

*Current Perspectives in Social Theory*  
Volume 25

**NO SOCIAL SCIENCE  
WITHOUT CRITICAL THEORY**

**EDITED BY  
H. DAHMS**



# CURRENT PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIAL THEORY

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EDITED BY

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# HOW SOCIAL SCIENCE IS IMPOSSIBLE WITHOUT CRITICAL THEORY: THE IMMERSION OF MAINSTREAM APPROACHES IN TIME AND SPACE ☆

Harry F. Dahms

## INTRODUCTION

Any endeavor to circumscribe, with a certain degree of precision, the nature of the relationship between social science and critical theory would appear to be daunting. Over the course of the past century, and especially since the end of World War II, countless efforts have been made in economics, psychology, political science, and sociology to illuminate the myriad manifestations of modern social life from a multiplicity of angles. It is doubtful that it would be possible to do justice to all the different variants of social science in an assessment of their relationship to critical theory.

☆ I presented aspects of this argument at the Philosophy and Social Science conference, Prague, Czech Republic, in May 2007; at the Sixth International Rethinking Marxism Conference, Amherst, MA, in October 2006; and at Florida State University, Tallahassee, Sociology Colloquium, in February 2002. I thank John Bradford and Lawrence Hazelrigg for helpful comments.

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Moreover, given the proliferation of critical theories since the 1980s, the effort to devise a “map” that would reflect the particular orientations and intricacies of each approach to critical theory would also be exacting in its own right.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, the challenge of characterizing the relationship between social science and critical theory is greater still considering that all approaches to social science and to critical theory emerged within specific historical circumstances, to which they were a response, and which they reflect, in different ways and to differing degrees. For this reason alone, it is not likely that it would be possible to identify the constellation of social science and critical theory once and for all, independent of “time and space,” i.e., of *socio-historical context*. In fact, careful examination of the nature of the constellation at a particular point in time and space ought to produce valuable insights about the societal circumstances that prevail in a concrete context.<sup>2</sup> Yet, in the absence of ongoing efforts to focus on the link between social science practice and context at a certain level of sophistication, examining the link between social science and critical theory is not likely to be particularly revealing or conclusive. Moreover, most approaches to understanding social life are oriented toward research in a manner that transcends the limitations imposed by actually existing societies on our ability to do so. Explicit consideration of how concrete circumstances may be detrimental to the effectiveness and pertinence of social research is the rare exception, rather than the rule, and for the most part regarded as “unscientific.”

One possible approach to remedying the neglect of context would be distinguishing between the actual disciplinary history of each social science, with regard to its stated successes and recognized failures, and its ability to confront, and live up to, what that history could and should have been. There are several possible reference frames for outlining the responsibility, purpose, and promise of a discipline. The measure could be how a discipline’s founders conceived of its characteristic contributions;<sup>3</sup> how competing approaches delineated the kind of contributions a discipline should make, compared to the other social sciences; how to assess the history of each discipline from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century; or how a discipline enables us to contribute to alleviating or solving current national and global challenges. What is much more important, however, is whether there is an ongoing and lively discussion within and between the individual social sciences, about the responsibility, purpose, and promise of each – a discussion that is driven by the desire to strive for the greatest correspondence between social scientists’ claims about their

particular discipline's contribution, effectiveness, and pertinence, regarding research as well as public policy, and their actual related contribution, effectiveness, and pertinence.<sup>4</sup>

Concordantly, to circumscribe the constellation between social science and critical theory, it would be imperative to make explicit, on a regular basis, the link between changing socio-historical conditions and challenges, and the "evolving" responsibilities and promise of each and all of the social science disciplines in time and space.<sup>5</sup> It would also be important to confront the fact that there appears to be a countervailing trend: while the social sciences as a whole are characterized by increasing diversity and accelerating fragmentation (theoretically and methodologically speaking), certain disciplines have tended to remain or to become more "monolithic"—such as economics, political science, and psychology – and other disciplines continue to diversify and fragment further and further – especially sociology.

Moreover, to differing degrees, directly and indirectly, efforts to illuminate patterns of co-existence in modern societies were oriented toward improving conditions in society. Especially after World War II, when the pursuit and incremental attainment of progress became an integral feature of modern societies, and the basis of political and social legitimacy in the context of the Cold War, progress was measured according to several criteria, especially economic well-being; social, economic, and job security; sanctity of life; political participation in collective decision-making processes; equality before the law; access to education and health care; and efficient natural resource extraction and utilization. In the interest of justifying ongoing private and especially public financial and institutional support of research in the social sciences, its results at least had to promise to be beneficial to underprivileged segments of population, to society "as a whole," or to "human civilization." The goal was success in all of the above-mentioned regards, and the assumption that success across the board is possible, and must be the guiding objective. Yet there was little or no consideration that success in one regard might come at the expense of any or most other regards. Indeed, such consideration would have been regarded as a betrayal of the promise and possibility of *both* social science and modern society.<sup>6</sup> Yet, from its inception, determining whether single-minded orientation toward progress in one regard, especially (though not exclusively) economic prosperity, might be detrimental to progress in other areas of social life, as well as in society as a whole, was one of the self-imposed, defining responsibilities of critical theory.

While critical theory must rely on the contributions of social science, many social scientists regard the contributions of critical theory as ancillary to their endeavors. As a consequence, in addition to it not being possible to

circumscribe the relationship between social science and critical theory once and for all, the contrary orientations of social scientists and critical theorists obscure the relationship between both further. Yet, if we were to follow well-established social science practice, we should try to provide focused working definitions of critical theory and social science, and delineate the relationship between both by formulating manageable hypotheses about the nature of the relationship. Instead, in the interest of raising a set of issues regarding the link between social science and critical theory that established discourse and research practice tend to neglect – even though they pertain directly to the purpose and promise of both – I will pursue a different strategy. To circumscribe the link between social science and critical theory, I will focus on the relative neglect of socio-historical context in mainstream approaches, and how the resulting tensions are detrimental to the analytical, descriptive, and practical pertinence and effectiveness of social science and social research today – at a time when revealing the dark side of modern society no longer may be merely desirable, but indeed, critically important for the survival of human civilization.<sup>7</sup>

## **DILEMMAS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE**

During the decades following World War II, there appeared to be mounting evidence that the efforts of social scientists to make valuable contributions to improving conditions for more and more people nationally and globally were bearing fruit, in different ways, at all levels of societal life – though neither across the board, nor simultaneously. In the context of the Cold War, modernization seemed to be the strategy of choice for stabilizing the Western model of democracy, for containing Soviet imperialism, for generating conditions conducive to economic growth and technological development, for diminishing the likelihood of war, and for strengthening human rights. As a consequence, public policies designed to enable national governments as well as international organizations to work toward the realization of explicitly stated and widely supported goals inspired by liberty, equality, solidarity, and self-determination appeared to become increasingly conducive to the attainment of stated objectives.

During the last quarter century, social scientists continued to be committed to producing the kind of knowledge needed to support the efforts of decision makers in positions of political and economic power, to amplify the effectiveness of public policies. Yet, achievements in politics, economics, culture, society, and natural environment, in the so-called “most

advanced” societies, neither seem to have translated into a greater capacity for overcoming social problems once and for all, nor to correspond with continuous qualitative improvements at the global level. Rather, the most advanced societies appear to remain in a state of stasis, striving to hold on to past achievements, in a context that is less and less conducive to successful public policies, in terms of stated goals, beyond the baseline that was reached during the 1970s. With regard to such indicators as social and economic inequality, labor conditions, and environmental degradation, progress and stability in the West appears to have been accompanied by a latent potential for crises to become more aggravated over time, both internally and externally, with changes in the geo-political context. Moreover, even if we confine ourselves to a purely economic cost-benefit analysis at the societal level, and ignore political, cultural, and social factors, presumed long-term achievements in advanced societies have begun to appear in an increasingly questionable and precarious light.

Until the end of the twentieth century, only proponents of approaches that are on the margins of the social science disciplines explicitly questioned that strategies in advanced societies for “mastering” political, economic, social, cultural, environmental, and organizational challenges provided the avenues most conducive to success.<sup>8</sup> For the majority of social scientists, those strategies seemed to combine into the most promising model for less advanced (especially, less wealthy) societies to confront a multiplicity of challenges as well. Yet, the further we move into the twenty-first century, indications suggesting that those strategies did not enhance opportunities in advanced societies to realize *comprehensive* and *lasting* responses to those challenges (actual *solutions*) continue to proliferate. Thus, it is not accidental that what used to be perceived as the purported ability of advanced societies to confront a multiplicity of challenges in ways that are positively related to the nature of those challenges, is giving way to the sense that the perceived ability was tied to highly specific circumstances: a geopolitical and economic context characterized by acceptance of the global superiority of the most advanced societies. For practical purposes, given emerging global economic, political, and environmental challenges, superiority has begun to look far more tenuous and temporally limited.<sup>9</sup>

### *The Purported Superiority of the Western Model*

From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, the seemingly superior capacity of “Western,” “advanced,” or “modern” societies to

produce long-term solutions to a multiplicity of structural problems – problems that are a function of social structure – to an increasing extent appears to have been a chimera. That superiority now appears as a projection that is contradicted by emerging probabilities of future trends, as its global environmental, political, and economic costs are becoming apparent, along with the fact that it is not sustainable. Today, in light of social, cultural, political, economic, and environmental costs, the superiority of the West is logically compelling mostly within the confines of advanced modern societies – *as ideology*, rather than as actually existing forms of societal organization. The issue is not that the problem-solving capacity of other actually existing societies and forms of social organization – such as traditional, authoritarian, or state-socialist – are superior to modern Western societies. In fact, the evidence would suggest that given economic and natural resource scarcity (both “home-grown” and as a consequence of prior and current geo-political position and policies of modern societies), and political institutions, cultural traditions, social structure, and technological capability, the problem-solving capacity of non-modern and non-Western societies has been below that of modern societies. Instead, the issue is that the idea that modern Western societies are superior to other types of society functions as an ideology that prevents the former from recognizing its own limitations and inability to confront problems in ways that alleviate urgent challenges, regarding the underlying logic of those challenges, and their nature.

In the present context, the illusory nature of the superiority of the West is most evident in its unwillingness to conceive of strategies to confront challenges that are contingent on recognizing the actual gravity and contradictory character of social structures and practices. Contemporary societies appear to be just as incapable of applying critical reflexivity to the logic of modern social structure as the latter is discordant with “dominant ideology,” especially where such reflexivity would be the necessary precondition for qualitative improvements.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the most conspicuous case in point is the fact that the modern way of economizing has been and continues to be based on the assumption that the Earth provides limitless resources, even though it has been evident since the beginning of modern capitalism, if not earlier, that resources are in fact limited, and that “production” is not possible without “destruction” – socially, ecologically, and organizationally.<sup>11</sup> Formulated more generally, the achievements of advanced societies are built on the assumption that it is justified to intervene into the natural, social, economic, and political environment, in the interest of realizing set goals, *without consistently and rigorously considering both the*

*destructive and unintended consequences of interventions, as well as our inclination to overlook those consequences, as par of the course.*

Indeed, the ideology of modern society may be the most apparent in the rejection of the need to reflect on the nature of reality in general, and of concrete challenges in particular, when reflection impedes the ability of decision makers to pursue well-established strategies or approaches to problems that are a function, and tied into the constitutional logic, of modern society – as a set of social structures and practices. Maintaining the *appearance* of a guiding concern about the nature of reality and concrete challenges, however, is an integral component of this ideology.<sup>12</sup>

Suppose that rather than pushing them to the side, we face the implications resulting from recent trends that appear increasingly disconcerting, not to say distressing, for our perspectives on modern society: population growth, resource depletion, rising inequalities, economic instability, increasingly volatile international tensions, pollution of the environment, and global warming. The superior problem-solving capacity of modern society increasingly resembles a projection that is a necessary precondition for the possibility of modern society as a form of societal organization. Today, it is difficult to deny that the West's problem-solving superiority never was as real as it appeared to its inhabitants – including most social scientists. Social and political stability, as a precondition for economic productivity and investment, would not have been sustainable without the projection of, and “faith” in, the West's superiority.<sup>13</sup> Thus, if social science is to be an effective and worthwhile undertaking, confronting directly the discrepancy between the projection and the actuality of modern society, and its ability to recognize and confront concrete and actual – rather than *simulated* – challenges, especially as they relate to social structure, must be the first order of business.<sup>14</sup>

Given the trajectories of overpopulation, overextraction of resources, and overpollution, ways in which the global community conceives and confronts economic, political, social, environmental, and cultural problems not only look to be increasingly conducive to failure, but the strategies pursued appear to be at least partly responsible for the deepening state of crisis.<sup>15</sup> For a pointed assessment and critique, the origin of those strategies would need to be traced to the pursuit of economic and political modernization, i.e., of prosperity and democracy, in the historically highly peculiar context of Cold War institutions and policies, starting in the late 1940s.<sup>16</sup> Though those institutions and policies certainly are not the sole reason for the current crisis, continued tacit reliance on the approach to “solving” problems, especially after the official “end” of the Cold War in 1989,

appears to become increasingly problematic.<sup>17</sup> The failure of social scientists to scrutinize the socio-political and economic perimeter of the Cold War, as the socio-historical context in and from which the modern social sciences took hold, remains quite symptomatic of the reluctance to scrutinize the real as opposed to legendary origins of social science disciplines.<sup>18</sup>

*From Cold War to Globalization: Opportunity Costs of Professionalization*

Instead of recognizing the academic and public discourse about globalization since the early 1990s as an opportunity to re-envision the future, and to seize upon newly emerging imperatives and possibilities, decision makers in political, business, and international organizations and institutions continue to hold on to the purportedly successful strategies and policy models of what should be a bygone era. By holding on to the logic of the modernization/Cold War period, decision makers are trying to stretch its approach to reconciling facts and norms, especially with regard to the field of tensions between prosperity and democracy, beyond its historical perimeter.<sup>19</sup> It is impossible to tell whether this reluctance to confront new challenges is the expression of concern that the political and social stability of modern societies since World War II may have concealed an underlying fragility that is coming to the fore. Alternatively, the reluctance may also be a consequence of the inability to recognize and confront the new reality of globalizing capitalism, as a context fraught with complexities, contingencies, and contradictions (Dahms, 2005), and to conceive of the reconciliation of facts and norms beyond the perimeter of the post-World War II era. It may be symptomatic of this inability to acknowledge and transcend the costs of continued reliance on the Cold War configuration that, paradoxically, modern societies employ political and economic bureaucracies to pursue goals, and to achieve successes, whose realization and attainment appears to be incompatible with the organizational logic according to which those bureaucracies operate.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the depth and breadth of changes that have been altering and shaping the conditions of human existence to differing degrees and in different ways in all societies, most social scientists continue to rely on the well-established and “legitimate” research agendas and questions that were conceived and formulated during the Cold War era, and on corresponding modes of reflexivity. These questions and agendas have been sanctified within academic disciplines, and at educational and research institutions, during the second half of the twentieth century, and to a large extent account for the degree and nature of successes attained in the interim. Yet, those questions

and agendas inevitably also limit the scope of research interests and the effectiveness of research efforts and agendas, as soon as the questions provide a disincentive for social scientists to recognize that and how the configuration characteristic of a specific socio-historical context changes.

For instance, to a larger extent than would seem justified, we work with and perpetuate interpretations of both classical and more recent contributions to each and all of the social sciences, in the form of established theories and methodologies.<sup>21</sup> We continue to produce ever more subtle interpretations of the particular intent that appears to have inspired each classical framework – from Smith to Hegel, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Freud, Keynes, Parsons, and beyond. All the while, we seem interminably captured by continuously regenerated jargons and tacitly agreed-upon ways of reading that define the perimeter of legitimate interpretations and applications. Efforts to illuminate social life in ways that are truly and compellingly innovative, inspiring, meaningful, or enlightening to both academic and non-academic readers and audiences, are rare. At the same time, we are in no position to assess to what extent the scarcity of such efforts is indicative of deficits and lack of ability on the part of individual social scientists, of the logic of institutionally grounded and defined imperatives of legitimate research and success, or of the current socio-historical context imposing invisible barriers on innovative cognition as far as theorizing modern society is concerned – in ways that would qualitatively transform social science practice. The most important indication of successful cognition of this kind would be the disruption of the pattern of increasing fragmentation within and across the social sciences: amplifying the ability of social scientists to collaborate constructively, practically as well as theoretically.<sup>22</sup>

Presently, few social scientists would regard triggering “chains of reflection” that relativize and transcend the status quo – in ways that are directed at opening up perspectives on viable and preferable alternative futures, so as to translate into rigorous research questions and agendas – as part of their stated responsibility.<sup>23</sup> For the sake of professionally “respectable” social research, sparking – and carrying through *collaboratively* – analytically rigorous and theoretically sound processes of reflection related to, and necessitated by, changing historical conditions, is not part of the agenda of any established discipline. In the absence of overarching disciplinary discourses about the evolving mission of each and all of the social sciences in the changing socio-historical environment of globalization, regarding the issue of whether and how prevailing norms and values are reconcilable with societal transformations currently occurring, approaches in each discipline follow a trajectory of “progress” according to priorities

that mostly tend to be the function of agendas and designs carried over from the discipline's very own past.

Furthermore, the permanence of established idioms, canonized interpretations, and methodological orientations is the product of both the desire to foster progress in sociology, economics, psychology, and political science, as social *science*, rather than *social science* (in the sense of socially oriented and relevant science), and of imperatives of professional career and academic success.<sup>24</sup> This permanence may weaken our determination to face the most important issues of our time in ways that are comparable both to the efforts of the classics of each discipline and of critical theory, and to the outcome of their endeavors, mostly in two regards. On the one hand, given the pressures of professional success, such determination may become more difficult to sustain, as it requires commitment to a logic and process of inquiry that might be neither compatible with ever more precisely formulated career imperatives, nor conducive to inclusion and success in increasingly rationalized and bureaucratized academic and research institutions.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, given the forces that have been shaping research practices in the social sciences since the 1980s (as expressed most clearly in the growing emphasis on efficiency and accountability at universities and research institutions), the gulf between the priorities and imperatives that are shaping research and academic careers, and the investment of time and energy that would be required for the analytical depth and interpretive sensitivity to historical context conducive to appreciating the thrust of theoretical agendas, keeps widening (Assheuer, 2008). As a consequence, it is becoming more and more difficult to conceive of research efforts that compare to those of the classics in depth, breadth, and especially, in pertinence. It is especially symptomatic that there is no ongoing debate in the social science, as to what does, should, or would constitute *basic research*.

To be sure, my purpose here is not to suggest that efforts in the social sciences to discern and confront the conditions of our existence are not sincere, that the classics of each social science ought to be arbiters for the kind of research we should be doing today (even when appreciated carefully and adequately), or that research and theorizing in the social sciences during the second half of the past century was pointless, misguided, or irrelevant. Instead, my effort is directed at providing the context for suggesting that there is a *glitch* in the "program" of all the social sciences that appears to prevent each from contributing to the kind of progress in society that points beyond present social structures *in their specificity* – and that identifying and scrutinizing this glitch has been the distinctive charge of critical theory. The ability to pinpoint how present societal conditions are politically, culturally,

socially, and economically specific is a necessary precondition for conceiving of strategies to confront and solve problems that, for now, remain *utopian* in the sense of *objectively unattainable*.<sup>26</sup> For now, we refrain from making explicit how exactly societies today, as social structures, are specific in space and time, and how social stability, political control, and economic prosperity are contingent on the invisibility of particular conceptions of reality, notions about reality, and practices in reality, to most individuals as well as social scientists. Yet, in order to engender the kind of social research whose results will enable social actors to engage in forms of individual as well as collective action (politics, research, education, etc.) that are positively related to the nature of concrete challenges at hand, the constitutional principle of modern society must become visible, especially where it is in profound conflict with representations of that principle in socialization, education, and politics.<sup>27</sup>

What complicates matters further is the need to rigorously scrutinize that dimension of social structure that is, at the same time, the force that overlays all specific forms of social, political, economic, and cultural existence in the modern age – and the formative concern of critical theory: *alienation*.<sup>28</sup> In whatever ways we may conceive of the phenomena the concept of alienation is meant to capture – ongoing transformations of societal forms of existence are the inevitable corollary of the spread of the capitalist mode of production – its entwinement with the nature of social change is central to modern society. As a consequence, it is not sufficient for social scientists to be concerned with the link between specific forms of societal existence as they undergo change, and the inevitable transformative impact of change in the modern age, on practices, institutions, and processes. The specificity of those forms is integral to the force-field of modern capitalism whose perpetually distorting effects social researchers in the tradition of Marxian theorizing have been striving to capture, by employing such concepts as alienation, commodity fetishism, reification, and instrumental reason: that *in the modern age, it is categorically impossible to take a straight look at anything social, political, economic, or cultural*.

## **CONSIDERING CONTEXT: CONFRONTING THE SPECIFICITY OF MODERN SOCIETIES**

Ironically, as professional social scientists, it is neither part of our day-to-day activities, nor of our disciplinary responsibility, to identify and

counteract the kinds of deficits that are built into our work, as an inevitable consequence of the fact that we are *immersed* in time and space – in concrete socio-historical contexts. We do not examine and spell out whether, and how exactly, concrete socio-historical circumstances are conducive to, or may limit, our ability to actualize the claims we set out to do. Rather, we work with two assumptions, above all, that are likely to be more problematic than we are willing, or able, to recognize – given professional and institutional constraints, as instances of structural and systemic societal constraints.

The first assumption pertains to the fact that in order for our work to be useful and relevant for individuals, organizations, and institutions, it must relate to perspectives, experiences, and challenges in actual circumstances. To the extent that as social scientists we subscribe to reality in a manner that is compatible with what we might call everyday life experiences and constraints, our contributions will be relevant to a certain degree, by default. On the other hand, as social scientists, subscribing to reality, as it exists for “real” individuals, organizations, and institutions, is likely to conflict with our efforts to illuminate societal realities. As a general principle, all societies (as integrated aggregations of different types of orders: social, political, economic, cultural, rational, ethnic, gender, etc.) sustain stability and integrity by limiting and channeling transparency regarding its defining features, as far as possible, while still being conducive to stability and integrity. The frameworks to study social life presented by the classics of sociology – such as those of Durkheim and Weber – confronted the challenge of conceiving of social science in the context of modern society, as a form of societal organization that may have more in common with premodern societies than we “moderns” tend to presuppose, and are supposed to consider possible (Latour, 1993). Social stability is contingent on the willingness of members of society to subscribe to notions and values that support and reinforce the projections that *modern* society must generate and regenerate of itself, as a necessary precondition for the possibility of social order, in an environment that is prone to instability. If members would be allowed or encouraged to face the actuality of modern society, as far as functional imperatives, structural patterns, and ideologies are concerned, modern society would have to generate and maintain a rather different mode of securing stability and integrity. One of the main challenges for theoretically oriented social scientists is whether such a society would still be *modern*, in the sense in which we commonly use the term.

Regarding the tension between the logic of social structure and efforts to illuminate this logic, we could go one step further (Kontopoulos, 1993).

Modern societies may remain stable due to organizations and institutions responding to demands for accountability and transparency, especially as far as the defining features of specific societies are concerned, only within limits that are conducive to maintaining those features and the corresponding social structure *in their specificity*, and by continuously utilizing newly emerging opportunities to conceal those features. The stability and security of social order may be contingent to a high degree on the willingness of individuals (including social scientists) to entertain as germane to understanding modern social reality, the representations a specific social order produces of itself – *precisely in order to limit transparency, as a precondition for stability – not the stability of social order in general, but the stability of a social order in its specificity*. Yet, stability is not free from normative content – the imperative of maintaining stability provides the scaffolding of the very norms and values that individuals at the same time take for granted, interpret, and misconstrue as their most personal characteristics, impulses, and inclinations.

The second assumption is more directly related to our labor as social scientists. As a matter of course, we must presume our efforts to illuminate the conditions of our existence to be sincere, and driven by the desire to do justice to the challenge at hand. This is especially true where illumination matters most – for instance, where shining light on features that tend to remain in the dark is a necessary precondition for solving, rather than regenerating, social problems. As a consequence, we usually surmise that our efforts ought to be successful – to the extent that our skills and intelligence are conducive to the attainment of success, to whatever extent success may be “objectively possible,” in a given environment.<sup>29</sup> Yet, if we take as the measure of “success” the ability of individuals, organizations, and institutions to tackle emerging challenges, by engaging in increasingly more effective strategies that are being measured in terms of the degree to which they are conducive to *both* rational *and* reasonable solutions to social problems, the contributions of social–scientific research appear more questionable. Viewed from this angle, we must scrutinize whether and how existing conditions are conducive to what kinds of “successes,” and consider that in all likelihood, conditions from the outset orient and limit possibilities of attaining success, as well as notions of reason and rationality, in ways that support, reinforce, and conceal those conditions. Yet, we could argue, it is precisely the purpose of such concepts as success, reason, and rationality, to engender the ability to acknowledge and identify the confines within which social research is bound to occur – confines that remain invisible, in the absence of determined efforts to make them accessible.<sup>30</sup>

In terms of theoretical logic, it is a matter of principle that we must regard as problematic notions of reason and rationality that are condoned by and directly compatible with “social structure,” as shorthand for societal systems of institutions and organizations, and structures of power and inequality. For instance, those individuals, organizations, and institutions that put forth, favor, or champion notions of reason and rationality that are entwined with social structure also resist critical reflexivity with regard to the *immersion* of concepts of rationality and reason in socio-historical contexts. Given the affinity between their particular interests, and concrete social structures, as in part both cause and effect of those structures at the same time, prevailing notions of reason and rationality are likely to be warped. Such notions, and especially their being summoned for purposes of legitimating – *rationalizing* – the prevalence of specific forms of power and inequality, reflect the limitations of context, rather than making them visible. Such rationalizing notions undercut possibilities to conceive of *rational* and *reasonable* approaches to meeting challenges and solving problems in a different sense as well. Approaches that would point beyond socio-historical practices and forms of organization whose problematic nature is increasingly apparent, in the present historical context, are more and more difficult to convey to individuals and social scientists. Wherever immersed notions of rationality and reason are conducive to problems getting solved, rather than managed in a manner that may in fact be inversely related to their solution, the absence of critical reflexivity is not especially problematic. Yet, where those notions are a function of problems being managed, as is more frequently the case, without recognition that the prospect of their solution is not part of the equation, “*reason*” and “*rationality*” *themselves are the problem*. To the extent that social scientists engage in research and theorizing without working with the distinction between immersed notions of reason and rationality, on the one hand, and such notions that would enable social scientists to thematize the perimeter and defining features of the context that is to be scrutinized, the result of research is more likely to be part of the problem as well.

Paradoxically, one characteristic feature of our “success” as professional social scientists appears to be our ability to explain to individuals, organizations, and institutions *that and how* in the present context, efforts to advance socially desirable goals are less than likely to succeed, in terms of stated goals, whenever they go beyond those condoned in the confines of existing social structures – without being able to explain *why* this is so. Explaining the obstacles to advancing socially desirable goals would require

that we focus to a far greater extent on the *specificity* of the dynamic processes that enable the modern social structure to maintain and reconstitute itself, as it relies on the proliferation of continuously deepening contradictions and paradoxes – even though this proliferation is not likely to be sustainable and conducive to societal stability in the long run (Postone, 1993). To the extent that social research and social theorizing are oriented toward engendering higher levels of reason and rationality, and qualitative transformations that are conducive to a greater reconciliation of facts and norms than is possible today, they conflict with the dynamic constitutional logic of modern society. We need to focus on the link between social science practice and social research, and the concrete and internally contradictory features of social structure, as part of our ongoing efforts as social scientists. Thus, we may postulate that *to the degree that we refuse to address in a systematic manner, as an integral component of our work, the link between our practices as social scientists and the contradictions of modern society, with regard to the concrete and specific consequences for our research, we may not only betray the claim to be social scientists, we actively – albeit unintentionally – may sabotage the possibility of social science.*

It would seem, then, that the *glitch* in the program of social science alluded to earlier takes the form of an invisible barrier that “mainstream” approaches neither have the means nor the incentive to recognize.<sup>31</sup> This barrier would appear to play a key role in preventing actual progress in the social sciences as well as in society. Despite ongoing and determined efforts, even incremental progress whose attainment is non-ambivalent, appears elusive – both in terms of engendering higher levels of reconciling facts and norms in contemporary societies, and in terms of explicating what preconditions would have to be in place for higher levels of reconciling facts and norms to become possible. That is, of course, unless we preinterpret changes and trends currently underway, e.g., globalization, as necessarily constituting progress. The kind of knowledge of our social world and the forces shaping it that would be a necessary precondition for taking steps in the direction of actually *solving problems*, however, appears to remain astonishingly rudimentary, and increasingly incompatible with imperatives that govern decision-making in institutions and organizations, along with appreciation of the kind of reflexivity that would facilitate such knowledge. Indeed, modern society appears to “evolve” according to a dynamic logic that is incompatible with the achievement of solutions to social problems – modern society appears to be synonymous with the perpetuity of problems having to be managed, rather than solved.

## **SOCIAL SCIENCE VERSUS CRITICAL THEORY?**

Throughout the history of the social sciences, the majority of economists, psychologists, political scientists, and sociologists have regarded critical theory – as well as its precursors, especially Hegel, Marx, and Freud – as ancillary to rigorous research at best, and as an undesirable, misguided, and even frivolous distraction, at worst. To be sure, those who regarded the contributions of critical theory as irrelevant or ineffective also tended to be representatives of precisely the kind of approaches to social science and social research that critical theorists have been scrutinizing since the 1930s. Especially in its inception as what later came to be known as the “Frankfurt School,” at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, under the leadership of Max Horkheimer since 1932, critical theory began as the project of illuminating how “traditional” theories of modern society, conceptions of social science, approaches to studying social life, and practices of doing research start out from largely implicit, yet highly problematic assumptions about the relationship between social science and society, in the sense of social science and concrete socio-historical context.<sup>32</sup>

Since the early 1930s, critical theory has stood as a reminder that the specific economic, political, cultural, and ideological configurations of socio-historical contexts have a direct bearing on the form, content, practice, and normative orientation of both social life and social sciences. Yet, rather than explicitly developing and pursuing its concern with the immersion of social life and the social sciences in space and time as a consistent feature of critical theory, individual representatives have confronted the issue more or less explicitly, to differing degrees, and in a variety of ways. There may be multiple reasons for why this feature of critical theory has not been more central to the tradition as a whole. Making accessible the link between particular formations of societal life within the same genus, such as modern industrialized society, and the ways in which they shape and influence concrete practices, concepts, ideas, and institutions, may be among the greatest challenges social scientists confront. One aspect of the challenge is the difficulty of stepping back from social reality in a manner that enables observers to recognize the particularity of formations of societal life, and its significance for how we coexist and make choices. Another aspect is that the challenge cannot be confronted effectively by individual social scientists, but requires the kind of ongoing collaborative efforts that are increasingly difficult to sustain in the present context given institutional and career constraints.

*Two Dimensions of Societal Reality*

While social scientists as a matter of principle tend to focus on those features and dimensions of societal life that logically are prior to issues of change, e.g., “static” structures and systemic characteristics, institutions, practices, notwithstanding the disciplinary proclivity towards dynamic issues of change, critical theorists regard as the penultimate purpose of the social sciences to track changes as they manifest themselves within concrete reference frames, whose potentially problematic nature required focused attention.<sup>33</sup> To illustrate this issue, we might visualize societal reality as divided into two interconnected, yet distinct, dimensions.

In the *first dimension*, the traditional province of social science, societal reality is described and analyzed, depending on the particular tradition at issue, e.g., at the level of practices, modes of interaction, institutions, spheres of life, or social subsystems. Constellations between sets of institutions that are critical to society’s ability to fulfill a multiplicity of increasingly differentiated tasks and functions, and which are characteristic of the type of society scrutinized, also belong to this dimension. Social research is concerned with the kinds of co-existence, decision-making, priorities, values, and practices that go hand in hand with those constellations, e.g., in modern industrialized societies.

In addition, both comparative and historical approaches in the social sciences recognize the variations that occur between societies, regarding the features of societal reality that individual incarnations of a general type of society have in common.<sup>34</sup> For instance, with differing degrees of variation, British, French, German, and American societies all adhere and function according to the same basic design of modern industrialized society, comprising the same components, such as the legal system, democratic political institutions, and market economy. This kind of variations has been framed, e.g., in the language of “exceptionalism” (especially with regard to American exceptionalism).<sup>35</sup> Drawing on the work of Karl Polanyi, since the 1980s, a growing number of social scientists, especially in economic sociology, have also been examining the social and cultural embeddedness of economic institutions – a perspective and approach that in principle can be applied to all aspects of modern societies. Yet, despite the apparent importance of comparative as well as historical approaches (and especially comparative–historical approaches) to social science, they have remained subordinate and marginal within each individual discipline, and largely a matter of individual social scientists’ preference whether to apply and pursue or not. Still, concerns that relate to the spatial and temporal

variations between, and the embeddedness of “non-social” (economic, political, military, educational, etc.) institutions and organizations in, modern societies (regarding cultural and social life), belong to the first dimension, in the terminology suggested here. In other words, comparative perspectives focus on the concrete form that the general framework of a type of society, as well as its components, take, both regarding forms of solidarity, structures of inequality, and their role in society, economic, political, legal institutions, organizations and forms of power, and their interrelations – both as cause and effect of cultural and religious traditions, and modes of collective action.<sup>36</sup>

For instance, when comparing economic or political systems in two distinct societies of the same type, social scientists tend to be interested in determining what kind of social relations correspond with capitalist economies or democratic government, in all societies of that type – especially modern society. To the extent that social scientists are concerned with the specifics of the differences between capitalist economies or democratic government in societies of the same genus, and their relationship with social relations, those social scientists are regarded, and usually regard themselves, as working in a specialized area within a discipline – the assumption being that the relevance of research questions asked and results generated is limited to the subdiscipline, and usually does not have a bearing on the discipline as a whole.

By contrast, the *second dimension* of societal reality concerns qualitative transformations in the general framework of a type of society (and its components) that accompany changes of the kind that alter the meaning and nature of “social,” “economic,” “political.” Such changes and qualitative transformations are exceedingly difficult to discern, in part because the distinction between cause and effect is most elusive. Capturing this kind of change requires a mindset, analytical framework, and set of tools that an orientation toward the traditional concerns of social science neglects – toward the first dimension of societal reality. In a sense, these kinds of change occur below the radar screen of traditional social science, even though they may be as momentous (if not more so) as the kinds of change that has been a defining concern for the latter since their inception. Given the overall orientation and self-understanding of critical theory, the impact resulting from such change at the level of institutions, spheres of life, and social subsystems is of primary importance, as well as at the level of social and cultural life.

Traditional social scientists tend to confine their rigorous labor to the nature of social relations that correspond with political, economic, and

cultural forms in modern societies, working with the assumption that the link, e.g., between social relations and capitalist market economies, should be viewed as static. By contrast, critical theorists are much more concerned with the transformations that inevitably occur at the social and cultural level, within forms of organization, and especially with regard to the constellations that are characteristic of modern societies. Put differently, in terms of the distinction between social science and critical theory, proponents of the latter charge that social scientists tend to neglect the fact that all elements of societal reality maintain stability by continually adapting to an environment that is inherently dynamic, rather than static. Critical theorists favor and rely on dialectical approaches and tools, because those are uniquely well-suited for studying processes and dimensions of reality that adhere to patterns whose nature cannot be captured with means that are not tailored specifically to capture the inherently dynamic qualities of modern societal reality. Concordantly, if the dynamic logic of capitalist market economies requires ongoing adaptations that engender transformations, which in turn permeate forms of social coexistence, it is inevitable that the nature of social relations will change as well. As a tradition, critical theory stands for the contention that unless social scientists explicitly track and examine such adaptations and transformations, their manifestations are likely to be overlooked. Furthermore, the nature of social relations may undergo qualitative transmutations of a kind that alters practices, priorities, choices, and values – without which the transmutations are not likely to be detected in a timely fashion. Yet, from the vantage point of critical theory, it is essential that social scientists be concerned with changes of this kind; due to their preferred position to recognize changes and their consequences, it is their responsibility, and especially because recognizing changes and consequences is a necessary precondition for detecting their impact on conceptions of the responsibilities of social scientists, and the practice of social research itself.

### *The Immersion of Social Science in Society*

Recognizing societal phenomena in their dynamic particularity is contingent on the willingness, first, to differentiate between the dimensions of societal life that are stable, and more similar than not across societies of the same type, especially *modern society*, and those dimensions that are variable, and specific, and for which dimensions of the first type provide the foil. Secondly, it is necessary to distance oneself from one's own societal

environment – the environment that provided the context for identity formation.<sup>37</sup>

Given that Karl Marx's critiques of alienation and commodity fetishism provided key reference points for the development of critical theory, its representatives were initially concerned with the changing influence of increasingly bureaucratic forms of economic organization in capitalism on modern society and social research, and the link between society and social science.<sup>38</sup> During the decades that followed, critical theorists expanded their concerns to scrutinize processes in society that impacted on the ability of social scientists to grasp the contradictory nature of social life in modern society: the subversion and inversion of the enlightenment in the interest of economic prosperity (Horkheimer & Adorno), the emergence and spread of the "culture industry" (Adorno), increasingly complex bureaucratic structures (Marcuse), the erosion of the public sphere and the ideological tendencies of technology and the natural sciences (Habermas).<sup>39</sup> Yet, overall, the commitment of critical theory to illuminating how exactly concrete socio-historical conditions shape and influence social life, and especially research and theoretical endeavors in each of the social sciences, has to date remained relatively implicit, submerged, and marginal to the tradition.

What came to be called "mainstream"<sup>40</sup> approaches in the social sciences during the 1970s have been resisting the contention that there is a categorical need for all social scientists to be critically reflexive, regarding the immersion of social science practice and social research in space and time. A simple comparison between two distinct social reference frames may illustrate the importance of critical reflexivity regarding context.

Take a society where dominant values to a continually increasing extent reflect, and are a function of, stories of personal economic success and wealth creation characteristic of a particular elite. Compare this society to another where prevailing values correspond with a widely practiced ability to cooperate and collaborate with others, in a manner that is "hard-wired" into individuals' identities. In addition, in the first case, the dominant values may not be recognizable to most members of society to the same degree and in the same way, as in the second case. In the first case, individual and social efforts to advance social justice or the reconciliation of facts and norms for most citizens in a tangible way would be strenuous, if not futile, since it would be impossible for most to be economically successful and wealthy. In the second case, the likelihood of individual and social efforts directed at increasing social justice would be distinctly more likely to bear fruit. The differential in ability to recognize dominant values might be a consequence of the cognitive dissonance such recognition would likely provoke in the first

case – assuming that the society would be characterized by a high degree of social and economic inequality – while there would not be a comparable cognitive dissonance in the second case.<sup>41</sup>

Evidently, in these two cases, social research and social science practice would be immersed in qualitatively different societal contexts – each context influencing the kind of questions social scientists would ask, framing the purpose and value of social research, and prioritizing the production of certain kinds of knowledge and insights as a function of societal context. From the perspective of critical theory, the notion that it should be possible to advance and engage in social science in ways that abstract from the specific features of both societal contexts would be unrealistic, ill-conceived, and ideological in the literal sense. In the extreme, such conceptions of social science suggest that the purposes of social science can and must be delineated independently of the concrete challenges that characterize particular societal contexts. As has been noted before, critical theory contests the possibility of “value-free” social science in this sense. To varying degrees, its proponents contend that in contexts where differences and changes are subtle, and may become manifest over time, the particulars of economic, political, organizational, cultural, social, and ideological context and change are especially important, as far as influence over “legitimate” questions, “relevant” research, and “desirable” knowledge and insights is concerned. However subtle the differences and changes between contexts in time and space may be, or appear to be, their consequences for both social life and social science could be most momentous – especially if social scientists exclude them from the process and purview of social research.

### *The Issue of “Globalization”*

Since the 1990s, there has been widespread public awareness and concern about the phenomenon of “globalization.” It is evident that efforts to illuminate effectively a phenomenon that comprises as many distinct discernable processes as globalization, and to disentangle competing meanings and interpretations of the concept, will require extensive and ongoing collaborative research. Yet, the willingness and ability of social scientists to agree, for instance, on a set of working definitions of globalization that would be conducive to collaborative research, has remained astonishingly limited, within disciplines, and especially across disciplines. Agreeing to the need for mutually arrived at and binding working definitions is not part of social science practice and process. Yet,

given that globalization is a process characterized by a high degree of complexities, contingencies, and contradictions, the formulation of research strategies that would be conducive to generating a rigorous understanding of the issues involved will depend on cooperation and collaboration within and across the social sciences.

The argument could be made that the failure to agree on what would be necessary and promising approaches to studying globalization, given the concrete and unprecedented challenges that its analysis entails – including agreement regarding the desirability of such approaches – is at least as likely to be a function of the nature of globalization as an expression of the contradictory nature of modern society, as of the flaws of individual social scientists, specific approaches in each of the disciplines, and social science as a whole – and probably much more so. We must determine whether our inability to arrive at a meaningful set of perspectives on how to study globalization effectively originates within the social sciences. To do so, we must assess whether the apparent ineffectiveness of social science may be related to, and the manifestation of, emerging dimensions and features of modern social life of which concern about globalization is the most recent expression. Put differently, what if what we diagnose as flawed and ineffective social science is in fact a consequence of that which we are trying to understand: modern society, as it changes over time? If globalization is not a distinct stage of “evolution” or “development,” but instead the most recent, discernable incarnation of modern society and its paradoxical constitutional logic – would that not mean that we would have to link directly our assessment of what social science is and should be, to our ability to grasp that which is the most important subject matter of social science – modern society?

Grasping the nature of globalization would require a willingness to confront the paradoxical and contradictory features of this process. Yet, to begin with, both historically and especially after World War II, the traditional social sciences have evolved in ways that exclude from the spectrum of legitimate research concerns consideration of the centrality of concrete structural and systemic contradictions to modern society, and the possibility of studying them in a systematic manner. If we frame difficulties to agree on working definitions of globalization in terms of this process constituting the culmination of all the contradictory processes that have been shaping the modern age, then such agreement will continue to be impossible as long as social scientists refuse to confront the central role of contradictions, and their entwinement with and aggravation of complexities and contingencies, to the design and stability of modern societies. At the same

time, how globalization keeps changing conditions of existence on Earth, in all areas of societal life, provides an excellent, as well as urgent, concrete reference frame for illustrating the importance of examining carefully how changing societal conditions, by sheer necessity, reconfigure practices and conceptions in society, including especially practices and conceptions in each and all the social sciences. *After all, it certainly is not inconceivable that, first, many assumptions that have guided mainstream research, in light of globalization, turn out to have been erroneous to differing degrees, and secondly, that what we frame in terms of globalization denotes processes that alter features of societal life in ways that supersede what used to be compelling and accurate representations of features of societal life in the past.*

Yet, the purpose of this chapter is not to scrutinize globalization, but to address difficulties in mainstream approaches to recognize and confront related challenges and dilemmas. Among mainstream social scientists, resistance to considering the specifics of socio-historical context takes many forms, the following being among the more prominent:

- the strict separation between the logic of scientific method and the analysis of the characteristic features of socio-historical context;
- the determined refusal to acknowledge that the centrality of contradictions to modern society influences concrete research agendas and modes of research, to scrutinize concrete contradictions and implications resulting from their centrality, and to determine the nature of the link between contradictions and social forms; and
- the ingrained unwillingness to ensure that claims made about the purpose and consequences of research coincide with its actual orientation and effects within socio-historical contexts that constitutionally (with regard to structural features and systemic imperatives) may prevent the actualization of those claims.

The guiding observation of critical theory is that in the social sciences, mainstream approaches tend to be detrimental to research that would be theoretically enlightening, socially empowering, and politically, morally, and psychologically conducive to the kind of reconciliation of facts and norms without whose promise and prospect modern society would neither have taken shape as it did, nor be able to function as it does.

Conceptually, in the name of *social science*, economists, psychologists, political scientists, and sociologists *should* be committed to advancing the emancipation of both human beings and societies from structural and systemic constraints that both result from, and sustain, our inability to know and understand, i.e., to *recognize*, how the defining features of modern

societal reality prevent actors from actualizing socially desirable goals. Social science in this sense is especially important where such constraints prevent the ability of individuals, collective actors, and organizations and institutions to pursue and realize comprehensively rational and lasting solutions to social problems – to take steps in the direction of reconciling facts and norms. *Critical theory continues as a tradition above all because most social scientists claim, implicitly or explicitly, that their efforts are directed at both theoretical and practical emancipation from constraints, without ascertaining that their efforts in fact are conducive to such emancipation, especially where constraints are both integral to the possibility of social order, in its specificity, and detrimental to human and societal agency, at the same time.*

### *The Place of Theory in Social Science*

As the title of Lemert's (2007) most recent book suggests, social theory is about "thinking the unthinkable" – about enabling both individuals and social scientists to recognize and appreciate the condition of their existence and responsibility as human actors. Critical theorists would add that social theories are attempts to enable individuals, and especially social scientists, to think the "socially" unthinkable, *in a socio-historical context – modern society – whose principle of reconstitution is contingent on the successful conditioning of the vast majority of its members into a societal reality that maintains itself through a multiplicity of fundamental and irreconcilable contradictions.* This conditioning compels all individuals, including most social scientists, as members of modern society, to frame the challenge of critical self-reflexivity regarding the "everyday self" as a carrier of the defining features of modern society, in ways that reinforce those features of modern society, against both implied and publicly stated intentions – and interests – of individuals, social scientists, collective actors, and society. Concordantly, as long as social scientists refrain from integrating this kind of critical self-reflexivity into social research and social science practice, both constitute little more than hypothetical language games – on the assumption that scrutinizing the specific link between socio-historical contexts and social science in fact is immaterial to the possibility, promise, and responsibility of social science.

Critical theorists insist that it is symptomatic of the socio-historical configuration of modern society that social scientists may claim to engage in research that is both socially beneficial and conducive to conceiving of actual solutions to social problems, while refusing to confront the most

central dilemma: the link between the defining features of socio-historical context, the ways in which social problems are integral to sustaining those features, and the specific orientations and agendas of each of the social science disciplines, respectively. Emancipation from structural and systemic societal constraints is a necessary precondition for individuals' ability to be self-reflexive, to recognize their talents, and to realize their potential. The same applies to social scientists. Contrary to its ideology, modern society channels the capacity to engage in reflexivity, uncover and apply talents, and realize one's potential in ways that feed back into its constitutional design, with contradictions providing the scaffolding. Yet, against dominant ideology, the resulting interconnecting feedback loops in all dimensions of socio-cultural life are both so comprehensive and so subtle that critical self-reflexivity – *with regard to one's socially constructed and determined self* – requires a firmly committed and never-ending effort. Recognizing the defining features of one's own society is a necessary precondition for individuals' and social scientists' ability to be critically self-reflexive. Those who are not able to recognize the particularities of their own society, are constitutionally incapable of being "self-reflexive" – regarding the ability to formulate and realize their personal or professional life-goals, to shape the circumstances of their existence and success, and their capacity to relate to "others" (members of "other" social groups, in terms of race, class, gender, ethnicity, etc.) – in ways that avoid replication of structural inequalities in society, and reliance on structural inequalities for purposes of forming and sustaining identities. In short, it is exceedingly difficult for individuals to construct meaningful life-histories that depart from the patterns characteristic of societal context.

While such impediments to individuals' ability to engage in critical self-reflexivity would be a necessary precondition for the very possibility of social order in all complex societies, it is disturbingly paradoxical in modern society – which conforms to and relies on this pattern to a greater degree than dominant ideology would admit. Moreover, it would be unrealistic for social scientists to expect individuals to be able to recognize the distinctive features of societies whose stability and possibility is contingent on the concealment of those features from its members. Yet, if the majority of social scientists refuse to be critically self-reflexive with regard to the gravity of their own society's defining features, and deny the possibility that those features exert a kind of force that resists recognition and escape, without sustained efforts – what then is the meaning of "social science"?

Implicitly or explicitly, critical theorists contend that social scientists striving to recognize the defining features of their own society is integral to

social research and social science. Social science must be oriented toward enabling and compelling societies to allow for qualitative changes regarding those structural and systemic societal constraints that sustain social problems – as a means to preserve especially those defining features of social order that are resistant to actual, comprehensive, and lasting progress. The emancipation of individuals from those constraints is the necessary precondition for emancipating society from shackles, preventing steps toward the reconciliation of facts and norms, which would constitute real progress. More importantly, for present purposes, without the emancipation of social scientists from the constraints, social science is in danger of being an accomplice in the prevention of steps toward such reconciliation. The constraints are most conspicuous regarding the inability of modern society to solve social problems, and to recognize and confront this inability as a function of the synergistic capacity of both established structures and systems of power and inequality, and of human actors and social groups who benefit most from those structures and systems, both knowingly and unknowingly, to maintain the prevailing configuration of societal life, *in their image*. Whatever the material, demographic, geographic limitations – the structural and systemic societal constraints add a further burden that obstructs opportunities to reconcile facts and norms. Revealing and dissecting these constraints ought to be the primary domain of the social sciences; by default, their neglect distorts whatever efforts social scientists make to illuminate social life.

Despite the sustained rejection by mainstream social scientists of contributions made by critical theorists, since the 1970s a continuously growing number of critical theorists have been making efforts to accommodate the standards and views of mainstream social science. In the interest of demonstrating how critical theory is not merely *critical of* – but also and especially *critical to* – the overall project of social science, proponents of critical theory have been reconceiving its agenda and orientation, to facilitate greater compatibility with mainstream approaches and perspectives. Surmising that the gulf separating critical theory and mainstream social science is circumstantial rather than foundational, and that mainstream social scientists will welcome the prospect of overcoming mystifying and frustrating hurdles against explicating paradoxes and dilemmas inherent in modern society, critical theorists of the second and third generations, represented by Habermas and Honneth, respectively, have been reconstructing critical theory. Yet, it seems that despite ongoing efforts by critical theorists to advocate the importance of their contributions in the context of globalization, mainstream approaches have become less,

rather than more, pervious to the kind of reflexivity critical theory represents. Thus, we must ask whether the efforts of a growing number of critical theorists to encourage and enable mainstream social science to become more critically reflexive, by treating its objectives, tools, and criteria for effective research as the relevant reference frame, may endanger the commitment of critical theory to the kind of questions, concerns, and tools that are *its* specific domain.

## **CRITICAL THEORY VERSUS MAINSTREAM SOCIAL SCIENCE?**

Despite its marginalized status in each of the social sciences, especially in economics, psychology, and political science, but also in sociology, *critical theory is key to the overall mission of social science* – of all the social sciences. Efforts in the individual social sciences to illuminate societal life in a rigorous manner will be futile as long as the specific issues that are the primary concern of critical theorists remain unaddressed in those efforts. Assuming that critical theory has an important and unique contribution to make to the social sciences that is both substantively and methodologically related to the nature of modern society, my claim is as follows: *Precisely to the degree that the issues that define the core agenda of critical theory remain implicit or are neglected entirely, in particular research designs and agendas, those designs and agendas are confined to hypothetical arguments and analyses – on the contingency that the nature of modern society as framed by critical theory, does not matter to efforts to study social life.* Pursuant to this claim, there is an imminent need to critically and scrupulously evaluate each social science, as well as each approach within each social science, with regard to the degree to which it addresses the issues that define critical theory. Evidently, we barely are in the position to register the importance of such an evaluation, not to mention the scale and scope at which it would have to be undertaken.

What are the issues defining critical theory? More specifically, is it possible to identify the “core” of Frankfurt-School-type neo-Marxist critical theory, both in its original incarnation and in more recent versions of critical theory? How internally consistent, compatible, and conducive to circumscribing their core are the different “generations” of Frankfurt School critical theorizing?<sup>42</sup> With regard to theoretical logic, what is the overarching agenda common to the first generation of critical theory, as represented by Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, the second generation

as represented mainly by Habermas, the third generation of Honneth, and the current generation? Are more recent versions of critical theory a continuation of the initial Frankfurt School project, and if so, how? Are there important differences? Is there a clearly identifiable, overriding core common to all, or are there variations and shifts in emphasis that may distract and detract from, and even conceal, the core?<sup>43</sup> Do similarities outweigh differences, or vice versa?

If we trace the beginning of critical theory to the early writings of Marx, the first concrete effort to address the critical-theoretical challenge in the history of ideas was directed at how exactly the capitalist mode of production engenders a radically new relationship between individuals in society, and their ability to conceive of reality (Postone, 1993). At the very root of critical theory, in Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, "alienation" denoted a process of ongoing, compounding mediation that isolates individuals further and further from their daily activity ("labor"), from their natural and social environments (nature, their own selves, their "species-being"), in a manner that produces a qualitatively different way of experiencing "reality." At the same time, this process thwarts the ability of individuals to consciously experience and discern this change in "reality." Yet, the continued use of the same language, the same words in everyday life, political discourse, education, as well as in the social sciences then and now, conceals a radically and continually altering reality that follows its own, newly emerging, self-generating logic. Not only is there a qualitative difference between "before" and "after," but also "after" is characterized by an ongoing process of reconstitution that socializes successive generations of individuals into a perpetually transforming reality. The pace of change inherent to this reality is greater and more warped, in certain regards, than any individual or group of individuals could possibly comprehend. In the context of structural and systemic patterns that remain astonishingly stable for long periods of time, such as the overall distribution of economic wealth, the paradox that individuals may be *socialized* into an environment that is becoming increasingly *antisocial*, literally would be too much to handle.<sup>44</sup>

Most mainstream approaches presume the adequacy of their approaches and tools in the endeavor to determine the particular subject matter of each social science, pending minor adjustments, and ascribing failure to lack of skills and other deficits on the part of researchers, to lack of funding or time, or to flawed theorizing and development or application of methods.<sup>45</sup> By contrast, critical theory in its original conception is interested in failure as it is the consequence – and function – of both the existing social structure, and the willingness of researchers to subscribe to dominant ideology – whatever

form it may take, in a particular socio-historical environment.<sup>46</sup> The following four criteria constitute necessary preconditions for any effort to theorize a phenomenon in society in a manner that is oriented toward doing justice to the nature of the phenomenon. These criteria are intended to counteract our inclination as traditional or non-critical social scientists to frame the analysis of a phenomenon in time and space *implicitly*, i.e., in terms of concrete norms, attributions of value, and definitions of reality that are endemic to a particular socio-historical context whose defining characteristics, typically, may be presumed not to be problematic – as individuals who are immersed in society.

From its earliest inception, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School rejected the notion that it is possible to circumscribe the particular, socially and historically situated responsibility of each individual discipline independently of the others – thus the need for a rigorously *interdisciplinary* perspective. Furthermore, since there needs to be as much correspondence between the contradictory and dynamic nature of the subject matter – modern industrial capitalist postliberal society – and the tools employed to scrutinize it, anything short of a *dialectical approach* will be inadequate. Horkheimer distinguished critical theory from traditional theory to highlight the need to examine the larger context in which research in the social sciences occurs, to spell out how both are closely entwined. Resisting the impulse to engage in traditional modes of theorizing and analysis may be the greatest challenge, considering the extent to which the Western model of science, centered on an understanding of physics that was outdated already a century ago, influences our thinking about social science as well. Critical theory, in this sense, is opposed to traditional theorizing, and rigorously *non-traditionalist*. Finally, it is not possible to see how the different social sciences supplement and complement each other, how their agendas intersect, and how the contributions of any social science, without linkages to the others, are mostly hypothetical statements about how to study the social world from the political, economic, cultural, psychological, and sociological perspective alone. To remedy this flaw that is built into the design of each social science, we need to work with the critical concept of *totality* (Jay, 1984).

As an initial approximation of the resulting unique contribution of critical theory to social science, we could frame modern society as a nexus of social relations that are the function of compounded layers of alienation (Dahms, 2006). As alienation resulted from the spread of the capitalist mode of production, politics, culture, and society increasingly assimilated to requirements that made straight, unmediated perspectives on societal life

more and more difficult, if not impossible. In the process, starting with the descendants of those who experienced the onslaught of alienation directly (as illustrated most vividly by Marx and Engels for the first generation of workers who moved from agricultural work into industrial factories and subterranean mines), alienation became submerged and compounded.

In the social sciences, the diversity of methods and theories reflect the increasing prevalence of alienation in different dimensions of societal life – especially to the extent that social science approaches neglect to recognize their immersion in this condition of alienation. Since the social sciences emerged and spread, the risk that particular approaches concealed, rather than revealed, the ubiquity of alienation has been increasing, and will continue to do so, for the foreseeable future. Approaches that explicitly name and consider alienation have not only remained on the margins of each discipline in the social sciences, but have become more so as time has gone by. In economics, psychology, political science, sociology, and especially social work, the mainstream of each of the social sciences keeps becoming more narrow, formalistic, and quantitative. As the utility of the concept of alienation seems to decrease, along with the willingness of social scientists to employ it, its force to shape the actuality of societal life keeps expanding exponentially. What was conceived by Hegel and Marx as an abstract philosophical concept, in the context of globalization can be gleaned from the surface of societal life, in more ways than we could ever enumerate and should have wished to be able to.

This, then, is the *very essence of critical theory*: alienation is the seemingly inescapable, ever more pervasive corollary of the economic process in capitalism, an ongoing process of societal mediation and reconstitution which, as members of society captured in the minutiae of everyday life, we are meant to experience and embrace, but not to detect. Yet, as social scientists, we must embrace the responsibility for making the most determined and sustained efforts to discern and reveal the truly awesome force that alienation has over our lives and our existence – as a constitutional feature of modern reality.<sup>47</sup>

### *On the Immersion of Mainstream Approaches in Modern Society*

In terms of its logic laid out during the 1930s and 1940s, critical theory works with the results of traditional or mainstream research, on a case-by-case basis, after determining whether, how, and to what degree a specific approach advocates, relies on, and is compatible with an interdisciplinary

perspective, the dialectical mode of reasoning (theoretically and/or methodologically), a non-traditionalist concept of theory and/or research, and the concept of totality. Given the availability of resources, in terms of funding and time, the first necessary step towards illuminating the gravity of mainstream approaches for social research, and the possibility of social science more generally, would be to locate the plurality of approaches along a spectrum, from most mainstream to least mainstream. In addition, such a framework would have the advantage of making accessible the concrete form and content of “mainstream”: what are the formative and organizing assumptions of approaches that reject interdisciplinary collaboration, dialectic outlook, concept of totality, and critical (non-traditionalist) reflexivity with regard to how an approach is socially and historically immersed? Is there a common denominator among approaches that subscribe to, reflect, and perpetuate what, for present purposes, we might refer to as ‘dominant ideology’?

To recall my earlier comments regarding the purported superiority of the Western model, one of the most obvious yet least scrutinized examples for dominant ideology permeating and shaping mainstream approaches occurred soon after World War II, when in the context of the Cold War the notion proliferated that postwar Western societies were qualitatively different from, and indeed superior to, both their predecessors before the war, and especially the primary opponent – the Soviet Union, or “Communism.” From a *political* perspective, it would have been exceedingly difficult and problematic – indeed frivolous – to contest this stance, both at the time, and in retrospect, from a multiplicity of angles. Yet, from a *theoretical* perspective, the fact that so many social scientists did not see the need, after 1945, to apply – or even to appreciate – the kind of systematically critical scrutiny to societal reality that the classics had advocated, especially Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, is most disconcerting. To a high degree, social scientists applied an affirmative perspective on post-World War II societal reality that, *at a theoretical level*, is not compatible with the determination of most of the classics to confront the inherently irreconcilable nature of modern society. The eagerness with which social scientists embraced the creed that after World War II, “things really got rather better,”<sup>48</sup> as even the highly ambivalent Habermas put it, revealed a widespread readiness to transpose politics onto the level of research agendas in the social sciences at the expense of theoretical rigor.<sup>49</sup> I am not suggesting that social scientists had no misgivings, but that those misgivings, for the most part, were viewed as exterior to social research, rather than integral and indispensable – as I am insisting they are.

To reiterate an earlier point, made in allusion to Lemert's "thinking the unthinkable": social scientists need to work from the stance that societies compel their members to subscribe to modes of interpreting social reality that are conducive to sustaining social order and political stability – rather than to illuminating them. This applies especially in modern society, where the resulting tensions and dilemmas for social research are not less pronounced than they would have been in premodern societies, but much more so. The willingness of most social scientists after 1945 to subscribe to dominant ideology *in this specific sense*, and to neglect the requisite critical attitude regarding societal imperatives that are a necessary precondition for the very possibility of a stable social order, and the concurrent requirement to distance oneself from the projection that every society must maintain of itself, was evidently problematic for the project of social science. Notwithstanding the fact that the desire of social scientists, as professionals, to relate to the societal world in a manner that is closely related to ways of relating to the social world in which we are immersed, is entirely understandable, but given the nature of societal life in the modern age, which includes the present time, this desire cannot, and will not, be fulfilled.

One of the distinctive objectives of critical theory is illuminating the specific relationship between conceptions of social science and socio-historical context, as an indispensable step in the process of examining how compounded layers of alienation alter our ability to discern and, if possible, to shape societal conditions. Yet, to state that critical theorists' contention that the possibility of social science is contingent on illuminating this relationship, is neither to suggest that doing so will be sufficient, nor that critical theorists have done so successfully. Instead, it is to caution, first, that the agenda of the early "classical" critical theorists of the Frankfurt School is likely to remain as pertinent as ever, for neo-Marxist critical theory, and for critical theory more generally, and second, that efforts at successful execution remain preliminary, despite claims of recent representatives like Habermas and Honneth to have left the classics behind. Rather, their conceptions of critical theory constitute departures from the original agenda that stressed and developed further certain, partial aspects of that agenda, and in this sense, are legitimate in their own right. However, as attempts to reconstruct the core of the original agenda, their departures are neither necessary nor sufficient. They do not constitute a direct continuation of that agenda, nor did they transpose that agenda to present times and conditions, nor are they necessarily or sufficiently compelling. Indeed, in light of the proliferating dangers not just to the achievements of the modern age – fragmented and contradictory as they were from its beginning – but

potentially to the survival of humanity as a whole, it would not be difficult to provide evidence supporting the claim that the incentive to realize the agenda has never been greater. The effort to make explicit, and realize, that agenda must continue.

Is it possible, then, to circumscribe more explicitly and more precisely the specific and distinguishing theoretical agenda of the early Frankfurt School, in and for the present context? Formulated thus, the question implies that current incarnations of critical theory do not necessarily represent successful efforts at transposing and continuing the agenda of the classics of critical theory to and for the present circumstances. Instead, current modes of critical theorizing may constitute parallel or branched-off agendas that, ironically, may obstruct the perspective on the critical theory's defining agenda. The purpose of transposing and continuing the original agenda to twenty-first century conditions would not be, primarily, to reassess how successful early proponents were. Rather, the challenge is to ascertain what implications result from the failure to connect the efforts of the first generation of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, to work that must be done today – the kind of work that may not be undertaken at all, in the absence of a stated orientation of inquiry for the present context that would correspond with the efforts of the classics. It also suggests that current efforts in the name of critical theory, may neither be consistent with the theoretical core of the original agenda of critical theory, as the classics tried to capture it, nor with an updated version of it. As soon as we apply this kind of perspective to the history of critical theory, questions arise with regard to the nature of successes achieved so far, and more importantly, to the state of critical theory today. In particular, the question is whether, to what extent, and in what ways, the main representatives of the second and third generations of critical theory, especially Habermas and Honneth, respectively, have continued the tradition on terms that are conducive to pushing ahead the program as it emerged during the 1930s – in what sense they are, or may not be, critical theorists in *that* sense of the term.

Given that critical theory is not compatible with, and indeed opposite to, mainstream approaches, how did successive “generations” of critical theorists relate to mainstream approaches in the social sciences? How did their immersion in time and space influence their ability to pursue and push further the agenda of critical theory? Did critical theory undergo mutations during the post-World War II period that deepened or diluted the initial objectives? To determine to what degree the project of critical theory succeeded in its efforts, however, it is not sufficient to trace its history as an approximation of its practicality, its theoretical logic, as well as its overall

legitimacy. Instead, we must also expand on each generation's efforts, with the proverbial benefit of hindsight. If earlier critical theorists would have been in our position – being able to draw both on knowledge of societal changes that have occurred since the 1970s, as well as on theoretical and empirical work that has been done since then, in the form of both traditional and critical social science – could and would they have laid out the project of critical theory differently, more explicitly, and sharply? At the same time, politically speaking, if the spread of democracy and the pursuit especially of economic modernization after World War II could have occurred without the weight of the Cold War, would the theoretical logic of critical theory have been more or less distinctive, and recognizable? Since in the present context, it will not be possible to address these questions adequately, here too, a few central points will have to suffice.

*Toward a Critical Theory of Mainstream Approaches: The Tension  
Between “Static” and “Dynamic” in Social Science*

To reiterate the basic claim suggested in the title of this chapter: the particular type of issues the first generation of Frankfurt School theorists tried to tackle during the 1930s and 1940s pertains to the very concept, and possibility, of social science today. These issues relate to the fact that mainstream approaches in the social sciences work from the implicit assumption that efforts to illuminate economic, political, cultural, and psychological features of social life do not require *rigorous reflection on how the immersion of social research in space and time, i.e., within concrete socio-historical circumstances, impacts on our ability to truly illuminate social life*. Put differently, whereas critical theory starts out from the contention that modern society is inherently contradictory – a fact that has a definite bearing on all attempts to describe, analyze, scrutinize, and advance modern society – proponents of mainstream approaches emphasize the difficulties of engaging in social research, independently of the specifically problematic nature of modern society. To be sure, few social scientists represent either position in its pure form; most are located along a spectrum with critical theory at one end, and determined refusal to acknowledge contradictions at the other.

While mainstream approaches are oriented toward identifying features of social life that remain constant over time, the early critical theorists were concerned specifically with how to confront the impact of concrete social changes on specific forms of social life, as well as on the analysis of those

forms. For instance, should social scientists be concerned with the impact of changes in the organization of the labor process over time, on how members of certain segments of a population view – and especially how they practically relate to – each other, members of other segments, political institutions, democracy, social justice, family life, and access to education and health care? Most social scientists probably would respond that within the division of labor among the social scientists, at least some researchers should study those changes and their consequences. Yet, assuming that changes in the labor process qualitatively alter social forms, e.g., the nature of social relations, should social scientists not directly concerned with either phenomenon, consider the implications of such a link for their own research? Moreover, what if such changes influence or impair our ability to do social research, in ways that we will not notice unless and until we pay focused attention – as a necessary precondition for the possibility to successful efforts, rather than those efforts themselves?

If we identify as the primary charge of social scientists to make accessible the nature of forms of social life as they are independent of, and transcend, the specifics of space and time, then the issues with which the early critical theorists struggled are marginal, if not irrelevant. Yet, if we respond to the above set of questions affirmatively, then our response implies the willingness to take responsibility for examining the specific nature of the link between concrete forms of life – *and the forces that shape or produce them*. From this perspective, social research needs to pursue challenges at several levels simultaneously:

- How are forms of societal life concretely manifested?
- How do changes in the socio-historical context influence concrete forms of societal life?
- How do forms of societal life reflect changes in the socio-historical context?
- How do forms of societal life reflecting changes in the socio-historical context provide access to the origins of those changes?
- How does knowledge of the link between concrete forms of societal life and socio-historical changes open up perspectives on society that are closed off from members of society who are actively engaged in societal life?

Since mainstream social scientists tend to be interested primarily in processes and phenomena in society that facilitate knowledge that is independent of time and space – knowledge that is generalizable beyond the specificity of societal context – concrete processes and phenomena are

relevant mostly inasmuch as they reveal stable patterns and trends. The early critical theorists contended that unless we are able to determine the nature of the link between change in society and forms of societal life, we would not be capable of truly illuminating the latter. Yet, in order to do the latter, we must put ourselves in the position of being able to distinguish between features of societal life that are independent of time and space, and those that are subject to social change – whose concrete shape, in other words, reveals the concrete manifestations and underlying logic of change in society.

If we orient the purpose of our research in such a manner that the specific, dominant features of a particular society, as they are consequences of social change, and continue to pattern future social change, are not part of our research agenda, then we are bound to conflate consequences of change with the nature of the phenomenon to be studied – we *process* consequences as indicative of the nature of the phenomenon. For instance, depending on the degree and kind of reflexivity applied to the link between socio-historical context and research, some approaches may be oriented toward illuminating the link in a manner that is in accordance with how most members of society relate to and view society in everyday life. In this sense, the effort to illuminate the link in fact would *reflect* (i.e., mirror) the features of society. (From a critical-theoretical perspective, relating the task of illuminating social life to prevailing ways of viewing social life, in an ironic twist, would then make accessible those prevailing views.) On the other hand, approaches may be directed at illuminating the link in a manner that is a necessary precondition for grasping the nature of the link as a representation of society itself. In this sense, the inquiry would explicitly go beyond perpetuating socially condoned views, and thus, *reflect on* (i.e., scrutinize) society.

In mainstream approaches, socio-historical circumstances tend to enter the picture in the form of concrete and observable facts: demographic and statistical data, historical events, concrete political and economic processes, institutions, systems of power, and social structure. The possibility that concrete socio-historical circumstances and trends influence or shape research in the social sciences itself in ways that are in profound conflict with how we, as members of society, see social life, does not enter into, or influence, mainstream perspectives. We should therefore orient our research in a manner that compels us to grasp the nature of such features and phenomena as social relations and political institutions, as their nature is the intersection between static and dynamic dimensions in and of modern society – rather than being constant over time. Yet, it may not be possible to study this nature separately, in terms of static versus dynamic dimensions.

Rather, we must study the ways in which static dimensions may provide the scaffolding for dynamic dimensions, and how both exist through their combination. It would not be possible, then, to grasp the nature of such phenomena and features as social relations and political institutions independently of time and space, i.e., independently of how members of society practically relate to them, in different socio-historical environments and contexts.

Since all efforts to analyze social reality occur in specific socio-historical contexts, the latter inevitably impact on the former in a multiplicity of ways. In addition to obvious influences that are inescapable – notions of necessary, desirable, legitimate research; ideology, at many different levels; funding opportunities; religion and cultural traditions; political, economic, and social power; structures of inequality – the term “socio-historical context” also highlights the particular, and particularly problematic, form and content those influences may take and entail in the modern age, in relation to structural changes, especially in economic, organizational, and political regards. It is not just *that*, but also especially *how* we adhere and subscribe to differing degrees to prevailing norms, traditional ideas, ideology, that fulfills necessary functions for the possibility of social order. How we are socialized, educated, and trained to view ourselves as individuals capable of being free, enlightened, self-interested, self-determining, emancipated, and social (i.e., solidaristic), engenders a view of the self that is a necessary precondition for the possibility of modern society as a social, political, and economic order. Yet, while our socially constructed ways of seeing our and each others’ selves is necessary for social order, it also impacts our ability to confront the discrepancy between the projection and actuality of social reality – as members of society we relate to certain features of society in ways that reinforce social order, even though those ways may not be conducive to illuminating its actual workings and constitutional principles.

As long as social scientists do not regard it as necessary to scrutinize the precise nature of the relationship between research agendas pursued and tools employed (theories, methods, concepts – along with the explicit or implicit priorities that shaped their development), and the defining features of the economic, political, cultural, and societal context that is to be illuminated, approaches in the social sciences are more likely than not to implicitly reflect – and perpetuate – those features, rather than critically reflecting on them. *In fact, this may be the essence of mainstream approaches: that their proponents and adherents insist on the possibility – and necessity – of analyzing and explaining social reality, and any and all of its component dimensions, with the help of tools that bypass (i.e., that make unnecessary*

*recognition of) the constitutionally problematic nature of modern society, as it keeps undergoing successive transmutations.* Ironically, in an inverted manner, this insistence is not far from the truth: implicitly, advocates of mainstream approaches suggest that all social scientists work with tools that reflect (work with, embody) the complexities, contingencies, and contradictions of modern social life in such a manner that responses to and/or solutions for theoretical, methodological, or practical challenges result by default. By contrast, the early critical theorists asserted that refusal to critically reflect on the link between social science practice and socio-historical context inevitably perpetuates or amplifies the defining features of the latter.

There are numerous approaches and traditions in each of the social sciences that are cognizant of the fact that at different levels of subtlety, preference for a particular methodology, theoretical orientation, notion of polity, economy, culture, or society, along with conceptions of the purpose and responsibility of each social science, are tied to and reflect specific societal and historical contexts. Yet, besides critical theory, there is no approach that has, in terms of its basic design and theoretical logic, a comparable obligation to scrutinize a particular type of possible pitfalls that accompany all efforts to take steps in the direction of a science of society, polity, culture, or economy. This particular type of pitfall results from the fact that it is not possible to conceive of a *social science* and its specific subject matter, purpose, and responsibility, entirely independently of the specific features that are characteristic of its socio-historical context.

Whether, for instance – in “static” terms – a society has a political system that adheres to and employs what Joseph Schumpeter (1942, pp. 269–302) referred to as the “democratic method,” will certainly influence and be reflected in the concepts of social science in that society. However, and at least as importantly, whether democratic values and validity claims are being feigned on a regular and consistent basis to compel voters to support parties, policies and candidates whose manipulative intent is apparent, must translate into attempts in the social sciences to examine and describe the actual functioning of societies with purportedly democratic political systems as well. This second “dynamic” dimension, whose incidence, concrete form and practical execution will differ from society to society, is at least as important for the possibility of social science that is related meaningfully to the actuality of forms of societal life, as the “static” dimension. Examples of this kind are so ubiquitous in every area of modern social life and modes of application that this one illustration will need to suffice here.

All efforts to conceive or design a social science, identify the need for it, and to formulate legitimate scientific questions, tools, and practices,

inevitably reflect priorities that are prevalent in geographical space and historical time. Evidently, how the latter influences and shapes conceptions of science must also be taken into consideration, regarding the orientation of each of the social sciences. For instance, the current entwinement of global context and the orientation of neoclassical economics as an established “social” science is merely the most conspicuous example; similar links could be identified and thematized for political science, psychology, and even sociology. While proponents of other approaches may allow for, or even rely on, the recognition that structures of power, interests, and inequalities in a particular society are bound to shape the kinds of questions and issues “respectable” social scientists should want to be concerned with, critical theorists have addressed this shaping force along an entire spectrum of phenomena, and how it entails the potential of undercutting the possibility of success from the outset. However, to date, no sustained effort has been made to systematically capture this shaping force, nor has there been an adequate focus on the consequences resulting from the conspicuous longing of many critical theorists to be regarded as respectable social scientists, for the future of critical theory.

## **CRITICAL THEORY ∞ MAINSTREAM APPROACHES?<sup>50</sup>**

How will social science be possible *with* critical theory? The fragmentation of the social sciences is a consequence of the same forces and processes that fragment societal life in the modern age, combined with the fact that most social scientists at best have a marginal interest in recognizing those forces and processes. De facto, mainstream social science largely is a hypothetical exercise on the supposition that modern society is an internally consistent form of social, political, cultural, and economic life and organization. However, as critical theorists and many other social scientists have recognized, stated, and demonstrated, actually existing modern societies are *constitutionally irreconcilable*, as far as the tension between norms and values is concerned. In addition, they rely, both implicitly and explicitly, on the projection that they are the most promising venue for reconciling facts and norms in history (Wellmer, [1993]1998a; Schluchter, 1996). The evidence that both of these “moments” are integral to modern society is too overwhelming to ignore, and continues to become more overwhelming as time goes by. Yet, we continue with business as usual.

The agenda laid out by Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and other representatives of the classical period of critical theory constituted a decisive, albeit certainly not a flawless step in the direction of approximating, if not actualizing, the kind of theoretically informed social science that will engender qualitative societal change beyond the current state of irreconcilable modernity. The latter seems forever bound by its unwillingness to spell out how its core consists of contradictions, and how its values are fraught by (though not reducible to) the need to produce and maintain projections that are tied up with contradictions. These projections conceal the proliferation of hyper-alienated forms of existence, by compelling individuals, as individuals, to interpret those forms of existence within reference frames that do not coincide with the ways of the world today – that are, in fact, *objectively impossible* (Dahms, 2005). In addition, we must recognize that established practices of trying to “solve” problems are a function of the warped design of modern society (inequality, poverty, unemployment, etc., to whatever degree they are part and parcel of modern society, rather than the consequence of aggregated individual failings, etc.) – not ancillary, but integral to modern society. Instead of changing prevailing modes of co-existence, we externalize those problems, and engage in efforts to solve them, without changing those modes of co-existence, along with ourselves, as they (we, ourselves) reflect specific socio-historical conditions.<sup>51</sup>

As should be expected, in light of the above, efforts to carry the original project of critical theory into the twenty-first century will have to overcome major obstacles. Ironically, though, in retrospect, the history of critical theory since the 1970s itself might be one of those obstacles. With regard to the problematic nature of mainstream approaches outlined here, it would be difficult to deny that the writings of the main representatives of critical theory since the 1970s, Habermas and Honneth, represent a major departure from the original agenda, as both have stressed repeatedly during the last quarter century. Habermas’s work since the 1970s is characterized by determined efforts to reconcile critical theory with mainstream approaches. Many of the approaches developed by earlier theorists that he utilized and incorporated are among the most sophisticated efforts to frame aspects of social life. Especially in *The Theory of Communicative Action* Habermas ([1981] 1984, 1987) relied heavily, though of course not exclusively, on approaches that did not address explicitly issues related to alienation (as shorthand for the willingness to recognize the centrality of contradictions to modern society) and the societal condition it denotes. Moreover, his particular reading and integration in his theory of those contributions tended to be more compatible with mainstream interpretations than with

critical theory. For instance, when viewed from the perspective of alienation, both Durkheim's concept of anomie and Weber's concept of the Protestant ethic, as organizing categories that are directly related to and expressive of the guiding thrust of their theoretically informed designs of sociology as a social science, entail more critical impetus than what Habermas allowed for.

*Critical Liberalism, Cultural Pessimism, and Public Sociology*

Given the degree to which both Habermas' and Honneth's respective attempts to move "beyond" critical theory reveal a willingness to subscribe to the ideology modern Western societies constructed of themselves – as the purported vehicles par excellence for advancing democracy, social justice, and economic equality – it might be more accurate to describe their perspectives as *critical liberalism*, rather than *critical theory*. Yet, framing liberalism as problematic does not translate into the wholesale rejection of Western democracy, rule of law, and economic prosperity. Rather, it emphasizes that conceptualizing the charge of critical theory within the context of and depending on a particular political arrangement, such as post-World War II democracy, is in danger of betraying its systematic theoretical commitment, without putting in its place a set of tools that will ensure that the kinds of questions that inspired the first generation of critical theorists will continue to guide social research in some form, in some regards, into the future.<sup>52</sup>

The issue is similar with regard to the charge of overly exaggerated pessimism that has been leveled especially at Horkheimer and Adorno. I propose that this charge might start out from an erroneous stance: that the distinction between optimism and pessimism provides suitable cornerstones for framing the original agenda of critical theory. In light of the perspective I have been advocating here, the distinction simply would not appear to apply. Instead, the distinction suggests an outlook that posits that theoretical analysis ought to translate into constructive political and practical action. While this indeed would be desirable, it should not be so at the expense of theoretical rigor – not for its own sake, but for the sake of our ability to confront facts perpetually seeking to hide themselves from sight. The supposition that constructive collective action is possible in the present context, and that theoretical endeavors ought to be conducive to such action and its conception, may not be warranted. At the present historical juncture, if we follow the contention that theoretically sound,

proactive politics *must* be possible, we might undercut the kind of research of “objective possibilities” – e.g., as far as solving social problems is concerned – that would warrant “optimism.” Put differently: within dominant ideology, as it permeates even critical-theoretical discourse, what may appear as optimism might undercut the possibility of actual, justified optimism, while the kind of “pessimism” of which especially Adorno was accused may be the necessary precondition for the kind of optimism that is grounded in an ability to “face facts” – i.e., the exceedingly warped nature of “modern” society.

As social scientists, it is not our main responsibility to “solve the world’s problems,” but to make critical contributions by confronting rigorously the causes of the different disciplines’ lack of effectiveness, as far as actual, comprehensive analytical and research progress is concerned. For instance, the lack of willingness and determination among many practitioners of social science to recognize the causes of fragmentation plays a key role in preserving the world’s problems. Fragmentation is not incidental to the link between modern social life and social science, but integral to both – and must be recognized and confronted accordingly. The fact that social life is fraught with fragmentation, and the need to “reign in” its constitutionally destructive consequences for social order, both a permanent challenge and an opportunity to reinforce social order by utilizing the destructive potential, inspired the classics of sociology to center their theories and conceptions of social science around categories that, at the time, were truly “unthinkable” – *alienation, anomie, and the Protestant ethic*.<sup>53</sup> We must recognize that the possibility of social science is contingent on our commitment to ascertain the empirical and theoretical impact of the dimensions of social reality that these categories denote at successive points in time. As long as we ignore that the very design of modern society is both consequence and cause of fragmentation at the same time, the temptation and inclination is great to surmise that social science can achieve any of its goals. As a result, we only delude ourselves; our readiness to be deluded is an integral part of the problem, rather than of the solution, and certainly not a matter of personal preference. We are a cause of the problem, and are far from providing decision makers in institutions and organizations, as well as collective actors, with the kind of categories and tools that would compel them – probably against their “better knowledge” – to begin to appreciate what it would mean to solve any social problem.

Acknowledging and scrutinizing the link between society and social science opens up an important avenue for examining the ability of social scientists to realize the claims made in the name of each discipline, and to

recognize the discrepancy between the claims made and their realization, in a multiplicity of ways. Critical theorists have pointed out that, and in certain regards also addressed how, particular aspects of the research process suffer from a lack of reflexivity regarding the limitations and biases that concrete socio-historical circumstances impose on our ability to illuminate modern social life, whenever those circumstances are treated as inevitable, desirable, natural, or given.<sup>54</sup> On the one hand, it is critically important to identify the characteristic features of the context that leads observers to the conclusion that specific circumstances are inevitable, desirable, natural, or given. Recognition that those features are most important inasmuch as they take a *specific form* is a necessary first step in the process of assessing to what degree social research is driven by the determination to illuminate and scrutinize a particular phenomenon, and to what degree it is driven by priorities and objectives that are extensions of a specific societal context that steers research in a direction that may be inversely related to illuminating and scrutinizing the phenomenon – instead framing it in ways that are compatible with, and reinforce, those very specific features of the societal context.

Given critical theory's emphasis on reflexivity regarding the link between societal context and research practice, it is uniquely positioned to make a necessary and indispensable contribution to the project and process of social science as a whole. Yet, the centrality to the agenda of critical theory, of reflexivity regarding concrete contexts, must be consistently made explicit, and expanded on systematically, in order for it to be possible to demonstrate that and how the tradition's contribution to all the social sciences is *foundational, rather than circumstantial*.

## **SOCIAL SCIENCE IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION: RECONCILING THE IRRECONCILABLE?**

In conclusion, circumscribing the relationship between social science and critical theory does not appear to be as daunting a challenge after all. Indeed, it can be summarized as follows. Social science without critical theory (or any of its close allies, such as critical realism) constitutes what has been referred to as “mainstream” social science, i.e., those approaches that lack reflexivity regarding their immersion in socio-historical contexts, and the implications resulting from that immersion for research capabilities, especially as far as the built-in systemic, structural, and cultural limitations

of the socio-historical context are concerned. If a particular form of social organization can function only because certain dimensions of social, political, cultural, and economic life are suppressed or kept out of sight, then the suppression or occlusion of those dimensions will have a bearing on the practices and orientations of social science. In the absence of reflexivity regarding the limiting and disabling impact of socio-historical context on research, it is not possible to interpret and try to explain the manifestations of suppression and occlusion in the social sciences as anything but flaws characteristic of particular – if not all – research designs and approaches, and thus, of social science per se.

By contrast, social science that relies on critical theory, in the sense outlined here, *as a matter of course* explicitly reflects on socio-historical context. Thus, researchers are in the position, *as a matter of principle*, to differentiate between flaws of research designs and approaches that reflect and are an extension of a socio-historical context *in its specificity*, and those flaws that are subject to methodological and theoretical errors and deficiencies. The latter are of concern to philosophers of science, especially *social science*, and their domain of competence. Historically, and in mainstream approaches in particular, the opportunity did not exist to differentiate clearly between deficits in research that need to be framed, understood, and explained in terms of the disciplinary methodological and theoretical horizon of each social science, respectively, on the one hand, and in terms of the bearing concrete empirical circumstances have on the disciplinary practices of each social science.

Thus, we have arrived at the concluding part of this chapter. As social scientists endeavoring to grasp the nature of the most important practical as well as theoretical challenges of the present age, we find ourselves in the proverbial “Catch-22.” Due in part to “globalization” – as shorthand for our socio-historical reference frame, which in certain regards represents a highly unique configuration – we may be able to state more explicitly than at earlier times the need to differentiate two types of research in the social sciences. On the one hand, there is social science of the sort that *de facto reflects* problematic features of the present specific context, in a manner that replicates and reinforces those features with and through social research, by default or by design.<sup>55</sup> This kind of social science literally, though to differing degrees, is a reflection of society, in the sense that it subscribes to the projection any society needs to sustain in order to function and be stable. On the other hand, the mode of social science that *critically reflects on* problematic features being detrimental to the practice of effective and pertinent social research, relates to social science that “reflects society” as

playing an active role in maintaining those features. To social scientists critically reflecting on society, the practices and orientation of social scientists that reflect society, are symptomatic of society – and thus, theoretically, could serve as a means to make visible problematic societal features – by counterposing the claims made by proponents of approaches that reflect society, about the purpose of social science, and the actual efficacy of those approaches.

Yet, in order to make visible the concrete link between problematic features and research practice, we must identify precisely the features that mainstream social scientists refuse to recognize as problematic, due to their unwillingness to acknowledge the “gravity” of socio-historical context *in its specificity*. The problem is not only that mainstream approaches deny that modern forms of social organization are bound to entail specific features, *under any and all circumstances*, that have a problematic bearing on research practice, down to the level of epistemology, and that these features must be identified carefully. Worse still, the gravity of mainstream approaches in each social science discipline undercuts the legitimacy of critically reflexive efforts, however rigorous they may be, to identify systemically, structurally, and culturally problematic features and their detrimental effects on the practice of social research.

On the one hand, mainstream approaches either refuse to acknowledge, or simply neglect, the existence of those specific features. This neglect provides a key criterion for determining whether a particular approach belongs to the mainstream or not – whether it is compatible with the categories of classical critical theory – dialectics, non-traditional reflexivity, totality, and interdisciplinarity. On the other hand, the gravitational pull of the mainstream – as obliviousness regarding socio-historical specificity – is both so great and so seemingly inescapable that efforts by context-reflexive social scientists to identify problematic features and to ascertain and convey their impact on research, will have little or no effect on mainstream approaches. Since the movement of the mainstream resembles a juggernaut, it does not need to immunize itself against critique, protect itself against opportunities to expand its horizon, or prevent itself from reflecting upon its socio-historical context. Critical reflexivity is immaterial to the existence or the direction of the mainstream, since its *raison d’être* was never meant to be, and never was, related to the production of representations of modern societal life *as a constitutionally warped totality*. Instead, it would be more appropriate and more justified to regard mainstream approaches as efforts, in the name of social science, to “analyze” and “scrutinize” modern society *within the horizon of modern society*. This means: mainstream

approaches do not provide truly probing analyses of modern society as such, which might (or would) engender qualitative transformations of modern society – but instead, present analyses of modern society, without making the effort to “think the unthinkable” – to recall Lemert’s phrase. As a consequence, mainstream approaches reflect modern societies in their specificity in the sense that they provide *a mirror of* modern society, rather than *a mirror for* society.

Mainstream representations of modern society do not, and never were meant to reveal its form of social organization as existing against the normative framework of modern society, but instead as it appears to itself within the normative framework of modern society. Concordantly, members of modern society who rely on mainstream representations of modern society – including social scientists, inasmuch as they are members of society as well – do not see modern society as it functions and reconstitutes itself through the design of the individual identities of its members and of social scientists, so as to secure the contours and features of modern society in its specificity – the specific contours and problematic features of each individual modern society – by imprinting them on every individual member, in ways that he or she could not possibly conceive.

By contrast, the goal and purpose of critical approaches is to direct research efforts at providing representations of modern society that reveal to its members and to social scientists their problematic features as integral components of its concrete socio-historical form, and thus, its very possibility. However, the mere fact that critical theory, along with other approaches and traditions that are critically reflexive with regard to particular aspects of socio-historical context – such as the continuing prevalence of patriarchy in modern society, or Western bias itself, both from poststructuralist and postcolonial perspectives – or of particular disciplines – such as Gouldner’s or Bourdieu’s arguments for reflexive sociology – does not relativize the preeminence and gravity of mainstream approaches.<sup>56</sup> Rather, they confirm the latter: to “think” social science without taking into consideration the gravitational pull of the mainstream runs the risk of overrating the relevance and weight of dissident approaches within each discipline, and the seeming significance of proliferating diversity and plurality. Underestimating the affinity between mainstream approaches and social structures in their specificity, thus, would be detrimental to the possibility to the kind of social science that is most important, most needed, and most challenging today: the kind of social science that enlightens society about its concrete form and condition of existence – the kind of enlightenment no society ever “wants” to confront, or is capable of

confronting, given that social order and stability are contingent on the facility of any society – including, most importantly, modern society – to limit transparency and accountability to levels well below those whose consistent projection is a necessary precondition for the legitimacy, and possibility, of modern society.

In conclusion, identifying the perimeter of “mainstream” approaches is both a necessary precondition for effective and pertinent social research, and a possible avenue for illuminating the functioning and constitutional logic of modern societies. Mainstream approaches, in one regard, are an impediment to analyzing society as far as today’s most important issues, along with the critically reflexive purpose, responsibility, and promise of each and all of the social sciences, are concerned. Yet, in another regard, mainstream approaches also provide access to the problematic features of particular contexts, once we “calculate,” as it were, the inability of mainstream approaches, first, to recognize their limitations as manifestation of specific social conditions, and second, to explain the consequences of those limitations for conceiving and designing social research programs – albeit in different ways and to different degrees. Thus, in a warped manner, mainstream approaches can in fact serve as highly pertinent contributions to conceiving of strategies for confronting more effectively social problems, and the prospect of their solution – just not in terms of mainstream social science, but read against the grain, within the more expansive perimeter of comprehensive social science that is capable of and fully engaged in critical reflexivity at all levels, as par for the course – and oriented toward the kind of qualitative transformations in and of modern societies whose urgency continues to become more obvious by the day. To do so, critical theorists must be reticent regarding the temptations of “mainstream” respectability, prestige and success, and continuously renew the “classical” commitment to analytical efforts that are, in fact, oriented toward a kind of *basic research* that is directed at illuminating the constitutional principle of a form of social organization that is built on and around contradictions, and that continues to produce and feed off of alienation, anomie, and the Protestant ethic, at an increasingly intensifying pace. Consequently, rather than being concerned about defending critical theory as a legitimate research agenda, we must direct our labor at revealing the causes and consequences of modern society’s inherent irreconcilability – on the assumption that if we should make it to the proverbial bottom, we might be in the position to conceive of social life in ways that are not determined by immersion in the gravitational pull of modernity’s inability to allow for a qualitatively superior constitution of societal existence.

## NOTES

1. While the argument presented here applies above all to the neo-Marxist critical theory that began as the “Frankfurt School,” post-structural, post-modernist, feminist, post-colonial, and critical race theories represent perspectives that are similar, and highly compatible, with Frankfurt School-style theorizing. Unless explicitly stated otherwise, in this chapter the focus is on the critical theory of the Frankfurt School only. Given that its reference frame is universal in aspiration, rather than particular to specific experiences, population, or lifestyle, in terms of theoretical logic, it has come to be regarded as the model of all critical theories. Note, however, that its universalist orientation has been criticized by all non-Frankfurt School approaches to critical theory as being highly problematic. On the issue of universality in relation to globalization, see the chapter by Wolfgang Natter, in this volume. For an overview and perspective that is similar in orientation, see Calhoun (1995). On mapping critical theories, see Huysen (1984) and Antonio (1998).

2. Reluctantly, I try to distinguish between “social” and “societal” in this chapter with as much consistency as possible, to signal when I refer to the *social* dimension of society – as opposed to the political, economic, or cultural dimensions – and when I refer to *societal* features – as dynamic intersections of the social, political, economic, cultural, and organizational dimensions of societies. In doing so, I adhere to the practice in Frankfurt School critical theory, of distinguishing between social (“*sozial*”) and societal (“*gesellschaftlich*”). In Adorno, in particular, critical theory is consistently concerned with societal rather than social issues, a distinction that tends to be neglected in translations into English. Strictly speaking, critical theory criticizes “social science” for its failure to recognize the need for “societal science” – social science of society as a “dialectic totality.”

3. In the sense that the work of founders provides a foil enabling latter social scientists to revisit on a regular basis, the question of whether and in what sense the trajectory of a discipline’s concerns and development of tools is consistent with early designs and standards, and does constitute “progress.”

4. I am not suggesting the conflation of research and public policy, as advocates of public policy appear to suggest, at times. Rather, I am acknowledging the fact that research in the social sciences always, inevitably, has policy implications, usually is informed by and funded for its potential for policy implications, and within the context of social structures and “dominant ideology,” often has a bearing on reality, via public policies – for better or for worse. For present purposes though, I propose that to frame a discipline’s responsibility, purpose, and promises, the distinction must be made between public-policy-oriented research (as in “public sociology”), on the one hand, and “basic research” – a term that largely has dropped out of social science discourse – on the other. On the issue of public sociology, see Paul Paolucci’s chapter in this volume.

5. “Evolution” is commonly employed to refer to qualitative improvement over time; I employ it here in the more narrow sense of continuous adaptation to a changing environment that may, but must not necessarily, entail qualitative improvement.

6. Case in point: From the end of World War II until the 1970s, faith in the advantages resulting from a nation's ability to achieve and sustain economic prosperity through economic growth was widespread, and the notion that the non-economic costs could outweigh the economic and non-economic benefits combined close to inconceivable, and tempered by optimistic projections of increasing personal and national wealth directly translating into an increasing capacity to *solve* social problems. The period from approximately 1950 to 1970 also saw the only period in recorded history when in globally the rate of economic inequality increasing decreased, compared to the decades preceding and succeeding it. See Bourguignon and Morrison (2002).

7. It is telling that today, a former U.S. Vice-President feels compelled to strike more critical tones than many self-proclaimed critical theorists, not to mention social scientists. Note the similarity between the title of Al Gore's most recent book, *The Assault on Reason* (2007), and one of Horkheimer's classical texts, *Eclipse of Reason* (1947). Though Gore does not reference Horkheimer, he does refer the "Frankfurt School of Philosophy" (p. 276) in general, and Habermas in particular (pp. 19, 26).

8. In the social sciences, proponents of the different kinds of critical theory mentioned earlier (neo-Marxism, feminism, post-structuralism, postmodernism, and post-colonialism), more traditional Marxism, world-systems theory, critical realism, and reflexively modernist approaches have been critical of modernization theory for decades in one way or the other. Note that the fact that proponents of marginalized approaches have achieved positions of great prominence, e.g., Jürgen Habermas, does not relativize the previous statement. Rather, the greater the gravity and stability of the "core" – in this case, modernization theory – the more likely it is that a growing number of scholars who are critical of the core will attain positions of prominence.

9. As I put it elsewhere, social policies in Western democratic capitalist societies do not appear to solve social problems, but to police social problems (Dahms, 2005, p. 230), effectively policing those who suffer most from social problems. See also Donzelot (1997).

10. I am using the phrase, dominant ideology, reluctantly. In my use, it refers not to more or less codified political ideologies, but the ideology of post-World War II Western societies as they are tied up with the political, social, economic, and cultural Cold War configuration that is supported and reinforced dynamically by those dimensions of modern social life that Marx, Durkheim, and Weber proposed to capture in terms of alienation, anomie, and the Protestant ethic. For a discussion of the phrase, see Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner (1980).

11. As suggested in Schumpeter's (1942, pp. 81–86) well-known phrase, *creative destruction*.

12. On the main three models of ideology critique in Frankfurt School critical theory, see the chapter by David Strecker in this volume.

13. On the category of "faith" as a central feature of capitalism, see Deutschmann (2001).

14. The similarity in spirit to the language of Baudrillard, especially in *Simulacra and Simulation* ([1981]1994) is not accidental, although my perspective is not just compatible with the notion that social science and modern society are viable categories, but inspired by the possibility and prospect of their actualization in a

much more comprehensive sense than the reality of both social science and modern society to date would seem to justify. Most importantly, while Baudrillard's categories and critique are sweeping in nature, my argument is directed at a particular kind of specificity of societal conditions for which social scientists are responsible, and must take responsibility.

15. To reiterate an earlier point, I am referring to the set of political, cultural and economic features, problems, and challenges, as *societal* – as pertaining to the dynamic nexus of intersecting and integrated levels of spheres of life in society. For the most thorough examination of the depth of the self-deception of modern society, as far as conceptions and the treatment of “nature” is concerned, from a sociological philosophy-of-science perspective, rather than post-structuralist or feminist vantage points, see Hazelrigg (1989a, 1989b, 1993, 1995).

16. For an analysis that traces the more problematic trends and features of the post-World War II era for the present to the 1970s, see McMurtry (1998).

17. Though this is most obvious in the US – perhaps due in part to the fact that here, there were few concrete signs of the end of the Cold War that would have been comparable to the closing of military bases and the removal of foreign troops in and from Central Europe – in less conspicuous ways it applies across the “democratic world.”

18. In the social sciences, interest in the Cold War and the Cold War period has been growing in recent years; see especially Abbott and Sparrow (2007), Steinmetz (2005b), Antonio and Bonanno (2006), Engerman, Gilman, Haeefele, and Latham (2003), and Westad (1998), the latter including especially Stephanson (1998), Lebow (1998), and Wohlforth (1998). See also Buck-Morss (2000) and Westad (2005).

19. For present purposes, I conceive of modern society as a form of social organization that both promises and betrays the “reconciliation of facts and norms” – as the vanishing point of efforts to synchronize the categories we employ to make sense of “reality,” the nature of reality, our place within it, and any of its aspects, components, and dimensions, both as far as natural and social reality are concerned, in theory, philosophy, science, ideology, and religion.

20. See Beetham (1996).

21. Classical contributions not merely in the sense of each discipline's founders and early representatives, but of waves of contributions that keep reconfiguring the agenda and purpose of each discipline, renewed typically through the adoption and embrace of a new, or additional, paradigm. Mainstream economists and psychologists appear to be most committed to the need for and desirability of one dominant paradigm, with mainstream political scientists being a close (and increasingly closer) second. Mainstream sociologists are less fixated on *one* paradigm, but work with the idea of organizing paradigms just as much.

22. The problem of fragmentation as a disciplinary challenge is most visible in sociology, which may well be the most fragmented discipline to date. Talcott Parsons' effort at developing a “general theory of society” was an expression of his concern about the threat of proliferating fragmentation. For an early perspective that resulted from concern about the fragmentation of social life, see Mills (1959), as well as Steven Dandaneau's chapter in this volume. See also Gouldner (1985) and Philips (2001). On the issue of “invisibility” as a theoretical category, see Phillips and

Johnston (2007). Honneth's (2001) use of the concept is a function of his recognition-oriented framework, rather than directed at critical theory as a comprehensive horizon; the same could be said for his comparably narrow employment of the concept of reification (Honneth, 2005), as it is centered around the concept of recognition as well.

23. The challenge of re-conceiving the future has begun to inspire especially politically and theoretically oriented social scientists; see George (2004), Jameson (2006), and Cooke (2006).

24. Social scientists who are primarily concerned with furthering progress in ways that live up to and reinforce "scientific" standards, pursue research that is inspired by the natural sciences. (They usually do not ask whether those scientific standards correspond to actual natural science practice.) Social science in this sense is not concerned with whether research advances our knowledge of politics, economics, culture, and society in a manner that is conducive to greater correspondence between how we (inhabitants as well as social scientists of modern life) perceive societal conditions, and the actuality of those conditions. Put differently, social *scientists* tend to work with the assumption that the results of their research, if sound, improve our conditions by default; addressing the question of whether or not societal conditions are conducive to the results of social research actually improving conditions is not considered among the responsibilities of social *science*.

25. See Adorno's (2003, p. 13) related complaint, expressed in one of his lectures in 1965. See also Dahms (1999, pp. 55–57).

26. Sarah Amsler has presented an argument and outlined a pedagogy that is oriented beyond the gravity of dis-utopias, in her chapter in this volume.

27. From a position that is both informed and influenced by Habermas's concept of deliberative democracy, Kevin Olson's chapter in this volume addresses the links and tensions between governmental rationality and collective political resistance; see also Olson (2006).

28. The literature relating to this concept is vast indeed, and I will not try to begin to provide references. Suffice it to say that it is quite apparent that its importance under conditions of globalization is not decreasing, but rapidly increasing (Langman & Kalekin-Fishman, 2006; Dahms, 2005, 2006, 2008). For a most probing and promising recent contribution at a high level of theoretical sophistication, see Jaeggi (2005a, 2005b).

29. I am employing the phrase here in allusion to the discussion surrounding Lukács's ([1923] 1971) use of the phrase; see especially Fetscher (1973).

30. See Walsh (2005, ch. 5, pp. 119–126).

31. Note that I employ the term "mainstream" not to refer to a set of concrete approaches that can be identified positively, but instead, negatively – through the absence of one particular characteristic – reflexivity with regard to the impact of changing socio-historical conditions of the orientation and practice of research in the social sciences.

32. See Horkheimer's (1937) programmatic essay, "Traditional and critical theory." The literature on the Frankfurt School ceased to be perspicuous some time ago; for a selection of both established and more recent treatments and overviews, see the classical treatments of Wellmer (1969) and Jay ([1973] 1996), as well as Wiggershaus (1995), Nealon and Irr (2002), and Wolin (2006).

33. For a typical illustration of the social-science perspective, see [Parsons \(1951, p. 480\)](#), where he states, in his characteristic language, that “the treatment of ... those [problems] concerned with processes of change of the system itself, that is, processes of resulting in the changes of the system itself ... comes in the present scheme logically last, and presupposed some level of theoretical solution of the [problems of working] out a conceptual scheme in which the major structural components of the social system could be identified ... and [of analyzing] motivational processes within the system.”

34. Also, it is not likely to be accidental that many critical theorists, and representatives of closely related approaches, were comparativists by default – having spent years of their lives in at least two different countries: Marx, Engels, Lukács, Mannheim, Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Gabel, Arato, Benhabib. It is quite possible, if not likely, that the experience of two different societies enables a person to transcend the specificity of either – as well as of society in general.

35. The related literature has placed special emphasis on the role of labor movement and religion in the United States, primarily compared to Europe, but also to Canada and Australia. See [Lipset \(1996\)](#), [Lloyd \(1997\)](#), [Wrobel \(1996\)](#), [Madsen \(1998\)](#), [Voss \(1993\)](#). Although in the existing literature the emphasis has been on American exceptionalism, in principle, this perspective could be applied to all societies, since it is highly unlikely that there is a society that is not exceptional in any regard.

36. In sociology, as the social science discipline most compatible with comparative and historical perspectives, see [Wallerstein \(1993\)](#), [Mandalios \(2000\)](#), and [Griffin and Stryker \(2000\)](#). For a more recent collection of excellent essays addressing related issues, see [Adams, Clemens, and Orloff \(2005\)](#).

37. I have been pursuing this line of inquiry in terms of “socioloanalysis” – in allusion to psychoanalysis – from the position that the latter remains incomplete as long as individuals are compelled to interpret problems in personal psychological terms what may be caused, at least in part, by imperatives of social order and the constitutional logic of society at a particular point in time and space, e.g., failure to adapt to a social environment as at least in part the consequence of prevalent form of social relations.

38. In Germany, the rise of National Socialism provided the strongest incentive for asking questions about the increasingly problematic links between business and bureaucracy, on the one hand, and the values of modern societies in terms of individual self-determination, freedom, equality, and so forth, on the other, with which the former could not be reconciled in ways that would have been conducive to the construction of meaningful life histories. Especially the studies on prejudice and on authority and family fall into this category, as well as works by social scientists that were associated with the Institute for Social Research, but did not belong to its core, such as Neumann and Kracauer. See also Mark Worrell’s chapter on anti-semitic workers and Jewish stereotypes during World War II, in this volume.

39. This volume includes several chapters that address aspects of the Frankfurt School critical theorists’ related contributions. Robert Gorman’s essay traces the linkages between logic and politics in Frankfurt School theorizing until the late 1960s. The chapters by Philip Walsh, Arnold Farr, and James Block examine aspects

of Marcuse's rendering of critical theory. Kevin Fox Gotham and Daniel Krier employed Adorno's category of culture industry to the Situationist International.

40. With regard to sociology, see the very useful overview over the history and role of mainstream approaches by Calhoun and VanAntwerpen (2007).

41. As Smith (1977, p. 232) put it in *The Wealth of Nations*, "For one very rich man, there must be at least five hundred poor ..."

42. See Dahms (2006) for my contention that the effort to circumscribe the core of critical theory must be made on a regular basis, in relation to changing socio-historical conditions.

43. Although the early members of the Frankfurt "School" did not regard themselves as such – the members of a school – they certainly shared an unusually high commitment to contributing to a common effort that translated directly into a degree of critical reflexivity and insuring the relevance of research (Wellmer, [1986]1998b).

44. See the collection of essays, Langman and Kalekin-Fishman (2006).

45. The perspective on mainstream social science is similar to the debate about positivism, though the latter was narrower. "Mainstream" is a more practical and frequently used term today, denotes acceptance of prevailing practices that especially social scientists with quantitative or applied goals today rarely have the opportunity to recognize as such, given the relatively marginal status of theoretical debates to the social sciences today, along with their history and issues related to philosophy of the social sciences. Most quantitatively oriented applied social scientists today are truly "innocent," as far as many of these matters are concerned, and strongly encouraged, if not coerced, not to be concerned with philosophy of [social] science issues, except as they pertain directly and narrowly to the very specific methods or theories employed. See Adorno et al. ([1969] 1976), and more recently especially Steinmetz (2005a), in particular his introduction, and the chapters by Mirowski and Hauptmann.

46. Evidently, this is not to say that societal structure and dominant ideology are entirely responsible for whatever failure occurs in social research, but that the early critical theorists were interested in failure to the extent to which it is the product of – and thus a means to access – concrete and specific societal structures and dominant ideologies.

47. *Alienation* was the first concept that enabled Hegel and Marx to explicate what accounts for and expresses the warped nature of modern society, to be followed by *commodity fetishism* (in the later Marx), *reification* (in Lukàcs), instrumental reason (in Horkheimer & Adorno), and *functionalist reason* (in Habermas). See Benhabib (1986).

48. "I am ... ambivalent because I have the impression that something is deeply amiss in the society in which I grew up and in which I now live. On the other hand, I have also retained something else from the experience of 1945 and after, namely that things got better. Things really got rather better. One must use that as a starting point too ..." (Habermas, 1992, p. 126).

49. In retrospect, the desire to make a break with the past was both understandable, in a myriad of ways, and a necessary precondition for the kind of progress that was made during the 1950s and 1960s, e.g., regarding the role of economic inequalities. But theoretically, we need to recognize today how

fundamentally problematic the implications of such attitudes were for the possibility of social science, and how it provided a ground for an increasingly wider and deeper discrepancy between social reality and social science.

50. As will become apparent in this section, I am employing the symbol of infinity to characterize efforts to integrate critical theory and mainstream approaches as likely to be futile. As long as the basic configuration of the modern socio-historical framework remains essentially the same, conditions will not be conducive to genuine integration of critical theory and mainstream approaches; we may engage in “endless” attempts to “square the circle,” but they can and they will not be successful. Yet, mainstream approaches and critical theory must relate to and rely on each other, for either – and in the long run for both – to succeed. Before the constitutional principle of society allows for the kind of social research that increases the ability of all or most social scientists to “face facts,” it will be impossible to close the breach between the imperative to compel individuals to subscribe to projections of social reality that are necessary for maintaining social order, and the emancipation of individuals from those projections.

51. I have framed this nexus between social structure and self/identity as a challenge to conceive of, and develop, “socio-analysis” – in allusion to psycho-analysis. My starting assumption is that many individuals who suffer from so-called “mental problems” are likely, to a degree that is as of now undetermined, to suffer from *social* pathologies that they are in no position to recognize, and to the extent that they seek “help” from professional psychologists and psychiatrists, are likely to be actively prevented from recognizing. It is a truism that one of the main flaws of psychoanalysis (not to mention psychology or psychotherapy) is its lack of ability to process the social dimension of human existence, as a specific challenge, rather than a general challenge. The combination of psychoanalysis and “socio-analysis” is more likely to enable individuals to differentiate between their personal problems, and how their personal problems are a function of social problems – as a necessary first step toward “health.” For an initial statement, see Dahms (2008).

52. As Flikschuh (2000) puts it, “Finally, there is critical liberalism. Although more influential in continental Europe, it offers an interesting counterpart to classical liberalism’s reception of Kantian metaphysics. As its name suggests, critical liberalism developed out of critical theory, drawing from Karl Marx, Max Weber, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, among others. To these, critical liberalism adds the idea of the Rechtsstaat, which links it back to the political philosophy of Kant. The most prominent proponent of critical liberalism is Habermas, who defends a post-metaphysical standpoint, and whose discourse ethical approach to political legitimation through democratic consensus is designed to meet the requirements of mature liberal post-metaphysical societies” (p. 15; also pp. 19, 38); see also Jung (2008). Depending on the particular context, “critical liberalism” can be the most constructive concept. In the present context, however, it presents a problem for critical theory, conceived in terms of theoretical logic. I cannot deny a certain irony, as far as my current position is concerned. In an article published a decade ago that compared Lukács and Habermas within a matrix of politics versus theory, I concluded that Lukács fell prey to political temptations to too great an extent, to the detriment of his importance as a theorist (Dahms, 1997). Evidently, I am contending now that at a different level, the same point could be made about

Habermas, as having been subscribed to too great an extent to the ideology that post-World War II Western democratic societies created of themselves, regarding their unique potential for qualitative progress. I am uncertain, as of yet, whether or not Habermas's recent writings on religion confirm my concern about his unwillingness to confront the dark side, as it were, of modern society. Anderson (2005) certainly seems to think so. For a compelling critique of the recognition paradigm, such as advocated by Honneth, see McNay (2007).

53. Contemplate the fact that in the absence of Marx's, Durkheim's, and Weber's respective and linked contributions, social scientists in the English-speaking world would not have had at their disposal tools to capture the dimensions of the warped design of modern society that alienation, anomie, and Protestant ethic make accessible. There are no comparable concepts that originated either in the UK or in the US, in all likelihood betraying a reluctance to confront the contradictory nature of modern society, as a feature specific to those particular incarnations of modern society.

54. See Postone's (1993) use of the term, "quasi-natural" with regard to the condition of labor in capitalism (e.g., pp. 65, 68, 105, 116, 157, 163, 165).

55. The possible objection that all socio-historical contexts entail "problematic" features, and that therefore makes my point trivial, would not apply here – for it is not the fact *that* there are problematic features, but the specific nature of those problematic features, as far as they influence and shape both social and research practices in ways that remain undetected. Thus, my emphasis on the specificity of the features, rather than on the fact that – as the evidence suggests – there appears to have been an increasing proliferation of problematic features, with "globalization." Unless we make preparations to scrutinize those features at the highest possible level of rigor, our labor as social scientists is much more likely to exemplify rather than illuminate those features.

56. See Gouldner (1971), Bourdieu (1990), Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), and Antonio (2005).

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# CRITICAL CONUNDRUMS – LOGIC AND POLITICS IN FRANKFURT CRITICAL THEORY PRIOR TO THE LINGUISTIC TURN

Robert A. Gorman

The underlying logic of all religions elevates doctrinal purity over the vicissitudes of everyday life. Agnosticism (a doctrine asserting the relativity and uncertainty of religious principles) and atheism (the unequivocal denial of divine truth), to varying degrees, respond by making humanity responsible for its own behavior, reasserting a subjective epistemology. Beginning in the early twentieth century many leftists (e.g., Lukacs, Korsch, Gramsci, Luxembour, Empirio-critics, Austro-Marxists, Bernstein, and others) saw Marxism as a quasi-religion, evolving in history by apotheosizing revealed truth. Stalin's purges and slaughters revealed how a doctrine ossified and then tormented nonbelievers, becoming a reign of justifiable terror. An emancipatory theory, these critics contended, was transformed into a human hell where physical survival was its own reward. Authentic, emancipatory Marxism can survive only by spurning promises of universality and fulfillment. This essay evaluates the legacy of Adorno, Horkheimer, and the early Habermas. Contemporary critical theorists, I argue, need to reignite the commitment to social justice without abandoning the spirit of critical inquiry.

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Marx was likely aware of this tension. “Nonbelievers” take seriously his injunctions against epistemology and philosophy, and his efforts to refocus attention on history, economy, and society. Philosophy, Marx asserted, was an oppressive tool that mystified and confused, and blocked meaningful change. “Truth” was unrelated to metaphysical systems. Only those thoughts generating need-satisfying activities were “true,” those inhibiting them “false.” Since humanity’s needs changed in history, so will valid knowledge. At any one time, needs are conditioned by society’s productive capacity, which determines how we labor and what is produced. “Truth” and “falsity” are social constructs. Dictatorships highlight particular interests rather than general needs, creating “false” ideas. Democracies emphasize public needs and thus formulate “scientific” knowledge.

Marx’s logic pointed to historical relativism: no absolute, objective, ahistorical standards existed to understand and evaluate societies. Yet Marx was also a revolutionary advocating proletarian insurrection and hegemony. This contradiction necessitated epistemology’s backdoor entrance. Marx thus discussed “essences,” material “laws” of history, the priority of historical and economic “facts,” and self-determining “praxis” to uncover criteria for distinguishing falsity from truth, to define *what* human needs are, *how* to satisfy them, and *why* history favors socialism.

The Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, Marxism’s agnostics, reasserted Marx’s admonitions against positive philosophical systems. Marx, Frankfurt theorists claimed, pierced capitalism’s artificiality and rhetoric, exposing the exploitation workers experience daily. Dialectics corrals the hidden linkages that, when perceived, sublimate bourgeois freedom, justice, and equality. Authentic Marxism is critique, not a source of doctrinal purity. It liberates humanity from false doctrines without creating new ones.

## I

Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno were affiliated with the Institute for Social Research throughout their careers.<sup>1</sup> Even today, no single work encompasses systematically and completely Critical Theory’s major principles, methodology, and findings.<sup>2</sup> Traditional social science embodies a Cartesian world view taken directly from the empirical sciences. Explanation depends on logical and empirically verified propositions. Living and nonliving phenomena, for empiricists, exist in a net of causal relationships that emerge by analytically deconstructing reality into unilinear deductive sets and stressing data accumulation. Horkheimer, on

the other hand, felt that scientific theorizing is historically conditioned.<sup>3</sup> Empirical science presupposes an a priorism that is derived from, and reflects, dominant social values. Science can never be independent and a priori. It is always linked to hidden socioeconomic forces. For Horkheimer, traditional theory is a reified ideological category. It is constrained by empirical evidence and it annihilates the social totality, fueling capitalism with an expanding technology and obscuring the linkages between economic exploitation and bourgeois democracy.

But Horkheimer's Critical Theory is not historicism. The latter reflects hegemonic socioeconomic forces by rejecting critique and hence ideologically strengthening established interests. Since social theory can never be neutral, Critical Theory works to transform existing social arrangements, and to establish a society of free human beings which, in Horkheimer's words, "transcend[s] the tension and ... [abolishes] the opposition between the individual's purposefulness, spontaneity, and rationality, and those work-process relationships on which society is built."<sup>4</sup> A society, in other words, that is free and rational. Critical Theory, not historicism, implicitly acknowledges a universal truth that is somehow manifesting in history, and also justifies our creating a more "perfect" noncapitalist society.

Equally significant, however, is Critical Theory's claim that truth is unknowable. Objective epistemologies transform a dynamic life world into an artificial, static, reified substance that is reduced to abstract principles.<sup>5</sup> Critical Theory condemns all closed philosophical systems. Habermas would later argue that "it can neither furnish the rational grounds for its own origin nor can it realize its own fulfillment by itself."<sup>6</sup> It is a revolutionary social theory that does not justify itself because it believes such justification unjustifiable. Truth has only a negative function, allowing observers to critically understand and evaluate society without adopting conventional values.

Critical Theory also refused to equate knowledge and sensation. Movement and interpenetration mark its world. Neither subject nor object is foundational. Sensations are therefore complex phenomena, entwining social forces and consciousness into a cognitively experienced unity. *What* we perceive is historically and socially conditioned. It is born in the past and reflects dominant values and institutions. *How* we perceive it depends on experiences that are reinforced by all the cultural forces that normally affect a situated actor. Perception, in short, is "a product of society as a whole."<sup>7</sup>

Critical Theory's early epistemological agnosticism means it defends neither the primacy of matter over consciousness (materialism) nor consciousness over matter (idealism), both of which mistakenly absolutize

a fragment of life. Materialism is concerned only with concrete, objective factors that cause us to suffer, not with suffering itself as cognitively experienced. It reduces life to artificial categories that interact impersonally.<sup>8</sup> Materialism, then, is inhuman. Idealism, on the other hand, makes cognition autonomous. By absolutizing consciousness – or, for empiricism, sensations – idealism ignores the context of our ideas and acts. Whereas materialism fetishizes concreteness and is inhuman, idealism is mystical and unreal. Horkheimer believed that social theory gravitates between inhumanity and irrelevance, neither of which can alter the human condition. All philosophical systems lean toward one or the other. The social interests they each serve, bureaucratic parties or corporate elites, in fact, verify materialism and idealism. Both distort the world to strengthen one group. Only Critical Theory absolutizes nothing. Reality's dialectical complexity is an irreducible totality. Critical thinkers advocate critique and change rather than narrow social interests.

Critical Theory's early views of Marx, and the orthodox movement generally, were ambivalent. Obviously, Marx's and Engels's suggestions that economics is in some sense prior to thought was false.<sup>9</sup> Sub- and superstructures are constantly interpenetrating. Although economics conditions values and institutions, the latter are also subjectively created and experienced, not objectively caused. Moreover, they ricochet throughout the social totality.<sup>10</sup>

With base and superstructure internally connected, and neither prior, no "objective" paths in history existed. Workers in capitalism were not predisposed to rebel merely because they were economically exploited.<sup>11</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno grew increasingly cynical of the left's hopes for proletarian rebellion. Most workers, they sadly noted, noncritically accepted conventionality. Horkheimer even speculated that critical theorists, not workers, might catalyze meaningful change. "Truth," he suggested, "may reside with numerically small groups of men ... [who] may at the decisive moment become the leaders because of their deeper insight."<sup>12</sup> In this scenario workers would passively reap the rewards.

Marx's work overflowed with an exuberant optimism based on history's *telos*. Socialist activism was simultaneously moral, desirable, and inevitable. Critical Theory, however, was less sanguine. Critique alone was justifiable and progressive change might follow in some indeterminate manner. From the beginning Critical Theory wanted to end exploitation, not create utopias. But even this was problematic. Critical Theory survived because reification has occurred in every historical era. Only reflective critique was always rational. Perfect justice was impossible because, in practice, it always

deteriorated into its opposite. Human misery, once experienced, was never balanced or undone by dramatically new ways of living. Critical Theory is what Adorno once called a “melancholy science.” It was bleak and uninspiring. “It might,” Adorno lamented, “seem a wonderful objective that future generations will live a happier and more intelligent life on earth than today’s generation does under the present bloody and stupefying conditions. But ultimately even those future generations will disappear and the world will continue in its orbit as if nothing happened.”<sup>13</sup> In such hopeless circumstances violence, revolutionary or not, was certainly not worth its horrible cost in lives. Why spend blood needlessly when the adventure goes nowhere? Horkheimer pushed this reasoning over the edge, praising those who quietly perished in Hitler’s concentration camps as “martyrs ... the symbols of humanity that is striving to be born.”<sup>14</sup> Critical Theory’s pessimism eventually overwhelmed common sense. Since only critique is justifiable, all political activity, not merely violence, became senseless. The present is at least the devil we already knew. An unknowable future could be worse, especially if naïve activists inspired it. Contemplation eventually replaced action. Critique became purely intellectual, personal reflection that negated reality without engaging others in the public arena. Purposeful acts require positive goals, and these, history proved, enslaved actors. Authentic revolutionaries must flee what turned Marxism from enlightened critique into totalitarianism. They must rebel without acting. Horkheimer’s critique of capitalism thus evolved, in his words, “without transgressing the principles of the exchange economy...”<sup>15</sup> It *theoretically* explained capitalism’s intensifying antagonisms. Critical Theory negated capitalism intellectually without proffering better economic schemes or advocating active resistance. Practically, its revolutionary critique left capitalism untouched.

By 1940, Critical Theory applied itself to explaining Nazism and the Holocaust. As expected, critical theorists rejected the orthodox canard that fascism was “the highest stage of capitalism,” a natural and inevitable corporate fling at salvaging economic power. The Frankfurt School collectively, and Horkheimer and Adorno in particular, broached topics that for Marxists were heretofore unthinkable. Fascism, they argued, embodied complex processes expressed in, and reinforced by, family relationships, religion, language, and social values – what sociologists called “everyday life.” Although economic contradictions conditioned capitalism’s slide to fascism, they neither caused nor adequately explained it. Liberalism was transformed into its bloody opposite by an inner logic that transcended the wickedness of Hitler or Mussolini, or the concrete class antagonisms of capitalism.

Even the most glorious of dreams, depicted by Horkheimer and Adorno as the “most general sense of progressive thought ... aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty,” turned into a nightmare.<sup>16</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno traced Hitler’s irrationality directly to the eighteenth-century enlightenment, which had used reason and freedom to bury feudalism. Medieval Christianity’s holistic universe was chopped into pieces. Individuals, like atoms, floated indeterminately in self-created social worlds. Government now existed to protect and serve individuals, while self-interest manifested a free-market economy based on private ownership. Here, Horkheimer and Adorno claimed, human liberation was rationalized by “enlightened” thought, promising a democratic utopia. But here also was a world view that obliterated nature’s unity, and empowered its strongest classes. Enlightenment philosophy nurtured empirical science, which eventually made nature capital’s tool, and also depersonalized humanity. The Enlightenment unintentionally negated its own democratic rhetoric with powerful industries, which in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries became hegemonic. Capitalist technology grew apace, manipulating nature as well as humanity via an insidious “culture industry.” Europeans became isolated, afraid, and anomic, ideal victims for fascist bureaucrats. Wealthy capitalists frantically grasped Hitler’s coattails, hoping to weather an incipient worker rebellion. The dialectic of enlightenment carried humanity to the brink. But it carried them in style, with democratic jargon promising freedom and equality. Enlightenment rationalism, born two hundred years ago in the myths of freedom and reason, was buried in myth as well: “Lebensraum,” “Arian supremacy,” “der Fuhrer,” and the “Final Solution.”

*Dialectic of Enlightenment* signaled a change in Critical Theory’s direction. Instead of focusing exclusively on the domination of human beings by others, in particular of workers by capitalists, Critical Theory now explored the actual quality of domination. It treated domination, not a particular economic system, as the significant cause of enslavement. Historically, domination had taken different forms, including the domination of man by man, of man by nature, and of nature by man. Domination, critical theorists argued, was never justified, whatever its form. Bourgeois domination was therefore morally indistinguishable from those forms that preceded and would follow.

Ours is a technological age. Technology, for Horkheimer and Adorno, isolates us from nature and transforms nature into an instrument of production, a means to an “unnatural” end. Domination is therefore endemic to technological civilization. Capitalism complicated things by

introducing private property, which permits those exploiting nature to search for profits by exploiting humans. Most Marxists believed socialism would abolish only this last kind of exploitation. Horkheimer and Adorno wrote that these utopian fantasies would be brutally expunged by the same technological weapons Hitler had perfected in Germany. Socialism's material reductivism had merely replaced capitalist exploitation with an equally horrible party apparatus that destroyed subjectivity. Domination, then, was not merely economic and was not just found in capitalism. Economic class became irrelevant for critical theorists. With the exception of one posthumously published article Adorno wrote in 1942, it was purged. Horkheimer and Adorno believed the ubiquitous conflict between humanity and nature has shaped all oppression, capitalist, *and* socialist.

Domination, then, was born when subject and object separated, and would end only when we dialectically reconstructed the unity of all people with each other and with nature. Positive philosophies and political acts both perverted their own myths and became dominating. Is civilization itself, then, possible without such actions and myths? Horkheimer and Adorno sadly intimate that civilization and horror are coexistent. "It is not the portrayal of reality as hell on earth but the slick challenge to break out of it that is suspect. If there is anyone today to whom we can pass the responsibilities for the message, we bequeath it not to the 'masses,' and not to the individual (who is powerless), but to an imaginary witness – lest it perish with us."<sup>17</sup>

As Germans inexorably sank into a new kind of barbarism, Critical Theory reverted compulsively to pessimism, despair, and immobility. Horkheimer claimed that overthrowing governments, nationalizing factories, and organizing workers were feasible only at some future, unspecified date. Critical Theory explained reality and exposed reification. It did not change either of them.<sup>18</sup> Authentic revolutionaries are fantasists. They are nonattached and critical. Fantasy *is* their reality.

*The Eclipse of Reason* described fantasism as "objective" or "emancipatory" reason. Fantacism highlighted history's totality, the dialectical unity of empirical opposites, the harmony of subjects with others and with nature. Emancipatory reason was therefore the necessary precondition for abolishing domination. "Instrumental" or "technical" reason, on the contrary, reinforced domination by stressing means not ends, technical efficiency not critical inquiry. It used technology to reinforce conventionality, and survived in capitalism, socialism, or fascism. Critical Theory's liberation struggle pitted reflective cognition against domination. Free action that

supported humanity rather than a small group required free actors. But freedom meant purging reified, reductive ideologies, and cognizing (not changing) the totality. Critical Theory thus freed us only by disavowing concrete actions.

By 1950, Critical Theory was publically debating well-known empirical scientists, the so-called *Methodenstreit*. This dialog solidified its critique of empiricism and materialism, and established Theodore Adorno as its prominent voice.<sup>19</sup>

Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* epitomized the best and worst of Critical Theory. It artfully depicted dialectics from a nonreductionist view. It was also pretentious, condescending, and often virtually incomprehensible. Adorno believed that truth cannot be communicated as narrative or philosophy because every concept and hypothesis generated its opposite, leaving no basis for building a philosophical system or organizing a book. Yet philosophy is required of thoughtful people because nonreflective praxis – the alternative – perpetuates conformity. Faced with the practical need for philosophy and its theoretical impossibility, Critical Theory favored philosophy as pure negation. The dialectic, so conceived, was not a method or an objective description. It expressed resistance to all epistemological and methodological schemes, and depicted reality's complexity without reducing it to simple formulas.<sup>20</sup>

Dialectics was therefore destructive and constructive: destructive by obliterating myths explaining time and space, as well as illusions surrounding the "separateness" of historical epochs and empirical facts; constructive by constituting what Adorno called "force-fields," and Walter Benjamin "constellations," i.e., historically and spatially open configurations surrounding particular actions. A responsible dialectician, in Benjamin's words, "stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one."<sup>21</sup> Constellations are critical concepts, not affirmative ones, that deconstruct modern life and thought without forming utopian patterns. Dialectics revealed contradictions and interconnections, and exposed the totality's priority over its parts: dialectical knowledge, not bloated promises or dangerous acts, emancipated humanity.

Perceived dialectically by critical theorists, society eluded definition, being neither the sum total of individual subjects nor an objective entity. As a totality, it constituted the reciprocal interaction among human subjects and material objects. Society expressed subjectivity and objectivity, but was also independent of both and, ultimately, determining. Positive definitions for "freedom" and "causality," for example, were impossible without reducing

the totality to a hollow identity theory. Even the notions of free will and determinism were false because they embodied epistemological markers, i.e., they assumed the priority of subject or object. Freedom's only meaning was negative: reflectively repudiating an instance of slavery.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, causality was meaningful only as critique of naïve free-will theories. Causality was heuristically useful, expressing one aspect of the whole. However, its reification in communism was as unjustified as capitalism's rhetorical commitment to freedom.<sup>23</sup> Art and science were also linked aspects of the same dynamic whole. Art and the artistic mentality were therefore valuable tools of social inquiry. They were our passages to rational fantasy.<sup>24</sup>

Adorno too became despairing and pessimistic. Technology was inherently domineering but critical acts would only bring more misery. "Whatever an individual or a group may undertake against the totality they are part of," Adorno said, "is infected by the evil of that totality; and no less infected is he who does nothing at all." Marx's injunction to change the world, not just interpret it, to Adorno is "arch-bourgeois" hypocrisy. By making the objective world into a subjective image, Marxists mimicked capitalism's principle of identity by reversing the connection of subject and object. Adorno retreated to critique because "the practice that would matter is barred." Reflectively challenging reality, going "as much against the façade as possible ... as far as it is capable of moving," provides us "a breathing spell it would be practically criminal not to utilize."<sup>25</sup>

Adorno lived his last years aloof from a new breed of radical bent on confrontation politics. German activists, who scolded Frankfurt theorists for their passivity, eventually lambasted the anti-capitalist Adorno. Stunned by this reprimand from the radical thinkers with whom he identified and based what little hope he could forage, Adorno was permanently scarred, and passed untimely in 1969. On the other hand, Horkheimer's despair sweetened his view of capitalism and turned him toward a nonsectarian God. He warned New Leftists that "Thoughtless and dogmatic application of the critical theory to practice in changed historical circumstances can only accelerate the very process which the theory aimed at denouncing .... Social theory [not action] therefore forms the main content of contemporary materialism." Horkheimer now treasured his right to privacy, which favored fantasy. Critique was an end, so any society that delivered was a justifiable and desirable means. Authentic actors critically evaluated the world, but also supported whatever society that allowed them to evaluate. In his words: "To judge the so-called free world by its own concept of itself, to take a critical attitude towards it and yet to stand by its ideas, and to defend it

against fascism, Stalinist, Hitlerian, or any other, is the right and duty of every thinking man. Despite its dangerous potential, despite all the injustice that marks its course both at home and abroad, the free world is at the moment still an island in space and time, and its destruction in the ocean of rule by violence would also mean the destruction of the culture of which the critical is a part."<sup>26</sup>

Horkheimer's newly discovered patriotism colored his Marxism. Ostensibly still a Marxist, he also argued that the "freedom of the entrepreneur which is limited today to a small group...be extended to the whole society."<sup>27</sup> Moreover, critique justified what he believed was the "still insufficiently noted ... fact that the development of man is bound up with competition, that is, with the most important element of the liberal economy."<sup>28</sup> Perversely affirming his life project, Horkheimer rejected all identity theories, all philosophical systems, including his own rejection. Pure critique consumed itself.

Critical Theory, in short, favored critique, not action. Its truncated radicalism leveled enemies, capitalist, and socialist, with brilliant narratives and evocative images, but withdrew fearfully without acting. It was revolutionary only in closed societies that blocked reflective behavior, where by negating the status quo it encouraged liberation. But at least for Horkheimer and Adorno, success generated failure. As reflective critique transformed society, Critical Theory became impotent and reactionary: new attitudes were also negated, negating the original negation. Social change needs positive visions justifying political demands, not merely abstract theorizing. Potentially, rebellions may indeed become domineering. They also, however, introduce hope where none existed, and motivate actors. Critical Theory opted for hopelessness.

## II

At Adorno's death and Horkheimer's conversions Critical Theory displayed the trappings of mystical intellectualism. Jurgen Habermas, an obvious heir to the Frankfurt legacy, wanted to reestablish links between theory and practice without abandoning antireductionism. *Theorie und Praxis* (1963), *Erkenntnis und Interesse* (1968), and "Technik und Wissenschaft als 'Ideologie'" (1970) all displayed the post-war Frankfurt School's anti-positivism, but with a new twist. Habermas saw scientific paradigms justifying and rationalizing practical human interests. Each unique science – i.e., each kind of theoretical reasoning – served a different practical interest,

and no transcendental evidence existed for positivism or any other science. Habermas thus echoed Critical Theory's antireductionism. However, his revised formula assumed knowledge (theory) was verified by practical activities of concerned actors (praxis), and hence created a glimmer of optimism about the human condition. Though interests alone determined a science's "objectivity," critical theorists now could ascertain the practical interests attached to reflective critique, and could act to satisfy these interests. Perhaps, Habermas likely felt, Critical Theory might justify itself. One obvious problem for Habermas is formulating foundational human interests without a foundational philosophy. Another is getting people to act without a positive vision of the future. These conundrums, we have seen, are endemic to Critical Theory. They can be hidden with precious concepts only until angry demonstrators demand support for their violent acts. Habermas is clever, but perhaps irrelevant.

Habermas outlined three possible sciences representing three distinct human interests, each with a unique meaning, object, and method of inquiry. In everyday activities we encounter bodies, things, events, and conditions that are purposefully manipulated. We must know how to make things happen predictably. Habermas called this instrumental behavior. Humanity, he argued, has created empirical science to provide us the technical knowledge needed to act in the everyday world, and positivism as its foundational philosophy.<sup>29</sup> Empirical science then provides knowledge for controlling our lives, satisfying a *technical human interest* with an instrumental technology. Empirical methods are open, flexible, and inductive, and flourish in societies honoring individual liberty and governmental restraint. Empiricism builds its theories with isolated facts, mirroring the epistemology of western culture. It generates commodities that are profitably sold to consumers already conditioned by technology. Finally, empirical science is limited to describing the status quo. This form of scientific knowledge is thus smoothly integrated into capitalist utility structures, though it can also exist in socialist systems that supply it the political room to incubate. Empirical science, in sum, nurtures technical knowledge used by powerful social interests.

Habermas also realized, however, that in society we meet intelligent people whose use of language, knowledge, and consciousness resembles our own, but whose subjectivity makes them unique. To survive we must communicate intersubjectively, understanding, and being understood by, symbol-using actors. We thus use language and everyday processes of symbolic interaction. Our *practical human interest* of communicating with and understanding others creates the need for hermeneutic or cultural

science, manifest in history as myth, religion, idealism, historicism, pragmatism, etc.<sup>30</sup> Hermeneutic science is a symbolic foundation for intersubjectivity, a means of cognitively understanding the meanings others experience and a basis for cooperating. Until recently, Habermas argued, hermeneutic science was the legitimating social ideology, and justified ancient and medieval institutions. Habermas believed that empirical science has now replaced hermeneutics. Modern capitalism, for Habermas, has replaced cognitive understanding and communication with manipulation and control. Empirical science turns people into objects, emphasizes the similarities between humans and nonhumans, discovers how to control behavior, and discourages political change. Today, then, we neither think reflectively nor perceive others as unique. We emphasize technical efficiency rather than the good life.<sup>31</sup> By diluting symbolic communication and interaction modern science minimizes the need for community. By “domination,” then, Habermas meant social interaction exhibiting what he called “distorted communication”: we simply cannot adequately understand each other or reflectively communicate.<sup>32</sup>

Habermas believed that intelligent people need to reestablish communicative links with others. He called this an *emancipatory human interest*. Emancipatory science negates technology and positivism. Its method is reflective, questioning modern institutions and capitalism’s empirical reasoning. By questioning social inhibitions on communicating, emancipatory science ends social repression and creates a milieu that stimulates what Habermas called “progressive individuation.”<sup>33</sup> Real communication also allows us to once again think ethically about social life. Emancipatory science, for Habermas, nourishes the social aspects of individuality, the interpenetration of self and other, subject and object, theory and praxis. Emancipatory science, in short, is critical and dialectical.

Hermeneutics requires reflection and communication, so Habermas believed it mediated domination and liberation allowing us to uncover new reflective answers to practical problems. It is reborn in the human need to communicate critical knowledge to others.<sup>34</sup>

Habermas, like Horkheimer and Adorno, tepidly praised Marx. As a critic of capitalism, Marx, of course, was unsurpassed.<sup>35</sup> Marx’s critique, however, ignored important epistemological and practical questions related to truth, freedom, and reflective praxis. “The critique of political economy,” observed Habermas, “was simply a theory of bourgeois society as a critique of its ideology.”<sup>36</sup> It could not bypass the bourgeois system it condemned. When Marx finally did struggle with foundational issues, Habermas believed, he abandoned critique and embraced metaphysical materialism,

an a priori world view that rationalized the hegemony of communist party bureaucrats.

Habermas also argued that Marx could not foresee the capitalist state's intrusion into the capitalist economy. Today, the state openly reinforces technical interests, just as the capitalist economy does, and therefore is equally as relevant. Neither is autonomous. Technical rationality is thus reinforced economically, socially, politically, and ideologically, saturating social life and infecting everyone, worker *and* nonworker. Marx's economism, to Habermas, is outdated. Class antagonism alone cannot explain capitalist oppression. In fact, as capitalist production is streamlined and an activist state improves the lives of workers, Marx's predictions of growing proletarian discontent become irrelevant. Marx saw subjectivity as an impersonal consequence of matter. So did positivists. Both treat subjects instrumentally, as homunculi controlled by objective truths. Habermas believed that Marx's emancipation ignored critical, self-conscious reflection, and reinforced a technical mentality.<sup>37</sup>

Habermas thus replaced Marx's objective economic categories – the means and relationships of production – with “labor” and “symbolically mediated interaction.”<sup>38</sup> Marx believed the means of production determined the quality of labor. Habermas defined labor as instrumental behavior: our rationally manipulating nature to satisfy needs. As technology grows, for Habermas, so will our ability to control people and make labor more efficient. Marx believed the dominant class forged supportive values and institutions that oppressed workers. For Habermas, oppression was measured by how we symbolically communicate. As technical replaces practical knowledge, our ability to think and communicate effectively atrophies. Instrumental labor, potentially a means to achieve a reflective end, becomes the end. Humans are depersonalized and manipulated by the owners of technology. This, for Habermas, was the real source of domination. Emancipation means praxis (instrumental labor) reunites with theory (symbolic communication) after reflective critique. Labor then becomes goal-oriented and purposive, and economic production fulfills reflective needs. Marx, finally, believed socialism is an inevitable product of matter. Habermas connected revolution to critique, without speculating on the nature of post-revolutionary economics, which will materialize after we learn to communicate properly.

Habermas knew that Critical Theory had become a helpless plea for sanity, a “protest, impotent in practice, against an apocalyptically self-obturing [sic] system of alienation and reification, and ... the spark whose preservation in a self-darkening world will keep alive the memory of

something quite different.” He agreed that identity theory was false, and he tried to connect Critical Theory to revolutionary practice. “The truth of critical social theory,” admitted Habermas, “is a ‘verite a faire’; in the last resort it can demonstrate its truthfulness only by successful liberation.”<sup>39</sup> Negative dialectics, even in Habermas’s skilled hands, remains a poor guide for people wishing to act as well as think. Although emancipated praxis leads to what Habermas called “a general and unforced consensus,” what will this consensus be? Habermas felt that only emancipated actors could respond. Fine, but who is emancipated? In a nutshell, what criteria shall we use to evaluate the quality of critical thinking and the utility of political acts. Habermas was uncertain, confessing that his was a “pre-political” discourse, incapable of drawing “the consequences of knowledge directed toward[s] liberation.”<sup>40</sup> He exhorted readers to think critically, reflectively negate conventionality, oppose all forms of domination, but without instigating state violence or internalizing dogma. Violent student activism in Western Europe was, in Habermas’s eyes, counterproductive “left Fascism,” or “actionism,” even though, presumably, it manifested the critical thinking of capitalism’s “enlightened” victims – the very group Critical Theory depends on. Habermas knew that students could “permanently destroy ... [capitalism’s] crumbling achievement ideology, and thus bring down the already fragile legitimizing basis of advanced capitalism...”<sup>41</sup> Then he cautioned against “the danger of diversion either into the privatization of an easily consolable hippie subculture or into the fruitless violent acts of the actionists.”<sup>42</sup> No absolute criteria exist for determining where the former ends and the latter begins. Habermas’s revised Critical Theory offered hope rather than despair, and action, not endless contemplation. Unfortunately, it was created by and for an intellectual.

Habermas’s Critical Theory did not go far beyond his predecessors, but even this short distance was too much for Frankfurt purists. They heard Habermas admit that he could not, in principle, discover the limits of human nature,<sup>43</sup> even though human interests are “deep-seated ... which direct our knowledge and which have a quasi-transcendental status.” These interests are also “invariant,” “abstract,” and “determine the aspect under which reality is objectified.... They are the conditions which are necessary in order that subjects capable of speech and action may have experience which can lay a claim to objectivity.”<sup>44</sup> Human interests make us cognitive, intelligent, creative, and communicating social beings simultaneously identical and nonidentical. They are the “fundamental interests of mankind as such” not merely the situated interests of a particular class.<sup>45</sup> Even Habermas was “embarrassed” with his own “quasi-transcendental”

phenomena. He argued plaintively against “transcendental logics” based on “intelligible egos” or other identity theories.<sup>46</sup> He could not, however, turn “interests” into a strictly empirical concept, because this would abolish objectivity, generating a multitude of unique interests and personal sciences. Hence the “quasi-transcendental” terminology, an awkward midpoint between idealism and negativity. Habermas tried to resolve the tension by describing his own narrative as tentative “speculations,” not the final word. His formal resignation from the Institute for Social Research in 1971 indicated the problem’s true dimensions.

To the extent that Habermas’s Critical Theory proffered useful guidance to activists it highlighted a priori interests to bridge the void between empirical life and human fulfillment. To the extent it rejected these “quasi-transcendentals” it became despairing intellectualism. Classical Critical Theory, revised or not, is trapped between logic and politics. The triumph of logic brings despair; of politics, idealism. Marcuse, Fromm – perhaps also Habermas – chose the latter. Critical thinkers, on the other hand, until recently appeared tethered to a restless and perpetual angst. The essays in this volume indicate that critical social scientists today are aware of the philosophical and empirical challenges they confront, and capable of injecting Critical Theory back into contemporary political discourse in order to meaningfully change society.

## NOTES

1. Under Carl Grunberg’s directorship the Institute published the journal *Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung*, commonly known as the *Grunbert Archiv*. Later, under Horkheimer, it changed to *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. The term “Frankfurt School,” which today describes the Institute’s work and members, was not chosen by them.

2. The closest thing to a systematic statement of Critical Theory are two later works: Institut für Sozialforschung, *Soziologische Exkurse* (Frankfurt, 1956), and Horkheimer and Adorno, *Sociologica II* (Frankfurt, 1956). A major English title is Wellmer’s (1971) *Critical Theory of Society*. See also Rusconi (1968) and Jay (1973).

3. See Horkheimer (1937a).

4. *Ibid.*, p. 210. See also Horkheimer (1937b).

5. See Horkheimer (1937a), *Critical Theory-Selected Essays (CTSE)*, p. 28.

6. Habermas (1973). See also Jay (1973) and Tar (1977).

7. Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *CTSE*, p. 200.

8. See Horkheimer (1933).

9. See the post-script to *ibid.*, p. 244, and Horkheimer (1933). See also Adorno (1973, p. 268). Wellmer (1971, pp. 55–120) argues that Stalinism is a direct consequence of Marx's own "metaphysical" statements.

10. *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, published in 1944, reversed the traditional Marxist hypothesis by arguing that bourgeois ideas irreducibly condition alienation, exploitation, and liberal democracy's transition to fascism. Freedom and progress, as subjectively meaningful ideas, evolve on their own into human domination.

11. In the early years Horkheimer, like Lukacs, evidently believed the self-conscious proletariat was history's agent of revolutionary transformation. See Therborn (1977). But events like the 1939 Nazi–Soviet Treaty reinforced non-reductionism and generated a Critical Theory belonging to no one class.

12. Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *CTSE*, p. 241.

13. Adorno (1978). See also Horkheimer (1935). Zoltan Tar attributes Horkheimer's pessimism to his early infatuation with Schopenhauer, who claimed the evils of capitalism are endemic to humanity. He also feels the Judaic influence on Critical Theory is strong, especially its stress on social justice and peace, and its refusal to anthropomorphize God. See Tar (1977, pp. 51–60).

14. Horkheimer (1947).

15. Horkheimer, *Kritische Theorie* (Frankfurt, 1968), II, p. 174. Cf. "Unlike the operation of modern specialized science, the critical theory of society remains philosophical even as a critique of economics: its content is formed by the inversion of the concepts which govern the economy into their opposites: fair exchange into widening social injustice, the free economy into the domination of monopoly, productive labor into the consolidation of relations which restrict production, the maintenance of the life of the society into the immiseration of the people" (*ibid.*, p. 195).

16. Horkheimer and Adorno (1972).

17. *Ibid.*, p. 256. See also Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason* and Adorno's *Minima Moralia*.

18. "The real social function of philosophy lies in its criticism of what is prevalent ... . By criticism, we mean that intellectual ... effort which is not satisfied to accept the prevailing ideas, actions, and social conditions unthinkingly..." (Horkheimer, "The Social Function of Philosophy," in *CTSE*, pp. 264–270).

19. After World War II, the Frankfurt School relocated in Frankfurt-am-Main. Horkheimer accepted a visiting Professorship at the University of Chicago from 1954 until 1959, and remained as Professor Emeritus after 1960. After 1950, critical theorists described their movement in a variety of ways, in addition to Critical Theory. These include: "Theory of Society," "Dialectical Theory of Society," "Critical Theory of Society," and "Science of Society." Both Horkheimer and Adorno detested the word "sociology," which they felt was irretrievably entwined with positivism. The debate is encapsulated in a series of essays, from both perspectives, included in Adorno et al. (1976).

20. Consequently, negative dialectics resembles Marx's critique of bourgeois alienation by reflectively rejecting capitalist principles as epistemologically baseless and oppressive. "Dialectics is the self-consciousness of the objective context of delusion; it does not mean to have escaped from that context. Its objective goal is to

break out of the context from within ... It lies in the definition of negative dialectics that it will not come to rest in itself, as if it were total.” (Adorno, 1973, p. 406).

21. Benjamin (1969) hoped to create a study of the nineteenth century consisting entirely of quotations, i.e., a “constellation” of disparate insights that, united, would recreate the totality. Adorno described this constellation of relevant forces as a force-field which lies between subject and object. See Adorno (1971).

22. “Freedom can be defined in negation only, corresponding to the concrete form of a specific unfreedom ... [It] turns concrete ... as resistance to repression. There has been as much free will as there were men with the will to be free” (Adorno, 1973, pp. 231–264).

23. “Eventually the [social] system will reach a point ... where the universal dependence of all moments on all other moments makes the talk of causality obsolete. It is idle to search for what might have been the cause within a monolithic society. Only that society itself remains the cause” (*Ibid.*, p. 267).

24. Adorno “cannot accept the usual mode of thought which is content to register facts and prepare them for subsequent classification ... [The social scientist’s] essential effort is to illuminate the realm of facticity – without which there can be no true knowledge – with reflections of a different type ... which diverges radically from the generally accepted canon of scientific validity” (Adorno, 1967).

25. Adorno (1973, pp. 242–245).

26. Horkheimer, “Preface” (1968) to *CTSE*, pp. v and ix.

27. Horkheimer (1970, p. 28).

28. Interview with Horkheimer in *Der Spiegel*, January 5, 1970, p. 1.

29. See Habermas (1971a, pp. 8f and 268ff; 1971b, p. 308f) and Wellmer (1971, pp. 9–65).

30. Habermas (1971a, p. 7ff; 1971b, p. 309ff).

31. “The moral realization of a normative order is a function of communicative action oriented to shared cultural meaning and presupposing the internalization of values. It is increasingly supplanted by conditioned behavior ... [in] the industrially most advanced societies ...” (Habermas, 1971c, p. 107 and p. 103).

32. Habermas (1970, pp. 144–148).

33. “Public, unrestricted discussion, free from domination, of the suitability and desirability of action-orienting principles and norms ... such communication at all levels of political and repoliticized decision-making processes is the only medium in which anything like ‘rationalization’ is possible” (Habermas, 1971c, pp. 118–119).

34. Habermas felt that Freudianism was useful to this process of communicating and understanding critical knowledge. Psychoanalysis liberates oppressed personalities who have subconsciously internalized and hidden a seminal childhood conflict. Neurotic symptoms are based on a theory of linguistic failure, Habermas’s “distorted communication.” By self-consciously contemplating these symptoms and acknowledging repressed sources, analysts restore the primal conflict to open, public communication. Self-conscious understanding liberates by allowing one to communicate freely as a non-repressed, critical thinker rationally shaping the future. Critical social science “socio-analyzes” social systems as Freudian psychoanalysis does individuals, opening up “the hidden pathology of collective behavior and entire social systems” (Habermas, 1970, pp. 117–118). See also Habermas (1971b, pp. 214–245) Habermas assumed “normal” societies and individuals – where free,

uninhibited understanding, and communication reign – are self-explanatory apart from subconscious primal conflicts. Hence, socioanalysis and psychoanalysis are useful only in oppressive, dominating circumstances.

35. Habermas (1971a, pp. 195–252).
36. Habermas (1971c, p. 101).
37. Habermas (1971b, pp. 43ff).
38. Habermas (1971c, pp. 93ff).
39. In Wellmer (1971, pp. 52 and 72).
40. Habermas (1971a, pp. 15–16).
41. Habermas (1971c, p. 122).
42. Habermas, “Student Protest in the Federal Republic of Germany,” in *ibid.*, p. 26.
43. Habermas (1971a, p. 37).
44. *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9. See also Habermas (1971b, pp. 140–160).
45. Habermas (1971c, p. 113).
46. Habermas (1971a, pp. 14–22); Habermas and Luhmann (1971).

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# THE ARCHITECTURE OF SOCIAL CRITIQUE: THREE MODELS OF IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE AND THE LEGACY OF THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

David Strecker

## 1. THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL AND THE PROBLEM OF IDEOLOGICAL POWER

Social critique is an enduring and pervasive feature of social life. It is deeply embedded in the fabric of modern societies, and certainly seems alive and well today: more- as well as less-institutionalized forms of critically monitoring societal and political processes through the social sciences and mass media are being supplemented by moral entrepreneurs, public intellectuals, and forms of activist protest; furthermore, this protest is no longer confined to demonstration marches, but instead also makes creative use of new technologies. In any case, critique is a matter of practical engagement. Therefore, as authors like Michael [Walzer \(2000\)](#) have argued, while social critique might depend on certain faculties of judgment, it definitely is not in need of a theory.

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No Social Science Without Critical Theory  
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To this day, the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory defends the opposite claim: to its adherents, theory is essential to social critique. Yet, in what sense should we conceive of critique as a theoretical enterprise? What would be the basis for such an assertion, as well as its underlying motivation? To address these questions, we need to turn to the problem of ideology. Social critique consists primarily in the identification of impediments to the flourishing of people. As ideology deludes actors about their actual interests and their visions of a good life, social critique advanced by these actors will be misdirected and will fail to detect the causes of their suffering. What is necessary, therefore, is a theory that identifies the particular type of delusions at issue here, and suggests strategies to lift the corresponding kind of veil.

My purpose in this chapter is to ground the claim that the problem of ideology provides the basis for the specific identity and orientation of Frankfurt School critical theory. By substantiating this interpretation of the Frankfurt School tradition, my effort is directed at formulating a systematic argument: critical theory is the most fruitful starting point for developing a convincing conception of ideology critique, i.e., the rational critique of social relations which are conceived of as legitimate by the actors involved in these relations. Even though in the final analysis the critical theorists' conceptualisations of the problem of ideology do not turn out to be convincing, they do point in the right direction in that they are attempts to answer the right question. What is this question, the awareness of which is lacking in alternative approaches to the concept of ideology?

The claim that the Frankfurt School provides the most promising account of ideology might be surprising to some readers. Usually, other theories and theoretical traditions come to mind regarding the issue of ideology. Two sets of approaches to studying ideology critique can be distinguished. While philosophical analyses primarily devote attention to conceptual problems, the focus within the realm of social theory rests on explanatory issues about social causation. Even if one does not take into account those who understand ideology in a purely descriptive sense (e.g., as any kind of conviction), and who thus abandon the critical edge traditionally associated with the concept, a broad range of conceptual issues remains in need of clarification and is discussed in numerous philosophical studies. Do false beliefs qualify as ideological? Does the designation merely apply to belief-systems? Does it apply – as Lukács' (1923) famous definition of ideology as necessarily false consciousness suggests – just to necessarily false belief-systems, i.e., false belief-systems that the institutional organization of society compels individuals to develop? Is it only possible for beliefs with

empirical content to be ideological, or for normative and evaluative beliefs as well? What about practices and life forms? An encompassing analysis of ideology would have to discuss all of these issues. However, my objective in this chapter is of a different kind.

My aim is to clarify the foundational problem of ideology critique: does the consent to an institutional order of power provided by members of society qualify as autonomous, authentic, and true, or is it actually distorted and is a function of illegitimate power relations? The problem is that there are two societal functions to power: power as repressive and power as constitutive. Thus, power relations can silence the explicit enunciation of interest, but they can also engender interests of a kind that are flawed inasmuch as they did not form under conditions of freedom. Wilhelm Reich (cited in Rosen, 2000, p. 393) captured the problem of ideology very accurately in a well-known formulation: “What has to be explained is not the fact that the man who is hungry steals or the fact that the man who is exploited strikes, but why the majority of those who are hungry *don't* steal and why the majority of those who are exploited *don't* strike.” With regard to the problem of what it is that keeps actors from following their interests, ideology critique provides a solution that rests upon the intuition that power relations are not only effective on the practical level of interest enforcement. Rather, they already come into play on the more basic cognitive level of the recognition of one's own interests, in a systematic manner. Conceptually, therefore, ideology critique differentiates the notion of interests, distinguishing empirical, subjective interests from true, objective interests. Accordingly, ideology critique necessitates a change in perspective; methodologically speaking: interests do not constitute the starting point, but rather have to be analyzed as the result of social processes.

Turning to ideology in view of the problem what it is that keeps actors from following their interests, the second type of approach to ideology critique deserves attention. In contrast to philosophy's conceptual contributions to ideology critique, social theoretical studies attempt to provide causal explanations. A number of social theories have devoted attention to the issue of ideology more explicitly than critical theory, however. Why, then, favor critical theory? Contrary to the established discourse about critical theory I argue that this tradition's main contribution does not take the form of clearly delimited hypotheses (as in its contributions to the political psychology of National Socialism), or of formulating a project of social critique (as claimed, most prominently, by Axel Honneth, 1994), based on a standpoint of immanent transcendence, a standpoint, i.e., grounded on measures for critique already shared by the

addresses of the critique and not external to them. Both of these ways of conceiving critical theory fail to capture what is peculiar to this tradition.

Critical theory's main insight, instead, consists in appreciating that the problem of ideology only can be approached successfully by distinguishing between the two very different perspectives of an observer of, and a participant in, social practices. The observer's (or third-person) perspective is the objectifying perspective of a scientist who is searching for causes; the participant's (or first-person) perspective is the performative perspective of an actor who is giving and demanding reasons. Only a combination of both that does not short-change either allows for a resolution to the problem at issue here. As I will develop below, critical theory is centered around a conceptualisation of this duality of perspectives. Following both Karl Marx and George Lukács, critical theorists tried to provide answers to problems they had posed. By contrast, structuralist interpretations of Marx are inadequate venues for tackling the problem of ideology because they neglected the participant's perspective. Theorists like Louis Althusser and Nicos Poulantzas, who wrote in the vein of "scientific Marxism" totalized the observer's perspective. To some degree, this is also true of approaches that abandoned the conceptual distinction between "true" and "false," as those of Karl Mannheim, and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Even Antonio Gramsci's analysis remains of limited value to ideology critique because of its restriction to the repression of manifest interests. Critical theory is the tradition that has focused most explicitly on the repression of latent interests and the analysis of manifest interests as false, by conceptualizing a "duality of perspectives." In effect, critical theory developed three distinct models of ideology critique.

## **2. A SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL MODEL OF IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE. THE AMBIVALENT PROGRAM OF INTERDISCIPLINARY MATERIALISM**

Karl Marx's formulation of the problem of ideology differs significantly from earlier accounts. To him, ideology as the main impediment to human emancipation consisted neither in subjective manipulation aiming at securing domination (the doctrine of deception by the priests), nor in subjective prejudices and errors (the view of the Encyclopedists), but rather in the surface appearances of the social structure whose functioning is objectively masked by those appearances. With Marx, therefore, ideology

critique took the form of a critique of structural power. The power structures it aims to unveil cannot be reduced to the intentions of actors. This kind of critique targets those social structures whose reproduction is contingent on its constitutional principles remaining hidden behind their false appearance. *Where there seems to be freedom, in fact there is coercion* – this is the basic intuition of Marx's ideology critique.

How can we unveil power relations concealing their injustice? How can we systematically criticize injustices not recognized by members of society as such? Overcoming injustices is a practical task; the role of philosophy, seeking an interpretation of the normative intuitions of society's members, is that of a participant in this practical task. The basic methodological assumption of ideology critique is that the role of the critic changes in case of ideological power which can be described as second-order injustice (Strecker, 2005). In contrast to first-order injustices, those of second order have to be unmasked before they can become an object of critique. What is required here, therefore, is a theoretical explanation. Accordingly, ideology critique assumes that in case of second-order injustices the participant's perspective must be supplemented by the perspective of an observing social scientist.

Marx had attempted to decipher the capitalist power relations hidden by the seemingly innocent categories in terms of which bourgeois society described itself. Only if one does not take into account the given social conditions can bourgeois freedom be perceived as being the same for capitalists and workers; only if one abstracts from the specific features of the commodity of labor is it possible to understand the employment relation as an exchange of equivalents. It is the social character of seemingly natural constraints which Marx unveils. But his program of ideology critique is by no means restricted to such a social-scientific analysis of power conducted from an observer's perspective. Marx was aware that revealing society's structure to be contingent upon social arrangements was not enough to justify demanding their change, and he did point out that the proletariat itself was the historical subject to formulate the appropriate critique of the existing social order. Whatever claims Marx raised about the objective interests of the suppressed, they were only hypotheses to be validated by the proletariat.

However, this aspect of Marx' thinking – later taken up by Lukács – remained indecisive. The vagueness regarding the moment of action explains the Marxist schism between voluntarist and determinist conceptions of revolution. It is rooted in a lacuna in Marx' analysis: his blindness to the process of the formation of subjects' motivations. It is only because Marx

did not devote any attention to this problem that he could interpret the growing economic crises as a sign of the coming revolution. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the mechanism of the formation of individuals' motives received attention in Marx-related discussions and theories when the Great Depression failed to spark the expected revolutionary change.

The research program of interdisciplinary materialism outlined by Max Horkheimer in 1931, in his inaugural speech as the Director of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research, represents the attempt to transform Marx' project of a critique of social power into a socio-psychological model of ideology critique. In doing so, Horkheimer had to confront a methodological as well as a historical challenge. The methodological challenge consisted in the revision of the notion of ideology Karl Mannheim had initiated in the context of his sociology of knowledge. Opposing Mannheim's position that all consciousness is ideological, because relative to the social context from which it originates, on a number of occasions, Horkheimer (e.g., [Horkheimer, 1930](#)) insisted that the distinction between true and false consciousness is imperative for the critique of ideology.

The historical challenge resulted from the fact that not only had the socialist revolution failed to take place, but that, instead, fascism had become a social force that was spreading across most of Europe and gaining more and more support. Under such conditions, the most pressing question could no longer be about how far the relations of production had become a fetter upon the forces of production. Instead, what was becoming increasingly urgent was identifying those mechanisms that hindered the crisis tendencies embedded within the capitalist structure of society to become manifest in the form of social conflicts.

What troubled the members of the Frankfurt Institute was that a majoritarian socialist will was not formed and formulated. Since they were convinced that Marx' basic assumptions were correct, they concluded that something kept social conflicts latent. Accordingly, the analytical core of the project of critical theory consisted in identifying those power structures that distracted workers from recognizing their purportedly objective interests in overcoming capitalism, and which generated the proletariat's false consciousness of its their own interests. Horkheimer and his collaborators located the causes in autonomous processes within personality formation, processes not determined by the relations and the forces of production, and mediating between the economic base and the cultural superstructure of society.

As such, the early critical theorists' modification of the Marxian model of social analysis resulted in a more refined version of materialist speculation.

Only if the theoretically oriented analysis is open to empirical findings that do not conform to expectations does imputing false consciousness not suggest a strategy of dogmatic “self-immunization.” Accordingly, the reason why the concept of interdisciplinary materialism deserves attention within the context of an inquiry into the concept of objective interests does not rest in the weight put on psychic mechanisms. What makes interdisciplinary materialism important as a specific form of ideology critique is the systematic inclusion of empirical social research.

Horkheimer was not particularly specific as to how to understand the cooperation of philosophy and social science. But the outline of his transformation of Marxian ideology critique is clear: Horkheimer retains Marx’ fundamental assumption that the relations of production which are in the objective interest of society’s members follow from the state of development of the forces of production. The conviction that this objective interest becomes the subjective interest of the proletariat to the degree that the relations and the forces of production conflict is dropped, however. Instead, critical theory allows for the possibility that the workers, due to their socialization contexts, will not recognize their true interests. The factors potentially relevant within this process, therefore, have to be put under scrutiny empirically. Accordingly, three empirical research areas are relevant to the concept of interdisciplinary materialism: political economy, cultural analysis, and social psychology. Social psychology was to bear the burden of explanation in case of a divergence between the first two. And if research in social psychology did not offer a plausible explanation, the tripartite model would have to be altered.

Actually, only two research projects were carried out within the scheme of interdisciplinary materialism. The first one analyzed the state of consciousness of the working class (*The Working Class in Weimar Germany. A Psychological and Sociological Study*). This project suffered a number of serious limitations with regard to Horkheimer’s prospected critical theory. First of all, conducted by Erich Fromm, it had already started two years earlier; accordingly, it was not well integrated into the new program of the institute. Further, only about a third of the questionnaires was returned. And finally, due to political, organizational, and personal problems the evaluation of the survey was never completed. Nevertheless, the interpretation of the collected data left no doubt that although a majority of the workers and the employed did express the expected political attitudes, their character structure was not of the revolutionary type. For the most part they were indifferent, contradictory, or even authoritarian. As interesting as this discrepancy between the expressed opinions and the latent character

structure of the working class might be on its own, it was only of limited value to Horkheimer's project of ideology critique because it did not allow to decide whether the deeper layers of the workers' personality were distorted by influences of power or whether this was not the case with regard to the manifest political outlook. How was one to decide whether deficient social contexts had made the proletariat susceptible to National Socialism or whether (ideological) workers' traditions had kept them from realizing their objective interest in a national socialist Volksgemeinschaft.

*Studies on Authority and the Family*, the second empirical research project conducted by the Frankfurt institute, and the only one more or less completed, can be interpreted as an attempt to support the first interpretation. This project aimed at gaining data that allowed for a socio-psychological explanation of personality and opinion formation. The research, conducted from 1933 to 1934, focused on the relations of authority within families and their change at a time of economic crisis. All in all, the studies, which again were tainted by organizational and methodological problems, did not hold any surprises. They indicated the stability of the patriarchic family. However, most of the research had failed in studying the consequences of economic crisis for the family structure. Only the expert survey that was part of this broad research program had succeeded in this respect. And there the findings had shown that unemployment can lead to diminishing parental authority.

The theoretical treatises included in *Studies on Authority and the Family* did not take the research into account seriously. But the findings of the expert survey do bear a striking resemblance to the socio-psychological explanation as to how people can be deluded about their true interests, which is advanced by Horkheimer in the opening chapter of the publication. The weakening of the father's authority, he argues, does not mitigate the authority relations within the family; rather, it destroys the autonomy of the family that served as the context for the children's character formation. Consequently, unemployment is not only detrimental to the male breadwinner's standing, but for the psychic constitution of the whole family. Horkheimer is by no means blind to the brutal nature of the patriarchic family; however, the change of family structure due to economic crisis destroys the last remnants of family integrity which also functioned as barriers against authoritarian rule.

This explanatory sketch advanced by Horkheimer is further elaborated by Fromm in his theoretical contribution to the *Studies*. Fromm's argumentation is based on a distinction between rational and irrational authority. In the case of the family, authority is rational if it is in the child's

(objective) interest. In a clever move, Fromm avoids to answer the obvious question how to identify the child's objective interest. He does not begin by identifying objective interests and continue then by outlining the corresponding relations of "rational" authority. Instead, he sets out by arguing that the existing relations of authority cannot be in the objective interest of those who are subjected to them.

Fromm finds the key to his argumentation in Freud's characterology and points out that the psychic development of individuals is not completely determined by the succession of oral, anal, and genital phases, but is also influenced by important experiences of theirs. Fromm leaves no doubt; he is convinced that these experiences (e.g. at work, within the family, etc.) bear the imprint of society's economic structure. Accordingly, not only the psychic constitution of individuals, but, relative to this, also that of societies, can be for the better or the worse. Capitalist society, Fromm writes, devalues happiness, puts a premium on duty, causes loneliness, and fosters social indifference while simultaneously creating a longing for rebellion. In capitalist societies, he concludes, the dominating personality type is the anal character. Under these conditions, the weakening of paternal authority does not liberate the self; to the contrary, the family's insecurity due to the father's unemployment increases the anal features and produces the sadomasochistic character type. The central idea is that self-control and freedom from fear are basic human needs which take a pathological form when social processes are conceived of as unalterable fate. Therefore, the insecurity brought about by unemployment can cause masochistic character traits. The character trait of finding satisfaction through obedience, Fromm continues, is necessarily accompanied by sadistic elements. Clearly, the authority relations that bring this about cannot be deemed rational; they are deficient not only because they hinder the development of the character type of the highest stage (genital), but also because these authority relations only allow for compensatory satisfaction of fundamental needs.

Empirical findings obviously do not play much of a role in this argument. At best they function as partial illustrations of theoretical assumptions. In view of the political situation in Germany and in large parts of Europe, it was, of course, impossible to extensively collect empirical data. But the shrinking importance of empirical research to the program of a critical theory of society did not only reflect these practical difficulties. It rather pointed to a conceptual problem within the socio-psychological model of ideology critique Horkheimer wanted the Frankfurt institute to develop: From the outset, it had remained unclear according to which of the two possible interpretations social philosophy and empirical science be

combined. The explicit claim was that the empirical findings would function as a touchstone to the speculative assumptions of the (modified) base-superstructure-scheme, which should, if necessary, be further revised. This, however, clashed with the basic motivation for modifying the Marxian scheme in the first instance, i.e., to find an explanation why the workers acted against their (objective) interests and did not start the socialist revolution. While the former interpretation was oriented towards an analysis of objective interests that was susceptible to empirical findings, the latter retained an orthodox interpretation of objective interests (as defined by the state of the forces of production) and used empirical research only insofar as to keep searching for barriers to their realization.

Interdisciplinary materialism stayed undecided between both of these interpretations. For this reason, the problem of how to verify the scientist's hypotheses about power relations could remain unconsidered and the imputation that the subjects actually had interests other than they realized unjustified. However, the reference to the participants of social practice was implicitly present. The fact that interdisciplinary materialism could only accommodate the two conflicting positions as long as it was possible to understand the proletariat to be an emancipatory collective actor that would finally toll capitalism's knell is an indication of this. Both, the politico-economic notion of objective interests as well as the framework conception susceptible to empirical findings, converged insofar as the social-scientific analysis of power explained why the formation of the correct class consciousness was only delayed. But considering the actual development at the time, this interpretation became increasingly implausible. To the degree that the critical theorists lost their confidence with respect to the working class, the justification of the power hypotheses formulated from an observer's perspective turned into a pressing conceptual problem of its own. From the mid-1930s on, [Horkheimer \(1935\)](#) explicitly recognized it as such. While he had hinted at the problem before, until then he had been confident that the working class would in the end act as he had expected. But now he considered the relation of theory and practice, of observer and participant to constitute his main task.

Because of the growing discrepancy between theory and practice, Horkheimer and his collaborators became increasingly aware of the ambivalence of the conception of interdisciplinary materialism. Was the social-scientific analysis of social practice to inform the revision of a Marxist-economist definition of objective interests or would the critical theorists cling to what they knew to be true? Essentially two alternative moves were possible: the theory could be further opened to a practice which

apparently did not fit with the assumptions made; or what was known to be true could be saved from the self-destructive social practice by isolating critical theory from it. National Socialist terror made it easy to favor the latter option. In view of a totalitarian practice critique could take on a dogmatic tinge without turning into dogma. When conditions are so obviously wrong, then it is not the isolated critic who is looking into the wrong direction. In any case, the excess of unreason come real made it easier to rebuild the program of ideology critique so as to generously loosen the connection between observer's and participant's perspectives. This revision did not lead to a complete uncoupling. However, it did result in a form of critique which neither helped to unveil the objective interests of the members of society nor allowed to decipher the mechanisms of their distortion.

### **3. A MODEL OF ISOLATED CRITIQUE: THE SPECULATIVE CONCEPT OF A CRITICAL THEORY OF INSTRUMENTAL REASON**

The core members of the Frankfurt institute shared a number of assumptions, which, from the outset, had stood against the systematic inclusion of social research into the program of a critique of power. Under the impression of the political development in National Socialist Germany and fascist Europe, these assumptions gained the upper hand. The concept of a totally integrated society now taking shape rested upon politico-economic theorems which can be traced back to the very beginning of Horkheimer's directorship and which existed long before all hope was lost that the working class would bring an end to the history of barbarism. The conviction that one cannot count on endogenous resistance from within society because its members are unable to see through the encompassing context of delusion grew simultaneously with the clarification of these politico-economic assumptions the Horkheimer circle shared from an early period on. Finally, these assumptions became central. It is the socio-psychological explanation for the destruction of personal autonomy, given in the previous section of this chapter, that has enabled the reconstruction of the program of ideology critique which was to take place now.

The weakening of paternal authority because of economic crisis was seen as the origin of the authoritarian personality. Horkheimer builds on this thesis to explain how the authoritarian state could come about: The space left empty in the process of the child's personality formation by the father

due to his loss of authority is taken over by the state. Authoritarian character and authoritarian state stabilize each other. The authoritarian state can come about because it satisfies the sadistic and masochistic inclinations of the individuals by incorporating them into a hierarchical system that couples the masochism of obedience with the sadism vis-à-vis the weaker members of society. The authoritarian state is then further stabilized by artificially maintaining the conditions for the production of authoritarian personalities: A common sense of insecurity and dependency is created by means of terror and the fear resulting from its arbitrary and atomizing character.

For Horkheimer, the authoritarian state is not synonymous with fascism. He distinguishes a reformist, a bolshevist, and a fascist variant. Their common denominator is the total bureaucratic penetration of all of society. Although the authoritarian state is described by Horkheimer as repressive in every form it may take, he remains fully on the tracks of historical materialism in describing its rise as progressive at first. According to him, the authoritarian state is the political form adequate to state capitalism which follows monopoly capitalism. After the competition of bourgeois capitalists at the times of liberal competitive capitalism had given way to large industries and monopoly capitalism, the elimination of domestic competition and the takeover of economic planning by the state bureaucracy paved the way for state capitalism. Fully in line with orthodox Marxism, Horkheimer is convinced that state organization is nothing more than a function of the economic structure. Accordingly, he explains the rise of the state bureaucracy as the result of processes of economic concentration and remains true to the basic theorem of historical materialism, namely that society is a totality rooted in an economic base, and social change therefore has to be analyzed by means of politico-economic analysis.

Friedrich Pollock was responsible for the field of politico-economic analysis at the Frankfurt institute. He studied the structural change of post-liberal capitalism for the period of a decade in which he only published four articles. But there can be no doubt that he became increasingly convinced that the classic model of phases of capitalist development had to be supplemented. Monopoly capitalism, following feudalism and competitive capitalism, did not represent the final form that a system based on the exploitation of labor would take. Although he shared the Marxist assumption that the crisis tendencies of monopoly capitalism could only be overcome by state organization and a planned economy, he believed that this could be achieved in two ways: either by a socialist or by a capitalist variant. The latter, a *contradictio in adjecto* according to most Marxists,

Pollock characterized as a social order continually marked by class antagonism and private ownership of the means of production in which the capitalists would receive profits, but in which they would be deprived of the power to make business decisions. Pollock's state capitalism is Horkheimer's authoritarian state described from a politico-economic perspective. The decisive provocation contained in this concept rests in the fact that the Marxist relation of economy and politics is turned on its head: Under state capitalist conditions, the social structure depends primarily upon politics, not upon the economy. Pollock's explanation for this result is Marxist, however: It has been brought about by the crisis tendencies of monopoly capitalism. But if the crisis tendencies could be brought under control in a capitalist order, the confidence that historical progress in the direction of socialism was continuing lost its foundation.

However, the thesis that state capitalism had come true in the shape of National Socialism remained as empirically unfounded as the Marxist conception of a logic of historical development. Pollock only refers to general tendencies of the economic policies of the time like increasing state interventionism. And to substantiate his assumptions, he refers to authors like Franz Neumann and Otto Kirchheimer who, as I will argue in the following section of his chapter, were exactly of the opposite opinion.

But not only was Pollock guilty of not providing any empirical evidence for his politico-economic analysis, more importantly, this analysis disabled the core members of the institute to even recognize the weaknesses that plagued their considerations. The concept of the authoritarian state to which the notion of state capitalism was the materialist foundation functioned as a catalyst to renouncing the promise of a systematic integration of the social sciences within the project of a critical theory of society: Economic crises necessitated the encompassing intervention by the authoritarian state which found its motivational base in the ego-weakness of the individuals caused by the very same crises; the authoritarian state then stabilized itself by offering compensatory satisfaction to these individuals. Further, culture was also conceptualized so as to smoothly fit into this model; possible counter-tendencies to be identified empirically could not even come into view within such a theoretical framework.

Horkheimer and Adorno elaborated this hermetically closed conception in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* which represents the culmination of their considerations on state capitalism and the authoritarian state. The notion of the culture industry, supported empirically only by a one-dimensional perception of isolated impressions, is meant to capture the complete assimilation of works of art to capitalist goods. This kind of "art" does not

spark irritating experiences any more, experiences that do not fit into the system of total integration.

All in all, the picture painted by the core members of the Frankfurt institute looked like this: The decline of competitive capitalism caused a weakening of the worker which then affected their families; as a consequence, the counterpart necessary for the young to develop ego-strength was missing. The individuals thus weakened did not possess the motivation necessary to oppose the new, post-auratic media of the cultural sphere which did not provoke any kind of reflection. In the final instance, culture and socialization, as this reconstruction makes clear, were only conceptualized as dependent variables of the economic base. The third field of empirical analysis, political economy, provided the central explanation in the critical theorists' conception. Without having undertaken any serious empirical research, it was here that Horkheimer and his circle found the theoretical key to social critique: The tendencies of economic concentration and monopolization were exaggeratingly perceived to indicate the rise of state capitalism, an order in which the ongoing process of capitalist accumulation had been tamed by means of a planned economy; this politico-economic integration became total once it had extended to the formation of the individuals' consciousness, disabling them to recognize their interest in establishing a socialist order.

Here, at the latest, the problems of a concept of ideology critique resting upon the social-theoretical model of a totally administered world became all too clear. As shown above, the critical theory of instrumental reason had its starting point in the ambivalence of the concept of interdisciplinary materialism: that it had remained undecided regarding the question whether the empirical findings could also inform the theorist about the true interests of the members of society or whether the collected data would only be helpful in finding an explanation as to why the actors were not working toward a society that would realize the possibilities for need satisfaction as objectively given according to the state of the forces of production. In view of what was happening in Germany and Europe, one could not seriously deliberate the alternative whether the participant's or the observer's perspective had to be strengthened.

Because the conception now developed by the critical theorists cut off every access to an undistorted participant's perspective, no possibility was left to justify their own perspective of social-scientific observers. Since the mid-1930s, Horkheimer had opposed Lukács' position that the proletariat due to its socio-economic position would necessarily reach a correct understanding of society. But now he radicalized his skepticism of Lukács'

confidence, and came to believe that the critic necessarily had to be isolated from the social actors. Only distance from the false practice could secure true knowledge of what was going on in society.

It is not the case, however, that Horkheimer totalized the perspective of the critic now. He was aware that ideology critique had to take the participant's perspective into account. The latter even deserved priority. This explains why the authors of the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* described their analysis as a "message in a bottle": The historical subject had moved without leaving a new address; but it remained the theory's addressee. Horkheimer's awareness of the priority of the participant's perspective, which alone would allow to make a final judgment on the theoreticians' hypotheses, is further attested to by the fact that he continued to observe the Marxian Bilderverbot (image interdiction): Critical theory remains restricted to criticizing what is inhumane in the nature of the existing society, but it is unable to determine the shape of a just and humane society. The latter can only be done by the members of society themselves.

But does the identification of what is inhumane not presuppose a picture of a society adequate to human dignity? Where else should one find the criteria for critique? The critic of ideology at least has to anticipate implicitly what the objective interests of the members of society are. The problem of how to combine the two perspectives, the observer's and the participant's, cannot be avoided, not even by a purely negativistic critique. But the aporetic conception of an isolated critique, which cannot justify itself as critique anymore, was by no means unavoidable. The neglect of even the last remnants of an empirical referent for the criteria employed by the critic rested on the dystopia of a totally integrated society. This conception is questionable. It was heavily disputed even within the institute. The members who did not belong to Horkheimer's closest circle, but who were more empirically oriented voiced considerable doubts.

#### **4. A POLITICO-SOCIOLOGICAL MODEL AND THE PROBLEM OF FREE-STANDING CRITIQUE: A REORIENTATION OF IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE**

At a time when the institute was in exile in New York, but still active, that is in the later part of the 1930s and the very beginning of the 1940s, alternatives to a model that aimed at unmasking ideology by means of isolated critique existed within the group of critical theorists. Throughout 1941,

the tensions grew, and finally the institute split into two parties. One was formed by the core institute, with mainly Horkheimer, Pollock, and Adorno; the other consisted of Neumann, Kirchheimer, Gurland, as well as Marcuse. The decisive question was how the members stood to Pollock's concept of state capitalism.

More than anyone else, Neumann vehemently attacked Pollock's analysis. In a letter to Horkheimer, Neumann (1941) remarked that he had been studying the economic processes in National Socialist Germany in detail for some time, but could not find any indication of a state capitalist order. He too was convinced that due to concentration processes, liberal competitive capitalism had been succeeded by a new economic order. However, this was not to be characterized as state capitalism, but rather as totalitarian monopoly capitalism.

It has often been said that the dispute was essentially about the question whether the economy or politics was primary. But this is misleading if interpreted simply in terms of whether the economy determines politics or vice versa. It is true that the concept of state capitalism does in fact rest on the assumption that politics is primary: while inequality and domination persist, planning has more or less abolished the "laws of the market." But the opposing concept of totalitarian monopoly capitalism does not simply retain the orthodox idea of the economy being primary in the sense of understanding political rule as a direct function of the economic class structure; instead, Neumann claims a relative autonomy of politics. The decisive question therefore is not if, but rather to what degree, politics disposes of the means to intervene in and to regulate social processes.

The notion of totalitarian monopoly capitalism, which is the result of 10 years of research conducted as sociology of power, as a systematic analysis of societal power relations, and which Neumann finally develops as the concept adequate to describe the social formation realized in Nazi Germany rests on two argumentative pillars. First, Neumann aims to identify the conditions under which law comes into play as a factor of its own with regard to social power relations. He concludes that the relative autonomy of the law depends upon an equilibrium of the power groups within society. The state and the law do not serve as an instrument of domination, he argues, only if the two opposing classes are in balance. While this was the case for most of Weimar Germany, Neumann points out that the political weakness of the working class became apparent when the Great Depression led to an identification of the monopolistic enterprises and the nation. General clauses and the like, formerly an instrument of mediation between labor and capital, now opened the legal system to

non-legal norms and catalyzed the assimilation of law to command. Under conditions of an unequal distribution of power, general clauses turn into a weapon of the stronger party.

In contrast to a crude materialist reductionism, the first pillar of Neumann's argument consists in highlighting that what seemingly belongs to society's superstructure can become a force of its own in specific circumstances. This insight leads him to develop an esteem for liberal freedom completely out of tune with Marxism. Liberal law, he now argues, fulfills not only the ideological function of masking class domination and the economic function of securing market exchange, but also the irreducible further function to guarantee a minimum of personal freedom. For this reason, the abolition of the general law during the transition from liberal competitive capitalism to monopoly capitalism does not only facilitate open class domination and the adaptation of the legal system to the needs of the monopolistic enterprises which, not having to fear for competitors, are better served by command and special decrees; rather, this process also destroys the still existing minimum of personal freedom by exposing the individual to the arbitrary will of the ruling. Essentially, the totalitarian organization of society, according to Neumann, only represented the final step of a process which first undermined the general law to maintain capital accumulation and culminated in abolishing the formal concession of a democratic appearance in the end.

Still, these considerations obviously remain strictly within the frame of a materialist conception of history. The assumption that features of the superstructure can become a force of their own under certain conditions is not formulated in opposition to the conviction that the foundational power relations are of a social and not a political nature. According to Neumann's conception, there are no dysfunctional elements in monopoly capitalism. In monopoly capitalism, the law and the state are nothing but superstructure phenomena. It seems as though Neumann does not provide an alternative to the model of a totally integrated society after all. Whether one believes that Neumann's conception is more refined or that of Pollock and Horkheimer more innovative, both seem to be nothing more than variants of the same hermetically closed functionalism.

However, this assessment changes once one takes into account the second part of Neumann's argument. If the analysis of the relative autonomy of the law is the first pillar of the conception of totalitarian monopoly capitalism, the second one consists in the thesis that the ruling class cannot be automatically deduced from the economic structure because the ruling class is fragmented. Neumann develops the firm

conviction that for an analysis of society to be adequate, everything turns on identifying the concrete relations of social power. Not taking these seriously would mean being led astray by the assumptions of historical materialism. This can have fatal political consequences, as can be witnessed with regard to Weimar Social Democracy which interpreted the process of economic concentration as a sign of the formation of a monopoly soon to be controlled by the working class; or with regard to the Communists who conceived of this development as a sign of the collapse of capitalism close ahead.

When Neumann takes a closer look at the social structure of later Weimar Germany, he notices the formation of democratically uncontrolled groups of power, an anti-state within the state, eliminating the forces that were an obstacle to capital's interests under conditions of a high level of economic concentration. In the end, only four players remained in the power game: the NSDAP, the industry, the bureaucracy, and the military. After the general norm had been demolished, nothing mediated between their rule and ruled. Still, this empirical analysis should have been reason for the Horkheimer circle to reconsider the model of a totally integrated society. In contrast to what Pollock's concept of state capitalism supposed, the four remaining powers did not melt into a homogenous ruling elite. Rather, they remained quite separate, and their rule depended upon negotiations and compromises. According to Neumann, National Socialist rule was the organized chaos of these four groups, which, far from acting in concert, were forced to cooperate even though each was characterized by a rationale of its own.

Because in contrast to Pollock, he realized the heterogeneity of interests, Neumann is conscious of the limits of state action. The groups cannot ignore each other. Therefore, politics is not primary vis-à-vis the economy in the sense of the unbounded ability of the former to steer the latter. Under conditions of monopoly capitalism, contract law is replaced by the administrative acts of a totalitarian command economy securing business and profit opportunities, and capital accumulation. By no means is this the same as a politically planned economy. While Pollock is of the opinion that nothing but a planned economy could manage to overcome monopoly capitalism's extreme susceptibility to crises, Neumann believes that totalitarian politics is able to sufficiently stabilize this system. Official documents might have created the illusion of a harmonious system of totalitarian rule, but extensive empirical research had proven that National Socialist Germany did not at all accord to the state capitalist model of a seamlessly integrated society.

Of course, dictatorships, and even more so, totalitarian systems, are not particularly interesting cases for social critique: criticizing them does not depend upon complex considerations about ideology critique. Where the context of uncoerced will-formation is so obviously destroyed, the explanation of why members of society do not formulate, or even recognize, what they truly want, is all too obvious. What is interesting theoretically is when mechanisms of coercion go unrecognized even though a social order is organized according to liberal standards. The problem of unrecognized distorting power relations turns into a riddle where basic rights are more or less effectively guaranteed and institutional mechanisms secure the responsiveness of political decision makers.

In his later works, Neumann does indeed hint at a reconstruction of ideology critique that could help understand such hidden mechanisms of power. It is true that the political sociology of power carried out in these publications emphasizes the importance of actors and action when highlighting the insoluble tension between law and power rooted in the irreducible contingency of the social and of the political. But the picture Neumann presents of post-war democracies also focuses on social structures that have grown out of political control. His diagnosis of bureaucratic apparatuses as the main, but unavoidable, peril to modern freedom is the key to an alternative to Horkheimer and Adorno's conception of speculative social critique isolated from empirical irritation and the aporias this conception had led into. The central idea is to search for distorting power relations within the uncontrolled systemic dynamics of political institutions. Neumann never fully developed this analysis, and neither was he able to reconcile his critique of bureaucracies with his reliance on them to bring about social change. But he had sketched the contours of a critique of power, focusing on the dialectics of political institutions and political will, on the dialectics of political form and political content.

This conception of a "duality of politics" as both an independent and dependent variable in the process of social structuration was explicitly studied by Otto Kirchheimer. Ultimately, Kirchheimer too failed to adequately address the problem that neither the socio-psychological model of ideology critique, nor the model of isolated critique, had managed to solve: the problem of reconciling the social scientist's hypotheses about power relations – formulated from an objectifying perspective – with the performative judgments of the members of society. However, Kirchheimer did develop components of a theory of institutional selectivities that promises to take the analysis of hidden power relations out of the speculative realm of traditional ideology critique and, instead,

to place it firmly within the realm of reasonable arguments, by opening it to empirical testing.

Like Neumann, Kirchheimer had noticed the compromise character of political rule in Nazi Germany. While this insight had led Neumann directly to work on a political sociology of power groups in society, Kirchheimer, in contrast, had always focused on the pluralism of social forces from the perspective of ideology critique. Under the influence of Carl Schmitt, his occupation with the heterogeneity of organized powers was shaped by a considerable theoretical interest for the problem of how societal pluralism and state sovereignty were to be made compatible. Unconvinced by the egalitarian self-understanding of the democratic constitutional state as expressed in liberal theories of pluralism, Kirchheimer did not believe that the political process could be considered a magical black box which provided for the competing and irreconcilable societal interests to form a *volonté générale*.

Kirchheimer's major study, *Political Justice* (Kirchheimer, 1961), superficially may appear to do little more than point out how helpless liberal institutions are when the actors who are supposed to make them work are willing to misuse their power. Yet, in fact, he is very clear about the ambivalent character of political justice: on the one hand, political justice is an instance of making juridical power serve political purposes in a way that severely damages the idea of separation of powers; on the other hand, the juridical form brings an autonomous dynamic to this process that prevents right being reduced to might. The juridical form of the trial as such limits the danger of arbitrariness; at the very least, it forces everyone to partake in a game of providing justifications. However, political justice is only one of the two research areas Kirchheimer "scans" for tendencies undermining the function of the *Rechtsstaat* to secure freedom.

This interest is even more explicit in Kirchheimer's famous analyses regarding the decline of political opposition due to changes of the party system: the structural transformation of political opposition within the framework of the competitive party system erodes the constitutional state's liberal character. What he was alluding to is the process of competition in the political sphere increasingly resembling competition in the economic marketplace – a process that is all too familiar nowadays. Parties are increasingly characterized by bureaucratization and oligarchization; even more importantly, instead of acting according to programmatic goals, they are primarily looking to maximize votes. This process of a displacement of ideology by tactics has resulted in the transformation of world-view parties into catch-all parties. Because of their shared orientation toward the mean voter, these parties have become nearly identical and the cartel-like structure

of political competition ultimately can be formalized by coalition contracts. The institutional structure of the political system eliminates substantive alternatives before they can even appear. This mechanism is the most prominent instance of the phenomenon of uncontrollable structural power Kirchheimer was concerned with.

Kirchheimer does not clarify to which degree this structural change results from pressures within the institutional system, as opposed to basic socio-structural transformations such as the growth of the middle class, increasing individualism, the decline of autonomy in the work-sphere, and the ubiquity of consumerism. Whatever the cause, the result is the same: social power relations disable members of society to form the consciousness of a socialist alternative, let alone to actually (and seriously) consider this alternative. Atomized and inert, individuals are presented with political options and alternatives whose differences are limited to packaging.

Kirchheimer leaves no doubt that the social order he describes does not allow for a humane and meaningful life. Such a society cannot find the consent of the governed, and if it would, this consent could by no means be authentic. Kirchheimer, however, does not justify his central claim that the individuals actually want a different society. Therefore, his critique of power is without foundation. It is critique only because of the social scientist's presumptions about the individuals' objective interests. Just as critical theory's two other models of ideology critique discussed above (socio-psychological critique as well as isolated critique), the politico-sociological model fails to connect the perspectives of observer and participant, and fails to mediate between theory and practice.

Nonetheless, Kirchheimer developed elements of a theory of institutional selectivities, which was taken up by the second generation of Frankfurt critical theorists. Without it, Claus Offe's theory of late capitalism would have been inconceivable. His theory is consistent with critical theory's concern with the problem of ideology, and his contention that the solution rests in the "duality of perspectives" combines a concept of the capitalist state (identifying hidden structural power in liberal political institutions) – the observer's perspective – with a theory of crises directed at capturing the participant's perspective. Offe's related reflections provided the sociological foil for Jürgen Habermas' transformation of the critique of ideology into the proceduralist critique of distorted communication (the heart of the theory of communicative action). Thus, the legacy of the Frankfurt School rests in its conceptualisation of the problem of ideology which requires that we take into account the centrality of the "duality of perspectives" to critical theory and the architecture of social critique (Strecker, 2009).

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# IS UNIVERSALITY THE OBJECT OF GLOBALIZATION? POLITICAL GEOGRAPHIES OF CONTINGENT UNIVERSALITY

Wolfgang Natter

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Toward the end of the 20th century, some work within political theory, of a kind that primarily foregrounds ethical considerations and another kind within political geography that links such ethical concerns to explication in terms of social space, territoriality and scale, has resuscitated the notion of contingent universality as an alternative to the either/or embrace or rejection of universality (and consequent denigration/celebration of particularity). As witnessed by the so-called spatial turn in many of the social and cultural sciences, this very circumstance, at least in the English-speaking world, has been one wellspring of current interdisciplinary interest in various geographical concepts and traditions. For political geographers, the idea of contingent universality arguably invites a fecund perspective from which to reflect upon a range of substantive and epistemological outcomes, which this essay will argue, are densely bound up in what, in short hand, is labeled globalization.

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By way of initial clarification, in contrast to some globalization scholarship, this essay presumes that “globalization” is not a phenomenon new to the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century, but rather is better understood as an ongoing, albeit uneven, spatial, social, political, and economic process, whose contemporary phase remains recognizable on a terrain made familiar by the long history, which, at the latest, follows the “age of discovery.” This in no way belies that the means, speed, and intensity of the current phase of time–space compression are particularly dramatic. The current period should nonetheless be considered as one of the many globalizations in history, each with its own scale of territorialization and uneven development. Further, globalization is of course not a thing; as quite a burgeoning literature has analyzed, it is fundamentally a set of relationships enacted territorially and in-jurisdiction over variable scales of territory, with outcomes which have re-routed, inhibited, accelerated, or hybridized flows of people, resources, information, technology, goods, and services. For these reasons, *territoriality* and *scale* have offered quite important signposts for geographers in conceptualizing the micro-, meso-, and macro-level geographies of “globalization.” The first term is deeply embedded in the history of geographic thought, but also in not-uncompromised ways that hearken back to the “age of discovery,” the “scramble for empire” and its deployment generally by *uncritical* geopolitics organized around the production of nation states and empires. Indicatively, the etymological links between *terra*, *terrere*, *territory*, and *territorialization* already point to the crucial role the territorialization of territory has played in defining social relations. The interplay of these terms refer, in short, to relations between space, identity, power, and representation, played out on the terrain, alternatively, of the earth, the planet, and the globe.

The second term, *scale*, has rarely been absent from any discussion of territory, whether invoked in support of state-centered or alternative understandings of it. The past decades, moreover, and in ways probably not unrelated to the dramatic reworking of the two-block system that had dominated post-1945 geopolitics, have witnessed considerable thought devoted by political geographers to the identification of defining sites and interfaces of scale and the integration of analyses across them with reference to global and regional frames, the nation-state, and localities (summarized by Howitt, 2003). A constructivist perspective, which fundamentally views scale as a fluid, ever-ongoing process – *scaling*-driven by ever-unfolding social relationships at multiple simultaneous sites – is a hallmark of this effort, notable also in conceptualizing globalization outside the field

constituted by the state and “from below” (Pile & Keith, 1997; Natter, 2002a).

Additionally, scale and territoriality point us to yet another terrain, where long passages of the history and geography of globalization can be traced conceptually: notably, and this is the major thesis this essay will test, in the ways in which geographies of the political have demarcated, and been demarcated by, the concept of universality and its relations to particularity.

In viewing *universality* and the idea of *contingent universality* as conceptual *spaces of globalization*, the essay examines a series of “epistemological objects” embedded in the history of political geography and European thought more generally that point to geographical and political dimensions of the binary universality–particularity, as these came to be articulated during and after the European Enlightenment. It is my presumption that these articulations can and ought be located with reference to what in contemporary discussions is labeled globalization. In terms of my empirical sites, for example, this means that the emergence and deployment of *race* as a category of identity and representation will be understood as a reflex to globalization, as will the formulation of various types of regional geography (and geopolitics), and the ever-wider understandings of *hegemony* these call forth. Analysis of these objects serve more generally as a reminder of the value of disciplinary history and the history of space for the contemporary pursuit of globalization studies.

While Laclau and Butler, two theorists of contingency and universality whose work will merit attention here, primarily (though not exclusively) tend to foreground ethical and temporal dimensions of the problematic, I wish to suggest in my case studies, first, that political theory, defined in ethical terms, is of course not without its own geography, and second, that contingent universality, as defined in this essay, has long been part and parcel of geography’s operating logics. Phrased perhaps somewhat more provocatively, I find reasons to suggest that the universal has generally gained purchase at the expense of the impulse we can today label post-essentialism in geography, and that geography has generally attained universality only as contingent universality. The choice between the kind of work contemporary political geographers might undertake – it therefore seems to me – is not an alignment with one or the other pole of the binary, universality–particularity, but rather, between different versions of contingent universality. As we will see, there are various forms it has taken and may take in political geography.

Throughout the essay, various seminal sites embedded in the history of spatial and geographical thinking will be examined while exploring this hypothesis. Following this introduction, the essay begins by asking the question “where is universality, what is particularity,” with reference to the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, the work of Karl Mannheim, and more recent theorists who have argued for an understanding of universality that cognizes the irreducible plenitude of particularity. **Section 3** examines the demarcation of universality in terms of geographical territoriality and via the geo-morphological particularities of climate and the socio-spatial notion of race, thereby suggesting the substantial and epistemological intertwining of the problematics of “nature,” political space, and the “floating signifier of race” in select works of Buffon, Linne, and Kant. These formulations, I argue, either implicitly or explicitly cognize the question of universality in recognition of the consequences of emerging forms of globalization. Hegel’s nature/society demarcation merits separate attention thereafter because in his work one also finds one of the most powerful and influential articulations of universality, an articulation that Judith Butler argues is rife for an alternative understanding of the role of particularity in the formulation of universality. The section retraces Judith Butler’s performative re-reading of Hegel’s concept of universality in greater detail, mindful with and past Butler, that Hegel’s universality also has revealed a political geography. Butler’s effort to re-situate the concept of universality on the terrain of contingency is largely phrased without explicit reference to space, yet it shares certain affinities with Henri Lefebvre’s previously articulated interest in Hegel’s notion of concrete universality, which are developed here. The next section invites analysis of how the positioning of universality embedded in those Enlightenment and immediate post-Enlightenment works may be related to the early 19th-century development of the subfield of regional geography (*Länderkunde*), whose formation, I will suggest, is a direct response by political geographers there to claims to universality (and territory) emanating from neighboring France. **Section 6** explicates the content and role of the border in the political geography of Friedrich Ratzel at the end of that century, identified by him as a particularly powerful site for the constitution of what geographers one hundred years later can call contingent universality. Ratzel’s geographical understanding of “race” then illustrates an important application of his border concept and is offered as a counterpoint to the understandings to be found in the previously discussed work of Kant and Hegel.

In political geography, arguments against the potentially oppressive character of universality have not only been used to justify the strivings of

the oppressed. To make the point, I summarize key relevant elements of the critique of universality poised by Carl Schmitt in the late 1930s, which can also be read in relation to the German geopolitics articulated during the 1920s and 1930s, associated with the name of Karl Haushofer. These examples probably suggest the desirability of careful reflection within critical political geography on the centering dynamic not necessarily overcome in various emerging articulations of geographical contingency. **Section 8** develops Ernesto Laclau's understanding of contingent universality as a field of hegemony, as well as a more deeply geographical reflection on post-essentialist relations between space, identity, and hegemony, which, via an analytic of the constitutive outside, the subsequent section suggests is of considerable relevance to civil society. The final section argues that, in terms of the political geographer's toolkit, translation and scale are proving to be particularly important terrains on which the ongoing contestation constitutive of contingent universality is in play. If this assessment is correct, it has implications for the analyses of both contemporary and historical articulations of globalization.

Through its analysis of various epistemological instruments embedded in the history of geography and spatial thought, the essay as a whole seeks to suggest the value of re-reading such objects as a reminder that debates that "have come to pass" – or simply been forgotten – may be instructive in any analysis regarding the constitution of "now time" and space for contemporaries (Benjamin, 2002). It surely is conceivable that quite a number of historical moments, which at their chronological entree point may not have been registered by world history under the sign of the global, nonetheless, upon examination, have proven to be significant transnational, transcultural, and transregional articulations of the phenomenon. In this sense, the essay's recourse to the past is not offered in order to list historicist "beads on a rosary" (Benjamin, 1969), but as a "progressive–regressive" mode of analysis (Lefebvre, 1991), spurring reflexion on the ordering of spatial and temporal categories implicated by universality.

## **2. WHERE IS UNIVERSALITY? WHAT IS PARTICULARITY?**

Reflection on contingent universality properly begins with what it seeks to make contingent, namely universality itself. The concept of universality is surely one of the most significant and powerful categories developed in

European Modernity, notably in German Idealism, as well as elsewhere before, during, and since the long century of the Enlightenment period. By now well-established deployments of the concept underscore universality's ongoing articulation (1) as a base from which to generate norms of conduct and to guarantee rights accorded to all human beings, (2) to define social, ecological, and economic scales of justice more broadly within national and international purviews, (3) to adjudicate the borders and jurisdiction of territoriality, resources and people, within and between various regions on the earth, or (4) to establish the very procedures of scientific investigation with respect to investigation of the social and natural world (Natter, Schatzki, & Jones, 1995). With regard to the classic triad of human geography, human–nature–space, all four instances suggest an indicative list of domains where the universal has held and holds purchase. And unlike the particular, against which the universal is opposed within a powerful binary logic, the universal holds forth the promise of being transportable beyond any determinate and limited context of space–time. The “transcendent moment of universal validity bursts every provinciality asunder,” writes one of our contemporaries, even as “accepted validity claims render them carriers of a context bound everyday practice” (Habermas, 1987, p. xvii).

It has occurred to various theorists to ask, not simply assume, why this should be the case, to wonder whether, how, and where the spatial–historical borders of such a postulation of universality ought be set, and to ask about the role of geography and the discipline of geography in the realization of this state of affairs. Various critiques of Enlightenment universality, the earliest nearly contemporaneous to German idealism, have registered both “the will to know” that sustains universality and the frequently pernicious effects of that will, notably in the service of territorial expansion and hegemony. In measured terms, Harvey and Berman have pointed to these unavoidably intertwined strands, consistent with what Horkheimer and Adorno referred to as the dialectic of the Enlightenment (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1991). Georg Forster and Captain Cook, representatives of these linked impulses in the phase of territorial surveillance frequently referred to as the “age of discovery,” exemplify the alternative deployments of an Enlightenment will to knowledge/mastery with respect to the political and geographical deployment of the concept (Berman, 1998). Before offering a critique of its instrumentalization, Harvey connects the quest for a kind of knowledge grounded by reference to the universal to the Enlightenment effort to develop rational forms of social organization and modes of thought freed from the arbitrary use of power (Harvey, 1989). That is, in order to legitimate an emerging social order, the

kind of knowledge required for that task came to be understood as necessarily cross-scalar in order to discern on that basis the core and irreducible qualities of humanity. Such a universal view could then provide a platform of legitimation with which to *make particular* a model of hegemony in which a presumptively divine political order represents people and things. As Habermas also phrases this aspect of the problematic with respect to the Enlightenment's consciousness of time and "need for reassurance," Enlightenment modernity could no longer be content to *borrow* the criteria by which it would take its orientation; "it has to create its normativity out of itself" (Habermas, 1987, p. 7, my emphasis) – doubtlessly a daunting task, in the 18th or the 21st century. Spatial thinking, which Habermas rarely shows an explicit interest in, came further to suggest that this effort of legitimation required both a vertical and a horizontal plane.

The latter plane may be particularly suited to considering the possibility that behind this "progressive" crystallization of universality and objectivity may be concealed the ever-spreading operation of modern techniques of domination of the self. Enlightenment critics (e.g., Foucault) have stressed the long complicity with terror, which is also articulated by the "sciences of man." Horkheimer and Adorno (1991) had earlier made quite clear their view that an enlightenment will to master nature has causally entailed an "internal" hierarchy of scale in human society to administrate it. That is, the process of transforming "nature" into resources of anthropocentric knowledge and production simultaneously transports and anchors social hierarchies along with their scapegoating mechanisms within and between human societies. Epistemologically, the laws of equivalence maintained by the universal result in a proscription of social apprehension. It is above all the desperate fear of the unknown that structures this equivalence, as a result of which the unknown turns out to be the rather well known after all. Socially, the deployment of universality in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is shown to perennially result in structures of othering and scapegoating, which homogenize and delimit ranges of difference for would-be universal subjects of enlightenment. Within this dialectic of the enlightenment, as has been underscored more recently within postcolonial theory, geopolitical deployments of universality have had and continue to have resonance for social selves and others both "within" and "outside" the society and state from which this or that centering of the universal has originated (Said, 1978, 1993; Driver, 1992; Ashcraft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1995).

As Karl Mannheim suggested in "Conservative Thought," the universalizing impulses of the Enlightenment was itself unevenly developed geographically (Mannheim, 1971/1927; Jones & Natter, 1999). Where

capitalist labor relations and commodity production were most developed, as in England, thought was most conducive to the mechanized world view within which that economy was dialectically embedded. In other contexts, such as Germany, Mannheim discerned a conservative romanticism that remained suspicious of liberal universalism well into the mid-19th century (and beyond, as the geopolitics of Carl Schmitt exemplifies). Arguably, the geography of these developments, not to say, at the disciplinary level, the geography of geography's development itself, might be readable with reference to each of the cultural settings differentially affected by emerging Enlightenment thought (Godlewska & Smith, 1994; Jones & Natter, 1999; Livingstone & Withers, 1999). Assessing the variable substantive geographies the concept of universality has underwritten for purposes of statecraft and social organization would therefore also merit attention.

For reasons this history and geography manifest, critics of universality have articulated the fear that what is named universal and legitimated by its cultural, economic, and political force very often turns out to be a very particular—universal, the parochial property of a dominant culture along with its territorial embrace, and inseparable from aspirations for hegemony, if not imperial expansion. The non-recognition of the status and interests of subaltern groups, both those located without and within the territoriality and societies of a delimited or expansive hegemonic power, has not infrequently been legitimated via the social deployment of a rhetoric of universality. The promise of a fuller realization of universality, precisely because of its explicit world-wide scope, has offered succor to arguments on behalf of the necessity of an extra-territorial reach by this or that hegemonic interest premised upon the disidentification of the attribute from the not quite or not quite-yet universal characteristics of those judged as being excluded from its attainment. Since the Enlightenment, this denigration of social particularity has in various places also been directed “internally” to non-propertied men, all women, racialized others, non-heterosexual humans, and so forth. Yet contemporaneously, almost all social movements since the 19th century, in regions where the notion of universality has taken hold, have explicitly appealed to the concept on behalf of those disenfranchised others (Scott, 1997). Empirically demonstrable, what has been at stake with these social movements is exactly not the annihilation of the universal, but rather the effort to broaden its embrace to include groups otherwise “othered out” by an operative catalog of representative elements; that is, social movements have sought to generate ideological arguments to extend universality to particularities hitherto bordered out of its grasp.

Clearly, some of these concerns have also been at the forefront of recent reflection by critical political geographers and others in our attempts to dissect the concept of globalization or its latest incarnation – globalism – and to analyze its effects (Guha & Spivak, 1988; Lefebvre, 1991; Agnew & Corbridge, 1995; Toal, 1996; Appadurai, 1996; Cox, 1997; Massey & Jess, 1997; Slater, 1997; Jameson & Miyoshi, 1998; Natter, 2002b; Gibson-Graham, 2003; Smith, 2003; Roberts, Secor, & Sparke, 2003). To the pleasure or consternation of many, what in short hand is referred to as globalization has in significant ways emerged as the latest candidate to fill the concept of the universal with determinate content and to set relationships with particularity. It bears notice how its depiction, particularly in neo-liberal discourse, exactly suggests globalism's forceful effort to overcome particularity – and locality – in its establishment of “a new global order.” In this discourse, to be sure, there remains at “the fringes” of the universal a stubborn residue of (mostly) cultural particularity, but in multiple versions of “the problem's resolution,” even that problem is thought to be the one that shall be overcome in time or at the least, containable to the periphery, by the beneficial effects of the agents and agencies of (neo) global capitalism. Critical political geographers, by contrast, have provocatively asked whether the discursive emergence of a new world order does not demonstrate that the term itself performs ideological effects that are a significant part of its own legitimation and concurrent postulation of seeming inevitability: in this context, Gibson-Graham, has observed that “a global regime seems to be consolidating itself not so much through institutional initiatives but through subjects who experience themselves as increasingly subsumed to a global order” (Gibson-Graham, 2003, p. 1). Social theorists and geographers have directed attention to the “spectral” dimensions through which “global space” extends its presumptive grasp (Roberts, 2003; Hardt & Negri, 2001). Globalization discourse, as noted by Gibson-Graham, situates the local (and thus all of us, who after all are in the world, through the local) in a place of subordination, as “the other within” of the global order. In this regard too, globalization may be seen as a new form of universality in its denigration of particularity and locality. And one of the not so subtle points of corporate globalization is that there seems little efficacy in pursuing locally based civil identity and civic professionalism at all, except to the extent that these might happen to be exercised and worked through by the ranks of the managerial elites and their allies (Reid & Taylor, 1999, 2002; Natter, 2002b). Attention to the adjudication of such nature–human–space relations, however, invariably refer us to the local as the terrain upon which

decision-making processes regulating the distribution of resources *take hold*, as well as to the consequences these distributions have on nature and on social formations; even as debates, for example, over land use sited at any particular local level can frequently be shown to quickly leap into an overarching global–local network of actors, agencies, and discourses (Natter & Zierhofer, 2004).

More will be said about this last point in exploring the notion of globalization “from below,” in order to see in the intertwining of globalization both “from below” and “from above” a particularly important discursive field in which both universalism and contingent universality find contemporary entree. What is at stake (again) is first the issue of which attributes in which domains will be accorded universal or merely particular status and what power-relations these generate. But secondly, in contrast to the strategy which has sought to widen the embrace of universality by the inclusion or incorporation of this or that particularity, leaving universality unchanged in principle, contingent universality suggests an understanding in which universality is always unavoidably and constitutively marked by its relationship to an irreducible plenitude of particularity. The working-through of this metonymy is what effectively determines the ever-alterable counters of the global/universal. Thought of as the process as well as its provisional outcome(s), universality remains an ongoing task, albeit one which must come to grips with a series of “relative permanencies” in its geography and history. This contingent understanding of universality suggests in social terms the desirability of a politics that recognizes that identity is never fully constituted, and that identification is not reducible to identity “fixed” by appeal to either particularity or universality (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 1995; Natter, 1995). In political terms, like-minded proponents of contingent universality have argued, no social movement can in fact enjoy its status as an open-ended democratic political articulation, without presuming and operationalizing this negativity at the heart of identity (Butler, Laclau, & Žižek, 2000), regardless of the particular, heuristic, localized “setting” or “scale” where these are applied. In spatial terms, an analytic of contingent universality will tend to question the centering dynamic that has invariably accompanied forms of universality. Thought of in these three ways, the “unfolding of hegemony” (in its counter-hegemonic dimension) may operate as readily from the inside-out as from the outside-in, but wherever the entree point, will tend to rework spatial relations across scales, including those geographically marked for heuristic purposes as inside or outside “the heart of identity.”

### 3. UNIVERSAL SPACE, NATURE, AND THE FLOATING SIGNIFIER OF RACE

Aiding in fulfilling the requirements of universality has demonstrably been a key general argument for the perceived necessity of allowing “the supplement” of geographical analysis into the universe of knowledge. The suturing of the discipline’s elements within the binary universal–particular has been of considerable significance since at least Kant’s seminal efforts to demarcate geography’s tasks and preferred objects of analysis with reference to the teleology of nature. Provocatively, one might even characterize the role of descriptive geography in this enterprise – a bill which fits so much of what passes for 18th- and 19th-century geography – as having assumed the role of intelligence officers on behalf of the universal, establishing scales of relatability between a *here* and a *there*, making known the unknown and transforming the unknown into the already well known. Following this teleology, the understanding of “the region,” its territory, inhabitants, flora and fauna, infrastructures, and so on, has tacitly or explicitly proceeded on the assumption that comparative study of any given region – the analysis of similarities and differences its set of elements contain – permits the classification of these particularities, which, in their comparative particularity, implicitly or explicitly corroborate the trans-contextual status of the universal (Hartshorne, 1939; Taffe, 1974; Agnew, 1989).

Immanuel Kant, who in the history of thought is widely regarded as *the* incarnation of Enlightenment rationality, applied this principle while reading such intelligence reports in Königsberg in his 1764 “Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime.” In the work, Kant sought to categorize the variously developed human capacities for the beautiful and the sublime in comparative, national terms. That is, in explicating this categorical topography, Kant linked general human cultural capacity to its particular location in physical space. Contemporary readers of the later *Critique of Judgment* will be reminded of his further development of those comparative categories (beautiful and sublime) that Kant uses in the later work to test teleological judgments. As readers will remember, the sensation of both the beautiful and the sublime fundamentally depend, prior to their *abstraction*, upon the varieties of extant nature to be found and capable of generating – following their abstraction – effects on the mind. That is to say, the pre-determination given by nature’s dissemination of plenitude pre-disposes entire human populations in their capacity for such experiences. Further, remember that it is in the experience (not mere sensation) of the sublime and the indirect representation of freedom it affords that human

apperception of individual nature, freedom, and mind most fully can be registered. It should also be recalled that at various points of his argument, Kant stresses both the radically different character of the sublime in distinction to the beautiful, yet at other points identifies elements that are common to each – until the point of abstraction. As various commentators have read it, this problematic of the subject representable to itself and with it this eradication of all substantialism became the most difficult and perhaps insolvable problem Kant bequeathed later thinkers, including those associated with Jena romanticism (Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy, 1988; Redfield, 1997). But it merits reiteration that the experiences of the beautiful and the sublime fundamentally do involve an encounter with substantialism (Nature, with its geomorphology, climate, etc.) prior to any passage to abstraction. And as we shall see, that passage may be enabled or hindered by the location from which it begins.

In Kant's writings, the biological, geographical, and cultural distribution of humans on earth occupied a rather extensive place in his science, including in the subfields of geography and anthropology, an oeuvre that also includes five longer essays on the topic of race. In the 1764 essay, Kant argued that various nations demonstrate different esthetic and moral sensibilities, but that "the German has a fortunate combination of feeling" for both the sublime and the beautiful, thereby surpassing either the Englishman and the Frenchman who, by contrast, are seen to have predominately only one half of these two sensibilities. Furthermore, in Kant's categorical ordering of these embodied sensibilities, "the African" is located at the bottom of the scale (Kant, 1960, quoted by Eze, 1997). The incorporation of both dispositions of feeling in the German, by contrast, serves as a standing argument for Kant's identification of the German with the sought-after representative status of the human universal, an argument taken up by other (German language) writers in the 19th century with respect to the delimitation of the concept of *Mitteleuropa* (e.g., Kapp, see Schultz & Natter, 2003). The capacity of mankind to fully realize its determination as being one of freedom and reason will appear – seemingly contingently in the first instance – to be markedly effected by geographical phenomena such as environment and location. In other of his writings, to which I return shortly, Kant offered further geographical specificity.

Since the advent of the "age of discovery" undertaken by the colonial powers of the West, the history of "racialization" more broadly has allowed thorough entree into postulated relations of universality and particularity, and thus space, human identity, and the environment. Historically, the development of the category of race given sensual, objective confirmation

within an “epistemology of the visable” has played the role of making and marking the other as a non-universal particular, a particular that participates in aspects of the universal, but not in its fullness. Hierarchical orderings of the varieties of humankind are much in evidence in the long century of the Enlightenment period. In the classification systems put forth on race during the early 18th century, for example, by George-Louis Buffon in his *A Natural History* (1748–1804) and *The System of Nature* (1735) by Carl Von Linne (Linne, 1806), respectively, it is argued that an underlying hierarchical order in nature was established by providence and that it is the duty of mankind to discover this order and to classify everything that exists from human to fauna and flora in order to understand providence’s plan. Notably, Buffon’s *Natural History*, bears the subtitle “*General and Particular*.” While in it, all humanity is of one origin, Buffon ascribes to climatic and biological causes differences in intelligence, customs, and habits. Positioned at the top of the human chain in Buffon’s schema, given these three criteria, is the European, while non-Europeans are ranked at lower points on the scale of a human, rational and moral, evolutionary capacity (Buffon, 1860; Eze, 1997).

Rational, moral, and evolutionary attributes—the enlightenment virtues par excellence – were in Kant’s writings to become virtually synonymous with both Northern Europe and its “white” inhabitants. Kant in fact felt able to specify the greatest frequency of the occurrence of these attributes and their borders along lines of latitude and longitude. In his writings on race, Kant frequently refers to Buffon and Linne. In his *On the Different Races of Man* (1775), Kant argued that there are four distinct varieties of the human species, each with a specific “natural disposition.” The stem genius of the species, that is, the original ideal human, was no longer present on the earth. Kant offered, however, that the location where its habitation most likely would have originated was between the 31st and 52nd parallels in the Old World. One may note Kant’s broader, more liberal specifications of the zone compared to Buffon. But further, precisely because of “Nature’s propensity to adapt to the soil everywhere over long generations, the human form must now everywhere be supplied with local modifications.” Note here that in contrast to the original ideal, local modifications equal mutability, which results in difference, valorized negatively, from the ideal. The portion of the earth between the 31st and 52nd parallels in the Old World by contrast, “is rightly held to be that in which the most happy mixture of influences of the colder and hotter regions, and also the greatest wealth of earthly creatures is encountered; where man too must have departed the least from his original formation because from here he is equally well

prepared for all transplantations” (quoted by Eze, 1997, p. 48). Kant’s speculations lead him to conclude that this applied particularly to those living in “the Northern regions of Germany” (Eze, 1997, p. 38). Finally, in his posthumous lectures on Physical Geography one learns what he already had stated in 1764: “Humanity is at its greatest perfection in the race of the whites” (Eze, 1997, p. 63).

This hierarchical ordering of difference has had valence in both directions of the signifying chain. “Race” does indeed matter, not as a biological or natural fact, but as the social, economic, and cultural firmament upon which it, as a “floating signifier,” to use Stuart Hall’s felicitous phrase, has been sustained. To affirm with Hall that race is a discursive practice furthermore recognizes that all attempts to ground this concept scientifically and to apply it in the effort to essentialize claims to human difference have been largely shown to be untenable, and that the explanatory power of the concept must instead be sought in cultural, social, economic, political, and geographical terms (Hall, 1997). Reading the evidence, Eze has argued that the Enlightenment’s declaration of itself as “the Age of Reason” was predicated upon “precisely the assumption that reason could historically only come to maturity in modern Europe, while the inhabitants of areas outside Europe, who were considered to be of non-European racial and cultural origins, were consistently described and theorized as rationally inferior and savage” (Eze, 1997, p. 4). A spatial analysis of the distribution of mankind is both cause and confirmation of this understanding, as space clarifies the relations between universal and particular: Savagery, in this topography, could be physically located outside Europe, outside of the climate and light of reason. Europe on the other hand, was classified as the ground of culture, reason and civilization.

The list of Enlightenment thinkers who wrote treatises on geography, climate, and race extends beyond Kant, Buffon, and Linne and includes Hume, Herder, and Hegel, among others. For Hegel, to whom we shall return later on, the positing of the representative and universal character of European reason allows the appearance, literally, of a non-racialized and hence universal self from which the racialized other is to be set apart. Ignoring what ends up being the social production of whiteness, however, redoubles its hegemony by naturalizing it (Natter, 2002a). That can only occur, I hasten to add, if geography and space are not thought to matter, or phrased differently if following its abstraction, the universal is able to veil its relationship to particularity. As I have argued elsewhere, making visible the social production of space in Lefebvre’s sense will by contrast necessarily make visible the social production of race (Natter, 2002a). Both remain absolutely

intertwined, and in ways that I hope my analysis of select Enlightenment works in the spirit of contingent universality have underscored.

#### 4. HEGEL'S UNIVERSALITY AS A PROBLEM OF SPACE

Hegel's concept of universality, one of the most powerful epistemological objects embedded in political philosophy, which has influenced thinkers as varied as Marx, Lefebvre, and Butler, is no less marked by this dynamic. For many, Hegel continues to enjoy – if that is the right word – a reputation as the totalizing thinker par excellence as a result of his service to it. That is, in seeking a reconciliation of subject–object relations across every conceivable scale, Hegel's account of universality must be a total one. To be sure, Hegel is no less free of the proclivity described earlier of other Enlightenment thinkers to use geography and climate as points of differentiation in the dynamic of universal and particular. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, for example, Hegel argued that from a philosophical point of view, non-European peoples – American Indians, Africans, and Asians – are less fully human than Europeans, because, to varying degrees, they are not fully aware of themselves as conscious historical beings. In terms that resonate with earlier arguments presented by Linne and Kant, Hegel argues that extreme climatic conditions – those that are “torrid” or “cold” – cannot “provide a basis for human freedom or world historical nations, and so it is only Europe, because of its geographical location in a “temperate zone” that “must furnish the theater of world history.” Further, “since no one particular type of environment predominates in Europe as it does in the other continents, man too is more universal in character.” Although in this work, it certainly seems that geography matters to the constitution of universality, Hegel with another hand, diminishes its import by separating spirit and nature, contingency and universality: “Natural life is also the realm of contingency, however, and only in its universal attributes does it exercise a determining influence commensurate with the principle of the spirit.” (Hegel, 1822–1828; Eze, 1997, pp. 148–149).

In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Right*, however, Hegel is even blunter about what political geographies ensue for the uneven relationship between universality and particularity. There he offers the view that imperialism and colonialism are justified on the grounds that while Europe is civilized, the

non-European victims of colonialism are presently barbarians and, for Hegel, the civilized nation is conscious that the rights of the barbarians are unequal to its own (Para. 243–249, quoted by Eze, 1997, pp. 150–153).

Given this conceptual history, arguably exemplified on the terrain of one of its thorniest manifestations, namely race, it may therefore seem a dubious undertaking to “salvage” the universal from its own “universal” history. Phrased differently, for me this conceptual history, at the least, makes any mobilization of universality without the qualifier “contingent” its justifiable political limit. Here however, the ever-contingent relationship between particularity and universality becomes crucial, mapable as it is on the terrain of hegemony.

For what is perhaps just as remarkable about the understanding Hegel proffers it in the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, as Butler stresses, is the multiply inflected historicity of universality’s grasp. She finds that in Hegel universality is a name which undergoes significant accruals and reversals of meaning, and cannot be reduced to any of its constitutive moments. For Butler, it makes a significant difference in undertaking this epistemological work, whether, as she stresses, universality denotes a field “whose integrity is secured by certain structurally identifiable limits and exclusions or whether this is a field understood as historically revisable and transformable.” I would say, amending Butler, that the very possibility of expanding the possible sites of articulation for justice, equality, and universality will be determined by whether we understand this field “as subject to change through time” – *and space* (Butler, 2000, p. 13). A further motivation for fostering such an understanding is the recognition that the established discourse remains established only by being perpetually re-established. “The reiterative act,” says Butler, “thus offers the possibility – though not the necessity – of depriving the past of the established discourse of its exclusive control over defining the parameters of the universal within politics” (Butler, 2000, p. 41, see also Mouffe, 1989).

At first Hegel refers to the product, the form, and the character of thought together as “universal” which he renders as equivalent to “the abstract.” But then he disaggregates and revises its definition offering three different names for a universality that he simultaneously identifies as singular and insists upon as various. As Butler comments: For humans, universality in its abstract form thus requires cutting the person off from qualities which s/he may well share with others, but which do not rise to the level of abstraction required for the term “universality.” “What is universal is therefore what pertains to every person, but it is not everything that pertains to every person” (Butler, 2000, p. 17).

Further and importantly, the universal can be the universal only to the extent that universality remains untainted by what is particular, concrete, and individual. Thus, “universality is inevitably haunted by the trace of the particular thing to which it is opposed; the relation of universality to its cultural articulation is insuperable; any transcultural notion of the universal will be spectralized and stained by the cultural norms it purports to transcend; and no notion of universality can rest easily within the notion of a single ‘culture’ since the very concept of universality compels an understanding of culture as a relation of exchange and a task of translation” (Butler, 2000, p. 24). The task of translation that the haunting of universality brings forth merits discussion later in this essay, as it has been invoked by other theorists as well, including David Harvey. As mentioned, however, because Butler’s emphasis is focused squarely on the temporal as the lever of change, space only rises implicitly (as in the above quote) above the level of the inert, of being more than a mere setting upon which the fecundity of life unfolds. Lefebvre by contrast, who like Butler saw the singular importance of Hegel’s concept of “concrete universality,” directs us to the opposite conclusion.

The concrete universal, Lefebvre insists, continues to have meaning and in two directions (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 15–16): first, via Marx’s understanding of Hegel’s concrete universality, it defines the production (of space) and the act of producing (space). Secondly, the synthetic power of the concrete universal “prevents a fall into a new fragmentation of disparate elements, enabling a thinking together of *the particular* (in this case descriptions or cross-sections of social space); *the general* (logical and mathematical); and *the singular* (i.e., “places” considered as natural, in their merely physical or sensory reality)” (italics mine). In short, while Lefebvre embraces the notion of concrete universality for reasons related to Butler’s embrace of contingent universality, Lefebvre’s articulation points to the fundamentally spatial character of the dynamic.

It is worth quoting Lefebvre at length here, as he explains the notion of production that derives from concrete universality:

The formal relationships which allow separate actions to form a coherent whole cannot be detached from the material preconditions of individual and collective activity; and this holds true whether the aim is to move a rock, to hunt game, or to make a simple or complex object. The rationality of space, according to this analysis, is not the outcome of a quality or property of human action in general, or human labor as such, of ‘man’, or of social organization. On the contrary, it is itself the origin and source—not distantly, but immediately, or rather inherently—of the rationality of activity (pp. 71–72).

Phrased differently, the social relations of production have a social existence to the extent that they have a spatial existence. As Lefebvre famously

formulated it: “they project themselves into a space, becoming inscribed there, and in the process producing that space itself” (p. 129). Lefebvre, as we shall see again in discussion of hegemony in [Section 8](#), which offers one fecund site for thinking through what the spatial work of translating contingent universality might require.

## 5. REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY AS AN EXPRESSION OF UNIVERSALITY

The geo-political application of a universal–particular divide unto a terrain of nature–culture–space has not of course only operated on the border of race. Entire systems of classification, whether in the realms treated by physical or human geography, have historically depended upon it. In political and regional geography during the epoch of the nation-state, it is explicitly in evidence whenever territorial conflict is mediated and arguments made for how borders should be drawn. Such efforts, however, confront two particularly thorny issues: the difficulty for reasons of (human and physical) geography of positing a unitary, self-enclosed regionalization of human culture, and the recognition that borders rarely can be drawn as cleanly as their cartographic representation suggests. Because of this, borders can be understood as quintessential sites of adjudication between universality and particularity.

One early and protean 19th-century example may suffice for now to illustrate the dynamic. For various geographically thinking German intellectuals, reacting to the French Republic’s continued assertion of a program of universal rights proclaimed during the Revolution, these had denuded themselves as the ideological platform upon which an empire of French hegemony was being launched throughout Europe. For many contemporaneous German intellectuals, the so-called Wars of Liberation were an anti-colonial struggle mobilizing national sentiment against an expanding empire that had forcefully and violently proclaimed universal and representative status for itself ([Johnston, 1990](#)). For political geographers, 19th-century German *Länderkunde* [regional geography] can be conceptually situated in relationship to Napoleon’s conquests and the subsequent wars of liberation, that is, as a reaction to an articulation of universality behind which was perceived a colonial and dynamic, French geopolitics. German *Länderkunde*, in reaction, argued for the correlation between natural political and geographical identity, by appeal to teleological

stable borders, albeit allowing “internally” for sufficient latitude for a to-be-realized state-making process. *Länderkunde*, in this initial series, criticized the power-driven expansionism of dynamic territorial states by appeal to a concrete and contained definition of spatial order and a national, homogeneous population filling it (Schultz, 2001).

The very notion of the region, as a segmented particularity, presupposes a part-whole relationship within a presumptively universal order of space, but also a uniqueness and solvency, on whose basis sovereignty could be exercised. This or that natural region, then, could be identified as a self-contained, delimited part of that whole, existing alongside other regions constituting other parts of that whole, a point of differentiation that could be mobilized to ward off incursions by any other region claiming, against its neighbors, to be a privileged agent of universal space. But as the subsequent history of this emerging discourse regarding natural borders as the grounds of boundary formation makes abundantly clear, the notion of natural borders proved to be endlessly pliable and contestable, in light of (in this instance) political, economic and social developments affecting the German-speaking lands. Indeed, upon reflection, 19th-century disciplinary history demonstrates a certain correspondence between the “natural borders” identified in such pronouncements and the emergence of the *Deutsche Bund*, then the “small German” solution of 1871, and so forth. The same pliability is on display in the history of efforts to define, delimit, or expand the territory of *Mitteleuropa* and Germany’s emplacement within it (Schultz & Natter, 2003).

By 1901, Ratzel could encapsulate a century’s worth of development with respect to efforts to delimitate and scale regional self-understandings and their borders in Germany this way: “How great are the similarities between North and South Germany and how small in comparison are their differences, and yet just these minimal differences were sufficient to divide Germany for centuries. In order to give substance to such contrasts, which are largely fictions, proponents draw geographical borders, whose significance is then incredibly over dramatized” (Ratzel, 1901, pp. 414–415). Ratzel’s empirical example is the “harmless line” drawn by the Main River, which through the mid-19th century, appeared in the eyes of many observers as one of the most important natural borders of Europe, setting apart Franconia despite its historical and physical proximity to other parts of Germany as if an insurmountable chasm separated them.

From a global-regional perspective, as developed by this author, a universal view of regions saw these as ever re-assembleable into greater wholes. Further, such a perspective, in pursuit of human geography and

history (Universal History or any of its other forms), truly needed to be worldwide in scope. Such history could not be content with the analysis of Europe and the Mediterranean world, an understanding pursued by Ranke and his followers, following “a misguided path of German Idealism” (Kant, Fichte, Schelling & Hegel), which had authorized “a geographic absurdity.” As Ratzel had already stated in the 1882 edition of *Anthropogeography*, “The unique, scientific perspective, with which geography views the world, is the interconnectedness of the earth’s surface and the life that belongs on it as a totality connected in multiple, reciprocal relationships” (Ratzel, 1882, p. 17). As another reviewer noted in making the same point: “Ratzel makes clear that an authentic history of mankind can only be on the basis of developments globally, in South America, Africa, and so forth” (Natter, 2005).

I wish to return to Ratzel on the subject of borders further below, in as much as the notion and definition of the border, intimated here, plays a key potential role in geographically adjudicating universality and particularity. But already note some of the terms he employs and calls into question in his 1901 text: correspondence, divergence, difference [*Übereinstimmungen, Abweichungen, Differenzen*]. Like the example of race, which Ratzel’s geography also addressed in some detail, the salience of this 19th-century debate on natural borders in relation to universality and contingent universality makes visible the ongoing social production of meaning attached to the connections made between the earth’s physical geography, political geography, and the ordering of the universal.

## 6. RATZEL ON BORDERS AND RACE

In important ways, which the example above also thematizes, Ratzel addressed the flows of global space as they were reconstituting a heightened phase of time–space compression in his lifetime. That is, both in his theorization of space and identity, he reflected on the tendencies of extant regional and national borders to be overrun by the tendency toward what he labeled large orders of space [*Grossraumformen*]. Commerce and transportation are the motors of this development for Ratzel, hence his abiding interest in developing the subdisciplines of transportation and economic geography. The essence [*Wesen*] of these, he wrote in his *Political Geography*, echoing his writings from the 1870s, “is the spatial movement of people and goods in the direction of specific goals with the purpose of adjusting the endowments of the earth and humans given by nature” (Ratzel, 1897, p. 447).

The resolutions of the proclivity toward large orders of spaces, which transportation and commerce accelerate, might be resolved by economic cooperation or by state reformations (including ones following states of war), variables including the specific region, its resources, and location. This general tendency did not, however, give purchase to the idea that the contemporaneous period was witnessing the “annihilation of space by time” or some such formulation. Despite all manner of technological changes – a train journey from Leipzig to Genua now (1897) took a mere 30 h (today, approximately 15 h) – “geographical conditionality is the highest law of commerce and transportation and no development leads around it.”

Aided or inhibited by the development over time of transportation modes – of goods, ideas, people – ceaseless movement of peoples, elevated to axiomatic status by the history of mankind, could be shown to result in a constant hybridization of both peoples and cultures, as well as that of the environments within which they interact. As a result: even if some groups stay in relative isolation over periods of time overall, mankind changes daily. Interestingly, within what he took to be a universal tendency toward larger orders of living spaces, the concrete contradiction within universality, to speak with Hegel (Section 4, omitted in this paper), in Ratzel’s work remains the status of this or that nation state or region (including the Germany called forth after 1871), instances which have not quite overcome this or that particularity (Natter, 2005).

Ratzel’s notion of the border, and as a sub application of it, his geographical theorization of race, makes several points with respect to my treatment of our topic. First, I believe it a very good idea for political geographers to re-read various founding texts in the tradition, not least to discern whether the inscription of them in disciplinary histories bear scrutiny. Second, I read Ratzel here in order to emphasize a dynamic understanding of the border, and the role it plays in spatially mediating universality and particularity. Third, I aim to suggest that contrary to a well-worn antinomy that opposes Ratzel to Vidal, Ratzel understood transformations of nature and the human world as a reciprocal process. Finally, I wish to note his embrace of the mutability that essentially structures universality as contingent universality.

How could one define or defend a notion of (unified) Germany, a task the decorated veteran of 1871 willingly took up, given both the fact of hybridization and an increasingly fluid understanding of borders, natural or otherwise? Defensively, the tension expresses itself whenever Ratzel speaks of the advantages and disadvantages that accrue to Germany given its richness of borders, including “internal” ones (e.g., the Main River).

Germany, perhaps best by economic associations with neighboring states, could expand with these global–regional flows, highly accentuated in his lifetime, or Germany could be crushed by the weight of expansive incarnations of the same proclivity centered elsewhere.

Borders play a crucial role in this geography, and they are highly interesting phenomena in Ratzel's political geography (notably after 1890). Ratzel sharply differentiates his understanding of borders from the one that considers them as being simply the end of one side and the beginning of the other, without transition. "All drawing of borders," he writes in his *Political Geography*, "is symbolical. Modern borders are no longer geographical realities" (Ratzel, 1897, p. 448). Further, the apparently blank border is in fact itself the expression of a movement (p. 450). In actuality, the most variable phenomena are seen to coalesce at the border, as effect and expression of the movement on the earth's surfaces" (Ratzel, 1896, p. 59). Ratzel therefore objects to the representation of borders in the form of a drawing of lines to demarcate them, because of the line's inherent tendency to abstract, simplify, and obfuscate the dynamic nature of the border. The drawing of a border, both in nature and in the live of peoples, is only scientifically justified when rendered with a self-understanding of its status as being the capturing of a moment and movement between transitions (Ratzel, 1896, p. 59), an *Augenblick*. Where "the abstraction of the line creates the illusion of a clean separation of areas, we in fact see the unique space of a border-edge [*Grenzsaum*] before us, which has developed between any two territories" (Ratzel, 1896, p. 76).

In nature, as exemplified in geological study, numerous phenomena demonstrate the general tendency to assume in-between forms, such that the border in any particular case appears as a border-edge (Ratzel, 1896, p. 54). A border-edge [*Grenzsaum*] is a manifestation of present and historical movements; their results are documented throughout the biosphere. Both within and without, for reasons of politics, culture and nature, border territories are dynamic, formative of the border territory itself, while as a periphery they react back on the centers that meet at the border. The "essence" of the border, consequently, is that it is always ready to be transformed and it, in turn, affects the centers which in manifold and important ways are constituted by it (Ratzel, 1896, p. 58). The border-edge is the reality, the borderline, merely an abstraction of it (Ratzel, 1897, p. 448).

Within critical social and political geography of the past three decades, one can find a comparable analytic articulated in the notion of the constitutive outside's relationship to centers and peripheries along with the identities they explicitly *cannot* contain and an interest in rethinking the

various dynamics at play in constituting borders of various kinds. Briefly the constitutive outside suggests the impossibility of a sharp drawing of borders, stresses the reciprocal character of processes on either side of porously construed borders, and reflects on how any given identity or center is in fact constituted by its others (Natter & Jones, 1997). As developed in the 1890s, Ratzel's political geography had uncovered the important role of the border, defined not as the end of one thing and the beginning of another, but rather as a zone of transition, reactive back on a center, a center, moreover, which in his most usefully ambivalent writings is shown to be so only contingently. This is the case, because what in one context functions as a center may in another function as a periphery.

What makes Ratzel's refusal to draw absolute borders of further interest, moreover, is a parallel train of thought that applies the content of the concept border across the full scale of natural and cultural phenomena. That is, every phenomenon appears to have or produce border edges, whether it be areal phenomena bordered by the sky, continents by oceans, countries, races and cultures by others of the same, centers by peripheries, and so on. In various historical and imaginable phases of development, any given particularity apparently submerged at the border, might under another imaginable scale-in-becoming come to constitute a new center for the arrangement of elements. Everything and everyplace is in some important sense a potential border, the tendency of which is to foster an admixture of elements, or in the case of human culture, hybridity.

Ratzel consistently emphasized that environmental conditions effect (but do not determine) the development of mankind. This is an essential truth, which, along with the essential fact that developments occur in and between spaces and on the various grounds [*Boeden*] of the earth, serves to ground the legitimacy of geography (in distinction to sociology, political science, and universal history) as a discipline. Restless movement, he writes in his *Anthropogeography*, in his *Political Geography*, in his *Anthropology* and in his *The Earth and Life*, is the signature of mankind. Premised on the recognition that the entire history of humanity was developed on the earth and with the earth, Ratzel endeavored to show how the earth, with its manifold differences, restrains, enables, slows down, speeds up, divides, and unites these movements (Natter, 2005).

This is part of Ratzel's response to the geographies of Herder and Kant. Another extremely important aspect is his understanding of race. Perhaps like no other issue, the question of race may mark the difference between what I have elsewhere labeled Ratzel's essential hybridity and that incarnated in the understanding of regional geography to be found in

numerous contemporaries as well as later racists in Germany who laid claim to Ratzel's legacy. I need here only recall the phantasmagoria of a historically and geographically embedded homogeneous concept of *race–nation–state* that animates much of National Socialist ideology, some of whose proponents cited aspects of Ratzel's work to legitimate that ideology (Natter, 2003a). Restless movement, as the signature of mankind, has created a culture in which people of the most different origins meet and are transformed, making highly suspect claims for any essential equation between race and region. Even when certain cultures stay “in place” over longer periods of time, at the borders, there still occurs contact and mixing with other groups (Ratzel, 1906, p. 465), whether these others be called peoples, or nations, or races. In Ratzel's terminology, people [*Volk*] is explicitly not necessarily identical to nation or race. Indeed, he firmly repudiates an essentialist equation of them, differentiating between their intersections on historical and spatial grounds.

In much of Ratzel's work, when the concept of race is addressed, it is simultaneously critiqued for being at best an inexact category. Race, it appears to Ratzel, cannot be definitively anchored by language, by physical attributes, by character disposition, by demonstrated evidence of origins. At best, the concept thus registers a phase of broader global contact between cultures, the moment when the concept of peoples [*Voelker*] is no longer adequate to measure degrees of separation between cultures, just as before that the identity marker peoples had supplanted the separation of humans into stems [*Stämme*]. Ratzel does invoke the common European categorization of humanity into three major groupings, the white, Mongolian, and Negro races [*Rassen*], but he also notes that these are (inexact) categorizations, also based on convenience and cursory observation. The everyday distinctions made to differentiate between the races, he writes in 1904, “occur on the basis of an ordering process which is far too raw to produce anything but a wild potpourri of individual traits with little in common, and collected into a category” (Ratzel, 1904, p. 479).

At worst, as he saw in the writings of the likes of Gobineau and Chamberlain, racial pseudo-science offered a dangerous illusion, which could be proffered only by ignoring both history and geography. “The exquisiteness of the observations,” he railed, “which are employed to denigrate races as lower on in the chain of being, border on the ludicrous” (p. 482). “A yellow tint in the whites of the eye, a hardly ascertainable red brown coloring behind finger nails, which here are bright pink, already suffices to prove someone is tainted by Negro blood. Other scientists claim the ability to smell racial difference. And the average white person doesn't

ask why Negroes are foreign to him, it suffices for him to declare the Negro race an inferior category of humanity.” This and other examples he provides underscore a caustic judgement: “[I]t is characteristic of the weakest peoples that it is they who are saddled with the most venomous battles over racial and stem identity” (p. 485).

What is true of “races”, “*is equally* so for the notion of “peoples.” As little as “race” is uniform, so too peoples, which likewise are purported to be completely uniform, show the “tears” [*Risse*] of the bordering of previous admixtures [*Mischungsbestandteile*] of humanity” (Ratzel, 1906, p. 474). Contrary to those such as Gobineau or Chamberlin who argued for the purity of a purported German race, Ratzel insisted that the above applied especially to the past and present inhabitants of Germany.

For Germany, as Ratzel reminded readers and student participants in his lectures, is not today what it was in Roman times. Just as the landscape had been transformed, so too had a people been transformed in the process. The German’s have never really been “a uniform people,” nor one race, except in the imaginations of racists. Not even the name *Germane* – he reminds readers – is German, if by the latter term one means Germanic, but rather a word used by Celts to characterize their foreign neighbors along the lower Rhine. Even physical attributes, which, as noted earlier, Ratzel refuses to give the last word to in proving the reality of race, provide outward signs of great geographical variability and mixed areas of concentration. The territory called Germany has historically been a meeting and melting ground of peoples who have been in transition. Using a geological analogy, Ratzel sees in “the Germans” a people “in which the foreign elements are as recognizable as in the crystal of feldspar and the glimmer in granite. It may be as solid and undegradable as granite, but it remains a mixed stone none the less.”

In his lecture notes, notably those devoted to the topic of Germany, Ratzel even more pointedly makes fun of those who indulge in the proclivity of paying homage to presumed (Aryan) ancestors, “although often enough not a drop of blood of the presumed ancestor flows in his veins. In Germany, we often find people whose faces are beautified Irish or Russian features, exclaiming themselves to be the children of the blond ancient Germans, or Slavic West Prussians or Silesians who honor the accounts of Tacitus and apply his reports about the Germans to themselves as much as do the half or fully Celtic Pfaelzer or Bodenser.” Nor was this situation to be lamented: “It is an entirely erroneous opinion to believe that a people is stronger in every regard, the more uniform it is. In fact, exactly in those peoples who have achieved the most, multiple races and nationalities are at

work together in achieving political and all the more, economic success” (Ratzel, 1906).

Ratzel was keenly aware of the growing popular desire to seek a self-definition of individual and collective identity grounded in pure origins [*Abstammung*] sometimes in mythological form (Aryanism). But in any case, as demonstrated by the recent national unifications of Germany and Italy, the attempt to encircle all “Germans” or “Italians” into a national state was not necessary, and indeed counterproductive. Political geography showed, by contrast, the important role of the border, defined not as the end of one thing and the beginning of another, but rather as a zone of transition, a spatial process that showed no signs of abetting.

Unlike Kant, who offered conjecture regarding where the *stems* most identical to the original were likely to be found, Ratzel consistently found the question irrelevant because of the fact that restless movement was the signature of mankind. Unlike Buffon, Kant, and Hegel, the interface between nature–culture–space in Ratzel’s work does not lead to the conclusion that regionally variable climatic and biological causes are what produce differences in intelligence (see also Ratzel, 1882). Unlike Hegel (see Section 4), the developmental model of “underdeveloped regions” Ratzel applies is ever tempered by consideration of Herder’s notion of the family of mankind. As suggested earlier, the environmental determinism in evidence in the political philosophies of Kant and Hegel would in any case tend to recalibrate what that term means, even as it points to the difference that Ratzel’s insertion of humanity into the orbit of geography has come to make. Finally, the border as a border-edge puts on spatial display the contingent universality of any identity posited in essentialist terms.

## 7. *GROSSRAUM* VERSUS UNIVERSALISM

There are various ways to instantiate or oppose universality. Carl Schmitt, who again is enjoying a renaissance among some political theorists, suggested one that in a parallel effort, also came to be articulated by some German *Geopolitik* of the 1930s. It is worth dwelling on this association, in order to consider what might be learned from it for proponents of contingent universality.

German geopolitics of the 1920s and 1930s, like the reflection on *Großraum* expressed by Carl Schmitt, demonstrates an engagement with the belief that the age of the nation state was ebbing and that an epoch of global spaces was reconstituting multiple cores and peripheries (Natter, 2003a).

Schmitt's spatial doctrine developed in the late 1930s contrasts two approaches: the regional, anti-universalistic space principle he was developing and the universalistic British (or "Anglo-American") principle of securing the lifelines for empire in every part of the world. For Schmitt, "behind the facade of general norms [of international law] lies, in reality, the system of Anglo-Saxon world imperialism (Schmitt, 1939a). The *gross-deutsche Reich*, by contrast, Schmitt proposed, should be the creator of its own international law in its own space. There should not be allegiance to this one international law, but to as many as there are large orders of spaces. To each of these was given the right to resist universalism and to define it on its own terrain of jurisdiction. The core of Schmitt's geopolitical writings of that period seek to argue an understanding of the relationship between universality and particularity that gives purchase to a specific form of contingent universality: one which authorizes the demarcation of self-enclosed particularities, individual orders of large space, or *Großräume*, within which different incarnations of universality hold sway.

The two doctrines Schmitt contrasts bear on his analysis of the Monroe Doctrine. The core of the "undistorted" Monroe doctrine, he offered, is the proposition of a *Grossraum* in which spatially foreign (*raumfremd*) powers dare not intervene. The opposite of such a principle, is that of a universal world principle which encompasses the entire earth and humanity. With Wilson, and all the more with Roosevelt, the Monroe doctrine had become an instrument of hegemony in the world market on behalf of Anglo-Saxon capital: "In point of fact, the original American Monroe Doctrine has nothing in common with the principles and methods of modern liberal-capitalistic imperialism. As an authentic spatial doctrine, it [Monroe Doctrine] explicitly contradicts the [current] falsification of space entailed by the transformation of the earth into an abstract world and capital market" (Schmitt, 1939a, p. 296). The names Monroe and Roosevelt point to this contradiction for Schmitt, albeit by way of Woodrow Wilson who had declared on January 22, 1917 "that the Monroe Doctrine must become a world doctrine. With this he did not intend a sensible extension of the non-intervention spatial idea of the genuine Monroe Doctrine, but rather a border-less and space-less extension of liberal-democratic principles to the entire earth and all of mankind" (Schmitt, 1939a, p. 296). Contemporaneous legal theorists, Schmitt criticized, were now applying "the idea that the Monroe Doctrine was a monopoly of the United States and that it could not be extended to other political and geopolitical situations or at least not without the approval and approbation of the government of the United States" (Schmitt, 1939a, p. 298, see too Schmitt, 1939b).

This transformation of a principle of spatially conceived non-intervention into a space-less (*raumlos*) universal intervention system had become possible precisely on the basis of the so-called free market, which Schmitt insists again is structurally constituted to unevenly benefit particular national entities. While the idea of (concrete) space – *Grossraum* – contains within it a perspective of bordering and distribution (*Abgrenzungs und Verteilungsgesichtspunkt*) and therewith an ordering principle of law, the universal intervention-in-the-world doctrine destroys every reasonable bordering and differentiation (*Unterscheidung*) for the benefit, ultimately, of maritime powers. As had become clear to him since the First World War, the Monroe doctrine was yet another particular–universal; that is deciding where it applied had become the monopoly of the United States, not a principle applied in advance and universally to other nations in other parts of the world.

The absurdity of the situation for Schmitt – and here the problem for contemporary theorists of contingent universality also comes into full force – is illustrated by the example of the International Nations Congress, which in 1931 prohibited the volition of Austria to inaugurate a customs union with Germany on the basis of a vote by a Cuban representative of that body, who wrote the judgement of the International Court of Law. The confusing and destructive effects of universalistic methods can be discerned wherever, argued Schmitt, it permits the intervention (*Einmischung*) of spatially foreign (*raumfremder*) powers, whether by international governance structures such as the INC or by the geo-economic force of “the free market.” What business did Bustemante, a Cuban national, have in intervening in European affairs? Why should the rights of maritime commerce, whose primary beneficiaries were Great Britain and the United States, constitute the basis of international law? Schmitt, who on occasion quoted Ratzel and Haushofer, but above all Mackinder, therefore sought to re-cast international law in order to stress that international law ought merely protect dominant ethnic groups (their industry, agriculture, and trade) from intervention by other dominant ethnic groups ensconced in other *Grossraum* formations. However, it is rather clear in Schmitt’s writings that no special protection of minority ethnicities or subaltern groups was to be forthcoming within this order, apart from what the dominant hegemon in power within it would allow them. The block formation of pan-regionalisms were, politically, territorialities in which the *hegemon of the one* would hold absolute sway.

In terms of universal–particular argumentation, Schmitt’s arguments can be seen to re-enact ones made by German nationalists in opposing the claims to universality marshaled by Napoleonic France. As discussed, this

opposition then was a wellspring for the development of German regional geography and its discourse of natural borders. Schmitt's formulation of the dynamic extends the scope of regionality to argue for international recognition of a limited number of pan-regions, in whose territory, an all encompassing, but, depending upon region, variable "universality" would hold sway. Thus, an argument of contingency was applied merely at the level of pan-regional state power in opposition to the presumption of interstate universality. Within individual territorialities, hegemony would operate unchecked; subaltern groups would find recourse only to the extent that their interests were adjudicated by those interests that represented the whole or had "captured the state."

Schmitt's contemporary Franz Neumann observed that as a scientific justification for expansion, the political theory of *Grossraum* was nonsense "of course." He also linked that observation to the issue of how space has been centered. Geopolitics of the type Schmitt represented "could have validity only *if the entire world were centered* around one focal location (emphasis added). Since more than one central location does in fact exist, however, how do we determine which shall swallow which? Why should Alsace-Lorraine be incorporated into Germany rather than have France swallow Germany up to the Rhine? Should Germany or the Soviet Union incorporate Poland? ... Obviously, the answer does not lie in geography, it lies in power" (Neumann, 1944, p. 147).

## 8. HEGEMONY AND CONTINGENT UNIVERSALITY

In contrast to the version Schmitt theorized, most contemporary interest in the idea of contingent universality is founded by the aspiration to expand democratic possibilities and settings so as to render them *more inclusive, more dynamic and more concrete*. As Chantal Mouffe put it nearly 20 years ago in asking the question "Radical Democracy, Modern or Postmodern," the general point of the project of radical and plural democracy is to extend the principle of "free and equal" to an ever greater number of settings (Natter, 1995b). Clearly, a universalistic aspiration lies behind this formulation, even as its tactical enactment will invoke contingency in its working-through the scales of social justice. By distinguishing between the terms tradition and traditional, Mouffe further suggested that the project of radical and plural democracy ought also indeed must, consider ones articulated in the traditions of liberalism and the enlightenment. Some recent poststructural theory has likewise taken issue with forms of

contemporary skepticism that lead to a full-scale rejection of the key terms of modernity, including universality and objectivity (Natter, 1995). For both tactics (not strategies) to work, however, it is argued that the status of these concepts must be explicated with reference to hegemony, opposition, and contestation. In Schmitt's "scaling up" of contingent universality, contestation and opposition are sited at the level of the nation or pan-regional state; internally, hegemony functions to absolutize a particular universality and its objectivity. In other words, even a delimited conception of universality may continue to insist on possessing an ontological force even while contesting its geographical scope, thus buttressing an extant order of things and people, resonant with the centering dynamic of space described earlier in this essay. Quite in opposition to the self-enclosure of Schmitt's pan-regionalism, the scale of efforts to pluralize democracy, as a number of critical geographers have voiced, must be of a kind that foregrounds the mutually constituting relationship between local-global articulations, whether with respect to identity, culture, or the economy (Massey, 1994; Swyngedouw, 1997; Harvey, 2001; Gibson-Graham, 2003).

For Laclau, to whom I now turn, universality, like other key enlightenment concepts, belongs to an open-ended hegemonic struggle. Universality is not a static presumption, not an a priori given. Universality is instead a process or condition irreducible to any of its determinate modes of appearance. Laclau phrases it this way: "It is the negative condition of all political articulation that is "the universal" and the contestatory process of hegemony that determines which forms of universality will be brought into a productive and ultimately irresolvable conflict with each other" (Laclau, 2000). The only universality society can achieve is a hegemonic universality, which means a universality contaminated by particularity. Applying this thought, one could, as did Marx, extend Hegel to develop a politics of subalternity that exposes the fact that capitalist historicity is subject to the conditions of any Hegelian "concrete universality" – that is, the "overdetermination of universality by part of its content." The spatial fix required by and constitutive of capitalism's uneven development of "relative permanencies" includes this articulation of universality and particularity. Alternatively, in ethnic, gender, or national terms, one can point to the contradiction that emerges for universality between those who are included or excluded from the benefits and burdens of (neo-)liberal economic policy. For feminists, any determination of the concept "humanity" as a substantive delimitation of attendant rights and responsibilities leaving out one half of the human race offers yet another example and impulse to tactics (Butler & Scott, 1992).

As understood by Gramsci, to whom much contemporary post-Marxism and -structuralism is indebted, the number and distribution of organizations belonging to civil society make of it fundamentally a political space in which hegemony operates in both its normative and counter hegemonic senses as an interruption in the causal chain of being. In civil society, as Laclau retraces Gramsci's analysis, the unevenness of power is constitutive of hegemony (Laclau, 2000). Hegemony, in turn, broadly functions in relationship to the dichotomy universality/particularity. Consequently, as argued by Laclau, this complex dialectic between particularity and universality structures social reality itself, and in the process the identity of social agents.

Any number of empirical social movements allow documentation of the appeal to universality in the struggles of marginalized groups seeking redress from inequality and injustice. From their vantage point, the exclusionary character of the universal has not prevented a simultaneous articulation of particularity – of women's human rights, lesbian, and gay rights – to seek redress and recognition from the universal. For Laclau, the point is not only an empirical but a theoretical one "Universality exists only incarnated in – and subverting some particularity but, conversely, no particularity can become political without becoming the locus of universalizing effects." (Laclau, 2000, p. 56). This is an important point, one which cautions against dispensing with a notion of universality altogether, ever mindful that following the analytic described here, both universal and particularity and their relations are, perhaps unevenly, continually transformed. But the analytic absolutely requires, as per both Laclau and Butler, emphasis on the transformative character of hegemony.

Oddly enough, neither Laclau (nor Butler) give much thought to *how space* structures concrete universality. Their oversight is of a piece with a fair amount of theorization regarding identity, which addresses the complex with only latent recognition that "space matters." For many poststructural geographers, however, who are similarly concerned to understand the relation between hegemony, particularity, and universality, the ideal of transparent communication across scales remains problematically an issue of power *and* space. The complex dialectic between particularity and universality, so central to Laclau's analysis above, in other words substantiates itself in and through social space. Perhaps not at all in contrast to Laclau, critical political geographers have stressed that these processes and the identifications they engender work at many scales, from the individual to the global, and across different cultural, political, and economic terrains where lines of demarcation take hold. Additionally, many have stressed that this line of thought requires a spatial theory

commensurate with an understanding of “the subject” as a temporary determination – a provisional nodal point subverted, asserted, and reconstituted through both contingent and social relations. Because subjects achieve and resist their systems of identification in and through social space, (or phrased differently, because the dividend identity/identification is never self identical as a result of social space), it seems to me that without a non-essentialist conception of space – as an a priori open, heterogeneous, and contested field – extant spatialities, both in theory and as lived, will have a tendency to reinforce, center, and homogenize an essentializing moment in identity, “its” spaces, and its theorization. But lastly, in apparent contrast to Laclau, a socio-spatial analytic, as per Lefebvre, does require focused attention on the relationship between hegemony and space.

Lefebvre’s own reference to Gramsci in *The Production of Space* invites him to ask whether it is “conceivable that the exercise of hegemony might leave space untouched? Could space be nothing more than the passive locus of social relations, the milieu in which their combinations takes on body, or the aggregate of the procedures employed in their removal? The answer must be no” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 11). That is because, on the one hand, of the active, operational and instrumental role of space in fostering hegemony. On the other hand, the presumptive cohesiveness of the “closed system” that hegemony aims at constantly threatens to boil over, as it produces structures that are “decidedly open, so open, indeed, that it must rely on violence to endure” (p. 11).

In a passage rich for its attention to *both* time and space, Lefebvre suggests a “regressive–progressive” mode of analysis as suitable to answering this question. This is the case because “The production of space ... acts retroactively upon the past, disclosing aspects and moments of it hitherto uncomprehended. The past appears in a different light, and hence the process whereby that past becomes the present also takes on another aspect.” Further, the principle of uneven development will be shown to apply in full force in this analysis “Some countries are still in the earliest stages of the production of things (goods) in space, and only the most industrialized and urbanized ones can exploit to the full the new possibilities opened up by technology and knowledge” (p. 65). This regressive–progressive mode, parenthetically, may justifiably remind some readers of Walter Benjamin’s notion of now time (*Jetztzeit*) and the cultural materialist analysis it calls forth in blasting the presumptive continuum of historicism (Benjamin, 1969). Recognition of the full force of uneven development, in turn, requires an analytic simultaneously attentive to contemporary, and by inference, past articulations of center-periphery relations.

Such an open-ended conception of space, open-ended for the present and by way of the past, by no means precludes necessary attention to the “relative permanencies” that lend apparent fixity to both identity and social space. Certain kinds of relative permanencies are of course produced in particular places and times so as to form values and shape resources to support them. This does not mean, however, that such places have a particular valance or fixity in and of themselves. For Harvey, as with Lefebvre, the production, reproduction, and reconfiguration of space is central to the political economy of capitalism (Harvey, 2001). Study of the specific local and global–regional fixations of space, which have been brought into contingent position by developments within this or that phase of globalization are, therefore, arguably essential to formulate a post-essentialist understanding of hegemony, its enabling limits, and the possibilities for change this entails. The final point also recognizes that any such fixations, by virtue of the constitutive outside, also preserve within them a non-essentialist identity recognizable socially, politically, and economically, despite the perhaps otherwise seemingly “full presence” in evidence at any given scale. In contrast to a category of space as self-present social or natural essence, in thinking through contingent universality, as per my earlier remarks about Laclau, it does appear more useful to start with a conception of space, both in the past and in the present, that, like the subject, is a lack to be filled, contested, and reconfigured through contingent and partially determined social relations, practices and meanings (Natter & Jones, 1997).

This shift of perspective is useful in obviating the manifest danger given by the appearance of an essentialized and centered conception of space or place due to the strategic fact that hegemonic cultural practices will generally always attempt to use such centered outcomes of space in order to legitimate the arrangement of any number of particularities, disjunctures, and juxtapositions into a seamless unity: the one place and the one identity, whether at the scale of the neighborhood, the city, the region, the nation, or beyond. Each of these scalar moments has tended to derive its ontological legitimacy from some notion of universality, of which each moment then stands in a metonymic relation. Such purported unities, in turn, are capable of forcefully homogenizing or disciplining the heterogeneity, which actually is generally present within any of these scalar sites. Such a centering of scale, as quite a bit of contemporary globalization research has investigated, has and continues to operate at supra- and sub-national levels as well, and as noted earlier, there has of course always been and remains a geography, or more precisely, a deployment of geography, at work in these efforts.

## 9. THE CONSTITUTIVE OUTSIDE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

It is worth dwelling on this last point, and with reference to what now may more fully be referred to as the political geographies of the constitutive outside. I argued earlier that Ratzel's border concept and his analysis of the geographical realities fostering hybridity, perhaps surprisingly, offer substantial geographical traces for purposes of such an analytic. As articulated more recently by Derrida, and amplified (with various differences) for political and cultural theory by Mouffe, Spivak, Hooks, Said, Bhabba, Balibar, Hall, and a range of other postcolonial theorists, the logic of the constitutive outside gives analytic entree into the process by which boundaries and categories are constructed and social objects within them framed. Following its deconstructive logic, what may appear to be a self-enclosed category maintained by boundaries – e.g., in identity politics, the notion of pure racial identity, or analytically, the boundaries demarking a particular incarnation of scale – is found in fact to unavoidably contain the marks of inscription left by “the outside” from which it seemingly has been separated (Natter & Jones, 1997; Natter, 2003b). The work of purification called for by “the modern constitution” can be shown, both theoretically and empirically, to be unsustainable (Latour, 1993).

Spatial configurations, notwithstanding the ever-so-material structures they are capable of bringing forth, likewise fundamentally elide such totalization. The social meanings of space – spaces in which social powers work to substantiate universality, truth value, and objectivity – remain open in the sense of being provisionally but never finally fixed. They are thus also characterized by contradiction, emptiness, and overdetermination – the irreconcilable particularities only provisionally contained by this or that rendering of concrete universality.

A Gramscian understanding of civil society as being just such a social space has been usefully raised in formulating questions raised by various proponents of what has been labeled the New Cultural Geography. The dynamics of civil society, understood as a terrain on which hegemony (normative and counter-hegemonic) operates, has invited questions on the spatial articulation of cultural representations of various kinds. Rather than seeing these representations merely as “superorganic” facts, one may instead ask how they put on display the processes by which cultural change is negotiated, contested, or struggled over, how such articulations are worked out in particular spaces and places, and what the sources and processes of

cultural differentiation are and what comes to constitute significant cultural difference in any given space–time (Jones & Natter, 1999; Mitchell, 2000; Natter, 2003b).

From a perspective informed by the classical paradigm of human geography, the constitutive outside can readily be seen to embrace each of the elements of the triad humans–environment–space. A critique of the work of “purification” involved in the “modern” separation between culture/society, on the one side, and “nature,” on the other, as distinct and separable orbits, likewise has received attention by political geographers and others (Latour, 1993, summarized by Natter & Zierhofer, 2002). With respect to the state-level juridical–political exercise of authority over territory, the apparent particularity of this or that nation draws from the start on the necessity of a supplement, i.e., other nations, in an order of things premised upon equivalence and difference. Since the scalar adjudication of these issues proposed at the Peace of Westphalia (1648), these interactions have fostered the development of apparently self-contained geopolitical identity markers such as nations or regions inscribed as partial occupations of more general global space, as well as of categories of citizenship, gender, sexuality, and race that have traditionally been bound to such spatial containments (Eley & Suny, 1996). Yet the power to make and maintain difference is never uni-directional: this power works at a variety of scales, from both within and outside the category. Though boundaries, through a process of hegemony, may appear as rigid and hermetic, the differences so sorted are never neatly contained; they are above all maintained, in part through the appearance of ontological force in operation in the category itself. As I have sought to reposition understandings of his work, this is a major epistemological point of Ratzel’s political geography, his concept of the border and his understanding of the inalterable fact of hybridity that results from “the ceaseless movement of mankind.”

What implications ensue from the recognition of the processes of hegemony and the constitutive outside? At one level, contemporary theory has long acknowledged that race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, and sexuality as bounded, self-enclosed categories are socially constructed. The purification of any of these requires human social labor to perform it. As products of hegemony, the categories we take as materially significant for social identity rest uncomfortably on presumptively determinate, “natural” or pre-discursive bases for grounding them, but the categories produced nonetheless may belatedly continue to operate as the forceful grounds upon which identity/identification is produced (Horkheimer &

Adorno, 1991). For political geographers, the history of attempts between the French Revolution and 1945 by German geographers to ground German identity in terms of “natural borders” has already been referred to as rife in revealing such contradictions. It is not just that categories are “social” – hardly a meaningful distinction, unless God is being invoked – but rather that those aspects of alterity that are seized upon and amplified into a system of social differentiation are always contingently productive of subjects in the interest of hegemonic power, where and whenever a center “grounds” a particular scalar dynamic. Yet no dominant cultural strategy has proven over time to be so seamless that the trace of exclusion has not remained as a perpetual irritation to the equivalence – the universality – proposed by this or that dominant group. This also happens to be exactly the point of contingent universality, understood within a dynamic of hegemony.

Such an understanding, far from simply throwing out the concept of universality altogether, seeks to re-conceive it in a way that has several advantages for strategies aimed to resist hegemony. First, as Said and others have made clear in the case of the European construction of the Orient, the relational process so described raises questions as to who has the power to construct the other, and how such constructions, far from being merely a projection onto the other, have equally served the function of providing the very grounds for constituting the self. Should the powerful imaginary of self and other come to exceed the de-limiting boundaries given it in the sense of a center, both will be transformed in the process. Second, the mutual dependencies derived from this constitutive process can be the basis for articulating alternative nodal point configurations that re-work rather than reinforce the surplus of social resistances now demarcated according to nation, gender, sexuality, class, citizenship, ethnicity, race, ableness, environment, and so on. Again, cross-scalar configurations will be a prominent and necessary feature of this micro-geographic re-working. Clearly, contingent universality as presented here invites reflection on the ever-present possibilities of interweaving and thereby strengthening such emerging nodal points on the basis of their extension of “local solidarities” embedded in specific places to other similarly embedded global regional solidarities. Within a global regional understanding of “locality,” such re-articulated counter-hegemonic subject positions offer a viable alternative to a political geography that otherwise presents as its choices either the subsumption of difference by or within a center, or its ever-increasing fragmentation (Natter, 2002b).

## 10. SCALES OF TRANSLATION

In Section 4, mention was first made of the importance of issues of translation and scale in situating the value of universality. A contingent universality recognizes very well that there is little cultural consensus on an international level about “what ought and ought not to be a claim to universality, who may make it, and what form it ought to take” (Butler, 2000, p. 35). For the claim to work and compel consensus, as Butler notes, it must undergo a set of *translations* into the various rhetorical, cultural (and spatial) contexts in which the meaning and force of universal claims are made “Without translation, the only way the assertion of universality can cross a border is through a colonial and expansionist logic” (Butler, 2000, p. 35). As we have seen, there are numerous possible analytics contained within general notions of universality and translation. As Butler cautions, translation by itself (like universality) can also work in full complicity with the logic of colonial expansion, when either becomes the instrument through which dominant values are transposed into the social field and language of the subordinated. Translation, as Horkheimer/Adorno remind us, may simply make of the unknown “the very well known.” To avoid that pitfall, the *effort* of translation requires, as per Butler, that particular identities acknowledge that they share with other such identities the situation of a necessarily incomplete determination, which is a constitutive lack that precludes the self-enclosure of a center “If any such particular identity seeks to universalize its own situation without recognizing that other such identities are in an identical structural situation, it will fail to achieve an alliance with other emergent identities and will mistakenly identify the meaning and place of universality itself” (Butler, 2000). It seems to me that this thought provides an important and highly useable compass in the normative extension of ethical aspirations for contingent universality.

David Harvey though, with a decidedly greater emphasis on both the spatial and the geographical dimensions of the problem of translation, has stressed that the issue of scale, like translation, remains a vexing one in articulating a regional–global understanding and practice of social justice (Harvey, 1997). Drawing upon Raymond Williams, Harvey notes that “loyalties contracted at one scale, in one place and in terms of a particular structure of feeling, cannot easily be carried over without transformation or translation into the kinds of loyalties required to make socialism a viable movement either elsewhere or in general” (Harvey, 1996, p. 39). The move from tangible solidarities understood as patterns of social life organized in

affective and knowable communities to a more abstract set of conceptions that would have universal purchase “involves a move from one level of abstraction, attached to place, to another level of abstraction capable of reaching out across space” (p. 33). The seeming contradictions between different levels of abstractions, between distinctively understood particularities of places and the necessary abstractions required to take such understandings into a wider realm, offer multiple hindrances to the establishment of the scales of social justice. Further, even what Raymond Williams called militant particularisms, as Harvey notes, can be profoundly conservative, if their militancy is founded on an enclosed, rather than a porous, consciousness and ideology of place (also see Massey, 1994). Historically, these militant particularities have rested on the perpetuation of patterns of social relations and community solidarities – loyalties – achieved under a certain kind of oppressive and uncaring industrial order. Such conditions have often enough, as a number of post-structural critics of the concept of community have stressed, served to undercut sympathies and civic identities for those who are not thought to be from that particular place, or to fit within a restrictive ideology of place, identity, and belonging. Precisely the structures that play a defensive role with respect to “the outside” – in the interest of furthering the power, autonomy, and unity of the community – are the same ones that often play an oppressive role “internally,” negating the multiplicity of the community itself. Doreen Massey’s study of the Dockland of London offers one example of the phenomenon, a working class neighborhood and community under duress from the pressures of gentrification and urban planning measures designed to re-make the neighborhood for other purposes (e.g., tourism), mounted resistance against these measures stressing community-based, non-property ownership rights. But at least initially, in the appeal to a sense of their historical, local privilege even in the absence of ownership, was also embedded rampant xenophobia that stigmatized “foreigners” – in reality simply more recent immigrants – as outsiders to the community (Massey, 1994).

Such a dynamic, one can hasten to add, also applies at other scales, including that of the nation. The nation, as sympathetic commentaries by Tom Nairn have stressed, affirming recent Scottish nationalism, appears progressive in its protective function against external domination or corporate global capitalism (Nairn, 1998). However, as other critical nation theorists have stressed – as did Nairn in earlier work – the nation can easily play an inverse role with respect to the interior it protects, repressing internal difference and opposition in the name of national identity, unity,

and security (Eley & Suny, 1996). Clearly the dynamic of centering, both for organized social collectivities and for individuals, is crucial here.

On these interrelated issues, Harvey has made several astute suggestions. First, we do need critical ways to think about how differences in ecological, cultural, economic, political, and social conditions are *produced* (not found) and we also need ways to evaluate the justice/injustice of the differences so produced (Harvey, 1996). Such an aspiration clearly requires some notion of universality along with persuasive cross-referencing at a worldwide scale. Second, the striving for equality will not mean the erasure of all forms of geographical difference, even presuming such erasure would be feasible. Third, the notion of universality required will need to be the one which recognizes that the equality presupposed in market exchange produces spiraling inequalities between regions and spaces insofar as these regions and spaces possess differential endowments and resources attractive for any particular phase of accumulation or development. A useable notion of universality – and translation – will therefore require recognition of geographical variation, but also analysis of how these geographical differences are and have been mobilized, deployed, and contested at regional sites within a global political economy.

## 11. CONCLUSION

Since and before the European Enlightenment, political geography, and geography more broadly, has been involved in establishing relations between a *here* and a *there*, and inextricably therewith, a relationship between universality and particularity. Core articulations of political philosophy have likewise made that relationship a central concern, and in ways that implicitly or explicitly can be shown to refer to (and be embedded in) particular geographies. Specific demarcations of geography within the universe of knowledge – that is, the presumptive disciplinary aims and objects of geographic knowledge – have themselves also been positioned within the enabling limits of this particular frame of exchange. That frame, over long stretches of modernity, has been productive of a notion of universality that has gained purchase at the expense of the particular and of geographies of the particular, which in a mirror image, have circumscribed the role of geography in the universe of knowledge to a supporting role in the postulation and centering of universality. In that sense, “modern” geography may not have traveled very far from the disciplinary contract Kant proposed two hundred years ago.

Along the way, temporally and spatially, this passage of universality has adjudicated notions of political and social space, territoriality, citizenship, race, gender, and ethnicity, and with each of these categories, has postulated relations between universality and particularity in relation to a presumptive hierarchy of human attributes, as well as to the places, and the political and social organization of the human and non-human resources to found where these are embedded.

Post-structural identity theory, from whose reflections a political geography of contingent universality became thinkable, has offered valuable signposts for assessing past and present relations contained by the will to universality in the 18th century through 21st century. Such reflection, I believe, provides a particularly usable framework in engaging cross-scalar, hybrid, and ever-emerging identifications, ones that can meaningfully contest the presumption that certain spaces always have and will therefore continue to equal certain identities. While frequently grounded at local sites and in social fields where social justice is in question, any number of contemporary struggles over resource and development policy, or over the political demand for universal and equal rights and responsibilities, have jumped scale past the delimitations of centered regional and national scales of jurisdiction (Natter, 2002b; *International Forum on Globalization*, 2002; Routledge, 2003). In the contemporary world, the character of these struggles signal that the forces that contest corporate globalization and effectively prefigure an alternative global society are themselves not de-limitable to any geographical region. As people in community-based projects for “sustainability” ponder the need for new forms of democratic action in apparently vast transregional and transnational contexts, the inadequacies of the old regionalism of “fixed geographies” become clearer, and this applies no less to the globalization from below than it does to globalization from above. Even while flexible and ever more mobile global capital, along with partner governance institutions (Roberts, 2003), currently appear to be etching out a neo-liberal formulation of universality and equivalence through these contemporary processes, recent years have also seen the emergence of a worldwide order of institutions that bear witness to what has been labeled “grassroots globalization” or “globalization from below” (Appadurai, 1991). The latter is a social and spatial field that in contrast to the corporate version of globalization, particularly calls out for the kinds of analytics that contingent universality may provide.

Both perspectives on globalization, albeit unequally, participate in a challenge to inherited suturings of identities and space. Both are uneven and cross-scalar and increasingly not easily framed within the borders previously

secured by such concepts as “community,” region, or the nation-state. For those interested in re-routing “the sorts of locational, informational, and political flexibility currently monopolized by the transnational corporations and their political allies,” Appadurai’s suggestion that the new regionalism is going to be one of “variable geographies” (pp. 7, 17) resonates for post-structural understandings of locality, place, and region, but also for a local-global articulation of contingent universality. A focus on *that* task requires an alternative mapping of global space, one in which locality acquires a renewed value and emphasis (Gibson-Graham, 2003).

This essay has argued both that universality is a concept deeply embedded in the structures and tools of thought within and outside geography and that an ontological notion of it has generally gained purchase at the expense of geography, even as geography, as it were, has entered through the back door to sustain its outcomes. Because of this, I have argued that contingent universality has in fact been part and partial of geography’s substance in a determinate sense since at least the Enlightenment. An alternative mapping of universality and globalization, one, which to borrow Lefebvre’s phrase, will operate in a progressive–regressive mode, will necessarily proceed with both a historical and a contemporary analysis of its formulation and effects in mind. Such a view will lead to outcomes that may well re-route political geography in particular and geography more generally. With respect to the historical project, political geographers interested in contingent universality will find value in re-reading disciplinary history as itself a primary site in which the spaces of globalization are articulated, and will note the particular notion of universality through which modern academic geography has been enframed. In a historical and comparative mode, which ought not shy away from contact with political philosophy or theory, the possibility of better assessing the work of disciplinary icons (read and unread today) as measured against their contemporaries in cognate disciplines will discover various traces of what can now be certified as contingent universality in geography.

With respect to more recent developments, moreover, this essay has also offered suggestions about the kind of conceptual concerns critical political geographers can usefully engage in support of contingent universality. Scale, it has been argued here, is embedded in and bespeaks outcomes of universal–particular relations. Reflection on borders may likewise be sited within them, as can an ethics of translation called forth by the refusal of the centering dynamic critiqued throughout this essay and in full recognition of the non-identity of identification. Further, while other, more or less ethical discourses on the topic of universality, for example as prevalent among

traditional political theorists, political philosophers and the like, have tended to encounter great difficulty – precisely because of the *Anspruch* of universality – when considering the possibility of a non-substantive or even “merely” procedural notion of it (as witnessed by the critique that Habermas’ notion of communicative rationality harvested), the geographical imagination when it contemplates both space and time is hypothetically able to turn the quandary of delivering substantive definitions of universality inside out. This capacity, in both a positive and a negative sense, may in fact account for geography’s uneven recognition in the world of science during long stretches of the past two centuries. Universality has generally gained purchase at the expense of geography. Post-essentialist geography, however, is well positioned to theorize and practice the moment of non-identity, which contingent universality announces along with the effort of translation that it requires, as a now growing body of multidisciplinary reflection on space, identity, and hegemony may attest.

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# FROM THE CULTURE INDUSTRY TO THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE: CRITICAL THEORY AND THE SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL

Kevin Fox Gotham and Daniel A. Krier

## ABSTRACT

*Since Karl Marx fashioned his theory of capitalism in the nineteenth century, scholars have continually updated Marxian theory to capture the pervasiveness of commodity relations in modern society. Influenced by Georg Lukács and Henri Lefebvre, the members of the French avant-garde group, the Situationist International (1957–1972), developed an intransigent critique of consumer capitalism based on the concept of the spectacle. In the spectacle, media and consumer society replace lived experience, the passive gaze of images supplants active social participation, and new forms of alienation induce social atomization at a more abstract level than in previous societies. We endeavor to make two theoretical contributions: First, we highlight the contributions of the Situationist International, pointing out how they revised the Marxian categories of alienation, commodification, and reification in order to analyze the dynamics of twentieth century capitalism and to give these*

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*concepts new explanatory power. Second, we build a critical theory of consumer capitalism that incorporates the theoretical assumptions and arguments of the Situationists and the Frankfurt School. Today, critical theory can make an important contribution to sociology by critically examining the plurality of spectacles and their reifying manifestations. In addition, critical theorists can explore how different spectacles connect to one another, how they connect to different social institutions, and how spectacles express contradictions and conflicting meanings. A critical theory of spectacle and consumption can disclose both novelties and discontinuities in the current period, as well as continuities in the development of globalized consumer capitalism.*

## INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have witnessed an explosion of sociological research on the changing role of consumption, entertainment, and leisure in contemporary society. Scholarly treatments of the subject of consumption, demographic analyses of consumer behavior, and studies on the increasing proliferation of goods and services now dominate the literature (Campbell, 1987; Rojek, 1985; Fine, 2002; Slater, 1997). Diverse scholars have examined the rise of theme parks, fast food restaurants, chain stores, shopping malls, cruise ships, casinos, and other sites in enabling people to consume many different commodities. Reflecting Max Weber's thesis on rationalization and disenchantment, Ritzer (1999, 2002) maintains that what unites these "new means of consumption" is that they are rationally designed to have an "enchanted" character to maximize consumption. Gottdiener's (1997) analysis of the development of a "fully themed mass culture" suggests that mass advertising, marketing, and other corporate efforts to create consumer demand now fuel the production of urban space. Hannigan's (1998) discussion of the rise of "fantasy city" draws attention to the increasing importance of historic preservation sites, megaplex cinema, themed restaurants, simulation theaters, and virtual reality arcades in constituting a "new urban economy" dominated by tourism, sports, and entertainment. The diverse research on consumption reflect scholarly interest in understanding the social dynamics of entertainment and leisure; the effect of themed environments on conceptions of time and space; changing socio-cultural attitudes toward consumption; and the amalgam of global-local connections that promote cultural homogeneity and heterogeneity through consumption (for overviews, see Gottdiener, 2000; Ritzer, 2002)

The burgeoning sociological work on entertainment and consumption dovetails with the growth of a vast secondary literature on the writings of the Situationist International, especially the work of Guy Debord. In the *Society of the Spectacle* and other essays, Debord ([1967]1994, [1957]1981) developed the concept of the “spectacle” to refer to the domination of media images and consumer society over the individual while obscuring the nature and effects of capitalism.<sup>1</sup> The spectacle is a tool of pacification, depoliticization, and massification that “distracts” and “seduces” people using the mechanisms of leisure, consumption, and entertainment as ruled by the dictates of advertising and commodified media culture. Synthesizing Hegel, Marx, and Lukács, Debord explicitly connected the concept of the spectacle to Marx’s critique of the commodity and the dominance of exchange-value over use-value. The spectacle, as Debord notes, is the unifying principle of modern society that signals a new stage in the development of capitalism, a movement from a society organized on the basis of an “immense accumulation of commodities” – to quote Marx ([1867]1978, pp. 302–303) – to a society dominated by “an immense accumulation of spectacles” (Debord, [1967]1994, #1). Debord and the Situationists maintained that Marx’s ([1852]1978, p. 594) famous observation that “men make their own history, but ... they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves” can only be understood in the present era through an appreciation of the dominance of media and the advertising image. The spectacle, according to Debord ([1967]1994, #34), is “capital accumulated to the point where it becomes an image” and represents the “historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life” (#42). In the spectacle, media and consumer society replace lived experience, the passive gaze of images supplants active social participation, and new forms of alienation induce social atomization at a more abstract level than in previous societies.

Decades after Debord developed his thesis, interest in the spectacle has attracted the attention of sociologists (Gardiner, 2000; Gotham, 2002, 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Ritzer, 2002), geographers (Bonnett, 1989; Ley & Olds, 1988; Swyngedouw, 2002), and other scholars interested in electronic media, computers, and urban design and planning (Pinder, 2000; Sadler, 1998). The concept has been used to refer to festivals of the Middle Ages, or mid-nineteenth century Paris with its *flâneurs*, or the great exhibitions in metropolises such as, Berlin and Paris, described by Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel (Chaney, 1993; Richards, 1990). In Plant (1992) and Best and Kellner (1997), Debord’s arguments are used to counter those of Jean Baudrillard, with the former’s commitment to materiality, praxis, and

radical social theory being contrasted with the latter's political acquiescence and emphasis on semiotics and the death of the social. Situationist ideas have become popular within music, film, and architectural design and several websites contain key texts and commentary on Debord and the Situationist International.<sup>2</sup> Recent years have also seen a new translation of Raoul Vaneigem's *Revolution of Everyday Life* (Vaneigem, [1967]2001), one of the Situationist's main theoretical contributions, also originally published in 1967 along with Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. Several new and re-edited books and collections have been published since the 1980s and a series of prestigious exhibitions have been staged to celebrate the Situationists' urban explorations in, among other places, Paris, New York, Barcelona, Boston, and the Hague (Bracken, 1999; Gray, 1974; Blazwick, 1989; Sussman, 1989; Jappe, 1999; Andreottie & Costa, 1996; Edwards, 2000).

Despite this renewed focus, the ideas of Debord and the Situationist International remain marginalized within social theory and their contributions to understanding capitalism are obscure. The Situationists suffered from organizational instability, changing intellectual foci, and serial purging-problems that impeded the development of a unified theory, political stance, and empirical agenda.<sup>3</sup> Many scholars have labeled the Situationist International as an artistic or cultural school and stressed the aesthetic focus of the group thereby ignoring or dismissing their theoretical insights (Plant, 1990; Stracey, 2003; Wollen, 1989, 2001; Berman, Pan, & Piccone, 1990–1991). Accounts on the history of Western Marxism by Anderson (1976), Poster (1975), and Jacoby (1981) ignore the importance of Debord and Situationist ideas. There are, of course, exceptions to this tendency. Jay's (1993) book on the denigration of vision in French thought locates the work of the Situationists in the esthetic traditions of Surrealism, Dadaism, and Lettrism. The fact that in French *spectacle* also means theatrical presentation suggests, according to Jay, that Debord and Situationists "were drawing on the long-standing suspicion of theatrical illusion evident in Rousseau and before" (pp. 419–420). MacDonald (1995, p. 108) argues that the Situationists's commitment to understanding the connections between micropolitical struggles and larger structures of cultural domination "points toward their relevance for the development of a viable post-Marxist position." These works offer a glimpse into the intellectual and socio-cultural context surrounding the development of the Situationist International and their attempt to revitalize Marxism under new historical conditions. Despite these laudable efforts, a comprehensive and detailed account of Situationist insights and contributions remain elusive and unexplored.

We endeavor to make two broad theoretical contributions. Our first theoretical contribution is to show that the concepts of Western Marxism broadly, and the ideas of Debord and the Situationists specifically, offer the theoretical resources to understand and explain the ascendance of consumer capitalism during the second half of the twentieth century. For Marxian theorists, the social theories of Georg Lukács, Henri Lefebvre, and the Frankfurt School theorists, especially Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and others, are complementary contributions of the analysis of modern capitalist society. The major contributions of these scholars lie in the elaboration and application of the ideas of alienation, commodification, and reification. Influenced by Lukács and Lefebvre, Debord and the Situationists attempted to update and extend these concepts, broaden their empirical application, and enhance their explanatory power. For the Situationists, the “spectacle” is a conceptual extension of the phenomenon of reification, a process of “objectification” or “thingification” of social relations and products that extends to the production and consumption of images. In turn, individuals view and experience the “image society” as an alien force, as an independent and objective reality that controls their lives by constituting them as torpid spectators. As we show, Debord and the Situationist International produced a sophisticated theoretically-driven critique of postwar consumer capitalism and the first analysis of the postmodern condition discussed by later scholars such as David Harvey (1989), Fredric Jameson (1984), and Jean-François Lyotard (1984).

Our second theoretical contribution is to combine Debord’s insights on the “spectacle” with the Frankfurt School’s critique of the “culture industry” to build a critical theory of consumer capitalism. Growing out of similar foundations in Western Marxism, the Situationists and the Frankfurt School independently developed critiques that share many assumptions and arguments, though with some significant differences. Scholars have long noted that the writings of the Frankfurt School flow within the broader intellectual stream of Western Marxism but connections between the Situationists and Western Marxism remain unclear. Moreover, despite the Situationists’s astute and prescient observations, their theoretical ideas and approach contain problems and limitations. Debord’s conceptualization of the spectacle is speculative, prone to abstraction and sweeping generalization, and lacks empirical specificity. Moreover, Debord and the Situationists never probed very deeply into the multiple logics, conflicts, and contradictions of the spectacle. We locate these limitations in the Situationists’s failure to make explicit their method of immanent critique.

As discussed by Antonio (1981), Calhoun (1995), Held (1980), and other scholars, the method of immanent critique “is a means of detecting the societal contradictions which offer the most determinant possibilities for emancipatory social change” (Antonio, 1981, p. 330). Against Debord’s conception of the spectacle as a single totality that dominates society from the top down, we maintain that there are a variety of different types of spectacles that are multidimensional and contradictory. To study spectacles dialectically, one should explore how different spectacles are represented, how they are produced and consumed, and what mechanisms regulate their use. A dialectical analysis that is informed by immanent critique seeks to identify and explain conflicts, contradictions, and crisis tendencies within different spectacles and illuminate the connections between relatively autonomous spheres of consumer society (tourism, entertainment, sports, and so on).<sup>4</sup>

Important to note here, we enter into a dialogue with the Frankfurt School to identify the weaknesses of Situationist theorizing in order to revise and extend critical theory to understand the development of capitalism and the production of spectacle. Despite their powerful analysis and prescient insights, there are several limitations in the work of the Situationists. They do not have a comprehensive, exhaustive, or systemic theoretical framework. Their antipathy toward scholars and academic scholarship, their lack of commitment to empirical research, and the absence of sophisticated analysis are major problems that limit the explanatory power of Situationist ideas. In the *Society of the Spectacle* and other essays, Debord’s conception of the spectacle is often presented as a monolithic juggernaut, an irresistible force of cultural hegemony that dominates society from the top down. It is this imagery that has led to the emergence of several critiques of the work of Debord and the Situationists, including claims that the group over-emphasized class and failed to take into account the everyday life of other sectors of the population, most notably women and ethnic minorities (Jay, 1993, p. 431). Other critiques include the Situationists’s failure to clearly specify the connections between macro- and micro-levels, their tendency toward hyperbole and exaggeration, their orthodox and naive faith in the revolutionary agency of the proletariat, and their lack of attention to the crisis tendencies and sources of opposition and resistance that affect capitalist societies (Best & Kellner, 1997, p. 117; Gardiner, 2000, pp. 124–125; Jappe, 1999, pp. 103–104).

Through a dialogue with the Frankfurt School, we hope to deepen scholarly understanding of the multiple sites of *spectacularization*, the conflicting meanings and effects of spectacles, and the novelties and discontinuities in the development of modern capitalism. We define

spectacularization as a conflictual and contested process by which the major institutions of society are adopting the logic and principles of entertainment and spectacle to their basic operations and organization. Indeed, the worldwide ascendance of globalized entertainment and techno-capitalism have thrust issues of alienation, commodification, and reification at the center of social-science research and theory. The expansion of tourism to all corners of the globe combined with the proliferation of advertising and marketing illustrate significant changes in the realm of social consumption (for overviews, see Urry, 2002; Alsayyad, 2001; Holmes, 2001; Crane, Kawashima, & Kawaski, 2002). Profound transformations in the global finance and culture have prompted some scholars to argue that we are moving toward a world of increasingly dehumanized services, delocalized culture and tradition (Giddens, 1991), and social forms that are devoid of distinctive content (Ritzer, 2004). Other scholars claim that “consumption” is taking precedence over “production” to the extent that the expansion and deepening of commodity markets has transferred the logic and rationality of “production” to the sphere of “consumption” (Bauman, 1992; Featherstone, 1991). Yet many of these changes remain under-theoretized and poorly understood. Few scholars have developed an overarching theoretical orientation, or elaborated a set of concepts or heuristic device that specifies the connections between consumption and other spheres of society (e.g., law and the political system, economy, culture, and so on) (for exceptions, see Ritzer, 2002; Gottdiener, 1997). Our goal is to remedy these problems and omissions by providing a critical theory of consumption and spectacle.

### **THEORIES OF CONSUMER CAPITALISM IN WESTERN MARXISM: LUKÁCS, THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL, AND LEFEBVRE**

Beginning with Karl Marx and continuing through Georg Lukács, the Frankfurt School theorists, Henri Lefebvre, and others, Marxian theory has been continually updated to capture the pervasiveness of commodity relations in the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> Early, Marx noted the tendency of capitalism to transform social relations into commodified exchange relations, “an act characterized by a total abstraction of use-value” (Marx [1867]1978, p. 305). Commodities embody both a use-value (its purpose or use to fulfill a need) and an exchange-value (its worth or

price as defined by money). In *Capital*, Marx noted that while a commodity may appear to be a “very trivial thing, and easily understood,” in reality it is a “very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (Marx [1867]1978, p. 319). The mysteriousness of the commodity, according to Marx, lies in its ability to mask social relationships between things through the medium of money and domination of exchange-value over use-value. In a market-driven world, money becomes the universal equivalent of exchange – for example, the commodity of commodities – and appears to people as a “power external to and independent of the producers” (p. 320). In his original analyses, Marx argued that with the spread of money and commodification, relations and experiences become “things” that people exchange for profit. “Just as money reduces everything to its abstract form, so it reduces itself in the course of its own movement to something merely quantitative” (p. 93). Money establishes an “inverted” world in which it simulates human qualities: money can buy beauty, intelligence, emotion, in addition to tangible goods (p. 78). As a consequence of the commodification process, “abstractions” dominate everyday life, camouflaging the underlying social relations that govern commodity production.

The process of commodification cuts across the phenomenon of commodity fetishism. In *Capital*, Marx understood that the commodification process “fetishized” human relationships, producing their representation as immutable and rational relationships among things in nature. This nature-like appearance of social relations, according to Marx, means that people view capital/labor relationships within capitalism as just, efficient, and egalitarian. For Marx ([1867]1978), fetishism is a process, a social condition, and an ideology. As a process, fetishism “attaches itself to products of labor, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities” (p. 321). As a social condition, fetishism “is a definite social relation between men, that assumes in their eyes, the fantastic form of relation between things” (p. 321). For Marx, the fetishism of commodities imputes to the “market” an independent objective reality; people come to believe that value arises from natural properties of the commodities themselves. As an ideology, fetishism expresses “the illusions of the monetary system” to the extent that “[i]n the eyes of each other we are nothing but exchange-values” (p. 328). To paraphrase Habermas (1975), fetishism contains a series of ideas or “legitimations” to support the existence of the system of commodity production. Fetishism “mystifies” the social character of production making it unclear how commodities obtain their value.

In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács ([1922]1968, pp. 83–222) maintained that the fetishism of commodities is part of a larger process of reification and implies that people believe social structures are beyond their control and unchangeable. Reification, as the German *Verdinglichung* is translated (see Dahms, 1997, 1998), is a process by which people come to believe that humanly created social structures are natural, universal, and absolute “things” and, as a result, that those social structures do acquire those characteristics. According to Lukács, reification is less perceptible than commodification and represents the generalization and totalization of commodity fetishism (see Dahms, 1998, pp. 11–12). Synthesizing Marx’s critique of commodity fetishism and Weber’s theory of rationalization, Lukács argued that the tenacity and resiliency of capitalism lies in its ability to adapt the bureaucratic mechanisms of efficiency, control, calculability, and predictability to all aspects of human action and social organization. Under the conditions of bureaucratized commodity exchange, for example, the social relations people enter as part of the labor contract appear as inevitable rather than historically contingent. As Lukács describes this process:

Man in capitalist society confronts a reality “made” by himself (as a class) which appears to him to be a natural phenomenon alien to himself; he is wholly at the mercy of its “laws”; his activity is confined to the exploitation of the inexorable fulfillment of certain individual laws for his own (egoistic) interests. But even while “acting” he remains, in the nature of the case, the object and not the subject of events ([1922]1968, p. 135).

Capital conceals the everydayness of alienated labor in the supposed economic laws of market economy, which produces the illusion of fair exchange promulgated by the labor contract. Concomitantly, the major institutions of society from law, politics, religion, education, and culture reproduce, protect, and legitimate the reification of social structure that, in turn, reproduces itself in workers’ quiescence and conformity. Lukács ([1922]1968, pp. 93–94) argued that reification was an immediate reality that dominated capitalist culture as an ideological phenomenon related to commodity relations and the preservation of the status quo. More broadly, Lukács expanded the meaning of reification, applying the concept to capture the process by the major institutions of society – the political system, culture, art, and so on – become oriented to the imperatives and logic of capital accumulation. According to Dahms (1998, p. 4), capitalism “assimilates to its specific requirements the ways in which human beings think the world.” As a result, the expansion of capitalism over more and more areas of social life “impoverishes concrete social, political, and

cultural forms of coexistence and cooperation, and brings about an impoverishment of our ability to conceive of reality from a variety of social, political, and philosophical viewpoints” (p. 4). Despite their otherwise diverse work, Marx and Lukács recognized that the movement and generalization of money and the commodity form is simultaneously the fetishization and reification of social reality.<sup>6</sup>

Such concerns animated the work of the Frankfurt School theorists who drew attention to the role of the “culture industry” in concealing class contradictions and legitimating social inequalities under capitalism.<sup>7</sup> Like Marx and Lukács, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno maintained that the spread of commodification and the domination of money transformed cultural forms into external, autonomous objects. As a result, politics, religion, and culture become commodities subject to the logic of capital accumulation, integrating all parts of social-life into a mass market. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for example, Horkheimer and Adorno ([1947]1972) argued that the institutions of religion, education, music and entertainment had emerged as the organs of mass deception and mystification that manipulated individuals into accepting the current organization of society. In their view, these culture industries were engaged in sophisticated forms of ideological indoctrination, using “entertainment” to seduce people and while eliding the distinction between “high” and “low” culture. Consumer choice and “individuality” itself “becomes the ideology of the pleasure industry,” according to Horkheimer and Adorno (1972, pp. 154), and leads to the standardization of consciousness, conformity to name-brand products, and mass production of homogenized consumer identity.

In his famous essay, “The Culture Industry Reconsidered,” Adorno ([1967]1989), lamented the transformation of spontaneous and authentic “popular culture” into a totally administered and reified “mass culture” that is imposed from above. Rather than autonomous culture creation, which is characteristic of social connectedness at the micro or everyday level, the culture industry works through a relentless process of commodification to hollow out the distinctive substantive content of social relations and their creations. In this process, culture becomes a centrally conceived and controlled social form, an object of market-based instrumental relations that is devoid of emotional and sensuous life. “The total effect of the cultural [sic] industry,” according to Adorno, is mass deception that “impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals” (p. 135). As Adorno elaborates,

Cultural entities typical of the culture industry are no longer *also* commodities, they are commodities through and through ... Ultimately, the culture industry no longer even

needs to directly pursue everywhere the profit interests from which it originated. These interests have been objectified in its ideology and have even made themselves independent of the compulsion to sell the commodity ... Brought to bear is a general uncritical consensus, advertisements produced for the world so that each product of the culture industry becomes its own advertisement ... What parades as progress in the culture industry, as the incessantly new which it offers up, remains the disguise of an eternal sameness (pp. 129–130).

For Adorno, music, fashion, and other products of the culture industry exhibit “incessantly repeated formulae” that suppress spontaneity and active creativity, and accelerate the trends toward commodification, standardization, and reification that distinguish all of capitalist culture. In a similar vein, Kracauer ([1927]1989) maintained that the patterns of dance and tightly rehearsed movements characteristic of popular entertainment reviews during the 1920s and later reflected the massification of audiences. Foreshadowing Adorno’s discussion of the culture industry, Kracauer’s essay, “Mass Ornament,” portrayed the role of movies, newsreels, variety shows, and other spectacles as constituting the “distraction factories” that are empty of social content. For Kracauer, Adorno, and the other Frankfurt School theorists, audiences and consumers believe that non-mainstream cultural styles are original, innovative, and express a type of rebellious and nonconformist cultural experience. Rather than challenging the status quo, music, film, and other forms of entertainment reflect the conformist tendencies shared by all forms of the culture industry.

It is in the context of the Frankfurt School’s critique of the culture industry that Henri Lefebvre’s insights on consumption, leisure, and alienation become poignant.<sup>8</sup> Several major themes unite Lefebvre’s oft-cited books, *Critique of Everyday Life* (Lefebvre, [1958]1991) and *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (Lefebvre, [1971]1984). One major theme involves theorizing the extension of alienation and the commodity form to the social realm of leisure and entertainment. For Lefebvre, leisure is not a separate social world that stands apart from the conditions of wage labor ([1958]1991, p. 29). In capitalist societies, leisure is commodified and rationalized, and therefore represents a profitable avenue of capital accumulation at the same time it involves the pacification of people through the ideology of consumerism: “leisure involves passive attitudes. Someone sitting in front of cinema screen offers an example and common model of this passivity, the potentially ‘alienating’ nature of which is immediately apparent. It is particularly easy to exploit these attitudes commercially” (p. 32). According to Lefebvre, commodified forms of leisure encourage the development of a society of “generalized display: television, cinema,

tourism” ([1971]1984, p. 53–54) which short-circuit active participation and signal the spread of alienation over all spheres of social life. “New types of alienation join the ranks of the old, enriching the typology of alienation: political, ideological, technological, bureaucratic, urban etc.” (p. 94). New forms of consumption, including advertising, film, and the mass media, mean that “alienation is spreading and becoming so powerful that it obliterates all trace or consciousness of alienation” (p. 94).

In a section of the *Critique of Everyday Life* entitled, “Critique of Needs,” Lefebvre argues that leisure and entertainment invert human values and relations through the creation of “fictitious, artificial, and imaginary needs” ([1958]1991, p. 161). Thus, advertisers, marketers, and other capitalist producers manufacture the need for leisure, vacations, and other “breaks” from work through the dissemination of advertising images, signs, and other simulations of pleasure and fantasy. Anticipating Marcuse’s (1964, 1968, pp. 159–200) contention that capitalism replaces authentic human needs with false ones, Lefebvre argued that the manufacturing of needs dovetails with the tendency toward the abstraction, homogenization, and quantification of human relations, embodied in the abstract commodity form. The image of advertising is of pleasure and enjoyment while the reality of capitalism is a mammoth increase in reification that blurs the distinction between the real and the non-real. As Lefebvre puts it:

We are now entering the vast domain of the *illusory reverse image*. What we find is a false world; firstly because it is not a world, and because it presents itself as true, and because it mimics real life closely in order to replace the real by its opposite; by replacing real unhappiness by fictions of happiness, for example-by offering a fiction in response to the real need for happiness-and so on. This is the ‘world’ of most films, most of the press, the theatre, the music hall: of a large sector of leisure activities. How strange the split between the real world and its reverse image is. For in the end it is not strange at all, but a false strangeness, a cheap-and-nasty, all-pervasive mystery ([1958], p. 1991, p. 35; emphasis in original).

For Lefebvre, the extension of alienated production to alienated consumption parallels the development of the “bureaucratic society of controlled consumption” (p. 60) in which the production and consumption of signs and images, rather than tangible material goods, becomes the essential vehicle of commodified exchange and communication. Quoting Lefebvre, “Consumer-goods are not only glorified by signs and ‘good’ in so far as they are signified; consumption is primarily related to these signs and not to the goods themselves” (p. 91). The result is that people do not consume commodities per se but consume signs, and signs of signs that are divorced from any referential relationship to actual consumer goods or

services. Reflecting Max Weber, Lefebvre suggests that in order for consumption to flourish, all aspects of life have to be increasingly rationally managed and designed, calculated, and quantified according to the dictates of formal rationality. This development portends the atomization and fragmentation of social life and, at the same time, integrates social life into the aegis of the commodification process. The dominance of exchange-value over use-value dissociates signifiers from signifieds, creating a “floating stock of meaningless signifiers” (1984, p. 116) that acquire an autonomous power. Thus, the ideology of consumption substitutes signs for human agency, and “for the image of active man that of the consumer as the possessor of happiness and of perfect rationality, as the ideal become reality” (p. 56). This shift is part of the increasing importance of consumption and consuming in the development of capitalism in the twentieth century, a position that parallels that of later theorists such as Boorstin (1962), Bauman (1992), and Lefebvre’s student, Jean Baudrillard, in his early work (Baudrillard [1968]1988, [1970]1988).

## **TOWARD THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE: CENTRAL CONCERNS OF THE SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL**

“theories are made only to die in the war of time: they are stronger or weaker units to be thrown at the right moment into combat” Guy Debord (quoted in Jappe, 1999, p. 114).

The work of the Frankfurt School and Henri Lefebvre reflect efforts at mid-century to understand the development of consumer capitalism, the commodification of leisure, and the increasing power of the culture industry in maximizing reification. It is in the same historical context, that the Situationist International developed a critical analysis of the role of advertising, entertainment, and consumption in the development of the “society of the spectacle.” The Situationists maintained that the rise of consumer capitalism in the 1920s and later had initiated a new stage in the development of modern societies where the manufacture of signs and images become the outcome and goal of production. For Debord, “spectacle” is “not a collection of images” but a “social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (1994, #4). The spectacle is the “totality of the commodity world” (#49) that represents the annihilation of use-value by exchange-value and the replacing of human needs by a “ceaseless manufacture of pseudo-needs” (#51), a position shared by Lefebvre and the

Frankfurt School. Much of Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* and Raoul Vaneigem's *Revolution in Everyday Life* (Vaneigem, [1967]2001) share Lefebvre's concern with alienation and the extension of the commodity form into everyday life. What distinguishes the Situationists's approach is their emphasis on commodification as a tripartite process of unification, trivialization, and homogenization of time and space; the centrality of consumption; and the "ever-intensifying imposition of alienation at all levels" (Debord, [1967]1994, #122) through the machinations of the mass media, advertising, and entertainment. To illustrate this approach, it is necessary to first grasp how the Situationists revised the Marxian categories of alienation, commodification, and reification in order to analyze the dynamics of twentieth century capitalism and to give these concepts new explanatory power.

*Alienation, Commodification, and the Homogenization of Time and Space*

Guy Debord's theorization of the spectacle extends Marxian discussions of alienation by tracing the transformation of social relations into abstract representations. For Marx, alienation manifested itself at the workplace where workers are alienated from the products of their labor, the process of production, from themselves as well as other human beings, and from their species-being and nature (Marx [1844]1978). Debord's contribution is to elaborate on Marx's theory of alienation to understand the extension of alienation to the sphere of consumption where hypothesized abstractions now affect all aspects of human life (#42). "Under capitalist regimes, 'to exist' and 'to have' are identical," Lefebvre had written in the *Critique of Everyday Life*, quoting Marx: "The man who has nothing is nothing" ([1958]1991, p. 155). Debord ([1967]1994, #17) agreed with Marx and Lefebvre that in the first phase of the historical development of alienation, "social life entailed an obvious downgrading of *being* into *having* that left its stamp on all human endeavor." Yet the transition to a society dominated by images and spectacles "entails a generalized shift from *having* to *appearing*" (#17, emphasis in original). Just as Marx lamented the alienated character of work as a process of estrangement and fragmentation, Debord maintains that "[s]eparation is the alpha and the omega of the spectacle," and individuals, atomized and dissociated from one another, rediscover their unity as "consumers" within the spectacle. In this view, social life becomes "blanketed by substratum after substratum of commodities" (#42) that

people become spectators of their own lives, assigned to roles that subject them to a condition of passive contemplation. As Debord puts it,

The spectator's alienation from and submission to the contemplated object (which is the outcome of his own unthinking activity) works like this: the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The spectacle's externality with respect to the acting is demonstrated by the fact that the individual's own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator feels at home nowhere, for the spectacle is everywhere (1994, #30).

It is important to note that Debord does not equate the spectacle with the television, film, or other means of mass media and communication. These are only manifestations of the larger system of social relations and institutions, from the economy to political system, art and science, culture and religion that paralyze self-activity and collective practice. In Debord's work, the spectacle is Janus-faced. On the one hand, the concept refers to the institutional apparatus of contemporary capitalism governed by class domination and the totalization of fetishism. On the other hand, the spectacle is an ideology, derived from material social conditions, which distorts reality and cloaks the exploitative conditions of capitalism in a *mélange* of images and signs. Debord and the other Situationists employed the metaphor of a motion picture to describe the society of the spectacle. During a motion picture, individuals are constituted as spectators rather than acting subjects, forced to observe the images that others create. Such a society is predicated on conformity, submission, inactivity, and contemplation. More broadly, the intensity and extensiveness of social and technological change combined with the speed of the changing images, on television and elsewhere, isolates and abstracts events and knowledge from the realm of affective and lived experience, creating a social condition of chronic ephemerality and discontinuity. As Debord ([1967]1994, #157) illustrates: "The pseudo-events that vie for attention in the spectacle's dramatizations have not been lived by those who are thus informed by them. In any case they are quickly forgotten, thanks to the precipitation with which the spectacle's pulsing machinery replaces one by the next."

To paraphrase Simmel ([1908]1971, [1903]1971, p. 337), the development of the society of the spectacle represents the pinnacle of the "tragedy of culture" whereby objective culture comes to dominate subjective culture. In place of the ensemble of concrete personal associations which are the source of authentic cultural creation and reproduction, the rule of the commodity induces separation and transforms culture (including law,

science, education, religion, and so on) into an object that is produced and valued for its instrumental qualities. In contrast to the inactivity of the spectacle, Debord and the Situationists advocate the construction of authentic community whereby people engage collectively in genuine communication and free exchange of ideas and knowledge. It is about, as Debord puts it, the active and imaginative creation of new desires, possibilities, and forms of living. The activist agenda of the Situationists focused on creating *dérives*, a technique of “rapid passage through varied ambiances” involving “playful-constructive behavior” (Debord, 1956a, 1956b). Drifting through the city at random, creating chance encounters, or engaging in disruptive acts to alter the routines of everyday life are techniques of the *dérive*. Such actions aimed to work through individual consciousness to help unlock the potential of the acting subject. For Debord, the subject “can only be the self-production of the living: the living becoming master and possessor of its world—that is, of history—and coming to exist as *consciousness of its own activity*” (#74, emphasis in original). Reflecting Marx’s famous published letter to Arnold Ruge (Marx [1843]1978, pp. 12–15), the Situationists committed themselves to a “ruthless critique of everything existing” and pointed to the need of constructing situations, a position they adopted from Sartre and the Surrealists.<sup>9</sup> In a 1957 text, “Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency’s Conditions of Organization of Action,” Debord suggested that

Our central idea is that of the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality ... The construction of situations begins on the ruins of the modern spectacle. It is easy to see what extent the very principle of the spectacle-nonintervention is linked to the alienation of the old world... The situation is thus designed to be lived by its constructors. The role played by a passive or merely bit-part playing “public” must constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors, but rather, in a new sense of the term, “livers,” must steadily increase ([1957]1981, pp. 22, 25).

One of the targets of critique in the work of the Situationists is the role of state policy and urban planning in the “self-destruction of the urban environment” (Debord, [1967]1994, #174) and the corresponding unification, trivialization, and homogenization of time and space. The notion of “unitary urbanism” reflected the Situationists’s belief that the problems of urban life could not be studied as separate and isolated issues but must be seen as interconnected (Situationist International, 1959). Running through Debord’s critique is a concern with the negative consequences of the development of mass suburbanization, shopping malls (“temples of frenetic

consumption,” #174), and the creation of an automobile-dependent populace in Western Europe and North America. As Swyngedouw (2002, p. 157) has noted, the modern metropolis is a recurrent theme in much of the work of Debord and the Situationists but “only to the extent that it constituted the spatialization of the most advanced form of capitalism.” Part of the Situationist critique of modern capitalism involved assailing transformation of the older sections of cities into “museums” for tourist consumption (Debord, [1967]1994, #65; Situationist International, 1959) and the tendency for planners to embrace “an *authoritarian decision-making process* that abstractly develops any environment into an environment of abstraction” (#173, emphasis in original). Debord’s assessment of urban planning and post-World War II metropolitan development is framed in terms of the destruction of indigenous cultures and place-bound traditions by commodity production and consumption. Commodification corrupts the sensuous, emotional, and qualitative aspect of authentic places by homogenizing space, allowing for its standardization and mass production, and ensuring its interchangeability. In his critique of travel, Debord laments that tourism is a “by-product of the circulation of commodities” and is a “chance to go and see what has been made trite” and artificial (#168). The society of the spectacle is a society devoid of community that integrates isolated individuals “as individuals *isolated together*” (#172, emphasis in original). As Debord continues,

Factories and cultural centers, holiday camps, and housing developments—all are expressly oriented to the goals of a pseudo-community of this kind. These imperatives pursue the isolated individual right into the *family cell*, where the generalized use of receivers of the spectacle’s message ensures that his isolation is filled with the dominant images-images that indeed attain their full force only by virtue of this isolation (#172, emphasis in original).

According to Debord, the spectacle’s destruction of place goes hand-in-hand with the destruction of history, loss of authentic time, and the coordinated planning and rationalization of an eternal present. Like space, time under the rule of the spectacle-commodity differs radically from time in pre-capitalist periods. In the chapter of the *Society of the Spectacle* called “Spectacular Time,” Debord draws attention to the significance of commodified time, where the qualitative and use-value of time is erased and transformed into a quantified, homogenized, and exchangeable unit (#149). Under the conditions of modern production and consumption, the production of pseudo-events and the selling of “‘fully-equipped’ blocks of time” (#152) become part of the expanding economy of leisure activities.

Paraphrasing Marx, who argued that the consumable product may serve as raw material for a further product, Debord maintains that consumable time is “raw material for the production of a diversity of new products to be put on the market” (#151). Time is appropriated to the consumption of images and modern society becomes obsessed with saving time, spending “quality” time with friends and family, and with maintaining young age and youthful appearances, which merely suggests that “under advertising’s bombardments it is simply forbidden to get old” (#160). Debord’s critique of time-as-commodity is based on his observation that time as lived and experienced, as a sequence of qualitative events that constitute traditions and community, has been replaced by the image of time, the advertisement of time, and consumable pseudo-cyclical time. Once time and space are commodified, it becomes possible to mass produce festivals and celebrations that incite people to spend money while producing only an illusion of community, a phenomenon discussed by George Ritzer (2000) in his analysis of McDonaldisation and Michael Sorkin and colleagues (Sorkin, 1992) in their explorations of the Disneyfication of urban space (see also Bryman, 1999; Eeckhout, 2001).

*From Reified Production to Reified Consumption*

Debord’s analysis of commodification and homogenization of time and space reflect larger Marxian concerns with the fetishism of commodities and reifying characteristics of contemporary capitalism and consumer culture. Whereas Lukács attempted to generalize Marx’s account of commodity fetishism from the sphere of work to other social institutions, the Situationists maintained that fetishism had moved into the sphere of representation, in which social relations are transformed into an image or spectacle. More broadly, Debord and the Situationists emphasize “the super-reification of image-objects as a massive unreality” (Best, 1989, pp. 31–32) that authenticates illusion as reality: “the spectacle is affirmation of appearance and affirmation of ... social life as mere appearance” (Debord, [1967]1994, p. 10). Debord’s insights in *the Society of the Spectacle* echo Vaneigem’s arguments in *Revolution of Everyday Life* that the “economy of consumption” has assimilated the “economy of production” and “the exploitation of labour power is submerged by the exploitation of everyday creativity. The same energy is torn from the worker in his hours of work and in his hours of leisure” (Vaneigem, [1967]2001, Chapter 2). In the realm of consumption, as Vaneigem ([1967]2001) argued, it is not

commodities that are alienating but the ideological conditioning that leads their buyers to choose them and their false promises of gratification and happiness. Reflecting Gramsci, Vaneigem maintains that consumerism, as the most recent manifestation of hegemonic domination, offers a false promise of material abundance and enjoyment while producing docility without the use of physical force. The “conditioning of choice” in consumer society is clever “mediations” which give the “illusion of action in a real passivity” and transform the consumer into “an essentially dependent thing.” As a result, “[t]he stolen mediations separate the individual from himself, his desires, his dreams, and his will to live; and so people come to believe in the myth that you can’t do without them, or the power that governs them” (Vaneigem, [1967]2001, Chapter 9).

The works of the Situationists connect to three schools of thought on the source of reification in modern society. First, the theorists associated with the Frankfurt School, especially Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse, identify the capitalist *production* process as the source of reification. For Marcuse (1964, p. 189) reification is akin to mystification and the “technical achievement of advanced industrial society, and the effective manipulation of mental and material productivity have brought about a *shift in the locus of mystification*.” Reification and ideology come “to be embodied in the process of production itself” and the “rational rather than the irrational becomes the most effective vehicle of mystification.” According to Marcuse, “a system that ‘delivers the goods’ legitimates itself in the process of commodity production and distribution” (pp. 1–18). Such a position corresponds with the Situationist position that the spectacle is a system of social and ideological control that reproduces consensus through the cultural domination of leisure, entertainment, and consumption. Rather than revolt against exploitation, the middle classes buy into new forms of entertainment, media spectacle, and cultural products that fuel consumer demand. Moreover, new communication and information technologies, new modes of entertainment, and other visual media broaden and extend a “jargon of authenticity” (Adorno, 1973) whereby people judge the image of sincerity of a speaker over and above the actual content of the message.

The Situationists maintain that the logic of reification has moved into the realm of consumption and representation and therefore has become universalized.<sup>10</sup> Yet neither Debord nor Vaneigem argue that consumption has displaced production as the prime source of capitalist exploitation, only that consumption is a further source of reification, in addition to the social relations of production. In the August 1964 issue of *Internationale Situationniste*, the Situationists noted that “with the development of leisure

and of forced consumption, pseudo-culture and pseudo-games not only become expanding sectors of the economy ... but tend to be what makes the entire economy run, by representing the very objective of that economy” (Situationist International, 1964). Reflecting Lefebvre, the Situationists view reification as a process of the imaging of society, “where the perceptible world is replaced by the set of images that are superior to that world yet at the same time impose themselves as *eminently* perceptible” (Debord, [1967]1994, #36, *emphasis in original*). In this situation, people produce art, culture, space, and time as consumable “things,” each of which combines a variety of other commodities that mask exploitative labor conditions. In turn, people do not experience events or reality as reflexive and acting subjects. Insofar as possible, consumer capitalism constructs people as acquiescent and submissive consumers, thereby reducing people’s capacity to perceive, conceive, and experience reality on multiple levels of complexity and sensitivity. According to Vaneigem ([1967]2001, Chapter 7),

[T]he present economic system can only be rescued by turning man into a consumer, by identifying him with the largest possible number of consumable values, which is to say, non-values, or empty, fictitious, abstract values. ... The stereotyped images of the star, the poor man, the communist, the murderer-for-love, the law-abiding-citizen, the rebel, the bourgeois, will replace man, putting in his place a system of multicopy categories arranged according to the irrefutable logic of robotisation. Already the idea of ‘teenager’ tends to define the buyer in conformity with the product he buys, to reduce his variety to a varied but limited range of objects in the shops (Records, guitars, Levis...). You are no longer as old as you feel or as old as you look, but as old as what you buy. The time of production-society where ‘time is money’ will give way to the time of consumption, measured in terms of products bought, worn out and thrown away.

Second, radical semiologists such as Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard argue that reification now manifests in the realm of the “code” or autonomous “sign” but do not specify the historical mechanisms by which this transformation occurs. Indeed their work is evasive on identifying whether capitalist consumption is the source of reification. For Baudrillard, the logic of reification is disembedded from social relations; it is not located in the logic of production or consumption. In *Simulations* (Baudrillard, 1983a) and *In the Shadow of Silent Majorities* (Baudrillard, 1983b), Baudrillard develops the argument that the ubiquity and complexity of the new media and informational world destroy referential reality by saturating the masses with signifiers and simulated models. In Baudrillard’s works, the commodity radiates with sign value in which the value of images, objects, and practices is organized into a hierarchy of prestige, coded differences,

and associative chains and symbols that “bears no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (1983a, p. 11). Sign value involves the atomization of the signifier in which common meanings and external referents break apart. Semiotic domination overrides materiality, and signifiers circulate in a purely contingent manner unconstrained by material or “structural” factors. Such a position emphasizes the causal primacy of semiotic over material exchange while maintaining that Marxian analyses of commodity production and consumption are antiquated and misguided. Against the Situationists, Baudrillard (1983a, p. 56) argues that “we are no longer in the society of the spectacle which the situationists talked about, nor in the specific types of alienation and repression which this implied.” Instead, we now live in a world dominated by “simulations” or infinite production of copies without originals, a situation that obliterates distinctions between real and illusory conditions or events, and evaporates the possibilities for genuine communication and agency.

The Situationist approach breaks with the semiotic determinism of Baudrillard and other radical semiologists. Whereas Baudrillard accepts the “impossibility of isolating the process of simulation” (1983a, p. 40), the Situationists locate the images and their reifying character in the process of commodification. More important, the strategy of the Situationists is to highlight the seemingly all-pervasive power of the spectacle while pointing to its antagonistic and contradictory aspects. On the one hand, the Situationists argued that attempts to conceptualize and organize the world along the imperatives of capitalist accumulation short-circuit resistant forms of collective action and discourage debate over genuine solutions to pressing social problems. On the other hand, they pointed out that the impoverishment of everyday life under the power of spectacular consumption creates the fissures that can nurture the development of revolutionary movements, a position shared by early Frankfurt School theorists. As Vaneigem ([1967]2001, Chapter 17) put it,

As we know, the consumption of goods ... carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction and the conditions of its own transcendence. The consumer cannot and must not ever attain satisfaction: the logic of the consumable object demands the creation of fresh needs, yet the accumulation of such false needs exacerbates the malaise of people confined with increasing difficulty solely to the status of consumers. Furthermore, the wealth of consumer goods impoverishes authentic life. It does so in two ways. First, it replaces authentic life with things. Secondly, it makes it impossible, with the best will in the world, to become attached to these things, precisely because they have to be consumed, i.e., destroyed. Whence an absence of life which is ever more frustrating, a self-devouring dissatisfaction.

A third position, advocated by Habermas (1984, 1987), locates reification in the sphere of formal rationality and the tendency of instrumental reason to colonize the “life-world.”<sup>11</sup> Following Max Weber’s critique of the rationalization process, Habermas argues that the dominance of efficiency and quantification in the capitalist production process and the administrative capacities of the welfare state reduce modern societies’ capacity to confront social problems by means of undistorted communication. Insofar as possible, the logic of formal rationality seeks to crush the substantive rationality of the life-world, the “context-forming background of processes of reaching understanding” through communicative action (Habermas, 1987, p. 204). The life-world is composed of several different elements, including culture, society, and personality. Each of these refers to rich emotional ties, strong cultural bonds and traditions, and normative prescriptions of appropriate individual and collective behavior. Engaging in communicative action and constructing meaning of the world in terms of these different themes reproduces the social world and integrates the individual into society. In contrast, the rationalization of the life-world assumes “the socio-pathological form of an internal colonization” (1987, p. 305) involving the growth of reification and the corresponding differentiation and fragmentation of society, culture, and personality (1987, p. 288). For Habermas, reification has its source in the process of instrumental or formal rationality which dominates all major institutions and suppresses the rich and diverse communicative capacities of the life-world (for an overview, see Dahms, 1998, pp. 16–21).

While Habermas attempts to specify the connection between reification and formal rationality, the Situationists approach stresses the capitalist character of reification. In a 1966 article, titled “The Root Structures of Reification,” Garnault (1966), another member of Situationists, noted that commodification and bureaucratization are twin processes that welcome each other: “The bureaucratization of capitalism does not mean an inner qualitative transformation, but on the contrary is an extension of the commodity form. The commodity was always bureaucratic.” Both the Situationists and Habermas (1987, p. 204) lament the tendency toward the rationalization of communication in the life-world, a process in which people’s styles of interaction come to be dominated by the pursuit of rational methods of achieving understanding and consensus. Under these conditions, abstract ideas such as freedom, democracy, and social justice lose their critical meaning and relevance and are transformed into politically legitimizing principles, a concern that permeates Vaneigem’s (1962, 1963) text “Basic Banalities” as well as other Situationists texts

(Situationist International, 1966). These concerns are also present in the work of Khayati (1966, p. 173), another member of the Situationist International, who argued that “[l]anguage colonized by bureaucracy is reduced to a series of blunt, inflexible formulas in which the same nouns are always accompanied by the same adjectives and participles.” For the Situationists, the dominance of commodification combined with the bureaucratic rationalization of consumption and information flows sanitizes language, robbing it of its depth and profundity, and abolishing critical distance through which people can challenge capitalism.

The Situationists’s critique thus follows a long tradition of theorizing reification as a subordination of human beings to objects (including representations, images, and signs) they have created. Yet, unlike Lukács, Adorno, and Horkheimer, the Situationists do not maintain that science and technology are reifying forces.<sup>12</sup> Early on, the Situationists followed Marx’s ([1846]1978, pp. 136–142) famous observation that technology could be a revolutionary force, a means to “imagine what can be done,” according to the Situationists (quoted in Jappe, 1999, p. 138). “[A]ll goods proposed by the spectacular system, from cars to televisions, also serve as weapons for that system,” according to Debord ([1967]1994, #28). When discussing environmental and social disasters, Debord did not denounce science but the subordination of science to a “spectacular domination” (quoted in Jappe, 1999, p. 138). The position of Debord and the Situationists parallels Marcuse’s (1964, p. 56) argument in *One-Dimensional Man* that while science and technology “sustain and streamline the continuum of domination” they are not inherently the “problem” and can be used to build a non-alienating society.

Despite the continuing significance of Situationist ideas there are unresolved dilemmas and limitations with Situationist theorizations. It is interesting to note the striking parallels between the deep cultural pessimism of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, in their later work, and the despair and cynicism of Debord (1988) in his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* published in 1988. Unlike the possibility of radical social change that Debord proclaimed in the *Society of the Spectacle*, by 1988, his optimism descends into fatalism and resignation that the spectacle has assimilated all instances of potential challenge and become a formidable and absolute power. In the *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord ([1967]1994, #63–#65) distinguished between two forms of spectacular power: the “concentrated” spectacle of totalitarian and overt state power and the “diffuse” spectacle of the rule of the commodity economy. By *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Debord (1988, pp. 11–12) maintained that these

categories had been assimilated into an all-pervasive “integrated” spectacle which is characterized by “incessant technological renewal, integration of state and economy, generalized secrecy, unanswerable lies, an eternal present.” These assertions have led critics to dismiss Debord’s work and claim that Situationist perspectives are outmoded and obsolete. We disagree and though we are critical of some of Debord’s totalizing claims and unreflexive theorizing, our goal is to update and extend Situationist theorizing via critical theory. To help remedy the theoretical, analytical, and practical limitations of the work of the Situationists, we call for the development of a critical theory that is more multidimensional and recognizes the conflictual and contradictory nature of different spectacles. Thus, we elaborate several major dimensions for understanding and analyzing consumption, spectacle, entertainment that a substantive critical theory must be willing to address.

### **TOWARD A CRITICAL THEORY OF ENTERTAINMENT AND SPECTACLE**

In our view, a critical theory will reject conceptualizations of spectacle as a totality in favor of an orientation that views spectacles as plural and multidimensional. From a dialectical and non-reductive perspective, a critical theory would identify and explain connections between different forms of spectacle (political, economic, and cultural), different types of spectacle (shopping malls, casinos, world fairs, sports, theme parks, tourist-oriented celebrations, media spectacles, and so on), and different technologies of spectacle (theming, simulation, virtual reality, and so on). As *Ritzer (2002, p. 200)* notes, not all spectacles take the commodity form. Political spectacles such as Watergate and the Monica Lewinsky scandal, military spectacles such as the Gulf War and the War in Iraq, and media spectacles such as the O.J. Simpson trial each have their own logic, suggesting that there are “multiple logics” that shape the production of spectacles. In short, a critical theory would eschew univocal explanations and refuse to reduce spectacles to any one dimension. Thus, a critical theory would draw attention to the role that different spectacles play as forms of commodified pleasure, how spectacles define individuals as consumers, and the impact of the entertainment industry in using advertising and marketing to constitute consumer desires and needs, and then exploiting them for profit. This analytic approach seeks to identify and explain conflicts,

contradictions, and crisis tendencies within the different forms, types, and technologies of spectacle. We break with Debord's extreme conception that the spectacle is the central organizing principle of society. Spectacles are part of a wider and multifaceted totality of capitalist modernity that includes the changing dynamics of the economy, culture, political system, and so on.

In addition, a critical theory would eschew generalized and abstract notions of spectacle and examine the interconnected processes that constitute the diverse forms, types, and technologies of spectacle. Against monolithic views, it is helpful to view spectacles as comprising the interconnected processes of production, consumption, representation, and regulation. Individuals and groups cannot consume spectacles without the corresponding and prior production and representation of spectacles. The production of spectacle refers to the multifaceted process of capital accumulation that involves investment, circulation, and profit realization through the commodification of images, space, and so on. A dialectical perspective would combine both macro- and micro-levels to understand how different governments and political organizations work with economic elites and private interests to produce spectacles; how different marketers and advertising agents use images and theming strategies to represent spectacles; which groups and interests oppose different spectacles; and which contending groups use spectacles to advance their own resistant agendas. Analyzing the different dimensions of spectacle also means exploring what social identities are connected with different spectacles, how people use and consume spectacles to reinforce or challenge identity categories, and what mechanisms regulate the distribution and use of particular spectacles. In this sense, while particular spectacles are produced by a combination of local power interests and multinational corporations, and regulated by various governmental frameworks, it is also necessary to explore the lived consumer experience and the role of human agents in shaping meanings and representations of different spectacles.

The above points suggest a further concern, namely, that a critical theory would reject views that consumers are cultural dupes that are manipulated by the producers and organizers of spectacles. In contrast, a critical theory would probe the diverse forms of action and resistance that consumers engage in to challenge corporate attempts to induce them to conform to established patterns of consumer behavior. Consumers of spectacles are not simply passive "recipients" of accepted meanings produced by advertisers and marketers. They are actively involved in the production of meaning and, indeed, produce meanings, some which are unintended by the promoters of spectacles. Indeed, spectacles are sites of struggle where powerful economic

and political interests are often forced to defend what they would prefer to have taken for granted. In this conception, spectacles are “a horizon of meaning: a specific or indefinite multiplicity of meanings, a shifting hierarchy in which one, now another meaning comes momentarily to the fore” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 222, emphasis in original). While spectacles connect to a larger process of ideological production and transmission, this process is not a one-dimensional process of indoctrination, but rather, is an active process of negotiation that groups of consumers can resist or transform to their own needs and interests. Reflecting de Certeau (1984, p. 21), who draws attention to the different “tactics of consumption,” consumers often use spectacles for ends rather different from those inscribed within them by their makers, suggesting that the consumption of spectacles is always contextual and relational (see also du Gay, 1996, p. 165; du Gay & Pryke, 2002). While the representation of spectacles connects to issues of political and economic power, the interpretation of spectacles is filtered through prior experience, one’s social location and identity (race, class, gender, and so on), and one’s conversations and engagement with others. Understanding the cultural construction of spectacles requires addressing a range of processes from encoding the practices of institutions involved in the representation of spectacles to individual and collective responses to these dominant representations.

In addition, a critical theory would analyze relations of domination and subordination, and the ways that inequality and exploitation are built into the structure and operation of spectacles. A critical theory would relate exploitative work relations in the sphere of consumption to wider structures of capitalism, and patterns of class, race, and gender inequality. At the same time, a critical theory recognizes that spectacles contain emancipatory as well as oppressive qualities. Critical theory is thus political, relating theory to practice and suggesting possibilities for emancipatory social change (Antonio, 1981). The Frankfurt School’s notion of immanent critique, for instance, evaluates the existing state of affairs in terms of society’s dominant ideas and values, showing in varied ways the problems and unrealized potentials. The purpose of immanent critique, as Horkheimer noted in *Eclipse of Reason* (1974), is to discern what aspects of existing society should be negated or transcended, in order to create a better society. The Situationists informed their critique of the spectacle with a vision of liberation using the strategy of detournement, a practice of transforming the original meaning of a photograph, film, advertisement, or other text by placing it in a new context, using new images and signs, to reveal the oppressive character of consumer capitalism and expose the contrast between

the image of abundance and the reality of poverty and material suffering (Jorn, 1959; Debord, [1967]1994, #206–211). For the Situationists, detournement is revolutionary praxis that attempts to reveal that the ideas, values, and cultural and technological means of launching progressive social change are already available to everyone. According to Vaneigem ([1967]2001), “all Situationist ideas are noting other than the faithful development of acts attempted constantly by thousands of people to try and prevent another day from being no more than twenty-four hours of wasted time.” The goal of Situationist practice is to appropriate the texts, images, and advertisements that are produced by the spectacular society in an effort to bring critical awareness to people’s struggles and conflicts, and to incite collective revolt against the stultification induced by entertainment and spectacle.

Finally, a critical theory would analyze past developments and current happenings using the method of immanent critique. As we enter into a new millennium we find that new communications and information technology are eroding previous stable conceptions of time and space, reinforcing a situation of ephemerality, chaos, and fragmentation that Harvey (1989) discussed in the *Condition of Postmodernity*. Douglas Kellner’s book on *Media Spectacle* (Kellner, 2003), George Ritzer’s book on the *Globalization of Nothing*, Gottdiener’s (1997, 2000) analysis of theming and consumption, and Hannigan’s (1998) study of the rise of “fantasy cities” draw attention to the new forms of spectacle, entertainment, and simulation that are transforming the society. These diverse thinkers imply that the processes of commodification and rationalization are producing widespread socio-cultural change, but they disagree over the form, impact, and periodization. The work of the Frankfurt School, Henri Lefebvre, and the Situationists offer the conceptual and analytic tools to understand the present conjuncture and provide crucial resources for a renewal of critical social theory. On advantage of critical theory, as Dahms (1997, p. 204) notes, is that it “cuts through veil of power and ideology” that existing theoretical perspectives often fail to identify (and often reflect or perpetuate). Critical theory provides a normative and analytic perspective, as well as critical and methodological standards, to evaluate the validity of different claims and data sources, and identify the shortcomings of different theoretical and methodological approaches. In this sense, critical theory offers a logic of analysis that brings a critical eye to the subject matter of culture, consumption, and entertainment; portrays contradictions between images and reality; and points to avenues to overcome these contradictions. The immanent critique of critical theory is not a reductionistic or idealistic because it aims for a fusion of theory and practice, for praxis.

## CONCLUSION

In light of our attempt to illuminate the Situationists's ideas on consumption and spectacle by pointing out certain affinities with Henri Lefebvre's insights on consumer capitalism and the Frankfurt School's critique of the culture industry, the Situationists offered a penetrating analysis of the development of postwar capitalism organized around consumption, entertainment, and new forms of domination. The Situationists in the 1950s and 1960s found themselves in a complex and changing socio-historical juncture and adapted and extended the classical ideas of Marx, Lukács, and Lefebvre to provide theoretical understanding of tenacity and resiliency of twentieth century capitalism. For Lukács, Lefebvre, and the Frankfurt School theorists, the reproduction of capitalist social relations took the form of the reproduction of labor power and the production of space, technology, and raw materials through the precepts of formal rationality. *For the Situationists, the development of the society of the spectacle inaugurates a new, qualitatively different, stage in the development of capitalism.* This stage of "consumer" capitalism includes the production and consumption of signs and spectacular images, the commodification of time and space and their transformation into abstract representations, and the development of new forms of advertising and marketing that operate through a bureaucratized communication and information network to stimulate consumer demand. In the world of consumer capitalism, fetishized commodities and reified social conditions obscure the relations of exploitation and alienation and ensure the survival and reproduction of capitalism through the creation of artificial needs and fictions of material abundance for all people.

Our integrative attempts have been motivated by a concern to connect several variants of Marxian social theory to each other in a meaningful manner, to address important social problems and empirical concerns, and answer questions of cultural significance. The Situationists's writings on consumption, entertainment, and spectacle have attracted much attention in recent years. Although their writings reflect the concerns of Marx, Lukács, and Lefebvre, their contribution to critical theory has yet to be assessed. Part of this problem has been that their work is widely interpreted by scholars as paradoxical and contradictory. The Situationists failed to distinguish normative issues from empirical ones and their tendency for overgeneralization and romanticism has caused scholars to easily dismiss their ideas. Despite limitations, we have argued that the Situationists's perspectives, if understood in historical context and in social theoretical

terms, can provide a promising starting point for developing a critical theory of consumer capitalism and for guiding empirical analysis on the changing relationship between economy and society. In addition, we have argued the case for a renewed interest in Situationist work by connecting their theories of alienation and reification to the broader Marxian concern with understanding the contradictions and crisis tendencies of capitalism. Our effort has been to renew the collaborative project of critical theory, specifying a starting point for rigorous sociological-research on consumption and entertainment, and on explicating the possibilities for social transformation.

The broad social transformations that are taking place in communication and information technology and globalized entertainment require the sort of radical reconstruction of social theory that Lukács, the Frankfurt School, and Lefebvre performed on Marxian theory in the 1920s and later. To grasp the changes that are occurring, we need more intense focus on political economy than is found in accounts that stress the ascendancy of cultural politics over class and the state, champion new consumption-based and niche-marketed “identities,” or explanations that maintain that the world of consumption and consumption experience is one in which image, advertising, and consumerism take primacy over production. Today, growing commodification of public goods and previously non-commodified realms of social activity means that increased “choice” is constrained by class and that the widely celebrated growth of new forms of consumption sharpens the material divisions between groups. Neoclassical economics assumes that consumer demand, tastes and preferences, and individual and group choices are given and that people freely enter markets to satisfy their desires and maximize individual utility. Yet schools of marketing for years have taught students and advised businesses on how to influence and control preferences, tastes, and motivations through advertising and other public relations efforts. Affirmations of “difference,” free “choice,” and consumer “demand” stressed in advertising combined with the growth of niche-markets belie the increasing dominance of transnational corporations in homogenizing cultural production and constraining consumer preferences. In addition, in the leisure and entertainment spaces of the changing city, paying substandard wages to an urban service proletariat helps subsidize the production of spectacle and entertainment. Linking political economy with issues of culture and marketing helps to focus attention on the role of simulations and imagery in stimulating consumer demand without missing or downplaying the exploitation and inequality that make possible the spaces of consumption devoted to glorifying and reproducing spectacles.

The analytic tools and resources of critical theory sensitize us to the complex, contradictory, and conflictual nature of new forms of consumption, entertainment, and spectacle. Today, the growth of globalized entertainment, media spectacle, and tourism suggests a process of standardization and rationalization that creates homogeneity and uniformity and thereby eradicates local differences and indigenous cultures, a phenomenon that George Ritzer (2004, p. 3) calls the “globalization of nothing,” in which “nothing” refers to a social form that is generally “centrally conceived, controlled, and comparatively devoid of distinctive content.” On the other hand, new globalized forms of cultural production and consumption sow the seeds of immanent critique that make possible new forms of resistance and opposition, thus nurturing diversity, variety, and hybridity. One advantage of critical theory is that it can help us grasp that processes of production, consumption, representation, and regulation of spectacles are forces of both homogeneity and heterogeneity, thus helping us avoid reductionist explanations. Another advantage is that critical theory can help fashion analyses that probe specific social conditions, power dynamics, and relations of domination and subordination that make consumption, simulation, theming, and advertising possible in the first place. Finally, critical theory can expose the theoretical limitations of rival explanations that refuse to critically probe the social relations underlying the production of spectacle. These theoretical advantages can help identify the key actors and organized interests involved in manufacturing cultural signifiers, and interrogate and explain the consequences of the actions of powerful groups, thereby pointing to possibilities for progressive societal transformation.

## NOTES

1. Originally published in France in 1967, *Society of the Spectacle* contains nine chapters organized into 221 theses composed in an aphoristic style. The book contains no page numbers and the citations to the text we use refer to the numbered theses. For many years, the book was only available in English published by Black and Red (Detroit, 1970). A new French edition appeared in 1983 and a new translation in 1994. We refer to the 1994 translation by Donald Nicholson-Smith.

2. We use the term “Situationists” throughout this paper to refer to the changing members of the Situationist International (S.I.), formed in 1957 and disbanded in 1972. See complete texts of the Situationists at [www.nothingness.org](http://www.nothingness.org); [www.cddc.vt.edu](http://www.cddc.vt.edu); [www.situationist.cjb.net](http://www.situationist.cjb.net); [www.notbored.org](http://www.notbored.org); [www.bopsecrets.org](http://www.bopsecrets.org).

3. The Situationist International was a merger of surrealist-inspired visual artists and architects and a group of anarcho-socialist political theorists and activists who

had been affiliated with the Lettrist International and the Imaginative Bauhaus. These different orientations were held together in an uncomfortable coalition through the late 1950s and early 1960s, splitting in 1962 when the visual artists/architects broke off and formed what some have labeled the “second situationist international” around the “CoBrA” (Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam) group of artists and architects who developed autonomously after 1962 but along lines consistent with the Situationist International’s writings. The primary break was a result of Guy Debord’s insistence that art and architecture would cease to exist as a separate, specialized activity for artistic virtuosos, since everyday life itself would be art in a post-revolutionary world. The CoBrA group, perhaps best represented by Constant’s “New Babylon” project, aimed at developing architecture that would enable playful, interactive, creative, and non-sterile interaction. The total size of the Situationist International was never large, and apart from an annual conference, the primary “unifier” of the group was its publication, the *International Situationist*, published on an erratic schedule between 1957 and 1969. There were periodic purgings of the remaining members during the 1960s, so that by the end of the decade, the group had essentially imploded. The Situationist International officially disbanded in 1972 (for overviews, see Bracken, 1999; Jappe, 1999).

4. We follow a long tradition of theorizing that embraces immanent critique as a powerful analytical and practical tool of analysis and explanation. According to Benhabib: “[Immanent] critique refuses to stand outside its object and instead juxtaposes the immanent, normative self-understanding of its object to the material actuality of the object. Criticism privileges an Archimedean standpoint, be it freedom, or reason and proceeds to show the unfreedom or unreasonableness of the world when measured against this ideal paradigm” (Benhabib, 1986, pp. 33). Unlike standpoint epistemology, where criticism emanates from the privileged social location of the social critic, immanent critique makes no assumptions about the critic. Instead, immanent critique focuses on the discrepancies and contradictions between the object of criticism and its explicit reality claims. Critical ideas do not have to be brought from outside by an autonomous critical standpoint or radical vanguard because they are already contained immanently within existing conditions. The practice of immanent critique is neither the production of moral statements nor normative judgments but critical interrogation, or “ruthless critique” according to Marx, of the terms and categories of existing society. The objective of immanent critique is to show the human construction of institutions, organizations, and relations, and thus to denaturalize them by removing them from the reified terrain of the “self-evident.” As such, immanent critique calls for analysis capable of deciphering the basis of exploitative relations in order to identify societal contradictions, injustices, and unrealized potential. In this way, we can criticize contemporary capitalism, not on the basis of privileged standpoints or transcendent standards, but from the perspective of an embryonic society developing within the old. “The conditions of [transcendence],” wrote Marx and Engels “result from the premises now in existence” (*The German Ideology*).

5. Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, Antonio Gramsci, and Ernst Bloch generally are considered the founders of “Western Marxism” (for an overview, see Agger (1979); see also Lowy, 1996; Poster, 1975, pp. 42–49). Marx’s early work, especially the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* Marx ([1932]1964), was heavily

influenced by G. W. F. Hegel but remained marginalized by Marxian scholars until the 1920s. Lukács's major contribution was to re-emphasize the Hegelian roots of Marx's theory by stressing the importance of the dialectical method and the interconnectedness of the subjective and objective dimensions of social life. According to Martin Jay, Lukács's seminal work, *History and Class Consciousness* (Lukács ([1922]1968)), "anticipated in several fundamental ways the philosophical implications of Marx's 1844 Manuscripts, whose publication antedated by almost a decade" (Jay, 1984, p. 102). Arato and Breines (1979, p. ix) pointed out that Lukács's work "was recognized by critics and sympathizers alike as a major event in the history of both Marxist and bourgeois thought." The renewed interest in subjective factors, dialectics, and concepts such as alienation and fetishism had a profound influence on the development of the Frankfurt School (Feenberg, 1981).

6. See Anderson (1993), Jay (1984), Starosta (2003), and Dahms (1997, 1998) for overviews on the history and application of the concept of reification in modern social theory.

7. The scholarship on the Frankfurt School is vast. For overviews, see Calhoun (1995), Kellner (1989, 1993); Jay (1973); Bottomore (1984); Agger (1998); Bernstein (1995); Wellmer ([1969]1971). See Cook (1996) for a critical assessment of the Frankfurt School's analysis of the culture industry.

8. Despite his prolific and wide-ranging writings, it has only been in recent years that Lefebvre's critical ideas on the city and "everyday life" has become popular in the English-speaking world. Along with Norman Guterman, Lefebvre translated and helped publish Marx's Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844. In 1939, Lefebvre published his *Dialectical Materialism* which drew attention to the Hegelian roots of Marxian theory. Gardiner (2000, p. 71) maintains that Lefebvre is "the quintessential critical theorist of everyday life." Scholars such as David Harvey, Manuel Castells, Mark Gottdiener, Joe Feagin, and Talmadge Wright have elaborated on Lefebvre's political economy of space. Many other urban scholars have incorporated Lefebvre's ideas into their perspectives and analyses, including Rob Shields, Fredrick Jameson, Michael Dear, Neil Smith, and Edward Soja, among others (for reviews, see Shields, 1999; Gottdiener, 1994; Benko & Strohmeyer, 1997; Liggett & Perry, 1995).

9. For an overview of the concept of the "situation" in the work of Sartre, see Poster (1975, pp. 89–105). See Gardiner (2000, pp. 104–106) for an elaboration on the use and application of the "situation" in the work of the Situationists.

10. The concept of reification never appears in Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* but appears several times in Vaneigem's *Revolution of Everyday Life* (Chapters 2, 12, 21, and 23), and other Situationist writings. Debord's ideas on fetishism and the reifying character of consumption are indebted to Karl Korsch who held that fetishism sufficed to describe reification.

11. Habermas's "colonization of the lifeworld" echoes one of Debord's key concepts, that of the "colonization of everyday life." The crucial difference is that Debord derives his concept from Lefebvre's notion of "everyday life" whereas Habermas's "lifeworld" comes from the theory of Alfred Schütz. Habermas's ideas on reification are consciously and explicitly connected to Weber's theory of rationalization and Talcott Parsons's systems-theoretic approach (for overview, see Calhoun, 1988, pp. 221–223).

12. In “Notes on Science and the Crisis,” Horkheimer (1989) contended that science and technology could be forces of emancipation that might dramatically improve human life. For Horkheimer, the irrationality of capitalism corrupts the scientific method, turning it into an end in itself dominated by instrumental rationality and a positivist epistemology. In their later works, the Frankfurt School theorists would adopt a highly critical view of science and technology, leading them to an increasingly “pessimistic” critique of modern capitalism and cynical view of the future (Postone, 1993, pp. 84–120).

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# SIGNIFYING THE JEW: ANTISEMITIC WORKERS AND JEWISH STEREOTYPES DURING WORLD WAR II

Mark P. Worrell

For the left, depending upon time and place and before they were simply forgotten from the 1980s to the present, the working class (if I may speak of it as a unitary object) has alternated between, on the one hand, an object of metaphysical faith (a la Marx) and, on the other, an unreliable mob to be replaced by party, vanguard, etc. Reformers and liberals have generally maintained a deep ambivalence toward workers: they may be brutish and dumb but they are victims of society and their lot can be improved through relief and charity. And, of course, conservatives have consistently bemoaned the horrific day workers arrived at self-consciousness making a mockery of order and duty. These stances were all preconceptions or arrived at through some kind of “experience” yet, relatively speaking, the way that workers think and feel as a class (vis-à-vis their capacity for either social democracy or authoritarianism) has seldom and only sporadically been submitted to rigorous, in-depth, scientific inquiry. The impulse to critically investigate workers, their radical or reactionary capacities, finally took off and came to fruition in the 1930s and 1940s when, nearly alone, the Frankfurt School

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undertook a series of research projects into the hearts and minds of both European and American laborers. The most impressive of their projects (I would argue that it was the single most important piece of empirical research in the history of critical sociology) was one conducted between 1944 and 1945 in several major cities around the United States to determine the state of readiness, on the part of organized labor (especially the CIO), to defend democracy against the specter of fascism and Nazi ideology. To what extent, they wanted to know, had antisemitism – the most perfected, avant-garde form of authoritarian ideology and the “spearhead of fascism” – penetrated the labor movement? Oddly enough the research project called “Antisemitism among American Labor, 1944–1945” was completed but never published and remains, to this day, virtually unknown to all but a handful of scholars. The labor antisemitism project, pioneering and unexpected in so many ways, is situated within the larger context and development of Western Marxism, the collapse of the Second International, and the rise of the Nazis.

## FROM INEVITABILITY TO INQUIRY

Faith in working-class revolution and the inevitability of socialism all but evaporated in the wake of the First World War when nationalism and patriotism triumphed over the principles of international solidarity and, as Perry Anderson put it, “The unity and reality of the Second International, cherished by Engels, was destroyed in a week” ([1976]1979, p. 14).<sup>1</sup> The notion of revolutionary inevitability seems embarrassingly naïve today (to the point that, now, discussions of radicalism are much more likely to focus on intellectuals rather than labor movements)<sup>2</sup> but prewar optimism was, in many ways, justified and, in fact, the idea of inevitability was shared across the political spectrum and not merely a symptom of the left. Dreading the rise of “plebian radicalism” Rudolf Sohm, for example, wrote that “The people is [sic] already aware of its powers. Already it has recognized itself as the real nation. The battalions of the workers are about to form, that they may thrust from its throne the bourgeoisie, the monarch of the present. More and more clearly are shown the signs of a movement, the aim of which is to destroy the entire social order, the State, the Church, the family ... .” (Smith, 1998, p. 38).

Nietzsche thought that European workers were incapable of subjugation once they were stirred from their slumber. Writing about the “labor

question” in *Twilight of the Idols* he said that, “The stupidity ... is that there is a labor question at all.”

I simply cannot see what one proposed to do with the European worker now that one has made a question of him. He is far too well off not to ask for more and more, not to ask more immodestly. In the end, he has numbers on his side. The hope is gone forever that a modest and self-sufficient kind of man, a Chinese type, might here develop as a class ... . The worker was qualified for military service, granted the right to organize and to vote: is it any wonder that the worker today experiences his own existence as distressing – morally speaking, as an injustice? But what is *wanted*? I ask once more. If one wants an end, one must also want the means: if one wants slaves, the one is a fool if one educates them to be masters ([1888] 1982, p. 545).

Influenced by Nietzsche, Max Weber was famously fearful of bureaucratized socialism as a “shell of bondage”: “State bureaucracy would rule alone if private capitalism were eliminated. The private and public bureaucracies, which now work next to, and potentially against, each other and hence check one another to a degree, would be merged into a single hierarchy. This would be similar to the situation in ancient Egypt, but it would occur in a much more rational – and hence unbreakable – form” (1978, p. 1402). Weber had sympathy for the working class but, like Nietzsche, could not honestly abandon “a cultured existence based on *their* labor” (Weber, 1988, p. 630). But reservations and fears aside, the bottom line was that politically organized social democracy seemed unstoppable before 1914 – and for good reasons. Far from passive objects of history, European workers proved time and again, through brutal struggle and heroic sacrifice that society was, as Marx observed, not a “solid crystal” and that they had the willingness and ability to not only strike fear into the hearts of the capitalist class but effect substantial changes. However, worker militancy and solidarity were *contradictory* and *unreliable* among all but the most dedicated, vanguard elements – and even on the cutting edge there were no guarantees. The dream of socialism, in other words, had empirical legs to stand on, but the certainty of inevitable revolution was predicated on more than either history or the facts could bear. But if starry-eyed optimism looked foolish in retrospect<sup>3</sup> then so too did the pessimism underlying vanguardism and substituting the party for the people and then leader for party.

While it is true that traditionalism and orthodoxy limped on during the 1920s, level-headed scholars of the working class, especially after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, were led, finally, to explore the antimonies of class psychology, family socialization, authoritarian psychodynamics, theology, political ideologies, propaganda, culture, art, and racism, among other “subjective” factors that figure into class containment and preservation of

capitalist social relations. Standout contributions, from my perspective, were: Reich's ([1934]1972) essay on class consciousness and his monumental *Mass Psychology of Fascism* ([1946/1970]1933); the Frankfurt School's work on authority and family (ISR, 1936) and its Weimar proletariat study (Fromm, 1984); Kracauer's (1995, 1998) investigations into working-class culture, entertainment, and lifestyles; Fromm's (1941) classic *Escape from Freedom* which, in many ways, represented a popularized, thumbnail sketch of the Institute's work up to the mid-1930s; Neumann's ([1944]1966) exhaustive analysis of the "structure and practice of National Socialism"; Massing's (1949) examination of political antisemitism in nineteenth-century Germany; and the Institute's controversial *Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, 1950) which, essentially, capped off the Institute's theoretical exploration of the fascist character.<sup>4</sup> Empirically existing people, as it turned out, were far more ambivalent, contradictory, and complex than either the cardboard constructs of revolutionary slogans or the static carriers of historical identities posited by orthodoxy.

The apex of this line of inquiry came, I would argue, during World War II when the Institute conducted its labor antisemitism research. Their written report of 1945, consisting of more than 1,400 pages over 4 volumes, was titled "Antisemitism among American Labor"<sup>5</sup> and it offers a wealth of information on a peculiar, ideological form of mass hatred and its relation to class, religion, gender, age, and numerous other factors. Oddly, the project (carried out by Paul Massing, A. R. L. Gurland, Leo Lowenthal, and Friedrich Pollock – with Adorno providing general oversight) has gone virtually unnoticed by all but a handful of intellectual historians. The unpublished report<sup>6</sup> was significant for a number of reasons not the least of which was that it exploded orthodox assumptions that the American working class was the natural defender of democratic values. At a time when America was supposedly at war to defend democracy against fascism the Institute's researchers found that nearly 30% of the workers investigated were to one degree or another sympathetic toward or unwilling to denounce the Nazi program of anti-Jewish hostility – ranging from desires to see Jews somehow controlled or restricted to full-blown extermination (more than 10% of the workers were essentially pro-Nazi).

Ultimately a full 50% of the workers questioned were afflicted by anti-semitic feelings of varying intensities. Widespread antisemitism meant, from both a theoretical and political standpoint, that American labor was seriously debilitated and unprepared to resist an authoritarian onslaught against democracy. Nazi-like propaganda, aided by the likes of Father Coughlin and his ilk (see Warren, 1996 for more on the Coughlin–Nazi connection), had significantly penetrated the collective consciousness of American workers

and had made inroads within the labor movement (both the AFL and the CIO). Another interesting aspect of the report was the extent to which the empirical findings of Gurland and Massing (the two principle authors of the report and two of the central figures belonging to what I refer to as the “Other Frankfurt School”) clashed with the philosophical inclinations of the Institute’s “inner circle” – especially Horkheimer and, to lesser extent, Adorno. In short, it appears that the famous and ultra pessimistic *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, published at roughly the same moment that the Institute was conducting its analysis of American labor, was to a great extent flawed in its infidelity to empirical reality ([1944]1972).<sup>7</sup> The labor antisemitism study revealed shocking truths about American society but a dialectical approach to the data, like that of Massing and Gurland, did not warrant the fatal conclusions drawn by Horkheimer. In fact, as the report stated, there was in fact “good news” to be found in the data such that the sample, skewed as it was in order to focus on the CIO, served as a crystal ball into the future of the labor movement and, according to Massing, the future (higher levels of education, younger workers, and female participation) all pointed to decreasing levels of antisemitic (authoritarian) bias over time.

## LABOR STUDY DATA AND METHODS

The Institute gathered data from major metropolitan areas including New York, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles. Their targets were CIO, AFL, and nonunionized workers engaged in defense-related industries. They collected data on skilled, semi-skilled, and manual laborers. There were also data regarding “professionals” and office workers, i.e., nonfactory employees as well as the occasional housewife. However, agricultural and mining workers were neglected as were workers in the South. The question of sample representativeness was certainly an issue and one that the Institute acknowledged. They concluded that, given their task of determining the level of antisemitism within war industries, their sample was adequately drawn and representative of American labor. As the report states:

The present study is not based on a systematically selected sample. Neither American labor as a whole nor any particular section within it was sampled in proportion to actual statistical distribution. Conceived as an experiment in methods and new approaches, the investigation centered on such groups of workers as could be easily contacted. Limitations of time and personnel made random selection of interviewees unavoidable . . . . In spite of the accidental mode of selection, the sample that was finally obtained seems representative of some major groups of the working population (ISR, 1945, pp. 30–31).

My suspicion is that the Institute was concerned mainly with the vaunted CIO because it was supposed to represent the cutting edge of labor radicalism in the United States. They wanted to know, if, at the decisive moment, the CIO would be capable of repulsing fascism. In effect, this study was, to some extent, an extension of their earlier work on the Weimar proletariat. But, considering their funding sources, including the conservative AJC, they had to be creative in their framing of the study.

The Institute gathered data from 967 separate people but the bulk of the research was based upon “screened” interviews of 566 workers conducted by 270 volunteer interviewers. “Screened” simply meant that the interviewers were operating “under cover” as participant observers. Interviewers came from the shop floors themselves and were acquainted with the interviewees. They memorized a battery of questions and then engaged in open-ended interviews (and follow-up interviews) with other workers and then compiled notes after the fact. Workers from 26 AFL and CIO unions were selected for this study – although nonunion workers were also interviewed (the sample composition, in terms of unionization, was AFL = 28.8%, CIO = 38.5%; Nonunion = 29.5%). More than 300 other interviews were conducted with officials and leaders of labor unions and organizations (Pollock was responsible for this section of the report).

The questions they asked were: (1) Do Jewish people act and feel different from others? What do people say about them? (2) Can you tell a Jew from a non-Jew? How? (3) Do you mind working with Jews on the job? Why? Have you ever worked with any? (a) How about working with Negroes (not posed to black workers)? (4) Did you know any Jews before you started in your first job? At school or in your hometown? What were they like? (5) How do you feel about what the Nazis did to the Jews in Germany? (6) Are there people in this country who would like to see feelings against the Jews grow? What groups? Why do they want it? (7) Do people think the Jews are doing their share in the war effort? What do you think?

The problem of interviewer bias was a particularly thorny issue the Institute confronted. The interview process, or, more accurately, avoiding the “interview situation” was the paramount concern. Interviewers were instructed not to act as mere passive recorders of what was said but to engage in “conversation” and not to shy away from challenging statements. The ISR discovered that workers were no less likely to express their true feelings to a skeptical interviewer as they were to a passive one so long as “bitter clashes” were avoided. Further, the interviewers found that antisemitic workers showed little in the way of reticence in expressing their thoughts. What was important was maintaining a casual, informal,

conversational situation that would not inhibit communication by virtue of feeling like an “interview.” In hindsight, the Institute also concluded that it was probably a mistake to exclude the most militant, pro-union, progressive, workers from acting as interviewers because those traits were, in retrospect, not thought to color the interview or hinder the free expression of thoughts. Another revelation to the researchers was that highly educated interviewers tended to project their own concerns into the interview process and more frequently attempted to influence the interviewee’s responses.

Close to 4,500 questionnaires were distributed in one way or another over the life of the project. Many collected dust or wound up in the trash of union officers, some were lost, some were given to people who agreed to conduct interviews, and then backed out of the project, etc. Approximately half of the questionnaires distributed to the target sample were ultimately completed. In survey research, completion rates of 80–85% are typically expected. The reasons for the Institute’s low completion rate were due to a number of factors including the unwillingness of union officers and management to allow “horrible” and “shocking” responses to be returned to the field workers. Had the Institute been able to incorporate the unreturned questionnaires, the results of the study may have been weighted further to the antisemitic, pro-Nazi end of the spectrum. In short, when the ISR concluded that nearly 11% of their sample possessed Nazi-like mentalities and that 30% of the sample was deeply affected by the hatred of Jews, those figures should be considered the best-case scenario.<sup>8</sup>

## ANTISEMITISM AS AN INSTRUMENT OF DOMINATION

In his January 5, 1945 “Report on the Scientific Department of the American Jewish Committee” Horkheimer (1945) stated that “Hitler seized power in Germany and launched his worldwide campaign against the Jews. His effect upon America was direct and deadly. Here, as in Europe, his agitators transformed antisemitism from a religious and social prejudice into a political instrument. Antisemitism today is one of the major political tools for destroying democracy and promoting a totalitarian order” (JFb57f7–9).<sup>9</sup> Antisemitism represented the *dress rehearsal* for a later and broader assault against all social institutions standing in the way of totalitarian domination (LL bMS Ger 185 [159]; Massing, 1949).<sup>10</sup>

As an “instrument of domination” and essential element in authoritarian movements like fascism and Nazism, the Institute argued that antisemitism

“did not grow out of any constitutional peculiarities of any one people or race. It was not a genuine native product of any particular country. Fascists introduced the evil myth of the ‘folk soul’ which, according to them, is permeated with innate hostility to Jews. History shows that there is no such natural, innate antisemitism” (AL (ISR, 1945), p. 8).<sup>11</sup> In other words, as researchers have demonstrated repeatedly, antisemitism can happen anywhere – even the total absence of Jews in a society does not exclude it from antisemitism (see [Goodman & Miyazawa, 1995](#); [Mayo, 1988](#)). Drawing upon some of the Institute’s data we will examine a few aspects of the thoughts and sentiments of antisemitic workers – those that fell into four antisemitic categories (A, B, C, and D):<sup>12</sup>

Type A: *Exterminatory*. Actively violent, vicious antisemites who openly favor the extermination of all Jews. These workers represented a group in which “extreme hostility to Jews to which physical violence, mass slaughter and extermination is basic” (ISR, 1945, p. 81).

The Nazis did a “damn good job. We should have let them finish it, and the Poles too.”

Jews are “the most terrible people on the face of the earth ... the Bible says they should be persecuted.” The Jews “got exactly what was coming to them.”

Hitler “didn’t do enough. He should have exterminated all of them ... . They are a menace to society and should be exterminated. Their aggressiveness soon brings [them] to a place of influence and power that is a threat to Gentiles.”

“More power to the Nazis!” (ISR, 1945, pp. 73–81).

Type B: *Intense Hatred*. Definitely and unwaveringly hostile toward Jews but avoid openly advocating the extermination of Jews or would prefer if Nazis exterminated Jews on a smaller scale or just deported them en masse. Taken together, Type A and B constitute beliefs that are essentially fascist or “Nazi-like.” Workers in the B category were glad that Jews were killed by the Nazi regime but hesitated to recommend that the same methods of dealing with Jews should be adopted in the U.S.

What of the fate of Jews in Nazi Germany? “Good riddance.”

“Nazis were ‘fairly reasonable’ in their treatment of Jews, ‘the thing had to be done.’”

Jews “deserve it.”

“... the Jews should all be put into one little place and kept by themselves, just as the colored people should.”

“Don’t believe in killing people – that’s murder . . . . However, if things were done on a smaller scale – things that have to be done for the good of everyone – well, that’s another story” (ISR, 1945, pp. 82–96).

Type C: *Inconsistently Hostile*. Outspokenly hostile to Jews; desire to see Jews regulated or controlled but inconsistent in this attitude; exhibit an inner conflict over how Jews should be controlled and regulated. Prone to rhetorical violence more than actual violence. Potentially an easy convert to fascism within the right social conditions.

“All the Jews can go to Hell.”

Jews “should never have been born . . . . Sooner we wash them from the face of the earth, the better for humanity” (ISR, 1945, pp. 97–105).

Type D: *Intolerant*. Wants to avoid Jews, get away from them, and to see legislative action taken to separate Jews from everyone else. Discrimination against Jews should be organized and enforced. “To aspire to the killing of all or many or some Jews is not a necessary prerequisite of dangerously violent antisemitism” (ISR, 1945, p. 106). The intolerant workers were more likely to focus on concrete reasons or “specific issues” for hating Jews than workers in the other antisemitic categories.

“The damn Jews are ruining the country. They control most of the business. They always act like they are better than anyone else.”

Jews “should be controlled but not persecuted.”<sup>13</sup>

Most Jews “are pushy and forward.” “Most of the people I know don’t care too much for them.”

“I have worked with a few. In fact, one of my best friends back home is a Jew, but you’d never know it to see or talk to him.”

“Jews control the financial world . . . . that control should be taken away from them.”

The Nazis “did some pretty good things over there . . . . No, not really. I guess they had to squelch them some way, but my motto is: live and let live.”

Jews “are aggressive and conceited and grabby.”

Nazi persecution of Jews is “terrible, there’s no need for such wholesale persecution and destruction. But they do need restraint. And we don’t want to be flooded with Jewish refugees.”

“Jews should be controlled, not killed” (ISR, 1945, pp. 107–114).

The intolerant worker's "combination of restraint and regulation looks very much akin to early Nazi policies. And it takes fascist imagination [on the part of a worker who detected Jews 'flooding' into government jobs] to detect the menace of Jews marching in rank formation to invade the civil service citadel" (ISR, 1945, p. 112).

Together, these four categories (A–D) constituted the strata of antisemitic workers. Of the 566 workers included in the sample the distribution of hostile feelings was thus: Type A: 10.6%; Type B: 10.2%; Type C: 3.7%; and Type D: 6.2%. Types A+B (20.8%) represented pro-fascist or Nazi-like sentiments; Types C+D (9.9%) represented sharply anti-Jewish feelings; Types A+B+C+D comprised 30.7% of the sample.

Naturally, there were qualitative and significant differences between workers in, for example, the A and D categories. Nonetheless, in practical terms, "D" workers may have been less hostile to Jews but clearly supported some measures adopted by Nazis and could be counted on to lend passive support or enthusiasm for totalitarian measures against Jews. However, this raises the problem of how to classify workers into categories. How did the Institute "label" a worker as antisemitic, ambivalent, or nonantisemitic? How did the researchers deal with the complexity of gradation? As the report states, "classification of different types of attitudes requires care and caution."

Generally speaking, it could be carried through on the basis of different criteria. People can be classified according to their opinions on Jews, or according to their emotional propensity to like or dislike Jews, or according to the action they want taken with respect to Jews.

For the purposes of a general survey of our sample, it seemed advisable to combine these three criteria for classifying the workers interviewed. But how should such a combination be designed to fit statistical requirements?

Such were the difficulties confronted by the Institute. However, their novel method of "screened" interviewing allowed for the interviewees to "state, develop and illustrate their opinions" rather than conform to a preselected and "rigid pattern of single 'Yes,' 'No' or 'Maybe-some' answers to which they analyst could assign score values" (ISR, 1945, p. 161).

To rate elaborate answers – and we did ask for elaborate answers – is not only a matter of interpreting the wording of the individual answer. It also matters considerably how and in what context the answer was stated, what arguments were adduced to support it, and whether or not it is in line with answers given by the same interviewee to other questions.

If unjustified simplifications and generalizations are to be avoided, all answers given by one interviewee must be treated as an integrated whole. Every interview must then be given an individual rating based not merely on "Yes" or "No" interpretations of individual answers but also on the context of what the person said and what he or she meant.

When we proceeded to rate the interview in this qualitative way, we devoted foremost attention to interpreting each interviewee's answer to the question dealing with approval or disapproval of Nazi terror against Jews. Answers to this question were rated by three independent coders, the ratings checked and corrected against each other. The final rating was arrived at by combined decision of three members of the analysis staff.

The rating thus established for the crucial question of our interview schedule subsequently was studied in the context of every interview taken as a whole. Finally, every individual interview was given an overall rating by a member of the analysis staff. These overall ratings served to class interviewees by "types." When these ratings were tabulated, it appeared that the numerical results obtained permitted deeper insight into the distribution of our interviewees by degrees of intensity of prejudice than did the computation of an "unweighted" index. Such an index based on simple score values also was constructed, but as it did not shed any new light on the problems under investigation its presentation can be dispensed with. Numerical results discussed here were computed from qualitative ratings (ISR, 1945, pp. 161-163).

This was the approach taken in assigning the hundreds of workers to the eight categories.

## **BROAD ANTISEMITIC THEMES IN THE DIFFERENT ANTISEMITIC GROUPS (A-D)**

Antisemites employ a "shorthand" when it comes to the Jew. A single word can stand in for a constellation of complaints and accusations. According to workers falling into the category of exterminatory or Nazi-like (A) common themes repeatedly appear: Jews are or act

All the same; different; terrible; dark; high and mighty; greedy; peddlers; rotten; dirty; insulting; war profiteers; self-serving; not self-respecting; gatherers (of junk, rags, garbage that nobody else wants); climbers; prideless; profiteers; a menace to society; aggressive; lazy; destroyers; dominating; hoarding; out of place here; no good for the country; exploiters; universally hated by all; devious; sinister; undermining; immediately identifiable through either appearance, speech, or actions and gestures.

According to workers in the A category, Jews controlled "all" the money and business in the world and were attempting to destroy America through trickery and underhanded or dirty methods. Jews were only interested in "big money" and would use any method, legitimate or otherwise to get big money.

Recurring themes among workers falling into the category of intense hatred (B) stress that Jews are:

Willing to settle for inferior food and clothing; think they are superior to non-Jews; scrimping; saving; always trying to getting ahead; sloppy; stick together; only after

money; war profiteers; conspiring with the enemy as a means to profit; bootlickers; climbers; loud; clannish; ostentatious; fat; know-it-all; overbearing; cheaters; bribers; draft evaders; whiners; lazy on the job; love to nose into other people's conversations; cheaters; untrustworthy; emotional; dissemble; pornographic.

For the workers in category B, Jews “act like they think they are too good to work with their hands. They think of only making money” (ISR, 1945, p. 83). Jews either controlled the federal government or were taking it over. One worker reported that Jews in his hometown neighborhood “were loud. Having their relatives spreading all over the terrace with food, the men in their shirt sleeves. And they just don't act like white people. They gather in crowds and make a party out of any affair” (ISR, 1945, p. 91). Jews “do as little as they can and talk as though they were doing a lot. They put up a bluff and try to get away with something” (ISR, 1945, p. 93). As the report says, differences in religion, gender, ethnicity, and political philosophies among workers in the A and B categories did not prevent them from all agreeing on the treatment of Jews. They could get together on the issue of the “Jew.” It was the one thing they could all agree on.

Workers in the inconsistently hostile category (C) thought that Jews were:

Cashing in on the war; money-grabbers; go-getters; argumentative; penny-wise; always selling something; guilty of wearing cheap clothing; money-makers; repulsive; vengeful; seeking “soft” jobs to avoid the draft.

Inconsistently hostile workers in some instances professed an inability to automatically detect a Jew (unlike workers in the A and B categories who could “spot them anywhere”) but used “Jew” as a classification for people they did not like or found offensive. They made a distinction between rich Jews and outcast Jews. Rich Jews should be deprived of their wealth: “Ever so often stand them on their heads and shake them by their heels” (ISR, 1945, p. 98). Supposedly Jewish traits like selling second-hand junk was attributed to being a poor worker: “A man that has a job should not resort to selling second-hand clothes to increase his income. Either be good at your job or get out” (ISR, 1945, p. 101).<sup>14</sup> Generally, these workers possessed more contradictory thoughts and struggled to reconcile liberal ideas with clearly antidemocratic impulses. In the case of one worker in the C category:

Answering the interviewer's question as to anti-Jewish groups and anti-Jewish feelings, on the spur of the moment she says: “No – that's all propaganda. There's so many communist Jews that they start things like that.” Again she retracts: “I know that deep in me is the seed of antisemitism, and I try to fight it. I'm getting better, but sometimes I just can't stand it.”

She blames Jews for her antisemitism, which conflicts with the liberal attitude she gradually develops. Later she adds: "I suppose fascist forces in America are all for it (antisemitism) – or poor-beat guys that are jealous of money."

The same ambiguity pervades her attitude to Nazi atrocities. "It's awful I guess," she says. Yet she admits: "But I can't really feel it because I can't imagine any of these Hollywood hebes being persecuted." Then repressed violence erupts: "There's a few dozen I'd like to see liquidated."

But once more the emotional outburst is subjected to correction on a rational level. "Racial injustice," Helen says about her "liquidation" wishes, "is a terrible thing" (ISR, 1945, pp. 104–105).

Intolerant workers (D) thought that Jews were or acted:

a little bit lazy; grabby; aggressive; conceited; belligerent; different; cut-throat; unscrupulous; money-hungry

It was common to find intolerant (D) workers who thought that Jews controlled the financial world. Jewish workers liked to "play up to the boss and try to get all the good jobs" (ISR, 1945, p. 112).

The various complaints antisemitic workers directed toward Jews fell along a broad range of concerns. Supposedly Jewish attitudes, morality, gestures, speech, dress and appearance, habits, manners, the way they worked, etc., were all found to be offensive to some workers and warranted, in their minds, anything from segregation and expulsion to all-out extermination. The Institute's labor report broke the data down into three "major areas of critique" and nine "individual areas of criticism" (see [Table 1](#)).<sup>15</sup>

The major areas of "critique," personal, economic, and political attempted to encompass all possible responses from antisemitic workers. Essentially the Institute asked their interviewees to daydream out loud and express the hopes, fears, and desires they had for themselves and the world they lived in. When antisemitic workers gnashed their teeth over "shirt sleeves," "grabbiness," and lack of Jewish effort in the war they were saying little or nothing about Jews as a social group but revealing what they desired or feared most for themselves and, more importantly, what they knew about the society they lived in and the logic behind its processes and relations. The areas of critique were basically trying to get at problems of morality, money, and authority in an unobtrusive manner. Knowing their intended audience, the ISR chose to avoid references such as the "capitalist mode of production" or "abstract labor" even though the data correspond directly to those concepts. The issue of "clannishness" is of particular importance because it addresses, in a metaphorical way, worker conceptions of group solidarity.

**Table 1.** Nine Major Categories of Antisemitic Criticism.

Area of Critique	Percent of Total Sample	Percent of Interviewees Expressing Critique	Antisemitic Workers A+B+C+D (Percent of Number Interviewees in Each Type of Intensity)
<b>Personal</b>			
Clannishness	22.4	28.0	23.0
Aggressiveness	37.6	47.1	48.9
Sex behavior	1.2	1.5	2.9
<b>Economic</b>			
Jews in business	22.1	27.7	38.5
Mercenary attitudes	55.1	69.0	79.9
Jews are no workers	15.9	19.9	27.6
<b>Political and social</b>			
Power	13.3	16.6	30.5
Education	3.4	4.2	2.9
War effort	34.3	42.9	59.2

In what follows we will restrict ourselves to the area of supposed “personal qualities” that Jews possessed according to antisemitic workers – specifically, the dimensions of “clannishness,” “aggressiveness,” and “sex behavior.”

## THE HATRED OF STEREOTYPICAL JEWISH TRAITS

According to antisemitic workers, Jews were synonymous with the violation of established norms that dictated hygiene, appearance, and adult self-restraint. “Jews who show contempt for the moral code violate the social taboos. They indulge in the child’s infantile pleasures” (ISR, 1945, p. 1018). Jews were seen as fundamentally filthy, sloppy, disheveled, morally loose, etc., but worse, not only did Jews not care about such things, they enjoyed being filthy and sloppy (ISR, 1945, pp. 1018–1019):

### *Dirty Jews*

We knew where they came from [the Jewish East side], and besides in a few years the clean section became filthy [CIO-UAW machinist].

...foreign born Jew...isn’t used to our way of living and he is dirty. Leaves his garbage around and has roaches and all sorts of bugs in the house [non-union “Laundress” in New Jersey area].

I will have to move out of my present neighborhood if Jews move in because they are dirty. They never keep their lawns clean [AFL boilermaker].

### *Sloppy and Improperly Dressed Jews*

They can stand to wear inferior clothes [AFL welder in San Francisco].

They are either overdressed or in shirt sleeves [CIO bacteriologist].

It's the way they dress that you can tell them. The men's pants are always low down, the tie is knotted wrong or is to one side. They're sloppy [non-union baker].

They would come out on the porch improperly clothed [CIO machinist in New York].

### *Ill-Mannered Jews*

In restaurants especially one can always tell a Jew by the way they eat as if they were starving. They gobble their food down in a mouthful [non-union operator in the clothing industry].

They eat fast, large mouthfuls. And lean toward their plates [non-union hostess].

They spit on the floor; when a Jew eats he will belch as if he were going to vomit [non-union baker].

The notion that Jews were dirty, sloppy, and had atrocious table manners were each linked, for Lowenthal, the Institute member who wrote about these aspects in volume four of the labor study, to the supposed "archaic" and out-of-date nature of Jews.<sup>16</sup> A recurring theme through all the data was that Jews did not fit into the main currents of modern life. They were on the outside and on the margins. As Lowenthal said, "The archaic is identified with the dirty. Old clothes become the symbol of uncleanness. The outer appearance of an orthodox Easter-European Jew sporting a beard or even a caftan evokes associations with dirtiness" (ISR, 1945, p. 1023). The larger picture though was that the Jewish propensity for being dirty, sloppy, coarse, and disgusting represented their nature as beings that have no self-control and, further, enjoy violating social taboos. "They disregard the illusionary, purely ideological nature of this elasticity of outward behavior rules. They are seen as indulging in liberties without being subject to discipline and punishment" (ISR, 1945, p. 1023). We find here an *admixture of antisemitic disgust and hatred*. The two emotions are related but illustrate the complexity of antisemitism in liberal society. "Disgust... creates and is witness to a claim of moral (and social) inequality, while hatred

tends to embody the resentment of an unwelcome admission of equality. Hatred can be quite positively energizing; disgust, by contrast, sickens and often enervates” (Miller, 1997, p. 35).

The revulsion and hostility of the antisemitic worker could be seen as symptomatic of the “perversity” of liberalism itself: formal, civil equality which serves to intensify and exacerbate actual material and social inequalities. One could even argue that the core logic of the commodity exchange, where inequalities are converted to equal quantities of labor time, lays the foundation for this kind of revolt against alienation. The authoritarian imagination, as it has been repeatedly noted by others, exhibits abhorrence for “mixing” and the transgression of “natural” boundaries (see Zerubavel, 1991). The exchange relation is, by definition, the ultimate expression of mixing and transgressed boundaries – it is the realm in which horror and science fiction become reality, where vampires actually exist, where 1+1 can be made to sum to any number and water can be transformed into wine. Could the very foundations of material culture, the core logic of modern society itself, our systems of classifications, engender the very social substance that animates authoritarian antisemitism and related forms of demonology? As Miller says, “Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter” (1997, p. 44). And all systems of classification are, as readers of Durkheim know, rooted in and reflect social organization. These issues aside, they denote an imprecise fusion of speculation, psychology, and sociology. As Lowenthal said, “Fantasies about specific Jewish enjoyments have a definitely projective character. They represent jealous participation in pleasures which are taboo for the community. Such pleasure can be experienced in psychological excursions only. Then they become permissible because the offender expiates his dream by castigating the moral depravity of those whom he envies” (ISR, 1945, p. 1016). All this is quite plausible but offers an incomplete picture. The ISR’s antisemitism project, unlike the dialectics adventure of Horkheimer and Adorno, is aimed at providing a sociological explanation of antisemitism as a collective form of consciousness. The unarticulated assumption behind expressions of disgust and hostility of dirt, sloppiness, etc., is that of “freedom” – Jews were seen as somehow free *from* the constraints that pressed down upon “normal” people and (more horrifying) threatened society by assuming an attitude that they were free *to do* whatever they wanted.<sup>17</sup> As Lowenthal suggested:

The images of Jews as parasites and as enemies of the collectivity pattern imply the idea of a playful exploitation of the social process. The Jews are seen as a group which by

biological necessity, cultural tradition or intellectual willfulness [sic] gets hold of economic positions at the expense, or against the interests, of the working community. They do not seem to coordinate their activities with the ways of public life accepted by the majority . . . . In their renunciation of institutionalized social duties, the Jews have built up a sphere of their own, a living space within – or rather outside – the genuine living space of the community. They have created a sphere of independence in a world of interdependence, a sphere of autonomy in a world of mutual dependence, a sphere of liberty in a world of restrictions (ISR, 1945, p. 1015).

This peculiar Jewish “sphere” of exclusion, freedom, and disregard for the “genuine living space of the community” was expressed in the antisemitic antipathy for Jewish clannishness.

## THE ANTISEMITIC HATRED OF CLANNISHNESS

“The complex of clannishness” says the labor report “embraces all those attitudes which indicate a real or imaginary tendency on the part of Jews to ‘stick together,’ ‘help each other,’ ‘favor Jews at the expense of Gentiles,’ in short, to promote Jewish interests at the exclusion and to the detriment of the interests of all other groups” (ISR, 1945, pp. 189–190). If a union organizer or a revolutionary Marxist replaced “Jew” with “worker” and “Gentile” with “capitalist” then clannishness would be a gift from Heaven. The irony here can be seen in the words of an AFL worker (female, lifelong member of the Association of Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen) who stated flatly that “They are clannish – should break away from that. It is held against them . . . . Very many opposed to them – even in labor circles...” (ISR, 1945, p. 452).

The antisemitic preoccupation with “clannishness” spoke volumes about the capacity (or lack thereof) for self-directed, group solidarity. One aspect of “clannishness” in the mind of antisemitic workers related to the belief that Jewish employers were, through their interpersonal relations with employees and hiring patterns, behind the times. “They vaguely feel that those peculiar traits which they attack as ‘Jewish’ belong to the past, that there is something archaic about the Jewish boss. He seems to belong to a different pattern of economic and social relationships. He is seen as an out-dated remnant of an economic era long gone” (ISR, 1945, p. 315). What were these “peculiar” and “anachronistic Jewish traits” resented by antisemitic workers? The giving of small gifts such as a box of candy, inquiring into one’s personal affairs, and favor-exchanging. These workers also thought that Jewish employers tended to hire nepotistically. The

charge, combined with the notion that Jewish bosses were anachronistic, combined to form a vague sense of paternalistic clannishness. "Paternalistic relationships within the industrial plant naturally imply that the employer surrounds himself with a crowd of relatives and friends, people belonging to his 'clan,' whom he will trust, whom he will want to protect and whose interests he will be eager to further at the expense of others. These others are the workers" (ISR, 1945, p. 316).

Recounting how a friend was laid off by his Jewish boss, a CIO textile worker from New Jersey protested: "...Who do you think they put in his place? Another brother-in-law. That factory is full of brother-in-laws. I don't know where they get them all. How do you think I feel about that man?" (ISR, 1945, p. 316). In short, Jewish employers were out to displace "real" workers with members of their extended "clan." Nonclan workers who were spared their jobs were "treated like slaves" and, it was felt, generally exploited. Jews, it was thought, always hired other Jews unless they were forced to hire from outside as an AFL worker in the Hatters union suggested; her sister was hired as a leading forelady because the boss couldn't find another Jew who was as good: "My sister is good. He can't help it. He couldn't get a Jew finisher good enough to be a forelady. She's getting \$50, and the scale is \$30" (ISR, 1945, p. 318). This same worker had other complaints about her Jewish employer: "You know, he came in the other day to the shop with a great big box of candy! The lousy Jew!" (ISR, 1945, p. 319). Jewish business ethics and desire to cheat non-Jews, both as consumers and workers, were also at the center of the antisemitic concern with clannishness.

For the antisemitic worker, it was common knowledge that Jews were clannish. When they dealt with a single Jew they were actually dealing with one instance of a tightly integrated group conspiring to defraud non-Jews for the benefit of the Jewish group. A "particularly vicious" CIO worker saw a conspiracy between Jewish dealers and customers: "I wanted to get a sink, went to the store and had to fill out some government order. But my Jewish neighbor bought a new sink and didn't even need an order. Is that fair? Those Jews stick together – help each other out" (ISR, 1945, p. 369). A carpenter in the AFL who wanted to see Jews deported to Palestine regretted that the deportation would never happen "because they won't have anyone to cheat. Oh, no, they don't cheat their own kind" (ISR, 1945, p. 369). The notion of individual Jewish dealers was a sham. Their clannishness precluded individual enterprise. All Jews were bound together even in making money. To the antisemite, particularly, but a thought common to even nonantisemitic workers, all Jews in business were secretly a

part of an invisible and monolithic corporation (super-cartel) and mutual aid society (ISR, 1945, pp. 370–372):

They really stick together . . . set each other up in business [AFL lathe operator].

One Jew can be down and out, and he doesn't have to work his way up, he has some big business Jew set him up in some trade, and before you know he is wealthy [AFL operating engineer].

They are close on business deals. They stick together. Jews are clannish. They will help each other out in case of difficulty. Once comes to another for help. They protect each other. Their salvation lies within the group rather than in society as a whole. Very individualistic, but they recognize responsibility to one another as a group. Their protection is within the group [CIO electrician].

They are too well organized among themselves and refuse to give others a break . . . Organized religiously and in business matters – own trade associations which others are not allowed into. No place for that here – Free Loan Societies only to Jews! Special Jewish charities – don't take part in general – strictly stick to their own! . . . They are too nose-y and very insistent about getting information from other people and reluctant to give about themselves, and they have no scruples about the way they use the information they get [AFL baker].

Only the Jews form into groups and everyone else is excluded. Every morning five of them get together [at the department store where they work] before the bell rings. They are off by themselves, talking about their own affairs, and no one is invited to join them. This has been going on for years. Some of the fellows kid them about it, and others pass remarks among themselves. But this group doesn't care, they just go on [CIO "stock girl"] (ISR, 1945, p. 452).

The only time Jews ventured out into the world, their only real purpose, was to either help the whole Jewish "clan" or, the same thing, exploit non-Jews. As an AFL worker in San Francisco put it, when not in parasite mode, Jews kept their distance: "Jews like to stick by themselves unless they can get something out of you" (ISR, 1945, p. 451). There were instances when this notion of Jewish clan absolutism was clearly suspended.

Some workers who concentrated on what they considered to be the peculiarities of Jewish business ethics thought that Jews applied "two measures for happenings within and outside the family group. Often the sphere outside of family life is indiscriminately regarded as 'business' while private life is seen confined to the 'Jewish clan'" (ISR, 1945, p. 596). A photographer in the AFL stated that

Jews more clannish. Worship the almighty dollar. Strangely contradictory in nature: For instance, a Jew may take either a Gentile or Jewish wife, shower it with love,

devotion, provide home, education, etc., but the same Jew might see a next-door businessman (Jewish) go broke – shedding plenty of crocodile tears over him.

Here the divide between family and business dictated whether someone would be exploited or treated fairly rather than on the basis of whether one was a Jewish or not. Some workers claimed that Jews would not help another Jew unless they were a part of the same family (ISR, 1945, p. 597). A semi-skilled, nonunion worker at DuPont said “Have you ever noticed that if you go into a Jewish store, there are always two Jews there – one to watch the other. The Jew will cheat another Jew if they get the chance, and if they don’t trust each other how can we trust them?” (ISR, 1945, p. 597).

Antisemitic workers seemed, from their aversion toward Jewish “clannishness” to be hostile to the entire notion of group cohesion. But antisemites, in general, were allergic to democratic forms of solidarity rather than just antigroup. Groups were fine for recreation like playing cards or gossip. Union and political affiliations were possible sometimes but the antisemitic (authoritarian) worker wanted obedience and conformity of the individual to an abstract principle or leader in place of an ethically driven set of social relations that would require a strong sense of personal responsibility, collective purpose, and concern for the well-being of others in the group. For example, a nonunion crane operator “who ‘does not care anything about the union’” attacked Jews for “looking out for themselves first” (ISR, 1945, pp. 451–452). Clannishness meant that a group held itself together through internal strength whereas antisemitic cohesion meant being held together by an external force from on high.<sup>18</sup>

## JEWISH AGGRESSIVENESS

A widespread belief among antisemitic workers was that, in their thinking and conduct, Jews were “peculiarly aggressive” which made them “conspicuous and discernible within any group, any community, any crowd . . . . They are said to trample on everyone, to intrude upon any group that they encounter, to try to dominate groups and individuals with whom they come into contact, etc.” (ISR, 1945, p. 190). This sentiment vaguely permeated nearly the entire labor report. Jews, it was said, were defensive and possessed traits worthy of attack such as being nosy, pushy, demanding, and acting superior. The ISR researchers found

that Jewish “aggressiveness” was linked most concretely in the imagination of the antisemite to the belief that Jews were compensating for a feeling of Jewish inferiority. There had to be a “reason” Jews acted the way they did.

“Peculiarities of ‘Jewish behavior’ are interpreted by some of our interviewees as expressions of a collective inferiority complex. In a more or less condescending way Jews then are partly freed from responsibility – on psychiatric grounds. A laboratory technician in San Francisco says: ‘Jewish people are often loud and tend to show off. If they have money they obviously make a display of it. They often have an inferiority complex. They expect people not to accept them’” (ISR, 1945, p. 583). A government worker claimed that Jews were “aggressive and conceited and grabby – all expressions of an inferiority complex” (ISR, 1945, p. 589). This inferiority is tied into supposed Jewish clannishness. By not interacting with non-Jews they failed to assimilate and, as such, are “unadjusted to and out of place in the prevailing social order” (*ibid.*). At the same time, it was believed that clannishness left Jews weak in the face of larger social pressures, which led individuals to compensate with aggressive and “grabby” behavior. Jews simply had no choice in how they acted. Jewishness was being fated to obnoxious and self-centered materialistic acquisition that non-Jewish workers found abrasive. In the words of an AFL worker in the Teamsters: Jews “are primarily interested in material things and getting a living as easy as possible, and care nothing about at whose expense they get the same ... a Jew may be recognized by his attitude toward his fellow man” (ISR, 1945, p. 589).

It seems that each year they became more bold and important in their bearing ... their actions are most obnoxious ... [they are] not to be trusted [on account of] their constant talking about themselves they are to be despised.

They feel that it’s a matter of pride within themselves to get the best of people. No necessarily the money involved but “the idea.” They must show in this way that they are smarter than their customer.

“Some interviewees” says the labor report “even have grasped the ‘aggressiveness’ for which they indict all Jews, although it is connected with the economic sphere, aims at material gain less than at personal success; that it is a means of self-assertion and an instrument to attain a social position which would give they Jewish individual a chance to partake of the fruits of power” (ISR, 1945, p. 585).

## JEWISH SEXUALITY

Fascist antisemitic propaganda traditionally portrays Jews as sexually perverse and rapacious. Unlike the European situation, the Institute researchers found, much to their astonishment, that American workers were virtually unaffected by stereotypes portraying Jews as sexually abnormal or deviant. The dimension did “not take any considerable place in the concepts and notions of our interviewees” (ISR, 1945, p. 191).

It is very characteristic of the unorganized, non-manipulated quality of anti-Jewish prejudice among American workers today that traces of the Nazi doctrine on Jewish sex attitudes are hardly noticeable. The idea that “the Jew” is out to “pollute the Aryan race,” to “rape Gentile women,” etc., was expressed by only very few interviewees, and those who voiced it were no industrial workers (ISR, 1945, p. 598).<sup>19</sup>

In the analysis of clannishness we saw that some antisemitic workers employed a conception of “two measures” whereby Jews exploited anybody, Jew or non-Jew, not a member of their family circle. This logic was extended to thinking about Jewish sexual practices. Interestingly, only female members of the survey concerned themselves with sexual practices. A nonunion clerical worker thought that

The men are good family supporters and they take good interest in the education of their children. Their sexual immorality runs higher than the Christian group’s ... I overheard the talk of Jewish men fur workers, and it seemed to me that all they want of women is sexual intercourse ... . Many Jewish men think they can get any colored girl because they feel they are better than she (ISR, 1945, p. 598).

An AFL member and sewing-machine operator said “... The Jewish women are bossy. And the men always try to date you up. The Jewish men are funny. They are wonderful to their wives, kind to them, and give them everything. But they have to have a sweetheart on the side” (ISR, 1945, p. 599). A nonunion worker in Los Angeles

A great deal of the hatred against Jews can be erased if they will in some way prove that they as a group do not disrespect non-Jewish women. But a certain few among them have probably immigrated into the United States recently, or else they remain with the older idea of a woman not being a man’s equal. This type of Jew doesn’t show disrespect to non-Jews especially but to all women, except his wife, when it comes to sexual intimacies (ISR, 1945, p. 600).

## ANTISEMITISM AND “JEWISH PERSONAL QUALITIES”

Antisemitic conceptions of “Jewish personal qualities” were quite revealing in that complaints about hygiene, clannishness, and aggressiveness appeared to worry about different aspects of Jews but reflect back a structural feature of antisemitic ideology: a preoccupation with boundaries and barriers between the pure and impure. For example, in the case of hygiene: because of the Jew “the clean section became filthy...” In other words, the world was divided between two sections: the clean and the dirty. The dirt (Jew) was repellent and had the force to drive clean people out of their homes in search of non-Jewish areas. On just the problem of hygiene the “good” and “clean” worker stood in binary opposition to the Jew who was dirty, foreign, collected garbage, had bugs in the house, wore and settled for inferior and cheap clothing or overdressed, was sloppy, impure, gobbled food down while sitting too close to their plate, too fast or too slow, and too fat or too thin.

Whatever it was Jews were, in nearly every instance, a case of being “too much” or “too little.” Jews were, essentially, the embodiment of either excess or deficiency (Table 2). One worker complained about her Jewish boss bringing a gift of candy: the box was “great big” and the Jew was therefore “lousy.” The “average” non-Jewish worker was just right,

**Table 2.** Some “Jewish Qualities” Clash with “Mainstream American Values”.

The “Good Worker”	“The Jew”
Reserved	Loud
Waits in line	Pushy
Blends in with the crowd	Conspicuous
Restrained, respects boundaries	Tramples/transgresses boundaries
Modest, normal	Acts superior, shows offs
Friendly	Defensive
Generous and giving	Grabby and greedy
Strong (individually), mistrust groups	Weak (individually), extra strong as a group
Mannered	Obnoxious
Self-sacrificing	Self-centered
Idealistic/realistic	Materialistic
Values hard labor	Seeks the “easy life”
Devoted to mainstream values	Not to be trusted

moderate, knew restraint, and so on whereas the Jew was that condition which exceeded moderation and restraint. These were not mere “traits” or “features” of the Jew. Instead, they were felt by the antisemite to be akin to natural forces with the power to repel or physically push away the clean and good. The Jew would “displace” real workers. And, importantly, from the perspective of the antisemite, every worker had a “place” that he or she belonged. The Jew was that which moved them, unwillingly, from their “place” at work. For example one worker complained that if Jews moved into his neighborhood, he would be “forced” to leave. Following Durkheim it appears that Jews were literally felt to be a personified and impure force that stood outside and threatened the sacred circle. Evidently, one could not live “with” Jews any more than matter could mix with antimatter.

The “problem” of Jewish clannishness was also tied to this same logic of excess. Jews were not merely excessively “group minded” but lacked any sense of identity. In other words, Jews were like prices, each individual Jew was but absolutely identical behind the facade of “difference” – Jews were “all the same” deep down. It was not that Jews even chose to adhere together. Like a gooey substance Jews coagulated (stick together). Jews moved as one, as a “crowd” or mob, and pushed out mere individuals. Or, on the other hand, Jews were overly individualistic and did not recognize the value of the group. Again, the Jew embodied the “too much – too little” problem. Supposed clannishness was a problem of hierarchy for the antisemite: the worker stood in an unmediated relation to the legitimate authority. The antisemitic worker should know only what they needed to know and was given to them by the boss. The Jew, by contrast, “stuck his nose into everything.” Jews “stuck together” as if by a law of nature but the Jew-hating worker needed an “invitation” to belong or enter a group. Group identity, belonging, and even information were related to “gifts” rather than the products of self-organizing. Mutual assistance was a gift to be organized by the great Other and not something that people should do themselves. The other knew what was good for the worker. To presume otherwise would be tantamount to a transgression on the other’s good graces and generosity. Crossing thresholds needed permission and authorization. Otherwise, things could “get out of hand” and excessive. Excesses, if permissible at all, were relegated to the private sphere.

And “Jewish aggressiveness” was related to the previous themes of hygiene and clannishness in that the so-called aggressive qualities of Jews marked an *excess* and simultaneous *lack* of respect, restraint, conformity, obedience to the norm, etc.

The antisemitic worker liked to imagine that he or she had found the right “balance” between their own individual concerns and the demands of

others. I want to pin this idea of excess and lack down by saying that the antisemites in the Institute's study had found a way, through the Jew, to 'resolve' a fundamental problem of alienation in the world of modern, capitalist exchange relations. Briefly, in capitalism, alienation involves a "mathematics" whereby the subject almost always comes up short in an "exchange" with the other. Modern antisemitism enables the subject to voluntarily will his or her own alienation in the absence of reciprocity. Antisemitism makes possible collective co-existence in a society that fails to raise itself up to an ethical order.

The antisemitic hostility toward Jewish business practices is extended and transfigured into a gendered critique of their treatment of women: "The Jewish male outside the family circle is seen as the unscrupulous businessman who takes advantage of the woman whom he thus likens to a commodity that can be bought. This accusation does not originate in the sphere of sex behavior; it is borrowed from the economic sphere" (ISR, 1945, p. 600). In the preceding, I have given an overview of wartime worker antisemitism in relation to stereotypical assumptions about Jewish personal qualities: their "clannishness," "aggressiveness," and "sex behavior." Antisemitic workers, though, tended to hate Jews for a variety of reasons. To conclude I would like to place the "personal qualities" into the larger context of the Institute's analysis and tie the theoretical threads together so that we may see how stereotypes pertaining to "clannishness," for example, are related to other dimensions in the economic sphere as well as political and social realms (see [Table 1](#)).

## AN OVERVIEW AND SUMMARY

In the intervening years since the Frankfurt School carried out its labor study, antisemitism continues to be a recurring problem in American and international affairs. "As long as anti-Semitism exists as a constant undercurrent in social life," said Adorno, "its influence reaches all groups of the population and it can always be rekindled by suitable propaganda" ([1941]1994, p. 136). But we know that antisemitism reaches different segments of society in different ways. Was there a difference between the antisemitic tendencies of white-collar workers and blue-collar factory workers? Undoubtedly. Gender, education, religion, occupation, and other salient factors all contribute to the distribution and resonance of antisemitic and authoritarian ideologies. We must treat as suspect explanations that attempt to boil antisemitism down to one dominant factor such as

Christianity or cultural codes (Dinnerstein, 1991, 1994; Volkov, 1978). Undoubtedly religion played a major role in worker antisemitism but it is also crystal clear that antisemitism was not an unchanging and eternal thought form and can we honestly say that Christianity was or is the only system of life regulation that featured puritanical and sadomasochistic strains? And if antisemitism was strictly determined by a system of durable dispositions then why was higher educational attainment correlated with lower levels of antisemitism? Character is in some ways “fate” – a second nature but can education later in life melt mental rigidities? Can irrational and hostile “islands of meaning” be broken down by reason and enlightenment? Or, does access to education merely provide the antisemite an awareness of what is “going on” when asked about Jews and then allow them to mask their secret hatred of Jews unlike their unsophisticated brethren who have few qualms about expressing their hatred in the open? This remains to be explored. And could the effect of education be tied to the dynamic interplay between character and world view?

The European mode of thinking about Jews was significantly different than the American. Likewise, the antisemitism of the early modern period, with its medieval holdovers, just did not mean much in the minds of American workers. Additionally, theories of antisemitism that treat the phenomenon as a universal explanatory cosmology must be amended to account for the fact that, for many of the workers in this study, their antisemitism simply did not explain more than a few fundamental features of social life while simultaneously using a language of “all” and “every.” I think social and historical context is responsible for configuring the particularities of any collective thought form. In some societies some aspects of traditional and religious antisemitism are simply “impossible.” America is a nation dripping with exchange value and the dazzling interplay of enchanted value forms. Money matters and any ideological form that comes into contact with the hegemony of money must expect to be warped and reconfigured by the gravitational force the visible divinities of money, commodities, and capital – the three faces of value. Antisemitism is not exempt from this process.

On the whole we can say that “dialectical materialism” was not the predominant form of consciousness exhibited by the workers studied by the Frankfurt School and the absence of antisemitic “prejudice” in the worker imagination was certainly not the index of antiauthoritarianism or deep-seated critical reason. The hope of finding radical class consciousness among American workers frustrated the ISR. Massing concluded that “...not one of the workers interviewed has expressed such a revolutionary philosophy coherently and consistently. More frequently fragments and evidence of a

'class-consciousness' may be found which also, and often vehemently, objects to the war as a 'capitalists' or 'rich man's' war but tends to tie up war resentment with antisemitism." Further, "these antiwar philosophies, expressions of a perverted labor militancy, operate on the 'Jew-capitalist' level. They correspond to a European variety of antisemitism known in the labor movement as 'the Socialism of the dumb'" (ISR, 1945, p. 624). But I think that this conclusion does not quite fit the data; Jews as capital, yes, but as the *excess* of capital: the aspects of capitalism that struck workers as "too much." And I think that the famous notion of the "socialism of fools" misplaces much about American working-class antisemitism that is unique and interesting by subsuming it under a preexisting, European reference. And that was one of the tensions visible in the Institute's report: they were European Marxists (to one degree or another) starting from a specifically European point of view. And nowhere else does this tension become more obvious than in the split between the ISR's so-called inner circle and the empirical and editorial wing responsible for the labor study and so at odds with the kind of sentiments found in Horkheimer's growing and deep pessimism.

Horkheimer considered the relationship between Europe and the United States as a continuum such that, literally, Detroit antisemitism was identical with Frankfurt antisemitism. But this was not true. It might be easy to overdramatize the breach between the Institute's inner circle and what I have called the "other Frankfurt School" (Worrell, 2003, 2004), but it is nonetheless interesting to note that Horkheimer (in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and his even more pessimistic reading of the postwar European situation in his "Academy" article) was bound and determined, it seems, to throw away the data and interpretations offered up by the labor study participants – especially Massing's contribution. And, in fact, their magnificent report on American labor, so at odds in many respects to what Horkheimer and Adorno were thinking at the time, comes off not so much as an unfortunate piece of research that was politically out of step with the times and methodologically flawed as to warrant its abandonment, but, on the contrary, the victim of censorship in a low-grade conflict between competing tendencies within the Institute.

The antisemitism that plagued workers was, for the most part, a transfigured and distorted system of representations depicting society itself in motion. One could approach antisemitism from the perspective of racism, prejudice, bias, etc., but we can get further I think by adopting the Durkheimian approach to systems and processes of collective thought and the logic of group solidarity vis-à-vis objects of devotion, the demonological

other, and the dynamics of the sacred and profane (Durkheim, [1912]1995). A society plagued by monsters is merely expressing a side of itself. Massing, in examining what workers thought of Jews and their war efforts, essentially worked along similar lines when he stressed that when workers disparaged Jews they were in reality saying little about Jews but much about the character of the war, the social organization of wartime America, the indelible features of capitalism, the determinations of a command economy, etc. “Apparently the worker wants to make a statement as to the character of the war itself. The attributes he generally uses to describe the Jews he also employs to describe the war. In the wider sense the war is ‘Jewish’ because it allegedly was instigated and is conducted by ‘Jews’. Their term ‘Jews’ here stands for people who are out to make money by the war, who use it to cheat others, to put something over on people, to run everything. The war appears as a huge business enterprise, organized by and for ‘Jewish’ fraud” (ISR, 1945, p. 640). But we can turn this around and say not that the war was Jewish but that the Jew was the face of war itself: anomie, obscene excess, and death.

To avoid a discursive anticlimax we might do well, here, to outline some of the major themes and findings of the ISR’s report and some of the main interpretations I have generated on the basis of the large data set:

- The antisemitic response to Jewish “clannishness” revealed something about the authoritarian stance toward solidarity and collective relations. Antisemitic workers were less anticollective or antigroup per se than they were opposed to democratic and plastic forms of cohesion and identification. Supposed clannishness was in a sense a way for workers to beat down a (positive) relationship of spontaneity and latitude and to erect, in its place, an ideal of hierarchy and static placement within a stable, durable, predictable social order under the sign of the legitimate leader. For the authoritarian, life “inside” the group was one of obedience and alienation whereas life “outside” the group was chaos. One prevented the descent into chaos by ritually and vigilantly maintaining rigid order within the group. Once depersonalization was allowed to dissolve within the group, chaos was sure to creep in. For this reason “groups” were automatically suspect at some level: they were fine for nonvital activities but when it came to anything serious, group solidarity might not be strong enough to suppress the tendency to devolve into a breakdown of order. It was easier to police the individual self than it was the whole group. This logic has more than a tinge of Weber’s and Nietzsche’s analysis of Christian brotherly love: one could never truly trust a neighbor or the

“eternally damned remainder” and entanglements with the other could only drag the individual down.

- Jewish “aggressiveness” was, ironically, a way for antisemitic workers to attack Jews for their perceived unwillingness to submit to the dictates of collective life. Jews were, they felt, “too good” to be a part of the group. This individualism led them to be weak and vulnerable so they overcompensated by being aggressive toward others. So, for the authoritarian, there was safety in numbers – the “herd” (the gray, undifferentiated mass of workers, each in his or her place, under the watchful gaze of embodied power – the “Great Other”) provided cover and security. If one wanted security, one had to sacrifice a good many things such as individual freedom. The antisemite’s motto is, “To Will Alienation.”
- Many aspects emerge from the “Jews in business” portion of the report: for one thing Jews represented frustrations and breakdowns in the normal flow of commodities such as rationed goods. Workers suspected that some groups had privileged connections and monopolized cigarettes and liquor, etc. Second, Jews symbolized not exchange per se but the mysteries and excesses of exchange – especially the felt but incomprehensible divide between prices and exchange values. The “Jew” was a sign of divergences and contingent fluctuations in prices above and beyond values. Here, again, the Jew was “too much” or “not enough” – exploiters and under-sellers. Hence, Jews controlled “all” stores and preferred loans and credit to hard, legitimate work. Jews, it was thought, willingly sought to operate on the margins of economic life as parasites who avoided hard work and who derived a perverse pleasure in getting something for nothing.
- Nearly 80% of antisemitic workers complained about the supposed “mercenary” spirit of Jews and this emphasis on profiteering served to focus and condense hostility into a more narrow conception of Jews in society. Here the “Jews as mercenaries” idea boiled things down to money and the various schemes Jews concocted to extract money from non-Jews. The schemes ran the gamut from simple and petty rip offs to manipulating the government, markets, and orchestrating the entire war. It was with the notion of profiteering and mercenary spirit that the “everything” of antisemitism was able to establish a gravitational center around money – or, really, excess money. When workers were able to identify the profiteering motives of Jews they were capable of retroactively recasting all Jewish activities and even personal traits such as clannishness and filth as means and secondary formations around the rapacious and “stop short of nothing” mentality of the imaginary Jew. Literally, the formula

for much of the Jewish relation to money was: “Jews running around Washington cashing in on the war.”

- The “Jew” as worker was an exceedingly complex problem and pointed to many aspects of workers and their relation to authority, work, the buying and selling of labor power, the split between prices and values, the value-form that their labor power assumed, the nature of the labor process, the normative aspects of work intensity, and the implied worker “code” that determined their stance toward making demands against capital for more of a share of the surplus. Jews were seen as a corruption of the imaginary, unmediated relation between the worker and the entitled boss who stood in the reflected glory of and received legitimation from the myth of the genius entrepreneur. The Jew was an alien intruder that degraded the dignity of the worker who knew and respected his or her “place” within the hierarchic work order. Jews were felt, by antisemites, to be biologically incapable of real work and, if they were found on the shop floor, were “slumming” to avoid the draft. In other words, Jews were essentially identical to “buying and selling” (junk, liquor, cigarettes, cheap clothes, etc.) but they were incapable of merely selling – i.e., being the individual possessing only one commodity to sell: labor power. Again, the Jew embodied an excess, a surplus.
- Jews were felt by many antisemitic workers to have an unnatural and perverse relationship toward power: they wanted it all for themselves rather than share it. Of course, for the antisemite, their desire was generally to see Jews divested of all power and redistributed, presumably, back into the world of non-Jews. But, we must observe, here, that the data did not generally support any widespread belief that Jews were the demonological masters of the universe; “the Jew” was not quite the key to all the mysteries of the cosmos in the way it was in European and Nazi propaganda. However, antisemitic workers still deployed a universalizing language of “all” and “every” when speaking of Jews. But it was not in the sense that Jews controlled all political power. In that case it was that Jews gravitated and migrated to Washington because that was where the soft jobs were. Jews could infiltrate government bureaus and boards to make life easier for themselves and other Jews (quite unlike the Nazi interpretation or the fantasies of contemporary right-wingers that see the Jews as part of a New World Order where the United Nations is but a screen for Jewish world domination. The notion, for example, of a Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG) would have been quite unreal and unconvincing for most of the workers in the Institute’s study. Jewish

“power,” quite simply, meant the control of business and banking. Though, it should be pointed out, some antisemitic workers thought that what Jews were able to achieve in Germany was something quite distinct from their power in America. Some were willing to believe that Jews really did represent a total social menace in Germany (hence, the necessity to exterminate them all), while simultaneously believing that Jews had limited powers in the United States. In a sense, many workers felt that America was simply bigger and stronger than the Jews and could resist the kind of effects that Jews had on Germany, while others worried about the power of Jews to furrow deeper into American life and eventually gain the upper hand on non-Jews: what the Nazis did might have to be replicated in the United States!

- Jews were felt by antisemitic workers to have an unnatural affinity for education and intellectualization. Their “brain power” went with their inability, avoidance, and antipathy toward manual labor. Jews “had to” get more education because they could not do real work and Jews used education to make more money doing far less than real workers. Education was the best route to exploit others and make excessive money. Jews were seen as unnaturally overrepresented in the fields of medicine and law. They monopolized the field of necessities – the sick worker had to go see the Jew. The worker who got into a scrape with the law had to pay the Jew. In this way any time a worker moved beyond the parameters of work they entered the nefarious web of Jewish appropriation and exploitation.
- 30.7% of workers sampled were considered to be antisemitic by the ISR. Of that group 20.8% were effectively pro-fascist or virtual Nazi sympathizers. As bad as that sounds on the surface the data was less damning and gloomy than it appeared.
- There was a nearly 10% difference between workers in the AFL and the CIO with the latter being less prone to antisemitism. That difference was probably greater and more important when it came to the decisive question five that sought to locate the levels of violent worker hostility toward Jews and identifying with the Nazi program of extermination.
- Gender was an important variable in worker antisemitism of the most violent type. Only 12 women out of the entire sample were sympathetic to the Nazi program of exterminating Jews. But when it came to less extreme and violent solutions women were not much different than male workers.
- Young workers (up to age of 25) were very much less prone to antisemitism as their older counterparts. Only 3.5% of workers in this category condoned Nazi terror against Jews.

- Education had an important effect on decreasing violent antisemitism. Workers with only a grammar school education were almost three times more likely to identify with the Nazi plan to cleanse the world of Jews. And, interestingly, a high school diploma was virtually as good as college experience or a college diploma in reducing violent antisemitism. The major exception to this rule was among workers over the age of 50 with higher educations.
- Catholics were more likely than Protestants to embrace Nazi terror and it appeared that Catholics needed frequent church attendance more than Protestants to check their violent impulses toward Jews.
- “Non-religious” workers were very similar to Protestant workers when it came to violent antisemitism.
- “Americanization” (the effect of American society on second- and third-generation workers) contributed significantly to decreasing hostility toward Jews.
- Nationality or national origins was not a tremendously decisive variable in determining levels of violent antisemitism except in the case of workers with Scandinavian backgrounds. They were much less likely to identify with Nazi measures and workers with roots in Mexico were the most likely to identify with the total rejection of Nazi extermination. But generally, no nationality was exempt.
- The wages paid to a worker had little effect on their level of antisemitism. Higher wages did not reduce hostility toward Jews nor did low wages increase hostility.
- The difference between skilled and unskilled workers was not significant in reducing antisemitism.
- Occupational status did have a strong effect on antisemitism. Unlike the European context, American white-collar, professional, and clerical workers were much less likely to succumb to hatred of Jews. The Institute concluded that they were “resistant” and had “amazingly liberal attitudes” compared to their European and blue-collar counterparts.

Theorizing working-class authoritarianism and antisemitism is no easy task. However, the approach of critical theory offers a powerful conceptual and theoretical matrix from which to explore the problem. In 1937, when he could still legitimately speak on the subject, Horkheimer argued that critical theory has, as its starting point, the commodity relation and I think that contemporary critical theory still has much to gain by being intimately grounded in Marx’s analysis of the exchange and circulation of commodities

and the social *forms* that exchange value assumes and the way those forms echo throughout myriad social relations. The all-decisive moment of alienation and the processes of identification that occur in the exchange of properties has much to tell us about how people form classes and the nature of servitude in capitalist society. Now, as never before thanks to the past efforts of the Institute of Social Research, and especially that largely unheralded “Other” Frankfurt School,<sup>20</sup> social scientists have at their disposal a monumental data set from which to launch new analyses, ask new questions, and delve deeper than ever before into the nature of not only the American working class at mid-century but contemporary class relations. Weber famously concluded his work on the Protestant ethic by saying that “stripped of its religious and ethical meaning” capitalism had come to rest “on mechanical foundations.” The system of commodity production and the accumulation of material goods had become, in his words, an “iron cage.” “No one knows” he said, “who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification...” (1958, p. 182).

The emergence of new ethics is always possible and the iron cage of commodity fetishism and class servitude is by no means logically necessary or eternal. Even before Weber’s death tremendous upheavals and revolutions of unprecedented magnitude sprang to life, hurling stagnant and anachronistic social orders into the air. Well in the 1940s there was no shortage of prophets of various political stripes calling on the working class to fulfill its duty-bound responsibilities to reshape society and storm the gates of heaven itself. That America entered the postwar era with a conservative bourgeois identity and ideology firmly “in the saddle” (and embraced by millions of workers) is, on the face of it and in some respects, rather surprising. But, occasionally, we have opportunities to look deep within the imaginations of those responsible for manifesting an ethic of democratic liberation and are, only then, from the “inside,” able to wrestle with the true depth, complexity, and contradictory nature of such a phenomenon.

## NOTES

1. “... French and German socialists, who at the 1907 and 1912 congresses of the Second International had voted overwhelmingly to oppose any ‘imperialist’ war carried out by their ‘bourgeois’ governments, now suddenly faced each other not as comrades but as combatants, each claiming that its government was only defending

itself from aggression. So great was the shock to Lenin that when he saw a German newspaper report on the German Social Democracy's vote to support the war, he initially thought that it was a forgery by the Prussian military for propaganda purposes" (Anderson, 1995, p. 3).

2. "Modern radicalism in the West appears to us a movement of intellectuals, both within and without the university. These intellectuals have been perpetually bemused at the indifference of the mass to its importunements. No amount of complex theorizing can conceal the fact that it is the intellectual and not the working class which resonates to the critique of bourgeois life. Workers have no quarrel, in principle, with the bourgeois. There is a debate between people of the same sort. Wealth and comfort motivate both; the issue between them is the technical one of distribution and, as such, is soluble" (Friedman, 1981, p. 17).

3. The urgency and unflinching faith demonstrated by the Spartacus League was not uncommon for Marxists of various hues during the first third of the twentieth century even in the midst of defeat and disunity: "In this hour, socialism is the only salvation for humanity. The words of the *Communist Manifesto* flare like a fiery *mene-tekel* [a sign of impending doom] above the crumbling bastions of capitalist society: Socialism or barbarism! . . . The proletarian revolution requires no terror for its aims; it hates and despises killing . . . It is not the desperate attempt of a minority to mold the world forcibly according to its ideal, but the action of the great massive millions of the people, destined to fulfill a historic mission, and to transform historical necessity into reality" (Luxemburg, 1971, pp. 367–370). Of course, less than a month after the above was published, the revolutionary situation, the "Spartacus Week," cooled into counter-revolutionary order and both Luxemburg and Liebknecht were executed. Before her death, Luxemburg blamed the apparent failure of worker revolution in Germany on leadership: "The leadership failed. But the leadership can and must be created anew by the masses and out of the masses. The masses are the crucial factor; they are the rock on which the ultimate victory of the revolution will be built. The masses were up to the task" (1971, p. 364). Here was the blind-spot of Marxist theory the mythology of a revolutionary proletarian *ethos*. Every failure and indignity suffered by the working class was due to venal and inept leadership within supposedly Marxist parties or unions. Blaming leadership and collusion eventually became a sort of reality-avoidance device whereby, as in the case of Preis's classic *Labor's Giant Step*, one could simply list the names of "top" labor leaders as an explanation for any failures (Preis, 1972). Concomitantly, the standard for what was considered labor "militancy" and "solidarity" was lowered so far by apologists that just sharing coffee around a bonfire and uttering harsh words for the boss was sufficient proof that workers were ablaze with the revolutionary spirit. Sociological inquiries produced in the last 20 years tend to take what they can find and extrapolate some kind of "solidarity" out of the most contradictory phenomena. The findings and formulations (e.g., "reactionary radicals") reflect a kind of desperation to save the concept of solidarity if not purposive class militancy or class consciousness (cf. Calhoun, 1982; Fantasia, 1988).

It is one thing to know that orthodox Marxism took working-class consciousness for granted and exhibited an uncritical faith in the inevitability of revolution but why was this form of thought, supposedly rooted in science and critical reason, characterized by such a romantic belief, or rather, *debilitation*? (cf. Calhoun, 1982,

pp. vii–viii). The causes were undoubtedly multiple and it would be impossible to trace the myriad determinations of Marxist “eschatology.” In his essay “Traditional and Critical Theory” Horkheimer ([1937]1972, p. 203) tried to elucidate the ideological nature of Kantian metaphysics as having hypostatized social facts and, in so doing, concocted a metaphysics of the transcendental subject. Kant could not posit a God but could, nonetheless, not theorize transcendent forces from a social-realist standpoint. The transcendental ego was a kind of halfway house between Protestant theology and social philosophy. Kantian critical philosophy stood in an analogous relationship with much of “vulgar” Marxism in that both suffered from a pre-Hegelian ontology such that subjective substance, even when comprehended in its material shape and movement (the chaos of bourgeois commerce and civil society), was pushed beyond the horizon of history and society to take up residence as a universal, indeterminate subject. Marxists knew how to speak critically yet continued to think in contradictory ways as if they could not bring themselves to fully believe what they were themselves saying – or were supposed to be saying. They had no recourse to a God but could not consistently maintain their dialectical materialism. Kautsky, for example, consciously knew (at some level) that orthodox theory was a lifeless and formal schematic yet published a massive tome like *The Materialist Conception of History* that offered yet another lifeless schematic – a dialectic of sorts but one that reduced class warfare, the proletariat, and revolution to mere abstractions; the future itself, post-capitalist society, “receded into a distant and eventually quite transcendental future” (Korsch, [1923]1970, p. 66). For continuously falling backward into abstractions and lifeless formulas, Korsch attacked Kautsky as “... a bourgeois cryptorevisionist who substituted evolution for the dialectic and thus eliminated the subjective, active component of Marx’s theory to focus exclusively on ‘objective, historical evolution [*Werden*] in nature and society” (Stenson, 1991, p. 237). Ironically, “vulgar” Marxism in practice came complete with transcendental subjects (History, Iron Laws, etc.) but, in theory, reduced them all to ideological specters – mere fantasy or “pseudo reality” – both crude idealism and materialism rolled into one.

4. What was true of the Frankfurt School and its extended circle of friends was generally true for the whole of Western Marxism. According to Anderson “this constant concourse with contemporary thought-systems outside historical materialism, often avowedly antagonistic to it, was something unknown to Marxist theory before the First World War. It was a specific and defining novelty of Western Marxism as such” ([1976]1979, p. 58).

5. The version of the report that I am using is 1,449 pages in length and was edited by Joseph Freeman, the legendary Communist author and editor and, among other things, the founder of *Partisan Review*. Freeman was a close friend of Paul Massing and a paid editorial and research assistant for the Institute. The labor study was funded in part by the Jewish Labor Committee but it was also one aspect of the larger “Studies in Antisemitism” program that the Institute was pitching to the American Jewish Committee (see *Institute of Social Research*, 1943, 1944).

6. The only portion of the report that reached publication came decades later when Lowenthal published his section in a highly edited form (Lowenthal, 1987). Sherman (1945) of the Jewish Labor Committee did publish a tiny pamphlet called “Labor’s Enemy: Anti-Semitism” that was a direct result of the Institute’s efforts but

it demonstrated no real connection with the overall study and was, not surprisingly, little more than counter-propaganda.

7. Others have commented on the deep pessimism reflected in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* but an unpublished piece written by Horkheimer in 1944 (known by Institute members and their extended circle of friends as the “Academy Article”) exhibited an almost unbelievable level of hopelessness, despair, and a complete flight from critical theory. Interestingly, Horkheimer’s idea to erect an “Inter-European Academy” for the education of Europe’s upper crust youth ran in exactly the opposite direction of the empirical findings and implications of the “Other” Frankfurt School. Whereas Horkheimer had totally abandoned faith in the masses Massing and Gurland were finding that education really did correlate to diminished levels of antisemitic and authoritarian hostility – posing a problem for assumptions in psychoanalytic theory about characterological durability. Instead of leaping into the data, Horkheimer jumped into the abyss of orthodox Freudianism (see Smith, 1992 on Adorno and Horkheimer vis-à-vis orthodox Freudianism and biological reductionism).

8. It is impossible, here, to fully explore the Institute’s data and methods; to do so would require a chapter in itself and could easily occupy a monograph-sized study of its own. Interested readers may consult Chapter 2 and Appendix D of my dissertation.

9. Joseph Freeman Collection, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University. On archival material “b” refers to box numbers and “f” refers to folder numbers.

10. “LL” refers to the Leo Lowenthal Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

11. “AL” is the “Antisemitism among American Labor” report by the Institute of Social Research.

12. The other worker categories were: Type E: *Ambivalent*. (19.1%) These people cannot make up their mind. While they are potentially antisemitic, they can go both ways in terms of their tolerance of Jews. This type feels that Jews have too much power or money, and that something ought to be done about it, but they do not know what should be done. They are undecided. Type F: *Consciously Tolerant/Emotionally Inconsistent*. (19.3%) These types are opposed to antisemitism at the level of humanitarian ideals and distaste for injustice. Type F may be mildly intolerant of Jews but are opposed to it at the level of “conscious intentions” so they try hard to control any prejudice they may have at the level of emotions. Type G: *Anti-discriminatory/Tolerant but still prone to stereotypes visible in friendly criticism*. (10.8%) These people do not harbor any dislike of Jews, are opposed to discrimination but do criticize some character traits commonly ascribed to Jews. Their criticism is based on reasoning if not in facts. Type H: *Absolutely not antisemitic*. (20.1%) No resentment, no criticism whatsoever.

13. “As simple as that! Tim [the worker quoted] has not bothered to find out how to go about controlling one particular group, in a democracy, without endangering the democratic safeguards of individual freedom. His plan paves the road for persecution” (ISR, 1945, p. 109).

14. Clearly embracing the logic of the detailed division of labor “real workers” were supposed to do one thing and one thing only. The antisemite, in this case, elevates the dehumanization of the assembly line to a moral virtue.

15. Table 1 is a composite of two separate tables found in the labor report (ISR, 1945, pp. 199, 206). The columns result in sums greater than 100% because antisemites tend to hate for more than one reason.

16. Lowenthal also wrote that “it may be noted that the problem of Jewish eating manners is a very complex one. Often statements about poor eating habits may be mere rationalizations of misgivings about kosher food. After all, the most crucial and the most cruel antisemitic accusations from the Middle Ages down to the turn of the last century referred to the food sphere – from well-poisoning to ritual murder. Criticism of table manners may still have something of the apprehension of the forbidden. Is it mere chance that people in our sample who resent bad eating manners are outspoken antisemites?” (ISR, 1945, p. 1020). And Lowenthal could have added the obvious contradiction: from the antisemitic perspective the Jew with bad manners represented the most impure and unclean element of society, the Jew, consuming the most pure and clean food. What better illustration of the contamination of the pure by the impure and the “allergic reaction” Jews had to (their own) food? Spitting, belching, nearly vomiting, etc., were in a sense proof enough for the antisemite that the Jew was unclean and impure by virtue of his or her reaction to kosher foods. Eating kosher food was logically related to the ritual murder and devouring of the pure Other.

17. This is, of course, the distinction between positive and negative freedom. Few things could be worse, from the standpoint of the authoritarian, than people running around doing whatever they pleased. But the notion of happy Jews running around shirking their responsibilities and duties provided the very source of enjoyment for the authoritarian. The very concept and potential of freedom, when “Jewified,” guaranteed the closure of positive freedom and its collapse back into the negative “freedom from” (see, e.g., Fromm, 1941).

18. In his piece on working-class authoritarianism, Lipset (1960, p. 103) observed that in America “authoritarians ‘do not join many community groups’ as compared with nonauthoritarians.”

19. An idea that emerges here is that if the American working class posed an especially difficult challenge to organizers of industrial or social democracy then this fact also militated against organizing labor for fascism and antisemitism.

20. One should also recognize the Emergency Committee of Displaced Foreign Scholars which awarded Paul Massing \$1,500 in 1943 specifically for work on the antisemitism project. Not much has been said about external support provided to the Institute and its members during the 1930s and 1940s but noteworthy support was provided by the Emergency Committee as well as the Oberlaender Trust.

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# HERBERT MARCUSE AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL THEORY: BEYOND THE CONSUMER SOCIETY

Philip Walsh

Society has invaded even the deepest roots of individual existence, even the unconscious of man. We must get at the roots of society in the individuals themselves, the individuals who, because of social engineering, constantly reproduce the continuum of repression (Marcuse, 2005b, p. 81).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Herbert Marcuse's vision of liberation from the 'affluent society' constitutes one of the most significant interventions into public life of any philosopher in the last half of the 20th century. Yet his major works are little read today in philosophy departments in North America, where, if first-generation Frankfurt School critical theory is on the menu, it is usually represented by the work of Theodor W. Adorno. Within North American and, to a lesser extent, European sociology, on the other hand, Marcuse is still generally acknowledged as an important influence, although the extent and nature of his legacy remains unclear. This article examines the relevance and

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applicability of some of Marcuse's theories to recent developments within sociology, and especially to the growing and influential critical literature within the sociology of consumption, in which ideas that originate in first-generation Frankfurt School theory are clearly operative, but rarely acknowledged.<sup>1</sup> The scope of the paper is restricted to three of Marcuse's most influential theoretical claims: (1) An underlying 'performance principle' has become a primary determining factor in shaping the economic, social and cultural systems of advanced industrial societies. (2) Resistance to the general developmental tendencies of these societies is being contained and weakened through a process of 'repressive desublimation'; and (3) The human activity of play, understood as a distinct field of free (i.e., unalienated) human activity, is threatened by the ascendancy of instrumental rationality. These claims are evaluated in terms of their applicability to the problem of self-experience and the threat to individuality that is a principal feature of contemporary consumer capitalism.

## 2. AFFLUENCE AND EMANCIPATION

Three initial objections color contemporary perceptions of Marcuse. The first objection takes issue with the basic premise of the 'affluent society', an expression originally coined by [John Kenneth Galbraith in 1958](#) to refer to the fact that abundance has replaced poverty as the central problem of advanced post-industrial societies, and taken over by Marcuse in his works of the late 1950s and 1960s. This objection takes roughly the following form: The kind of 'affluent society' that Marcuse envisioned in the early 1960s as becoming generalized throughout the world as industrialization advanced, has not occurred and may be in the process of reversing, even in the advanced post-industrial societies. As [Immanuel Wallerstein \(2003, 2004\)](#), [Glenn Firebaugh](#) and others influenced by Kondratieff-cycle theories, have argued, generalized economic prosperity in the advanced industrialized nations peaked during the long post-war boom, and income levels in these societies are becoming polarized, with the share of national income increasingly concentrated at the top and declining levels of prosperity among the lower and middle classes.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, New Left visions that were formed in a climate that saw the introduction of anti-poverty programs, collective bargaining legislation, social security protection and other Great Society policy achievements, at least in North America and Western Europe, are irrelevant in a world which, in the past 30 years, has seen increases in real wages stalled, social benefits cut and public industries transferred

en masse to the private sector. Moreover, the model of globalization that has been pursued in the last decade has so damaged the national policy pretensions of the individual nation-states, while entrenching industrialism under conditions that resemble the 19th century Europe in many parts of the developing world, as to make the idea of emancipation from an 'affluent society' at best quaint. On this view, Marcuse's historically shortsighted and elitist views are best forgotten, and emancipation from affluence must await emancipation from want.

Such a position, however, fails to take account of the historical positioning of Marcuse's vision or the actual conditions which predominate in the first-world. While anti-progressive legislation leading to cutbacks of public provision has more recently amplified economic insecurity for a significant proportion of the population, and relative inequality has increased alarmingly, especially in the last decade, *absolute* levels of income have risen several times over during the last 50 years in the advanced post-industrial societies. From the perspective of the 19th century, or even from the first half of the 20th century, material scarcity *per se* has been vanquished for all but perhaps the bottom 10% of the population in the advanced post-industrial societies.<sup>3</sup> In many areas of the post-colonial, developing world, the picture is more complex, but the new middle classes in East Asia, South America and especially India have experienced something like a generalization of affluence, even if this seems to have occurred in conjunction with a new phase of 'primitive accumulation'.<sup>4</sup> But this does not necessarily contradict Marcuse's own predictions.<sup>5</sup>

But if affluence – or at least a state of postscarcity – has been achieved in the first-world nation-states, and at least looks possible in the developing world, with it has come many of the serious pathologies that Marcuse accurately foresaw as requiring critical attention. The most obvious recent expression of this realization is the sudden explosion of research, especially among psychologists and economists, but surprisingly few sociologists, into the so-called 'problem of happiness': The recognition that increased wealth and income does not correlate (or at least not straightforwardly so) with higher levels of 'happiness' or well-being, and indeed in many respects is antithetical to it. The fact that such questions – first addressed by the Frankfurt School theorists at least 50 years ago – are being raised publicly at last is perhaps encouraging, but the manner in which they are being posed and answered for the most part, as I argue below, is highly problematic.

A second objection concerns Marcuse's vision of emancipation itself. As Zygmunt Bauman expresses it, few people living in the

advanced industrialized nations and who understood Marcuse's call for liberation

wished to be liberated [and] even fewer were willing to act on that wish... [Therefore,] the awakening of the people to the unfulfilled task of liberation is not on the cards. Marcuse's quandary is outdated since 'the individual' has already been granted all the freedom he might have dreamed of and all the freedom he might have reasonably hoped for (2000, pp. 16, 22).

Bauman goes on to argue that Marcuse's vision is purely utopian and fatally harnessed to a vision of mass emancipation from mass delusion inherited from Marx, in which change must be revolutionary and universal or it is no change at all.

But this critique too fails to square with Marcuse's actual perspective. In the first place, it suggests a misleadingly narrow and individualistic conception of emancipation that bears little resemblance to Marcuse's views on the subject. Marcuse's understanding of freedom stands squarely within a Hegelian-Marxist tradition that explicitly rejects the equation of emancipation with individualism, and situates it instead in the context of institutions and communitarian ideals. Second, Marcuse was intensely aware of the difficulties and contradictions of translating a theoretical vision into a viable politics. To the extent that it became possible to build a social movement around that vision in the context of the late 1960s, he took advantage of it, but he remained palpably aware of its fragility and limitations. For Marcuse, and the more sophisticated leaders of the New Left, indeed, the idea of emancipation as a 'mass awakening' was viewed with definite ambivalence.

A third objection, which has been lodged against the Frankfurt School approach in general, is that Marcuse's critique of modern ideology is 'totalizing', to the point where both his own standpoint and the source of genuine alternative conceptions of modernity, are erased.<sup>6</sup> This objection is generally deployed against Marcuse's notion of 'one-dimensionality' which, like Max Weber's conception of the 'iron cage', stands for a sclerotic society that has become incapable of examining its own normative grounds or structural contradictions, and thus unable to correct the resulting developmental tendencies. While this critique has some force in relation to Adorno and Horkheimer's perspective on modernity and its futures, Marcuse quite explicitly notes the tentative and provisional status of his inquiries. The 'one-dimensional' metaphor, together with Marcuse's other generalized concepts, are not intended to designate 'iron laws' or even 'social forces' pointing to an inevitable future. Rather, they refer to tendencies and

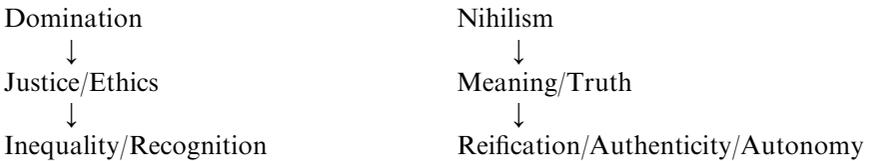
possibilities likely to affect certain key sections of the population of the advanced industrialized societies.

Contrary to these objections, then, Marcuse's understanding of the particular problems of the 'affluent society' bears re-examination, both for the robustness of its theoretical grounding and for its applicability to current social research. Within contemporary sociology, recent critical approaches to overconsumption and consumerism as an ideology point to some immediate points of continuity with Marcuse's perspective. Consider the general shift within recent sociological theory away from ideal-type descriptions of society that emphasize features of the social world associated with productivity, such as 'industrial', 'post-industrial' or 'late capitalist' society, and emphasize instead consumption and consumerism, which as 'mass' phenomena presuppose the prevalence of affluence. The shift involves a new emphasis on consumption as the dominant site of social transformation, and on consumerism as a mode of generalized subjective experience. It is complemented by trends in empirical sociology that privilege the study of social practices associated with consumption. Various studies have emerged that deal directly with the relationship between the commercial saturation of culture and the nature of self-experience, as well as psychological well-being and the commodification of inner life (see, e.g., Schor, 1999, 2004; Hamilton, 2001; Hochschild, 2003). An anti-consumerist 'ethos', which arguably constitutes a distinct social movement has even congealed around this literature, mobilizing compelling public arguments that connect hyper-consumerism with various pathologies, including corporate-led globalization, the impoverishment of individuality and stunting of critical thought.<sup>7</sup>

Such themes suggest strong continuities with Marcuse's critical theory, and to the extent that this continuity remains untheorized, sociology in this area will lack an important socio-historical and meta-theoretical perspective on its core problematic. In particular, the exploration of the phenomenon of consumerism in relation to the *subject* – i.e., the analysis of the effects of the culture of consumption that pervades the affluent societies on the basic categories of experience – is nowhere more thoroughly developed than among the first-generation of Frankfurt School theorists.<sup>8</sup> Among these, Marcuse's conception of the relationship between the self and practices of consumption remains central. He helped to both define the problem and shaped the way contemporary sociology approached it. Therefore, recovery of the key elements of his argument sheds light on both the way critical sociology approaches the problem, and on the validity and relevance of Marcuse's approach.

### 3. RETHINKING THE PERFORMANCE PRINCIPLE

Bernstein (1995) has argued that Frankfurt School critical theory constitutes a unified and coherent research program to the extent that it sustains a focus on two generalized features of late-capitalist society – *domination* and *nihilism* (1995, pp. 21–27). These two fields of focus allow the identification of a range of problems that have become familiar within contemporary critical social theory. The two foci, however, while articulated with each other, yield rather different priorities. Bernstein argues, persuasively, that the problem of modern nihilism issues in a concern with meaning and truth, while the problem of domination yields a concern with justice and ethics. It is possible, though, to develop the argument further and to identify a series of problems that extend from these two foci and which define quite distinct fields within contemporary social theory. These problem-fields can be roughly indicated as follows:



Bernstein deploys this analysis in the context of a defense of Adorno's perspective against Habermas's 'revision' of the critical theory project. However, Marcuse's contributions to the establishment of the problem-field play no role in the argument, reproducing an implicit but, one suspects, widely held belief that Marcuse's contribution is at least secondary too, and perhaps can be simply absorbed into, Adorno's. The content, and even the boundaries, of such a debate are beyond the scope of this paper, but it is assumed here that Marcuse's perspective bears re-examination in its own right, and not least because of his contribution to this problem-field. Indeed, one of Marcuse's core concepts – the rule of the performance principle, first introduced in *Eros and Civilization*, and developed in *One-Dimensional Man* – can be interpreted in two ways that mirror the divisions within this problem-field, and allow insight into the tensions and priorities within recent critical approaches to consumption and consumerism.

In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse develops an analysis of the performance principle, together with an account of the possibilities available to 'late industrial' civilization, through a critical reworking of concepts drawn

primarily from Freud's later 'sociological' writings. The framework that emerges from the work survives, with some important variations, into the critical project developed in *One-Dimensional Man*. Most importantly, Marcuse refashions Freud's twin notions of repression and the conflict between the pleasure and the reality principles in order to address the same economic and social concerns that have been the province of classical Marxism.<sup>9</sup> This refashioning of psychoanalytic concepts, which in Freud's thought terminated in his trademark conservative pessimism, into concrete vehicles for re-thinking and challenging nihilism and social domination from a Marxist perspective is one of Marcuse's most distinctive achievements. However, reconstruction of his argument reveals an ambiguity in the meaning of the performance principle that points towards the split in the problem field of critical theory cited above.

The original Freudian notion of repression refers to the unconscious psychic structure of restraints on the basic drives, whose restriction is a condition for the emergence and maintenance of 'civilization'.<sup>10</sup> The mechanism of development of these constraints within the individual is a result of the conflict between the pleasure and the reality principles. The pleasure principle refers to the urge for gratification and the aversion to pain, which directs the interplay of drives and thus shapes the basic structure of desire. The reality principle refers to the inherent limits that are placed on gratification by the social framework of law and moral rules, which confront desire as the prevailing external 'world conditions'. Those world conditions are, for Freud, ultimately economic; i.e., they are dictated by the fact of scarcity, or the principle of Ananke. The action of the world on the domain of desire – which takes the form of a struggle between the pleasure and reality principles – produces repression as a distinctive psychic structure, a 'secondary process' that acts to check the operations of the primary one.<sup>11</sup> The affinity of Freud's model with Marx's base-superstructure model of society (unrecognized by Freud himself) becomes clear if we view the principle of Ananke as structuring what Marx designated the economic 'base' of society, and the normative and legal 'superstructure' that arises from this as the principal means by which repression is produced in the individual.

To this 'socialized' model of both the meaning and the mechanism of repression, Marcuse adds two elements. The first is the concept of surplus repression, which refers to those restraints that have developed above and beyond the fact of scarcity and the framework of law and moral rules necessary for social life, and attained a degree of independent causal power. The independence derives from the fact that these restraints now far outstrip the core 'necessary' restraints, because of a decline in the quantum of

‘necessary repression’ required by a society of abundance – the weakening of the power of Ananke. Second, this independent sphere gets institutionalized in a form that is directed not towards economic exploitation but towards social domination. Therefore, advanced industrial society has not only broken free from the causal primacy of the ‘base’ over the ‘superstructure’, but has also become entrenched within a new system of restraints that Marcuse dubs the ‘performance principle’. Beyond their ‘superstructural’ status though, the actual content and mechanism of the performance principle are not fully specified by Marcuse, and the term allows the two different interpretations mentioned above.

First, one can interpret the performance principle as a reworking of the theme of reification, as this was interpreted by two of Marcuse’s most formative influences, Georg Lukàcs and Martin Heidegger.<sup>12</sup> On this account, the performance principle refers to those features of advanced industrial societies, especially the emphasis on technology, that bring about a reflexively produced human self-understanding of its own actions and goals as oriented exclusively toward the production of things *qua* things. Reification is premised on the culture of utility that pervades contemporary society, and through which

society emerges as a lasting and expanding system of *useful* performances; the hierarchy of functions and relations assumes the form of objective reason: law and order are identical with the life of society itself (1956a, p. 89 [italics added]).

On this account, the performance principle is also the basis for Marcuse’s understanding of the tendency towards technocracy and an all-pervasive culture of utility within contemporary society.<sup>13</sup> Interpreted sociologically, as a critique of the advance of nihilism, the performance principle may here be said to refer to the progressive absorption of all human activities into either ‘labor-time’ or ‘consumption-time’, both of which constitute ‘durations’ spent in the service of centrally conceived and controlled, but subjectless agencies. Expanding the realm of ‘duration’ degrades the *meaning* of distinct activities, as action, work, and play all come to be conceived as labor. Such developments threaten – among other things – the proclaimed autonomy and authenticity of the self.

Second, one can interpret the performance principle as an ideological component of the contemporary superstructure that promotes the endless accumulation of capital. Such a reading can be derived from Marcuse’s claim that

[w]e designate [this institutional system of restraints] the performance principle in order to emphasize that under its rule society is stratified according to the competitive

economic performances of its members... [It becomes] an acquisitive and antagonistic society in the process of constant expansion (Marcuse, 1956a, pp. 44–45; cf. Marcuse, 2005b, p. 165).

Again, read sociologically, from the perspective of the problem of social domination, Marcuse's explanation here suggests a combination of a social action with a systems-theory model: The performance principle re-programs the ends and means of individuals' actions in ways that are conducive to competitive economic behavior in general, and such behavior is functional for capital accumulation. The realm of action may be understood as comprising both the economic 'performances' of workers, but also those of consumers, with consumption practices being functional for the stimulation and expansion of markets and constant re-legitimation of the 'law of value'.<sup>14</sup>

Each of these interpretations of the performance principle therefore privileges tendencies associated with either nihilism or domination. On the first interpretation, the performance principle constitutes the reifying force that presses forms of action and interaction into the category of 'productive activity', thus impoverishing the meaning of human action, and reproducing nihilism. On the second, the principle drives actors to integrate all aspects of their life-activity into a competitive process that privileges and reproduces the mechanisms of accumulation and the culture of capitalism as a system of domination.

This division of the analytical field into these problem areas is no doubt problematic. Marcuse, and indeed each of the first-generation Frankfurt School thinkers, would insist that the two problems cannot be analytically separated or understood in isolation from each other. Nevertheless, nuances of emphasis in theory-building eventually develop into distinct fields of investigation, and within the terrain of contemporary critical sociology of consumption, the two problems have become distinct areas of focus, with often conflicting agendas. In what follows I lay out some of this terrain in the context of recent critical sociology of consumption.

### *3.1. The Performance Principle and Nihilism*

Jean Baudrillard's writings on the culture of advertising may be understood as a development of the first interpretation of the performance principle. This involves an explicit rejection of the systems-theory interpretation, since Baudrillard argues that the development of advertising as a principal component of postmodern culture has involved a shift from its early

function as a means of intensifying accumulation to its later one as a means of integration (Baudrillard, 1970, 1983). More recently, this theoretical perspective has been explicitly connected with the critical theory tradition by such theorists as Douglas Kellner (1989), Bauman (2000) and Infolfur Bluhdorn (2006), all of whom have emphasized the ‘nihilistic’ dimension of modernity as a progressive loss of meaning, secondary to the decline of the ideal of the autonomous self.

Bauman’s recently advanced ideal type description of advanced post-industrial society as ‘liquid modernity’ is a case in point. Advanced post-industrialism, for Bauman, is ‘liquid’ insofar as it consists in the “radical melting of the fetters and manacles rightly or wrongly suspected of limiting the individual freedom to choose and to act” (2000, p. 5). The metaphor is intended to suggest a double process: an expansion of the field of individual freedom to ‘choose and act’, and contraction of the qualitative range of the socially recognized forms of activity available. This double process produces a de-differentiation of personal identity as marketing and advertising become the dominant forms of both integration and communication between subjects.

In a similar vein, Bluhdorn has coined the term ‘denucleated modernity’ as a heuristic description of the role that advertising and marketing have come to play in the erosion of the ideal of an autonomous self. Enlightenment ideology assumes an equivalence between ‘action’ and ‘agency’, i.e., the existence of an autonomous ego empowered to direct activity – a structure that was the ‘nucleus’ of modernist culture and aspirations. In contemporary society, however,

Every imaginable, supposedly self-determined, human activity, ranging from sexuality or parenting to mobility and gardening, is governed by the range of options which the market has made available for the respective purposes; and the market itself also generates the criteria by which product choices are supposed to be made. Accordingly, any emerging identity is assembled through product choices: it is no longer prior to, distinct from and autonomous vis-à-vis the market, but identical with it. This, specifically, i.e., the abdication of the autonomous subject and the dissolution of the distinction and dualism between the individual and its environment, the subject and system, the Self and the Other, is the defining criterion of what may be called denucleated modernity (Bluhdorn, 2006, p. 30).

The array of social forces that Marcuse attempts to capture in the notion of the performance principle is here re-thought, in a contemporary context as a reifying set of processes that collapse the social conditions that sustain authentic self-identity. They replace the possibility of an authentic self based on ‘internal conversation’, with an externally generated ‘consumer profile’.

The ‘performances’ of greatest relevance are no longer those associated with work but with consumption, as the culture of marketing is inserted into the organs and ventricles of everyday life. Bluhdorn and other theorists working in this area therefore find themselves engaging with the problems of authenticity, autonomy, and identity as the legacy of the Frankfurt School identification of the intertwined problems of reification and nihilism.

### 3.2. *The Performance Principle and Domination*

In contrast, Nancy Fraser’s attempted synthesis of critical theory and post-structuralism emphasizes the themes associated with Marcuse’s critique of the performance principle, understood as *domination*. Fraser has also attempted to connect themes inherited from first-generation Frankfurt School theory with topics associated with post-structuralism (especially post-structuralist feminist theory), on the grounds that the problem of domination is central to both. She therefore emphasizes those features, rather than the problems of authenticity and autonomy *per se*, that may be said to concern the question of domination and its articulated problem areas. In the 1990s, Fraser was strongly critical of the species of identity politics that succeeded to the universalism of the New Left project, and this criticism may be generalized to include epistemological and methodological commitments that give priority to the problems of identity, authenticity, and autonomy, such as those advanced by Bluhdorn, Bauman and Baudrillard. According to Fraser, such approaches ignore or underplay the ‘Hegelian’ moment of critical theory that shifts priority from the question of authenticity and autonomy to that of *recognition*, understood as an ethics of ‘full participation’ in cultural, social and political life. Recognition and misrecognition are functions not – or at least not directly – of exploitation and maldistribution, but of domination, which in advanced industrialized societies produce “hierarchies of cultural value that deny [individuals] the requisite standing” (2005, p. 74; cf. 2000, p. 110).

While Fraser does not engage directly with this issue, it is clear that misrecognition and the reproduction of hierarchies of cultural value are sustained not simply – or even principally – by the class structure of advanced post-industrial societies, but within its status order, which is propelled partly by competitive practices of consumption. In a postscarcity society driven by the performance principle, such practices fuel some of the most toxic kinds of status hierarchies. As a range of thinkers, from George Bernard Shaw to Thorstein Veblen to Pierre Bourdieu, have emphasized,

status-seeking in contemporary capitalist societies has a logic and intensity that is difficult to break, and is oppressive in its effects. Its contemporary empirical investigation has been pioneered by, among others, [Richard Wilkinson \(2000\)](#), who argues that status-seeking through consumption is clearly newly ascendant in portions of American and British society since the early 1990s. It is correlated with a range of social pathologies, including reduced level of friendship networks, higher mental health risk factors and lower levels of well-being ([Wilkinson, 2000, p. 294](#); cf. Frank, 1999). Status-seeking through consumption also has well-documented spillover effects into other areas of social life, including the class system. As Juliet Schor has argued, in her important studies of competitive consumption, it fuels competition within workplace hierarchies, leading to increased work-hours, declining solidarity among workers, and the consequent accrual of progressive advantage to employers over labor. A defensible conclusion to draw, and one which Marcuse makes explicit in *One-Dimensional Man*, is that postscarcity, in the form of the ‘affluent society’, produces a net increase in the level of domination, understood as the degree to which action is driven by the logic of misrecognition, rather than by need or desire.

#### **4. RE-THINKING REPRESSIVE DE-SUBLIMATION**

If the idea of the performance principle can be fruitfully connected to particular ways in which the themes of nihilism and domination have been taken up within contemporary sociology, what of the concept that has become perhaps most closely associated with Marcuse’s legacy – that of repressive desublimation? The concept is commonly viewed as central to *One-Dimensional Man*, where it is deployed to diagnose a tendency toward the effacement of an oppositional culture as a result of the centrally controlled satisfaction of false needs. The concept of repressive desublimation – like the performance principle, Freudian in inspiration – suggests a set of subjective processes, which would seem to fit more closely with the concern with nihilism and authenticity discussed above. However, in Chapter 3 of *One-Dimensional Man*, in which the concept is initially deployed, Marcuse is at least as much concerned with *objective* processes, which may be conceptualized as forms of domination. Therefore, the cross-cutting problem field can also be traced through a re-interpretation of this concept. I argue here that Marcuse’s conception of the loss of meaning

(nihilism) associated with repressive desublimation in *One-Dimensional Man* has to be understood as integrally linked to his account of an objective process, which may be usefully dubbed 'aesthetic de-alienation', but that Marcuse's accounts of both processes are vulnerable to serious objections. However, his analysis of both processes leads back to his elaboration of the concept of *play*, which is a central theme in his earlier work. As will be seen, the importance of play, as a preserve of the imagination, has also become important within recent sociology of consumption, suggesting that some cross-fertilization of this literature with Marcusean insights would also be valuable.

Marcuse's account of repressive desublimation in *One-Dimensional Man* was shaped by the argument of Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) in the essay on the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and it is worth offering some initial clarification of the relationship between the two arguments. While Marcuse agrees with the broad thrust of Adorno and Horkheimer's argument, he emphasizes different elements. The divergence of his perspective from Adorno and Horkheimer's can be cast generally along the following lines. First, Marcuse presents an interpretation of the sphere of culture which resembles an 'anthropological' Hegel. This differs markedly from Adorno's approach that was based on a detailed epistemological engagement with Hegel's key texts. Second, Marcuse offers a generalized diagnosis as to the subjective effects of the industrialization of culture using the vocabulary of psychoanalysis. Adorno and Horkheimer were much more wary of this vocabulary than Marcuse, or the other strongly 'psychoanalytic' theorist associated with the School, Erich Fromm. Third, Marcuse is more constructive in presenting alternatives to the prevailing processes of reification and domination than Adorno or Horkheimer. In this last respect, Marcuse draws on the theme of play and imagination, and this constitutes both an interesting point of convergence with Fromm, and with themes within the recent critical sociology of consumption. In this respect, it is worth noting that the bitter theoretical divisions between the two most 'psychoanalytic' of the Frankfurt School theorists seem in retrospect far less significant than they did in their own time.<sup>15</sup>

The concept of repressive desublimation appears in Chapter 3 of *One-Dimensional Man*, entitled, in a self-consciously Hegelian fashion, "The Conquest of the Unhappy Consciousness: Repressive Desublimation". Marcuse argues here that the conditions of advanced industrial societies alter the form taken by cultural institutions, such as religion, art, literature and those associated with sexuality as they confront individuals in everyday life.<sup>16</sup> This argument derives its force from a purported contrast between the

culture of premodern or early-modern societies and that of advanced industrial societies. In a manner that recalls Durkheim's distinction between the sacred and profane, perhaps more than it does Hegel, Marcuse argues that, in premodern and early modern societies, cultural forms are expressed in terms of their *estrangement* from the everyday. Aesthetic and religious symbolism therefore appear as radically 'other', as differentiated, sacred and remote from the reality of everyday life, thus constituting a distinct artistic, religious, or political field that both responds *to*, and has its source *in*, human imagination. The "decisive distinction", indicative of the contrast between premodern and early-modern culture on the one hand and that of the contemporary social world on the other

is not the psychological one between art created in joy and art created in sorrow, between sanity and neurosis, but that between the artistic and the societal reality. The rupture with the latter, the magic or rational transgression, is an essential quality of even the most affirmative art; it is alienated also from the very public to which it is addressed. No matter how close and familiar the temple or cathedral were to the people living around them, they remained in terrifying or elevating contrast to the daily life of the slave, the peasant and the artisan – and perhaps even to that of the masters (1964, p. 63).

The transgressive component of a distinct imaginary (whether it is 'affirmative' in the form of public monument, or 'negative' in the form of works that explore suffering), is the result of *sublimation*. Indeed, "artistic alienation *is* sublimation" – it involves the construction of an imaginary as a response to the resistance to gratification represented by Ananke and the reality principle. *Desublimation* therefore involves the inverse process and becomes possible only within a postscarcity society. However, it also becomes repressive insofar as it is monitored, administered, and directed by the social and cultural system precisely to limit antagonism and defuse social opposition to the prevailing systems of domination.

Marcuse's principal examples of such repressive desublimation within *One-Dimensional Man*, are aesthetic works that advance the process of repressive desublimation through bringing libidinal impulses closer to the surface of everyday life.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, repressive desublimation is bound up closely with the instrumentalization and commodification of sexuality in late industrial society, which has the effect of desacralizing and de-erotizing the landscape of the imaginary within which sexuality was previously encountered (see 1964, pp. 73–5). The breakdown of such a landscape – a field of remoteness that could be invested with notions of the sacred and of auratic intensity – is representative of the more general 'de-alienation' of the aesthetic that accompanies desublimation. The tendency is visible more generally in the extent of a 'theme-park' mentality of contemporary

practices of consumption, in which spectacle, simulation and centralized administration become dominant features (see Ritzer, 2003). Since such features are *formal* – i.e., they can be extended over any form of imagery – they break up both the need and the ability of art, literature, religion and the mystique associated with sexuality to represent a symbolic landscape that can transcend the everyday. Aesthetic forms become colonized and absorbed by the culture industry not necessarily through trivialization, but by their de-differentiation from the context of alienation in which their antagonism to the everyday can be discerned.

The theory of repressive desublimation and the attendant theory of culture, as they appear in *One-Dimensional Man*, however, are subject to a number of significant problems and objections. First, Marcuse's use of the term 'alienation' or 'estrangement' is inconsistent, and its meaning seems to fluctuate somewhere between Feuerbach, Marx and Hegel. Second, Marcuse conflates aesthetic, religious and sexual experience as particular manifestations of a more general phenomenon, and fails to consider the important distinctions between these institutional spheres. Third, his analysis of the social structure of premodern societies, which he simply classifies as 'feudal' (see Marcuse, 1964, p. 58), is problematic. Finally, his diagnosis of the effacement of the estrangement between the individual and the imaginary order of contemporary society – or aesthetic de-alienation – seems dubious on purely empirical grounds, and seemed so even in the 1950s and 1960s. As Walter Benjamin argued in the 1940s, 'aura', which corresponds to the kind of 'remoteness' that Marcuse associates with aesthetic alienation can be preserved and even intensified through technological reproducibility. Similarly, a widespread 'sense of the sacred' and the sacralization of everyday life are possibly ascendant – in American society in particular, as Arlie Hochschild has argued (2003, pp. 203–4). Marcuse's theory of culture becomes more interesting and relevant to contemporary critical sociology of consumption, however, if we examine his analysis of the origins and basis of culture in the faculty of imagination and the play impulse, which constitutes a principal theme of his writings prior to *One-Dimensional Man*.

## 5. IMAGINATION, PLAY AND WELL-BEING

Marcuse's analysis of imagination and play can be extracted from the psychoanalytic theory that he worked out in *Eros and Civilization*, but has its roots in his work in the 1930s when he studied with Heidegger at Freiburg. In *Eros and Civilization*, and paralleling his augmentation of the

theory of repression, Marcuse concurs with Freud about the *genesis* of the imagination, but disagrees with him about its contemporary manifestation and *function*. For Freud, the imagination evolved, in the history of the species, and as a kind of compensation for the increasingly tyrannical regime of the superego or conscience, and as the exclusive preserve of the pleasure principle. Imagination occupies a space insulated from ‘reality-testing’, and therefore from the frustrations that the reality principle imposes, but at the price of worldly impotence. The establishment of a sovereign inner domain of imagination leads – anthropologically speaking – to a bifurcation of consciousness. Those activities that are to be carried out in the world become subject to the faculty of reason, which moderates, interprets and directs action in the world. But a parallel set of capacities evolves to organize and mediate, though not to exercise dominion over, the realm of the imagination. The sphere of the imagination therefore involves conscious directed *activity*, but this activity does not become *work*. Consequently, an entirely different set of stimuli are involved in the development and shaping of the faculties whose responsibilities are confined to the imagination, and whose primary function for Freud becomes one of *escape* from the travails of the reality principle.

Given Freud’s rather reductive and naturalistic explanation of the origins and function of imagination, Marcuse’s use of psychoanalytic language to explore the philosophical meaning of imagination might seem an odd choice. However, Freud’s conception of the genesis and function of the imagination and its relationship to the other faculties responds to a problem that has its source in Kant’s philosophy of mind, and which was inherited not simply by psychoanalysis but also by philosophical anthropology via Schiller (e.g., in the work of Cassirer) and, via Nietzsche, by Heidegger. There is therefore a genealogy to the problem that exceeds Freud’s formulations.

For Kant, the possibility of human experience is premised on the separation of the faculties into two primary spheres, those of understanding and intuition. The concepts of the understanding are empty, the manifold content of intuitions blind, without the presence and activity of the other. The ‘mixing’ of these two alien elements is one of the functions of the imagination, whose modes of mediation Kant analyzed in the important ‘Schematism’ chapter in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, on one interpretation, the imagination has a purely mediating role in Kant’s faculty psychology. However, in various places, Kant poses the problem in a different way by raising the idea of a ‘common root’ of understanding and intuition, i.e., an original source of their original affinity that allows them to

be brought together, and thereby to be influenced by the ideas and ends of reason. Kant's answer to the problem of the common root, as it emerged in his later writings, lies in the imagination. Therefore, in the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant extends the role of the imagination, seeing in it not simply the basis for the vital connection between the senses and the intellect but also between the external world of facts and the inner world of will – between the realms of nature and freedom. This is what allows the imagination to exercise aesthetic judgments, which are free from both the requirements of the moral law and of external necessity. Thus, the imagination operates according to its own rules and, in Marcuse's terms, according to an independent set of truth-values.

For Freudian psychoanalysis, the problem of the imagination is not philosophical, but anthropological (or 'phylogenetic'), and psychological (or 'ontogenetic'). Both dimensions are treated by Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization*, but the ontogenetic dimension comes to the fore in the question of the development and assertion of the imagination in the life-stage development of the individual. Imagination comes into being through "such sub-real and surreal processes as dreaming, daydreaming, play, the 'stream of consciousness'" (1956a, p. 146). This notion of play as the central preserve of imagination is consciously opposed to the demands of work or 'performance'. With the ascendance of the performance principle as the prevailing form of the reality principle, work – or rather alienated labor – comes to be aligned with formal rationality, with antagonism and with competition. Play, inasmuch as its activity is maintained as an independent sovereign space, is to be understood – as Kant himself characterized the 'art of judgment'<sup>19</sup> – as "purposiveness without purpose and lawfulness without law" (1956a, p. 177), thereby distinguishing it from both the formal rationality that governs the economic sphere (since play is "useless... it 'just plays'" (p. 195)) and from the power of the superego that governs the conscience.

The opposition between play and the spheres of rationality and morality, and its sovereign status, is the basis for Marcuse's claim, in *Eros and Civilization*, that it provides a well of resistance against both the reifying and domineering tendencies of the performance principle. However, in *One-Dimensional Man*, that potential resistance is viewed as having been largely overcome and the play impulse as having become absorbed into the reductive categories of 'recreation', 'leisure' and 'entertainment', i.e., centrally controlled apparatuses oriented towards the administration and control of 'free time' (cf. Adorno, 2001). In other words, the work of repressive desublimation is ultimately directed against the play impulse and its sovereign status.

While Marcuse's theory of culture seems deficient in retrospect, his analysis of the importance of the imagination and play impulse seem highly topical. Curiously, it is also a major point of convergence with the work of Fromm, whose analysis of the role of play also bears re-examination.

Fromm addresses this theme in the two early works, *Man for Himself* (Fromm, 1947) and *The Sane Society* (Fromm, 1955), that adhere most closely to the Frankfurt School research program. In both works, he opposes the faculty of play to the tendency towards a 'marketing orientation'. The antithesis is centered on two oppositions, which are also Kantian in origin and inspiration – receptivity versus spontaneity and reflexivity versus habituation. Fromm posits a close association between a marketing orientation, the growth of receptivity and lack of reflexivity, and attributes spontaneity and reflexivity to the 'creative impulse'. 'Creativity' is the source not of the play impulse *per se*, but of activity that exhibits entelechy, i.e., practices whose justification and purpose are internal to their meaning, and therefore are capable of being thought of as ends-in-themselves.<sup>20</sup> The lack of entelechy defines all forms of alienated activity – i.e., both deskilled, alienated work *and* play reduced to recreation.<sup>21</sup> For Fromm's perspective, Marcuse's notion of imaginative play as purposiveness without purpose cedes too much dominion to intuition and sensibility. Correspondingly, Marcuse convicts Fromm of a 'productivist' ideology, valorizing reflexivity and action to the detriment of 'life' and 'sensuous activity'. The postscript to *Eros and Civilization*, in which Marcuse is highly critical of Fromm, together with a bitter exchange of letters that appeared in *Dissent* in 1955–1956 poisoned the relationship and has inhibited cross-fertilization of the respective insights of both thinkers ever since (see Rickert, 1986; McLaughlin, 1999).

To account for and adjudicate the differences between Fromm and Marcuse in this context is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it should be noted that Marcuse's earlier analyses of the concept of play are far closer to Fromm's perspective than to the standpoint developed in *Eros and Civilization*. In particular, in an important, and only recently translated, essay from Marcuse's 'Heidegger' period, written in 1930, "On the Philosophical Foundations of the Concept of Labor in Economics", Marcuse argues for a reconception of the relationship between labor and play in terms that resemble Fromm's understanding in some key respects. Marcuse's argument in the essay can be reconstructed briefly as follows.<sup>22</sup>

Economic thinking, which is increasingly the mode of everyday experience under the conditions of industrial capitalism, tends to define play in sharp opposition to labor and as dependent, in both its meaning and its value, on

the primary term. The archetype of modern work – as “precisely supervised, direction-oriented activity” (Marcuse, 2005a, p. 123) – therefore also defines play in terms of the opposites of these qualities. But modern conceptions of work also inherit the associations of the *purpose* of play from Aristotle, who understands play as preparation for work, and as unrelated to the higher concern with happiness (cf. De Grazia, 1994, p. 16). Work is understood as involving the three elements of duration, permanence and burdensomeness, and play as their temporary interruption and cessation for the purpose of reconstitution. These elements do not belong to any particular type of work, but are qualities or categories that western culture brings to the understanding and evaluation of work *qua* activity.

Against such an understanding, Marcuse argues for a more fundamental understanding of work that regards

economic labor itself [as having], inherently, a duty and a goal that is itself *no longer economic* (in the sense of satisfying needs within the world of goods.) It has the task – essential to human *dasein* as such – of self-effectuation (2005a, p. 135)

If we abstract from the Heideggerian idiom that Marcuse uses in this early essay, it is possible to see him as defending three key propositions:

1. Western societies have entrenched and essentialized an inherited and contingent understanding of the meaning and purpose of both work and play.
2. This understanding regards the two activities as ‘opposites’ in terms of their basic qualities and as mutually interdependent in terms of their functions.
3. Reflection on the respective meanings and purpose of both activities in the larger context of human social relations reveals a commonality that is closely associated with reflexivity, self-direction, imagination and technical aptitude. It is, of course, no coincidence that these constitute those features that Marx, in *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* argued were lacking in the reality of alienated labor.

If Marcuse is understood as defending a conception of work and play against the perceived encroachment of alienation, then the ‘productivist’ charge against Fromm seems misplaced. It also becomes more apparent how Marcuse regards the ‘essential’ elements of play. These are faculties that have evolved to organize the spaces of both work and play. They are not directed toward external goals – i.e., they exhibit entelechy; they resist command from the superego or from the wishes of others; they belong to a distinct order of human experience strongly associated with the imagination;

they are reflexive, spontaneous, diffuse and decentralized. It is this understanding of the components of the play impulse that are given priority in *Eros and Civilization* and the early writings, and they hold out interesting heuristic possibilities for contemporary critical sociology of consumption. Two examples of such possibilities can be cited.

First, the concern with the decline of play as a distinct human faculty is a significant feature in the recent work of Judith Schor (1999, 2004) and Robert Frank (1999), who have attempted to define empirically the extent to which involvement in consumer culture is connected to the impoverishment of interiority, and how this affects conceptions of self and other. Through analysis of levels of television watching, the influence of commercials and the growth of materialist values, Frank and Schor both draw the conclusion that the degree of involvement in consumer culture is linked to behaviors that are sharply opposed to the general features of play and imagination cited above. Schor cites studies that suggest deep involvement in television and other electronic media especially are linked to weaker fantasy lives. The spontaneous and generative character of play is opposed especially by behaviors that bear the characteristics of habituation and addiction, and which are also strongly associated with commercially saturated entertainment. As Anthony Giddens (1994) and others have argued, addiction is a widespread generalized phenomenon of postmodernity. It seems to have no essential connection to intoxication, but has broader application – one can become addicted to work, gambling, sex or shopping. The common feature is that of a receptive orientation, surrender to habit, and an inability to become reflexive – in therapy language, addiction is typically accompanied by denial. Addictive practices, it may be noted, are marked by attributes that are essentially at odds with the notion of *entelechy*.

Influential empirical research of this kind is commonly thought able to stand on its own; the claims to truth and normativity are generally thought to be self-explanatory or grounded in taken-for-granted social psychology. Nevertheless, the larger significance and historical embeddedness of such studies will be missed if a more fundamental theoretical grounding is not present. Marcuse's epistemologically and historically grounded theory of play provides a remarkably concrete model for the development of such a foundation.

A second field of application for Marcuse's conception of play has opened up from the expanding field of studies of well-being. Much of this research is typified by the work of the economist Richard Layard, whose synthesis of positivist psychology and economics supposedly holds out the possibility of reducing questions of human well-being to a self-proclaimed 'science of

happiness' (see Layard, 2005). An important contemporary antidote to this approach is represented by Hamilton (2001, 2004), who, in a series of influential articles and books connected to the Australia Research Foundation has argued for the contemporary significance of play and imagination in defining and conceptualizing human well-being. Interestingly, Hamilton's interventions began to be widely read at about the same time as those of Layard, and both have influenced theory and policy.

Hamilton connects the issue of play and imagination closely with reflexivity, and the capacity to monitor and conceive one's life in terms of potential – an adaptation of the principle of *entelechy* that has also been explored by Alisdair MacIntyre's notion of a 'practice' (MacIntyre, 1985, pp. 187–188). Hamilton's language is strongly reminiscent of Marcuse's and Fromm's conceptions of psychic health in which reflexivity is understood as the bounding of life as a project of 'self-effectuation' from which it derives its meaning. Hamilton concludes that

the dimensions of psychological well-being may be described as 'self-actualisers'. They include self-acceptance; the ability to maintain warm, trusting and loving relationships; being free of social and cultural pressures to conform in ways that are inconsistent with inner standards; having a clear sense of personal direction and purpose in life; and being in a state of growth and realization of potential... [Yet] 20th century consumer capitalism has seen a progressive substitution of activities and desires that result in immediate stimulation for the more challenging and potentially more fulfilling demands of realizing one's potential. (Hamilton, p. 50)

Two aspects of Hamilton's argument may be mapped onto Marcuse's perspective. First, the progressive accumulation of activities and desires based on immediate stimulation appears as a contemporary form of repressive desublimation. Hamilton goes on to argue that the effects of such accumulation are the proliferation of shopping malls, advertising and the concern with 'lifestyle' as the central elements of contemporary culture. Whether this proliferation is consistent with Marcuse's conception of a future aesthetic de-alienation, in which the opposition between everyday life and aesthetic experience is collapsed, is an open question, and points toward a cluster of more specific questions. Second, while Hamilton's perspective and his 'productivist' recommendations arguably cohere more closely with Fromm's conception of 'creativity' than with Marcuse's notion of play, it may be, as suggested above, that the differences between Fromm and Marcuse are less significant than has been previously thought. In that case, it may be that a Marcuseian genealogy of play can be grafted onto Hamilton's underlying framework.

The alternative vision of addressing well-being in the ‘affluent society’ has been clearly laid out by Layard. His blueprint for a postscarcity society is based around a conception of ‘happiness’ based on Benthamite premises, i.e., measurable quantities of experienced pleasure. This overtly utilitarian model conceives of ‘happiness’ as a sphere of human experience that responds to the same logic of problem-solving that applies in the economic sphere. By objectifying human well-being as a purely economic problem, it threatens to further erode an independent meaning to the activity of play, and to potentially sharpen those elements of the performance principle that are sustained through competitive consumerism and social atomization. Layard’s proposal advances the tendency toward reification through instrumental rationality, resistance to which constitutes a core element of the critical theory program.

## 6. CONCLUSION: FUTURE DIRECTIONS

If Marcuse’s numerous essays and the larger visions presented in *One-Dimensional Man* and *Eros and Civilization*, are interpreted as attempts to offer a unified theory of late capitalist society, they appear dated and themselves one-dimensional. This article has shown how we might connect Marcuse’s ideas of the performance principle, repressive desublimation and the emancipatory potential of play to some areas of contemporary sociological research. It is on this level that contemporary scholarship and interest in Marcuse among sociologists is likely to proceed in future.

## NOTES

1. There are a number of reasons for this lack of direct engagement with Frankfurt School theories within the critical sociology of consumption literature. First, the works of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and, to a lesser extent, Erich Fromm, are directed at large-scale and long-term historical trends rather than micro- or ‘middle-range’ analyses. This theoretical scaling makes it difficult to apply their ideas directly to meaningful empirical work or to ideal-typical constructions. Second, the alternatives they offer – in one form or another – are ring-fenced with caveats to avoid co-optation and compromise, and are therefore highly inaccessible. Third, any theoretical road ‘back’ to Frankfurt School theory would seem to require an initial negotiation with the work of Jurgen Habermas, whose own engagement with the problems of the ‘consumer society’, which he casts into the language of ‘system’ and ‘lifeworld’ presents a need for reconstruction in its own right. Fourth, in the work of

Adorno and Marcuse at least, who were most exercised by the issue, the critique of consumer society is bound to an important critique of the philosophical tradition within which they conceived themselves as working, and this took their preoccupation focus away from the terrain most comfortably occupied by sociologists.

2. Wallerstein's position is of course contentious and arguably oversimplified. Glenn Firebaugh, for example, agrees that inequality is increasing *within* nations in the (over)developed world, but argues that it is decreasing between nations globally (see 2003, pp. 15, 23).

3. This is not to say that other forms of scarcity based on real needs do not persist. In this respect, the United States has moved from being the archetypal 'affluent society' to being something of an anomaly among first-world nation-states in terms of the percentage of national resources that it devotes to removing the constraints of needs-based scarcity. The most glaring contrast – the lack of state provision for healthcare – is the sharp end of an array of these that have direct effects on the structuring of life-choices among working and middle-class Americans. In Europe, however, together with Australia, Canada, Japan and an expanding coterie of nation-states in South America and Asia, the problem of needs-based scarcity has essentially been solved.

4. The 'bifurcated' character of economic growth in the developing world (or former 'periphery' and 'semi-periphery' areas) has been explored extensively within the world systems theory literature. For an overview of the state of the field (see Wallerstein, 2004).

5. Marcuse is the only member of the first-generation Frankfurt School to actually address the prospects for industrialization in the developing world. His comments in *One-Dimensional Man* concerning the Middle East and India are brief enough and are limited by the assumptions of the Cold War. However, his claim that "the backward areas are likely to succumb either to one of the various forms of neo-colonialism, or to a more or less terroristic system of primary accumulation" (1964, p. 47) (given a broad interpretation of the meanings of neo-colonialism and primary accumulation) have not been proven false.

6. Pippin (1997, pp. 187–189) has laid out the basic charge of the 'totalizing' vision of the Frankfurt School.

7. Perhaps the most prominent, although arguably least authentic vehicle for this ethic is the magazine *Adbusters*. But widely read works by Naomi Klein (2002), George Monbiot (2003) and others connecting issues of consumption to the anti-globalization movement attest to the depth and breadth of interest and concern.

8. The recognition of the tendency of consumer culture to erode the conditions for human well-being is not the exclusive concern of the first-generation Frankfurt School. Proto-critiques of the effects of hyper-consumption on self-identity appear in several forms in the postwar period – in the idea of 'mass society' expounded by conservative figures, such as David Riesman and Daniel Bell in the 1950s and 1960s, and in various Heidegger-influenced constructions, but notably another of 'Heidegger's children', Hannah Arendt's critique of consumer society in *The Human Condition*. One could also go back further and cite Simmel's account of the domination of subjective by objective culture in *The Philosophy of Money*, Thorstein Veblen's analysis of the leisure class and Marx's notion of commodity fetishism. What is distinctive about Marcuse's perspective is the vocabulary within which he

addresses these elements, and which, I argue, reaffirms their relevance to recent critical sociology.

9. According to Rolf Wiggershaus, it was Marcuse's fusion of the vocabularies of Marxism and psychoanalysis that clarified for Habermas, for the first time, the utopian element within critical theory. (see Wiggershaus, 1986, pp. 544–5)

10. What Freud means by civilization is no doubt vague, but, in this context it implies a society in which the members restrain their own potentially infinite desires and aggressive impulses sufficiently for society to be able to reproduce itself.

11. Freud's analysis of repression as a set of processes appears in his 'middle period' writings, most clearly in "The Psychology of the Dream-Processes" (Freud, 1938, pp. 533–542). The idea is developed in a more 'socio-historical' setting in his later writings, especially in *Civilization and its Discontents*.

12. The theme is addressed in the central essay of Lukàcs' *History and Class Consciousness*, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" (Lukàcs, 1971). Heidegger is most directly concerned with the problem of reification in his late writings on technology. However, he addresses the issue in an explicitly sociological context in *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 72–73).

13. See Chapter 6 of *One-Dimensional Man*. This interpretation links Marcuse closely with many themes from Heidegger, who views utility as the progressive transformation of human action and being into a set of thing-like categories. As Richard Wolin has argued, the influence of Heidegger on Marcuse's thought has been greatly underestimated (see Wolin, 2001, pp. 134–173, 2005, pp. x1–xxx)

14. The law of value derives from Marx's general formula for capital and states that the reproduction of capitalism as a social system requires an ever-increasing accumulation of constant capital.

15. Marcuse laid out his basic objections to Fromm's 'humanistic' interpretation of Freud (discussed below) in the afterword to *Eros and Civilization*. Further differences were exposed in a subsequent exchange that appeared in the pages of *Dissent* in 1955–56 (see Marcuse, 1955, 1956b; Fromm, 1956). Apart from the charge of 'productivism' (discussed below), Marcuse attacked Fromm as politically naïve, moralistic in his theorizing and homilous in his style. Fromm responded by accusing Marcuse of a willful misreading of his own work and of embracing nihilism.

16. For the purposes of this essay, I ignore Marcuse's later (1979) elaboration of his aesthetics.

17. For example, Nabokov's *Lolita* and O'Neill's *Streetcar Named Desire*, which are contrasted with works, such as *Anna Karenina* in which sexuality remains sublimated and therefore 'oppositional'.

18. The role of the imagination constitutes a shibboleth in secondary Kant scholarship. Pippin (1982) and Caygill (1989) offer two of the most influential and scholarly recent interpretations of its importance.

19. The expression is coined by Howard Caygill (1989).

20. The notion of entelechy has been explored more recently by Alisdair MacIntyre in his influential *After Virtue* in defense of an Aristotelian ethics of 'practices'. He distinguishes between a 'practice' as involving internal goods, i.e., benefits intrinsic to the activity, and a 'pseudo-practice', which is pursued only for its instrumental value.

21. Fromm generalizes Marx's theory of alienation to include a range of human activities. However, he traces its origins to particular kinds of religious experience (see Fromm, 1955, pp. 120–124)

22. Marcuse's vocabulary in this essay retains a Heideggerian cast that makes it somewhat difficult to translate into an idiom that is compatible with his later perspective.

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# RESTRICTED EROS AND ONE-DIMENSIONAL MORALITY: A MARCUSEAN READING OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICS

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## INTRODUCTION

Just like in mainstream society, types of academic discourse seem to go in and out of fashion. We are now in a moment when it seems that the critical theory of the Frankfurt School has little to offer. The son of one of the prominent members of the Frankfurt School even said to me “My father’s main thesis in *One-Dimensional Man* is that our society is inherently irrational. How does one revive such work in such an irrational time?” (Conversation with Peter Marcuse, November 2005.) My response was that in these irrational times such a work is most relevant.

Although we are in a very different era than that which gave birth to critical theory, and the structure of our society in some ways seems radically different than that in which critical theory began, things are perhaps not all that different. The failure to change society for the better – that is, to make it less oppressive – is not due to the failure of early critical theory, but rather, it reflects the failure to realize the vision of critical theory and the willingness to abandon critical theory too quickly. Although critical theory is a

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historical theory and must perpetually change to make itself relevant, it also discloses to us the degree to which things have not changed. The purpose of this paper is to revisit the critical theory of Herbert Marcuse in light of the contemporary crisis of politics, or what I will call the depoliticization of politics.

At the origin of critical theory lies a puzzle that has yet to be solved and still troubles us today. Critical theory was born as a response to what Douglas Kellner calls the crisis of Marxism. This crisis is multifaceted but can be boiled down to the problem of revolutionary consciousness. Kellner writes:

Both bourgeois science and scientific Marxism utilized excessively objectivistic methods, and thus were not able to conceptualize current problems, such as the ways in which social and cultural conditions were inclining strata of the working class and other social groups toward fascism. Lacking a theory of the subject, orthodox Marxism could not really confront the failure of revolutionary consciousness to develop, and could not point to ways in which revolutionary consciousness and struggle could be produced. (Kellner, 1989, p. 23)

Today we are confronted by the same problem. Not only does there seem to be a failure of the development of revolutionary consciousness, but those who have everything to gain from a radical transformation of the present society are the most likely to resist such change. I realize that I am not saying anything new here nor am I disclosing something hitherto unknown. I simply want to remind us that things have not changed that much since the birth of critical theory. I also want to suggest that in order to understand the “containment of social change” today, a return to Frankfurt School critical theory – especially Marcuse – would be helpful.

Of the Frankfurt School critical theorists, Marcuse was perhaps the one who provided us with the most historical and dialectical form of critical theory. That is, Marcuse, more than anyone else, was always aware of the potential for social change in every historical period. He never tired of looking for the revolutionary subject or agent of social transformation. However, he was also always aware of the evolution of oppressive, restrictive, repressive forces that hindered social change and liberation. My purpose in this paper is to employ the insights of Marcusean critical theory in an attempt to understand the repressive forces in our society and their influence on the present political landscape.

I want to preface my claims in this paper by saying that while the content of our society has changed and even the mechanisms of oppression and repression may have changed, the form has not changed. It is important that we keep this distinction between form and content in mind if we want to

understand the relevance of Marcusean critical theory in our time. An example of this distinction can be found in the ways in which racism is perpetuated in our society. When *Eros and Civilization* was published in 1955, racial segregation was in form and content de facto and de jure. The idea of white racial superiority was expressed intentionally in law and in our daily lives. However, in the “post” civil rights era, such forms of de jure racism are nearly obsolete. Nevertheless, there are new, more subtle forms of racial segregation and displays of alleged white superiority, from neighborhood zoning to the whiteness of our Eurocentric education. I will not go into detail here but will leave this matter open for later discussion. My point is that Marcuse’s form of critical theory is not made obsolete by the changes that have taken place in our society since his lifetime.

## 1. ONE-DIMENSIONALITY AND THE PERFORMANCE PRINCIPLE

In this section I will argue that the concept of one-dimensionality and the notion of the performance principle is the common thread running from *Eros and Civilization* through *One-Dimensional Man*. It is a mistake to interpret *Eros and Civilization* as an optimistic text or mood and *One-Dimensional Man* as reflecting a more pessimistic mood. *One-Dimensional Man* is a further analysis of one side of the dialectic in *Eros and Civilization*. That is, Marcuse’s goal in *Eros and Civilization* is to overcome the pessimistic conclusion of Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents* by using Freud against Freud. Marcuse writes in the introduction to *Eros and Civilization*:

The notion of a non-repressive civilization will be discussed not as an abstract and utopian speculation. We believe that the discussion is justified on two concrete and realistic grounds: first, Freud’s theoretical conception itself seems to refute his consistent denial of the historical possibility of a non-repressive civilization, and, second, the very achievements of repressive civilization seem to create the preconditions for the gradual abolition of repression. (Marcuse, 1966a, p. 5)

With regards to the first realistic ground, Freud’s theory suggests two things of importance. First, that the instinctual structure of the human being is not merely biological, but social and historical. This suggests that the instincts are not fixed but malleable. Therefore, it is at least possible that a new social structure could produce a non-repressed instinctual structure. Second, Freud also informs us that repressed instincts or desires are not

absent but merely repressed. This suggests that the presence of repressed instincts leaves room for resistance.

With regards to the second realistic ground, Marcuse's position is that in advanced industrial societies there is the possibility of making certain forms of repression obsolete. For example, at one point in history a certain amount of labor was required to combat scarcity. In our society scarcity is no longer the threat that it once was but we continue to labor as if it is. Hence, Marcuse's task is to explore in ways that Freud did not address the possibility of a non-repressive society, a possibility made possible by that society itself.

En route to a theory for a non-repressive civilization Marcuse makes a distinction between the type of repression required just for human beings to co-exist and the type of repression that is based on domination. In the context of distinguishing between basic repression and surplus repression, Marcuse launches into a discussion of the performance principle, which he defines as "the prevailing historical form of the *reality principle*" (Marcuse, p. 35). In a nutshell, the performance principle, like one-dimensional thinking, is a type of leveling. It is a reduction of all persons to sameness, and the systemic and systematic erasure of emancipatory possibilities.

The performance principle functions as a type of superego wherein the values and ideas of an oppressive society are internalized by its members. Hence, repression is not forced but freely accepted. With regards to the restrictions imposed on the libido by the performance principle Marcuse writes:

They operate on the individual as external objective laws and as an internalized force: the societal authority is absorbed into the "conscience" and into the unconscious of the individual and works as his own desire, morality, and fulfillment. In the "normal" development, the individual lives his repression "freely" as his own life: he desires what he is supposed to desire; his gratifications are profitable to him and to others; he is reasonably and often exuberantly happy. (Marcuse, 1966b, p. 46)

The above passage should be read in conjunction with the following passage from *One-dimensional Man*:

The Happy Consciousness—the belief that the real is rational and that the system delivers the goods—reflects the new conformism which is a facet of technological rationality translated into social behavior. (Marcuse, 1966b, p. 84)

The question for us here is how does the victim of repression at the same time become the agent of repression? Why does the individual freely participate in and condone the forces of his/her own repression? What is needed here is an analysis of the development of false consciousness and the

role that it plays in the manipulation of desires. However, there is no time for such an analysis here. For now we can only briefly examine some of the hints provided by Marcuse.

Critical consciousness – that is, consciousness of a qualitatively different and better form of life – is whittled down by the minor rewards of the system. The new conformism is an acceptance of the present oppressive, repressive, system because the system does meet certain needs. In a 1978 interview with Brian McGee, Marcuse rejects the claim made by Marx that the proletariat has nothing to lose but their chains. He argues that it is not the case that the proletariat has nothing to lose but their chains but they have considerably more to lose than chains alone. The system has ways of first, satisfying certain needs to a minimal degree, second, it has a way of producing false needs and satisfying them.

With regards to the first, one may think of the Great Depression and the New Deal of FDR. The Great Depression harbored the potential to be a revolutionary moment due to the intolerable suffering of the poor in America. The New Deal provided the poor with enough resources to make life slightly better, but not enough to eliminate poverty and class division. However, instant but minor relief from intense suffering has an opiate effect. Even the Civil Rights Movement was criticized by some blacks who were content to accept the gift of freedom from slavery even if they had not yet achieved full citizenship. The fear was that any revolt against the system of white supremacy would jeopardize what little freedom they had.

With respect to the second, that is, the production and satisfaction of false needs, one may think about the many toys that we enjoy as a result of technological advancement. Even the poorest homes have a television set. The poor and the rich can all share equally in the many forms of mindless entertainment provided by the system. The poor and the rich are united as one as they vote for America's next top model or American idol. Marcuse makes the point very well in *One-Dimensional Man*:

Here, the so-called equalization of class distinctions reveals its ideological function. If the worker and his boss enjoy the same television program and visit the same resort places, if the typist is as attractively made up as the daughter of her employer, if the Negro owns a Cadillac, if they all read the same newspaper, then this simulation indicates not the disappearance of classes, but the extent to which the needs and satisfactions that serve the preservation of the Establishment are shared by the underlying population. (Marcuse, 1966b, p. 8)

The above passage reveals to us that revolt against the system jeopardizes the reception of certain benefits from the system. There is also the issue of

identity formation, which requires an expanded theory of intersubjectivity and recognition that is not possible here. Let me just briefly discuss this issue which is present in an embryonic stage in early critical theory. A key Freudian text for critical theorists such as Marcuse is Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. In short, Freud offers us something like a theory of one-dimensionality insofar as he explores the development of the herd instinct and the ways in which individual persons identify with their leaders. There are many ideological and rhetorical tools that can be used by the leaders to create a sense of unity. Also in *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud briefly examines the way in which the Christian idea of love gives birth to nationalism. This will be discussed in the following section.

## 2. RESTRICTED EROS (LIBIDO) AND THE CREATION OF ONE-DIMENSIONAL HUMANITY

The question before us is, what is the relationship between restricted Eros and one-dimensional humanity? I begin with Freud's critique of the Christian notion of love in *Civilization and its Discontents*. Freud contrasts Eros – which includes the life instinct, sexuality, and creativity – with the death instinct. Both are in the service of the pleasure principle. It must be mentioned from the start that Freud's conception of sexuality is not as broad as Marcuse's and in some ways Freud himself remains trapped within the framework of repressive sexuality. Nevertheless, Freud's insights are valuable for Marcuse. Let us begin with Freud's understanding of restricted sexuality. He writes:

As regards the sexually mature individual, the choice of an object is restricted to the opposite sex, and most extra-genital satisfactions are forbidden as perversions. The requirement, demonstrated in these prohibitions, that there shall be a single kind of sexual life for everyone, disregards the dissimilarities, whether innate or acquired, in the sexual constitution of human beings; it cuts off a fair number of them from sexual enjoyment, and so becomes the source of serious injustice. (Freud, 1961, p. 60)

The idea that there should be a single kind of sexual life for everyone is already the beginning of one-dimensionality with respect to human sexuality. If human sexuality can be properly restricted, manipulated, and controlled, this makes possible the control of the human being in general.

The above passage opens the door for a multiplicity of problems and questions. However, there is no time to explore them all here. Let's assume

that we accept this form of sexuality that is imposed on all of us; that is, heterosexual, genital, and reproductive sexuality. Would we be content? Freud's answer is no. He argues:

Reality shows that civilization is not content with the ties we have so far allowed it. It aims at binding the members of the community together in a libidinal way as well and employs every means to that end. It favors every path by which strong identifications can be established between the members of the community, and it summons up aim-inhibited libido on the largest scale so as to strengthen the communal bond by relations of friendship. In order for these aims to be fulfilled, a restriction upon sexual life is unavoidable. But we are unable to understand what the necessity is which forces civilization along this path and which causes its antagonism to sexuality. There must be some disturbing factor which we have not yet discovered. (Freud, 1961, p. 65)

The type of love, call it erotic love, that binds together man and woman and produces families is not enough. Christianity – we may say religion in general since Freud claims that the ideal of Christian love is actually older than Christianity – seeks to create a bond between individuals that goes beyond the boundaries of family and friends. Freud claims that we know that human beings are not just loving creatures seeking to be loved, but rather, are aggressive.

As a result, their neighbor is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. (Freud, 1961, pp. 68–69)

Freud recognizes the role of the death instinct in human aggression. The aggression caused by the death instinct must be repressed just like the sexual instincts. Also, like the sexual instincts, the death instinct can be manipulated and reconstructed in the service of the performance principle. In Freud's theory, the idea of Christian love creates a bond between members of a society so that aggression may be mitigated. However, this aggression can be harnessed and turned toward those who are not members of the group or society in question.

### **3. POLITICS, PSEUDO MORALITY, AND THE NEGATION OF THE POLITICAL AND THE MORAL**

I began this paper by trying to explain why Marcuse's form of critical theory is still relevant today. The social change that Marcuse hoped for has not

occurred and in fact seems less likely to occur in our time. However, this makes Marcuse more relevant than ever. Although Marcuse energetically searched for revolutionary possibilities, he also provided us with one of the most well-developed and sophisticated theories of the containment of social change. We see today the very mechanisms of repression at work that Marcuse was concerned about over half a century ago. We bear witness to the “closing of the political universe” and the “closing of the universe of discourse.”

In this section I want to briefly examine the way our society and its political landscape have become one-dimensional and the way this one-dimensionality prohibits social change and liberation. I will examine two problems in particular. First, I will discuss the reduction of the political to politics. This is the depoliticization of the public realm. Second, I will discuss the reduction of morality to sexuality and the way in which a mere sexual morality serves the present performance principle.

The first problem, that of the depoliticization of the public sphere, is what I call the crisis of democracy. Marcuse bore witness to this crisis in *One-Dimensional Man* when he wrote: “Free election of masters does not abolish the masters or the slaves. Free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear – that is, if they sustain alienation” (Marcuse, 1966b, pp. 7–8).

We may take Marcuse’s comment as a warning against one-dimensional democracy, which is not democracy at all due to the absence of real democratic discourse and autonomy in the process of will-formation. The one-dimensionality lies in the fact that democracy has been reduced to voting, which may have no liberating effect on oppressive social structures. That is, voting merely reflects the opinion of a majority without acknowledging the process of opinion-formation which takes place under the present performance principle. If one’s opinion has developed in the absence of relevant information and within an oppressive and repressive social framework, then one’s opinion and vote may perpetuate systems of oppression and repression. Further, after casting a vote, one does not have access to the process of decision-making that determines our lives. We see here the Habermasian distinction between system and lifeworld. As participants in the lifeworld we do not participate in the system wherein policies are made and passed. As non-experts we stand outside of the system that shapes our lives. However, because we are free to vote we think that we are free and must support the leaders that we have chosen.

There are at least two forms of the depoliticization of the political that must be examined here. First, I will examine the loss of subjectivity in the identification of the individual with political leaders. Second, I will discuss the reduction of the many to the one, that is, the attempt to ignore difference.

In an unpublished essay entitled “The Historical Fate of Bourgeois Democracy,” Marcuse examines the tendency of individuals to identify themselves with their political leaders. We see this problem today when individuals seem incapable of making a distinction between “the American People” and the government, or the tendency to conflate opposition to the war in Iraq with non-support of our troops. Somehow, the troops are taken to be identical with the government (who represent the most economically affluent in our society, while most of our troops are from the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder). The will of the leaders is somehow the will of the people even if that will leads to the physical, economic, social, and emotional destruction of the people. The willingness to identify oneself with “the leader” signifies a form of emotional, psychological, and intellectual arrested development. Further, in our society there is a trend toward making political decisions (such as who one should vote for) on very non-political grounds such as, “I like candidate X because he seems like the kind of guy you would like to have a beer with.” One can never forget the way Reagan charmed his way into the Whitehouse. The charming but firm and protective grandfather figure perhaps made Americans a bit nostalgic for their own childhoods. With respect to this trend Marcuse writes:

To be sure, instinctual identification is primarily always with persons, not with institutions, policies, a social system. In its emphasis on the sensuous “image,” on the “sex appeal” of the political leader, the American system has mastered, in a terribly efficient way, the depth dimension of satisfactory submission beneath the political dimension. The real issues recede before the instinctual affirmation of the image: the people find themselves in their leader. No wonder then that it does not matter much what the leaders do in Vietnam, what unprecedented atrocities are committed under their regime; it does not matter much whether they lie or tell the truth, what they promise and don’t keep; corruption and deception at the most august level of government does not cause much trouble ... All these things are only the enlargement of what is going on daily, what is germane to this society; if the politicians get away with it, they only prove their competitive prowess. The crimes of the administration are indeed crimes only from an “extraneous” *moral* point of view – otherwise they are requirements of national security, free enterprise, self-preservation, etc. (Marcuse, 2001, pp. 170–171)

With the exception of the word *Vietnam*, every word in this passage is descriptive of our present political landscape. This needs no explanation.

What I do want to develop a bit here is the “extraneous moral point of view” that Marcuse mentions in the above passage.

One of the functions of one-dimensional thinking is to maintain the present social state of affairs or the performance principle by building resistance to the mechanisms of social change and also to any ideas that may demand or influence social change. Indeed, if the present oppressive and repressive system is to be maintained, then the ideas of the ruling class must become and remain the ruling ideas. Other ideas, moral or otherwise, are extraneous. That which is morally right is determined from within the system. The crimes of the administration cannot be considered crimes since they are designed to protect the system, which is good as it is.

Embedded in this attitude is a prejudice and confusion that has permeated Western society since its origins in ancient Greece. The first is the position of Thrasymachus in Plato’s *Republic* who argues against Socrates that, with regards to justice, might makes right. This seems to be the foundation of the US foreign policy. The second Greek prejudice and confusion is the identification of the beautiful with the good. Hence, even in the political domain we gravitate toward the strong and the beautiful, charming, handsome, etc .... The quest for truth has hardly any place in contemporary political discourse. We choose leaders on the basis of their appeal and then identify ourselves with those leaders. The leader becomes a new father figure who will protect us from the threat of the “other,” whether the “other” be communist, terrorist, heathens, blacks, latinos, gays, and lesbians, etc.... Notice the ways in which various oppressed groups are put against each other. The poor working class white male is told that his economic situation is so grim because unqualified, blacks, women, and Hispanics are getting the best jobs and promotions. Everyone is promised protection against everyone else. Nevertheless, in the midst of group antagonisms there is the rhetoric of unity. “United we stand” if the threat comes from outside American borders. Yet, divided we stand in terms of our day-to-day interactions and the distribution of necessary resources and liberties. This leads me to the next problem that I want to address.

The public realm is depoliticized if we think that we are all the same. This false unity and identity erases the possibility for democratic and emancipatory discourse. While the production of one-dimensional society and the one-dimensional person is a sinister process which serves the domination of one group or groups by another, there is another side to this coin that is not so sinister in its intention but nevertheless has

very problematic consequences. I am speaking here of the liberal ideal of impartiality. That is, the idea that political judgment should be made without any consideration of social group membership. Liberalism, with its good intentions, inadvertently perpetuates systems of repression and domination by not properly recognizing the structural positions of certain individuals and social groups. A metaphysical claim about the equal worth and dignity of all persons gets mistakenly translated into a claim about real concrete material relations between people, and opportunities for self-development and self-determination.

The notion that we are all the same prohibits democratic discourse and social change by conflating opposites, by reducing the experience of all to the experience and interpretation of the world of the dominate group. The overuse of sweeping generalizations such as “freedom,” “The American people,” “the American way of life,” etc ..., all function to erase any awareness of difference and inequality. What does it mean to talk about the “American way of life” when in 1999 the richest 20% of our population controlled 84.3% of the wealth (Mishel, Bernstein, & Schmitt, 1999, p. 262), while many other Americans are homeless and must find their meals in a garbage can in a McDonalds parking lot? Only those who benefit from the comforts that our society produces on the backs of others can afford to use such language. In this context one is reminded of Benjamin’s “Thesis on History.” History, and our education, world views etc ..., are determined by the victors of history. Only the victors of history can conflate the metaphysical ideal of equality with the social reality of gross inequalities. This one-dimensional thinking perpetuates systems of repression and domination.

This reduction of all individuals to sameness also produces a common moral vision which is designed to serve the dominant group. Here my critique is aimed at the political right and left. With regards to the left, or those of us who consider ourselves progressive, we have weakened our position by allowing the right to co-op the concept of morality. By failing to develop a moral basis we have made it nearly impossible to be heard by the voting masses. There is much to be said about our failure here, but that is for another time since my focus here is on the forces of repression.

The concept of morality itself has become one-dimensional. By and large, morality has been reduced to “deviant” sexual behavior. One need simply think about the role that the issues of abortion and gay and lesbian marriage played in the last presidential election. Further, morality has been reduced to the behavior of individuals, while the moral or immoral

natures of institutions and even entire social structures go unquestioned. It is to the credit of theorists such as Marcuse, psychologists such as Eric Fromm and Karen Horney, and political philosophers like John Rawls that we know that the structure of an entire society can be immoral and pathological. Nevertheless, contemporary political and religious rhetoric restricts morality and immorality to individuals. The reduction of morality to the behavior of individuals and to sexual behavior in particular makes it difficult for us to examine the morality of larger social structures.

Repression is maintained and perpetuated in the contemporary view of morality in at least two ways. First, certain forms of sexuality are repressed thereby making it impossible for certain individuals to achieve sexual fulfillment and happiness. Second, the reduction of morality to issues of sexual behavior functions as a distraction in that it excludes from moral discourse issues of concrete human material relations. It excludes conversations about class domination and economic greed. Indeed, in a capitalist economy the concept of greed has no place until there is a scandal that hurts the rich as well as the poor. In a capitalist economy the term greed is eliminated and replaced by more positive terms such as "production," "economic growth," "competition," etc ... The fact is that the gross accumulation of wealth by a few has great consequences for others. Actual harm is done when there is no limit placed on the accumulation of capital by a few, whereas no harm is done if one decides to marry someone of the same sex.

#### **4. EROS: THE PSYCHIC REMAINDER**

We have now come to the most difficult part of the paper. That is, in light of the above analysis of repression and restricted eros, how does one overcome such repression? At this point I must proceed in a humble manner because I am not sure I have an answer. However, at this point answering the above question is not my task. I simply want to reopen a door that seems to have been closed prematurely. That door is Marcuse's critical theory. Just as Habermas has argued that the enlightenment is an unfinished project, I believe that Marcuse's critical theory is an unfinished project. Although Marcuse's project is unfinished it does provide us with an adequate starting point not only for understanding our society and our failure to completely liberate the oppressed but also for developing the tools for liberation.

One of the most important chapters in *Eros and Civilization* is Chapter 5 entitled "Philosophical Interlude." This chapter basically calls for a paradigm shift in philosophy. Here Marcuse explains his turn to Freud as a form of resistance to one of the major flaws of Western philosophy; traditional Western philosophy has been too logocentric. Although Marcuse was no fan of Derridian deconstruction there are some affinities between Marcuse's project and Derrida's that cannot be discussed here. Suffice it to say that a thorough examination of *Eros and Civilization* would disclose a form of deconstruction whereby the closed logocentric systems of traditional Western philosophy are torn asunder by their own attempt to exclude what is at their center, Eros.

According to Marcuse, it is Freud who goes beyond the Western preoccupation with Logos to find Eros at its core. Eros, the builder of culture, becomes repressed by the very culture that it has created. Logocentric philosophy ignores the Eros that sets it in motion. The main example of such a philosophy is Hegel's. Marcuse writes:

The *Phenomenology of Spirit* unfolds the structure of reason as the structure of domination – and as the overcoming of domination. Reason develops through the developing self-consciousness of man who conquers the natural and historical world and makes it the material of his self-realization. When mere consciousness reaches the stage of self-consciousness, it finds itself as *ego*, and the ego is first *desire*: it can become conscious of itself only through satisfying itself in and by an "other." But such satisfaction involves "negation" of the other, for the ego has to prove itself by truly "being-for-itself" *against* all "otherness." (Marcuse, 1966a, p. 113)

In a nutshell, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel traces the development of human consciousness from its origin in mere desire, the desire for satisfaction in certain objects, to the desire to be desired by another human being. We will avoid Hegel's analysis of the struggle for recognition between human beings. The point here is that consciousness has its origin in desire. The problem here is that reason, which is derivative of desire and the struggle for recognition, eventually represses desire. Logos trumps Eros.

The entire Western tradition has been based on the repression of Eros by Logos, or reason. The domination and repression of Eros and nature has led to the repression and domination of human beings by other human beings. One is reminded here of the ways women and people of African descent were reduced to a sub-human category because it was believed that these people were closer to nature than the white male European. However, this is another story. Marcuse's point is that, although repressed,

Eros still haunts Western society like a specter still awaiting its fulfillment. He writes:

Freud's interpretation of being in terms of Eros recaptures the early stage of Plato's philosophy, which conceived of culture not as the repressive sublimation but as the free self-development of Eros. As early as Plato, this conception appears as an archaic-mythical residue. Eros is being absorbed into Logos, and Logos is reason which subdues the instincts. (Marcuse, 1966a, pp. 125–126)

The entire history of Western philosophy has been based on this attempt to subdue Eros. In this philosophical interlude Marcuse exposes the prejudices of philosophers. However, this prejudice has implications beyond philosophy and theory. It seems that we are cursed by the desire to reduce social reality to abstractions. That is, much political rhetoric is merely the dissemination of empty concepts designed to conceal concrete material relations. Truth, if it exists, must not only be impartial but also disembodied, according to the Western philosophical tradition. This emphasis on impartial, disembodied truth opens the door for the erasure of difference and the reduction of the human subject to a sameness that conceals oppressive relationships.

The positive side of Marcuse's theory is that although Eros is repressed and thinking in our society has become one-dimensional, repressed Eros continues to exert its influence. Marcuse's vision is that there will be a reconciliation of Eros and Logos, or in his words, a "rationality of gratification" (Marcuse, p. 224). The Kantian dichotomy between reason and happiness must be overcome. Logos no longer seeks to dominate Eros. For Marcuse, social struggles are not based on the conflict of rational concepts – or following Paul Ricoeur's terminology, the "conflict of interpretations." It is not the case that political struggles are merely differences of opinion. It is not the case that the conflict between the right and the so-called left is nothing more than a conflict of world views. The problem is much deeper than that. Social struggle is the result of repressed social groups seeking to free themselves from alienated labor, surplus repression, and misrecognition. Marcuse remained hopeful that social change would be ignited by various catalyst groups who had grown tired of perpetual dehumanization in our affluent society.

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# THE RADICAL PRESENT: THE PSYCHOPOLITICS OF TRANSFORMATION IN MARCUSE

James E. Block

The greatest danger for radical social theory in an age of empire is not its own hidden imperial ambitions – though these are never to be discounted – but rather its search for consolation in reactivity, that is, in efforts to escape from the hegemony of imperial discourses. Long accustomed to reign, these discourses suck up all available light, leaving as openings only the will to darkness. Such contrariness has led to the self-medicating backwater of post-modern ahistoricism and anti-narrativism, the end of meaning, the celebration of discord and disenchantment, of trauma and tear, where “noise too has its pleasures” and we can wonder “what Empire?” For those unable to bear this metasilence, there is a further flight to theory, any theory, that would cushion the trauma, quiet the questioning, in particular the dark wisdoms of Freud, Augustine, Leo Strauss, Thucydides. Too often, even the Frankfurt School – note the incomplete label “Critical Theory” – has been conjoined to counterhegemonic enterprises, and to what in its analysis of alienation and reification could too easily result in the resolution to bear the agonies of empire in an inevitably fallen world.

How can we challenge progressive social theorists to move from pessimism, forms of Marcuse’s Great Refusal, to believe in the unprecedented possibilities offered by technocratic abundance to create Gardens beyond our wildest dreams? Why has Euro-American progressivism failed to move

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beyond the ground of its opposition, unable to find anywhere “outside” to go? I want to explore the conditions facing and possible directions offered to a post-industrial social theory that would restore if not enchantment certainly faith within the post-industrial world system in possible futures, to escape the twin vortices of a social theory of incommensurable fragmentation and the endless semi-principled ways to join the liberal consensus in a wall of denial.

My challenge to the progressive movement is that we know where “outside” is. Like all Ishmaels on a premier class – if death-bound juggernaut – we fear what we know and even more its implications for action, especially where the price is exclusion “beyond marginalization.” Who wants to be a barbarian in Rome? Who would want to trade the uncompromised luxuries of Luxor for the regimen of the desert, who would forego the Baths of Caracalla for the Den of Lions? Yet, we know. We have known for decades about the Second Revolution, the post-materialist revolution, that Keniston and Inglehart witnessed. We are fully acquainted with the long tradition of post-liberal theory in Rousseau and Emerson, Marcuse and Pirsig, Randolph Bourne, and Mabel Dodge Luhan and the counterculture theories of the sixties.

We know that the world of secondary narcissism is an oxymoronic world of substitute gratification and substitute selfhood, of hollowed institutions enacting hollow processes. We know that repressive desublimation is not real pleasure but a commercialized mirror world of empty and repetitive – ritualized – motions. We fully understand that behind all the mainstream rhetoric of individuality lies a fundamental fear of the self and its liberation which drives the conformity, standardization, and self-repression that dominates contemporary social practice. Even more, we know what instinctual liberation and expansive gratification within a world of equitable post-industrial distribution would offer. We recognize the need for meaningful work and lifelong growth, for just and mutual personal and social relations within communities that embrace difference. We realize that a shift of first-world priorities away from rampant materialist consumption would open new possibilities for social justice globally.

We sense that there are millions now trapped within a logic of instinctual and work-to-consume-to-work domination and institutional hierarchy who yearn for such a message of liberation and reconnection, but have been unable to formulate and announce such a message. Only when theory turns to reembrace our own desires and dreams, our impulse toward self-realization, selfhood and just community as the center from which all worldly transformation flows will skepticism and cynicism – markers of our own fears – be overcome. Only then will the *essentially undialectical* canceling

of the future, a magnification of the negative dimensions of the present, recede before the alternative future that is also already here. Only then will this existing future-as-present that found its earliest theoretical expression long before Hegel, in the transformational visions of religious and political activists who have since the beginning of Western culture announced – often still upon their knees in subservience – “the Kingdom is Come,” once again become the province of a theory capable of being its handmaiden.

In fact, despite the retreat of contemporary progressives from transformation, the emancipatory present has already been announced in the psychopolitical work of Marcuse and others. Refusing to absolutize existing limits, they insist with their radical reconfiguration of human desire that the dialectical journey to a liberated human order *is already well underway*. Building upon the radical theoretical turn in Rousseau, Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche, Marcuse resituates the classic Freudian views on instinctual inevitability as a stage, a long stage to be sure, within a developmental history and genealogy rapidly being transcended. The timeless psychobiological dynamic of scarcity, for which the species was virtually hard-wired since time began, is over. Deprivations which in the past – and present if social policy refuses what is possible – were simply accommodations to an inflexible reality are now no more than arbitrary refusals to face the potentialities of post-industrial productivity.

Given the unprecedented flexibility of reality made feasible by the (realizable) end of material scarcity, elements of instinctual life once unavoidably repressed can for the first time be allowed to emerge as the basis of a new, radically extended, process of human development. Not “simply allowed to emerge,” rather, they cannot be stopped, they are emergent, everywhere. Can we face this future? To do so, we must begin by accepting Marcuse’s invitation to psychopolitics, the space in which that future arrives. The very hollowing out of the political and moral structures of the liberal world and the vacuum of meaning the Right has rushed to fill proceeds – if we think dialectically – only because progressive investments of desire and conviction have moved on, to open up and explore new terrain. The current theater state is by contrast now no more than a project in overt satire, strung together with campaigns of noisy and furious motion which veil its essential immobility.

But how can these deep structural changes be accessed? Individuals must be prepared to track the deep tectonic shifts within their own patterns of investment, in the prelinguistic aspirations emergent everywhere. *Is this politics?* In an age of transformation, of foundational collapse and rebirth, everything else reflects the surface turbulence and fragility, the rank

expression of instrumental immediacy and desensitized manipulation, a willed detachment from depths no one wants to see. Why even enter such a countercultural realm? – incomplete, anarchic, untutored, seemingly more deconstruction than reconstruction? For anyone who believes the future arrives packaged, shaped, and pre-livable – welcome to history: the journey to a *livable* future is a long, and endlessly challenging experience.

Will we find what we are looking for? – or, should we make do...? Whether we embrace these new narcissistic energies, or allow them to be channeled into the twisted dynamic of secondary narcissism as addictive consumption, raging power hunger, and self-repression, within the Imperium lies the Promised Land, an age of unprecedented narcissistic possibility, nurtured and prefigured...present, actively infusing – if we would see – the lives and choices of each one of us. The future, in other words, is come.

Marcuse initiates his revision by insisting that Freud's eternal present, his transhistorical and metapsychological constants, mask psychohistorical contingencies rapidly being dissolved. Two central projects follow: first, to historicize the dynamics of psychosocial repression, achieved by linking Freud's timeless intrapsychic mechanisms of control to existing social forces and then tracing the dramatic contemporary shifts in their character and impact; secondly, to restore and elaborate the lost dialectic of psychosocial development beyond the present impasse, recalling the future as the realization of existing struggles for personal liberation, non-coercive social integration, and collective well-being. The first, the precondition for any contemporary project of emancipation, produces a compelling refiguration of the Freudian cage, clearly specifying the psychosocial forces of the present repressive matrix as they have evolved internally and institutionally since Freud. The second argument offers a framework for an alternative psychodynamics which forms the point of departure for the contemporary process of liberation.

In exposing the features of contemporary psychic repression, Marcuse identifies three crucial shifts: decline of the superego with the waning internalization of traditional moralism; expansion of ego-reality repression (to replace the superego), created by totalizing the organizational, bureaucratic, and corporate logic into the specter of an unyielding Reality which must simply – even absent normative claims – be submitted to and endured; and the massive and unrelenting intrusion of that totalist project – through advertising and seduction in ever more sophisticated forms – into the domain of pleasure, creating from early life a false “id” whose substitution for genuine pleasure forms the internal beachhead against self-recognition of a self-grounded instinctual dynamic.

Regarding the superego, the classic resolution of Oedipal rebellion against a figure who monopolizes power and pleasure through an internalizing idealization of his authority and value system has given way. As a distant corporate subject within a vast hierarchical organization of labor, the father no longer exercises a commanding role either in society or the family. With the parental figure a “rather inappropriate target of aggression” and thus a “most unsuitable ‘ideal’” to trigger “renunciation and sublimation,” he can no longer promote acquiescence to “obsolescent paternal forms” of traditional morality and authority. The young in turn are now being encouraged by the radically anti-traditional global administrative order to leapfrog their elders in competence and adaptation, and to resist any recurrence of traditionalism by a “whole system of extra-familial agents and agencies.” In this way, the classical superego constraints of guilty self-compliance explained as moral and customary rectitude are “weakened” and wither.<sup>1</sup>

Raised into and shaped for an administered world that organizes all through “universal control” and provides all, not only “goods and services for the progressive satisfaction of human needs” but “liberty” itself, the individual is presented an objectified, inflexible and boundless Reality. This is not a classical moral order but a fluid system of “permanent mobilization” that ‘melts into air all that is solid’ as it continually expands its reach through internal and external colonization. Oversocialized from the beginning into its “set...pattern” and “required values” by the “overpowering machine of education and entertainment,” the ego, once able to manipulate, alter, and master its environment, has severely “shrunk” into inescapable compliant accommodation. With the superego surrendering from parental powerlessness, and parents now serving as the deliverers and magnifiers of reality pressure to David Brooks’ “Organization Kids” to enhance their remaining leverage as adaptation-specialists, repression and self-repression are now ego driven by the intensifying demands of modernist adaptation. This “mature reality principle” accepts organized Reality as pervasive and incontrovertible, and rejects rebellion less from guilt than from a reasoned calculus of unavailable options.<sup>2</sup>

The ascendancy of instrumental ego demands over superego limits – evident in this radical reaction that sweeps up all institutional barriers (laws, treaties, ethical norms, institutional protections) in its protean policies – is mirrored in the realm of pleasure. Perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of the new repressive order, the Archimedean fulcrum in its bid for permanence, is its colonization of the id. Released by abundance from the need to justify an order of deprivation and instinctual denial, it now

poses as the deliverer of pleasure, fulfiller of wants, provider of choice, releaser of fantasy, promoter of the interdicted. Under the guise of eliminating repression, the colonization of desire by a never ending and ubiquitous campaign of intrusive seduction and channeling appropriates all mental space for the pursuit of “what he is supposed to desire.”<sup>3</sup>

Before one can recognize one’s own desires, the individual is inundated by a reality driven fantasy world of standardized and repetitive satisfaction. These psychic chains and monitors, the delusion of perfect fulfillment in momentary release, generate an addictive craving for “spurious” and “illusory” gratification. What was once discrete socially conforming secondary narcissistic substitutes has in this totalizing thrust become a socially constructed secondary narcissistic substitute “id.” This theater world of shadow gratification, where “repression has become so effective” that “it assumes the (illusory) form of freedom,” of pleasure never pleasurable, leaves one feeling taken over, unable to find impulses by which to resist, not so much selling out any moral code as accommodating to its “all is permitted” absence, less buying in to substitutes than becoming oneself a substitute self, a mechanized self of “frozen traits and gestures,” in the new secondary narcissistic order.<sup>4</sup>

The cost of inhabiting the shadow world is precisely to be out of touch, anesthetized in an amnesiac world lacking real cathexis or connection, rendered in turn rageful and depressed, aggressive and hopeless, imperial and self-destructive. The controls, perhaps not greater than in the past, are more evident and more overt precisely because they are unnecessary. Resistance thus begins by challenging the structure of the substitute self, the absolutized ego, and the secondary “id.” One must deflect the relentless claim – and its claimants – that organized Reality has no boundaries or edges, there are no walls in the walled city, and commit to a process of inner sorting, refusing all of the pleasures that are mine that are not my pleasures, refusing their outcome in an alienated life that is not my life and an alienated social order arrayed against it.

This first task is thus to challenge the aura of inevitability surrounding the substitute self, the absolutized ego, and the secondary “id.” The second theoretical task, following the method originated by Rousseau in the *Second Discourse* and employed in *Emile*, involves recovering the internal instinctual logic of natural development and then extrapolating the non-repressive social and institutional order that might result. As Rousseau understood, organized repression involves a deflection of subjects from their optimal developmental trajectory, imposed as a result of environmental and institutional limits. Moving forward, in an apparent paradox, requires

returning to the point of deflection, at which internal development of the natural id and ego, relating to things and oneself (and others), was lost, identifying and integrating the capacities newly feasible with the liberation from material necessity, and extending the metapsychological pathway to higher forms of development.

Marcuse's synthesis provocatively and suggestively applies the dialectic of return, recovery, and advance. Decoupling the id from its momentary, forbidden defiance of superego limits and the substitute pleasures that diverted ego development by returning to the internal roots of primary narcissism could under conditions of material abundance allow an unbroken, unfallen libidinal development. Restoring internal narcissistic development would in turn permit the emergence of a narcissistic ego utilizing a new libido based rationality and morality to assist integrated self-sublimation toward an eroticized, libidinally grounded social and productive human organization.

This vision, dialectically imagined even under the present repressive order by an ego recovering primary eros and identifying the limits of the fiction of a perfectly organized reality (as in Peter Weir's 1998 movie, *The Truman Show*), opens a vast new human order within our reach. And yet, it is here that Marcuse's framework needs supplementing. Freud provides Marcuse little guidance for an adequate model. More specifically, Marcuse offers no psychodynamics of a libidinal ego development, perhaps fearing the ego's corruption by culture to the degree that it must be entirely resurrected anew (revealing his lone link with European despair). Failing to recognize previous historic achievements of the ego, he would thus return it to its earliest state from which it can alas offer little resistance and little transformational guidance (even as *Eros and Civilization* does just that).

The prospects for instituting a new psychosocial order along the lines drawn by Marcuse increase dramatically once we recognize that even the current repressive order is the product of previous developmental achievements, within a developmental trajectory. To suggest the logic of internal development as it has emerged from Western cultural advances, I draw upon the work of Rousseau as well as of Fromm, Erikson, Kohlberg, Kohut, and my own work-in-progress. Extending the developmental narrative into this new frontier begins by returning to the tripartite internal structure yet again. We must consider how the child's developing relations with the world beyond itself would unfold, once grounded not merely in expressions of pleasure, libido and fantasy but their source, amour de soi, self-love, the emerging self-cathexis of the ego.

The resulting structural capacities would take two forms: as a libidinally cathected ego reorienting our relation to things not as substitute

gratifications and projective containers of desire but as the expressive material of developing internal facets of the self; and as a libidinally cathected ego ideal arising from a new relation to others, to culture, not as a superego which is the cultural introjection demanding the moral idealization of identificatory replacements/substitutes, but as a self-image that develops by appropriating from cultural and interpersonal experience optimal capacities to shape and direct the individual in a self-defining, socially engaged life course.

*Eros and Civilization* offers a partial vision of the new reality of the libidinal ego, of the internally generated and expansive forms of expression, play and work that would emerge from an unbroken self-development. At the same time, unlike *Emile* and to an extent ego psychology, it offers no developmental narrative of the ego's increasing mastery in the world. That is, if allowed to develop internally, with appropriate challenges within ever larger protected spaces to encourage the exercise and enhancement of interests, skills and capacities, the child will develop a strong sense of reality – both its rigidities and fluidities – and of how to actualize oneself within it. Through a flourishing process of internal growth, the ego will expand its concerns from pleasure in experience, the always irreducible base, to the pleasures of mastery in useful, productive and creative activity, to the pleasure of such mastery within and constructively contributing to a framework of meaning and morality.

*Emile* turns out – before the retreat of Book V – to be, in a less advanced society, a citizen of Marcuse's creative polity. Marcuse, like Rousseau, however, is weaker on the relational skills and capacities for connectedness that would be central to any developing ego/self, both its ego skills in the world *and* its emergent self ideal. This significant oversight in both cases reflects deep fears about the deflections and substitutions that relationships, beginning in the socializing experience, exact as the unavoidable price of entering the domain of culture. Rousseau specifically elaborates the process by which dominance and coercion force relational adaptation into submission to cultural ideals that necessarily breaks the developmental trajectory.

Early attachments are perilous, and yet one inevitably lives in culture and relationships. There can be no optimal internal development or reshaped patterns of relationship, production, and play that reflect and sustain that development without attachment. Effective relational engagement by the ego involves and makes possible the development of ideals both regarding one's own emerging self, those meaningful forms of expression and contribution that shape its sense of empowerment and self-validation, and

the kind of common setting and world one wants within which to be that individual.

Thus, the issue before us, at once theoretical and strategic, is what kind of attachments, in what kind of culture? How do we enable the developing self to appropriate ideals about itself and the world from others, not as a fall into otherness but in order to shape and expand its own sense of empowerment and self-definition? How can a child, dependent and suggestible, utilize adult cultural guidance and approval not as manipulations into idealizing forms of disempowerment but as the catalyst for self-love to generate self-development toward an ego ideal? What if we don't have faith in non-repressive relations because we can't imagine adults siding with a child's growth? adult facilitators without coercive expectations and interdictions that render development impossible?

I want, finally, to suggest the terrain these questions might open. If ego-ideal development injects us into the domain of culture, we must reassess the availability of cultural resources that make a Marcuse, a Rousseau, possible. What enables us to imagine a common emancipated world, not as a mere discontinuous image of opposition and refusal to what now exists but as its fulfillment? The emancipatory project now arises as a realistic possibility, a specter haunting the present order, precisely because it emerges from the Western project of human and social development. At the deepest level of Western cultural experience can be located the historical evolution of the ego ideal toward the emancipatory self whose presence we now feel.

To access this realm of developing self-ideals, we must turn to religion, the cultural space freed from the pressures of narrow realism and necessity for the metapsychological working out of ego-ideal development. Here, God has been utilized as the projected ego ideal, in Kohut's terms both the idealized self-object of our narcissistic idealizations and the idealizing mirror of our own emerging possibilities as a narcissistic self. Through this relationship, a veiled laboratory of internal development, we shape and expand our narcissistic ego potential. As our divinities absorb and form the repository for our idealizations and authorize in return – by mirroring and demanding – the performance of existing ideals, we achieve the requisite ego-ideal development to create and operate within the social world reflecting that stage.

Within each ego-ideal age, as power consolidates, churches, theologies, and institutional practices can certainly become the realm of coercion, a prison house of demanded idealizations and arrested development. But examined in the larger picture, the evolution of monotheistic culture sorts into three primary stages of ego-ideal development: the traditional servant

relation to God as the demanding power who commands the universe and all within it to follow the letter of divine injunction; the agency relation to God emerging in the radical Reformation, in which we are authorized, deputized in a great advance of ego capacity, to actively operate in the world with personal judgment and self-reliance to carry out and fulfill larger divine ends according to one's own inner lights; and, finally, the developmental step to self-authority or principality in our time, in which one internalizes Kohut's self-mirroring capacity to become the model for one's own ego ideal, setting both ends and means for oneself in its identity with itself and in its relation to the world. Its responsibility and obligation now lie primordially with itself, though the public world retains crucial functions of enabling, expression, and regulation.

The child coming of age will traverse servanthood, agency, and self-authority in that and no other order as each stage presupposes the prior, ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny. Only as the skills and responsibilities at one level are mastered can subsequent developmental shifts be undertaken. A mirroring idealized Other who allows for this growth will enable the child to move on to more demanding and autonomous levels of functioning, mirroring the eventual equality as the child becomes a self-idealizing self appropriating the powers of the idealized Other from the idealizing projection. The Other will recognize these stages of dependence and deference, treating them as transitions that need to be worked through on the path to selfhood rather than as termination points (which the child reads and stops growing). The culmination is separation with the possibility of equal and non-symbiotic relations, politics, and culture. Because this process requires authority to progressively relinquish its prerogatives and at the end Authority itself, the one compensation promised in the Oedipal world for one's own self-loss, herein originates much of the rage of the present Reaction – the end of the Oedipal chain is the end of a world indeed.

To initiate this transformative movement under the conditions of post-industrial rationalization and neoliberal closure requires rethinking both the nature and site of politics itself. On several fronts, the announcement goes forth of "the end of history": on the one hand, the darker neoliberal-neoconservative American version which under the guise of a world marketplace of free citizens and states throws garlands over a relentless national will to power; on the other, a far more attractive social democratic version, what Jeremy Rifkin calls "the European Dream," in which life is gradually being organized under the promise of extended productivity and distribution, broader higher education and more skilled work, greater social inclusion and leisure, propelled by the focus on an increasing quality of life.

What both versions of post-industrial society presume is settled priorities, global convergence toward a highly ordered administrative state.

What both versions also presume by quiet excision is the absence of spaces (or need) for effective individualism with its insistent impetus toward self-realization and democratic participation with its necessary institutional deformations, that is, (playing into the hands of entrepreneurial ideologues) the renewal of personal and social creativity. Because especially as public institutions close, youth, while they retain their developmental integrity and openness to the new both symbolize and concretely inhabit the space of emancipatory potential, are the *proletariat of the post-industrial age*. It is thus no accident that both systems organize the systemic dominance by older generations already rendered complicit in their own oversocialization. Both fear the admittedly unsettling and disordering impact that youth bring, and are mobilized to pressure them into settled slots and attitudes and seduce them with a delicatessen of ritualized consumption and perverted play through fantasies of mock-illicit pleasure. Neither would invite them into ongoing processes of personal and social formation, for neither values these as priorities. In both cases, then, strategies pursued under the rubric of the end of history seek to deflect, deny, and repress a vast global shift now underway in the empowerment of the young.

This movement of the rights of the young to the center of post-industrial society has been brewing for a long time, reflecting core shifts in contemporary psychological formation. The process of narcissistic, libidinal ego, and self-constituting ego-ideal development is well underway throughout our culture and in our lives, as are endless decentralized socializing experiments that are making these developments possible. The opportunities provided by increasing affluence, education, individuation, and child-centered socialization to achieve higher levels of internal growth, new capacities, and evolved forms of expression already provide younger generational cohorts with new developmental access to levels of selfhood, autonomy, empowerment, and moral growth previously unimaginable. Despite the ideology of normalization, the hierarchical authority structures of both domestic and public institutions have been cracking under the pressures of global democratization and the declining ability of generational elites to speak for younger cohorts.

In this transitional age, the universal right to adult inclusion has won the struggle at least conceptually for legitimacy. What remains, and whose legitimacy has nowhere been validated, are the rights of the young to this new empowering role. Because they represent all of us, as the most inclusive of all social and identity movements, as well as the promise of a self and

world not yet routinized and repressed, the reshaping of socializing institutions overseeing the developmental trajectory embodies the potential for universal liberation. As the young are afforded new leverage by their increasing competence and independence as those who function most adaptively in a mobile and knowledge-based world, their ever more central roles in defining cultural tastes and priorities, shaping decisions in primary institutions, and spearheading political dissent in turn open promising avenues for restructuring post-industrial society.

This struggle for systemic realization will be a long one. There are vast numbers that sense the imminence of internal transformation but have no language for understanding it, opting out of the existing nightmare and leaving to the Reaction a monopoly over the public discourse. As conservatives play on the fear of anarchic release – a characteristic of all great ages of psychosocial experimentation and advance – the public apprehension about the uncertain implications of vast material productivity and psychic liberation will continue to cast over the present period its deathlike silence regarding meaningful options. But we must not be misled by repressive desublimation and political despair. As the forces of liberation and progressive politics turn from the discourses of marginalization and disempowerment to the post-industrial movement for the right of the young to new forms of human and social development, the emerging shape of our own lives and institutions will come into focus.

Our future development, an Hegelian bacchanal with its sweeping ups and downs, is embodied in a process occurring at this moment at the center of the Western experience. Marcuse's call to return to the dynamic of instinctual life, opened by reversing the immemorial logic of human scarcity, offers a beacon of light on our long journey to fulfill the promises of the post-industrial age to come, a journey which as we look back we will see began long ago. The Future is Come.

## NOTES

1. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston, MA, 1966), pp. 97, 99.
2. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, pp. 92, 93, 97, 99, 101, 104.
3. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p. 46.
4. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, pp. 92, 102, 103, 224.

# PEDAGOGY AGAINST “DIS-UTOPIA”: FROM *CONSCIENTIZATION* TO THE EDUCATION OF DESIRE ☆

Sarah S. Amsler

Not only does society, as it is presently structured, keep people immature but every serious attempt to shift it – I’m avoiding the word ‘educate’ deliberately – to shift it towards maturity is immediately met with indescribable resistances, and all the evil in the world at once finds its most eloquent advocates, who will prove to you that the very thing you are attempting to achieve has either long been overtaken or is utopian or is no longer relevant. What I’d really like to leave our listeners to think about is a particular phenomenon, which is all too often pushed aside in the enthusiasm which accompanies the desire to change things – that is, that any serious attempts to intervene in order to alter our world in any specific area immediately come up against the overwhelming force of inertia in the prevailing situation, and seem condemned to impotence. Anyone who wishes to bring about change can probably only do so at all, by turning that very impotence, and their own impotence, into an active ingredient in their own thinking and maybe in their own actions too. Adorno and Becker (1999, p. 32)

☆ An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the 102nd annual meeting of the American Sociological Association (New York) in August 2007.

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## CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY AND THE POSSIBILITY OF POSSIBILITY

In August 2007, over 6,000 sociologists gathered in New York to attend the 102nd meeting of the American Sociological Association and discuss the possibility of radical social transformation in post-modern capitalist society.<sup>1</sup> The adoption of the conference theme 'Is another world possible?' was theoretically significant, for it seemed to call into question one of the most fundamental assumptions upon which critical sociology depends: that despite the rarity of radical social change, it is possible, desirable and even imperative to imagine and struggle for better alternatives to existing ways of being. From phenomenological insights into the contingency of our subjective interpretations of reality to the imperative of reconciling 'appearance' with 'reality'; from the long history of collective movements to defend human dignity to the 'politics of small things' (Goldfarb, 2006), critical theories of society presume that human fates are not determined and futures are not reified, and that the possibility of possibility is a precondition for 'normal' human existence. This is not to say that progressive alternatives to the status quo are not often and everywhere repressed to some degree and in some form, or that they are equally distributed or attainable. But as Gustavo Gutierrez once remarked, a 'commitment to the creation of a just society and, ultimately, to a new human being, presupposes confidence in the future' (2003, p. 197).

The commitments of critical sociology also hinge on another, often less-recognized assumption that the human condition itself is grounded in the existence or potentiality of a pre-theoretical and universal human *need* or *desire* to transcend, to self-determine, to be. Hence, while the project of struggling to create a better world is often framed as a problem of removing political, economic, cultural and psychological barriers to social change, for critical theorists it also begs questions about the social constitution of deep subjective impulses, the essence or contingency of 'human nature', and the possibility of educating people to need and desire differently than they presently do. The question of whether 'another world is possible', therefore, also communicates a new (and perhaps long overdue) ambivalence about basic sociological concepts of structure and agency, subjective and objective culture, and the definition of basic human needs and desires.

Furthermore, beneath the question's scholastic veneer lies a palpable fear that contemporary society is already becoming something other than what it has been; other, perhaps, than it appears to be and other than what it might potentially or ought to become. Unlike the bold assertions of political

activists that another world is and must be possible (de Sousa Santos, 2003; George, 2004; Skrimshire, 2006; Tarrow, 2005), the question of whether the claim is sociologically viable belies the anxiety of a profession alienated both from its own philosophical roots and from the people with whom it claims to speak. It is the anxiety that even if social scientists are able to develop the cognitive tools to understand why these processes are occurring, we lack the confidence, imagination, relationships, means and will to interrupt or resist them. It is thus a humbling, almost despairing question, for it does not even go so far as to ask, 'can we build a better world together?' There is no obvious 'we', no unanimous definition of 'better', and a credible anti-authoritarian fear of imposing or presuming shared purpose where none actually exists. In fact, we now fear that even previous assurances were romanticized illusions – for example, as Zygmunt Bauman points out, orthodox beliefs in the revolutionary potential of 'the working class' not only homogenized workers but also mistook a need for security rather than a desire for revolution as the motivating factor for collective action (Jacobsen & Tester, 2007). And although we are situated in the midst of a long and fruitful cultural turn in the critical social sciences, two perennial dilemmas continue to break ground: 'how to maintain social solidarity amidst the celebration of difference, and how to ground normative evaluation of action amidst the decline of cultural authority' (Jacobs & Hanrahan, 2005, p. 1). The shift from asking how we can tactically effect radical social change to asking whether it is humanly possible at all, given the post-modern critique of enlightenment notions of 'agency' and more difference-focused definitions of freedom and justice, suggests a general decline of professional confidence in the sociological 'normality' of the possibility of radical social change.

I would like to suggest that it is also a manifestation of several wider dilemmas more specific to critical theory.<sup>2</sup> First, there is the question of whether the analytical and normative projects of critical social science can be legitimately grounded in the absence of an empirically verifiable, 'quasi-sociological specification of an emancipatory interest in society itself' (Honneth, 2007, p. 65). Second, the problems of *where* such a pre-theoretical, pre-pedagogical need or desire originates, and what its relation to the material structures of society might be, have not yet been satisfactorily resolved within the critical tradition. Third, the absence of an adequate theory of either normative judgement or human need makes it difficult to articulate and justify potential strategies of emancipatory action. And finally, the role of radical, critical hope in legitimizing faith in the possibility of possibility – the sort of speculative, normative, militant hope

that is maintained in spite of appearance; which enables a style of critique that ‘speaks against the facts and confronts [bare] facticity with its better potentialities’ (Marcuse, 1989, p. 64) – remains unclear and extremely contested. Hope thus appeals again, as Theodor Adorno once imagined, to its ongoing ‘Court of Appeal’ (Adorno, 1951).

### **CRITICAL THEORY AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY: CHALLENGES IN THEORY AND PRACTICE**

These dilemmas are gaining visibility in new scholarship about hope and utopia (Browne, 2005; Crapanzano, 2003; Smith, 2005). However, in this essay, I would like to illustrate how they are also taking shape in applied critical theory, specifically, in the current movement to rehabilitate concepts of ‘critical hope’ and ‘utopia’ through critical pedagogy (Ainley & Canaan, 2005; Canaan, 2002, 2005; van Heertum, 2006).<sup>3</sup> There are not only strong parallels between philosophical and pedagogical developments in social critique, but also unfinished pedagogical projects within critical theory itself. And while critical educators often ground their pedagogical work in the theoretical tradition, critical theorists have much to learn from the challenges that their philosophical work creates in politico-educational and cultural practice.

The critical education movement is conceptualized both as an ‘educational dimension of the struggles within and against neo-liberalism’ (Coté et al., 2007, p. 3), and more generally as a form of democratic political pedagogy (Giroux, 2004b). It manifests in new ways a classical paradox of critical theory: that ‘the forces that were to bring about the transformation [of capitalist society] are suppressed and appear to be defeated’ (Marcuse, 1989, p. 63), and more specifically that ‘the forces of domination have rendered problematic the very possibility for critical thinking’ (Aronowitz, 1985, p. 119). On the one hand, educational institutions (universities in particular) are being dramatically transformed by the expansion of post-modern capitalist culture, the colonization of relatively autonomous cultural spaces by economic and bureaucratic logics, managerial control over professional and intellectual identity, and the reformation of teaching and learning as instrumentalized and commercial practices.<sup>4</sup> It is argued that these processes have taken hold within institutions of knowledge-production themselves; that ‘the introduction of corporate standards and an external mode of scrutiny are changing the

culture and ethos of the university' (Harris, 2005, p. 428), perhaps to the point that the process is 'killing thinking', or at least its more radical potential (Evans, 2005). There is a sense, therefore, that 'at a moment when higher education...is needed to focus on issues and help realize broad humanitarian goals, its vision and focus is being narrowed to meet utilitarian economic ends' (Canaan, 2005, p. 76).

On the other hand, however, educational institutions continue to be viewed as sites of resistance to the very forces that make them into institutions of domination.<sup>5</sup> Pedagogy is hence understood as a form of direct political struggle over the ideological construction of reality, and as a potential method of resistance to the bureaucratization, homogenization, instrumentalization, marketization and de-democratization of human need, desire and ethical will. This focus on the ideational and on deep subjectivity is qualitatively different from many traditional interpretations of critical pedagogy, which are more concretely grounded in the pursuit of '*conscientization*' in direct relation to more specific political struggles (Freire, 1992, 2001, 2005). In this sense, critical pedagogy asserts that individuals' analyses of the social world mediate their existing limitations and possibilities. By reorganizing or 're-cognizing' their perceptions and cognitive maps, and by identifying both their 'limit situations' and the concrete actions that they can take to overcome them, people can become conscious of their pre-existing desires and will to transcendence. This in turn motivates them to undertake willed transformative action for changing their social conditions and engaging in collective struggle. Put more simply, it is a practice in which 'we listen to our students and support their efforts to articulate and understand limits to their lives so that they can recognize and work to lessen these limits and those of others' (Canaan, 2007, p. 74). In other words, critical pedagogy is often assumed to be an inherent source of hope because it disrupts and denounces the illusion of historical fate and liberates emergent utopian impulses through which self-determination is announced (da Veiga Coutinho, 1974, p. 11).

But critical educators are now asking what relevance this understanding of pedagogy might have in a society where desires for individual transcendence and social change are or appear to be absent, devalued or denied. What are the possible consequences of *conscientization* in conditions where exposing complex power relations and dominant social forces emboldens fatalistic emotions rather than transforming them into hope; where, to paraphrase a well-worn theory, we see through ideologies and yet still buy into them? Or as Henry Giroux more poignantly asks – and here what appears as hyperbole must be understood in the context of

contemporary American political culture and the moral indignities of Abu Ghraib – ‘what resources and visions does hope offer ... when most attempts to interrupt the operations of an incipient fascism appear to fuel a growing cynicism rather than promote widespread individual and collective acts of resistance?’ (Giroux, 2002, p. 38) What become of efforts to democratize knowledge when consuming publics democratically demand authoritarian teaching, or when self-realization is defined as the skilful adaptation to an existing order of things?

In such circumstances, ‘critical hope’ becomes a paradoxical problematic rather than an assumed outcome of critical education. If the *need* or *desire* for personal transcendence or social change is not taken for granted as pre-existing or immanent, then the object of critical pedagogy must either be to *create* them, or to create the conditions for their emergence. The aim of educating against the ideological forces of post-modern capitalism is therefore neither simply to recognize the social world, nor to create conditions of emancipatory communication. Instead, it is to produce the value orientations that make both of these activities meaningful in the first place.

Hence, the new movement in critical pedagogy prioritizes the ideational production of ‘critical hope’ as a motivational basis for transformative social action *prior to and outside of concrete political or economic struggle*, rather than beginning from it. Institutionalized critical education has become a project less in the service of particular political struggles and more an attempt to resist the closure, privatization, apathy and psycho-emotional ‘coldness’ that is presumed to abort political struggle at its immediate roots of subjective experience. Writing in defence of higher education as a key site of cultural resistance, Giroux argued that critical pedagogy is no longer simply a matter of ‘raising consciousness’ about the possibilities for realistic opposition, but a question of educating people *to believe* that these possibilities are worthwhile in the first place (2004d, pp. 500–502). This type of educational practice moves beyond cognitive rationality and towards the psychological, emotional and ethical experiences through which it is mediated. The question here is not only what makes it possible for people to rationally formulate alternatives to existing conditions, but also what makes it possible for them to *want* to do so. This reflects a turn away from the duality of ‘reason and freedom’ towards a more complex theory of social agency that includes its ‘more-than-rational’ and ‘less-than-rational’ dimensions (or in other words, the ‘pre-theoretical’ and ‘extramundane’ elements) of human action, as well as the social and emotional foundations of inter-subjective ethics (Ahmed, 2004; Anderson, 2006; Anderson & Harrison, 2006).

In other words, contemporary critical educators are trying to produce through pedagogy a condition which, according to Honneth, is presumed to have been lost in the mid-twentieth century and yet which critical theory requires for its own justification: an innate, essential and indomitable need for personal and social transformation. This presents a familiar dilemma: 'how can we imagine these new concepts even arising here and now in living beings if the entire society is against such an emergence of new needs?' (Marcuse, 1970a, p. 76). Or, in the words of C. Wright Mills, we seem to have two choices when theorizing need and desire. On the one hand, he wrote, 'if we take the simple democratic view that *what men [sic] are interested in* is all that concerns us, then we are accepting the values that have been inculcated, often accidentally and often deliberately'. On the other hand, 'if we take the dogmatic view that *what is to men's interests*, whether they are interested in it or not, is all that need concern us morally, then we run the risk of violating democratic values' (Mills, 1959, p. 194). In his habitually accessible way, Mills expressed the stubborn tension between socially constituted need as-it-appears or is experienced, on the one hand, and universal norms of need that may be abstracted from or alien to lived experience, on the other. It is this unhappy no-choice between the reification of immediate particular experience and the authoritarian imposition of abstract generality that critical theory must aim to transcend.

Before illustrating more specifically how this is being negotiated in movements for critical education, however, it is important to explain the critical diagnosis of society that frames and directs this movement. It is also important to understand how it is positioned within the broader theoretical project which explains how the dialectical relationships between social structure and individual subjectivity both reproduce and interrupt political domination. The next section of this essay is therefore devoted to explaining the thesis that a 'crisis of hope' has paralyzed political agency and social movements in post-modern capitalist societies, and that the geographical and ideological expansion of capital threatens to globalize both forces of dehumanization and a pathological one-dimensionality of inter-subjective consciousness.

## **POST-MODERN CAPITALISM – THE 'END OF SOCIAL DREAMS'?**

What is crippling is not the presence of an enemy but rather the universal belief, not only that this tendency is irreversible, but that the historic alternatives to capitalism have been

proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socio-economic system is conceivable, let alone practicable. (Jameson, 2005, p. xii)

There is a range of theories now circulating to characterize this condition, many of which take the form of ‘social pathologies’. I borrow the term ‘pathology’ from Axel Honneth to denote a specific genre of analysis which is not simply a critique of particular social problems (such as, for example, the decline of organized Left politics or the rise of privatized consumer cultures), but which rather aims to provide a general account of systemic ‘misdevelopments’ in individual and social character (Honneth, 2007, p. 4).<sup>6</sup> Although this approach to social analysis is often considered central to critical theory but antithetical to post-structuralist epistemologies, I would argue that in fact the rhetorical delineation of ‘normal’ from ‘abnormal’ phenomena is a foundational, if often latent or repressed, condition for any critique, including that which has as its target the construction of such boundaries themselves.<sup>7</sup> Such accounts are by definition grounded in normative assumptions about truth, right and human nature. Honneth explains that ‘if we claim that a society’s characteristic desires or interests have taken a wrong turn, or if we problematize the mechanisms by which they are generated, then we are implicitly defending the thesis that a given set of social relations has violated the conditions which constitute a necessary presupposition for the good life’ (2007, p. 56).

In this case, the pre-conditions for the ‘good life’ include hope and the need or desire for transcendence and freedom; the social relations violating these conditions are the relations of neo-liberal capitalism.<sup>8</sup> The hypothesis is that it is becoming increasingly difficult to counter the deleterious effects of capitalism because its relations of production and cultural practices not only disable the critical imagination of alternatives and the organization of collective action, but also produce types of human beings for whom these practices are subjectively and objectively meaningless. The empirical evidence for this, it is argued, is that utopia – as a genre, a project and a form of anticipatory knowledge – is either vanishing from public culture, or (less often) already extinct. This is said to signify the structural preclusion of hope, which has long been considered an innate motivational resource for individual and collective agency in democratic participation, progressive politics and social revolution (Smith, 2005).<sup>9</sup>

It has become relatively commonplace to speak about the ‘crisis of hope’ as an actually existing and generalized social condition to be observed, described and acted upon. In the early 1980s, for example, Jürgen Habermas spoke of the ‘exhaustion of utopian energies’ associated with the

legitimation crisis of the welfare state and the declining importance and possibility of the emancipatory potential of non-alienated social labour in late capitalist societies (Habermas, 1989).<sup>10</sup> Two decades on, Frederic Jameson has argued that there continues to be a powerful anti-utopian tendency or even 'revolt against utopia' in intellectual and political life, and that the 'waning of the utopian idea is a fundamental historical and political symptom, which deserves diagnosis in its own right' (Jameson, 2004, p. 41, 36).<sup>11</sup> Zygmunt Bauman paints a slightly different version of this 'crisis', arguing that while 'utopia will never die because humans cannot and will not stop hoping', we nevertheless inhabit a 'post-utopian' society in which it has become necessary to symbolically defend the very value of hope before one can set about discussing it (2004).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in the post-Soviet period, serious charges have been levied against utopianism, namely, that it is an inverted form of totalitarianism. The neoconservative Right equate 'utopianism' with Stalinist-style and fundamentalist politics, while the anti-authoritarian and post-modern Left define it as an ontological offence to difference and complexity<sup>13</sup> – and in much critical theory, utopia has the neurotic privilege of being both imperative and desirable and impossible and dangerous.<sup>14</sup> According to Bauman, this delegitimation of utopianism from both Left and Right creates a sense that there are 'no visible bridges' left to a better society and no collective will to cross any that might be built (Jacobsen & Tester, 2007, p. 309).<sup>15</sup> In a recently published collection of interviews about hope with intellectuals and cultural workers, Mary Zournazi similarly concludes that 'we live in a world where our belief, faith and trust in political or individual actions are increasingly being threatened, leading to despair and uncertainty' Zournazi (2002, p. 14). In more public space, Anthony Giddens recently issued a 'call to arms' in the British left-of-centre newspaper *The Guardian*, claiming that 'there are no longer utopian projects that would supply a source of direction for social reform and a source of motivating ideas' (2006).

This diagnosis takes on more dystopian dimensions as well, with writers announcing the 'celebration of the end of social dreams' (Dinerstein and Neary quoted in McLaren, 2001, p. 117) and lamenting the decline of societies where individuals 'sleepwalk' through utterly dominated lives, having only nightmares about impossibly determined futures or living in deluded, mediated fantasies (Weiler, 2003). Writing from Britain, Dinerstein and Neary suggest that in our everyday lives as well as in more formal theory-work we stand against projects of systematic 'disutopia' McLaren (2001).<sup>16</sup> In its most radical versions, such work sketches out a dystopian future where Max Weber's 'iron cage' of capitalist rationality is locked from

within and where capabilities of emancipatory reason are quite literally educated out of human nature (Beck, 2002). These extreme forms of hopelessness and anti-hope are linked directly to the dangerous excesses of post-modern capitalism (Ainley & Canaan, 2005; Giroux, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c; McLaren, 2001), and the prognosis is sometimes apocalyptic.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, spectres of authoritarianism and (proto)fascism are again being pronounced on the politico-pedagogical landscape, and the classical work of first- and second-generation critical theorists is being rehabilitated as attention returns once again to explaining and idealistically combating the subtle, complicated mechanisms of subjective domination in contemporary society.

Some theorists, such as Frederic Jameson, argue that this trend towards 'disutopia' is a consequence of material injustice and symptomatic of a form of 'globalization' which segregates the world's populations into equally anti-utopian halves:

In one of these worlds, the disintegration of the social is so absolute – misery, poverty, unemployment, starvation, squalor, violence and death – that the intricately elaborated social schemes of utopian thinkers become as frivolous as they are irrelevant. In the other, unparalleled wealth, computerized production, scientific and medical discoveries unimaginable a century ago as well as an endless variety of commercial and cultural pleasures, seem to have rendered utopian fantasy and speculation as boring and antiquated as pre-technological narratives of space flight. (Jameson, 2005)

Here, 'possibility' and fate are understood not as inherent features of human nature, but as Mills once argued, as 'feature[s] of an historically specific kind of social structure' (1959, p. 183) or unmediated subjective expressions of structural power relations. While Jameson himself has long defended the value of utopian imaginaries, he also asserts that these are only meaningful or indeed possible within certain socio-historical and cultural arrangements (Jameson, 2005).

In addition to such concerns about inequality and exploitation, however, there is considerable concern about changes in the culture(s) of post-modern capitalism, particularly those that disable democratic sociation and critical thought. These anxieties are expressed in the traditional vocabulary of the political Left, and include the privatization and commercialization of public life, the disarticulation of 'the social' and collective social responsibility, the censorship and enclosure of democratic cultures and relatively autonomous public spheres, the decline of sustained social movements, the rise of cultural authoritarianism and societies of control, the empowerment of new, aggressive forms of military and cultural imperialism, the commercialization of culture and identity, and the drift in democratic societies towards more

authoritarian forms of political and ideological control (Bauman, 2004; Coté et al., 2007; Giddens, 2006; Giroux, 2004a, 2007; Habermas, 1999; Harvey, 2005; Jameson, 2005; McLaren, 2002; Sennett, 1998). This constellation of related phenomena is widely (and I think largely inaccurately) referred to simply as 'neo-liberal capitalism', and each of these conditions is said to contribute to what Brazilian educator and activist Paulo Freire once described as the 'inflexible negation of the right to dream differently, to dream of utopia' (2001, p. 22).

Freire's use of the term 'right' is telling, for his judgement is based on a first principle that human beings possess a natural (or at least historically regular) 'utopian impulse'; a longing *to be* that is unjustly, albeit often unconsciously, suppressed or unlearned within this social order. Such assertions are, on the one hand, anthropological and essentialist. Zygmunt Bauman (2004), for example, argues that 'to hope is to be human'; Darren Webb recently claimed that hope is a 'human universal that can be experienced in different modes' (2007a, p. 65); and Freire (1998, p. 69) concluded even more bluntly that 'the absence of hope is not the "normal" way to be human. It is a distortion'. However, appeals to the anthropological normality of hope and the deviant nature of its suppression are also existentialist insofar as they assume that 'revolt, need, hope, rejection and desire' are socially constituted and that they emerge from inter-subjective experience within particular historical conditions (de Beauvoir, 1948). From this unconventional combination of humanist essentialism and existentialist philosophy emerges a hypothesis that some of the most powerful, empirically existing intellectual and emotional resources of resistance to dehumanization that have been available to past generations – namely, utopian imaginaries and the ethical will and capability to conceptualize alternative ways of being – have themselves been materially transformed.<sup>18</sup>

The 'root-of-all-evil' diagnosis<sup>19</sup> in this narrative of social decline is the loss of the human capacity or will to desire hope itself, either because individuals have lost the ability or desire to imagine alternative ways of being (i.e., an erosion of both critical and anticipatory forms of consciousness) or because they are deprived of the structural possibilities of agency that this will had heretofore been rooted in.<sup>20</sup> These arguments are theoretically significant because they go beyond tactical critiques of particular social problems and suggest pathological changes in the *quality and total way of being* in post-modern capitalist societies. The present 'crisis of hope' is regarded as a materially based distortion of subjective human development. In other words, the question is no longer whether certain social arrangements are possible or debating their desirability, but rather

whether the entire organization of the social environment disables people from developing the psychological and emotional desire for personal transcendence or social change, and prevents them from developing the inter-subjective empathy and compassion that would allow them to identify with the suffering of others. We suspect we may be losing or have lost, not only as Adorno once put it, ‘the capacity to imagine the totality as something entirely different’ (quoted in Daniel & Moylan, 1997, p. vii), but in some cases the deeper desire to do so, and in other cases, where given reality seems impenetrable, the will to even try. This, the reification of impossibility, is the contemporary crisis of hope – not simply a shift in ways of knowing or enacting society, but as C. Wright Mills once wrote, a concern about ‘pervasive transformations of the very “nature” of man [*sic*] and the conditions and aims of his life’ (1959, p. 13).

### NEED, DESIRE AND HOPE IN CRITICAL THEORY

There is hence an enormous urgency about much of the literature on ‘critical hope’. However, it is neither unprecedented nor unusual for critical theorists to be occupied with identifying and monitoring forces of dehumanization within capitalist societies. Nor is post-modern capitalism the first social order to threaten ‘critical hope’ or to manipulate need and desire, and utopia has been ‘waning’ for quite a prolonged while (Kumar, 1987; Milojevic, 2003).<sup>21</sup> The over-arching analytical framework is so familiar, in fact, that it often seems either woefully unoriginal or indicative of a remarkable historical continuity which makes the critical analyses of mid-twentieth century societies prescient for our own (James, 2006).<sup>22</sup> What is relatively new, however, is the particular interest in rehabilitating hope, utopia, need and desire as mainstream categories of critical analysis. The classical works of Karl Marx, Karl Mannheim, William Morris, Edward P. Thompson, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno are increasingly being dusted off and re-excavated for insight into the empirical and normative foundations of these concepts.<sup>23</sup> This project is long overdue, for despite the enduring inclination amongst first- and second-generation critical theorists to suspect that there was something empirically indomitable and theoretically important about hope, the concept has been treated unevenly at best (Smith, 2005). There are several notable exceptions: Ernst Bloch’s *The Principle of Hope* (1959), Herbert Marcuse’s *Revolution of Hope* (1968) and ‘The end of utopia’ (1970), Walter Benjamin’s work on hope and history

(1940; see also Gur Ze’ev, 1998), and passing references to hope and utopia in other writings. More recently, however, hope and utopia have re-emerged as organizing principles for entire theoretical projects: David Harvey’s *Spaces of Hope* (2000), Susan Buck-Morss’ *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The passing of mass utopia in East and West* (2000), Immanuel Wallerstein’s *Utopistics* (1998), Frederic Jameson’s *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005) and Erik Olin Wright’s Real Utopias Project (1991–present) being only a few obvious examples.

A crucial question arises here: how should we interpret this intellectual and political migration towards hope and utopia, particularly given the long-standing ‘theoretical aversion’ to hope in critical theory (Smith, 2005)? Why, after three decades of deliberate movement away from both philosophical anthropology and normative universals, after the routinization of the post-modern and cultural turns, do we find renewed interest in hitherto marginalized (and often maligned) concepts of human nature, need, desire, will, hope and utopia?<sup>24</sup> It has perhaps predictably been argued that this is simply an ideological expression of the more structural ‘dissipation of utopian energies’ in post-modern capitalist societies (Browne, 2005; Sinnerbrink, Deranty, & Smith, 2005). In such interpretations, hope is associated with compensatory ideology or naïve optimism, a foil to the transformative potential of ‘radical hopelessness’ or more goal-oriented critical utopias (Chopra, 2004). When thus defined as diluted or disempowered utopianism, hope is interpreted as an unimaginative and cowardly reaction to the political and intellectual fragmentation of the Left, the implosion of grand narratives of historical agency, and the censorship or incorporation of all mass alternatives to neo-liberal capitalism. It is hence singled out from other extramundane concepts like justice, desire, memory and love as something particularly ‘amateurish’, ‘second-rate’, immature, and even ‘religious’ (Smith, 2005, pp. 46–48; see also Levitas, 2005, p. 171), and scholarly interest in utopianism stigmatized as ‘unscientific’ anachronism (Daniel & Moylan, 1997).<sup>25</sup> Indeed, E. P. Thompson once argued that the debate between ‘scientific’ and ‘utopian’ socialism in nineteenth-century Europe had shaped the entire architecture of thought about both Marxism and utopia in unfortunate ways. Referring to the essay ‘Socialism – utopian and scientific’ (Marx & Engels, 1959, pp. 68–111), Thompson quipped that we had been ‘running away from the acceptance of utopianism as a valid imaginative form, because of a fright given to us by Engels in 1880’ (Thompson, 1976, p. 101). Hence, although utopian vision is central to critical theory, the dominance of its more materialist and scientized orientations has institutionalized an anxiety that entertaining the utopian

imagination is a shameful flight from ‘concrete politics’ into an inhibiting form of intellectual bad faith.<sup>26</sup>

However, such critiques of the turn towards hope and utopia do little to aid its interpretation. Are these theories accurate diagnoses of a new, empirically existing form of ideologically based determinism in post-modern capitalist societies; literally, the historical ‘end of social dreams’? Are they, more accurately, discourses which express the class-specific critiques of a disempowered and disappointed Left that is attempting to crack through the hegemony of neo-liberal ‘utopias’ in a largely post-socialist world? Are new theories of hope and utopia enabled by the ‘affective turn’ in critical and cultural theory, which opens up greater opportunities to legitimately inquire into emotional aspects of social life and concepts such as respect, love, fear and desire (Anderson & Harrison, 2006; Webb, 2007a)? Or might they be interpreted as secular theodicies which seek to explain – again, still – how and why injustice, irrationality and inhumanity continue to be so legitimately executed in and by ostensibly ‘enlightened’, privileged, democratic and humane societies?

I would like to argue that these factors constitute a familiar constellation that critical theorists have developed to explain the relationship between the material conditions of society, human subjectivity and the possibilities for radical social transformation. It combines philosophical anthropology (i.e. philosophies of ‘human nature’), socialist politics, theories linking individual subjectivity to socio-economic structure, and normative commitment to (variably defined) values of freedom, justice, truth and right. Interpreted within this framework, the ‘crisis of hope’ can neither be reduced to a world-historical threat to human nature nor explained as an epiphenomenal ‘shift in critical reflections on late modernity from the possibility of utopia to the problem of hope’ (Browne, 2005). I would suggest that it rather constitutes a new version of a familiar and paradoxical ‘social pathology’: that a fundamental crisis of critical, anticipatory consciousness has emerged from the relations of production of post-modern capitalism, and that this phenomenon threatens to make impossible the subjective possibilities for their material transformation. At the same time, developments in post-modern critical theory – many of which also emerge from these same relations – enable us to take the analysis of this paradoxical situation even further than classical critical theorists ever could. A number of unresolved theoretical problematics are hence productively re-opened, including the ontological nature of anticipatory knowledge, the role of ideas and ideologies in motivating social action and the social constitution of human need and desire that motivate different ‘modes of hoping’ in the first place.<sup>27</sup>

## CLASSICAL ROOTS OF CRITICAL-UTOPIAN EDUCATION

This is one reason that critical educators have turned to classical critical theories as inspiration for analyzing and resisting subjective dehumanization within post-modern capitalism. Four first- and second-generation theorists – Ernst Bloch, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno – now appear prominently in critical educational theory to inform questions of how need and desire are constituted within particular social systems, and how they might be radically reconstituted within the same. While they disagreed about the relationships between critique and utopia and pedagogy and politics, as well as about the ontological nature of human need and desire, all ultimately argued that political movements for radical freedom must include a subjective process of critical-utopian education.

Ernst Bloch's work, for example has been invoked by educators to theorize the notion of 'critical hope', defined as the 'desire for a better way of living expressed in the description of a different kind of society that makes possible that alternative way of life' (Levitas, 1993, p. 257). Such hope is also regarded as a form of 'militant utopianism' that 'pluralizes politics by generating dissent against the claims of a false hegemony of neo-liberal capitalism and authoritarian social values (Giroux, 2003, p. 477). Bloch understood hope as an ontological fact: 'not only a basic feature of human consciousness, but, concretely and correctly grasped, a basic determination within objective reality as a whole' (Bloch, 1995, p. 7). His philosophy of hope is balanced, rather precariously, inside the unresolved tension between human nature and social contingency. On the one hand, Bloch assumed that expectation, desire, 'thinking-forward' and thinking-better are inherently human properties. As Douglas Kellner argues, 'Bloch always begins with the wishing, hopeful, needy, and hungry human being and analyzes what prohibits realization of human desire and fulfilment of human needs' (1997, p. 87). On the other hand, however, the hope instinct is not simply biological. Bloch was critical of hypotheses that our 'natural' behaviours – including self-preservation – can be explained as unconscious drives (Bloch, 1995, pp. 65–77). 'All definitions of basic drives', he argued, 'only flourish in the soil of their own time and are limited to that time...[they] cannot be made absolute, even less separated from the economic being of mankind in each age' (Bloch, 1995, p. 69).

Thus, on the one hand, Bloch argued that as a species we require hope; 'hopelessness is itself, in a temporal and factual sense, the most insupportable thing, downright intolerable to human needs' (Bloch, 1995, p. 5).

On the other hand, if hope proceeds ‘uneducated’, without guidance about how to formulate ‘informed discontent’, the desire to know what is in front of us can turn into a dangerously abstract form of fantasy which Bloch calls ‘fraudulent hope’ (i.e. ideology). We must therefore learn how to hope ‘correctly’; to ‘think beyond’ in forms of ‘educated hope’ (*docta spes*) or ‘concrete utopia’, rather than merely ‘wishful thinking’. For Bloch, therefore, the proper method and objective of education was the critical hermeneutics of everyday life. We must learn to read past and present society not for what it is but for what it once intended to be, seeking out the ‘utopian residue or surplus that can be used for social critique and to advance progressive politics’ (Kellner, 1997, p. 82). As Kellner puts it, Bloch offers a form of cultural ideology critique that ‘is not merely unmasking (*Entlarfung*) but is also uncovering and discovery: revelations of unrealized dreams, lost possibilities, abortive hopes that can be resurrected, enlivened and realized in our current situation’ (1997, p. 84).

While Bloch does not make reference to ‘true’ or ‘false’ possibilities, he made clear in his work that only educated, concrete intimations towards socialism were to be considered adequate forms of resistance to forces of exploitation, alienation and oppression (Kellner, 1997, p. 94). His teleological conception of hope is exemplified by a passage from one of Karl Marx’s early letters to Arnold Ruge, which Bloch refers to repeatedly in *The Principle of Hope*:

Our motto must therefore be: reform of consciousness not through dogmas but through the analysis of mystical consciousness which is still unclear to itself. It will then become apparent that the world has long possessed the dream of a matter, of which it must only possess the consciousness in order to possess it in reality. It will become apparent that it is not a question of the great thought-dash between past and future, but of the *carrying through* of the thoughts of the past. (Marx, 1843; also in Levitas, 1997, p. 69)

The need for this movement – for following a ‘red arrow’ of socialist movement through historical progress – was empirically factual for Bloch, evident in the way that ‘succeeding ages “re-function” the material of the past to suit their ideological requirements’. Although only some of these projects could be considered progressive, he believed that ‘from all progressive thinking a utopian surplus is carried over into the future’ (Plaice, Knight, & Plaice, 1995, p. xxvii). This latent potentiality has only to be uncovered and revealed, in all societies at all times, in order to be consciously realized.

Although Bloch’s theory of ‘educated hope’ is extremely relevant for theorizing pedagogical contributions to struggles for human freedom, his

deep commitment to a particular vision of socialism as the teleological culmination of all human dreams, wishes, hopes and desires was not fully shared by other critical theorists. *To Have or To Be?* (Fromm, 1976), for example, challenged this asymmetry by arguing that both actually existing capitalism and actually existing socialism were modernist distortions of human hope. The 'Great Promise of Unlimited Progress', as Fromm called it, was founded on two main principles: hedonism and egoism (i.e. the obsessive pursuit of individual pleasure). He argued that both were believed to be dominant elements of 'human nature', but the irony was that this ideologically based belief constituted a threat to human existence itself. What could be more abnormal, he asked, more 'pathogenic' than a collective desire for a way of life that was ultimately its own negation (Fromm, 1976, p. 19)? In other words, Fromm argued that the very *acts* of hoping, needing and desiring within advanced industrial societies must be defined as ideological practices of subjective domination. Like Bloch, he believed that under 'normal' conditions, 'human beings have an inherent and deeply rooted desire to be: to express our faculties, to be active, to be related to others, to escape the prison cell of selfishness' (Fromm, 1976, p. 103).<sup>28</sup> The desire for freedom and transcendence, while it might be repressed, could thus never actually cease to be a potentiality (Fromm, 2001, p. 247).

However, Fromm believed that the human character also has the potential to be shaped otherwise by the socio-economic system that requires it (Rickert, 1986, p. 360). He therefore inquired into the nature of desire itself – its deformity, rather than its formation. Like many of his contemporaries, he was particularly interested in explaining why 'the strongest of all instincts, that for survival, seems to have ceased to motivate us' to make radical changes in the way we live (Fromm, 1976, p. 19). He posited a number of hypotheses: the emptying and technocratization of politics; social atomization and egoistic action; collective fear of radical change; and 'the view that we have no alternatives to the models of corporate capitalism, social democratic or Soviet socialism, or "technocratic fascism with a smiling face"' (1976, p. 20). Ultimately, Fromm's solution to combat this tendency was pedagogical. To restore the normality of human desire to realize unlimited potentials, it would be necessary to produce a 'radical change of the human heart' as well as effecting 'drastic economic and social changes...that give the human heart the chance for change and the courage and vision to achieve it' (1976, p. 19).<sup>29</sup> This, he argued, would be an essentially 'educational process' of change (*ibid.*, p. 173).

For Herbert Marcuse, the relationship between subjective and objective change was more problematic. He described capitalist domination as a

‘counter-revolution anchored in the instinctual structure’ of individuals (1971, p. 21), and argued that its transformation demanded a ‘radical transvaluation of values’ (Marcuse, 1971, p. 15).

A society constantly re-creates, this side of consciousness and ideology, patterns of behaviour and aspiration as part of the “nature” of its people, and unless the revolt reaches into this “second” nature, into these ingrown patterns, social change will remain incomplete, even self-defeating. (Marcuse, 1971, p. 20; see also Marcuse, 1964, pp. 4–5)

Because Marcuse believed that political injustices were internalized into the deep psychological structures of individuals – and that the potential for radical resistance was also instinctually rooted (Rickert, 1986, p. 368) – he placed deep subjectivity at the heart of social change. The creation of ‘true’ needs would motivate new types of political action towards a non-aggressive, non-alienating, and non-oppressive society. For Marcuse, there was one obvious and empirically verifiable category of ‘false’ needs in any society: needs that ‘perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery and injustice’ – not only for oneself, but also for the others upon which our ‘happiness’ may depend (1964, p. 5). These needs can and must be resisted and unlearned, for ‘we find ourselves up against a system...whose internal contradictions repeatedly manifest themselves in inhuman and unnecessary wars and whose growing productivity is growing destruction and growing waste’ (Marcuse, 1970b, p. 108).<sup>30</sup>

Throughout his work, Marcuse therefore criticized the ‘socially engineered arrest of consciousness’ in highly industrialized societies where ‘capitalist progress....not only reduces the environment of freedom, the “open space” of the human existence, but also the “longing”, the need for such an environment’ (1969, pp. 25–26). Under such conditions, alternatives to existing reality through either critique or utopian imagination become irrelevant because they do not correspond to individuals’ needs and desires, which are synonymous with those of the dominant system (Marcuse, 1969, p. 82, 1970a; see also Lodziak, 2005). Hence, for Marcuse, radical pedagogy was central to a cultural revolution that prioritized the transformation of instinctual needs themselves. He advocated not only ‘liberating the consciousness of...realizable possibilities’, but also argued that cultural revolutionaries should ‘work on the development of consciousness’ (Marcuse, 1970a, p. 74), on creating a ‘new sensibility’ at the level of ‘second nature’ or ‘socialized instinct’ (Marcuse, 1969, p. 21), and on ‘transforming the will itself so that people no longer want what they want now’ (Marcuse, 1970a, p. 77). He argued that ‘morality is not necessarily

and not primarily ideological. In the face of an amoral society, it becomes a political weapon' (Marcuse, 1969, p. 8).

Theodor Adorno also addressed the cultural formation of needs, desires and values and envisioned a strong role for education in this process, while remaining perpetually critical of the role that formal education played in shaping anti-democratic attitudes and relationships. In 'Education after Auschwitz', for example, he asserted that the deliberate formation of subjective human psychology was the only legitimate defence against an insurgent 'barbarism [which] is inscribed within the principle of civilization' (1967, p. 1). Here he parts company with Bloch, Fromm and Marcuse, whose theories assumed that education was ultimately a corrective practice which aimed to restore some state of normality against the pathological pedagogies of late-modern capitalism. For Adorno (1967), the problem was darker: Auschwitz, the Armenian genocide, the dropping of atomic bombs – these were not anomalous events but rather 'expressions of an extremely powerful societal tendency' towards dehumanization that is an ever-present potentiality within human beings, emboldened under some conditions and repressed in others. He argued that traditional educational practices – in schools, but also the more widespread pedagogies of mass culture – produced individuals who were psychologically 'cold': unable to love others, and unable to relate to others' suffering or their desires.<sup>31</sup>

Adorno agreed with Fromm and Marcuse that it would be an authoritarian irony to 'force' people to love, and that there was thus no reason to 'appeal to eternal values, at which the very people who are prone to commit such atrocities would merely shrug their shoulders'. Neither did he see any point in attempting to humanize victims or 'enlighten' persecutors 'about the positive qualities possessed by persecuted minorities' (Adorno & Becker, 1999 p. 2). Instead, he argued, critical education must attempt to elicit the *need* for love within individuals who do not experience it through a process of critical self-reflection, and the capability for civic 'maturity' (Adorno & Becker, 1991). Indeed, despite Adorno's deep ambivalence about the promises of enlightenment and rational knowledge, he argued that while barbarism could not be eradicated solely through subjective change, 'education and enlightenment can still manage a little something' in the perpetual struggle against it (Adorno, 1967, p. 10). 'If anything can help against coldness as the condition for disaster', he wrote, 'then it is the insight into the conditions that determine it and the attempt to combat those conditions, initially in the domain of the individual' (1967, p. 9).

These classical examples illustrate that the concepts of need, desire and hope have been central to critical theory, and that they have been intricately

connected to cultural and pedagogical practices. However, instead of being considered useful analytical categories, they are regarded as embarrassing reminders of more 'naïve' explanations of the relationship between individual subjectivities and social forces. The arrogation that 'theorists' might be able to distinguish universal 'true needs' from 'false needs' through rational critical analysis has been challenged by the insight that these normative judgements are themselves socially situated. It is argued that questions of 'need' and 'desire' must instead be dealt with existentially and empirically, or indeed, that we must abandon them entirely. There have thus been attempts to make this an anti-metaphysical and empirical problem. Browne, for example, describes critical theory as combining 'utopian projections with the explication of the needs of subjects that are unfulfilled and the empirical analysis of the developmental tendencies of capitalist society', not a method to 'juxtapose an ideal state against existing conditions of oppression and inequality'. It is, in this definition, a 'synthesis of normative and empirical analysis to disclose change in the present that prefigure an emancipated or democratic society' (Browne, 2005, p. 65). In another example, Honneth, suggests that we can observe context-dependent manifestations of 'need' and 'desire' in instances where 'human subjects are denied the recognition they feel they deserve'; in other words, in 'such moral experiences as feelings of social disrespect' (Honneth, 2007, p. 71). In this case, we are no longer responsible for attributing 'true' and 'false' needs to individuals or for assuming that people share some collective experience of desire for transcendence that is impeded by particular social conditions. Instead, if we assume only that all human beings have a 'pre-theoretical' need for recognition, we need only be responsible for identifying instances in which this need is unfulfilled and then 'reveal the socio-structural causes responsible for a distortion of the social framework of recognition in each particular case' (Honneth, 2007, p. 74). While we cannot use this approach to distinguish between universally legitimate or 'natural' needs and desires and 'distorted' forms that have been imposed or constructed by social forces, we can at least verify the existence of a 'pre-theoretical resource' which alerts us to an incongruity between personal desire or expectation and the experience of social reality (2007, p. 77).

For critical theorists who diagnose a systemic 'crisis of hope', however, these 'pre-theoretical' needs that might alert individuals to the need for change are *not* immediately visible. In fact, the conspicuous absence of incongruity between personal needs, desires and hopes and systemic values and relationships is precisely the problem to be addressed. It is generally accepted that critical theory can no longer be considered an intellectual

exposition of a 'process of emancipation which is already under way' amongst communities of struggle (Honneth, 2007, p. 78). However, it is also not simply a question of how people who are 'victimized, disrespected and ostracized' might become able to articulate themselves in a democratic public sphere instead of 'living out [their experiences] in a counterculture of violence' (Honneth, 2007, p. 78). Rather, it is a matter of trying to explain why a social system which seems empirically to proliferate relations of disrespect for human life and happiness does not result in cognitive or emotional dissonance, but rather 'appeals to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and desires' to the extent that it becomes 'so embedded in common sense as to be taken for granted and not open for question' (Harvey, 2007, p. 5). It is a question of why we are lacking, in the words of Frederic Jameson, the 'desire called utopia' (2005) which constitutes the ultimate justification for any critical analysis of actually existing social reality, or of social reality as it is perceived and interpreted.

### **FROM *CONSCIANTIZATION* TO THE 'EDUCATION OF DESIRE'**

The project of producing this desire is therefore now being interpreted as the primary task of education by critical pedagogues who subscribe to the 'death of utopia' pathology and who see the rehabilitation of utopian imagination on a grand scale as fundamental to the creation of alternatives to post-modern capitalism. The 'education of desire' is an analytical concept used to describe a particular thread of ideas within critical utopian socialist philosophy that emphasizes the centrality of ideational and ideological transformation in social change. Thompson (1976) borrowed the term from Miguel Abensour (1973), who wrote a now oft-cited article defending the value of utopianism in Marxist critical thought.<sup>32</sup> Abensour's goal was to defend William Morris, an English writer and socialist activist whose utopian fiction and political lectures on hope were maligned by champions of 'scientific socialism' in the early twentieth century as overly 'romantic'. Abensour argued that rather than attempting to rescue Morris (or any other utopian) from embarrassment by emphasizing his 'scientific' qualities, we must rather rescue the critical tradition from a form of sterilizing scientized rationality which ignores the materiality of subjective factors such as emotion, need, desire and hope in radical social change. Long before the rise of 'sociology of emotions', Abensour (and Thompson) asserted that

problems of freedom, emancipation and transcendence cannot be understood solely through rational analysis (or analysis of rational action).

Significantly, the meaning of ‘critical’ shifts slightly in the context of the education of desire. The dominant definition of ‘critical’ has historically referred to the taming or making ‘scientific’ of pre-existing needs, desires or longings for emancipation and change so that they did not become ideological, fanatical or unreflexive. This is the root stuff of ‘educated hope’ and ‘concrete utopia’; of learning to distinguish between fantasies of social change and more ‘realistic utopias’ that inform political practice. While the ‘critical’ prefix maintains this concern in the new context, it also prioritizes its more utopian and normative dimensions. In a world dominated by ‘realism’, the aim of criticality is to *create* the desire or need for such values. Its goal is to produce alternative knowledge, values, emotions and identities as well as to educate rational critique. The ‘education of desire’ hence departs from the science of consciousness-raising by recognizing the *affective* and *imaginative* conditions of social action – asserting, in other words, the merits of utopianism as a means of cultural transformation and resistance. It refers not only to the utopian practice of critical education, but also to the critical education of utopian imagination and desire. This practice is now being asserted as one of the most appropriate responses to the forces of ‘disutopia’ in post-modern capitalist society.

Contemporary critical theorists and educators rarely use the term ‘education of desire’. But they do speak frequently about things such as ‘raising ambitions, desires and real hope for those who wish to take seriously the issue of educational struggle and social justice’ (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p. 51) and ‘working with students to nurture...hunger for utopian social dreams’ (Canaan, 2007, p. 76).<sup>33</sup> In assuming this task, however, educators find themselves in a paradoxical situation: they are often (though certainly not always) challenged, resisted and resented by the individuals and institutions they claim to want to ‘emancipate’. In particular, student apathy about or resistance to critical pedagogy is regarded as a consequence of intellectual, political, ethical and existential colonization by the prevailing logic of power.<sup>34</sup> In other words, critical educators interpret the *absence* of, *denial* of or *indifference* towards the ‘crisis of hope’ as symptomatic of the crisis itself.

This tension – and it is a moral and political tension as well as a practical one – parallels the philosophical dilemma in contemporary critical theory: that ‘without some form of proof that its critical perspective is reinforced by a need or a movement within social reality’, critical theory (and critical pedagogy) loses its legitimacy (Honneth, 2007, p. 66). In other words, in

education as well as in theory, ‘what is primarily disputed today is whether we can still consider useful a form of social criticism that owes its standards not to “immanent” ideas of the good or the just, but to “external” notions of value’ (Honneth, 2007, p. 50). If we cannot locate justification for normative standards of truth and justice outside of what presently exists as knowable, and if we cannot arrogate value for any vision that is not universally and democratically shared by others, must the entire critical project come crashing down, leaving in its wake nothing but our immanent and imminent ‘reality’?

Here, critical pedagogy has something to offer critical theory, for this tension has become a problematic rather than a *Thanatos*. Many educators do not simply assume or accept that critical theory can remain legitimate only insofar as it can claim to ‘give a sociological account of the condition of the society’s state of consciousness or its [empirically existing] desire for emancipation’ (Honneth, 2007, p. 65). The political and moral imperatives of their own practice preclude this conclusion. Instead, they argue that we can use the theoretical tools of critique not only to reveal an innate need for freedom, but to *create* a need for the ‘pre-theoretical’ sources of emancipatory desire upon which critical knowledge and transformative pedagogical practice are based (see also Browne, 2005, p. 69). Discrepancies between social theory and the consciously lived experiences of individuals – elsewhere described as the ‘embarrassing fact’ that critical theory had lost its existential plausibility (Honneth, 2007, p. 65) – are seen as the central challenge of education itself.<sup>35</sup> From this perspective, the task of pedagogy is to resolve the paradox of the ‘one-dimensionality’ of need and the paralysis of agency not (only) through *conscientization*, but also through the ‘education of desire’ and epistemological revolt.

There are several possible ways to disrupt one-dimensional thought. One is to attempt to convince others that an alternative view is valid and desirable by attempting to directly influence their existing emotional commitments and value orientations. In other words, we ‘redeem the normative validity claim directly by employing ethical arguments to sketch and defend the outlines of an alternative notion of the good life’ (Honneth, 2007, p. 57). In this approach, debate is interpreted as the deliberate transformation of *desire* through rational and scientific persuasion. Throughout critical theory, this is generally regarded as the weakest, least effective and most analytically dubious approach to educating criticality. In another approach, these existing values and desires are ostensibly bracketed and the task is rather to *immanently disclose*, through critique and rhetorical device, the (inferior or inaccurate) interpretation of existing

conditions. In this case, we 'redeem the normative validity claim indirectly by giving such a radically new description of social reality as to alter our view of it fundamentally and change our value beliefs in the process' (Honneth, 2007, p. 57). This approach, epitomized by first- and second-generation critical theory, has long been the dominant practice in critical pedagogy.

There is also a third approach to the education of desire which is grounded neither in moral education nor in immanent critique, but rather in critical speculation. This, according to Ruth Levitas (2005), is the function of utopia and the proper task of sociology itself. Objections may still be raised about the ontological status of the imagination, about how we can differentiate 'critical' from 'uncritical' utopias and 'educated' from 'naïve' hope; indeed, about the epistemological criteria that we might use to distinguish desirable from undesirable visions of the future. However, if we assume that 'scientific predictability does not [necessarily] coincide with the futuristic mode in which the truth exists' (Marcuse, 1989, p. 72), the paradox is less problematic. Honneth argues that the aim of a 'disclosing critique of society' such as the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is to 'change our value beliefs by evoking a new way of seeing the social world' (2007, p. 58), not to stake claim on objective truth. Its sole purpose is to create alternative ideational conditions 'under which a society conducts evaluative discourse on the ends of common action' (Honneth, 2007, p. 58). This differs considerably from the truth-claims of classical critical pedagogy, which are grounded in more 'scientific' conceptions of ideology critique. It also departs from 'educated hope', which draws legitimacy from the possibility of rationally separating objectively 'true' from objectively 'false' forms of utopian imagination. In combination, therefore, world-disclosing critique and world-producing utopia point away from the traditional preoccupations of goal-oriented critical pedagogy and towards a more utopian philosophy of education.

## CONCLUSION

Critical theorists have long believed that the possibility or impossibility of radical historical agency is both a political and a pedagogical problem. Rejecting both subjectivist and objectivist accounts of social change, they obstinately maintain that 'another world is possible' and that critical education has an important role to play in the process of creating it. However, they are deeply sceptical about the probability of radical social change on a grand scale, partly because of trenchant resistance to it, but also

because they argue it can only occur if there are multiple and concurrent transformations: of existing material conditions, of 'the human heart', and of subjective needs, desires and inter-subjective relationships. This theory in particular is something that critical educators might bring more closely to home, as their work tends to presume the possibility of a division of political and intellectual labour. Lacking direct access to the material relations of production and often lacking organic connections to communities of struggle, critical educators tend to privilege (and sometimes overly so) the importance of analysis, critique and reflection in agency and social change.

In this context, 'critical hope' is both a state of mind and a relationship of power, and the pedagogy of hope aims to enable agency by demystifying power relations, humanizing social relations, training the utopian imagination and educating need and desire. However, whilst this thesis is central to the normative foundations of critical theory, it also remains contested and paradoxical in pedagogical practice. On the one hand, it is argued that critical theory is justifiable only when it expresses the pre-existing repressed needs of the oppressed and enables them to employ this critical consciousness to motivate and inform practices of empowerment. In this view, pedagogy is a relatively straightforward practice of nurturing, disciplining and legitimizing emergent political sentiment and action. Pedagogies of hope in this context are processes of education that make existing or potential possibilities within society visible where they are obscured by intellectual habits of determinism, fatalism, ignorance and fear. Here, pedagogy is understood as an important 'rational' dimension of political action; to speak of educating critical hope in this context is to refer either to the demystification of 'false consciousness', or to disciplining or making more 'scientific' the pre-existing needs, desires or longings for emancipation and change so that they do not become ideological, fanatical or unreflexive.

On the other hand, however, it is also argued that human needs and desires are social constructions and hence themselves not necessarily reliable indicators of objective oppression. In fact, it is presumed that one of the greatest indications of generalized oppression in post-modern capitalist societies is the absence of the subjective desire for universal human needs such as peace, freedom and justice, either for oneself or for others. In other words, gross levels of apathy and indifference to the damaging consequences of capitalist relations – epitomized by the contemporary 'crisis of hope' – are interpreted as signs that the most fundamental instincts of human beings have been colonized by this logic. Under such conditions, critical theory aims not to theorize pre-existing needs for change, but rather to 'work on consciousness' to create the desire for change by reconstructing or

'recognizing' existing conditions as being antithetical to these universal (or universally desirable) human needs. Here, pedagogy is seen as *prior* to political agency, and education is ascribed a central role in motivating social action. In this context, the definition of 'critical hope' shifts, so that criticality is not simply an ability to recognize injustice, but also to be 'moved to change it' (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p. 50). Critical theory hence accepts a more affective remit, stretching beneath rational problems of structure and agency into the emotional and psychological dispositions that are seen to underlie them. This shift represents a migration from traditional 'pedagogies of hope' towards alternative traditions in the 'education of desire', and indeed, towards some of the most under-developed problematics in critical theory itself.

The tension which inheres between these two perspectives of the relationship between human subjectivity and social change, or pedagogy and practice, is often seen as a paralyzing paradox: Marcuse articulated it and then proceeded to be vexed by it, while Adorno (1967) essentially abandoned hope in the possibility of large-scale revolution of social relations but concluded that 'education and enlightenment might manage a little something' to help individuals recognize and resist incivility and domination. Critical educators, on the other hand, argue that pedagogy has a considerably more significant role to play in transforming the subjective conditions of personal transcendence, political struggle and the creation of new types of inter-subjective ethics. However, very few critical theorists have actually concentrated on theorizing the pedagogical dimensions of social change, instead leaving this largely to 'pedagogues' who often by dint of circumstance embed their theory-work in the narrow context of specific educational practices.<sup>36</sup>

What is most needed now, therefore, is a set of conceptual tools which allows us to theorize the complex relationship between the social constitution of human subjectivity and the possibility of social change – a new theory of the relationship between pedagogical politics and political pedagogy – a post-modern critical theory that shies away from neither human anthropology nor the philosophy of knowledge – which takes the experienced impotence of the 'crisis of hope' as an 'active ingredient' in its own thinking and acting – which recognizes educational and emotional transcendence as integral but not isolated practices of social transformation. What is needed, in short, is the broadening of new critical theories that enable us to understand the possibility of possibility in post-modern capitalist societies, and that educate the obstinacy of critical-utopian hope that is required for this difficult project.

## NOTES

1. My characterization of contemporary (northern/western) society as both post-modern and capitalist draws on Frederic Jameson’s *Postmodernity: The cultural logic of late capitalism* (1991) and David Harvey’s *Condition of Post-modernity: An enquiry into the origins of cultural change* (1991). It is also informed by Adorno’s (1968) insistence that such definitions are more than mere nomenclature, as they shape the choices we make about which theoretical categories are most relevant and appropriate for analyzing a society.

2. For further views on the ‘impasses’ of ‘post-Habermasian’, ‘post-1989’ and ‘post-9/11’ critical theory, see Kompridis (2005).

3. ‘Critical pedagogy’ is not a homogenous practice, but a label which unifies diverse and competing disciplines and practices. It includes, among other things, cultural studies, popular education, post-colonial theory, anarchist education, feminist pedagogy and autonomist Marxism. Here, however, I am interested in the conviction – shared across though not necessarily within the different traditions – that education can be a counter-hegemonic or post-hegemonic means of political agency (see Coté, Day, & de Peuter, 2007 for further discussion).

4. For more about the structural and cultural transformation of the academy, particularly in Britain and the United States, see Ainley and Canaan (2005), Beck (1999, 2002), Crowther, Martin, and Shaw (2000), Gaianguet (1998), Giroux (2004a, 2004b, 2007), Gray (2003), Harris (2005), McLaren and Farahmandpur (2001), Ryan (2000), and Thompson (2000). Specific concerns include (1) government policies to ‘widen participation’, with student numbers increasing by 88% between 1989 and 2002, while state funding decreased by 37% during the same period; (2) the erasure of public spheres and democratic spaces and the dominance of organized, programmatic and assessed activities; (3) the domination of neo-liberal languages and practices that frame academic work in terms of quality assessment, transparency exercises, best practice, indicators, competencies, audits and outcomes; (4) the managerialization of the academy; (5) the commodification of knowledge as something that can be bought and sold rather than as a public good or social practice; (6) the intensification of labour for both students and academics; and (7) the disengagement of the university from radical social politics.

5. The meaning of ‘educational institutions’ can be broadly interpreted. Henry Giroux, for example, cites Stuart Hall’s definition of pedagogy as being ‘at work in all of those public places where culture works to secure identities; it does its bridging work negotiating the relationship between knowledge, pleasure and values; and it renders authority both crucial and problematic in legitimating particular social practices, communities and forms of power’ (Giroux, 2000, p. 354).

6. For an earlier consideration of the notion of social ‘pathology’, particularly as regards the relationship between ‘system’ and ‘lifeworld’ in processes of modern rationalization, see Habermas (1987).

7. It is interesting that Michel Foucault, whose work has arguably been most fundamental to dismantling the construction of deviance and normality, had very clear ideas about such boundaries in his own intellectual and political work. During a debate with Noam Chomsky, when asked ‘which malady contemporary society is most afflicted’, Foucault answered, ‘I would say that our society has been afflicted by

a disease, a very curious, a very paradoxical disease, for which we haven't yet found a name; and this mental disease has a very curious symptom, which is that the symptom itself brought the mental disease into being' (Elders, 1971/2006, p. 59).

8. David Harvey defines neo-liberalism as 'in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade' (2007, p. 2). However, it has been clear for some time that while the term 'neo-liberalism' was initially used to describe a specific economic ideology, it has come to mean something entirely more complex.

9. For a useful and provocative typology of different 'modes of hoping' (including 'patient, critical, estimative, resolute and utopian' forms of hope), see Webb (2007b).

10. For an interesting discussion of the relationship between Habermas' analysis and more recent diagnoses of a 'crisis of hope', see Browne (2005).

11. Jameson (2004, p. 41, fn. 4) defines anti-utopia as 'the expression of the fiercely anti-utopian and anti-revolutionary ideology for which utopias inevitably lead to repression and dictatorship, to conformity and boredom'.

12. It is significant to note that he made a similar argument to explain the more specific decline of socialist politics three decades ago (Bauman, 1976), and that Habermas long ago recognized historical struggles to rehabilitate the idea of 'utopia' as a 'legitimate medium for depicting alternative life possibilities that are seen as inherent in the historical process itself' (1989, p. 50).

13. See, e.g., Gray (2007) as an example of conservative anti-utopianism, and Daniel and Moylan (1997), Jameson (2005) and Levitas (2005) for critical discussions of this tendency.

14. See, especially, Whitebook's *Perversion and Utopia* (1996). I am grateful to Harry Dahms for pointing me towards this work.

15. Bauman argues that this distinguishes us from Marx, whom he claims was convinced that large-scale, revolutionary, top-down social change was imminent and desirable in his lifetime. However, as illustrated above, Marx's earlier writing suggests that prior to 1848 he himself was doubtful about the nature and possibility of revolutionary agency within German and wider European societies (Marx, 1843).

16. 'Disutopia' refers not simply to the broader 'waning of utopia' often discussed, but is based on a specific theory of the 'subsumption of concrete labour by abstract labour' (Allman, McLaren, & Rikowski, 2000, p. 16).

17. See, for example, Gray's (2003) 'dire warning' for intellectual life and Giroux's (2004a) *Terror of neoliberalism: Authoritarianism and the eclipse of democracy*.

18. Darren Webb makes a similar observation, identifying two 'contrasting perspectives' on hope, one that understands it as an essential feature of human existence and another that views it as a social construction. He proposes a 'more nuanced' approach that would understand hope as 'both biologically rooted and socially constructed' (2007a, p. 67).

19. This phrase is used by both Frederic Jameson and Gustavo Gutierrez.

20. However, we must here recall the situated nature of utopian diagnoses, for as Jameson points out, 'their root-of-all-evil diagnosis...will also reflect a specific

class-historical standpoint or perspective' (2004, p. 47). Similarly, Honneth reminds us that 'what constitutes the standard according to which social pathologies are evaluated is an ethical conception of social normality tailored to conditions that enable human self-realization' (2007, p. 36).

21. Consider, for example, Adorno's much earlier comment that 'nowadays the critique of utopia has sunk into the common ideological stockpile, while at the same time the triumph of technical productivity strives to maintain the illusion that utopia, incompatible with the relations of production, has already been realized within its realm' Adorno (1968).

22. Consider, for example, the epistemological relationship between Adorno's essay on 'Education after Auschwitz' (1968) and Giroux's 'Education after Abu Ghraib' (2004c). Does Adorno provide analytical tools for disclosing forces of domination and 'dissolving the spells' of cultural domination in post-modern capitalist society? Or do the normative principles and general categories of analysis of critical theory serve as rhetorical frameworks? What is the relationship between the Holocaust and the American 'war on terror'? Is this a new phenomenon (and if so why do the classical theories seem so relevant) or is it a manifestation of a longer historical process that has been ongoing or that we see repeated in different times and places (and if so, why is it being interpreted as new)?

23. See, for example, Anderson (2006), Daniel and Moylan (1997) and Gur Ze'ev (1998).

24. This interest in need, desire and subjectivity also places these theorists in a particularly marginal position within the Marxist tradition (for more on this, see Kellner, 1997, p. 87).

25. For an interesting discussion on the rise of the non-Marxist and post-Marxist Left, see Therborn (2007).

26. Here, Thompson refers to Marx's and Engels' critique of 'utopian socialism' as represented by 'idealists' such as Robert Owen and Charles Fourier (see Levitas, 2005, pp. 6-7; Jameson, 2005, p. xii). It is important to note that Engels situated the nature of their work (which he also admired). Each version of socialism claimed to be the 'expression of absolute truth, reason and justice, [which] has only to be discovered [accidentally] to conquer all the world by virtue of its own power'. In addition, he argued, 'as each one's special kind of absolute truth, reason, and justice is again conditioned by his subjective understanding, his conditions of existence, the measure of his knowledge and his intellectual training, there is no other ending possible in this conflict of absolute truths than that they shall be mutually exclusive of one another'. In other words, in much the same way as Karl Mannheim regarded competing political ideologies as a crisis of truth, Engels regarded intellectual and political pluralism as the source of a 'mish-mash' type of socialism. He argued that this conditionality should be done away with; that what was needed was a *science* of socialism that was placed on a '*real basis*'. He argued that history, politics and anticipatory vision should be not metaphysical but economic, rooted in class struggle and understood dialectically. For Engels, the difference between utopian and scientific socialism was that the first attempted to 'manufacture a system of society as perfect as possible' while the second aimed to 'examine the historic-economic succession of events from which these classes and their antagonism had of necessity sprung,

and to discover in the economic conditions thus created the means of ending the conflict’.

27. For more on ‘modes of hoping’, see [Webb \(2007a\)](#).

28. For more about Fromm’s psycho-social theory of human need and desire, see [John Rickert’s \(1986\)](#) excellent discussion of *Escape from Freedom* (1941), here referenced in its alternative translation as *The Fear of Freedom* (2001), *Man for Himself* (1947/2003) and *The Sane Society* (1955/2001), as well as numerous of Fromm’s essays.

29. As an example of the mutually dependent relationship between ideational and material change might work, he offered the example of consumption. ‘Sane consumption’, or patterns of consumption that did not destroy either human beings or their environments, could not be forced upon people. ‘To force citizens to consume what the state decides is best – even if it *is* the best – is out of the question. Bureaucratic control that would forcibly block consumption would only make people all the more consumption hungry. Sane consumption can only take place if an ever-increasing number of people *want* to change their consumption patterns and their lifestyles. And this is possible only if people are offered a type of consumption that is more attractive than the one they are used to. This cannot happen overnight or by decree, but will require a slow educational process, and in this the government must play an important role’ ([Fromm, 1976, p. 173](#)).

30. This quote continues: ‘Such a system is not immune. It is already defending itself against opposition, even that of intellectuals, in all corners of the world. And even if we see no transformation, we must fight on. We must resist if we still want to live as human beings, to work and be happy. In alliance with the system we can no longer do so’.

31. ‘The inability to identify with others was unquestionably the most important psycho-logical condition for the fact that something like Auschwitz could have occurred in the midst of more or less civilized and innocent people’ ([Adorno, 1967, p. 8](#)).

32. [Ruth Levitas \(2005\)](#) elaborates a useful discussion of this in her essay on ‘the imaginary reconstitution of society’.

33. There are several excellent discussions of the difference between ‘moral education’, ‘critical pedagogy’, ‘educated hope’ and the ‘education of desire’, and I hence do not want to reiterate them here. I would rather like to explain how new movements in critical education are embedded in longer critical traditions that address issues of need, desire, will and hope, and in the history of the ‘education of desire’.

34. [Joyce Canaan](#), for example, found that her ‘students were considering the active subject position that engaging in critical hope entails, yet found reasons for rejecting it, hardly surprising in the TINA [There Is No Alternative] logic era’ ([Canaan \(2005, p. 89\)](#)).

35. [Browne \(2005, p. 65\)](#) describes critical theory as combining ‘utopian projections with the explication of the needs of subjects that are unfulfilled and the empirical analysis of the developmental tendencies of capitalist society’, not a method to ‘juxtapose an ideal state against existing conditions of oppression and inequality’. It is, in this definition, a ‘synthesis of normative and empirical analysis to disclose change in the present that pre-figure an emancipated or democratic society’.

36. Notable exceptions to this include [Henry Giroux](#), [Douglas Kellner](#), [Ilan Gur Ze’ev](#) and [Peter McLaren](#).

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# GOVERNMENTAL RATIONALITY AND POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY

Kevin Olson

## ABSTRACT

*This essay investigates the meaning of rationality in Michel Foucault's notion of "governmental rationality," both in what he takes rationalities to be and in how they relate to practices of governing. I try to resolve these questions in a sympathetic manner by detailing some of the social dynamics implicit in practices of governing. Pierre Bourdieu provides means to connect such practices with a detailed understanding of social struggle and resistance to power. These insights reveal strong lines of continuity between governmental rationality and collective political resistance to it. On this basis, I suggest a new path of investigation into forms of popular sovereignty as relatively neglected examples of governmental rationality.*

In this essay I will apply sustained scrutiny to a set of preliminary studies of the "art of government" that Michel Foucault conducted in the late 1970s. These studies step around the standard 17th and 18th Century picture of government as an institution that contractually enacts the sovereign will of the people. Instead, they hearken back to a 16th Century paradigm of "raison d'état" or "ragion di stato," in which *processes* and *practices* of governing take center stage as arts with their own proper techniques and rules.

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Foucault brought very little of his work on the art of government to press. That which found its way into public view, however, has given rise to a rich and productive literature on the modes and practices of governing.<sup>1</sup> With the recent transcription and publication of Foucault's heretofore unpublished lectures on governmentality,<sup>2</sup> we may return to the sources of this literature with a new perspective on basic issues, particularly his characterization of the art of governing as a kind of "governmental rationality." My goal is to develop and extend this notion beyond Foucault's own use of it, molding it into a broader framework for the analysis of grassroots politics and popular sovereignty. In doing this, I will expand our view to include not only practices and "rationalities" of the state, but also the connections between these practices and other forms of collective political action. Here I develop some of Foucault's fertile insights in a distinctively Bourdieuan direction. This picture gives us broader insights into social struggle, the politics of truth, and the complex ways that governmental power is opposed as it is deployed. It provides the basis, I argue, for a rather different history of governmental rationalities, one that we could call a "history of popular sovereignties."

## 1. RATIONALITIES OF GOVERNMENT

Shortly after the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* was published, Foucault began a series of studies designed to amplify and broaden the analytics of the modern state that he had initiated with the notion of biopower. This analysis is built on a related but more general idea that he called "governmental rationality."<sup>3</sup> According to Foucault, a kind of order can be discerned in the apparent chaos of political intrigue, legislative compromise, and bureaucratic self-interest that go into practices of governing. He claims that these practices possess characteristic and general forms of rationality that inform the rules, procedures, and goals of governmental action.<sup>4</sup> This is observed most clearly in the concepts and techniques characteristic of a particular regime of government at a particular time. Such forms of rationality, at least in a loose sense, are implicit within governmental practices as the set of common organizational possibilities that people have at their disposal in governing. This notion is intended, then, to give us an account of government that goes beyond the minute details of laws, regulations, and policy decisions. It looks "within" these practices to note similarities that structure, inform, or at least characterize them.

Foucault's use of the notion of rationality in this work is complex and not entirely clear, however. In order to work out a more detailed understanding of the concept, we can start by reviewing some of his illustrations of it. In his lectures at the Collège de France in February 1978, Foucault outlines a form of governmental rationality that emphasizes individualized care and correction.<sup>5</sup> This is the early medieval Christian tradition of pastoral care, in which the spiritual "shepherd" of a flock is responsible for knowing each and every one of its sheep and pursuing the good of each one. It is a logic of individualized care.

In contrast to the specific, individualized attention that pastorship focuses on individual subjects, Foucault traces more abstract, macro-social forms of governmental rationality in his lectures at the Collège during the following year. With the development of what he calls biopolitics, Foucault claims, the state made a major transition into its modern form.<sup>6</sup> Biopolitics is macropolitical in character, aimed at promoting national prosperity and national security by guaranteeing a healthy, numerous, and productive population. Its development was characterized by a new set of techniques and ways of thinking about the tasks of the state: a focus on population as a management task, the adoption of the welfare of the population as the end of government, and the development of statistical sciences making it possible to study and deal with populations constructively. The resulting form of governmental rationality managed populations by operating through these new technologies of power.

These two examples illustrate the practical and teleological, yet abstract character of governmental rationality. This notion seems above all to describe a kind of instrumental rationality characteristic of the modern bureaucratic state. It is not, however, a simple Weberian form of means-ends reasoning used to pursue concrete tasks of social management. Foucault's picture includes this, but reveals an additional unity of character amongst the techniques of governing that suggests deeper patterns and shared epistemic bases.

In order to understand governmental rationality, Foucault claims, we must understand how people govern themselves and others. This is a matter, he says, of seeing ensembles of practices as "different regimes of 'jurisdiction' and 'veridiction.'"<sup>7</sup> In other words, governing is a matter of enunciating truths in a literal sense. These truths are enunciated in the form of "codes," or "codifications," and "true discourses." A code "rules ways of doing things (how people are to be graded and examined, things and signs classified, individuals trained, etc.)." It is, in some way, the generalized formula that is used to partition spaces, organize bodies, and classify

identities. True discourses “serve to found, justify and provide reasons and principles for these ways of doing things”; they establish “domains in which the practice of true and false can be made at once ordered and pertinent.” In other words, they are the fabric of a socially constructed, shared understanding of the world, which is in turn the means through which people and things are governed.

These programmatic statements are traced in more detail through Foucault’s characterizations of specific forms of governmental rationality. He characterizes the early Christian tradition of pastorship, for example, as a kind of government in relation to truth.<sup>8</sup> The pastor’s teaching constantly corrects the conduct of his flock. It requires each individual to create a discourse of truth about her or his “hidden soul” by examining her or his conscience. This discourse is a corrective one in which the hidden truth is evaluated in relation to a universal conception of truth taught by the pastor. Truth is at once a means of self-disclosure, evaluation, and correction in this picture. It connects all of these components in a particular technology of government.

This theme also threads its way through Foucault’s description of the beginnings of biopolitics in the 17th century. In this new conception of *raison d’état*, the sovereign must have knowledge of the elements necessary to maintain the force of the state.<sup>9</sup> This consists in knowing useful items of information like the numbers of births and deaths, the wealth of individuals and the resources available to the state – the kinds of things that come to be called “statistics” because of their importance to managing the forces of the state.<sup>10</sup> Again, Foucault characterizes the rationality of government with reference to a conception of truth, though in this case it is a thoroughly empiricist one that functions at the level of populations rather than individual souls.

These varying descriptions reveal what is, I believe, the crucial question in understanding Foucault’s notion of governmental rationality. This is the question of what we mean when we talk about the “rationality” of governing. More specifically, it is the question of how governmental practices, on one hand, relate to “rationalities,” “mentalities,” and “true discourses” – the things that Foucault sometimes called “systems of thought” – on the other. Are the “mentalities” in question a kind of instrumental rationality, practical reason, deeply concealed ideology, state of mind, form of practice, generative schema, or something else?

To resolve this issue, I will try to unpack Foucault’s idea of governmental rationality more fully. We can roughly distinguish two different interpretations of this idea, which I label “crypto-structuralist” and “intentionalistic.”

The crypto-structuralist interpretation makes the relatively striking claim that there are sets of basic concepts regulating political life, which serve as the underlying conceptual schemata of forms of government. This interpretation reads certain aspects of Foucault's earlier structuralist epistemology back into his middle-period work. It asks to what extent forms of knowledge or rationality function as more universal bases or generative schemes for what is conceivable and thus possible in a given political order. Unlike the stricter structuralism of *The Order of Things*, however, this is a fragmentary and incomplete epistemology (thus "crypto-," as opposed to "neo-"), one in which many alternative conceptualizations are available and the conceptual bases of thought are not unitary or simple.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, it holds that the way a state articulates social relations, structures individual lives, and deploys power is to a great extent a function of what is thinkable within its particular political culture.

From this perspective, we would read the origins of early-modern state power as conditioned in some way by their cultural background in Christian pastorship. For people in this particular culture with its particular history, pastorship would have seemed like a natural relation between someone vested with power and those on whom power should be deployed. From a crypto-structuralist perspective, this notion of the role and activities of the state would not have been intentionally devised as a strategy of state power. It is seen instead as a natural and correct modality of state action.

The crypto-structuralist interpretation seems to be supported by remarks like Foucault's assertion that the medical fundamentals of the small pox vaccine were "unthinkable" [*impensable*] in the terms of the medical rationality of its time.<sup>12</sup> Similar support for this interpretation might come from his more general characterization of governmental rationalities, that

One isn't assessing things in terms of an absolute against which they could be evaluated as constituting more or less perfect forms of rationality, but rather examining how forms of rationality inscribe themselves in practices or systems of practices, and what role they play within them, because it's true that 'practices' don't exist without a certain regime of rationality.<sup>13</sup>

Here forms of rationality are not absolute or monolithic – not structuralist generative schemata in the robust sense of the term. Nonetheless, they seem to have a sort of autonomy or independence from the practices within which they are inscribed, and they seem to exercise some sort of formative influence on those practices, determining what is possible or reasonable within a certain domain of action. In this case, the production

of codes and true discourses would largely be an unintentional one, an implicit and fragmentary constellation of beliefs. The production of truth would likely be an out-growth of daily practices and actions, quietly and subtly setting the terms in which the social world is understood and created.

In contrast to this, we could think of the relation between knowledges and practices in a more intentionalistic, agency-oriented way. Here government is a practice of particular people endowed with bureaucratic authority. They act in a teleological manner to accomplish defined goals, using forms of practice or “technologies” that are current in their society. In this picture, there is no epistemic constraint limiting what can be thought or done in a given political culture. Rationalities have no common, underlying conceptual source that constitutes their grounds of possibility. Rather, they exhibit various family resemblances or general tendencies. These arise from the common use of a given set of technologies and/or the shared environment within which such practices are developed. Similarities in governmental practices are thus a result of mimicry and convergent evolution, rather than more profound epistemic foundations.

From this perspective, the technologies of pastoral care and biopolitics were known and available modalities for the exercise of power. People building the modern managerial state found these technologies ready at hand as models for accomplishing particular kinds of managerial tasks. There is nothing deeply “epistemic” about the use of such techniques here, any more than there would be anything epistemically interesting about the invention and subsequent use of, say, the steel plow or the cotton gin.

This interpretation seems to be supported by Foucault’s statement that, “‘Discipline’ isn’t the expression of an ‘ideal type’ (that of ‘disciplined man’); it’s the generalization and interconnection of different techniques themselves designed in response to localized requirements (schooling; training troops to handle rifles).”<sup>14</sup> It also seems to square with his assertion that,

The rational schemas of the prison, the hospital or the asylum are not general principles which can be rediscovered only through the historian’s retrospective interpretation. They are explicit *programmes*; we are dealing with sets of calculated, reasoned prescriptions in terms of which institutions are meant to be reorganized, spaces arranged, behaviours regulated. If they have an ideality, it is that of a programming left in abeyance, not that of a general but hidden meaning.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, the rationality of governmental practices is “on the surface” in an important way, available for the intentional use of people

organizing social life. It is informed by the sets of technologies that happen to be available at any given time.

Having noted Foucault's seeming agreement with this view, it is also important to recognize that his writing limits how far we can go with a purely intentionalistic interpretation. He immediately undercuts the emphasis on free agency in the above quotation by stating that, "Of course this programming depends on forms of rationality much more general than those which they directly implement." He elaborates on this by saying,

These programmes don't take effect in the institutions in an integral manner; they are simplified, or some are chosen and not others; and things never work out as planned. But what I wanted to show is that this difference is not one between the purity of the ideal and the disorderly impurity of the real, but that in fact there are different strategies which are mutually opposed, composed and superposed so as to produce permanent and solid effects which can perfectly well be understood in terms of their rationality, even though they don't conform to the initial programming; this is what gives the resulting apparatus (*dispositif*) its solidity and suppleness.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, programmes are abstract and schematic to an extent (though still very "real," Foucault assures us). Further, they are related to more general forms of rationality in some way. Nonetheless, programmes are implemented, chosen, and used intentionally. They are portrayed here more as tools or technologies than as profound or mystified conceptual backgrounds. Whether this would also be true of the more general forms of rationality to which they are related is, of course, another question.

Each of the interpretations I have laid out – both the "crypto-structuralist" and "intentionalistic" – seems to ring true of Foucault's work in a certain way. Each seems to portray a certain aspect of his thought on governmental rationality and its relation to subjectivity and practices. A choice between them would thus be difficult – and, I believe, distorting. It seems to me that choosing between these two possibilities would occlude the extent to which Foucault embraces both, and the ways each is supported in different ways in his writings. Choosing one over the other would obscure an interesting and fertile tension within his conception of rationality and his notion of the "arts of governing" in general. This problem goes well beyond issues of interpretation, then. Its stakes are instead deep within our conception of the nature and modalities of government, and particularly with the possibly contradictory ways in which it can be said to be "rational."

## 2. POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY AND THE MODALITIES OF RESISTANCE

The best way to reveal these constitutive and productive tensions is to show how neither interpretation could succeed on its own terms. It would be a mistake to think of governmental rationality solely in terms of the intentions of political actors *or* the deeper cultural structures informing political action.

An exclusive focus on the intentionalistic interpretation would reduce the logic of a governmental regime to what its strongest players want it to be at any particular time. Such an interpretation would be blind to the historical and cultural embeddedness of these regimes, reducing them to the here-and-now of conscious strategies and conflicts. It would thereby have a hard time explaining the apparent regularities and patterns in the practices of government. Such an account would fail to provide what Foucault characterizes as “a reflective, reasoned coherence, a coherence established by intelligible mechanisms that connect these different practices and their effects to one another....”<sup>17</sup> This kind of coherence, he claims, comes when a series of practices is coordinated with a given regime of truth. Finding such connections would unmask the intelligible mechanisms at work in human practices. Ignoring them, in contrast, would lead to an analytically impoverished conception of politics, insufficient to explain any kind of rational coherence in governmental practices.

The crypto-structuralist interpretation has opposite and symmetrical problems. It implies a form of epistemic determinism in which autonomous, deeply structural forms of rationality dictate human actions. Such a thorough-going use of structuralist ideas would fall prey to all of the problems unfairly pinned on Foucault: that agency is impossible, that resistance is futile, and that the subject is conditioned all the way down. We can see the problems with a sole reliance on this view in the way it excludes intention and agency. In the crypto-structuralist interpretation, forms of rationality are seen as unacknowledged, unintentional structures that are implicit within governmental practices. As such, they are beyond the conscious reach of governmental actors and beyond their conscious ability to modify. The people practicing government would act within these frameworks, but could not consciously shape or alter them. Such an interpretation portrays regimes of government in synchronic cross-section, ignoring the dynamic character of governing and the extent to which its practitioners modify their own cultural and rational environment as they are acted upon by it. This view allows us to trace a genealogy of rationalities,

but only as the development of systems of thought, not as practical ideologies that are molded and shaped by the individuals using them.

Moreover, such a view seems to preclude any idea of resistance or “counter-government” as a reaction to government. If governmental practice is conditioned by broader, epistemically deep systems of thought, then such practices would seem natural and correct to all who share their background. This kind of epistemic unanimity would in turn create political unanimity. One would never think to question the legitimacy of governmental regime that is perceived as natural and correct. This view fails to explain all of the actually existing cases in which regimes of government are not accepted, in which they encounter resistance, or moreover, in which they seem to cause such resistance simultaneous with their own creation. In short, such a view cannot account for actually existing politics, particularly when they take the form of struggles against government.

Clearly we need a third alternative, one capable of characterizing the back-and-forth between intentional political struggle and the culturally deep lines of continuity within such practices. A fertile way to start is by locating the inquiry in specific sites of struggle – at the seams where practices clash and intentions come into conflict with broader epistemic paradigms. This will allow us to view governmental rationalities in formation, in process, under contestation, with the idea that their inner workings will be thereby disturbed and exposed to view.

Foucault himself provides a point of entry. On two occasions in the 1978 lectures on governmental rationality, he gestures to the idea of “counter-conduct” [*contre-conduite*] or “revolts of conduct” [*révoltes de conduite*].<sup>18</sup> These are forms of resistance to government on the part of governed subjects. His example is the various medieval forms of opposition to pastoral care, which eventually blossomed into the Reformation. Varieties of asceticism, mysticism, and religious community aimed at undoing the influence of pastoral practice on the formation of the self.<sup>19</sup> They opposed government by exercising countervailing programs of self-formation. Rather than being constituted as selves by some external regime of government, such people tried to constitute themselves according to a different rationality using their own regime of self-government. These are the practices of the self described in great detail in Foucault’s later work. They try to enact a kind of counter-government through practices of self-creation.

Of course, practices of the self do not by themselves constitute a counter-politics. They focus on creating a different self, one shaped largely by self-initiated practices rather than those solicited by others. Such regimes of self-modification could be the foundation for political insight and action,

but more often the forms that Foucault traces have a more narcissistic orientation. They aim at deep self-knowledge (“*gnothi seauton*”<sup>20</sup>), rather than the constitution of a collective political subject that could exercise counter-power against external sources of government. In this sense, self-government is an incomplete model of counter-politics. Taken by itself, it is reformist rather than revolutionary. Such forms of self-government are enacted within larger regimes of power focused on the self. They try to manage the self as a way of pre-empting broader regimes of power, but in so doing, they only address the symptoms of government while leaving its causes in place. They do nothing to change the broader regimes of government that they attempt to counter. It is no wonder, then, that asceticism is Foucault’s model for this kind of revolt. It withdraws from worldly influences in order to escape them. It thereby avoids revolt of a more direct and radical kind: one that would alter regimes of governmental practice, change the terms under which individual conduct is shaped, and thereby liberate subjects of government more truly.

To see how things might be otherwise, it is useful to draw on some of Foucault’s earlier work. In his lectures on war the year before he began talking about governmental rationality, Foucault had characterized the struggles of dominated groups as “insurrections of subjugated knowledges.”<sup>21</sup> He contrasts the dominance of academic, “official,” and particularly social-scientific discourse with the local, contextual, unofficial claims made by people with no warrant or authority to speak. Although the remark was primarily oriented towards the social effects of the social sciences, it parallels Foucault’s later statements about governmental rationality as involving the production of truth. Bringing the two together, we can imagine “insurrections of subjugated knowledges” in a more fully political and governmental sense. Here struggles over truth would go beyond a critique of the social sciences to form a broader *politics of truth*.

To frame such a vision, let us start with an actual case. Consider Arjun Appadurai’s account of the Mumbai Alliance of slum dwellers’ and poor women’s groups.<sup>22</sup> The Alliance is a loose confederation of poor people’s groups. Following Foucault, Appadurai describes their activities as forms of governmental rationality. For instance, the Alliance practices the kinds of census-taking normally conducted by large, bureaucratic states.<sup>23</sup> It teaches its slum-dweller members to enumerate their own identities and characteristics, rendering them politically visible when they would ordinarily be invisible in the eyes of the state. This practice relies on the testimony of neighbors, a form of mutual identification that builds solidarity and association. Appadurai sees this form of self-reporting as a “governmentality

from below” that builds community and political agency. At the same time, it increases slum dwellers’ visibility as members of the community, legitimating them as citizens with needs and interests. This form of governmental rationality thus functions as a politics of truth, renegotiating the identity and status of poor people through practices that they initiate themselves.

Other activities of the Alliance are similarly governmental in character. It conducts a politics of truth around issues of housing, staging exhibitions that showcase creative, local innovations in improving slum life.<sup>24</sup> One such exhibit was staged at the United Nations headquarters in New York. These public displays of creative adaptation legitimate slum-dwellers’ abilities, needs, and ideas of the good life. They “mobilize the knowledge of the poor” in an explicitly political sense. The competencies, creativity, knowledge, and expertise of slum dwellers are legitimated by being practiced in public. Again, this is a politics of truth that aims at countering forms of governmental rationality.

These examples reveal ways of resisting governmental rationality that are not solely or primarily practices of the self. This is a form of counter-conduct that focuses on direct political action rather than reshaping the subjectivities of governed subjects. It poses the question of how we can think about the constitution of collective agents who “govern back” against the forces governing them. These are groups who conduct a counter-politics using the same tools of truth, knowledge, and management as the state that governs them. Theirs is a counter-governmental practice that is not simply counter-conduct in the highly individualized sense – a “practice of the self” – but also a *practice of the group*, a collective constitution of collective agency. To better understand how this works, we need a theory of group formation that can be connected with governmental rationality, political agency, and collective political action.

Such a conception would provide the basis for an entirely new conception of popular sovereignty, one articulated not as the aggregation of votes but as the counter-governing force of the people.<sup>25</sup> It would be a form of counter-government that is intimately related to government itself – the flip side of the same coin, or more technically, a practice of government constituted out of the same set of practices that govern subjects in the first place. The question, though, is how to think about this kind of counter-governmentality, how to theorize it, how to describe its emergence or failure to emerge, its conditions of possibility as a counterpart to other practices of government?

This is very much the problem of how subjugated knowledges can fight their way out of subjugation to “speak truth to power.” To answer this

question, we need an enhanced view of governmental rationality, one that actively characterizes the way such struggles can be mobilized and effected. This problem has everything to do with the tension between intention and *epistème*. A successful account should be able to explain how regimes of rationality are contested and redirected, used, or countered by various of a state's citizens. It should show how practices can promote the acceptance of knowledge and how marginalized people can acquire the resources to do this. It thus needs to link various distributions of resources – the material bases of political action – to “knowledges,” practices, and systems of belief. It must characterize the ways that government provides a rationality not just for governing citizens, but also for struggles to liberate forms of knowledge and turn back other forms of power.

### 3. GOVERNMENTAL RATIONALITY AS SYMBOLIC STRUGGLE

To develop the enhanced conception of governmental rationality that I have been envisioning, I will further develop some of the resources that I find already nascent in Foucault's work. Pierre Bourdieu is the ideal partner for such an enterprise. He shares many aspects of Foucault's sensibility but additionally outlines a conception of power in which people's differential abilities to mobilize resources provides a basis for understanding the fine texture of governmental rationalities. His work highlights the dynamic social processes connecting governmental rationality with the politics of truth. It thus provides elegant means to theorize what Foucault would call “the production of true discourses” as a key element in governmental practice. As a result, this account can easily be adapted to incorporate the symbolic struggles of grassroots political groups as “insurrections of subjugated knowledges.”

Foucault organizes his insights about power and resistance around the idea of the “production of true discourses.” Such production of truth has a close parallel in Bourdieu's work, where it takes the form of a carefully achieved orchestration of belief. The socially shared truths of Foucault's analysis are what Bourdieu refers to as “doxa,” a largely taken-for-granted view of the world.<sup>26</sup> Doxa, as this Greek word for belief implies, is not a rigidly structural conception of truth, an underarching substratum that determines all possible thought and perception. Rather, it is a set of regularities or forms of coordination within the thought and perception of

(virtually) all people in a given group. Doxa is not, therefore, a free-floating, autonomous entity that imposes structure on individual minds, nor is it reducible to a common pattern found in practices. Instead, it is a coordinated set of mental-physical dispositions embodied in individual people, that exists nowhere *but* in those people, and only insofar as their dispositions are similarly orchestrated. In Bourdieu's account, doxa is a partial, fragile symbolic "order" that is carefully but incompletely reproduced throughout a given society or culture. This coordination of belief is an achievement that is always incomplete and always in process.

In Bourdieu's account, creating a doxic understanding of the world is a linguistic process. It produces truth by saying what is true or false, just as Foucault describes. Going beyond Foucault, however, Bourdieu tries to account for the social dynamics that confer legitimacy on some truths rather than others. In his analysis, some forms of speech are accorded greater legitimacy because they are associated with the identities of groups that are "authorized" to speak.<sup>27</sup> Having such an ability is what Bourdieu calls "symbolic power." It gives its possessor the authority to assert that something is true or false. As Bourdieu says, this provides a person with means "of constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world and, thereby, action on the world and thus the world itself."<sup>28</sup> Symbolic power is thus the power to have one's assertions recognized as true.

Symbolic power, for Bourdieu, is based on the resources one has to make recognized, legitimate, authorized speech. To characterize such resources, he refashions the notion of capital to include cultural, social, and political as well as economic forms.<sup>29</sup> Like economic capital, the others are resources in particular domains: cultural capital, for example, is perceived wealth in cultural knowledge; social capital is the wealth of connections and status that a given social position provides. Like economic capital, these other forms are similarly fungible. Cultural capital can be traded for economic, as when skill in upper-class manners and customs gains its possessor a prestigious job. More importantly, any of these forms of capital can be turned into symbolic power. Cultural knowledge, money, political status, and social connections all enhance one's ability to speak with authority. They provide the symbolic resources that allow a person to say what is true or false. In short, conversion of any of these forms of capital into symbolic power provides one the means to produce truth.

Bourdieu's account of symbolic power is at core a theory of social struggle. Because the resources that confer symbolic power are unequally distributed, they distinguish those who are authorized to speak from those

who are unauthorized.<sup>30</sup> In addition, different forms and concentrations of symbolic power create different qualifications to speak: politicians have their expert domain, cultural producers can pass judgment on aesthetic matters, scientists have expert capabilities to characterize the nature of the physical world, and so on. Each unique combination of cultural, economic, social, and political capital produces characteristic forms of expertise with corresponding privileges of veridiction. However, the boundaries between such social positions are not fixed, nor are the relative entitlements of various people to speak. Rather, they too are subject to dispute. People struggle to increase their symbolic power by asserting the greater worth of their own competence and expertise. In recent years, for instance, the global public sphere has seen disputes over who is better able to assess the threat of global warming: scientists? citizens? politicians? Contending attempts to answer this question are simultaneously struggles to enunciate what is true or false (“global warming is bad” – true or false?) and struggles for the *means* to enunciate what is true or false (“as a scientist, I am best able to assess the truth or falsity of the statement ‘global warming is bad’”).

Struggles between experts are merely struggles to dominate the dominant class, of course. More importantly, Bourdieu uses the same picture to characterize “insurrections of subjugated knowledges.” Those without entitlement to speak legitimately must struggle to have their claims recognized in public discourse.<sup>31</sup> Such struggle follows the same terms outlined above: it is both a struggle to say what is true or false and a struggle for the *means* to say what is true or false. This requires people to assert their own legitimacy to speak the truth, which is of course a difficult claim to make for one not already entitled to speak the truth. A variety of paths may be pursued to make such a claim, trading on other forms of capital to develop symbolic power resources which can then be used to further enhance one’s social position and one’s symbolic power.<sup>32</sup>

Arjun Appadurai’s account of the Mumbai Alliance provides an excellent example of such forms of power in action. He describes savings practices encouraged by the Alliance that are designed to accumulate capital for opening small businesses.<sup>33</sup> Based on a regime of daily savings seen as akin to spiritual rituals, these practices parallel Foucault’s description of asceticism in remarkable ways.<sup>34</sup> They have the regular, progressive, developmental character of such practices and they constitute a kind of “exercise of self on self” that counters other governing influences. As such, they are very much the kind of counter-conduct that Foucault describes.

Appadurai’s analysis reveals important further dimensions, however, that go beyond the subjectivistic character of Foucault’s counter-practices.

For the Alliance, practices like saving have an import that is political and collective as well as self-oriented. They pool resources as part of a process of collective group formation called “federating.”<sup>35</sup> This practice aims to organize people into larger collectives, particularly those from unrepresented areas and populations. To the extent that the Alliance encourages practices of the self like saving, they serve both as a model of collectivization and as a resource base for collective political action. These practices inculcate attitudes and skills of federation while marshalling the money needed to support it.

Here we see a close connection between governmental rationality, economic capital, and symbolic power. Alliance members govern themselves in order to generate economic capital and enhance cooperation skills. At once, then, they lay the individual bases for a collective form of governmental rationality while also building a resource base for this action. Collective action and economic capital come together as a form of symbolic power – namely, in the other activities of the Alliance dedicated to legitimating the expertise of its members. Savings and microcredit enhance economic capital. They in turn provide the material basis for a collective politics of truth, designed to further enhance the symbolic power of the people who practice it. Here we see a virtuous spiral of resource accumulation, symbolic power enhancement, and increasing legitimacy. All of this is made possible through the joint use of two governmental rationalities: one a “practice of the self” dedicated to saving, the other a “practice of the group” dedicated to collective action as a politics of truth.

#### **4. COUNTER-GOVERNMENT AND THE POLITICS OF TRUTH**

Bourdieu’s insights about social struggle significantly reframe our thinking about governmental rationality. They articulate important aspects of the relation between government and the governed, between power and counter-power. Now we can return to the topic of governmental rationality with some additional means to describe such “counter-conducts” and counter-government – and thus, governmental rationality itself.

Following Foucault’s characterization of governmental rationality as having an essential relation to truth, we can use Bourdieu’s insights to sketch some of the social dynamics that connect government to truth.

As we have seen, the process of saying what is true and false produces a largely-taken-for-granted understanding of the world. Truth here is both a tool of control and a stake of struggle. It allows institutions and people to govern by controlling the consensually accepted view of the world.

Bourdieu emphasizes that the state has a privileged position in the assertion of truth. His studies of the state largely focus on its place in the symbolic order and its role in the deployment of symbolic power.<sup>36</sup> He argues that the state has several important functions in establishing categories of perception, thought, and understanding. Because of its unique position in the symbolic order as the only institution that can claim to speak “for the people,” it has the ability to set the terms through which many aspects of social existence are understood. Bourdieu writes that,

In our societies, the state makes a decisive contribution to the production and reproduction of the instruments of construction of social reality. As organizational structure and regulator of practices, the state exerts an ongoing action formative of durable dispositions through the whole range of constraints and through the corporeal and mental discipline it uniformly imposes upon all agents. Furthermore, it imposes and inculcates all the fundamental principles of classification, according to sex, age, “skill,” etc.<sup>37</sup>

His substantial agreement with Foucault is evident here. The state, Bourdieu indicates, produces truth through its place in the construction of reality. It imposes discipline upon minds and bodies and it generates schemes of classification that mold subjectivity and shape identity.

While the state has a privileged position in establishing the shared understanding of the world, Bourdieu also shows that it operates using mechanisms and techniques that are widely shared. Being accepted as a legitimate speaker in discourses of truth and falsity gives one the ability to participate in this world-making process. This holds in a general sense for not only the state but for other kinds of institutions, groups, and individuals as well. This picture of social struggle reveals a fundamental continuity between different forms of governing. In this view, governing is a matter of one’s discursive status, one’s capability to assert the truth. Having the ability to speak legitimately is both a goal of political action and a primary requirement of political effectiveness. Governing is thus a general form of practice that is widely conducted by institutions, groups, and individuals. This fundamental continuity is clear in Bourdieu’s view, echoing Foucault’s own methodological desire to study of “the government of oneself and others” in a way that avoids “institution-centrism.”<sup>38</sup>

Bourdieu’s view also helps to prevent the tendency to see the state as a unique or qualitatively distinct source of government. In this picture,

the state operates using techniques characteristic of social struggle in general. It thus functions in ways that would be characteristic of other institutions, organizations, collectivities, and groups, as well as individuals seeking to govern themselves or others. The state's governmental power is articulated through the conversion of other forms of capital into symbolic power. States are unique in their legally sanctioned legitimacy of speech and in their ample resource base. In other aspects, however, state government follows more general forms of practice. The mechanisms of its action are not qualitatively different from those available to others. To utilize its resources and legally sanctioned sources of power, it must act through mechanisms that are, in the end, general and shared.

This picture also draws important lines of connection between governmental rationality and other characteristics of society. It shows how resources of various kinds – economic, cultural, social, and political forms of capital – are connected with practices of governing. They provide the social and material basis for such practices. This gives us theoretical means to say how aspects of society like social position, cultural competence, and money confer the power to govern. Symmetrically, it also gives us an incisive picture of the ways that counter-power and counter-government can be mobilized. Examining the distribution of such resources and disparities in the ways people use them provides important insights about the political topography of a given society.

Here we can draw governmental rationality into the same picture as counter-government and social struggle. This notion of resistance follows a different path from an inward-turning hermeneutics of the self. Alternative understandings of the world like those arising in social movements and subcultures have the ability to alter the dominant understanding represented in the symbolic order.<sup>39</sup> These alternative understandings are the equivalent of Foucault's "subjugated knowledges," but in this case they operate through the medium of symbolic power to challenge hegemony over symbolic production. In Bourdieu's terms, such struggles could be undertaken by groups or even individuals. Anyone challenging the symbolic order would only need the ability to mobilize symbolic power themselves, likely by possessing some kind of power-in-reserve such as economic, cultural, social, or political capital.<sup>40</sup>

This view emphasizes that governmental rationality is also the rationality of social struggle. The socially constructed realities that are partly modified and reproduced by the state can also be thematized, challenged, modified, and revised by other institutions, groups, and individuals. Thus, governmental rationality can be used to deploy power *upon* the state.<sup>41</sup> Such groups

would have to fight an uphill battle against the state's symbolic dominance, but there is no reason that they could not employ the tactics of governmental rationality as a form of counter-government. Governmental rationality thus operates from many different sites in many different ways. The state's ability to deploy symbolic power through the use of its constitutionally-granted powers of ordination and classification is one of these; they are paralleled by the ability of various groups to deflect, redirect, or seize control of governmental power through similar symbolic means.

With all of the previous discussion as a background, we can now return to the task of clarifying what one should mean by "governmental rationality." Above I offered two possible and equally limited interpretations of rationality in Foucault's work, arguing that the best view would retain the productive tensions between them. From Bourdieu's perspective, we can see that these tensions are not an artifact of an insufficiently worked-out theory, but are inherent in social life itself.

In the picture I have drawn, there is an extent to which governmental rationalities are "crypto-structuralist" in character. People reproduce a shared understanding of the world by engaging in everyday activities, most of which serve to reinforce the view already held. Most instances of the government of oneself and others are of this type. Normal, routine practices of government follow preset scripts that draw upon and reproduce existing worldviews. However, this normality is occasionally disturbed by contestation over its very meaning and significance. Thus we cannot think of governmental rationality solely as an epistemically deep, independent pool of conceptual possibilities. The doxic symbolic order is a socially and institutionally conserved set of background understandings, but it is always open to contest during the process of its reproduction.

The ever-present possibility of disagreement implies that governmental rationality has an intentional aspect as well. Those trying to oppose regimes of government do so chiefly by contesting hegemony in the production of truth. Struggles over truth require a conscious intention to reshape shared understandings. This requires intentional action within the realm of knowledge production itself, a form of practice that Bourdieu provides excellent resources for understanding. However, we cannot completely reduce governmental rationality to intentional action. This would deny the influence of broader forms of enculturation that produce patterns in such practices. It would ignore the interconnection of these acts *as* forms of cultural politics, portraying them instead as discrete, individual acts with no relation to broader regimes of truth or rationality.

The modalities of governmental rationality thus exist in a state of perpetual tension between social facticity and free innovation. Governmental rationality is a product of both deeply embedded “mentalities” and consciously devised practices. More precisely, it is the product of some contingent combination of the two. The rationalities that result are a mix of the professional socialization of institutional bureaucrats, symbolic pressures from social movements and other people who are subject to governmental power, and free innovation to match appropriate technologies of government with the goals one is pursuing. In this picture, governmental rationalities are sites of conflict and contestation. More importantly, they are also the very *logic* of that form of social struggle.

Although the Bourdieuan insights I have canvassed are useful additions to the study of governmental rationalities, it is important to understand their limits. Bourdieu’s own elaboration of these ideas is limited to the synchronic cross-section of a given set of institutions and practices. It portrays the specific relations among different concentrations of capital, power, and social position at a particular time. However, this work is completely consistent with the kind of careful historiographic interpretation at which Foucault excels. The Foucauldian style of “critical and effective history”<sup>42</sup> would add a dynamic element to Bourdieu’s ideas, showing how resources and social position have been used in historically specific ways to create particular governmental regimes. We could imagine a history of such governmentalities as “regimes of truth.”<sup>43</sup> These would draw on a productive fusion of Bourdieuan and Foucauldian insights, showing how lumpy, discontinuous allocations of resources produce different concentrations of governmental power.

## 5. GOVERNMENTAL RATIONALITY FROM BELOW

Although Foucault famously declared that “in political thought and analysis, we still have not cut off the head of the king,”<sup>44</sup> his lectures on governmental rationality tend to stay within the bounds of state practices. He may have cut off the head of the king, but not necessarily the head of the bureaucrat. In these lectures Foucault tends to portray government as a technology of the state, even though his own thinking was clearly much broader.<sup>45</sup>

The corrective that I have sketched here opens up the horizon for examining a whole new collection of governmental rationalities. We might

call them “histories of popular sovereignties,” cases in which people have opposed power by constituting their own counter-governmentalities. Arjun Appadurai provides a fine example of this in the work I have already examined. Another is Larry Kramer’s careful study of popular practices of resistance to the governmental self-assertion of American courts.<sup>46</sup> Kramer interprets this resistance as what he calls “popular constitutionalism,” but the story could equally well be told as a series of clashing governmental rationalities – countervailing attempts to assert truths about society using governmental practices as tactics. From this perspective, popular efforts to check local institutions in the pre-revolutionary American colonies, for instance, can also be seen as attempts to mobilize available resources and assert a form of counter-government. Kramer notes, for instance, creative uses of tools of popular justice – like the “skimmington” and “charivari” – against colonial governments. Similarly, colonial grand juries refused to enforce laws they deemed unjust, and citizens sometimes interfered or refused to cooperate with the enforcement of the law.<sup>47</sup> All of these practices can be viewed as counter-government – attempts to govern state agencies by shaping their practices and beliefs.

Similarly, I have outlined a perspective on American welfare policy that reveals a particular kind of counter-government.<sup>48</sup> It tells the interlocking histories of the United States’ War on Poverty and the citizens groups that were spawned as a result of its action. Here social policy aimed explicitly at creating particular kinds of subjects.<sup>49</sup> Those subjects were constituted as political agents, which ultimately led many of them to take action against the agencies that constituted them as such. The National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), for instance, arose as a national coordinating body for the community groups established under anti-poverty legislation. As such, the NWRO acted as a counter-governmental body, constituted out of the aggregated agency of poor people who had, in turn, been constituted as political agents by anti-poverty policy itself. In this example there is a particularly tight relation between government and counter-government, since the one created the conditions of possibility for the other. Chief among those conditions were the forms of economic and political capital needed to support successful political agents. A governmental politics was thus enacted through the kinds of mechanisms I have been describing.

Histories of such “popular sovereignties” reveal the internal connections between state power and oppositional practice. On one hand we have the expected relation between government and counter-government: the people’s attempt to oppose, modify, and redirect governmental practices

that are applied to them. On the other hand, though, we also see a more surprising relation: the constitution of oppositional groups out of the action of government itself. This is what Foucault would call the productive capacities of governmental rationality, constituting collective political identities that take on a life of their own. The story becomes all the more interesting if those political collectivities then act to modify the regime of government that constitutes them as such, as they did during the War on Poverty. Tracing such internal relations promises a much richer view of the multiple, entangled practices and rationalities that government creates.

Ultimately, the value of this analysis is to open the social theoretic underpinnings of governmental rationality to view. The critical fusion of Foucauldian and Bourdieuan insights that I have outlined provides a schema for detailing these complexities. It particularly highlights the ways that they inspire, enable, and even constitute forms of counter-government.

This revision of Foucault's work is above all a clarification and a supplement. The Bourdieuan modifications I have made broaden the analytical scope of governmental rationality, connecting it with theories of culture, social knowledge, and social movement politics. While these additions add a certain theoretical weight to Foucault's purposely under-theorized analytics, they also provide us with new tools for tracing out the pathways and mechanisms of contemporary governmental rationalities.

## NOTES

1. The journal *Economy and Society* has been a notable forum for this work. Books of signal importance include Cruikshank (1999), Dean (1991, 1999), Ewald (1986), Osborne (1998), Poovey (1995), and Rose (1999).

2. Foucault (2004a, 2004b).

3. Foucault (2004a), lecture of 1 February 1978, pp. 111–113.

4. Foucault (2004b), lecture of 17 January 1979; ([1979]1988, p. 84), and Foucault (1980a, p. 79).

5. Foucault (2004a), lectures of 8, 15, and 22 February 1978, pp. 128–188. See also ([1979]1988).

6. Foucault (2004b). See also Foucault (1980b, Part 5).

7. See Foucault (1980a, pp. 78–82). This and the following quotations are from 79. See also Foucault (2004b), lecture of 17 January 1979; and ([1973]2000).

8. Foucault (2004a), lecture of 22 February 1978, pp. 183–186.

9. Foucault (2004a), lecture of 15 March 1978, pp. 278–281.

10. Cf. Foucault (2004a), lecture of 15 March 1978, p. 280, 291n61.

11. To be fair, Foucault claims that his epistemology was always pluralist, even during the archaeological years. See Foucault ([1968]1991, pp. 53–54).
12. Foucault (2004a), lecture of 25 Jan 1978, p. 60.
13. Foucault (1980a, p. 79).
14. Foucault (1980a, p. 80).
15. Foucault (1980a, p. 80). Emphasis in the original.
16. Foucault (1980a, pp. 80–81).
17. Foucault (2004b), lecture of 10 January 1979, p. 21. My translation.
18. Foucault (2004a), lecture of 1 March 1978, esp. p. 199, 205; lecture of 5 April 1978, pp. 362–365.
19. Foucault (2004a), lecture of 1 March 1978, pp. 208–219.
20. Foucault (2005), lecture of 13 January 1982, p. 52.
21. Foucault (2003), lecture of 7 January 1976, pp. 7–9.
22. Appadurai (2002, pp. 21–47).
23. Appadurai (2002, pp. 35–36).
24. Appadurai (2002, pp. 37–38, 40).
25. I have tried to outline such a view in Olson (2008b).
26. Bourdieu (1977), Chapter 4.
27. Bourdieu (1984), Chapter 8.
28. Bourdieu (1991a, p. 170).
29. Bourdieu (1986), Bourdieu (1991c).
30. Bourdieu (1984, Chapter 8).
31. Bourdieu (1991b).
32. Bourdieu (2000).
33. Appadurai (2002, pp. 33–34).
34. Foucault (2004a), lecture of 1 March 1978, pp. 208–211.
35. Appadurai (2002, pp. 32–33).
36. Bourdieu (1994, 1996).
37. Bourdieu (1994, p. 13). I have slightly altered an otherwise elegant translation here.
38. Foucault (2004a), lecture of 8 February 1978, pp. 120–121.
39. Melucci (1985); Fraser (1997).
40. Bourdieu (1991c).
41. I develop this theme further in Olson (2008b). See also Olson (2006, Chapter 6, 2008a).
42. Dean (1994).
43. Foucault ([1980]1994, pp. 125–126).
44. Foucault (1980b, pp. 88–89).
45. This is clear, for instance, in his statements about the continuity of state government with the many other ways in which people are governed. Foucault (2004a), lecture of 1 February 1978. It is also clear in his remarks about de-institutionalizing our view of relations of power. Lecture of 8 February 1978, pp. 120–123, especially the manuscript notes printed as a footnote to pp. 123–125.
46. Kramer (2004).
47. Kramer (2004, pp. 24–29).
48. Olson (2008b).
49. Insightfully described by Barbara Cruikshank in (1999, Chapter 3).

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# PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY, MARXISM, AND MARX

Paul Paolucci

## ABSTRACT

*The prospect of public sociology is beginning to be widely discussed and debated. Critics put forth several reasons for skepticism, one of which is that the program of public sociology, under the leadership of Michael Burawoy, will infect sociology with a Marxist drift. This paper examines whether this drift in fact comports with Marx's ideas on the relationship between scientific knowledge, the role of intellectuals in the class struggle, and the type of political action he advocated. It finds that critics are fundamentally mistaken about the extent to which Marx's ideas are expressed in public sociology's program.*

## I

In 2004, members of the American Sociological Association (ASA) embarked on a path whose “aims [are] to enrich public debate about moral and political issues by infusing them with sociological theory and research” (Burawoy, 2004a, p. 1603). This “public sociology” program (also see Agger, 2000) encourages sociologists – in and out of the ASA – to engage in the wider social discourse about social organization and policy. Journals

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have made space for debates on this proposal's merits. Critiques range from concerns about the "serious shortcomings in its agenda and program" (Brady, 2004, p. 1629) to fears that former ASA President Michael Burawoy, in an attempt to elevate his professional-political goals, aims to invigorate sociology with Marxism, which, according to one skeptic, "has been most effective not as a scientific approach but as an ideology of social movements" (Nielsen, 2004, p. 1621). Such accusations stem from Burawoy's links with Marxist thought and his support for a more politically engaged sociology. His initiatives and the responses to them have reignited debate over the role Marx is or is not to have within the discipline. As a contribution to this debate, this paper challenges the idea that Burawoy's program reflects Marx's political approach and argues that the fears of public sociology will imbue the discipline with a Marxist thrust are ultimately groundless. In this discussion, I address several contradictions and problems that I believe have not received adequate attention in the debate on public sociology. Rather than solving such debates once and for all, I hope to illuminate how public sociology facilitates anew misplaced attacks on Marx and his ideas and thus help fend off claims that his work no longer retains any relevance for sociology.

## II

Sociology has witnessed an on-going succession of conflicting perspectives on the purpose, meaning, and importance of Marx's work. Much of the resistance to his contribution among sociologists in the United States, including critics of public sociology, is traceable to the view that his ideas are closely associated with the history of the Soviet Union, as illustrated in this contention that Marx's influence poses contaminating dangers to social science in general:

By its very existence the Soviet Union, even when criticized by western Marxists as reactionary and misguided, did provide useful support to the status of Marxist intellectuals. There was considerable prestige in being associated, however distantly, with the socialist universe.... It seems that the fall of the Berlin Wall has rendered Marxist sociologists speechless. One wonders if public sociology is a new avatar of denial, a new packaging of the old ideas, a new ideological mantle to cover up the embarrassing shortcomings of the "really existing Socialist societies."... Revolutionary Marxism has not produced any just society, but has been exceedingly effective at justifying oppression of the people by an oligarchy. It is opium for the people more potent than any of the traditional religions identified as such by Marx. Thus when I hear Western intellectuals claim inspiration from Marxism, I have lingering suspicions that they might be using

Marxist ideology as a vehicle for their own personal advancement and drive for power – under the guise of collective concerns. Is this too paranoid? Perhaps it is, but since there seems to be an overlap of personnel between Marxist sociology and public sociology one would like to hear public sociologists reflect on their own career association with Marxism, and the role this experience has played in their new vocation in public sociology. (Nielsen, 2004, pp. 1621–1622)

Yes, perhaps this view is too paranoid. It certainly makes fantastic claims. The idea that Marxist scholars were granted “considerable prestige” by association with Leninist–Stalinism is a curious reading of American sociology’s history. Writing off Marx’s continuing appeal as a product of ill-placed affection for the former Communist bloc is vastly less convincing than the notion that scholars still find his work useful for their own study of capitalist society. The assertion that Marxists have been in speechless denial after the Berlin Wall’s fall is contradicted by the facts, available to all who would look. And, the belief that the public sociology initiative has the covert goal of covering up for the shortcomings of the Soviet universe leaves one downright dumbfounded. It is as if invoking “really existing communism” justifies any claim one wishes to make about Marx or scholars interested in his intellectual agenda. Perusal of journals and books from all sides of Cold War discourse demonstrates that when it comes to Marx, almost any claim can be – and thus has been – accepted. Social scientists are charged with being measured and discerning, though their shared past has often demonstrated overreaction – pro and con – to Marx’s ideas. Though perhaps a more reasoned debate is possible today, broadsides such as Nielsen’s do nothing to improve its likelihood.

The assertion that Marxist orientations in scholarship per se mask nefarious intentions and dubious methods deserves critical evaluation. According to this perspective, Marx-oriented sociologists cannot be trusted because their political goals, often rooted in personal vainglory, irretrievably skew their analytical acumen. Such arguments tend to disregard the influence of materialist research on the social sciences, downplay or even ignore Marx’s contribution to political–economic analysis, and overlook the continuing scholarship on his methodological practice. To the extent that they function to deflect attention away from a critical analysis of capitalism, which is Marx’s greatest contribution to research problems in sociology, criticisms such as Nielsen’s above are highly political in their own right. In light of the sweeping period spanning the rise of modernity to the emerging era of “globalization,” any denial of the need for a critical analysis of capitalist society abdicates sociology’s scientific responsibility. Nevertheless, it is the perceived alliance of public sociology with Marxian thought that

critics assume negates the possibility of a scientific enterprise. The *premises* of such attacks would be valid – though this is to say nothing of their substantive *conclusions* – only if public sociology’s intellectual–political program mirrors the one Marx advocated. A question stands before us, though public sociology’s aims are political, does this also mean it is a *Marx-ian* program?

Given that Burawoy (2003, 2000, 1990) has published Marxist-oriented work, it is not unreasonable for critics to impute “that as a proponent of sociological Marxism he does not want to tear down the ivory tower, he is merely trying to paint it red” (Deflem, 2004a, p. B17). While the latter may be true, only close inspection, not assertion, will reveal how close this shade of red is to Marx’s. One problem with such inspection is that mainstream sociological discourse is so strapped with problematic claims about Marx that many purported facts about Marx “known to all” turn out to be wrong or at least highly misleading.<sup>1</sup> Further, early communist parties qualitatively changed Marx’s thought in a series of discursive shifts that fundamentally transformed his ideas (Paolucci, 2004), rendering critiques such as Nielsen’s non-sequiturs. Adding to these difficulties is the fact that Burawoy’s writings are inconsistent on this issue. While he agrees that Sovietism cannot be reduced to Marx, he freely applies the label “Marxism” to Stalinist regimes, Western Marxism, American scholars, and social movements in the “Third World” without significantly qualifying what makes them especially distinct (Burawoy, 2000). If Leninist–Stalinism represented a *qualitative* transformation of Marx’s thought, then each inhabits distinct and incommensurate discourses. Conjoining Marx’s discourse with Leninist–Stalinism, then, as Burawoy and many of his and Marx’s critics do, distorts a coherent view of either, rendering more difficult evaluations of both.

Marx believed that understanding the world scientifically was both possible and desirable. His research methodology shares several principles with mainstream sociology in more respects than is often acknowledged, including empirical inquiry, use of controlled comparison, and statistical analysis (Paolucci, 2003). Also like some in the mainstream, Marx believed that bringing about progressive social change is a task best not left to intellectuals/scientists (herein lies the tension, an issue which will be discussed below). While these parallels are not usually stressed, when one examines the positions of public sociology advocates and their critics, one *is* struck by a common thread: both support the idea that in Marx’s outlook political criteria should shape what can or cannot, what will or will not, be accepted as a viable form of knowledge. As a result, if Marx brings motivation to public sociologists, their critics fear he has little to offer but

corruption. In fact, however, the relationship between his vision of scientific inquiry and his approach to political action was so central a concern in Marx's writings that, if properly recognized, it would lift the debate on public sociology to a qualitatively higher level.

### III

One hallmark of scientific thinking is to measure truth-claims according to the rigors of data, logic, theory, and experimentation. But in its social context, scientific knowledge is rarely neutral but rather has consequences for the social order. Its authority can be – and has been – mobilized for causes with conservative, liberal, and progressive implications. For example, the authority of biological science has been mobilized for racial programs ranging from eugenics, to segregation-apartheid, to Affirmative Action, to the Genome Project. Historically, sociological inquiry has similarly inspired both support and critique of social arrangements and the knowledge systems that have accompanied them. This history has seen oscillating attempts at drawing a line separating the definition and role of intellectual work and the definition and place of political action. The “where” and “when” of this line has shifted with the factional configurations shaping the discipline's most prestigious publication venues and/or its most influential discourses. As this line has moved with changes in the demographics, orientation, and working conditions of sociology's practitioners, there have also been changes in support for certain types of social activism, whether conservative, liberal, or radical.

Plainly, many activist–sociologists take Marx's work as an inspiration. Burawoy (2000, p. 156), who believes that in Marx's ideas there is a “complex relation between theory and practice,” is no exception. In its defense, Burawoy (2000, p. 152) argues that Marxism's complex relationships contain three interrelated moments:

first, its *objectivity*, diagnosing capitalism as a totality riddled with contradictions, limits, and insurgent social forces; second, its *engagement*, challenging capitalism on its own terrain, and thereby also generating an intimate knowledge of its weaknesses and its resiliencies; and third, its *imagination*, daring to postulate a freer world beyond capitalism, knowing full well capitalism's ability to deny, obliterate, and ridicule the very idea of an alternative to itself.

Burawoy believes that Marxism's “revival ... depends on reconfiguration of these three moments but without abandoning any of them,” a view with

which few Marxists would disagree. Nevertheless, such a set up does little to help us advance our knowledge of the relationship between theory and practice in Marx's life and writings.

One problem in reading Marx is delineating "precisely how and in what way [his dialectical method, historical materialism, political-economy, and his communist project] relate to one another" (Paolucci, 2000, pp. 304–305). While these moments of inquiry *are interconnected*, each has its own associated discursive field and identifying principles. Among these, the dialectical method is the most generalized level of discourse in Marx's thought, informing both his way of viewing the world's changing dynamics and his conceptual principles in their analysis. Historical materialist ideas are entwined with Marx's research into history and society in general and contain principles about material-ideal relations, the role of productive relations in social systems, the conflicts between classes, and the mechanisms of social change. Marx mobilized these previous two moments for his political economy, that is, the study of bourgeois society and its mode of production. Finally, Marx used what he learned from these three moments of inquiry to inform his political struggles in the world, that is, his communist project.

These interrelated moments of inquiry should not be conflated without qualification if we are to avoid undue distortion of Marx's thought. While dialectical thinking informs historical materialism, political economy, and the communist project, these latter three are not simply deduced from the former, or each other. Both historical materialist principles and Marx's political-economic analysis emerged through a long period of research and personal intellectual effort. Historical materialist principles focus on social relations in general but also provide a special focus on the history of class societies, capitalism included. Political economy, on the other hand, applies only to capitalist society. Marx's scientific endeavors find expression in his dialectical method as well as his historical materialist and political-economic research, while his political strategies, informed by what is to be learned through these previous moments of inquiry, are best expressed in his communist project, a political strategy for a socialist transition out of capitalism and into communism, a program requiring a great deal of organizing, resistance, and struggle (for discussion on these issues, see Paolucci, 2007). Collapsing these moments of inquiry into an undifferentiated "Marxism" or into each other distorts Marx's thought and action and provides an imprecise model for interpreting his views.

For public sociology, political goals are the fulcrum upon which the utility of scientific ideas pivot; that is, political goals and values are posited in

advance and sociological knowledge is interpreted and evaluated in relation to its service to these ends. However, Marx's communist project did not dictate findings to his scientific work, whether in his dialectical, historical-materialist, or political-economic moments of inquiry. The same thing cannot be said of Soviet ideology, which subsumed scientific knowledge to the machinations of a political apparatus and its leaders. Critics fear that Burawoy's platform similarly strives for the "blurring of boundaries between" scholarly work and our engagement with society (Zimmer, 2004, p. 1601). There are thus at least two views in "Marxism" – not mutually compatible with one another – from which to pick. In the approach traceable to Marx, it is paramount to attain valid scientific knowledge and intellectuals are seen as a group ill-suited for political leadership over the public. According to the approach traceable to Lenin, political goals should determine the worthiness of scientific endeavors and intellectuals should serve as vanguard leaders of the working class. If one conflates these views, then they are liable to end up confusing the views of Lenin and later Soviets – and associated approaches – with those of Marx, though these two approaches are in fact mirror (that is, reversed) images of each other.

Debates about public sociology center on the political role and social responsibility of the sociologist as knowledge producer. Convincing conclusions to such debates underwrite Burawoy's efforts less than a perceived shift in the ASA's ideological balance of power. He argues that "the membership of the ASA ... has moved much further to the left" than it was in 1968, and, sensing a receptive audience, puts forth the proposition that the "'pure science' position that research must be completely insulated from politics is untenable since antipolitics is no less political than *public engagement*" (Burawoy, 2004a, pp. 1604–1605). Quite true. Silence in the face of relations of domination amounts to a tacit support of those holding positions of power. Likewise, failing to investigate the power of capital is as scientifically malfeasant as using political expediency to determine what counts as valid knowledge. With regard to the ASA, Burawoy (2004a, p. 1606) believes that the "association is a political venue unto itself" and that the post-1968 political climate in sociology justifies transforming the ASA into "a place to debate the stances we might adopt." In this version of public sociology, the goal for the discipline's largest organization, faced with the social domination of capital, is to professionally endorse political and social policies. One would think a wholesale critical analysis of that power relation itself would be a greater priority for Marxist *sociologists*, though it is doubtful whether many of public sociology's critics would accept either this goal or the one to which Burawoy lays claim.

Two strategies in sociology's ascendance as a profession were the adopting of natural science models for its episteme and the selling of its services to state institutions in exchange for funding and status (Steinmetz, 2005, see citations therein).<sup>2</sup> Not only did many leaders in sociology *not* see this close association with the state as political contamination but also sociology's practitioners were inconsistent about from which streams of natural science they would choose. A common thread in the mainstream is wound around the ideas that (1) only impartial and objective analyses make sociology a valid science – an agreeable proposition – and (2) a critical analysis of capitalism and/or its associated institutions diverts attention from this – a confounding position. From a Marxist perspective, such scholarly practice would be similar to microbiology failing to direct its attention to the damaging effects pathogens have on human health and how to cure related diseases, that is, an abdication of one purpose of knowledge production – improving the human condition. No one, for the most part, questions the commitment biological scientists have toward both the generation of objective knowledge and the quest for solutions to human problems. It is for such reasons that Marxists (and others) often see mainstream sociology scientifically malfeasant, politically biased, and even naive just in the same way those in the mainstream view them in return.

Many early sociologists celebrated the Enlightenment's protest against the blurring of the lines between knowledge and political authority. In Europe, sociology formed in part against the combined worldviews of Church authority and the aristocracy; in the United States, there was a close entwinement between sociology and Protestantism and related reformist movements (Vidich & Lyman, 1985). While the work of Comte and Saint-Simon echoed the conflation of knowledge and authority from the past, other classical sociologists strove for a more independent scientific footing. Aware that a scientific sociology was likely to upset the powers that be, Durkheim (1982, pp. 73–74) observed that, "Any opinion which is embarrassing is treated as hostile ... cold, dry analysis is repugnant to certain minds." Marx (1873, p. 25) was critical of scholars for whom it is "no longer a question, whether this theorem or that [is] true, but whether it [is] useful to capital or harmful, expedient or inexpedient, politically dangerous or not." Both believed in social research that proceeds "as impartially as possible" (Marx, 1873, p. 27) and is as "objective as possible" (Durkheim, 1982, p. 82).

Sociology later brought in religious undercurrents and a penchant for social engineering, drawing itself ever closer to state institutions. Because of

this history, the cloak of science brings sociologists a level of power and authority, which, though not usually residing in control of political, economic, or military institutions, is located at an intersection in the “ideological state apparatus” (Althusser, 1971). This power and authority ranges from their status as intellectuals – writers, teachers, and researchers – to their participation in policy planning, to active involvement in social change. In their participation in the collective steering of public debate and their influence on the predominantly accepted view of humans and society, sociologists help shape institutional knowledge. They do not control these things but they do play a greater part in molding them than does the public at large. Marx-oriented sociologists often read this trend as generally conservative, a support for the status quo and liberal reform, where the ethos of “value neutrality” functions as a tacit endorsement of existing power relations by default. Conventional sociologists, in return, see radicals, Marxists, and others (such as feminists) as irretrievably biased. A common thread exists here too: both radicals and conventional sociologists enjoy a certain comfort when the discipline’s drift fits their political proclivities. As a result, each has worked to shape the discipline toward their own conception of science’s proper relationship with politics. For radicals, the posture of neutrality in the face of social relations of domination, inequality, and exploitation amounts to a crime by omission. For detractors, radicals’ commitment to a critique of power renders their commitment to scientific detachment suspect.

Marx distinguished specific relationships between scientific knowledge and political action. For him, “Thinking and being are thus no doubt *distinct*, but at the same time they are in *unity* with each other” (Marx, 1844b, pp. 105–106). Scientific reason and political action have a similar relationship, that is, they have realms that are both distinct and internally related. At a meeting of the General Council of the International, discussing desirable political strategies, Marx (1869, p. 399) argued that ...

Nothing could be introduced either in primary or higher schools that admitted of party and class interpretation. Only subjects such as the physical sciences, grammar, etc., were fit matter for schools. The rules of grammar, for instance, could not differ, whether explained by a religious Tory or a free thinker. Subjects that admitted different conclusions must be excluded.

Marx accepted neither a conflation nor a subsuming of science and politics into and/or underneath one another. For example, though Engels described their general approach as “Scientific Socialism,” a phrase that conjoins science and politics in the same concept, Marx (1874–1875, p. 546) explained

that this term was “used only in opposition to utopian socialism, which tries to impose new hallucinations and illusions on the people instead of confining the scope of its knowledge to the study of the social movement of the people itself.” Clearly, many sociologists agree with Marx, that is, that science should confine its scope to an impartial study of the movement of the people without biasing it with a class or party interpretation.

For public sociology critic Deflem (2005a, p. 13), a non-Marxist, “sociological work ought to be resolutely directed at analyzing, rather than evaluating society and its various components.” Marx was no different, as far as *determining valid knowledge through the research act* goes. However, though Marx does not do conceptual gymnastics to analyze the class character of capitalism, his humanism is not simply abstracted out of view. Studying capitalism as a class system, filled with contradictions and exploitative social relations, is his scientific order of the day. Marx does not pretend capitalism’s exploitative character and its damage to social relations do not exist and he often refuses to mask this with a technical language. His narrative on class exploitation, in fact, shifts from analytical to evaluative, basing one on the other since any valid evaluation must be based on an objective analysis. Further, what is the ultimate point of a *social science* if not to provide some sort of knowledge that can be trusted to use in our decision-making process? Whether or not it is class-revolutionary (e.g., Marx’s approach) or state-functionary (e.g., policy analysis), one goal of sociology has *always* been to assist in an evaluation of our situation in order to inform action based on that knowledge. Because capitalism’s predominant ideology denies the reality of class-exploitation, Marx’s scientific analysis is inherently radical and thus political because of the evaluations it facilitates.

Burawoy’s view, on the other hand, appears to be the opposite of Marx’s. His position seems to be that a desire for a *directly political* sociology is a self-justification for being radical, that is, his political commitments come before and thus lead his scientific thinking. He argues, for example, that a party or class interpretation *should* be used to guide our evaluation of sociological knowledge: “Today’s post-Vietnam generations are more accustomed to criticizing the U.S. government and in particular its foreign policy. They are also less concerned about the purity of sociology as science and more likely to assume that our accumulated knowledge should be put to public use, whether in the form of member resolutions or policy intervention” (Burawoy, 2004a, p. 1604). Here, Burawoy sets up a false dilemma that leads to the heart of the problem between radicals and their critics. Power relations are as much a central social reality as that which

comes along with them, that is, state authority, the military apparatus, monopolies on productive resources, etc. These are questions for sociologists, whether one holds a Marxist orientation or not. If “To be radical is to grasp things by the root” (Marx, 1844a, p. 60), then good science is radical and does not need to be – moreover, should not be – intentionally shaped toward predetermined conclusions.<sup>3</sup>

Burawoy (2004a, p. 1605) asserts in his own defense that a precedent exists for using political values to determine sociological knowledge: “One such example is the ASA’s recent statement that summarized the sociological literature on race: race exists, it has social causes, and it has social consequences.” However, this example is of a different sort than the approach he advocates for public sociology. The ASA’s statement on race holds that the popular conception of race does not comport with scientific knowledge, which is less an advocacy or policy position than a scientific-social fact. Though the ASA’s position *could be* used to animate a public–political discourse that threatens the status quo, political values do not determine its truth-value. Observing that the modern military apparatus tends to be wielded in support of capitalist interests is a similar sociological observation. It can be used to inform political critique and action, though one does not need to be either a Marxist or skewed by political corruption to make or agree with this observation. Burawoy’s program, however, offers to conflate and/or blur the relationship between scientific discourse, political values, and the goals these might inform, criticism of which he writes off as a misplaced concern with “purity.” Surely discovering new knowledge as objectively as possible is desirable and the first task of any and all sociologists. Asking public sociologists to let political proclivities determine what counts as sociological knowledge worthy of the name also asks them to dispense with any pretense to science.

#### IV

Burawoy (2004a, p. 1605) disagrees that “scientific sociologists have no business making moral or political pronouncements.” Deflem and Cole (2004) demur, holding that “sociologists can claim no expertise [when it comes to values], for in ethical debates all members of society can freely and equally participate” (cited in Deflem, 2004c). What body of knowledge exists – outside of Comte’s rhetorical flourishes, perhaps – that provides sociologists a mandate as specialists on moral issues? Sociology as a science per se tells us nothing about a desirable morality, offering no theoretical

grounding for what people *should* think, say, or do. If sociological practice is conflated with moralizing, then its practitioners' findings can easily be seen as positing a special spiritual knowledge. When natural science has uncovered the secret of the atom and the evolution of species, it is no leap to interpret sociologists speaking out on morality *as scientists* as if they believe they have discovered the secrets of human life, though they have done no such thing. Many people in the (American) public at large already react to sociology as they do to evolutionary theory and cosmological theories, that is, as somewhere between heresy and pabulum. A program where citizens are to receive the expert advice of sociologists as scientific moralists is just as likely to alienate the public as it is to influence and win them over.

The discourse of public sociology contains all manner of non-specific abstract concepts that sound worthy of support: freedom, justice, human rights, equality, and democracy. But these terms are difficult to translate into concrete analysis. What *are* justice, freedom, and human rights? If there are contested terrains of human knowledge, surely these are a few of them. For his part, one rarely finds Marx engaging such constructs in any way but critically exposing their hidden elitist biases. In a critique of Proudhon, he states:

So it is men of learning that make history, the men who know how to purloin God's secret thoughts. The common people have only to apply their revelations.... The solution of present problems does not lie for him in public action but in the dialectical rotations of his own head. (Marx, 1846, p. 141)

It is not morality or absolute truth for which Marx's agenda strives, though his analysis of capitalism is often read as just this. Similarly, Marx's socialism is not an abstract hypothetical nor is it measured by a moral yardstick. By extension, simply because a social movement proclaimed socialist allegiances did not mean Marx would unequivocally lend it support:

My own conviction is that the critical conjuncture for a new international working men's association has not yet arrived; hence I consider all labour congresses and/or socialist congresses, in so far as they are not related to the immediate, actual conditions obtaining in this or that specific nation, to be not only useless but also harmful. They will invariably fizzle out in a host of rehashed generalised banalities. (Marx, 1881, p. 67)

While public sociologists cannot be held liable for the lack of working class organization, it is such an organization that Marx asks us to join. And while it is true that public sociology's supporters often aim their inquiries toward specific conditions in particular regions, this is often done outside a direct

relationship to any international workers' association. Marx encouraged a tempered scholarly approach, won his political-economic knowledge through long intellectual struggle, and, in translating knowledge subsequently won into a political program, he advocated an active participatory politics predicated upon the emergence of working class organization. Above, Marx deems proclamations of right from learned classes outside of active participation in public action predicated on worker organization as amounting to little more than "rehashed generalised banalities" and as exhibitionism of "God's secret thoughts." Though Comte's rhetorical bluster – sociologists as a "priesthood" of society – is today seen as naive, utopian, and misguided, Marx's view sees many forms of social thought as not straying very far from this. However, ironically, public sociology's goal of social moralizing is suspected by its critics to be less Comtean in spirit and more Marxist in design.

Conflating the analytical and the political is a strategy every Machiavellian – right, left, or center – agrees with so long as the politics suits them. Burawoy (2004a, p. 1609), indicatively, forwards the Machiavellian principle that "our disciplinary knowledge" is simply "instrumental." Do the ends justify the means? Indeed for him they do:

In other words, should we repress the question of ends and pretend that knowledge and laws spring spontaneously from the data, if only we can develop the right methods? Or should we be concerned explicitly with the goals for which our research may be mobilized, and with the values that underpin and guide our research? (Burawoy, 2004a, p. 1606)

Certainly Marx's analytical work was animated by a concern over the suffering of the working classes and he saw *Capital* as offering tools working classes could use in their own self-defense. But, at the same time, he saw this work as a scientific analysis that exposed the inner-workings of the capitalist system. As a form of critical analysis done to (his view of) strict scientific standards, *Capital* was an inherently political work. But it was getting the science right, not the morality right, that animated Marx's efforts. Tellingly, he criticized two social reformist journals (*Zukunft* [Future] and *Neue Gesellschaft* [New Society]) because they had not ...

... contributed anything which could advance the movement one step further. Here there is an absolute lack of real educational material, whether factual or theoretical. In its place there are attempts to bring superficially mastered socialist ideas into harmony with the exceedingly varied theoretical standpoints which these gentlemen have brought with them from the university or elsewhere and of which, owing to the process of decomposition which the remnants of German philosophy are at present undergoing, one is more confused than the other. Instead of thoroughly studying the new science

themselves to begin with, each of them preferred to trim it to fit the point of view he had already brought along, made himself forthwith a private science of his own and at once came forward with the pretensions of wanting to teach it. Hence, there are about as many points of view among these gentry as there are heads; instead of producing clarity in a single case they have only produced desperate confusion – fortunately almost exclusively among themselves. Educative elements whose first principle is to teach what they have not learnt can very well be dispensed with by the Party. (Marx, 1879, p. 554)

While it is up to the readers to conclude for themselves whether Marx's depiction fits the public sociology program, it *is* worth pointing out that Burawoy's call places political values and goals ahead of misplaced concerns with "purity" – that is, getting the science right. Using the statement above as a template, a Marx-*ist* position would view the need to study science and the contribution of factual and/or theoretical material by intellectuals as the priorities ahead of any simple spoken alignment with socialist ideas, especially those superficially mastered. Just announcing oneself and associates as leftists did not mean that Marx would see them as kindred spirits in the communist cause. No doubt this strict position often left Marx isolated but at the same time it also shows his determined commitment to sound thinking and strategy and a refusal to accept an instrumentalist approach.

Be all this as it may, there *is* a particular moral critique in Marx's work worthy of note, though it does not stem from an abstract theory of right or justice. Marx's moral critique functions (*contra* Burawoy) through his methodological tack, as he treats capitalism as the most recent class system witnessed thus far in history. From the vantage point of the present looking backward, the intellectual–scientific discourse that defended slavery in the nineteenth century – or at least reacted with disdain to criticism of slavery and support for racial equality – appears not only tainted by racism – a support for the social domination of whites and slave owners – but also as scientifically malfasant. Clearly, social, political, and economic struggles have delegitimized the practice of slavery and racism in much of the world, in word if not always in deed. Marx's approach would similarly use a potential future, based on what our present makes possible but does not have capitalists in it as a ruling class, as its point of view for looking back at our present, treating capitalists much in the same way we think of slave owners today, that is, as an exploiting class of the past. Marxists often are a bit nonplussed at the inability of liberals to see capitalists this way. And, in a Marxist political vision, if it was possible to get rid of aristocrats and slave owners, then there is no reason why capitalists should not be next, a viewpoint that reveals an internal relation between Marx's method and his politics.

This form of analysis reveals a significant divide between a Marxist view of class analysis and sociological approaches that fail to conceptualize our capitalist present as a *capitalist present*, a mistake almost never made on the far-right end of the ideological divide. Simply put, any approach that abstracts capitalist society at the level of “society in general” only is both scientifically imprecise and just as politically biased in the favor of the forces of social domination as the editorial board of the *Wall Street Journal*, who do it more openly and therefore honestly.

## V

Public sociology has been criticized for arrogance (Tittle, 2004). The program does court a form of intellectual elitism as it asks sociologists to engage “publics beyond the academy in dialogue about matters of political and moral concern ... to be relevant to such publics without being faddish, that is subservient to publics” (Burawoy, 2004a, p. 1607). This engagement is to include “books that stimulate reflexive debate” and “columns in national newspapers such as the *New York Times*,” strategies of a “traditional” public sociology that “formulates a common public ‘interest’ and does so at arms length” (Burawoy, 2004a, p. 1607), an approach Burawoy (2004b, p. 17) openly describes as “in the paradigm of the elite public intellectual.” This stance he juxtaposes with an “*organic* or grassroots public sociology that engages the particularistic interests of more circumscribed publics – neighborhood groups, communities of faith, labor organizations, and so on” (Burawoy, 2004a, p. 1608). In short, Burawoy asks sociologists to engage the public through elite publications, policy-making institutions, and local organizations.

Marx was dubious and even contemptuous of the drive by an intellectual vanguard for leadership in a workers’ movement. Eschewing arms-length elitism, Marx’s outlook asks the scientist to participate in direct action as a fellow traveler in struggle and views top-down strategies as aloof, or at least an indication of an immature stage of a workers’ movement:

The first phase of the proletariat’s struggle against the bourgeoisie is marked by a sectarian movement. That is logical at a time when the proletariat has not yet developed sufficiently to act as a class. Certain thinkers criticise social antagonisms and suggest fantastic solutions thereof, which the mass of workers is left to accept, preach and put into practice. The sects formed by these initiators [like Bakunin, Owen, Fourier, Saint-Simon] are abstentionist by their very nature, i.e., alien to all real action, politics, strikes, coalitions, or, in a word, to any united movement. (Marx & Engels, 1872, p. 106)

This scientist–activist link Marx depicts as disdainful of the masses. Marx (1879, p. 551) caustically complained that for such intellectuals, “the working class of itself is incapable of its own emancipation. For this purpose it must place itself under the leadership of ‘educated and propertied’ bourgeois who alone possess the ‘time and opportunity’ to acquaint themselves with what is good for the workers.”

While Marx refuses to see the population as incapable of liberating themselves, Burawoy (2004a, p. 1613), accepting and paraphrasing Wolfe’s (1998) belief that some publics are “so far out of political kilter with sociology that they can offer no stable roots for a public sociology,” writes: “There are still many publics with whom we can converse” and asserts that “sociology itself creates categories of people who then often assume a public identity of their own. Social movements arise from new identities, often forged by intellectuals, and those identities in turn forge new publics.” This view argues that sociological research and political activism should be mutually reinforcing activities: “Public sociology has been the transmission belt of the civil rights and women’s movements that have transformed professional sociology” (Burawoy, 2004a, p. 1611). Thus with Comtean conviction, Burawoy (2004a, p. 1604) claims sociologists should engage society in order to help it catch up with its knowledge of the human condition:

... today the world is lagging behind sociology, unapologetic about its drift into political and economic fundamentalism.... The political context and the sociological conscience have moved in opposite directions, so that the world we inhabit is increasingly in conflict with the ethos and principles that animate sociologists – an ethos opposed to inequality, to the erosion of civil liberties, to the destruction of public life, and to discrimination and exclusion.

That is, public sociologists should try to help re-make the world according to their own image of what it *should* be (the abstract realm of ideas). It is difficult to imagine how a Leninist (or a Tory or a priest) would disagree. In reviewing the pre-Soviet struggles in Russia, Lenin (1929, p. 32) wrote: “We said that there could not yet be Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers. This consciousness could only be brought to them from without.” This appears to be Burawoy’s message, too, that is, for sociologists to act as vanguard leaders of masses. For Marx, the point is to try to remake the world according to what its material conditions make possible, what it *could* be (the concrete realm of real potential). Even if the accusation sounds unduly harsh and even if they are to be praised and supported for their efforts, nevertheless, *to the extent* it is fair to describe them as the “educated

and well-to-do” engaged in idealistic activism that proposes political goals for the masses to adopt, public sociology’s type of politics is not one that Marx’s advocates.

## VI

Though Burawoy (2004a, p. 1608) claims that public sociology “should be distinguished from *policy sociology* ... [which] focuses on solutions to specific problems defined by clients” – governmental, corporate, religious, and others – he admits that “There is no watertight distinction” between the two. Such blurred distinctions between policy and public sociology are to carry over into professional sociology, as Burawoy (2004a, p. 1609) urges that the mixing of the scientific search for knowledge with moral and policy pronouncements become the priorities of the discipline *as a profession*: “Public and policy sociologies could not exist without professional sociology, which provides legitimacy, expertise, distinctive problem definitions, relevant bodies of knowledge, and techniques for analyzing data. An effective public or policy sociology is not hostile to, but depends upon the professional sociology that lies at the core of our disciplinary field.” Here, professional sociology is to serve the needs of public and policy sociology. As public sociology finds expression in the discipline’s journals and websites, its audience is likely to be elite intellectuals in elite institutions – such as think tanks, government bureaus, and political advocacy organizations, that is, people who have the time and education to access this special knowledge. Public sociology then, in part, strives to re-shape the discipline toward active liberal reformism through advice to bureaucrats and the shaping of public discourse through business and state agencies as well as the corporate media.

Though this platform makes Burawoy’s critics take pause, these positions do not correspond with Marx’s (though it should be noted that Marx did write many articles for newspapers and did speak to worker organizations). In his criticism of the Social-Democratic Party, Marx (1879, p. 551) complained that in their approach “the bourgeoisie is on no account to be fought against but – to be won over by energetic propaganda.” Marx (1879, p. 552) criticized any reformist approach that “devotes one’s ‘whole strength and energy’ to all sorts of petty rubbish and the patching up of the capitalist order of society in order at least to produce the appearance of something happening without at the same time scaring the bourgeoisie.” For him, political action outside of direct class struggle amounts to mere

liberal tinkering without getting to the root of the problem. Marx (1879, pp. 553–554) summarized the putatively radical politics of his day:

It is the representatives of the petty bourgeoisie who are here presenting themselves, full of anxiety that the proletariat, under the pressure of its revolutionary position, may “go too far.” Instead of determined political opposition, general mediation; instead of struggle against the government and the bourgeoisie, an attempt to win over and persuade them; instead of defiant resistance to ill treatment from above, humble submission and confession that punishment was deserved. Historically necessary conflicts are all interpreted as misunderstandings, and all discussion ends with the assurance that after all we are all agreed on the main point. The people who came out as bourgeois democrats in 1848 could just as well call themselves Social-Democrats now. To the former the democratic republic was as unattainably remote as the overthrow of the capitalist system is to the latter, and therefore is of absolutely no importance in present-day politics; one can mediate, compromise and philanthropise to one’s heart’s content. It is just the same with the class struggle because its existence can no longer be denied, but in practice it is hushed up, diluted, attenuated. The Social-Democratic Party *is not* to be a worker’s party, is not to incur the odium of the bourgeoisie or of anyone else; it should above all conduct energetic propaganda among the bourgeoisie; instead of laying stress on far-reaching aims which frighten away the bourgeoisie and after all are not attainable in our generation, it should rather devote its whole strength and energy to those petty-bourgeois patchwork reforms which, by providing the old order of society with new props, may perhaps transform the ultimate catastrophe into a gradual, piece-meal and as far as possible peaceful process of dissolution. These are the same people who, ostensibly engaged in indefatigable activity, not only do nothing themselves but try to prevent anything from happening at all except – chatter.... Where the class struggle is pushed aside as a disagreeable “coarse” phenomenon, nothing remains as a basis for socialism but “true love of humanity” and empty phraseology about “justice.”

Marx asks for determined opposition over general mediation, struggle against the government and the bourgeoisie rather than attempts at persuasion, and defiant resistance over submission to authority. Conflicts should be interpreted less as misunderstandings and more as fundamentally opposed interests, that is, the left and right mystify the problem should they amicably admit they are at least agreed on the importance of justice, freedom, democracy, etc. His goal is the overthrow of the capitalist system, which cannot be achieved through compromise and philanthropy and further, because the reality of class struggle cannot be denied, it should not be assuaged. In fact, political struggle should frighten the bourgeoisie and incur their odium, not conduct energetic propaganda among them. Marx opposes patchwork reforms offering a gradual, piecemeal, and peaceful process of dissolution of capitalism and he is especially disdainful of politics that cultivate rhetoric about a “true love of humanity” and “justice.”

This demanding and radical politic fundamentally challenges any comparison of it with public sociology. Burawoy's program, in fact, reflects more of those sentiments Marx *argues against* rather than those he *argues for*. Burawoy's public sociology does not demand a confrontation with the powers-that-be but hopes to goad them into seeing things the way of the sociologist, tactics quite outside the scope of struggle, agitation, and revolt. In light of Marx's statement above, Burawoy's approach is tempered, measured, and not radical in the least. However, mirroring Marx's critique of liberals who fear radical action, some critics actually complain that Burawoy's strategy "goes too far" (Godard, 2004, p. B18). Imagine the outrage from the mainstream of sociology if Burawoy had advocated *Marx's* platform! To the extent that Burawoy's views are too radical for mainstream sociologists today, the distance between Marx's views and both of these camps is amply demonstrated.

Not only is public sociology closer to a liberal reformism Marx criticized, it also contains forms of socialist discourse he found objectionable. On the one hand, he pronounced a distinct "dislike for sentimental socialistic daydreams" (Marx, 1846, p. 142). On the other, he objected to what he termed *vulgar socialism*: "Vulgar socialism (and from it in turn a section of the democracy) has taken over from the bourgeois economists the consideration and treatment of distribution as independent of the mode of production and hence the presentation of socialism as turning principally on distribution. After the real relation has long been made clear, why retrogress again?" (Marx, 1875, p. 532). These two forms of socialist thought, though not identical, are not unrelated. Utopian socialism erects abstract models and theories of a more perfect society in the mind outside of real concrete struggles in the present. Vulgar socialism demands simply a greater level of material social equality, a politic that does not strive to overturn all relations of domination, especially the rule of capital. Both forms of socialist discourse thus fail to adequately grasp the organizing principle of capital and how a future society must be built upon this foundation while transcending it at the same time. Rather, vulgar and utopian socialist approaches attempt to make society conform to an abstract notion of "just" and "fair," the former simply reforming capital and the latter disregarding its power to limit what can or cannot be done in the present. Understood as such, one might see utopian and vulgar socialist strands in those public sociology positions that strive for the "implementation of human rights and social justice" (Rodriguez, 2004, p. 404).

While these are important questions for those suffering under institutional arrangements that rob them of dignity, autonomy, and the material

resources that sustain life, that theorizing over these concerns is commensurate with Marx's political strategy is doubtful:

I have dealt more at length with the "undiminished proceeds of labour," on the one hand, and with "equal right" and "fair distribution," on the other, in order to show what a crime it is to attempt, on the one hand, to force on our Party again, as dogmas, ideas which in certain period had some meaning but have now become obsolete rubbish, while again perverting, on the other, the realistic outlook, which it cost so much effort to instill into the Party but which has now taken root in it, by means of ideological nonsense about right and other trash so common among the democrats and French Socialists. (Marx, 1875, p. 531)

Viewing dialog about right, justice, and equality as "ideological nonsense" is indeed a harsh judgment. One is given pause to ask why Marx would render such an opinion. Usually, these notions are pitched at a broad level – that is, "society" in general – and then applied to a capitalist society that is (1) interpreted as if it is simply an expression of "society" in general but also (2) fundamentally unable to cultivate any concrete practice of right, justice, and equality given the class structure at its material base. In such a construction, "such hollow phrases can be twisted and turned as desired" (Marx, 1875, p. 527).

The points of contention for this paper are whether questions of social justice *can be* illuminated by sociological knowledge (perhaps), *should be* ensconced into the ASA through the program of public sociology (a question for debate), and, moreover, whether this thrust is in fact aligned with Marx's approach to science and politics (doubtful). To the extent that public sociology remains within the realm of inquiry over abstract values such as freedom or justice and to the extent its policy advocacy goes no farther than support for a more equal distribution of status and wealth *within* capitalist society, it is reasonable to conclude that public sociology has little to do with Marx's ideas. If so, critics of public sociology who accuse it of smuggling in Marx's intellectual-political program are simply wrong.

## VII

Are Marx's political principles worth supporting? They certainly are radical, demanding, and maybe even impractical. Perhaps capitalism has developed to such an extent that the timeliness of Marx's call to action for mid-late nineteenth century European class struggle has passed for us today? Perhaps his critique of liberal and/or reformist politics is too harsh and dogmatic and his approach simply unrealistic? Even Marx (1881, p. 66) believed in a

flexible political strategy, arguing that “What is to be done, and done *immediately* at any given, particular moment in the future, depends, of course, wholly and entirely on the actual historical circumstances in which action is taken.” Could we not reasonably (and more charitably) view public sociology as a Gramscian “war of position?” Perhaps with the capitalist system’s current dominance and with the lack of working class organization with which to align political action, it is strategically necessary to wield the tools of sociological knowledge in a way that is most useful for our present conditions. Further, injecting a sociological critique into the editorial pages of the *Wall Street Journal* is certainly an attractive idea. Be all this as it may, mainstream sociologists are unlikely to admit that their support for value neutrality and their rejection of a critique of the capitalist political economy are also wars of position in favor of the institutions and classes that dominate modern society. Treating the institutions of capitalist society as taken-for-granted is as value-laden and no less a political act than the public sociology program its critics decry. So, it is not politics per se public sociology’s critics object to, just the politics of others, a double-standard monopolized by no one school of thought.

This brings up an ironic observation. Not only are Marx’s political principles not in-line with many of those advocated by Burawoy and public sociology’s supporters, but his principles and those of public sociology’s *critics* are closer in form and content than one might suppose. Like Marx’s broadside again “empty phraseology,” Brady (2004, p. 1631) worries that “Burawoy does not offer any set of concrete proposals for practice.” Like Marx’s critique of “fantastic solutions,” Brady (2004, p. 1636) also feels that “Public sociology seems an admirable grand theme. But, as is often the case, grand themes can be less promising upon close inspection.” Like Marx’s critique of forms of knowledge that base their validity on whether this theorem or that is useful or harmful, expedient or inexpedient, politically dangerous or not, Tittle (2004, p. 1641) believes that public sociology “endangers what little legitimacy sociology has, thereby helping to undermine the chances of sociological knowledge ever being taken seriously.” And, like Marx’s advocacy of “public action,” Tittle (2004, p. 1643), too, criticizes the view “that we should engage societal processes as sociologists rather than as citizens,” which he believes “is contrary to the principles of participatory democracy.” These critics fear public sociology’s program will undermine sociology’s scientific basis and has a decidedly anti-democratic thrust, views that are not at all out of sync with Marx.

Why are Burawoy’s mainstream critics, then, so hostile at the Marxian influence they perceive to be embedded in public sociology? Perhaps they are

confusing a Marx they think existed with the Leninists who actually did? In *What is to be Done?*, for example, Lenin (1929, p. 41) proposed a program to “divert the labour movement ... from under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social-Democracy.” Two commentators note: “Democracy throughout society was not yet feasible, Lenin believed, because the masses could not yet be trusted to know their own real interests. Left to their own devices, without a vanguard party to tutor and guide them, the workers would make wrong or even reactionary decisions” (Ball & Dagger, 1999, p. 158, 160). Contrary to this view, in the “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” Marx and Engels (1848, p. 490) argued that the goal of working class revolutionary action is to “win the battle of democracy” rather than handing this battle over to elite public intellectuals to fight and win for them. Plainly, public sociology’s political stance is closer to Lenin’s views than to Marx’s.

Whether by supporters or critics, viewing public sociology as Marxist in design opens the door for Marx’s critics from conventional sociology to again paint anything remotely associated with his thought as suspiciously malfeasant. While the presence of Marxists as a small community grants intellectual legitimacy to the discipline as a whole, none-too-few conventional sociologists have failed to engage in a sustained analysis of capitalism and have refused to examine Marx’s work on the terrain he set out. Waving him off as a naive, utopian, romantic, and/or authoritarian is not a substitute for serious inquiry into his work’s ontological and epistemological principles. A rigorous literature exists that has reconstructed Marx’s principles of research but for conventional views it is as if appealing to accepted, stereotypical, and inaccurate “truths” about Marx and discharging his supporters with cavalier dismissals substitutes for real analytical engagement. One source of confusion lies in that the Marx that conventional sociology and none-too-few Marxists have handed down sees him holding views similar to the ways of thinking and acting advocated by public sociology’s supporters. On the contrary, by courting moral discourse, public sociology is closer to Comte than to Marx. Its political elitism mirrors Lenin. Put together, public sociology unifies elite-liberal social activism, Cometean religiosity, and Leninist vanguardism, all features that tend away from Marx’s research and political programs.

Those who fear the prospect of Marx’s corrupting influence on professional sociology through public sociology should rest easy. The main differences between public sociology and its critics are (1) a *slightly* greater leftist bent in politics and (2) a more honest and open admittance about having a political program. Little to none of this is specifically or uniquely Marx-ian.

## VIII

Declarations on the ideal conditions of social life are no simple matter. Striving for purity via neutrality achieves neither, as an attempt at neutrality in any sociology of the present endorses the power of capital. Public sociology's program argues that we should treat explicit political advocacy as a legitimate part of our organizational discourse. While members of the ASA might have strong views on social issues, and probably should, cloaking activism and advocacy under the umbrella of an organization whose *collective raison d'être* is a scientific pursuit of knowledge is disingenuous because it creates the double illusion that its members accept declarations on social policy and of greater unanimity on those policy positions themselves. It is simply not the case that the discipline or the ASA membership enjoys a general agreement on issues of social right or policy. Burawoy (2004c, p. B24) claims that he is "not suggesting that public sociology have a particular orientation." It is hard to accept him at his word here, given that he justified his proposal on the ASA's move to the left. Further, would he favor the prospect of an activist public sociology had it been proposed after the membership of the ASA moved further to the right? And, would his supporters bemoan a public sociology actively and openly subservient to conservative, sexist, homophobic, racist, and/or ruling class interests? These questions answer themselves.

Burawoy (2004a, p. 1605) admits Weber, whom he references to defend his position, held that, given that "moral stances and value commitments are the sine qua non of any research program ... there is no inherent contradiction in publicly declaring those commitments (although for Weber this should be done in the altogether separate sphere of politics)." Here, Burawoy in as much admits his proposal is not Weberian but rather that it conflates scientific inquiry and political action without carving out their identities, their differences, and their internal relations. What happens when political advocacy is conflated with science? Burawoy (2004a, p. 1616) suggests he knows the answer: "Sociology disappears with the eclipse of civil society as in fascism, Stalinism or Pinochet's Chile, just as it quickly bubbles to the surface with the unfurling of perestroika in the Soviet Union or the civic and labor associations of South Africa's anti-apartheid movement." Does this recognition not also suggest that inserting sociology into the political apparatus could threaten our profession once the winds of political change approach fascism again, a real threat today? There is little prospect that public sociology can chart a new course for the capitalist ship of state. There is also no doubt that aligning professional sociology more closely with

state power will make it easier to swat should it become the fly that threatens to spoil the ointment.

The threat to radicals – and thus conventional sociologists by professional association – is not that Marx was wrong, but, rather, if he was right. That is, if Marx developed the necessary analytical tools to expose the exploitation and ideological rhetoric inherent to the capitalist system, then his work and those aligned with it should expect to be attacked by the class allies of capital. By extension, should a Marxist sociology achieve greater academic notoriety, which is something those who work within this tradition often declare as a desire, one possible outcome is that the forces of reaction will attack the discipline. With the academy already under attack as a haven for liberal corruption, without wider social support from working class organization as a structural reality, an intellectual movement that proclaims Marxism as its mantle threatens to antagonize reactionary forces of domination but with only a professional organization as a defensive weapon, a tactic and a politic that not even all its members support. One analogy is from chess, where a strategic blunder is to send a pawn on an attack without sufficient support from other pieces. Should the pawn actually threaten the other side, it will likely receive swift and eliminating attention. Should the pawn's attack be perceived as relatively harmless, the opponent is likely to simply ignore it.

As a liberal reformist movement, public sociology offers no real threat to the structure of capitalist power. Why must this program, supposedly informed by Marxian thinking, strive for fitting into the institutions of power? Why not work outside of them? Perhaps this is because institutions are where established power and professional influence reside. Nevertheless, public sociology, mobilizing the university without sufficient support from working class organizations, opens itself – and by extension the discipline – to attack. Burawoy forgets Marx's central lesson – it is *class* struggle that remains the name of the game – and as a result his program makes all sociologists vulnerable by waging its struggles outside of class solidarity and organization. On this point, public sociology's critics are not paranoid in their worries. Even if their concerns are not articulated as such, public sociology offers a political avenue for radical intellectuals but without the protection and solidarity of class allies. If this is Marxism, it is bad Marxism and its supporters should not pretend this does not open the discipline to threats, at least in potential.

It is nonetheless worth considering that perhaps sociologists *should* use the ASA to take the political risk and target the forces of exploitation, power, and ideological bamboozling. It is certainly worth debating and

history has not condemned such things as the abolitionist movement for its efforts against slavery. Still, it bears acknowledging that mobilizing their professional organization under the guise of science rather than that of politics might weaken all sociologists. When the ASA sponsored a resolution for members to endorse against the Bush administration's attack on Iraq, this view could be supported without pretending to mobilize sociological theory in the service of a moral claim. Just as one needs no moral theory to defend oneself from an attack by someone on the street, one needs no general theory to explain why unilaterally attacking another country should be opposed. One can be used to inform the other if one so wishes; there are points of contact. Our use of science in a political confrontation. However, should not simply conflate the two and blur the discursive tacks needed to engage them. While principled stands on power relations often threaten a reaction from the powerful, historically, it has been those making such stands that have initiated positive changes in this world. Supporters of Burawoy are thus stuck between being knowledge producers and a reasonable desire to do something with that knowledge. All ASA members have a right to question whether or not the ASA is the place for activism and if public sociology's platform is one that should be adopted. We must not push our pawns forward too quickly and, moreover, we must not push them into a poorly considered position. A desire for progress can make us as impatient and imprudent as the forces of reaction, but at the same time, capitalism is a game we cannot opt out of, so push our pieces we must.

Facing the dilemmas of our society, Marx (1867, p. 20) asks that we resist the urge to "draw the magic cap down over eyes and ears as a make-believe that there are no monsters." To their credit, public sociology's defenders have initiated a dialog on how to address the social inequalities of capitalist society that sociology is geared to study, a prospect mainstream sociologists have often lacked the initiative, will, and/or courage to do. However, in advancing public sociology's agenda, it appears as if officials in the ASA acted on their own accord, without a mandate, and based only on the assertion of a general trend. According to one critic, public sociology was initiated "by means of a strategically manufactured consent based on an absence of a dialogue *about* public sociology" (Deflem, 2005b, p. 92). Deflem (2004b, p. 9) bases this claim on the fact that when the ASA presented its membership a resolution on a proposed constitutional amendment on gay marriage, they were told that the ASA Council "voiced unanimous, strong support for this resolution," that the resolution was "member initiated," though "it was in fact ASA President Burawoy who

first initiated the idea” and that “the resolution process was not preceded by any debate.” If true, sociology’s collective did not democratically empower its leadership to act in the manner that public sociologists claim to advocate but rather supported an issue forced upon the ASA by a vanguard. Here is thus another horn in the dilemma: the debate over public sociology’s initiatives expresses the outlines of an emerging schism within the disciples of Comte over morals, tactics, and what will count as sociological knowledge. To draw a cap down over our eyes and pretend all is well within our professional ranks would be foolish.

## IX

Burawoy (2004a, p. 1612) believes one problem this program is “fraught” with is “deciding the criteria of good public sociology and who should evaluate it.” Addressing such issues, his supporters are asked to “institutionalize these subordinate sociologies within the academy, alongside a hegemonic professional sociology” (Burawoy, 2004a, p. 1612). In the January, 2005, edition of *Footnotes* (the ASA newsletter), for instance, the Task Force on Institutionalizing Public Sociologies directs members to go to their website and “enter information on their public sociology activities as well as any departmental tenure and promotion guidelines relevant to evaluating public sociology” (Hossfeld, 2005, p. 3). The Task Force’s charge from the ASA is to “(1) develop proposals for the recognition and validation of on-going public sociology; (2) develop guidelines for evaluating public sociology as a scholarly enterprise; and (3) propose incentives and rewards for doing public sociology.” Rather than cultivating ties to the working class, “the Task Force wants to engage the membership in a discussion on the important issues affecting public sociologists – specifically issues around promotion and tenure” (Hossfeld, 2005, p. 3).

Has the horse been let out of the barn? The central themes of public sociology are discourse on social morality, public policy, and institutional reform, engaging in debate on these questions through governmental organizations, professional journals, and the mass media, and institutionalizing these activities within the discipline as scholarship worthy of tenure. Public sociology’s use of professional sociology as an institutional cover for legitimacy makes it tempting to revisit Marx’s complaint about advancing middle-class careers and professional opportunism under the guise of activism. Too cynical? Perhaps. Still, it is doubtful whether the goal of achieving promotion and tenure through activism would be very high on

Marx's scholarly agenda. If both public sociology's supporters and its critics would leave their appeals to and broadsides against Marx out of their debates over this program's merits, they would provide better service to our discipline. Given that Marx's ideas are part of the sociological tradition and that his politics are outside those found in the proposals for a public sociology, this strand of the debate has proceeded under entirely false premises.

## X

It is quite reasonable to argue that Marx's politic is too demanding or radical and that the type of engagement supported by public sociology is more pragmatic. Even if true, this supports the contention that public sociology is no reflection of Marx's politics. A skeptic might still ask: "What of Marx's Thesis Eleven? That the point is not to just interpret the world but to change it?" The positions reviewed here in no way contradict Marx's support for class struggle. If one were to sum up Marx's views above, what would this look like? Marx was an activist, yes, but he avoided letting his political commitments turn his research simply into a piece of clay to fit his notion of a perfect or just world. Changing the world in the way Marx advocates requires mass movements and public action based on worker organization. He demanded determined political opposition, struggle against the government and the bourgeoisie, defiant resistance, and a steadfast conviction that capitalism was imbued with opposed class interests. The bourgeoisie should be intimidated, and reformist approaches are rejected in favor of the whole scale elimination of the capitalist order through an un-muted class struggle. Activists should attack the bourgeois institutional framework rather than engage in propaganda or philanthropy within it. One need not agree with these views, and it is unlikely many who support Burawoy's initiative will find succor in them. The central goal of *this* analysis, however, is not to undercut a Marxian-inspired sociology or a Marxian politic but to demonstrate that the debate between public sociology and its critics has set up a vision of Marx that bears little resemblance to the actually existing Marx, and this functions as a strawman for more conservative sociologists to shoot down, thus adding one more string of attacks to the already brutal treatment Marx's work commonly receives at their hands.

Why do critics fear that public sociology is a program inspired by Marx? The public sociology program contradicts Marx's own and so critics should not fear that it will infect sociology with Marx's radical politics. With its

omission of active class struggle that attacks capital and scares the bourgeoisie, with its conflation of scientific discourse with political action, and its pronouncements on abstract principles such as democracy, freedom, and justice, public sociology is neither Marxist nor radical. Perhaps critics, and some public sociologists, rely too much on the received wisdom of “what everybody knows” about Marx and both threaten to once again paint Marx as a Leninist. If subverting capitalism is public sociology’s goal, then their advocates should follow the directive to “openly, in the face of the whole world, publish their views, their aims, their tendencies” (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 473). This would be an honest declaration of an alignment, whether with Marx or Lenin (not both) or Comte. It also would confirm their critics’ fears, but at least a debate could take place in a more productive way. However, most of public sociology’s discourse does not openly declare that their plans incorporate an attack on capital. To this extent, may be the bourgeoisie will hardly take notice.

## NOTES

1. A short list of terms and ideas commonly associated with Marx but which he never used or endorsed would include: dialectical materialism, thesis-antithesis-synthesis, false consciousness, and economic determinism. “Dialectical materialism” was invented after his death and is a simplified and misleading reconstruction used by the Soviets as a world-philosophy. The “thesis-antithesis-synthesis” model was one he explicitly rejected as metaphysical. “False consciousness” was a term used by Engels after Marx’s death. And, finally, serious Marxian scholarship has debunked the assumption that Marx was an economic determinist. It might be added that Marx was not “the father of communism,” nor was he a Utopian, he eschewed the term “Marxism,” was against cults of personality and all forms of authority, did not believe all societies move through the same modes of production in a linear fashion, and did not see communism as a teleological force that would arrive by its own accord (for discussion, see Paolucci, 2007, Chapter 1).

2. Steinmetz (2005) provides an insightful discussion on the rise of favored epistemological traditions in sociology as related to material conditions (e.g., Fordism) and relations of political power (e.g., government funding). Often, though not always, these conditions – external to issues in the philosophy of science – determined which research programs have ruled in various eras.

3. In 1890, Marx’s son-in-law, Paul Lafargue, commented on his memory of his wife’s father: “Although Marx sympathized profoundly with the sufferings of the working classes, it was not sentimental considerations but the study of history and political economy that led him to communist views. He maintained that any unbiased man, free from the influence of private interests and not blinded by class prejudices, must necessarily come to the same conclusions” (in McLellan, 1981, p. 67).

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# THE SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY OF C. WRIGHT MILLS: TOWARD A CRITIQUE OF POSTMODERNITY

Steven P. Dandaneau

American intellectuals are suffering the tremors of men who face overwhelming defeat. They are worried and distraught, some only half aware of their condition, others so painfully aware of it that they must obscure it by busy work and self-deception. C. Wright Mills (1944, p. 292)

In 1960, C. Wright Mills glanced back over the frantic intellectual production that was to serve posterity as his mature sociology and took stock. In “A Personal Note to the Reader,” which was meant as an appendix to the book manuscript, *The Cultural Apparatus*, Mills writes, “early one morning last year” he re-read his 1944 article, “The Powerless People: The Role of the Intellectuals”:

I was both depressed and pleased to see how many themes it contained which, during the last sixteen years, I have been working out.<sup>1</sup>

He then proceeded to summarize these themes in the form of a characteristically Millsian “Slogun [sic] Sheet.”

The overdeveloped society  
Withdrawal from politics  
Triumph of technique  
Bureaucratization of reason

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Cheerful robots  
 Liberal rhetoric  
 The national celebration  
 Collapse of ideology  
 Withdrawn, subservient  
 Semi-intellectual  
 Crackpot realism  
 Commercialization and governmentalization of falsehood<sup>2</sup>

This laundry list resides among Mills' papers at the University of Texas at Austin. It can be read as part explanation, part indictment, partly handwaving, and partly handwringing. But could it really be that the main thrust of Mills' critique of mid-century America was present or otherwise implied in 1944s "The Powerless People," a seemingly minor text in Mills' corpus from the war years, his concise contribution to the third issue of Dwight MacDonald's *Politics*?<sup>3</sup>

Mills' 1960 self-reflection suggests not so much a remarkable consistency as a remarkable prescience at the core of his distinctive sociology. If, as I will argue, Mills theorized the salient features of postmodernity in the midst of the Second World War, he did so 35 years prior to Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1983 [1979]). This perspective on Mills' truncated oeuvre helps situate him as a prescient sociological theorist and dispels at least some of the myths about his sociology.<sup>4</sup> That the defining character of Mills' sociological theory would have coalesced in this particular essay is also important for the reason that, while Mills apparently recognized the lineage, none of his many and various expositors since have retraced his steps in quite the same way.<sup>5</sup> The following is an attempt to do so.

## I

The "theory" in the distinctive sociological theory of C. Wright Mills is this: American society was increasingly "postmodern," by which he meant a society devoid of reason and freedom as practical features of everyday life and thus a societal formation fundamentally severed from the aims and optimism of The Enlightenment (Mills, 1959b, p. 13, p. 166, also 1959a). With Max Weber and John Dewey principally in mind, but also upon the benefit of his study of Marx and the Frankfurt School, Mills argued that "rationality without reason" was coming to dominate lived experience (see Dandaneau, 2001, 2006, 2007).

This postmodern dystopia, in Mills' view, resulted primarily from two disastrous developments emerging from within the totality of modernity. First, there was what might be called the reproduction of mass society by means of mass society, which, although certainly known in other advanced capitalist-industrial societies, was in the United States further developed than it was anywhere else. Second, and of no less significance, there was also in the United States the creation of a state apparatus as menacing as German fascism or Soviet totalitarianism was to the free exercise of reason in the practical conduct of human affairs, perhaps even more so because its existence had typically gone unrecognized. In other words, Mills theorized an epochal shift within the totality of modernity, which he was among the first to name "postmodern,"<sup>6</sup> and which he explained through analysis of an emergent culture industry (compare Mills, 1960a with Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002 [1944]), and, as it were, by bringing the state back in (see Skocpol, Evans, & Rueschemeyer, 1985). One implication of this interpretation is already evident: while it is commonplace to regard Mills as foremost a theorist of "power" (see Horowitz, 1983; Form, 2007), it is instead more accurate to think of him as a theorist of postmodernity, to which his various analyses of changes in the institutionalization of cultural and political power are subordinate as a means to this practical, historical end.

Mills' epistemology and politics were always and without exception pragmatist, even when he declared himself a "plain Marxist" (see Mills, 1962; also Tilman, 1984; West, 1989). Mills' theory of mass society was therefore historically specific and especially mindful of the dialectics of agency and structure. Mills therefore attended to the reproduction of mass society from out of mass society and through its own historically established institutional means because he viewed this process as chiefly responsible for the increasingly delusory quality of everyday life in the United States. Mills was here in basic agreement with Max Weber, who had 40 years prior determined that culture in the United States was effectively vanquished, a "nullity" (Weber, 1958 [1904/1905], p. 182). But Mills argued that the full-scale commercialization and administration of culture did not begin in earnest until the 1920s. The reification of culture has since worked its way through various periods of substantial practical reproduction, and since Mills' time, of course, additional cycles of reproduction still. The effect of commercial culture's *administered commercial reproduction* was an increasing pervasiveness of mass society wedded to an increasing maddening character (as later effectively analyzed, e.g., by the late Jean Baurillard).

As he was not insensible to experience or captured by a prevailing ideology, Mills also saw the power and madness of modern war. A populist

outsider who was skeptical of the Eastern Establishment's "New Deal," a sour veteran of the marshal environs of Texas A&M University, and an employee in and of wartime Washington, DC, Mills viewed the making of the modern war-making (and, soon thereafter, nuclear) state as an historically specific development of nearly unrivaled sociological significance. With an accurate, one might say, Weberian sense for its immense scale and significance amid competing institutional features of the emergent postmodern totality, Mills identified the American state as the source of what would become a historically unprecedented use of violence in human affairs. As with the continual reproduction of Culture, Inc., the postmodern American state stands back of an unbroken string of wars and lesser human atrocities at home and abroad which were (and are) enacted and conducted without the benefit of democratic legitimation. Even sociologists who are sympathetic to Mills' later theory of the "power elite" typically misunderstand this aspect of his sociology (see, e.g., Wolfe, 2000; Dandaneau, 2006), although it is essential and distinctive and, arguably, of the greatest contemporary value (Summers, 2006).

Thus, while Eric Blair did not live long enough to use a notion like postmodernity to describe Oceania's societal organization (see Dandaneau & Falcone, 1998), I want to suggest that he and C. Wright Mills spent the waning years of the Second World War working out similar visions of the Anglo-American post-war world. It is not merely incidental, but rather further proof of the veracity of their theoretical production that the workings of this self-same postmodernity would in time distort the legacy of both thinkers via its characteristic machinations: both would enjoy a considerable popularity made hollow by the near-complete absence of genuine, much less politically useful, understanding. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is perhaps the most widely recognized work in 20th century British literature; C. Wright Mills is perhaps the most recognized American sociologist. Yet, neither author has made any real difference. They would be the first to say so and, moreover, to offer compelling explanations for their defeat.

## II

Having asserted the existence of a distinctive sociological theory and intimated the nature of its subsequent fate, I turn to its documentation, particularly via "The Powerless People," which Mills presumably composed for himself, MacDonald, and the other would-be Winston Smiths of the

day. In order to make my explication maximally accessible, all references other than those to archival documents are drawn using the version of the “The Powerless People” reprinted in Irving Louis Horowitz’s *Power, Politics and People* (1963), and under the title, “The Social Role of the Intellectual,” or similarly available sources. Before taking up Mills’ analysis of the American state circa 1944, then, what evidence exists for the notion that he attached great theoretical importance to the reproduction of mass society by means of mass society?

A novel approach to Mills’ theory of mass society is via his unpublished notes. The same file in the C. Wright Mills Papers that is home to Mills’ 1960 reflections on “The Powerless People” also contains an impressively in-depth 1952–1953 syllabus for “Social Science 179b: The American Twenties.” Mills was a student of the period even after the publication of *White Collar* (1951), which is usually recognized as Mills’ principal study of mass society even though a chapter on mass society appears in *The Power Elite* (1956; also Vidich, 1995). In a manuscript assembled by Mills for use in completing *The Cultural Apparatus*, and, in this particular instance, for addressing the origin of mass society, Mills writes:

The pivotal decade for this shift [from production to merchandising, and the economic system which makes a fetish of efficiency (to one that) becomes highly inefficient and systematically wasteful] in the USA was the ‘twenties’; but it is since the ending of World War Two that the overdeveloped economy has truly come to flourish.<sup>7</sup>

And of this overdeveloped economy, Mills then asserts that its “marketing apparatus defines reality, banalizes sensibility, and confuses reasoning.”<sup>8</sup> To assess the extent of these posited consequences of socio-economic overdevelopment, if also to highlight its implications for democratic politics, Mills then places intellectuals at center stage and queries as to the changing nature of their social location under conditions of postmodernity. This theoretical move is the manifest burden of 1944s “The Powerless People” and it is a prominent theme of the 1959 published version “The Cultural Apparatus.” In both, intellectuals are treated as canaries in the culture industry coal mine.

Appropriating Marxian theoretical language, Mills stresses in “The Powerless People” that “the means of effective communication are being expropriated from the intellectual worker” (1944, p. 297). He continues in italicized print:

The material basis of his initiative and intellectual freedom is no longer in his hands. Some intellectuals feel these processes in their work. They know more than they say and they are powerless and afraid (p. 297).

As an evidence for this elimination of the means by which could flourish would-be public intellectuals and what is often today called public sociology, Mills points to the restrictive conditions of work for “the hired man of an ‘information industry’” and bemoans the decline of “the larger universities” as once-proud bastions of an independent, politically courageous professoriate (pp. 296–297). Mills also points to “the subtle effects upon some American intellectuals” of “The United States’ growing international entanglements,” which Mills suggests too often leads to “a voluntary censorship” (*ibid.*).

But as important as each manifestation of the bureaucratization of culture and the cultural forms of ideological conformity, repression, and censorship are, Mills is most keen to stress what might be called the hegemonic consequence of these factors for the total condition of intellectual work. In a rather decisive and astonishing turn in his argument, Mills asserts of his own times that “a politics of organized irresponsibility prevails, and because of it, men in high places must hide the facts of life in order to retain their power” (p. 298). If the apex of the information/culture industries promote “universal deception” concerning “the facts of life,” then the paid hirelings of state, firm, and university, Mills thinks, are increasingly encouraged to have their “published opinions” conform to the prevailing “limits” (*ibid.*). An understanding of such a domestic and international American totality – what Henry Luce would in 1941 trumpet as “The American Century” and what Mills would later deride as “the new American celebration” (1956, p. 25), or, as in the litany quoted above, “the National Celebration” – was in 1944 central to Mills’ analysis of the denuded status of the American intellectual and, by extension, to the mass character of the American cultural apparatus.

The value of the coal mine metaphor ceases, however, when Mills turns, as he does at this point in “The Powerless People,” to the problem of responsibility vis-à-vis organized irresponsibility, and with respect, in particular, to the decline of intellectual independence amid an overall decline in the consequential role for reason in human affairs. Even though it did not rate inclusion in his slogan sheet, Mills would later call this the problem of “the Intellectual Default” to “the Main Drift.” Making explicit and exclusive reference to “the ethics and politics” of John Dewey and Max Weber, Mills argues that “the tragedy of irresponsibility may be confronted introspectively, as a moral or intellectual problem,” and “it may be confronted publicly, as problem of political economy” (*ibid.*). As any reader of *The Sociological Imagination* (1959b) knows, Mills believed it best to integrate the introspective and the public, the ethical and the political, the

realm of action in particular milieux and the realm of institutional causation and global interdependence. The medium of this integration was the self-consciousness that comes with an exact imagining of what obtains, what once obtained, and what might yet be practical within the totality of human experience. "If he is to think politically in a realistic way," Mills writes, "the intellectual must constantly know his own social position" (p. 299).

What I am arguing is that Mills understands the nature of the intellectual's social position as the product of the reproduction of mass society from out of itself, which is not meant as anything more mysterious than asserting the existence of a mass society, taking its measure at T1, T2, T3, and so on, and stressing that the conditions of T2 are determined by T1, and the conditions of T3 are determined by those prevailing at T2, and so forth. Social position is given within a historical institutional totality. Likewise, there is no mystery in identifying the principal institutional fact that links the inner world of the would-be intellectual and the problem of reason playing a pragmatic or history-making role in human affairs: Mills has already identified it in the language of Marxian political economy as the expropriation of the means of communication. When the means of communication are so expropriated via increasingly integrated capitalist and state bureaucracies, their product, the products of a politically oriented cultural apparatus or culture industry, shape and, if pervasive and compelling enough, effectively determine the given definition of seemingly innumerable local realities. Respite and resistance is thus cornered and contained and the main of social life is then left to be continuously shaped and re-shaped by rationalized central cultural mechanisms mindful of their symbiotic relationship to increasingly centralized political dominion. Over time, the result is that seemingly innumerable local milieu and inner worlds are increasingly formed from the outset as attuned to accept, even desire, reified and mass-produced commercial culture. Mills would later, of course, identify the specter of the "Cheerful Robot" (1959b).

But it is intellectuals whose fate in the process of mechanized cultural reproduction is least easily and practically determined, whose responsibilities are therefore the greatest and whose experience in the fight against organized irresponsibility is perhaps the most telling. So eloquent is Mills on this point, I quote a full paragraph from "The Powerless People":

The independent artist and intellectual are among the few remaining personalities equipped to resist and to fight the stereotyping and consequent death of genuinely lively things. Fresh perception now involves the capacity continually to unmask and to smash the stereotypes of vision and intellect with which modern communications swamp us. These worlds of mass-art and mass-thought are increasingly geared to the demands of

politics. That is why it is in politics that intellectual solidarity and effort must be centered. If the thinker does not relate himself to the value of truth in political struggle, he cannot responsibly cope with the whole of live experience (*ibid.*).

The pragmatist Mills stresses the always, already vital importance of “live experience,” “fresh perception,” “personalities” equipped with agency, ready to experience “genuinely lively things,” ready to resist, fight, and join in solidarity with others. The medium of this experience is the free communication of “relevant knowledge” over and against the workings of what he later calls postmodernity’s “communicational machineries” (p. 302, p. 304).

Mills’ debt to Dewey, but also to the likes of George Herbert Mead, William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Thorstein Veblen could not be more on display. As Mills writes in the published version of “The Cultural Apparatus” (1960a), “the second-hand worlds” of “meanings and designs and communications” stand between “material existence” and “the consciousness of men” (p. 405). This intermediate, or better, mediating realm of organized and managed symbols is “passed on” through generations living and dead, forming the basis of all socially meaningful interpretation and interaction. Thus, for Mills, the systematic alienation of intellectuals from the means of communication is parallel in significance to Marx’s concern for the alienation of the worker from the means of material production. Although he warns that it is a mistake to “make a political fetish” out of “alienation,” Mills also stresses that:

The basis of our integrity can be gained or renewed only by activity, including communication, in which we may give ourselves with a minimum of repression. It cannot be gained nor retained by selling what we believe to be our selves. When you sell the lies of others you are also selling yourself. To sell your self is to turn is to turn your self into a commodity. A commodity does not control the market; its nominal worth is determined by what the market will offer. And it isn’t enough (1944, p. 301, p. 303).

If Marx held an implicit view of humanity as inherently *homo faber*, then the pragmatist Mills could be said to subscribe to a parallel *homo communicatus*.

It is profitable in this context to acknowledge the seamless connection between Mills’ resistance to the “Intellectual Default” and Gouldner’s (1970) promotion of “reflexive sociology” and Jacoby’s (2001) burial of “The Last Public Intellectuals.” At stake in each is sociological attention to the implications of the increasingly concentrated ownership and control of the means of communication, what Mills colorfully parsed as “the observation posts, the interpretation centers, the presentation depots” of the postmodern cultural apparatus (1960a, p. 406). For Mills, alienated

postmodern intellectuals typically vacillate between the self-delusion of an exaggerated historical relevance and the cowardice of self-imposed powerlessness, after which they settle for withdrawal and resignation and a leveled calling “simply to understand” (1944, p. 300). In any case, the results are pathological and politically self-defeating. Mills’ later analysis of mass society generally followed this same theoretical tact (see 1956, 1959b). For the postmodern masses are, as it were, equally jerked between illusory participation in so-called reality television and sobering treatment as meaningless consumers and clients of massive bureaucracies. Often it is the case that withdrawal and resignation seem the only rational response.

### III

“The Powerless People” is not, however, so easily exhausted. The second principal factor that led Mills to theorize the advent of a postmodern society and culture, the rise of an extra-Constitutional, non-democratic American state, is also raised in this article, although admittedly in comparatively less detail than his discussion of mass society. As I have already suggested, the two processes, although analytically and historically distinct, are not without considerable overlap and mutual reinforcement. Indeed, their historically specific combination in modern U.S. history contributes substantially to distinguishing the American state from the German or Soviet state of the same period.

Recall that “The Power People” was published in April, 1944, 16 months prior to the conclusion of the Second World War. In it, Mills directs the readers’ attention to what he considers perhaps the most disturbing consequence of intellectual and popular withdrawal from politics, the production of the status quo via “unanchored expectations of the future” (1944, p. 302). “This method,” he writes, “is now being used in the production and publicity of hundreds of ‘postwar plans,’” plans for the future that Mills calls the “‘new propaganda’” (*ibid.*). While these plans “serve either as diversions from immediate realities or as tacit intellectual sanctions of future disasters,” the postwar world is, continues Mills, “already rather clearly scheduled by authoritative decisions” (p. 302, p. 303). Behind these history-making decisions are the nations “which have shown themselves mightiest in organizing world violence” and promoting “collective dominance” (p. 303). “Such collective dominance,” writes Mills, “may lead either to counter-alliances and bigger wars, or to decisions not effectively responsible to the man who is born in India or on an island of the

Caribbean” (p. 303). Thus, 16 months prior to the conclusion of the Second World War, the future author of *Listen, Yankee!* anticipated the Cold War and seemingly divined his own future participation in its greatest crisis 16 years ahead.

But already in 1944, Mills appreciated that “there is little serious public discussion of these facts and prospects, or of the causes of the current war” (p. 303).

Writers simply accept war as given, refer to December 7 when it all began, and then talk of the warless future. Nobody goes further in the scholarly directions of the inter-war investigations of the causes of modern wars. All that is forgotten, hidden beneath the rather meaningless shield, ‘Isolationist.’ It is easier to discuss an anchorless future, where there are as yet no facts, than to face up to the troublesome questions of the present and recent past (p. 303).

The prevailing silence that disturbs Mills would not, however, remain unchallenged. Most probably do not realize, for example, that one of the country’s most distinguished American historians, Charles A. Beard, published in 1948 *Roosevelt and the Coming of the War, 1941: A Study in Appearances and Realities*. This, Beard’s follow-up to his 1946 *American Foreign Policy in the Making, 1932–1940*, used over 600 pages to argue the straightforward thesis that F.D.R. secretly reneged on his most significant campaign promise in the election of 1940, ignoring thus the basic principles of democracy, and thereafter violated the most significant restraints on executive power articulated in the U.S. Constitution when he conspired with a handful of U.S. civilian and military officials and their foreign counterparts, particularly in the United Kingdom, to involve the U.S. in war by secret and devious means and without democratic legitimation (a la *realpolitik*). Reference to Charles Beard’s now long-forgotten foray into the history of the troublesome present and recent past is not so much a digression when it is known that Mills’ research files from this period contained a packet labeled “the truth about Pearl Harbor,” which includes reference to George A. Lundberg’s “Is Constitutional Government Finished?,” George Morgenstern’s 1947 *Pearl Harbor: The Story of the Secret War*, and a book notice for Beard’s *Roosevelt and the Coming of War*, with Mills’ handwriting pointing and saying simply, “get.” Lest it be too easily passed over, the first three words of Mills’ chapter on “The Military Ascendancy” in *The Power Elite* are, “Since Pearl Harbor...”<sup>9</sup>

Regardless of what Mills might have learned from Beard’s history, if anything, it is important to recall that such historically specific analyses were alive in Mills’ intellectual world. Beard associates Roosevelt with Hitler and

Mussolini, ponders the meaning of the U.S.'s war-time alliance with Stalin, and, with a sense for the irony, one imagines, quotes Alexander Hamilton in making his case for the harms wrought by "the theory of limitless power in the Executive to conduct foreign affairs and initiate war at will..." (1948, p. 590). Drawing on No. 8 of *The Federalist Papers*, Beard writes:

Alexander Hamilton pointed out that any necessity which enhances the importance of the soldier "proportionably degrades the condition of the citizen. The military state becomes elevated above the civil"(p. 591).

Mills does not cite Beard's work in any later publications with which I am familiar nor certainly in the most likely of these, *The Power Elite*, which depicts, above all, the hyper-militarization of the already gargantuan civilian New Deal state. But as early as 1944, with the Second World War still very much raging and *The Power Elite* 12 years from fruition, Mills was already questioning "the covenants of power" in which "the future is being planned, even if later it must be laid down in blood with a sword" (1944, p. 303).

What Mills does *not*, it seems to me, do in "The Powerless People" is more than intimate his theory that American postmodernity is founded in an extra-Constitutional, undemocratic state. This second pillar of Mills' sociological theory of postmodernity would come full-force only after 1956, when, upon the theory set out in *The Power Elite*, Mills eschewed public consideration of the causes of the Second World War in favor, famously, of a study of *The Causes of World War Three* (1958). Indeed, like Mills, I regard this second book not as a lesser "pamphlet," but more an appendix to the first. It is also an obvious direct precursor to Mills' increasingly exclusive and urgent attention to opposing the organization of power and violence under conditions of worldwide Cold War. The latter, of course, found expression in many of Mills' public acts and commitments as well as such later publications as the aforementioned *Listen, Yankee!* (1960b), but also in *The Marxists* (1962) and the unfinished and only still very partially published manuscripts for *The New Left, Soviet Journal*, and, the most unfinished of the three, *Comparative Sociology* (see Horowitz, 1983; Mills & Mills, 2000). Mills was thus increasingly, as he said of himself, a "political writer" (see Dandaneau, 2001, p. 82). Of course, he was such in his 1944 contribution to *Politics* as well.

In any case, the Mills who early in his intellectual career was schooled in the study of such things as labor unions, medium-sized cities, and ethnic enclaves gave way in the mid-1950s to the theorist of a postmodernity that places these otherwise intrinsically interesting and important societal and

cultural milieu squarely within thermonuclear bombsights. And as with most sociologists who attempt to “bring the state back in,” Mills’ attention to the workings of the Cold War nuclear state earned him indifference and scorn from many a scientist of society. Of those few who did seek to follow him, many were distracted by the side-show of perpetually answering the question of “who rules America?” when Mills’ own focus was clearly, as in the title to part three of *The Causes of World War Three*, “What, Then, Ought We To Do?” (1958, p. 91).

Mills had already provided a roadmap to this question in the closing pages of “The Powerless People.” As was the case in *The Causes of World War Three*, with its chapter on “Tragedy and Responsibility” and six concluding chapters under the rubric, “The Role of the Intellectuals,” Mills lays greatest emphasis upon the challenges and responsibilities facing intellectuals, many of whom Mills chided as ideologues, that is, with simply “leading a prayer and such prayer is a mass indirection” (1944, p. 303). What we ought to do, the Mills of 1944 tells us, is engage the “internal power struggles” that are “the only determinants of international affairs which we may influence” (*ibid.*). He continues: “the effective way to plan the world’s future is to criticize the decisions of the present” (*ibid.*). “Unless it is at every point so anchored,” writes Mills, “‘planning’ disguises the world that is actually in the works; it is therefore a dangerous disguise which permits a spurious escape from the anxieties surrounding the decisions and happenings of the present” (*ibid.*). Here, the delusory character of postmodern culture meets the result of the new propaganda: both are unanchored and fantastic, and, together, politically harmful.

Mills suggests the extent and quality of this harm throughout “The Powerless People,” but he reserves the last two paragraphs for its most explicit formulation. “The writer,” Mills intones, “tends to believe that problems are *really* going to be solved in *his* medium, that of the word” (p. 304, emphases in original). “Thus,” Mills writes, “he often underplays the threat of violence, the coercive power always present in decisive political questions” (*ibid.*). Mills was, no doubt, himself afflicted by the occupational hazard that he squarely identified. Yet, it was characteristic of Mills’ approach to sociology that he would acknowledge his own contradictions and theorize them from within his own experience. For pragmatists as much as for dialecticians, the demand to unmake from within what has already been made leaves no alternative. The rise of the total state and its threat of total war made the analysis of the organized irresponsibility of unprecedented global violence a necessity, but could one write about that from within the United States, could one oppose it with mere writing?

As his title anticipates, Mills concludes “The Powerless People” on a somber but not necessarily pessimistic note. “He would like to stand for a politics of truth in a democratically responsible society. But such efforts as he has made on behalf of freedom for his function have been defeated” (*ibid.*). By “he,” Mills refers to “the political intellectual,” but as his last words make clear, he makes no bones about including himself among the defeated:

Our impersonal defeat has spun a tragic plot and many are betrayed by what is false within them (*ibid.*).

For Mills, where there is tragedy, there is also the need for political responsibility. Indeed, as he stresses in his chapter on “Tragedy and Responsibility” in *The Causes of World War Three*, we might even view our situation in an “optimistic way” because the existence of elite control over history-making makes the discourse of political responsibility all the more appropriate, vital, and compelling (1958, p. 37). Where there are “pivots of history,” there are those who are responsible for pivoting or not, this way or that (p. 38).

## IV

I have argued that Mills is best understood as a theorist, not of “power” per se, but of the emergent totality of American postmodernity, and that, for Mills, this postmodernity is the result of the reproduction of mass society by means of mass society, on the one hand, and the rise of a historically specific state apparatus, itself equally as deleterious for democratic society as the cultural apparatus was for genuine “live experience” on the other. I conclude by situating my interpretation within the literature on Mills’ sociological theory. How does reading Mills’ sociological theory in this way fit with received wisdom about Mills and his sociology?

Even though I note in the above that no previous interpretation of Mills has attempted to retrace Mills’ own reflections by according “The Powerless People” such importance, and even though I have indicated specific disenchantment with the tact popularized by G. William Domhoff (1967) and his followers (see the official “Who Rules America?” website at <http://sociology.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/>), it is often the case, I think, that interpreters of Mills have done a good job of understanding many of the key elements of Mills’ sociology. The best are outstanding theorists in their own right, and include the aforementioned Alvin W. Gouldner and Russell

Jacoby, but much about the man and his distinctive approach to sociology can also be learned from former students like Form (2007, 1995), Press (1978), and Wakefield (2000), as well as from the vitally important documents collected by Mills' daughters, Kathryn and Pamela (Mills & Mills, 2000).

Had he lived past 1962, Mills' sociology would have no doubt paralleled that which was produced by his most admired friends and colleagues, among them the philosopher and sociologist Marcuse, who theorized the coming of "One-Dimensional Society and Culture" (1964), "the Welfare/Warfare State" (1969), and the processes of *Counter Revolution and Revolt* (1972), and including also the political scientist Miliband, who was a leading theorist of *The State in Capitalist Society* (1969), and the historian Thompson, who followed Mills to a theory of "Exterminism" (1982). While few contemporaries combine Mills' empirical and political sense, among the most able are theorists whose engagement with postmodern social and cultural theory is as productive as their understanding of the contemporary totality, such as the sociologists Agger (2000) and Orr (2006).

A wide gulf, however, remains among Mills' contemporary interpreters. Irving Louis Horowitz, whose 1983 biography set the tone for America's respective burial of Mills as anything more than a colorful, tragic figure of its exuberant heyday, represents one pole. This interpretive angle is amplified more recently, for example, by Alan Wolfe (2000) in his dismissal of *The Power Elite* to the dustbin of history (see Dandaneau, 2006). On the other side, one encounters the likes of Hayden (2006), whose nostalgia for Mills runs toward self-congratulation and who is joined in articulating a contemporary version of "Liberal Rhetoric" by the illustrious "60's" trio of Richard Flacks, Stanley Aronowitz, and even the enigmatic reverend Charles Lemert. The gulf is instructive. Where, for example, Hayden wants the world to know that it took him only a year of study before he "fully absorbed [Mills'] thinking and style" (2006, p. 58), Wolfe divides Mills' social science from his social criticism and finds the former admirable for its times but overshadowed by the "arrogant," "cantankerous," "sour," even anti-Americanist "resigned bitterness" of the latter (2000, p. 380). At the very least, it would appear that Mills remains a polarizing figure. His oeuvre would also appear a still-meaningful point of reference for sociological self-definition, a mirror of sorts which reflects various facets of even contemporary sociology.

But what none of these theorists accord much significance is Mills as a theorist of the postmodern.<sup>10</sup> When Mills is analyzed as a sociological theorist, as in Ritzer's (1981) study of macro/micro integration or in

Scimecca's *The Sociological Theory of C. Wright Mills* (1977), it is typically the case that Mills' forays into metatheory take precedence over his historically-specific and engaged, if you will, *sociology of*. The focus often runs from Mills and Hans H. Gerth's edited *From Max Weber* (1946) to their *Character and Social Structure* (1953), and from there jumping to Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* (1959b) and edited *Images of Man* (1960c). On the basis of these works, Mills is thought to have developed a theoretically interesting and more or less formal theoretical "model," full of background assumptions and generalized variables, what Scimecca describes as "systematic inventory of [theoretical] elements" that can be neither "true or false" (1977, p. 4). Such a view necessarily overshadows Mills' much more significant historically specific explanations, understandings, and interventions.

A second implication of this common view of Mills as a formal theoretician is that Mills' social criticism, particularly his later pamphleteering in the form of *The Causes of World War Three* and *Listen, Yankee!*, or, as in Wolfe's analysis, even the second part of *The Power Elite* itself, is treated as in principle distinguishable from his presumably more readily value-neutral, disinterested, dispassionate "social science." The integrity of Mills' struggle to create a self-styled American brand of sociology-as-critical-theory that rejects the positivist is/ought divide is thus denied through a style of classically liberal interpretation. Sometimes, this occurs at the hands of relatively unsympathetic students, such as in Horowitz's reference to "stratification volumes." But just as often this style of interpretation comes from those who are manifestly sympathetic to Mills' sociology. When, for example, Scimecca concludes his study under the rubric, "Paying Homage to the Father," explaining that Mills offered a "sociological paradigm to analyze the manner in which psychological regularities are affected and shaped by historical social structures," he would not have imagined his own interpretation being dubbed *crackpot sociology* (1977, p. 116). But Scimecca's approach seems to suffer from what Jean-Paul Sartre called "the spirit of seriousness" in that it gives too much to weight to sociology per se and forgets, as Mills did not, that our struggle with semi-organized irresponsibility and the violence that it wields does not respect the Sociological Paradigm any more than it does the written word.

In this vein, the most pressing, historically specific consequence of viewing Mills as a theorist of the American postmodern, and in particular, as a theorist of an American postmodernity built on the twin pillars of hyperreality and global violence, is that we are then led to assess the immediate causes of the present delusions and wars, so that we can oppose

them using the few means of communication occasional still available. From this perspective, one might profitably view British playwright Pinter's 7 December 2005 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, beamed via satellite to Stockholm as though jamming the routine workings of Oceania's telescreens, as a stark and telling instance of Millsian sociology breaking into the open and speaking its mind. Comparing the United States to the Soviet Union, Pinter argued that, whereas Soviet crimes are documented and well-known, the postwar crimes of the United States "have only been superficially recorded, let alone documented, let alone acknowledged, let alone recognized as crimes at all" (2005). And further, "the crimes of the United States have been systematic, constant, vicious, remorseless, but very few people have actually talked about them" (*ibid.*). If Pinter's hypothesis is correct, then surely American sociologists are called to attend more forcefully than they have heretofore to the last from Mills' slogan list, "the commercialization and governmentalization of falsehood." Surely, then, we would regard Mills' sociological theory as safe from the dustbin of history.

## NOTES

1. C. Wright Mills Papers, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, Box 4B367a. Quotation includes Mills' handwritten editing in place of crossed-out typing.

2. *Ibid.*, Mills concludes his list with a partially illegible entry: "[illegible] establishment."

3. Since it is a common misunderstanding, it is perhaps worth noting that William Form, not C. Wright Mills, proposed "Politics" as the title for MacDonald's journal. Mills was the go-between (see Form, 1995).

4. In my view, Mills was not a "conflict theorist," nor was he interested in the study of "power" or "social problems" or anything similar for its own sake. My reading of Mills' sociology is the focus of the present statement but is also scattered through a variety of publications, many of which are herein cited, and is the subject of a current book project.

5. For example, in response to a key passage in "The Powerless People," Horowitz notes, correctly, I believe, that it "contains the germ of almost everything that Mills would write thereafter on the relationship between power and the free-floating intellect" (1983, p. 162). But Horowitz is incorrect, I think, to write a few sentences later that Mills' later "stratification volumes could be better appreciated as missionary work exhorting secular and religious priesthods to transform ideas into political action than as sheer empirical or descriptive studies" (1983, p. 162). Part of the problem with Horowitz's reading, in addition to his obvious intent to deride Mills' political aims, lies in the notion of "stratification volumes," by which Horowitz reduces the significance of texts that I would prefer to read as emergent studies of the postmodern totality.

6. Mills opened his essay “Culture and Politics” thus: “We are at the ending of what is called The Modern Age. Just as Antiquity was followed by several centuries of Oriental ascendancy, which Westerners provincially call The Dark Ages, so now The Modern Age is being succeeded by a post-modern period. Perhaps we may call it: The Fourth Epoch.” See “Culture and Politics” (1959a), in Horowitz (1963), pp. 236–246, p. 236. This idea is repeated in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959b).

7. C. Wright Mills Papers, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, Box 4B367a, untitled mimeograph, p. 9.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Mills writes, “Since Pearl Harbor those who command the enlarged means of American violence have come to possess considerable autonomy, as well as great influence, among their political and economic colleagues.” See *The Power Elite* (1956, p. 198).

10. Exceptions include Zygmunt Bauman and Charles Lemert. See Dandaneau (2001).

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