-called "first generation" of Frankfurt School theorists. Active, roughly, from the late 1920s through the early 1970s, the most influential members of this group included Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, Friedrich Pollock, Siegfried Kracauer, Erich Fromm, Leo Lowenthal, and Franz Neumann. Even when restricted to these thinkers, however, the term "critical theory" remains somewhat ambiguous. It misleadingly suggests that they shared the same interests and perspectives, when, in fact, it would be closer to the truth to say that what they shared was a loose set of methodological commitments, the most important of which was to a multidisciplinary approach for constructing a comprehensive, neo-Marxist theory of contemporary society.

At the risk of being somewhat simplistic, however, two basic positions can be drawn out.¹ One position, which predominated during the 1930s, finds its clearest expression in Horkheimer's early writings. It holds that critical theory is concerned with mediating the ideals of philosophy (which includes such notions as "freedom," "equality," "justice," and "reconciliation") and society's prevailing practices and underlying tendencies. What makes critical theory "critical," indeed, is its refusal to yield unilaterally to either one. Like Kant, whose self-styled "critical" philosophy was designed to steer a path between the Charybdis of empiricism and the Scylla of rationalism within traditional philosophy, critical theory is designed to steer a path between idealism of the philosophical tradition, whose utopianism tends to see human beings as "essentially" (i.e., in abstract or ahistorical terms) and their history "teleologically" (i.e., as geared toward the realization of this human essence), critical theory juxtaposes the facts of the social sciences. And, as against the uncritical realism of the social

society as "meaningless" (and **thus has the practical affect of confirming it**), critical theory juxtaposes the norms of the German philosophical tradition. Critical theory, in sum, brings the insights of both into a dynamic tension to produce a materialist social theory.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, this position was based upon the belief that the possibility for human emancipation continued to inhere within the institutional dynamics of the advanced capitalist societies, such that there was no ultimate contradiction between the norms of philosophy and the facts of the social sciences: the ideals of the former would be vindicated by the underlying tendencies within the latter. But with the increasingly catastrophic turn of events during the late 1930s and early 1940s, this relation between the norms of philosophy and the facts of the social sciences, or, as it is put in the vernacular, between theory and practice, became increasingly disparate. In response, Horkheimer all but gave up this position, while Marcuse continued to embrace it, albeit in a much more tentative fashion. With the rise of Jürgen Habermas, the doyen of the second generation of Frankfurt School theorists, the attempt to ground the ideals of the philosophical tradition in the social sciences was taken up with a new fervency, but for Habermas, whose political commitments run toward social-democratic reformism, its grounds are no longer to be found in economics and history, but rather in sociolinguistics.

The other basic position, which, in no small part, originates with Benjamin, finds its most far-reaching expression in Adorno's works. Although Adorno also sought to mediate the relation between philosophy's ideals and the prevailing sociohistorical practices in the service of an emancipated society, he discerned a somewhat more problematical relation between them. As a result, he had less confidence in their ultimate convergence — or, to be more precise, he had less confidence in the fact that if they did ultimately converge, it would testify to the existence of an emancipated society. This is because idealist philosophies, according to Adorno, have a dual nature: they not only posit the ideals toward which society ostensibly strives but, by virtue of their very abstractness, tend to see these ideals as already embodied in society's regressive practices, thereby legitimating them. Idealist philosophies are, in other words, inherently ideological, and thus obscure sociohistorical truths no less than they illuminate them. Adorno believed, however, that these obscured truths could be glimpsed by probing these philosophies for their internal contradictions, which he took to be a manifestation of the contradictions that exist in the society that gives rise to them. Because these contradictions arise from idealism's conceptual abstractness, which reflects and supports the abstractness of (monetarily mediated) social relations in capitalist society, it is necessary to reintroduce the moment of materiality that is lost. This is one of the reasons why Adorno privileges aesthetics as a vehicle of emancipation, for it resurrects a sensitivity to the natural world, which is just what idealism's abstract conceptual categories leave behind. Thus, while Adorno relied upon, and contributed to, the Frankfurt School's research in the social sciences, he focused on philosophy and aesthetics, as opposed to Horkheimer, who focused on social practices and their tendencies to instantiate philosophy's abstract ideals.

In what follows, I shall first provide a brief historical background of the Frankfurt School. I shall then consider what are ordinarily taken to be the three principal

representative of the primary philosophical positions within each period.² Unfortunately, given space limitations, this means that many of the Frankfurt School's works cannot be considered in this chapter, including, most conspicuously, the wealth of material concerning cultural phenomena.

Historical Background

Endowed by Felix Weil, the son of a wealthy industrialist, the Institute for Social Research was founded in 1923 for the purpose of providing an institutional context within which Marxist theory could be freely pursued – that is, pursued in a way that would be unconstrained by either the ideological dogmatism of the Communist Party or the rigid disciplinary divisions and pedantic style of German academic life. Inaugurated in 1924, the Institute's first Director was Carl Grünberg, a Professor of Law and Political Science, who specialized in the history of the workers' movement. Although it is unlikely that Grünberg was ever actually aligned with the Communist Party, he retained a strong commitment to orthodox Marxist methodology and, in particular, its doctrine of "historical materialism." This commitment was disputed by the younger members of the Institute, who, led by Horkheimer, charged that such an approach smacked of an orthodox (albeit secular) religion. In 1929, Grünberg was forced to step down from the Institute's Directorship due to illness, and in 1930, Horkheimer, who was then only 35 years old, assumed the position.

The first-generation Frankfurt School theorists were from varied disciplinary backgrounds: Horkheimer and Marcuse were philosophers, as was Adorno, who was a musicologist as well; Pollack, who was charged with administering the Institute's financial affairs, was an economist; Lowenthal was a literary theorist; Neumann was a lawyer; and Fromm, who was the best known of the group during the early 1930s, was a trained psychoanalyst. What they did share, however, was the same Jewish upper middle class background, which, given the rise of the Nazis, prompted most of them to flee Germany in the late 1930s. Benjamin, however, chose not to leave Germany until 1940, and when he was not allowed to cross from occupied France into Spain, he committed suicide at the border. Despite varied and circuitous routes, the others members of the Frankfurt School ended up in the United States, where they operated in exile. After the war, Adorno and Horkheimer returned to Frankfurt, where, besides their theoretical labors, they were instrumental in placing the German educational system on a sounder pedagogical footing. Marcuse, in contrast, chose to remain in the United States, where he taught at Brandeis University and the University of California at San Diego, and became the leading intellectual inspiration for the New Left during the late 1960s. Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, the three figures with whom this chapter will primarily deal, died in 1969, 1973, and 1980, respectively. By the late 1960s, however, their philosophical commitments were in the process of being supplanted by the second generation of critical theorists, who, led by Habermas, gave critical theory a communicative turn.³

1930-7: Interdisciplinary Materialism and Disintegrative Dialectics

Interdisciplinary materialism

With his assumption of the Institute's Directorship in 1930, Horkheimer immediately elucidated its new orientation. Although he continued to adhere to a Marxist position of sorts – in fact, for Horkheimer, the term "materialism" itself operated as a covering concept for his particular brand of Marxism – he largely rejected the prevailing doctrines of "orthodox" Marxism, which had more or less continued to function as the centerpiece of Grünberg's worldview. Accordingly, in his inaugural address, "The State of Contemporary Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research," Horkheimer rejects the overly simplistic base-superstructure model that had theoretically informed orthodox Marxism. On this model, philosophy, psychology, law, art, and all other cultural products are wholly derivative phenomena, and it is just the economy, or material being, that constitutes the true underlying reality. Such an approach is idealistic, he claims, for it largely abstracts from the existing social situation, and therefore, like other versions of idealism, is "ultimately devoid of any type of verification procedure."⁴ Horkheimer further asserts that this model, which misinterprets Marx, is simply the flip side of a common misinterpretation of Hegel, which privileges the life of the mind or spirit, while viewing material life as wholly derivative. In contrast, he argues, there is only "one question" around which social philosophy must non-reductively "crystallize": "the question of 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."⁵

Horkheimer further explicates his brand of Marxism in two important articles that appeared in the *Journal of Social Research* (the Institute's own publication) in 1933. The first of these articles deals with the relationship between Horkheimer's materialism and metaphysics, the second with the relationship between his materialism and morality. In "Materialism and metaphysics," Horkheimer argues that the advocacy of materialism by orthodox Marxists played into the hands of its idealist opponents because it amounted to a metaphysical thesis, and a poor one at that, namely, that "materialism" amounted to the claim "that only matter and its movements are real" (which draws sustenance from Engel's mechanistic *The Dialectics of Nature*). According to Horkheimer, however, materialism, properly understood, precludes any sort of claim that purports to capture "the nature of total reality," for all knowledge arises within a social context that is shaped by a particular set of human practices and objectives. This has important ramifications in terms of the question of praxis – that is, the attempt to transform existing social practices in accordance with theoretical objectives. It returns the responsibility for both formulating and bringing about these changes to "particular men within a particular period of time" (CT, p. 32), who are constituted by society and constitute it in turn, as opposed to the "longer view" of

suggests that there remains within capitalist society the economic and cultural preconditions for a genuinely democratic socialist society. Of course, in contrast with the doctrine of historical materialism as postulated by orthodox Marxism – namely, that the ascendancy of the working class is guaranteed by the inner workings of history (if not nature itself) – Horkheimer asserts that the “materialist theory certainly does not afford to the political actor the solace that he will necessarily achieve his objective; it is not a metaphysics of history, but rather a changing image of the world, evolving in relation to the practical efforts toward its improvement.”¹² Nevertheless, during this period, one gets the sense that even if it is understood that a genuinely democratic socialist society is not guaranteed, this strain of critical theory sees it as a real historical possibility, and, in any event, certainly not in conflict with the underlying historical tendencies of the time.

Although Horkheimer's works from this period are most philosophically representative of this strain of critical theory, as well as the Frankfurt School's orientation, more generally, other members also produced significant pieces during this time. Following Horkheimer's lead, the theme that unified their various works was the attempt to mediate the relation between their respective disciplines and a materialist theory of society. Representative, along these lines, were the following essays, all of which were published in the early editions of the *Journal of Social Research*. Lowenthal's “On the social position of literature,” which demanded that literature be appraised in terms of both the underlying economic structures that informed it and its tendencies to ideologically reinforce these structures; Pollock's “The present state of capitalism and the prospects for a planned economy,” which argued that although the economic preconditions for a socialist society existed, the capitalist class had the means to indefinitely forestall this possibility through planning; and, most notably, Fromm's “On the methods and tasks of an analytical social psychology” and “Psychoanalytic characterology and its significance for social psychology,” both of which reflect his ambitious project of synthesizing Marx and Freud.¹³

Disintegrative dialectics

Unlike Horkheimer's theoretical commitments, which changed over time, Adorno's commitments, though ceaselessly refined, remained relatively constant. A comparison of such later works as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Negative Dialectics* (considered below) with “The actuality of philosophy” and “The idea of natural history,” two seminal essays from the early 1930s, bears this out.

In the opening sentences of “The actuality of philosophy,” which was written in 1931 for his inaugural lecture at the University of Frankfurt, Adorno presages what will be nothing less than his lifelong philosophical aim, namely, the liquidation of idealism. Philosophy must reject the “illusion” that “the power of thought is sufficient to grasp the totality of reality,” he begins, for such an approach, which is based on the thesis that “autonomous reason” is able to develop reality “from out of itself,” only “veils reality and eternalizes its present condition.”¹⁴ All idealistic philosophies are misconceived, Adorno believes, because sociohistorical concepts invariably

concepts to grasp the “totality” or “essence” of reality through what they take to be the autonomy of rational thought, therefore, they project, albeit unwittingly, the existing sociohistorical factors that condition their thought onto what they falsely privilege as such a reality. The sociohistorical nature of idealism's projections thus remain “veiled,” and since these projections purport to capture nothing less than the “totality” or “essence” of reality, the existing sociohistorical conditions that inform them are “eternalized.” The idealist philosophies of the day, such as neo-Kantianism, Husserl's phenomenology, and Heidegger's nominally anti-rationalistic fundamental ontology, all fell into this trap, according to Adorno, but, paradoxically, so did the “scientific philosophies,” which wholly rejected the idealist question concerning the “totality of reality.” By privileging the natural sciences as the model for philosophical inquiry and seeking to “possess secure ground in the given,” such philosophies also abstracted from the sociohistorical nature of philosophical concepts. Ultimately, therefore, they also tended to “eternalize” the given sociohistorical reality.¹⁵

For Adorno, these failures give rise to the question that motivates the title of his essay, namely, whether philosophy is “actual,” which means whether “there exists an adequacy between the philosophic questions and the possibility of their being answered at all”¹⁶ – or, more simply, whether philosophy still has the capacity to get at the “truth,” its historic task, or just bogs down in existing intellectual attitudes (which is another, more profane, sense of philosophy's “actuality”). Adorno responds to this question by offering his own idea of philosophy; or, more precisely, his own idea of epistemology, which is based on dialectical and materialist principles. Preliminarily, he argues, “philosophy is interpretation,”¹⁷ but not the interpretation of a truer world that hangs behind appearances. It is, rather, the interpretation of a constantly changing sociohistorical reality that can offer up no eternal truths, but can provide glimpses of fleeting sociohistorical ones, provided that the philosopher inquires in the right way. Inspired by Benjamin, Adorno asserts that the right way to proceed is by constructing “constellations” or “trial combinations” out of various constituents of the existing sociohistorical reality that will “light up suddenly and momentarily” sociohistorical truths. In other words, in much the same way that one would play around with puzzles or riddles, one imaginatively juxtaposes and rearranges various constituents of the existing sociohistorical reality in thought experiments until one “sees” the answer, that is, a sociohistorical truth. Such a process is “materialist” because it does not begin with large conceptual categories that schematize reality, as does idealism, but rather begins with what is often the smallest material constituents of reality and builds toward concepts. And it is “dialectical” because it does not reify either the subject or its truths. The concrete subject pushes beyond its sociohistorical conditioning through the imaginative construction of constellations, and the truths it “lights up” are “consumed at the same time,” for the sociohistorical reality, and thus its truths, are constantly changing.¹⁸

Ruminating on the possibilities of this interpretive model, Adorno suggests that a sufficient constellatory construction of the commodity structure, which, as Marx taught, underpins capitalist society, could have the affect of lighting up Kant's “thing-in-itself” problem (i.e., the unknowable reality behind the world of appearances), and thus make it disappear. This hypothesis draws upon the work of the Hungarian

and had a strong influence on the Frankfurt School theorists. Thus, in accordance with Lukács's insight that the contradictions inherent within philosophical problems is suggesting that the stilted subject-object split implied by the thing-in-itself problem reproduces the stilted subject-object split within commodity production. In other words, the worker's separation from his product, whose social mediations hang behind his comprehension, is mirrored in the philosopher's separation from the unknowable thing-in-itself. When the sociohistorical reality that hangs behind the commodity structure is unveiled, therefore, the distinction between phenomenal knowledge and knowledge of the thing-in-itself disappears, for it becomes phenomenally obsolete. Crucially, however, while Adorno buys into Lukács's dialectical analysis, he rejects Lukács's claim that the working class is the "universal subject" to whom the ideological mystifications of the commodity structure will appear, and that it is only from its standpoint that the truths inherent within the existing sociohistorical constellation can be unriddled. In this way, Adorno also differs from the other critical theorists, for whom the working class retains a somewhat privileged epistemic status.

While in "The actuality of philosophy" Adorno offers a normative epistemological model in which a non-reflexed subject neither cognitively constitutes reality nor is abstractly split off from it, in "The idea of a natural history" he offers what will become his basic approach for dealing with the antinomies generated by the philosophical tradition. "The idea of a natural history" was motivated by the issue of philosophical relativism, and, in particular, the three basic positions that had crystallized around this issue: the ontological claim that there is an absolute realm of values that transcends what appears to be their historical relativity (Scheler); the historicist claim that values simply are relative (Mannheim); and, most of all, Heidegger's attempt to collapse this antithesis in his fundamental ontology, in which "history itself... has become the basic ontological structure."¹⁹ According to Adorno, who sees the question of ontology as a question of the status of the natural world, the first two positions artificially split the world into nature and history, while Heidegger's position achieves the "concrete unity of nature and history," but miscarries insofar as this unity is abstractly posited – that is, it is an overarching unity achieved by autonomous reason at the expense of the natural element, which is purged from its synthesis. It is Adorno's position, in contrast, that while history and nature interweave, they do not form an "encompassing whole" in which real history is transmuted into the abstract category of "historicity" and subsumed under Being.

More specifically, for Adorno, "history" and "nature" – and, for that matter, the two sides of every antithesis or "binary opposition" generated by the philosophical tradition – stand in a non-hierarchical relation to one another, in which each has a "double character."²⁰ On the one hand, each is irreducibly "other." "History," he contends, is characterized by "the occurrence of the qualitatively new," while "nature" refers to "what has always been." Depending on the object under consideration, then, each is to be used as a counterbalance to an overemphasis upon the other. In response to historical relativity, for instance, Adorno would pose the natural

element, or, to be more precise, seek to reconstitute a remembrance of both external and internal nature (i.e., the natural in the subject), while in response to, say, Heidegger's ontological claim, which absorbed "historicity" into the nature of Being, he would juxtapose the contingent facticity of a changing sociohistorical context. On the other hand, each term passes into the other. What seems most historical is comprised of what is irreducibly natural within it (such as the struggle for existence), while, as Lukács asserted, what seems most natural is actually just "second nature," which is historically produced (such as the claims of classical economists who see the insatiable desire for goods and competition under capitalism as "natural"). And, indeed, it is the constellation that provides the key for interpreting "this alienated, reified, dead world," for it yields the insight that what was taken to be "natural" is really historical, thus potentially unfreezing a petrified history.²¹

Ultimately, for Adorno, privileging one of the two terms in any of the antitheses or binary oppositions bequeathed by the philosophical tradition results in an undialectical oscillation between the two extremes. Thus, in *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, which was published one year later, Adorno maintains that by privileging subject over object (and, likewise, internal history over external history and history over nature), Kierkegaard does not merely subjectify the object (externalize internal history and historicize nature), but also unwittingly hardens the subject into an object (internalizes external history and naturalizes history), thus effectively negating his vaunted subjectivity. This basic thesis, as we shall see, is taken up again in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

1937–1940: Critical Theory

While in 1934 Marcuse could still contend that "the fate of the labor movement... is clouded with uncertainty,"²² by 1937 this uncertainty (at least for the near future) had disappeared. With the ascendancy of fascism in Germany during the mid-1930s, which crushed the progressive elements of the German labor movement (and forced the Institute for Social Research into exile), as well as the barbaric policies of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, the historical tide had turned against what Marxism took to be history's emancipatory force, namely, the proletariat. Under these deteriorating conditions, it became increasingly difficult for the Frankfurt School theorists to reconcile their earlier project of "interdisciplinary materialism," which had more or less continued to rely upon Marxism's more optimistic prognostications, with the actual course of historical events. It is within this context that Horkheimer steps into the breach with what is undoubtedly one of the defining works produced by the Frankfurt School, "Traditional and critical theory," which is the first work that calls "critical theory" by its name.

"Traditional and critical theory" is chiefly concerned with explicating the relation between theory and practice at a time when the gap between the two is rapidly widening. It was no easy matter to formulate the new historical relation. To continue to privilege "traditional" Marxist theory despite the turn of events would be to collapse into idealism (of what Marcuse called "orthodox Marxism," its self-understanding notwithstanding,

course of history, which had swept along a considerable percentage of the working class – would be to collapse into an apologetic for fascism. Thus, Horkheimer attempts to cleave a middle position. Horkheimer begins “Traditional and critical theory” by emphasizing that “the traditional idea of theory” is based on the scientific model, which, in turn, is based on the sort of deductive processes that hold sway in mathematics. On this account, knowledge is hierarchically classified and manipulated in a supposedly “objective” fashion; in fact, however, it is precisely “objectivity” that is lost in this process insofar as the sociohistorical context, which generates the particular forms that theoretical inquiry first takes, is bracketed. This model, moreover, conforms to the theoretical model that underpins capitalist society: “The seeming self-sufficiency enjoyed by work processes whose course is supposedly determined by the very nature of the object corresponds to the seeming freedom of the economic subject in bourgeois society.”²² Given the pervasiveness of this model, Horkheimer argues that “what is needed is a radical reconsideration, not of the scientist alone, but of the knowing individual as such” (CT, p. 199). Thus, in contrast to his analyses of the drawbacks of science during the period of “interdisciplinary materialism,” which were based upon an “external” critique of the improper uses of science within society, Horkheimer shifts to an “internal” critique of the ways in which all knowledge tends to presuppose and reinforce a distorted image of society.²⁴

Horkheimer’s “radical reconsideration” thus issues in a “critical” theory, namely, a theory that “has society itself for its object.” A “critical” theoretical approach, he argues, is distinguished by a tension in which, on the one hand, economic categories such as work, value, and productivity are interpreted just as they exist in the prevailing order, while, on the other hand, this interpretation is implicitly subjected to criticism, for “the critical acceptance of the categories which rule social life contain simultaneously their condemnation” (CT, pp. 207–8). With this notion, Horkheimer is advancing the idea of an “immanent critique” – namely, a critique whose standpoint exists within the very structures that are being subjected to critique. In other words, capitalist society is based upon certain abstract concepts, such as freedom, equality, and the harmonization of particular interests, and when these concepts are fully articulated, it turns out that they are at odds with the very order from which they arise. In this way, the critical theorist can avoid a collapse into either the abstract normativity of idealism or a wholly descriptive conformism. Of course, since the basis for such a critique is parasitic upon the society being critiqued, critical theory is historically contingent; or, as Horkheimer states, “this knowledge guarantees only a contemporary, not a future community of transmitters” (CT, p. 241). Indeed, it is the very possibility of critique that is called into question once “first-generation” critical theory moves into its third period in the 1940s. At this juncture, however, the grounds of critical theory itself are not yet being called into question.

In “Traditional and critical theory,” moreover, Horkheimer qualifiedly shifts the locus of emancipation from the proletariat to the intellectual, who, nevertheless, continues to speak on the proletariat’s behalf. Although, as Horkheimer puts it, “the situation of the proletariat is, in this society, no guarantee of correct knowledge” (CT, p. 213), it continues to be the repository of emancipatory hopes by dint of

both its central and inherently subversive position within capitalism. The intellectual is thus committed to speaking on behalf of this class even when he or she is at odds with it: “The sharpness of the conflict shows in the ever present possibility of tension between the theoretician and the class which his thinking is to serve” (CT, p. 215). Along these lines, he distinguishes his notion of the intellectual’s role from the role that the intellectual plays in orthodox Marxism by asserting that orthodox Marxist theoreticians dogmatically identify with the proletariat, while critical thought “must at times isolate its subject and throw him back on himself” (CT, p. 214). Horkheimer’s depiction of the orthodox Marxist theorist here is misleading, because his belief that the proletariat suffers from a “false consciousness” is one with which orthodox Marxists concurred – thus the need for a “vanguard party.” Still, critical theory, as Horkheimer conceives it, does differ from orthodox Marxism in important respects. While orthodox Marxism privileges the economy, and otherwise views cultural matters as epiphenomenal, Horkheimer maintains that “the dependence of the cultural on the economic has changed” as a result of “ruling economic and political bureaucracies” (CT, p. 237). So, too, while orthodox Marxism privileges the proletariat as a collective subject whose historical ascendancy is assured, and traditional bourgeois theory privileges the individual, Horkheimer does not privilege either one, for both are abstract: “Critical thinking is the function neither of the isolated individual nor of a sum-total of individuals. Its subject is rather a definite individual in his real relation to other individuals and groups, in his conflict with a particular class, and finally, in the resultant web of relationships with the social totality and with nature” (CT, pp. 210–11). To the extent that they “absolutize” their respective theories, “as though they were grounded in the inner nature of knowledge as such or justified in some other ahistorical way,” both orthodox Marxism and traditional bourgeois theory posit “reified, ideological categories” (CT, p. 194).

“True theory is more critical than affirmative” (CT, p. 242), Horkheimer states at the end of “Traditional and critical theory,” and in “Philosophy and critical theory,” which was written by Marcuse in response to the discussion generated by Horkheimer’s essay, Marcuse fleshes out the relation between “critical” and “affirmative” thought. In certain respects “Philosophy and critical theory,” which was also published in 1937, reflects Marcuse’s relatively recent break with phenomenology, or, to be more exact, the project of amalgamating Heidegger’s phenomenological ontology and Hegelian-Marxism. As late as 1932, Marcuse’s thought remained in Heidegger’s orbit, as is evidenced by the publication of what had been his intended *habilitationsschrift*, *Hegel’s Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*. Still, as Adorno points out in a review of the book, Marcuse was beginning to strain against the limits of Heidegger’s philosophy in his attempt to move “from historicity to history,” which leads Adorno to ask: “Why indeed should the ‘ontological’ question precede that of real, historical facts since Marcuse himself would like to bridge the gap between ontology and facticity?”²⁵ Marcuse will soon come to agree, and by the mid-1930s he begins to speak in terms of historical tendencies and human potentialities instead of ontological structures.²⁶ Thus, in a thinly veiled slap at Heidegger, Marcuse states in “Philosophy and critical theory” that “the philosophical ideals of a better world and of true Being are incorporated into the practical aim of struggling mankind, where they take on human form.”²⁷

autonomous and critical theory," two of which I shall address here. First, he stresses the utopian component in critical theory, which Horkheimer had only touched upon. As Marcuse puts it, there are two basic elements in a critical social theory, namely, the "concern with human happiness" and the recognition that it "can be attained only through a transformation of the material conditions of existence."²⁸ This concern with human happiness is the "without which not" of critical theory: It is the source of critical theory's normative impulse. When Horkheimer states that "true theory is more critical than affirmative," therefore, he is only denigrating those theories that affirm either the prevailing socioeconomic conditions or their underlying tendencies notwithstanding the actual fact of the matter, not "the affirmative" as a regulative ideal. And in the service of this ideal, Marcuse asserts, fantasy must be enlisted, for it can span "the abyss between rational and present reality."²⁹ Second, while "the affirmative" as a regulative ideal is indispensable to a "critical" theory, critical theory, as Horkheimer had stated, must still be able to discern "the affirmative" somewhere within the existing so as to stay "critical," otherwise it lapses. Following Horkheimer's notion of "immanent critique," Marcuse asserts that "the affirmative" can still be discerned within the classical bourgeois ideals, which have a dual nature: critical theory "only makes explicit what was always the foundation of [bourgeois philosophy's] categories."³⁰ Indeed, more than Horkheimer and Adorno, Marcuse always believed in the emancipatory power of bourgeois philosophy's most basic category, namely, rational thought: "Reason represents the highest potentiality of man and of existence."³¹ It is precisely this belief, however, that is made somewhat more problematical during the next period of critical theory.

1940-5: The Critique of Instrumental Reason

In "Traditional and critical theory," Horkheimer asserts that "the issue is not simply the theory of emancipation, but the practice of it as well" (CT, p. 233), and in "Philosophy and critical theory," Marcuse asserts that "reason is the fundamental category of philosophical thought, the only one by means of which it has bound itself to human destiny." Yet, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which is generally taken to be the most representative work of the first generation of critical theorists, not only practice, but reason itself, and therefore theory, is called into question. Before examining this work, however, I shall briefly consider Pollock's important essay, "State capitalism: its possibilities and limitations," for the socioeconomic picture that it paints is arguably presupposed by *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and contributes to its pessimistic nature.

State capitalism or state capitalism

By the early 1940s, the Second World War was in full swing, and while the sociopolitical commitments of the warring nations were relatively distinct, their economies,

surprisingly enough, were not. In particular, neither the fascist nor imperialist autocratic economies seemed to bear an especially strong resemblance to the classic capitalist model, which is distinguished by a private market made up of profit-driven competitors and a government whose attitude toward the operation of this market is essentially *laissez-faire* in nature. From Keynesian economic policies to the command economy, state intervention in the economic sphere seemed to be the rule. Thus, Marx's critique of political economy, which was based upon the idea that capitalism would be plagued by increasingly intense crises due to a tendency for the rate of profit to fall, was called into question. Pollock's "State capitalism: its possibilities and limitations" called it into question more than most.

According to Pollock, although "nineteenth century free trade and free enterprise are on the way out," capitalism itself is not, but instead will transform into "state capitalism," which could assume either a totalitarian or democratic form.³² The defining feature of "state capitalism," he contends, is the relative displacement of the market by the state, which develops a "general plan." This plan involves coordinating access to credit (banks are transformed into government agencies), capital investment, production and distribution, prices and wages, consumption, and research and development. As a result, the "economic," strictly speaking, is displaced by the "political." This means that while a "pseudo-market" continues to operate, and the profit motive, at least nominally, continues to exist, the capitalist, in effect, no longer manages the enterprise. Ultimately, then, "the profit motive is superseded by the power motive."³³ Moreover, according to Pollock, due to the rationalization of the economy, which supersedes the natural laws of the market and therefore forecloses "economic problems in the old sense," there are no limits on state capitalism. Thus, he asserts, "we are unable to discover any inherent economic forces, 'economic laws' of the old or new type, which could prevent the functioning of state capitalism."³⁴ For Pollock, this means that Marx's crisis theory becomes obsolete. With planning, the economic havoc caused by increasing rates of surplus value extraction could be averted by political determinations, which might take the form of a full employment policy.³⁵ To use an expression that Adorno will come to increasingly use, the economy, and, more generally, society, effectively becomes "administered."

Although Pollock's thesis is generally deemed to animate *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,³⁶ it is not one that all the Frankfurt School theorists accepted, and, arguably, is not even one that Adorno accepted — at least unequivocally. In *Behemoth*, for example, Neumann argues that while the state had begun to intervene in the operations of the free market, in both the fascist and liberal democratic economies the profit motive was still controlling. Referring to Nazi Germany's economy as "totalitarian monopoly capitalism," Neumann asserts that the new forms into which capitalism was evolving were essentially an outgrowth of trends that Marxism had already diagnosed within capitalism. Neumann's analysis, in fact, is less reductionistic than Pollock's, for he does not privilege the economic at the expense of the political in the way that Pollock privileged the political at the expense of the economic. Even Adorno is inclined to charge Pollock's thesis with being reductive: it is based on "the undialectical assumption that a non-antagonistic economy might be possible in an antagonistic society."³⁷ In the aftermath of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, however, the question will become how antagonistic Adorno himself thinks society actually is.

While Adorno's early works evidence a certain wariness of Enlightenment reason – or, to be more precise, a wariness of its unreflective employment (i.e., an employment that does not reflect upon Enlightenment reason's own grounds and assumptions) – it is doubtful that the same could be said of Horkheimer's "critical theory" period, much less his "interdisciplinary materialism" period. In 1941, however, Horkheimer moves closer to Adorno's position with the publication of "The end of reason," a short essay that prefigures various themes that will be taken up in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. "The end of reason" is wide-ranging in scope. It surveys the fate of reason since the Middle Ages, namely, its increasing instrumentalization in the face of skepticism; it considers the "gangsterism" of fascism, which is emblematic of reason's decline; it considers the relation between the decline of reason and the decline of the individual ego, which is due to economic and cultural processes that circumvent family and school to directly condition the young for unqualified obedience; and, after a renewed attack upon fascism, it ends with the either/or to which reason has historically progressed: barbarism or freedom. What is most striking in this work, however, is Horkheimer's dawning recognition that reason is a two-edged sword. "The idea of reason, even in its nominalistic and purified form, has always justified sacrifice,"³⁸ he states, and "the age-old definition of reason in terms of self-preservation always implied the curtailment of reason itself."³⁹

These themes are more fully developed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which is often taken to be one of the first "deconstructions" of Enlightenment reason. In certain respects (but only in certain respects) the analysis of reason is reminiscent of Nietzsche's analyses, which are a primary source of inspiration for poststructuralist thought. Nevertheless, unlike Heidegger, whose uncompromising attacks on reason and subjectivity are an even greater source of inspiration for most (but not all) strains of poststructuralist thought, Adorno and Horkheimer hold on to these Enlightenment notions. Their commitment to Enlightenment reason, despite its dialectical reversals, is manifest, as is evidenced by the book's Introduction, in which this commitment is made explicit various times in statements such as the following: "We are wholly convinced – and therein lies our *petitio principii* – that social freedom is inseparable from enlightened thought . . . If enlightenment does not accommodate reflection on the recidivist element then it seals its own fate."⁴⁰ Ultimately, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a critique of reason by (dialectical) reason⁴¹ (namely, a critique of *Verstehen* by *Vernunft*), and, as such, is reminiscent of no less an Enlightenment project than Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Furthermore, as was the case for Kant, the very grounds of such an undertaking are problematical, which is implicitly acknowledged by Adorno and Horkheimer in the Introduction as well: "Thought has to forgo not only the affirmative use of scientific and everyday conceptual language, but just as much that of the opposition. There is no longer any available form of linguistic expression which has not tended toward accommodation to dominant currents of thought" (DOE, p. xii). Through its experimental style (interdisciplinary and fragmentary), as well as sheer density, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* seeks to overcome this problem. It requires of the reader not only a sustained effort, but a

controversial one. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* seeks to resurrect individual subjectivity in the face of mass society's attempt to level all thinking to the "dominant currents of thought," which afford ideological cover to dominant economic and political interests. Generally speaking, the book immanently critiques Enlightenment rationality and subjectivity as they have historically unfolded by examining, respectively, the link between myth and Enlightenment, the genesis of the Enlightenment subject through an interpretation of Homer's *Odyssey*, the ultimate logic of Enlightenment morality, mass culture, and (through a constellatory, multiperspectival approach) the phenomenon of anti-Semitism.

The central thesis of the first essay, "The concept of Enlightenment," is that "myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology" (DOE, p. xvi). "Myth is already enlightenment" to the extent that the ancients sought to control the natural world through abstract principles of equivalence, which are the very stuff of Enlightenment thinking. Through the mythic offering of sacrifices, for example, they would barter with the gods to gain control over them, and, thereby, a hostile and threatening nature. So, too, for the ancients, myth meant not only "report, naming, and the narration of the Beginning, but also presentation, confirmation, and explanation, [which] grew stronger with the recording and collection of myths" (DOE, p. 8). "Enlightenment reverts to mythology," conversely, to the extent that it fetishizes its own products. This second, more crucial, prong of the thesis draws upon the insights of Max Weber, the early twentieth-century German sociologist, and Lukács, whom Weber strongly influenced. It was Weber's thesis that in disenchanting the world, reason becomes "formal" or "purposive" in nature – that is, relegated to calculating the best means to the ends sought, but unable to determine the ends themselves. Reason, in other words, functions as an arch-bureaucrat. In one sense, it becomes an end in itself, an "iron cage" of rationality in a lifeless world, while, in another sense, it indiscriminately serves any pre-rational end, since it cannot determine substantive ends. Lukács extends Weber's thesis to the reifying effects of the commodity form under capitalism, in which abstract principles of equivalence like labor and exchange value prevail, and Adorno and Horkheimer, in turn, extend Lukács' thesis to the top-down administrative processes of "state capitalism," which they see as the dead end of this process. Through increasing abstraction, which is the underlying tendency of capitalism in its movement from competitive to state forms, they argue, the particularities of the natural world are increasingly effaced. Enlightened thought thus increasingly becomes unenlightened about itself, and turns on the very subject in whose interest it ostensibly operates: "In class history, the enmity of the self to sacrifice implied a sacrifice of the self, inasmuch as it was paid for by a denial of nature in man for the sake of domination over non-human nature and other men . . . Man's domination over himself, which grounds his selfhood, is almost always the destruction of the subject in whose service it is undertaken" (DOE, p. 54).

This dynamic is probed by Adorno and Horkheimer within the context of their discussion of subject formation in Homer's *Odyssey*. Much like myth and Enlightenment, they contend, self-denial and self-assertion are intertwined – a fact which can

the more easily glimpsed by looking at the relatively unproblematic oneness withjectivity shortly after "the subject" has sprung from its undifferentiated oneness with nature. Accordingly, with every adventure, Odysseus, who Adorno and Horkheimer describe as "a prototype of the bourgeois individual" (DOE, p. 43), preserves his newly won subjectivity at the expense of his own internal nature, external nature, or other human beings. For example, in the episode with the Sirens, whose "call of nature" is both the beckoning of natural happiness and the death of subjectivity, Odysseus plugs the ears of his oarsmen so that they cannot hear the call of happiness, and has himself bound tightly to his ship's mast, where he can listen to its call, but cannot act upon it. Such are the relative fortunes of the working class and bourgeoisie within modern society, in which myth, domination, and labor are entangled. The idea of self-denial in the name of self-assertion is made even clearer, since it is made more literal, when Odysseus confronts the Cyclops Polyphemus. Cunningly, Odysseus escapes Polyphemus by referring to himself as *Uteis* – which rhymes with Odysseus, and in Greek means, quite literally, "no one" – for when Polyphemus screams that *Uteis* has blinded him, there is no reason for other Cyclops to come to Polyphemus's aid. By renouncing himself as a self, in other words, Odysseus affirms himself, a point that he egotistically pauses to make to Polyphemus while escaping, which costs the lives of his oarsmen.

This same dynamic – self-denial is already self-assertion, and self-assertion reverts to self-denial – is evidenced in Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of Enlightenment morality, which they take to be intrinsically sadomasochistic. Along these lines, Kant's moral philosophy is especially representative. According to Kant, the subject must abstract from all natural and historical residues to act upon the moral law, which is tantamount to being free, but since it is the natural and historical that constitutes "the subject" (*qua* "empirical self," which Kant disparages as the stuff of anthropology), Kant's moral subject is abstract in nature. Although seemingly swallowed up by the imperatives of a pure practical reason that operates in accordance with universal laws, however, the concrete subject that is denied unwittingly reproduces the very stuff of its empirical context precisely because of the thoroughgoing formality of its moral decision-making procedures: "So long as the identity of the user of reason is disregarded, the affinity of reason is as much to force as to mediation . . . Since it exposes substantial goals as the power of nature over mind, as the erosion of its self-legislation, reason is – by virtue, too, of its very formality – at the service of *any* natural interest" (DOE, p. 87). In this way, Adorno and Horkheimer argue, Kant's morality (which, Kant had hoped, would make good Christian ends through formal means) slips into the immorality of the Marquis de Sade, and, for that matter, the Nazis, both of whose "systems" were organized in accordance with the hierarchical, systematizing principles of formal rationality.

Finally, in their critique of contemporary culture, "The culture industry: Enlightenment as mass deception," Adorno and Horkheimer argue that culture, once viewed as a retreat in an otherwise profane commercial world, has been entirely assimilated by that world – hence the term "culture industry," which once would have been perceived as an oxymoron. Culture is no longer designed to perform the function of enabling what must now be called its "consumers" to think against the dominant currents of thought, but rather is designed to do its consumers' thinking for them, thus precluding the possibility of potentially subversive ideas: "The need which

vidual consciousness" (DOE, p. 131). This type of control, they conclude, "brings the end of the individual subject of competitive capitalism while exalting a pseudo-individuality that is based on one's accidental traits or preferences as a consumer. It takes the form of a stultifying sameness that reproduces the subordination to capital in the economic sphere within the entertainment sphere so as to more thoroughly confirm it, thus giving the lie to the idea that culture is an escape from work life.

It has subsequently been argued that the "Culture industry" essay, and, more generally, Adorno's miscellaneous cultural writings, presuppose a static dualism of "high" modernist culture, which is valorized, and "mass," "low," or "popular" culture, which is disparaged as regressive. Despite Adorno's attacks on various aspects of popular culture (the most notorious of which are his pieces on jazz), however, this characterization is incorrect. Although one might reject Adorno's analyses of particular cultural phenomena, he did not reject popular culture *qua* "popular" culture; rather, he believed that popular culture itself is not "popular" because it does not arise from the classes that consume it. The essential point of the "Culture industry" essay and Adorno's works on culture, therefore, is not so much that "high" culture is being crowded out (or, better, absorbed) by "low" culture, but that both high and low culture are commodified in the first instance by commercial interests, which superimpose culture from above. Indeed, Adorno recognized that in a society riven by class interests, there would be different cultural expressions, and that, ideally, popular culture would be an expression of the interests and concerns of the working classes. As he states in a letter to Benjamin, high culture and popular culture are "torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up."⁴²

In any event, in the final analysis, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* would seem to leave little hope for breaking out of the administered world of late capitalism. Actually, however, we are left with some possibilities. Adorno and Horkheimer assert, for instance, that by the "remembrance of nature in the subject, in whose fulfillment the unacknowledged truth of all culture lies hidden, enlightenment is universally opposed to domination" (DOE, p. 40). In different ways, it is to this "remembrance of nature in the subject," which is the fount of human happiness, that Adorno and Marcuse will advert in later aesthetic and psychoanalytic works. So, too, Adorno and Horkheimer assert that the notion of "determinate negativity," which is the driving force in Hegel's dialectic, is a form of Enlightenment thinking that does not fetishize its products – although by posing "Absolute knowing" as a historical end realized in his own time, Hegel, too, ultimately succumbed to this inclination (DOE, p. 24). Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, which draws upon his earlier works, reflects the attempt to make good Hegel's promise.

1945–70: Theory and Practice in a One-Dimensional Society

Philosophy and psychology

In the decade following the Second World War, the Frankfurt School turned much of its attention toward psychoanalytic issues to better grasp the penchant for fascism that had just been observed. This decade ends with the 1955 publication of *Essays and*

terms the psychological bases for fascism, but also to reveal an emancipatory standpoint within Freud's theories that went unnoticed by Freud himself.

In fact, the Frankfurt School's attempt to explain the sociopsychological bases of fascism began even before the war ended, although it was undertaken by one who actually was no longer a member. Due to theoretical differences, Fromm broke with the Institute for Social Research in 1939, and in 1941 his most influential work, *Escape from Freedom*, was published. *Escape from Freedom* probes the social psychology of Germany's lower and middle classes. Drawing on Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Fromm argues that the psychological preconditions for fascism were already present in these classes due to the self-renunciation demanded by their predominant religious (Lutheranism and Calvinism) and economic (competitive capitalism) forms. In keeping with Weber, however, he argues that the existential meaning that religion could still effectively offer in the Middle Ages had been lost, thus leaving humanity without purpose: far from being seen as desirable, then, the freedom bequeathed by modernity is alienating. For Fromm, the way to approach this problem is to revisit humanity's existential situation in terms of the potential for love and spontaneity rather than focus upon what he increasingly came to reject in Freud's corpus, namely, a biologically rooted drive theory. It is this position, which the other members of the Frankfurt School saw as idealistic (and, ultimately, conformist), that facilitated the break.

In 1950, Adorno, in conjunction with a group of American psychologists, published *The Authoritarian Personality*, which was based on interviews and questionnaires constructed to identify individuals with latent fascistic biases, that is, individuals susceptible to anti-democratic propaganda. Based on the scores of 2099 respondents in nine general areas – conventionalism, authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, anti-intraception (hostility to the subjective and imaginative), superstition and stereotypy, power and toughness, destructiveness and cynicism, projectivity (the outward projection of base impulses), and sex – the researchers found a strong relation between anti-Semitic and anti-democratic tendencies, as well as both of these tendencies and a childhood marked by parents whose discipline was strict, but arbitrary. And the psychology of this family, the study implies, is itself the result of the family's attempt to steel itself against unfathomable social pressures, and then project its feelings of anxiety and inferiority onto groups that are even more marginalized, who then serve as scapegoats. This accounts for the authoritarian personality's hostility toward the unfathomable "other," which, as Adorno and Horkheimer state in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ("Elements of anti-Semitism"), is personified by the Jew.

Adorno produced a number of important theoretical essays on psychology in the early 1950s, such as "Freudian theory and the pattern of fascist propaganda"⁴³ and "Sociology and psychology,"⁴⁴ but it is only with Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* that the Frankfurt School, in some sense, returns to its early 1930s project, namely, finding the grounds for the emancipatory ideals of the philosophical tradition in the social sciences. At this historical juncture, however, such a project was far more problematic. Given the recent ascendance of fascism in Europe and McCarthyism in the United States, as well as the conservatism of the 1950s, history did not seem to be

on the side of the working class. And, even so, Marcuse's attempt to explain the socio-psychological bases for fascism, but also to reveal an emancipatory standpoint within Freud's theories that went unnoticed by Freud himself.

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an "ontogenetic" analysis, which considers the individual's development from birth, and a "phylogenetic" analysis, which speculatively advances civilization's archetypal development from birth. At both of these levels – that is, the individual and the collective – which are interrelated, the very possibility for development arises from an original guilt-inducing act that plays out in increasingly virulent cycles of resistance, guilt, and repression.

Marcuse does not succumb to pessimism, however, and argues that there are emancipatory possibilities inherent within this bad dialectic. Phantasy "retains a high degree of freedom from the reality principle,"⁴⁷ and consequently provides uncolored images of happiness; art manifests "the repressed harmony of sensuousness and reason",⁴⁸ and there remain archetypes in Western culture, such as Orpheus and Narcissus, who embody joy and fulfillment. Ultimately, Marcuse asserts, a society built upon a new relationship between the instincts and reason – that is, a "libidinal rationality" (which presupposes, among other things, the end of the performance principle, surplus repression, and therefore a reduction in the work day) – is indeed possible. There would not only be a re-criticization of the body, but also of the entire personality, as well as society itself. Those who reductively attack Marcuse for merely valorizing polymorphous perversity, such as Fromm, therefore miss his more important point that in this new context "sexuality would tend to its own sublimation": "the libido would not simply reactivate precivilized and infantile stages, but would also transform the perverted content of these stages."⁴⁹

Philosophical models

During the 1960s, Marcuse and Adorno were the most productive critical theorists, and, from a strictly philosophical standpoint, *One-Dimensional Man* and *Negative Dialectics*, respectively, were arguably their most significant works (although, admittedly, in Adorno's case, it is virtually impossible to make this sort of distinction between *Negative Dialectics* and his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, which are not only homologous, but mutually reinforcing as well).

Published in 1964, *One-Dimensional Man* echoes the fears of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, although Marcuse's target is not the totalitarian impulse of modernity, more generally, but rather its particular manifestation – 20 years later – in the phenomenon of advanced capitalist society. Like *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, however, the fundamental concern of *One-Dimensional Man*, as the title suggests, is modern society's ability to bring about irrational or pseudo-reconciliations in which forms of opposition that would otherwise transcend prevailing social theories and practices are preempted. In his Introduction to the book, Marcuse acknowledges that this state of affairs raises the question of whether critical theory has lost the ground of its own critique, but he argues that even if there are no agents or agencies of social change, "the distinction between true and false consciousness, real and immediate interest still is meaningful."⁵⁰ In other words, for Marcuse, there is, at least in principle, some standpoint from which one's "true" needs and interests can be distinguished from those "false" needs and interests with which the individual is instilled by the ide-

ological apparatus of the social totality, and which internally reinforce his repression. The question of whether (due to this state of affairs) critical theory itself is in any position to make this distinction, however, is one that Marcuse ultimately leaves unanswered.

Marcuse begins *One-Dimensional Man* by asserting that democracy and freedom no longer go hand-in-hand. While advanced capitalist society retains the support of the majority due to its ability to deliver the goods, the rights and liberties that were basic to prior stages of entrepreneurial capitalism "lose their traditional rationale and content" (*ODM*, p. 1). Indeed, precisely because it delivers the goods, the tendency of advanced capitalism to undercut basic rights and liberties is exacerbated, for non-conformity appears to the majority as socially useless. Implicitly drawing on his analysis of artificial scarcity, surplus repression, and the performance principle in *Eros and Civilization*, moreover, Marcuse claims that the prospects for liberation are effectively undermined by the perpetual implantation of new material needs, which artificially perpetuate the struggle for existence, and that the distinction between true and false needs can be made on this basis. Making this distinction is problematical, however, for "the efficiency of the system blunts the individuals' recognition that it contains no facts that do not communicate the repressive power of the whole" (*ODM*, p. 11). This means that the system no longer appears as ideological because it is permeated by ideology – in other words, the backdrop against which ideology might be identified as such disappears, which reflects the fact that ideology permeates even the production process. Thus, even the subjectivity of the working class is flattened, which calls its emancipatory role into question. This phenomenon, Marcuse adds, is only worsened by technological advancement, for by diminishing the quantity and intensity of physical labor, it further tends to conceal capitalist domination. The consciousness of the working class thus changes, and it is more easily integrated into the workplace and society at large. And, finally, this process is reinforced by the system's ability to project itself as tolerant and reasonable: a "subdued pluralism" obscures the system's unfreedom, and the rationalization of means obscures the system's overall irrationality.

There are factors at play, moreover, that implicitly call into question the emancipatory role played by the instincts in *Eros and Civilization*. After suggesting that ideological indoctrination penetrates the very instincts of the individual, Marcuse asserts that the diminution in the quantity and intensity of work has not redounded to the benefit of emancipatory practices, but has had the opposite affect: "Desublimation is practiced from a 'position of strength' on the part of society, which can afford to grant more than before because its interests have become the innermost drives of its citizens, and because the joys which it grants promote social cohesion and contentment" (*ODM*, p. 72). Marcuse calls this phenomenon "repressive desublimation." At first blush, "repressive desublimation" would appear to be an oxymoron. It was Freud's position that "sublimation" is the compelled redirection of the drives away from their principal object, which suggests that desublimation would be emancipatory. Marcuse, however, takes a more nuanced approach. As we saw in *Eros and Civilization*, in an emancipated society "sexuality would tend to its own sublimation," which means that the individual personality, and thus the larger society, would be eroticized. Sublimation, in other words, is not always inconsistent with

is the converse, namely, that desublimation in a repressive society would not necessarily serve the interests of liberation. In late capitalist society, the process of desublimation is ideologically manipulated by the culture industry to reinforce the existing social relations in various ways. Trifling movies, television programs, and novels tacitly reinforce mindless consumerism, and sex is routinely used to advertise products. This produces what Marcuse calls a "happy consciousness" – that is, a facile consciousness that on the surface is satisfied, but whose impoverished inner life is a source of unhappiness.

Finally, Marcuse argues, ideology penetrates language (both semantically and syntactically) to its core, such that the possibility of *truly* "thinking outside the box" is veritably foreclosed. Concepts that would comprehend the given facts, and thus afford the basis for transcending them, are losing their linguistic representation. This is achieved by "a telescoping and abridgement of syntax which cuts off development of meaning by creating fixed images which impose themselves with an overwhelming and petrified concreteness" (*ODM*, p. 91). Further exacerbating this situation, according to Marcuse, is the character of Anglo-American philosophy itself, whose linguistic analyses discard the speculative moment, and therefore tacitly reaffirm the bad given. In other words, in contrast to classic philosophy, in which "the subversive power of reason" seeks to mediate dialectically the critical tension between metaphysical ideals and the given reality, Anglo-American philosophy dispels the tension by dispelling the ideals: "The empiricism of linguistic analysis moves within a framework which does not allow such contradiction – the self-imposed restriction to the prevalent behavioral universe makes for an intrinsically positive [i.e., conformist] attitude" (*ODM*, p. 171). What linguistic philosophy fails to grasp, Marcuse contends, is that language cannot be abstracted from its concrete sociohistorical context without reifying it, with all its contradictions. The aim of language, instead, is to push beyond the present stock of meanings by making "the established language itself speak what it conceals or excludes" (*ODM*, p. 195).

Despite Marcuse's characterization of society as "one-dimensional," he continues to hold out hope in the reconciling power of reason. Any "transcendent project," he declares, "must demonstrate its own higher rationality" by serving the "pacification of existence" through optimizing "the free development of human needs and facilities" – given, of course, the material limits of the existing sociohistorical context (*ODM*, p. 220). Although Marcuse warns against "technological fetishism," he thus remains firmly committed to the Enlightenment project: "If the completion of the technological project involves a break with the prevailing technological rationality, the break in turn depends on the continued existence of the technical base, for it is the base which has rendered possible the satisfaction of needs and the reduction of toil – it remains the very base of all forms of human freedom" (*ODM*, p. 231). Ultimately, it is Marcuse's belief that technology could be aestheticized, which would involve the free play of thought and imagination, and would ostensibly circumvent the repressive aspects of the dialectic of Enlightenment.

At first blush, Marcuse's alternatives are presumably ones that would, in some sense, resonate with Adorno. But given Marcuse's concession that there are no forces within one-dimensional society that have the ability to bring about the historical alter-

alternatives could ~~consequently~~ **more** harm than good: by "subjectively constituting" these goals, **Marcuse might ultimately** implicate himself in the very dialectic of Enlightenment from which he seeks to escape. (This is why Adorno never speculated upon the state of sociohistorical reconciliation.) Despite overlapping diagnoses and concerns, therefore, there are differences between Marcuse and Adorno that might be understood as arising from an underlying difference of perspective: Marcuse uses concrete sociohistorical analyses to project what are ostensibly still immanent substantive ideals into the future, which then serve as a basis for praxis, while Adorno uses the non-substantive regulative ideal of the reconciled society in the service of concrete sociohistorical analyses that seek to expose the false promises and contradictions of the past, which then (albeit more problematically) serve as a basis for praxis. With the intensification of the civil rights movement, the advent of anti-war protests, and the birth of the New Left in the mid-1960s, which raised anew the question of the relation between theory and practice, this "difference of perspective" becomes more conspicuous, for it leads Marcuse and Adorno in different directions, both theoretically and practically.

In the decade following the publication of *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse, in response to rapidly changing social conditions, produced a number of politically explosive theoretical works. In "Repressive tolerance," which appeared in a 1965 book titled *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, he argues that intolerance, and, indeed, violence, is morally justified (if not required) in response to capitalist society's depredations. This position, which is arguably the product of his diagnosis of the limits of pluralism in *One-Dimensional Man*, theoretically justified the confrontational politics that were beginning to take shape. The radical days of 1968, in turn, led Marcuse to take a more expansive theoretical approach. In *An Essay on Liberation*, published in 1969, he argues that the increasing incidence of Third World revolutionary movements effectively undermines capitalist markets abroad, and that, coupled with the student movements in the advanced capitalist societies (which are not "revolutionary" in themselves), has the potential to engender capitalist crises. And, finally, in his 1972 book *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Marcuse argues that large segments of advanced capitalist society itself are becoming increasingly alienated. The surface appearance of a pacified consumer society, he argues, is belied by a widening disparity between the expectations created by the system's promises and the (dispirited) lives that people actually lead as consumers and workers ("workers" broadly defined, i.e., not just limited to orthodox Marxism's factory workers). For Marcuse, who now stresses a longer historical view, the emphasis is upon political education, which serves to build a United Front within the advanced capitalist societies.⁵¹

Like Marcuse, who tacitly returns to Hegel's dialectical notion of "determinate negation" in *Counterrevolution and Revolt*,⁵² Adorno also believes that determinate negation is the appropriate philosophical starting point. But, for Adorno, who had his doubts about the efficacy of the New Left, this meant a return to the intricacies of theory itself, as opposed to the attempt to theoretically shape (or, worse, retrospectively justify) practice, which, he believed, invariably debases theory, and, ultimately, practice as well. This philosophical commitment led Adorno to take a different tack in *Negative Dialectics*, which was published in 1966, three years before his death.

Thus, unlike Hegel, and, for that matter, Marcuse, Adorno does not think that dialectics can "achieve something positive by means of negation"⁵³ – hence, a *negative* dialectic. In effect, negative dialectics gives the Hegelian dialectic a turn from "identity" toward "non-identity," which Adorno characterizes as follows: negative dialectics "does not tend to the identity in the difference between each object and its concept; instead it is suspicious of all identity. Its logic is one of disintegration" (ND, p. 145). Although the language of "identity" is new, *Negative Dialectics* hearkens back not only to Adorno and Horkheimer's emphasis upon "determinate negation" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but, even more directly, to "The actuality of philosophy," which was written 35 years earlier. As we observed in "The actuality of philosophy," Adorno thinks that the constellatory framework gives rise to fleeting sociohistorical truths. This is another way of saying that objects of knowledge cannot be conceptually pinned or identified once and for all, thus establishing their "identity," but are constantly changing, which requires our concepts to change as well if we are to do justice to them. Quite simply, then, "the hinge of negative dialectics" is to "change the direction of conceptuality" (ND, p. 12).

This "change of direction" resonates throughout Adorno's philosophy, and fundamentally alters Hegel's dialectic. Thus, although Hegel and Adorno agree that subject and object, universal and particular, cannot be properly understood apart from their dialectical interrelation, Hegel privileges the subject, while Adorno privileges the object, and Hegel privileges the universal, while Adorno privileges the particular. For Adorno, this "axial turn," which converts Hegel's idealistic dialectic into a materialist one, redeems the true Enlightenment impulse in dialectics. Privileging "the object" (which, as a part of nature, the subject always already is) and "the particular" (which is the individual subject within the context of the social whole) ultimately recurs to the benefit of the Enlightenment subject, while abstractly privileging "the subject" and "the universal," as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* teaches, strips both of their natural content, and does violence to them in equal measure. Thus, while Hegel states that "the whole is true," Adorno declares in *Minima Moralia*, a book of aphorisms written after the war, that "the whole is false."⁵⁴ Again, this does not mean that "the whole" – namely, the universal – is not an essential moment in comprehension, since it must factor into all (nonfetishized) knowledge of particulars, nor does it mean that it somehow lacks reality, for Adorno is not a nominalist. Instead, "the whole is false" means that, like the concept with respect to its objects, it must be understood as being driven by the sensuous particulars that comprise it. For Adorno, then, to privilege the whole, as Hegel does, is to hypostatize it (to think it identically), and thereby falsify it. In this way, Hegel's "system," which culminates in Absolute Knowing (*Phenomenology of Spirit*) and the State (*Philosophy of Right*), goes astray. Adorno thus declares: "No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb" (ND, p. 320). Hegel's teleology, in other words, is inconsistent with the type of Enlightened (self-reflective) thought that would truly be in the service of humanitarianism, which is an uncoerced reconciliation of the particulars that comprise the whole, but it is consistent with the sort of unreflective instrumentalizing reason that is part and parcel of the dialectic of Enlightenment.

More broadly, *Negative Dialectics* is a historically specific philosophical constellation. The Introduction, which begins with the momentous line that "philosophy,

which once seemed necessary, was un- because the inmanent to nature is missed" (ND, p. 3), grapples with the concept of philosophical experience, and how this concept, as it has historically unfolded, conspires with the bad turn of historical events that precluded philosophy's own realization. Part One, in turn, considers Heidegger's fundamental ontology (which was also the subject of a 1964 book by Adorno, *Jargon of Authenticity*). Adorno's consideration of Heidegger here is due less to the fact that Adorno puts Heidegger on the same footing as Kant and Hegel, the two other philosophers with whom the book extensively deals, than with the fact that, according to Adorno, "the ontologies in Germany, Heidegger's in particular, remain effective to this day" (ND, p. 61). Adorno immanently critiques this ontology, while simultaneously seeking to make sense of the sociohistorical need that motivated it. In Part Two, Adorno sets forth his own concept of negative dialectics, some of whose basic commitments were summarized above. And, finally, in Part Three, Adorno "elaborates models of negative dialectics . . . to make plain what negative dialectics is" (ND, p. xx) – that is, we see Adorno's *negative* dialectic in action. The first two models with which Adorno deals in this part – Kant's freedom model and Hegel's history model – reflect his attempt to show that each is informed by that which it represses. Crudely, Kant's freedom model is suffused by the social totality from which it seeks to abstract, while Hegel's history model presupposes the very individual subject to which it otherwise gives short shrift.

In the final analysis, moreover, both models lose "the object," or natural element, as is the wont of all idealistic philosophies, according to Adorno. Yet, the last model that Adorno proffers in Part Three involves his own questioning of the status and possibility of metaphysics in the wake of Auschwitz. "The indifference of [the modern] consciousness to metaphysical questions . . . [hides] a horror that would take men's breath away if they did not repress it" (ND, p. 395), he states, for to continue to ask the metaphysical question is no less a condition of the possibility of emancipation than a resurrection of the natural element that metaphysics represses. For Adorno, in sum, it is only by continuing to ask the metaphysical question that we might ever dare hope to break the spell of metaphysical thinking, and thus redeem a "full, unreduced experience in the medium of conceptual reflection" (ND, p. 13). The aim of negative dialectics, in sum, is nothing less than rich individual experience, which is the unfulfilled promise of the Enlightenment.

Conclusion

Adorno's negative dialectics is often taken to be the final legacy of first-generation critical theory, and, for many second-generation critical theorists, reflects its dead end. According to Habermas, by rejecting the 1930s project, which revolved around the attempt to ground the philosophical ideals of the Enlightenment tradition in the social sciences, Adorno leaves us with a purely negative conception of reason that is relegated to impotently critiquing the prevailing state of affairs. The way out of this aporia, Habermas argues, is a linguistic turn in which the subject-object paradigm of the first-generation critical theorists is replaced by a communicative paradigm, which is based on what he calls an "ego-alter-ego relation." By virtue of what he

claims are universal pragmatic constructions that implicitly assume a language (or, as it is called in the vernacular, our "speech-acts") – namely, truthfulness, rightness, sincerity, and comprehensibility – Habermas claims to have found the grounds for a discourse ethics. Obviously, then, by the very act of speaking, we are implicitly committing ourselves to the realization of an uncensored consensus through the force of the better reasoned argument, or what he calls an ideal speech community.

The details of this turn, as well as its merits, are well beyond the scope of this chapter. In terms of the project of the first-generation critical theorists, however, it should be pointed out that Habermas's abandonment of the subject-object paradigm has entailed the abandonment of not only nature as a thing of concern, but also the utopian themes that depended upon it, and which were so crucial to first-generation critical theory. Under these circumstances, one must wonder whether Habermas's communicative paradigm is implicated in the very dialectic of Enlightenment that he takes it to have surmounted.

Notes

- 1 See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), pp. 65–9.
- 2 See, for example, Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) and Helmut Dubiel, *Theory and Politics: Studies in the Development of Critical Theory*, trans. B. Gregg (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1985).
- 3 For intellectual histories of the Frankfurt School, see Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, trans. M. Robertson (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1995) and Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923–1950* (Boston: Little Brown, 1973).
- 4 Max Horkheimer, "The state of contemporary social philosophy and the tasks of an Institute for Social Research" (trans. P. Wagner), in S. E. Bronner and D. M. Kellner (eds.), *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 34.
- 5 Ibid., p. 33.
- 6 Max Horkheimer, "Materialism and metaphysics" (trans. M. J. O'Connell), in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1992), p. 14. Further references will be contained in the text in the form "(CT, p. ●●)."
- 7 See Max Horkheimer, "Notes on science and the crisis," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p. 3.
- 8 Max Horkheimer, "Materialism and morality," *Telos* 69 (Fall 1986), pp. 87–8.
- 9 Ibid., p. 95.
- 10 Ibid., p. 108.
- 11 Ibid., p. 109.
- 12 Ibid., p. 114.
- 13 See Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, pp. 118–23.
- 14 Theodor W. Adorno, "The actuality of philosophy" (trans. B. Snow), *Telos* 31 (Spring 1977), pp. 120–1.

- 16 Ibid., p. 124.
- 17 Ibid., p. 126.
- 18 Ibid., p. 127.
- 19 Theodor W. Adorno, "The idea of natural history" (trans. R. Hullot-Kentor), *Telos* 60 (1984), p. 114.
- 20 My analysis here draws upon Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, pp. 57–9.
- 21 Theodor W. Adorno, "The idea of natural history," pp. 118–19.
- 22 Herbert Marcuse, "The struggle against liberalism in the totalitarian view of the state" (trans. J. J. Shapiro), in *Negations: Essay in Critical Theory* (London: Free Association Books, 1988), p. 42.
- 23 Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and critical theory" (trans. M. J. O'Connell), in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p. 197. Further references will be contained in the text in the form "(CT, p. ●●)."
- 24 Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, p. 153.
- 25 This review, which was published in the first volume of the *Journal for Social Research*, is reproduced, in part, in Seyla Benhabib's Introduction to Marcuse's *Hegel's Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*, trans. S. Benhabib (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1987), p. xxxi.
- 26 Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), p. 61.
- 27 Herbert Marcuse, "Philosophy and critical theory," in *Negations*, p. 142.
- 28 Ibid., p. 135.
- 29 Ibid., p. 154.
- 30 Ibid., p. 145.
- 31 Ibid., p. 136. Martin Jay says that "despite the consistent emphasis on negativity in his work and the pessimism often attributed to it, Marcuse's writings always contained an implicit faith in possible realization of *Vernunft* in the social world." Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, p. 71. And, as Douglas Kellner says, "from the 1930s until his death, Marcuse was convinced that reason can judge between true and false needs, pseudo- and real happiness." But as Kellner also points out, Marcuse "never really addresses or works out the issue of the foundation of critical theory." See Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism*, p. 125.
- 32 Friedrich Pollock, "State capitalism: its possibilities and limitations," in A. Arato and E. Gebhardt (eds.), *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1993), p. 72.
- 33 Ibid., p. 78.
- 34 Ibid., pp. 86–7.
- 35 See ibid., p. 175, n. 28.
- 36 See, for example, Helmut Dubiel, *Theory and Politics*, p. 81.
- 37 Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, p. 282.
- 38 Max Horkheimer, "The end of reason," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, p. 33.
- 39 Ibid., p. 47.
- 40 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. J. Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1991), p. xiii. Further references will be contained in the text in the form "(DOE, p. ●●)."

- 41 For a vigorous defense of this position, see Robert ...
- 42 *Zeits 81* (Fall 1989).
- 43 See *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. F. Jameson (London: New Left Books, 1977), p. 123.
- 44 Theodor W. Adorno, "Freudian theory and the pattern of fascist propaganda," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, p. 118.
- 45 Theodor W. Adorno, "Sociology and psychology," *New Left Review* 46/47 (December 1967-January 1968).
- 46 Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 86.
- 47 Ibid., p. 87.
- 48 Ibid., p. 140.
- 49 Ibid., p. 144.
- 50 Ibid., p. 202.
- 51 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), pp. xlv-xlv.
- 52 Further references will be contained in the text in the form "(ODM, p. ••)."
- 53 See Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism*, ch. 9.
- 54 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: New Left Books, 1974), p. 50.

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Jürgen Habermas and Hans-Georg Gadamer

David Ingram

[E]very one that asketh receiveth . . . and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. (Matthew 7:8)

My brother and I strongly disagree about the meaning of the Gospels: I think they tell a story about a humble humanitarian who urged his disciples to surrender their material possessions to devote their lives to redeeming the suffering of the poor and meek; he thinks they tell a story about the Son of God, who admonishes rich and poor alike to believe in Him for the sake of gaining eternal life. Regardless of who has got it right, one thing seems patently clear: our conflicting interpretations lack the transparency of meaning we normally attribute to the printed word which, after all, appears on the page in all its indisputable objectivity. In this respect, our interpretations appear to be much like our subjective judgments of taste: we can agree that the large body of water facing us is the ocean, but we can't agree on whether it looks green or blue.

No doubt my interpretation of the Gospels is also colored by a biased perspective (unlike my brother, I'm an atheist, committed to furthering social justice in *this* world). However, this fact about personal bias ignores what Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2001) and Jürgen Habermas (1929–) – the two most influential German philosophers living at the turn of the twentieth-first century – take to be the inescapably interpretative nature of even our most objective knowledge. If they are right, knowledge is inherently relative to the perspective of the knower. But a perspective, they remind us, need not be merely personal. Indeed, a perspective that is shared can be as universally accessible as that afforded by a telescope – assuming, of course, that one adopts the posture requisite for telescopic viewing.

Indeed, what Gadamer dubs *philosophical hermeneutics* – the science of interpreting texts named after the Greek messenger God *Hermes* – ostensibly shows that knowledge is inconceivable apart from adopting some perspective, horizon of understanding, or interpretative standpoint. Gadamer and Habermas insist that experience is necessarily filtered through a familiar way of understanding things. We already have at our disposal a way of organizing experience – be it a conceptual grid, language, or way of seeing – that determines whether (for instance) the T-shaped patch of color in my field of vision will be **seen** by me as a plane, bird, angel of God, kite, or