CRITICAL THEORY

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(The Institut für Socialforschung was set up at Frankfurter-am-Main in 1923. Horkheimer, whose father endowed it, became director in 1930, and continued in exile after 1933, in France, and then in the United States. The Institute closed in 1941, with some members returning to Germany, and others, notably Fromm and Marcuse, remaining in the USA. Adorno and Horkheimer re-established the School at Frankfurt in 1950. Habermas (now at the Max Planck Institute) came in at that stage. Adorno died in 1969; Horkheimer is still alive. These three all moved to a conservative position, especially after the 1968 student revolts, which they denounced.)

This article is an attempt to define and assess what is known as critical theory. The perspective which is taken here is that there are common themes running through the work of Marx, Lukacs and the Frankfurt School, including its living exponents, Marcuse and Habermas, and that although there are significant differences between these theorists, they all share a critical position.

The defining characteristic of this position is a critical and transcendent view of reality which encompasses the negation of the existing reality which presents itself to us, and urges such negation in practice in order to liberate the possibilities for man immanent in that reality. This characteristic will usually be referred to in this essay as the critical position, a term which will be used in a general way to include also themes concomitant with this characteristic.

"The truth is the whole." Hegel's dictum is the point of departure for critical theory, but it is in Marx that it acquires its material relevance. I intend to base my explication of Marx's critical theory upon Marcuse's lucid statement of "The Marxian Dialectic." (1)

Both Hegel and Marx, says Marcuse, saw the negative character of reality, and truth was only to be found in the "negative totality". The elements of transcendence and negation are already apparent - the truth was the whole, and the whole was reality as it presented itself to us, plus the negation of that reality as discerned in its negativity, which was its motor. It was only in the context of the negative totality, said Marx, that the process and structure of social reality could be understood, for it enabled one to see through the reification and mystification of class society to its contradictions.

The difference between the Hegelian and the Marxian dialectic, as Marcuse points out, is that the former was "... a universal ontological one in which history was patterned on the metaphysical process of being," whilst the latter was historically specific and materialist. ("The critic... can... develop the true actuality out of the forms inherent in existing actuality as its ought-to-be and goal." (2) Similarly, his materialism is evident in "The German Ideology," especially on the first few pages where he says that his premises "... are men, not in any fantastic isolation and fixation, but in their real, empirically perceptible process of development under certain conditions." (3) It is Marx's view of the negative totality of social reality that has come to be called "dialectical materialism". But there is more to dialectical materialism than this, and it is now that we see the defining characteristic of critical theory:

"The historical character of the Marxian dialectic embraces the prevailing negativity (that is, the contradictions of class society) as well as its negation. The given state of affairs is negative and can be rendered positive only by liberating the possibilities immanent in it. This last, the negation of the negation (obviously not in the same sense as Hegel used the term) is accomplished by establishing a new order of things."


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The negativity and its negation are two different phases of the same historical process, straddled by man's historical action. The new state is the *truth* of the old, but that truth does not steadily and automatically grow out of the earlier state; it can be set free only by an autonomous act on the part of men, that will cancel the whole of the existing negative state." (4)

The negation of negativity then, is not inevitable nor is it just a philosophical conception as far as Marx is concerned -- rather, it needs conscious action to bring it about. Thus, two consequential elements which emerge from Marx's critical theory are the emphasis on consciousness, and the emphasis on Praxis, both of which are necessary to bring about negation and therefore central to the critical position. For Marx, the conscious and acting men who were to bring this about were the proletariat:

"Heralding the dissolution of the existing order of things, the proletariat merely announces the secret of its own existence because it is the real dissolution of this order." (5) The object of the negation of the proletariat's negativity was human emancipation:

"The role of emancipator ... finally reaches the class which actualises social freedom, no longer assuming certain conditions external to man and yet created by human society but rather organising all the conditions of human existence on the basis of social freedom." (6)

Marx was aware, however, of the difficulties which capitalism put against the attainment of consciousness and the inspiration to Praxis:

"The class having the means of material production has also control over the means of intellectual production, so that it also controls, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of intellectual production." (7)

Similarly, science and philosophy were subject to the mystification of capitalism:

"Science was either pressed 'into the service' of capital or degraded to the position of a leisurely past-time remote from any concern with the actual struggles of mankind, while philosophy undertook in the medium of abstract thought to guard the solutions to man's problems of needs, fears and desires." (8)


6. ibid., p. 262 (added stress).


8. Marcuse, op.cit., p. 321 (original stress). This is ironic in view of subsequent developments.

What then, were the implications of Marx's thought for philosophy and sociology? Marcuse answers:

"The material connection of his theory with a definite historical form of practice negated not only philosophy but sociology as well ... The fundamental relations of the Marxian categories are not within the reach of sociology or of any science that is preoccupied with describing and organising the objective phenomena of society. They will appear as facts only to a theory that takes them in the preview of their negation. According to Marx, the correct theory is the consciousness of a practice that aims at changing the world." (9)

We can now see, particularly in this last statement, the defining characteristic and the concomitant themes of critical theory as it is found in Marx: the critical and transcendent view of reality as negative totality, which, given a materialistic cast, saw through the ideology of class society to reveal its contradictions and made possible the negations of this negativity. This could only be done through the proletariat acting with this consciousness to liberate the human possibilities immanent in class society, that is, negating it by creating socialism. This is the critical position as found in Marx and which is carried through to a greater or lesser degree in Lukacs and the Frankfurt School.

Lukacs' *What is Orthodox Marxism?*, a polemic against Bernstein and other revisionists, clearly places him in the critical theory tradition. (10) He emphasises, like Marx, the method of dialectical materialism, the relationship of theory and practice, historical specificity, capitalism's use of science and so on. However, with Lukacs is found a movement away from Hegel and the concept of negative totality when he insists on the importance of the "concrete totality."

Starting from Marx's dictum that "the relations of production form a whole," Lukacs lays emphasis on the historical character of reality, and argues that the reality which we experience (as distinct from the negative totality) must be viewed holistically and historically, but further, that we must also come to know "the concrete totality i.e. the conceptual reproduction of reality." (11) That is to say, it is only by seeing past the concepts through which capitalism reproduces itself that we can see its real contradictions.

It is this consideration that leads Lukacs, as it was later to lead Habermas, to an emphasis on the critique

9. ibid., cf. Marx's Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach; also "As philosophy finds its material weapons in the proletariat, the proletariat finds its intellectual weapons in philosophy." Marx, in Easton and Guddat, op. cit., p. 263 (original stress).


11. ibid., p. 8 (stress added).
of ideology and a corresponding emphasis on reification and the problem of consciousness. Lukacs’ argument is made clearest when he says:

“The fetishistic illusions enveloping all phenomena in capitalist society succeed in concealing reality, but more is concealed than the historical, i.e. transitory, ephemeral nature of the phenomena. This concealment is made possible by the fact that in capitalist society man’s environment, and especially the categories of economics, appear to him immediately and necessarily in forms of objectivity which conceal the fact that they are the categories of the relations of men with each other. Instead they appear as things and the relations of things with each other. Therefore, when the dialectical method destroys the fiction of the immortality of the categories it also destroys their reified character and clears the way to a knowledge of reality.” (12)

This echoes Marx, certainly, but in the emphasis on knowing the reality of the ideological superstructure, it appears that Lukacs’ emphasis here is quite different to the Hegelian and Marxian emphasis on the negativity of reality. However, whilst this may be so, Lukacs comes back to Marx and Hegel when he sees the proletariat as the negations of capitalism:

“... for the proletariat the total knowledge of its class-situation was a vital necessity ... its class situation becomes comprehensible only if the whole of society can be understood ... this understanding is the inescapable pre-condition of its actions ... From its own point of view, self-knowledge coincides with knowledge of the whole so that the proletariat is at one and the same time the subject and object of its own knowledge.” (13) Thus, for Lukacs, as with Marx, critical theory is clearly identified with the proletariat, an identification which later was to be lost in critical theory.

Although I have previously used the term “critical theory” in regard to Marx and to Lukacs, for reasons already given, it is most closely associated with the work of the Frankfurt School: mainly Horkheimer, Adorno, *Marcuse* and Habermas.

In regard to the term itself, an orthodox Marxist critic of the Frankfurt School, Goran Therborn, points out that Horkheimer used the term “materialism” rather than “critical theory” at first; that Adorno saw critical theory as an attempt to bring materialism “to theoretical self-consciousness;” and that the phrase derives “from the conventional description of Marxism as the critique of political economy.” (14) It would appear, then, that there is at least nominal continuity between Marx, Lukacs, and the Frankfurt School: however, Therborn’s judgment is that “Critical theory is primarily a prise de position (Haltung) and only secondarily a theory of a specific type.” Further, he says that “the content of critical theory was essentially indeterminate.” (15)

I share sufficient reservation with Therborn to incline me to use the phrase “critical position,” as indicated above, when trying to discern the continuities in all the theorists with whom I am dealing. However, whilst being aware of emphasising similarity at the expense of distinction, it seems to me that with Horkheimer’s statements that the critical theorist is “the theoretician whose only concern is to accelerate a development which should lead to a society without exploitation” and that “Critical theory explains: it must not be like this, men could alter being, the conditions for doing so already exist,” (16) the continuity is more than nominal with Marcuse’s judgment on Marx, cited above: “According to Marx, the correct theory is the consciousness of a practice that aims at changing the world.” (17)

However, the radical programme which Horkheimer set out in 1937 was not and has not been realised by the Frankfurt School -- on the contrary, the School has been characterised by a marked retreat from practice, especially from practice identified with the proletariat. This marks a clear break with Lukacs and with Marx, who saw clearly that “real liberation can be achieved only in the real world and with real means ... ‘Liberation’ is a historical and not a mental act.” (18)

Therbom argues that the Frankfurt School’s retreat is characterised by a “double reduction of science and politics to philosophy.” (19) Therborn apparently shares Marx’s attraction to positivism and materialism: “Where speculation ends, namely in actual life, there, real, positive science begins as the representation of the practical activity and practical process of the development of men ... Apart from actual history ... abstractions have in themselves no value whatsoever.” (20)

It is from a similar position that Therborn criticises the Frankfurt School. He argues that the School’s critical theory is rooted in the tradition of classical philosophy by virtue of its idealism and objective view of truth which leads to the use of a “metaphysical humanism” as its epistemology. This in turn leads to a critique of political economy, as with Marx, but its transcendence of bourgeois economics “leaves its system of concepts intact ... It leaves
Also, in regard to the relationship of critical theory to the proletariat, Therborn argues that Horkheimer’s programme is vague and unsure, and that...

“Critical theory’s” conception of politics also ends in a paradox. On the one hand, it presents itself as a mere component of a political practice; on the other, it lacks any specific political anchorage. This is not just a description of its historical situation after the victory of Nazism in Germany, but a rigorous consequence of Frankfurt School theory. The over-politicisation of theory leads logically to the substitution of theory as a surrogate for politics -- an Ersatz-politik.” (22) (Therbom goes on to discuss the continuities of the Frankfurt School with Lukacs in its critique of science as contemplation, which in time moved to a critique of science as domination. This element reaches its apogee in Habermas, to be discussed below.)

Like Lukacs, and like Marx, critical theory takes the Hegelian view of history as an unfolding, as the realisation of the subject, such that conscious action to negate the negativity of capitalism realises socialism. Therborn’s essential criticism here of this view is that it is non-scientific and non-materialist, but what leads him to this view, apart from his own bias towards science, is his concentration on the “social totality” rather than on the “negative totality.” In looking for the Frankfurt School’s continuities with Marx, then, it becomes a question of which element is dominant in Marx -- positivism (“scientific socialism”) or Hegelianism. Therborn argues from the former, this essay from the latter, so that my own judgment on this theoretical score is that the critical position is maintained through Marx, Lukacs and the Frankfurt School.

However, the question of the relationship of theory and practice is another one entirely, and it is clearly demonstrable that the post-War developments in the Frankfurt School, with an exception perhaps in the case of Marcuse, have led to the retreat from practice to pure philosophy and to individual reflection rather than social emancipation, and to the academic integration of the School as well as the embourgeoisement of its individual members, as Therborn shows. One can only agree with Therborn’s judgment that:

“The effect of the combined factors of formal presentation of the theory, exclusive individualisation and academic integration is a cumulative mystification. The formula here provides a legitimation for a purely ideological radicalism smugly installed in the cosy academic institution, without even an indirect relationship to politics as experienced by the masses but still cultivating a critical theory going back to an interpretation of Marx.” (23)

Bearing in mind the distinction between critical theory as theory and the relationship of the theory to practice, we now pass to the two most influential living Frankfurters, Marcuse and Habermas. In regard to this distinction, Marcuse can be said to maintain the relationship of theory to practice in practice, although his theory is open to Therborn’s criticism of the Frankfurt School. For Marcuse, critical theory is concerned to analyse the contradictions of society, its modes of domination and its ideology (or “concrete totality” as Lukacs puts it.)

“... in the light of its used and unused or abused capabilities for improving the human condition ..., critical theory must abstract from the actual organisation and utilisation of society’s resources ... Such abstraction which refuses to accept the given universe of facts as the final context of validation, such ‘transcending’ analysis of the facts in the light of their arrested and denied possibilities, pertains to the very structure of social theory. It is opposed to all metaphysics by virtue of the rigorously historical character of the transcendence ...” (24)

However, because, as Marcuse argues, society has become “one-dimensional,” and absorbed the proletariat, “in the absence of demonstrable agents and agencies of social change, the critique is thus thrown back to a high level of abstraction. There is no ground on which theory and practice, thought and action meet ...” (25)

All the elements of the critical position which were identified above can be seen clearly here -- immanent critique in terms of real possibilities, the historical and materialist elements, the aim of human liberation, transcendence of reality -- however, Marcuse’s analysis at this stage leads him away from Praxis “in the absence of demonstrable agents and agencies of social change” -- not just the proletariat, but anyone. Thus, “the analysis is forced to proceed from a position ‘outside’ the positive as well as negative, the productive as well as destructive tendencies in society.” (26) Thus, Marcuse finds himself in the same dilemma as his peers at Frankfurt -- having the critical position, but no group with which it might be identified.

Whilst it might be argued that Marcuse’s One Dimensional Man shows precisely how this dilemma has come about, Marcuse’s critics are keen to point out that he...

21. Therborn, op. cit., p. 70.
22. ibid., p. 73.
* See note 9 above.

23. ibid., p. 86. Elsewhere he uses the fitting term “hyper-radicalism.”
25. ibid., pp. 11-12.

AUSTRALIAN LEFT REVIEW - DECEMBER, 1972
was wrong -- if society really were one-dimensional, Marcuse could not have written a book like that: (27) the critical position would be impossible. Further, in “mistaking an interlude for an inexorable trend,” (28) Marcuse, like Daniel Bell of all people, failed to see the political resurgence which was to occur in the late ’sixties amongst the American Blacks, Third World revolutionaries and students in all capitalist countries. The irony in the latter case is that “They act in order to negate the reality he described, even if that entails negating his theory at the same time.” (29)

Marcuse is also criticised for alleged departures from Marx -- for emphasising culture at the expense of social structure, and consumption at the expense of production. (30) Marcuse could defend himself from most of these -- he has made himself aware of the new groups in opposition and addressed himself to them; he has modified his view of one-dimensionality, and re-asserted his Marxism. (31) However, the most telling criticism of Marcuse’s One Dimensional Man is that it is characterised by a “self-destructive hyper-radicalism.” (32) This criticism will be returned to later.

The last member of the Frankfurt School to be discussed is Jurgen Habermas, whose work represents a clear break with the other theorists discussed, although certain continuities are still discernible: he can still be identified with the “critical position.”

Habermas’ argument that technology and science are at once the form of domination and legitimation in contemporary capitalist society (33) is certainly consistent with the critical position -- as seen above, this notion arose with Marx, was carried through by Lukacs and developed by Horkheimer. Similarly, his method is one of immanent critique (the defining characteristic of the critical position) seeing as he does the possibility of individual liberation through the rationalisation of communication. (34) However, the content of the immanent critique breaks with the critical position, moving from social to personal possibilities for liberation, but although this has come a long way from Marx, it is not inconsistent with others of the post-war Frankfurt School, as noted above.

However, it is not Habermas’ conclusions so much that mark the departure, but how he arrives at them, taking as he does merely elements from Marx (whom he explicitly rejects otherwise (35) as well as from Freud and, of all people, Talcott Parsons. (36) Further, his concern is more epistemological and ontological (37), rooted as it is in Erkenntnistheorie -- involving the three sorts of interests and their corresponding sciences and social mediation -- rather than in Kritische Theorie.

On the other hand, Habermas, although rejecting the proletariat, did have an eye open for a group to bring about negation at the time of writing Science and Technology as Ideology, and this was the radical students. However, whereas Marcuse has exonerated himself as a practical critical theorist since One Dimensional Man, Habermas has moved right away from the critical position since Science and Technology as Ideology with his denunciation of the students and his own absorption into the Max Planck Institute. Embourgeoisement came at an earlier age for Habermas than it did for Horkheimer or Adorno. Thus, even though Habermas may be broadly considered to take the critical position, his work is further apart from the other theorists considered than the distance of the difference between them.

I have now examined Marx, Lukacs, and the Frankfurt School in terms of the critical position as I have defined it, and have found it present in the thought of each considered. It remains, however, to assess the Frankfurt School overall. In doing so, Therborn’s judgment is of interest:

“Critical theory rejects any positive presence in capitalist society (such as the proletariat) and seeks the purest negation, the negation of the negation, as the essence of the revolution. This Hegelian notion of revolutionary change has played a central and disastrous role in Frankfurt thought. In their search for the absolute negations of the prevailing theoretical and ideological discourse, the thinkers of the Frankfurt School feel forced to go outside both science, concrete social analysis, and formal logic. [sic] Horkheimer’s 1937 programme for a critical theory tried to find an Archimedian point outside society in order to uproot itself from the process of social reproduction. In the 1940s, Horkheimer and Adorno considered it necessary to go even further, formulating their social critique only in philosophical fragments, because any continuous discourse was

35. ibid., p. 113.
37. ibid., p. 72.
bound to lapse into positivity. The search for an absolute negation of the negation is also the rationale for Marcuse's retreat from Marxism in *One Dimensional Man* ...” (38)

It is in the light of this that one sees the full impact of Therborn's critique noted earlier. It is not a question of the degree to which critical theory has stayed in the Marxist tradition -- this is a question of interpretation of Marx: Marcuse's own thought, for instance, seems consistent with his interpretation of Marx discussed above. (39) The flaw however, in Marcuse's interpretation which lends validity to Therborn's criticism is that Marcuse emphasised the negation of the negation at the expense of this aspect: "... the struggle with the 'realm of necessity' will continue with man's passage to the stage of his 'actual history' and the negativity and the contradiction will not disappear.” (40) That is, the search for the absolute negation of the negation is futile. As Therborn notes, it leads to the search for an external negating subject at the expense of the analysis of structural contradictions, and to an Hegelian concern with consciousness, and to a preoccupation with ideological domination. (41)

But the argument that this is not Marxist is less important, and from my viewpoint, less valid, than the tendency of the search for pure negation to lead away from Praxis and social emancipation. That this is the case is evident from the foregoing, and it is in this sense that critical theory, through its retreat to philosophy and self-reflection, is self-destructive, for even though it maintains the critical position, it has done little to change society by its negation, except for Marcuse's efforts and through its influence, by default, on radical students.

The philosophers continue to interpret the world, the point remains, to change it.