

Critical Theory and the Crisis of Social Theory

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Social theory today is in crisis. During the 1960s, a variety of new theoretical paradigms emerged which put in question the prevailing quantitative, empiricist, and positivist conceptions of social theory and social research. Growing dissatisfaction with the dominant methodologies and theories produced by the mainstream promoted a search for alternative methodologies and conceptions of social theory and research. The new paradigms of phenomenology, ethno-methodology, structuralism, Marxism, feminism, and other critical theories offered new conceptions which claimed to be more adequate in characterizing contemporary society and in providing inspiration and guidance for transforming it. These theories have caused much ferment in the field of social theory and have inspired heated debates over the nature, methods, and goals of critical social theory.

More recently, poststructuralist and postmodern social theory have further challenged mainstream social theory and science, attacking their basic presuppositions. In addition, these new critical discourses have sharply criticized Marxism, structuralism, phenomenology, and other critical paradigms for participating too staunchly in the premises and methods of modern, enlightenment rationality and traditional social theory (Kellner 1988 and 1989b). While debates have emerged between advocates of critical theory and the newer, postmodern approaches which I shall discuss later in the paper, there are also common positions. Like some of the new French theories, the critical theory of the so-called Frankfurt school offers a multi-disciplinary approach for social theory which combines perspectives drawn from political economy, sociology, cultural theory, philosophy, anthropology, and history. It thus overcomes the fragmentation endemic to established academic disciplines in order to address issues of broader interest.

Both new French theory and critical theory therefore put in question the boundaries established by the academic division of labor which separates social theory from other disciplines. Both claim that there are epistemological and metaphysical problems with abstracting from the interconnectedness of phenomena in the world, or from our experience of it. On this view, philosophy, for example, that abstracts from sociology and economics, or political science that excludes, say, economics or culture from its conceptual boundaries, is by nature one-sided, limited, and flawed. Both critical theory and new French theory therefore transgress established disciplinary boundaries and create new theories and discourses that avoid the deficiencies of the traditional academic division of labor.

In this paper, I shall argue that as an antidote to the frequently non-critical quantitative approaches within mainstream social science and theory, critical theory provides a potentially more useful and politically relevant alternative than poststructuralist and postmodernist theory. In opposition to the subjectivism and relativism, often bordering on nihilism, advanced by some

of these postmodernist perspectives, critical theory, by contrast, advances the conception of a critical and normative theory which is committed to emancipation from all forms of oppression, as well as to freedom, happiness, and a rational ordering of society. In contrast to the often hypertheoretical and apolitical discourse of postmodern theory, critical theory seeks a connection with empirical analysis of the contemporary world and social movements which are attempting to transform society in progressive ways.

To highlight the contributions of critical theory to contemporary social theory, I shall therefore, first, present the conception of dialectical social theory contained in the notion of a critical theory of society. Next, I articulate what I consider to be among its most substantive contributions to contemporary social theory, and then I shall criticize some of its limitations and provide some new perspectives for critical theory today. To begin, however, I wish to briefly describe the origins and development of critical theory.

Historical Background

Critical theory is often associated with the so-called "Frankfurt School," a term which refers to the work of members of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* (Institute for Social Research). [1] The Institute was established in Frankfurt, Germany during 1923 as the first Marxist-oriented research center affiliated with a major German university. The Institute's work in the 1920's was directed by Carl Grunberg, and tended to be empirical, historical, and oriented toward problems of the European working class movement, although theoretical works by Karl Korsch, Georg Lukacs, and others were also published in its journal, *Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung*.

After Grunberg's retirement in 1930, Max Horkheimer became Director of the Institute. Horkheimer gathered around him such talented theorists as Leo Lowenthal, Friedrich Pollock, Erich Fromm, Henryk Grossman, and Herbert Marcuse. Later T.W. Adorno, Otto Kirchheimer, Franz Neumann and others joined the Institute, which also supported theorists like Korsch and Walter Benjamin. Under Horkheimer's directorship, the Institute sought to develop an interdisciplinary social theory which could serve as an instrument of social transformation. During the Horkheimer era, Institute work was characterized by a synthesis of philosophy and social theory and research. The results of Institute work were published in its journal, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (1932-1941), which contains a rich collection of articles and book reviews still worth reading.

Upon assuming the position of Director, Horkheimer delivered an inaugural address on January 24, 1931, entitled "The State of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research" (Bronner and Kellner 1989:25-36). In this text, Horkheimer defines social philosophy as an attempt to elucidate the "fate of human beings, insofar as they are parts of a community, and not mere individuals. It concerns itself above all with the social life of people: state, law, economy, religion, in short, with the entire material and spiritual culture of humanity" (ibid:33). Horkheimer's lecture provides the first major conception of his view of critical social theory as a

synthesis of social science and philosophy, and therefore provides a useful introduction to the Institute's project.

Horkheimer begins by pointing to the limitations of the classical German social theories of Kant and Hegel, and the limitations of contemporary metaphysical and positivist philosophies. This exercise typifies Horkheimer's method of clarifying his own position through criticism of opposing positions. Kant is criticized for grounding social philosophy in the experience and faculties of the particular individual (ibid:33ff). Hegel's attempt to situate philosophy within society and history is presented as an improvement over Kant, yet Hegel's idealism and tendency to justify the existing order is rejected (ibid:34-37). Then Horkheimer criticizes the current forms of idealism in the neo-Kantian, neo-Hegelian, phenomenological, and existential philosophies for their questionable speculative metaphysics and for their tendencies to celebrate a higher transcendental sphere of Being (*Sein*) and meaning (*Sinn*) over concrete existence (ibid:38-39). The positivist schools which root their theories in isolated facts are also criticized for their unsupportable metaphysical presuppositions and methodological limitations (ibid:39).

Horkheimer concludes that none of the dominant philosophical schools contain an adequate social philosophy. He assumes that social philosophy encompasses "the entire material and spiritual culture of humanity." Consequently, he rejects the claims of the specific social sciences such as "material sociology" to provide adequate knowledge since the specialized sciences abstract from the structure and organization of society as a whole to describe limited domains of social experience. In opposing the separation between social theory, science, and philosophy which was dominant at the time, and which continues to be dominant today, Horkheimer calls for a new sort of *synthesis* between philosophy and the specialized sciences.

Consequently, while Comte, Durkheim, positivists, and others want to purge philosophy from social theory, Horkheimer defends its importance for critical social theory. He claims that the positivist conception that philosophy "is perhaps beautiful, but scientifically fruitless because it is not subject to controls," verification, experiments and the like, must be rejected, as must as well the philosopher's prejudice that he or she is dealing with the essential while the scientist is dealing with bare, trivial facts (ibid:40). These conflicting claims to the primacy of science and philosophy must be overcome in favor of a "dialectical penetration and development of philosophical theory and the praxis of the individual disciplines" (ibid:40). For Horkheimer, the philosophical drive toward the universal and essential should be the animating spirit for social research, but philosophy must be at the same time "sufficiently open to the world to allow itself to be impressed with, and transformed by, progress in concrete studies" (ibid:41).

To fulfill these goals, Horkheimer envisaged a program of supradisciplinary research which would investigate current social and political problems. This project would unite "philosophers, sociologists, economists, historians, and psychologists in an ongoing research community who would do together what in other disciplines one individual does alone in the laboratory, -- which is what genuine scientists have always done: namely, to pursue the great philosophical questions using the most refined scientific methods; to reformulate and to make more precise the questions

in the course of work as demanded by the object; and to develop new methods without losing sight of the universal" (ibid:41).

After praising his predecessor Carl Grundberg's legacy and contributions, Horkheimer stresses that the Institute will now undertake a "new start" directed at "new tasks" (ibid:42). He claims that the Institute's new multidisciplinary program will allow its members to raise the question of "the interconnections between the economic life of society, the psychic development of the individual and transformations in the realm of culture... including not only the so-called spiritual contents of science, art and religion, but also law, ethics, fashion, public opinion, sport, amusement, life style, etc." (ibid:43). This research program is somewhat unorthodox for a Marxian social theory which in the past tended to neglect the dimension of individual and social psychology, and which also downplayed the study of culture and leisure. Attention to these topics would eventually produce many of the distinctive contributions of critical theory.

In his inaugural address, Horkheimer distances his conception of social theory from a crude Marxian materialism. He proclaims that the Institute will not subscribe to any metaphysical theses, such as idealism or materialism, on the relation between the economy, society, culture, and consciousness. Horkheimer notes that the attempt to derive all forms of life from one metaphysical substance is "bad Spinozism." From the very beginning, therefore, Horkheimer rejects all metaphysical absolutism and all philosophical reductionism. He argues that an illusory idealism that derives everything from the Idea is "an abstract and therefore badly understood Hegel," just as the attempt to derive everything from an economy which is understood merely as material being is "an abstract and therefore badly understood Marx" (ibid:43). Such theses posit an "uncritical, obsolete and highly problematic cleavage of spirit and reality into naive absolutes" and must be dialectically overcome (ibid:43).

Critical social philosophy, by contrast, describes the complex set of *mediations* that interconnect consciousness and society, culture and economy, state and citizens. These relations can best be clarified and developed in concrete historical contexts in which one asks: "which interconnections exist in a definite social group, in a definite period of time and in a definite country, between the role of this group in the economic process, the transformation of the psychic structures of its individual members, and the totality of the system that affects and produces its thoughts and mechanism" (ibid:44).

To begin this task, the Institute proposed to study technically qualified workers and employees in Germany by gathering empirical material on their psychological, social, and political attitudes which would be interpreted in a theoretical framework that encompasses economic theory, sociology, and psychology. Horkheimer illustrated the project of the Institute's social theory by indicating that an empirical study of the white-collar working class would be its first research project. In addition, he indicated that his colleagues would predominantly undertake studies in "theoretical economics, economic history, and the history of the working class movement" (ibid:45). Thus, at least during the early Horkheimer years, the Institute sought to continue many of Grundberg's projects with regard to topics central to classical Marxism and socialist politics,

but from a more comprehensive theoretical vantage point.

Materialism and Dialectics

The Institute began publishing its research and studies in its journal *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. In the first issue, Horkheimer described the goal of their work as developing a "theory of contemporary society as a whole," aiming at "the entirety of the social process. It presupposes that beneath the chaotic surface of events one can grasp and conceptualize a structure of the effective powers" (Horkheimer 1932:1). This theory would be based on the results of historical studies and the individual sciences and would therefore strive for the status of "science" (ibid:1 and 4). Yet these investigations would not exclude philosophy, "for it is not affiliation to a specific discipline but its importance for the theory of society which determines the choice of material" (ibid:1).

Although Horkheimer and his colleagues were basically inspired by Marxism, from 1930 through 1936, members of the Institute used code words like "materialism" and the "economic theory of society" for their version of the Marxian theory (Dubiel 1985). The Institute developed a supradisciplinary, materialist social theory as a response both to inadequacies within classical Marxism and within the dominant forms of bourgeois science and philosophy. Orthodox Marxism had congealed into a dogmatic, reductionist, and objectivist metaphysical materialism, while bourgeois social science was characterized by a fragmentation of the sciences, each cut off from the other and pursuing its own investigations isolated from other disciplines. Both bourgeois science and scientific Marxism utilized excessively objectivist methods, and thus were not able to conceptualize current problems such as the ways that 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 explain why revolutionary consciousness failed to develop, and could not point to how revolutionary consciousness and struggle could be produced.

The Institute theorists created a new variety of *materialism* against all idealist modes of thought. Rejecting both the mechanistic metaphysical materialism already criticized by Marx and Engels in *The Holy Family*, as well as the current positivist forms of materialism, Horkheimer and his colleagues defined the objects of materialist theory in terms of material conditions, human needs, and social struggles against oppression. Furthermore, materialism did not signify for the Institute a specific metaphysical doctrine but stood instead for a whole series of ideas and practical attitudes, taking different forms in different contexts. Their materialist social theory during the early 1930s developed a particular style of "ideology critique" which analyzes the social interests ideologies serve by exposing their historical roots and assumptions, including the distortions and mystifications which they perpetuate. The Institute also developed a materialist approach to "cultural critique and produced one of the first systematic critical theories of mass culture.

In "Materialism and Metaphysics," Horkheimer spells out what is involved for him in a materialist view of the world, and what sort of thought, research, and action it involves

(Horkheimer 1972:10ff). [2] He begins by criticizing metaphysical materialism which attempts to capture the totality of being in a universal philosophical system. In these remarks, Horkheimer makes evident his hostility to metaphysical systems, absolutism, and all foundationalist theories that attempt to discover a metaphysical foundation for knowledge. He then argues that the specific views that a materialist holds at a given moment are not dictated by any unchanging metaphysical theses, but rather by the:

"tasks which at any given period are to be mastered with the help of the theory. Thus, for example, criticism of a dogma of religious faith may, at a particular time and place, play a decisive role within the complex of materialist views, while under other circumstances such criticism may be unimportant. Today the knowledge of movements and tendencies affecting society as a whole is immensely important for materialist theory, but in the eighteenth century the need for knowledge of the social totality was overshadowed by questions of epistemology, of natural science, and of politics" (ibid:20-21).

Horkheimer claims that while idealist views generally aim at *justification*, and are advanced by ruling class ideologues to affirm dominant class interests, materialist theories aim at *explanation* with references to material conditions, classes, and specific historical situations (ibid:22ff.). He especially objects to notions of metaphysical cognition and absolute truth, and argues that there is "an irreducible tension between concept and being" (ibid:27). Horkheimer here rejects metaphysical theses of the identity of thought and being, of knowledge and the known. He argues, instead, that concepts are not organs of absolute knowledge, but are simply instruments for achieving certain goals which are to be constantly developed and modified in the course of experience.

Horkheimer thus proposes a post-metaphysical conception of materialism, and stresses the different content that materialist theories have in different contexts. He and his colleagues rejected both Hegel's identity theory which posits an identity between thought and being within an idealist ontology, as well as the forms of epistemological realism held by many positivist materialists then and now which maintained that correct thought simply mirrors or reflects the object of thought. In addition, the Institute stressed the historical nature of all theories and their subject matter: "The theoretical activity of humans, like the practical, is not the independent knowledge of a fixed object, but a product of ever-changing reality" (ibid:29). As historical conditions change, concepts and theories must also change; thus, there is no stable foundation for absolutist metaphysical views.

For Horkheimer, concepts and theories therefore provide representations of the socio-material world and not any absolute or indubitable knowledge. Horkheimer also criticizes theories which operate with a subject/object model that rigidly distinguishes between subject and object, arguing that "the subject-object relation is not accurately described by the picture of two fixed realities which are conceptually fully transparent and move towards each other. Rather, in what we call objective, subjective factors are at work; and in what we call subjective, objective factors are at work" (ibid:29). Horkheimer's materialism is thus *dialectical*, utilizing a subject/object dialectic

in which objective conditions help constitute the subject, while the subject in turn helps constitute objective (material, historical) conditions. For Horkheimer:

"A dialectical process is negatively characterized by the fact that it is not to be conceived as the result of individual unchanging factors. To put it positively, its elements continuously change in relation to each other within the process, so that they are not even to be radically distinguished from each other. Thus the development of human character, for example, is conditioned both by the economic situation and by the individual powers of the person in question. But both these elements determine each other continuously, so that in the total development neither of them is to be presented as an effective factor without giving the other its role" (ibid:28).

Horkheimer and his colleagues consistently followed this dialectical conception which stressed the relative autonomy of thought, culture, and all other "superstructural" phenomena in a process of reciprocal interaction with a socio-economic "base." They thereby rejected all versions of economic determinism and reductionism and provided conceptual space for analyzing the often important causal role of cultural factors in history and society. A dialectical social theory thus analyzes the relationships between different aspects of society rather than providing a unidimensional determinist model that appeals to the economic dimension of society as the sole causal factor in explaining social development and structure.

Furthermore, the Institute's version of "dialectical materialism" is thoroughly *historical* because it stresses that our experience, views of the world, and concepts change in relation to historical development, and that therefore both our theories and perceptual apparatuses, as well as the objects of knowledge, are historical: "Materialism, unlike idealism, always understands thinking to be the thinking of particular men within a particular period of time. It challenges every claim to the autonomy of thought" (ibid:32).

In sum, for Horkheimer, "materialism is not interested in a worldview or in the souls of men. It is concerned with changing the concrete conditions under which humans suffer and in which, of course, their souls must become stunted. This concern may be comprehended historically and psychologically; it cannot be grounded in general principles" (ibid:32). Horkheimer believes that it is primarily materialist theories which are currently concerned with human suffering, and with transforming the material conditions which produce human suffering to produce a more rational society and a more humane form of existence. This analysis assumes that "the wretchedness of our own time is connected with the structure of society; social theory therefore forms the main content of contemporary materialism" (ibid, p. 24). In particular, "the fundamental historical role of economic relations is characteristic of the materialist position... Understanding of the present becomes more idealist, the more it avoids the economic causes of material need and looks to a psychologically naive elaboration of so-called 'basic elements of human existence'" (ibid:25-26).

Horkheimer's materialist social theory thus focuses on human needs and suffering, the ways that economic conditions produce suffering, and the changes necessary to eliminate human suffering

and to increase human well-being. Such a project requires a critical social theory which confronts the social problems of the present age: "If materialist theory is an aspect of efforts to improve the human situation, it inevitably opposes every attempt to reduce social problems to second place" (ibid:26). The social theory in turn is produced by a synthesis of philosophy and the sciences (ibid:34ff).

For the Institute, philosophy without empirical scientific research is empty, just as science without philosophy is blind. In the mid-1930s, Horkheimer's unification of science and philosophy seemed to involve a dialectical interpenetration and mediation of science and philosophy, without making one superordinate to the other. [3] Consequently, Horkheimer rejects both metaphysics and positivist concepts of science which profess "the dogma of the invariability of natural laws" (ibid, p. 36). Dominant positivist conceptions of science, according to Horkheimer, are "unhistorical," and "science" for critical theory will not be privileged above philosophy and social theory. Yet Horkheimer maintains that: "materialism has in common with positivism that it acknowledges as real only what is given in sense experience, and it has done so since its beginnings" (ibid:42). Sense experience, however, is mediated through concepts, and both sense perception and cognition are subject to social conditions and historical change. Thus, notions of absolute intuition, whether through the senses or cognition, are to be rejected. Horkheimer and his colleagues therefore subscribe to a non-transcendental materialist theory of knowledge which acknowledges, with Kant and the idealists, that forms of cognition and theories determine our experience of the external world, but which acknowledges as well that objective material conditions in turn condition forms of thought and knowledge. The results of post-metaphysical, materialist social theory are thus always provisional, contextual, and subject to revision.

Critical Theory

The term "critical theory" was first coined in 1937 after the majority of the Institute's members had already emigrated to the United States following the triumph of Hitler. For many years, "critical theory" stood as a codeword for the Institute's Marxism and for its attempt to found a radical supradisciplinary social theory rooted in Hegelian-Marxian dialectics, historical materialism, and the Marxian critique of political economy and theory of revolution. Note that I said *supradisciplinary* and not "interdisciplinary." The critical theory project initially involved attempts of individuals from various disciplines to work together collectively to develop a historical and systematic theory of contemporary society rather than just bringing individuals from separate disciplines together to chat, or assigning various specialists different topics for research and inquiry. As Lowenthal (1980:109) put it:

the term "interdisciplinary work" simply "means nothing more than to leave the disciplines as they are while developing certain techniques which foster a kind of acquaintance between them without forcing them to give up their self-sufficiency or individual claims." Critical theory, on the contrary, criticized the validity claims of the separate disciplines and attempted to create a new kind of social theory.

Critical theorists privileged Marxian categories in their supradisciplinary discourse, arguing that Marx's concepts of commodity, money, value, exchange, and fetishism characterize not only the capitalist economy but also social relations under capitalism where human relations and all forms of life are governed by commodity and exchange relations and values. Building on Lukacs' theory of reification (1971), they argued that capitalist society produced a rigid, reified structure wherein human beings were transformed into things. On this theory, through the process of reification, the unnatural conditions of the capitalist economy and labor process, the commodification of all goods, services, and objects, and the new modes of thought promoted by the mass media and positivist science appear to be "natural" and to form a system impervious to human control or intervention.

Horkheimer's essay "Traditional and Critical Theory" (1972) provides the most systematic and comprehensive presentation of the Institute's conception of social theory, while spelling out the presuppositions of their project and its relation to traditional theory. Traditional theory from Descartes through positivism is characterized by what is now called "foundationalism" i.e the attempt to ground theory in theoretical postulates which form the foundation of its theory upon which the traditional theorist builds its theoretical constructions. Traditional theory tends to be deductive, privileging natural science and mathematics; its goal, Horkheimer claims, is unity and harmony, with mathematics as its model (1972:190).

Horkheimer suggests that traditional theory is thus a projection of the bourgeois ideal of the harmonious capitalist market unified by calculable laws of supply and demand. Critical theory frequently shows the relationships between ideas and theoretical positions and their social environment, and thus attempts to contextualize or historicize ideas in terms of their roots within social processes. Following this line of inquiry, Horkheimer suggests that traditional theory is itself part of the social practices that constituted capitalism and bourgeois society. Its tendencies toward mechanistic materialism reproduced the mechanistic thought and practice of the industrial revolution according to which the world was conceptualized as a machine during an era in which machines came to dominate human beings. The dominant bourgeois trends of abstract and quantitative thought which informed traditional theory reproduced the tendencies toward abstraction and a mode of quantification that was based on exchange in the capitalist market where value was expressed in abstract, quantitative terms. Just as a bourgeois society governed by exchange value abstracted from values, goals, sentiments, and qualities, so too did traditional theory. And, finally, the fragmentation and division of the sciences reproduces the bourgeois division of labor under capitalism whereby specialization and fragmentation are dominant features of the structure of society.

Social theories, for critical theory, are thus forms of social practice which reproduce dominant forms of social activity. [4] Traditional theory is, Horkheimer claims, unaware of the ways in which it is bound together with social processes and thus fails to see its lack of autonomy and social determination. As it became increasingly involved in social processes of production and reproduction, it became increasingly conformist, uncritically submitting to the dominant instrumental, quantitative, and capitalist values. Unaware of its social determination, "theory was

absolutized...and became a reified, ideological category" (ibid:194). Consequently, "The scholar and his science are incorporated into the apparatus of society; his achievements are a factor in the conservation and continuous renewal of the existing state of affairs, no matter what fine names he gives to what he does" (ibid:196).

Traditional theory uncritically reproduces the existing society, while critical theory articulates activity striving to transform society. As Horkheimer put it:

"There is a human activity that has society itself for its object. The aim of this activity is not simply to eliminate one or another abuse, for it regards such abuses as necessarily connected with the way in which the social structure is organized. Although it itself emerges from the social structure, its purpose is not, either in its conscious intention, or in its objective significance, the better functioning of any element in the structure. On the contrary, it is suspicious of the very categories of better, useful, appropriate, productive, and valuable, as these are understood in the present order" (ibid:206-207).

Critical theory is thus rooted in "critical activity" which is oppositional and which is involved in a struggle for social change and the unification of theory and practice. "Critique," in this context, therefore involves criticism of oppression and exploitation and the struggle for a better society. Yet, in addition to its critique of vulgarized Marxian mechanistic materialism and economic reductionism and determinism, critical theory also rejects the efforts to ground Marxism in proletarian class-consciousness and its embodiment in a communist party --a concept that governed Lukacs' earlier work. Horkheimer argues that "even the situation of the proletariat is, in this society, no guarantee of correct knowledge" (ibid:213). While the proletariat may have knowledge of its exploitation and wretchedness, the fragmentation of the working class and the fact that many of its members are brutalized and undereducated indicates that some workers will fall prey to conservative or reformist tendencies; thus, there is no guarantee that its consciousness will be either theoretically correct or revolutionary.

Nonetheless, a careful reading of Horkheimer's "manifesto" makes it clear that the Institute conceived of itself at the time as part of the tradition of Hegelian Marxism, and grounded its theory in the Marxian critique of political economy. Horkheimer and his associates firmly adhere to the Marxian standpoint that the economy is the crucial determining factor for all social life and individual activity. Moreover, critical theory accepts the Marxian critique of capitalism which sees all social problems as ultimately rooted in the irrationality and contradictions of the capitalist mode of production. For example, Horkheimer writes: "The categories which have arisen under its influence criticize the present. The Marxian categories of class, exploitation, surplus value, profit, impoverishment and collapse are moments of a conceptual whole whose meaning is to be sought, not in the reproduction of the present society, but in its transformation to a correct society" (ibid:218).

System, Totality, and Critical Global Theory

Critical theory insists that one needs a theory of society grounded in a theory of capitalism to make sense of socio-historical processes and developments because the dynamics of capitalism play such a constitutive role in social life. Furthermore, to understand and explain social phenomena, one needs to contextualize one's topic of inquiry within a comprehensive theoretical framework for social analysis and critique in order to avoid illegitimate abstraction which would, for instance, analyze a political or cultural phenomena apart from its constitution in socio-economic processes. Yet while critics of totalizing modes of thought often attack critical theory's use of Hegelian-Marxian concepts of totality, I would argue that critical theory does not operate with either a fetishized or reified concept of totality. Indeed, polemics against the concept of totality, or totalizing modes of thought, generally do not distinguish between varying senses and types of "totality." [5] Often "totality" is identified with a harmonizing metaphysical mode of thought which stresses coherence, unity, and order in which all parts are seen as elements of a whole in which holistic harmony is posited as a normative value. The Institute sharply rejected such metaphysical concepts of totality, and they use the term "totality" in different ways in different contexts.

Frequently, critical theorists use the term "totality" in a synchronic sense to refer to the structure of society, defined by the Marxian critique of political economy, which provides the framework and context of inquiry, and which constitutes many social facts. For the Marxian theory, the relations of production provide the framework for development of a capitalist system; the economy thus constitutes a form of society. The critical theorists begin with the categories of economics and the Marxian critique of political economy precisely because the economy continues to play a constitutive role within all areas of social life and thus provides the framework for developing a theory of society. Marx's concepts of commodity, money, value, and exchange characterize not only economics, but also social relations because social relations and everyday life are governed by commodity and exchange relations and values. In this sense, critical theory utilizes totalizing concepts to describe a totalizing capitalist system which attempts to impose its values, structures, and practices throughout social life.

The concept of totality refers in other contexts to the diachronic, or historical, perspectives of critical theory which both characterize the historical conditions which have produced the existing capitalist society, and which conceptualize the vicissitudes of capitalist development and the (hoped for) transition to socialism. Thus, rather than operating with a static or metaphysical notion of totality, the Institute utilized dynamic and historical modes of totalizing thought. The Institute's justifications for its macro, or global, theory of society were thus: 1) capitalist society is organized as a system and requires systemic theory to grasp its social organization; 2) the logic and social processes of capitalism penetrate into ever more domains of social life requiring a theory of capitalist society as a whole to explain developments and processes in every domain of social reality. Consequently, since capitalist society is totalizing, so too must social theory; 3) capitalist society constantly changes and develops, and requires global historical analysis of its various stages and transformations; and 4) social critique and transformation require delineation

of historical alternatives and normative values which can be used to criticize existing states of affairs and to argue for alternative values and organization of society.

Critical theory is thus intrinsically global and historical, and attempts to provide the "Big Picture" that sketches the fundamental outlines of socio-economic development and the ways in which capitalism structures social life, as well as the dynamics through which a capitalist society can be replaced by a socialist one. Yet the Institute was constantly on the alert to avoid any sort of economic reductionism and was especially concerned to trace the linkages between the economy and the political, social, cultural, and psychic realms while stressing the relative autonomy of the superstructures. The critical theorists thus described the *mediations*, or interconnections, between these spheres as well as the contradictions, and thus produced what might be called a "*mediated totality*." That is, the critical theorists believed that the boundaries between the various realms of existence reproduced in the fragmentation of the disciplinary sciences are artificial and abstract. Consequently, to intelligently pursue theoretical and political issues requires supradisciplinary research and a dialectical method of presentation that demonstrates in concrete detail the interconnections and conflicts between the primary areas of the socio-historical system that constitutes the context and framework for thought and action. Dialectics for the Institute involved model-building and the making of connections or mediations. Social theory therefore involves construction of a model of the current society and a demonstration of the fundamental connections -- as well as of the contradictions and conflicts -- among the various domains of the current social system. Consequently, critical theory provides analyses of a mediated social totality that describe various relations among spheres of reality, rather than reducing all of society to the dynamics of the economy.

Critical theory is thus systemic, totalizing, integrating, and global. Social theory therefore has a mediating function for the critical theorists, integrating science and philosophy and mediating between research (*Forschung*) and theoretical construction and presentation (*Darstellung*) (Dubiel 1985). Critical theory mediates between various domains of reality, between parts and whole, between appearance and essence, and between theory and practice. The now "classical" 1930s model of critical theory thus synthesizes social theory, research, and radical politics in a critical global theory of the present age. Critical theory today, as I shall argue in the remainder of this essay, confronts the challenge of reconstructing its theory of capitalist society in the light of new social conditions and developments.

Conflicting Paradigms and the Critical Theory of Society

In discussions within the Institute, Marcuse argued that Horkheimer's "manifesto" underplayed the importance of philosophy and consequently he wrote a systematic essay on "Philosophy and Critical Theory" (1968). Horkheimer seemed to agree with this position and himself contributed a "Postscript" which highlighted the role of philosophy (1972:244ff). Critical theory's goal of helping to create a rational society, Horkheimer suggests, follows rationalist philosophy's demand that reason should shape the totality of life and follows as well its activist concept of rational/critical activity (ibid:244ff.). Yet critical theory "never aims simply at an increase of

knowledge as such. Its goal is man's emancipation from slavery" (ibid:245).

Philosophy's role in critical theory is to analyze the presuppositions of a critical social theory and to criticize the presuppositions and effects of competing theories. For the Institute, philosophy provided a critical perspective on the nature and social function of social theories that was constitutive for the development of a critical theory of society. Rejecting dichotomies between fact and values and the Weberian/positivist notion of a value-free social science, critical theory urged reflection on the values and interests underlying any specific social theory and urged scrutiny and defense of its presuppositions. Critical theory is thus deeply self-reflexive and self-critical, forcing critical theorists to continually concern themselves with reflections on method and the nature and effects of a critical social theory.

Horkheimer and Marcuse generally agreed on the project of developing a synthesis of philosophy, social theory, and research in a supradisciplinary project. There were some differences, however, with the models developed by Adorno and Benjamin (Buck-Morss 1977; Breuer 1985). While Horkheimer believed that critical social sciences would provide indispensable material for the theory, Adorno and Benjamin put more faith in philosophy and cultural theory as providing privileged sources of knowledge of contemporary society. For both, constellations of certain cultural artifacts contained "dialectical images" which would illuminate contemporary social conditions. They were more mistrustful of the social sciences than Horkheimer and tended to focus on cultural and philosophical criticism and ideology critique - emphases that would increasingly come to dominate the Institute's work and which would frequently displace their project of developing a social theory of the contemporary era.

During the 1930s and early 1940s, the Institute attempted to develop a theory of capitalist society which would build upon, update, and go beyond classical Marxism. Thus, it is important to discern that critical theory strives to provide both a substantive social theory of the present age and a meta-theory of its theoretical presuppositions and method. On one hand, critical theory contains a set of ways of looking at theory and at the world and a set of investigative, research, textual, and political practices. Yet, critical theory also provides a substantive, comprehensive theory of the present age in addition to its methodological orientation for doing social theory and research and for relating theoretical work to radical politics. Its substantive theory contains one of the first attempts to develop a synthesis of Marx and Freud and to incorporate psychoanalytic perspectives into its research. The critical theorists undertook projects which attempted to discern why individuals submitted to irrational authority and what psychological conditions produced authoritarian personalities who would submit to fascism. [6] Later, the critical theorists analyzed changes in socialization processes which were producing a weakness of the ego and "the decline of the individual." They also analyzed the new relationships between the state and economy, the role of new technologies and mass communication as new modes of social control, and new class stratifications and the integration of the proletariat which was diminishing class conflict in a new consumer society.

In general, the critical theorists hoped to produce aspects of a theory of the transformation of

competitive capitalism into monopoly capitalism and fascism, and hoped to be part of a historical process through which capitalism would be replaced by socialism. Their categories were intended to criticize the existing organization of society and to provide utopian sketches of a better society. Critical theory is thus motivated by an interest in emancipation from capitalism and provides a philosophy of social practice engaged in "the struggle for the future." Critical theory, Horkheimer argued, must remain loyal to the "idea of a future society as the community of free human beings, insofar as such a society is possible, given the present technical means" (1972:245).

Pollock's "State Capitalism" (Bronner and Kellner 1989:95-118) established a framework for the Institute's later analysis of the new relations between the state and the economy during the postwar era. Pollock claims that state capitalism -- in both its "democratic" and "totalitarian" forms -- produces a "command economy" exhibiting a "primacy of the political" whereby the state comes to manage the economy. Against Neumann's analysis of fascism in *Behemoth* (1941), Pollock maintained that "the profit motive is superseded by the power motive." Indeed, the Institute members never agreed about whether economic or political imperatives were primary for the new fascist state. Building on the Austrian Social Democrat Rudolf's Hilferding's *Finance Capital* (1910), Pollock's essay laid the foundation for later claims regarding the integration of the economy, the state, and the public sphere. It also maintained that capitalism had discovered new strategies to avoid economic crisis and provided the basis for the burgeoning belief that capitalism could henceforth stabilize itself and prevent the realization of socialism. Thus, it raised new doubts concerning the revolutionary role of the working class which was so central to the classical Marxian theory.

For Marx, the industrial proletariat was to serve as the agent of socialist revolution because it was the largest, most exploited, and the most militant class. Bearing the burden of industrial production, the working class was seen as the logical subject of revolution due to its crucial position in the production process and its potential for organization in highly centralized, large-scale industries. The Marxian theory of revolution also predicted severe capitalist economic crises which would lead the working class to revolt against poverty-stricken conditions where it had "nothing to lose but its chains." Even as capitalism was undergoing one of its most intense crises in the 1930s, however, the powerful parties and unions of the European working classes were defeated by the forces of fascism. Indeed, following that defeat, the prospects for socialist revolution looked ever bleaker to the Institute theorists.

As a consequence, the critical theorists increasingly distanced themselves from the traditional Marxist position which claimed that socialist revolution was inevitable and that historical progress would necessarily lead from capitalism to socialism. Henceforth, their relation to Marxism would become more ambivalent and complex. While individuals like Horkheimer would eventually abandon Marxism altogether for a form of mystical irrationalism derived from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Marcuse and others would continue to develop their own particular versions of the Marxian theory.

One-Dimensional Society and the Crisis of Critical Theory

One of the key Institute positions was that the "culture industries" were now playing an increasingly important role in managing consciousness and obscuring social conflict. First sketched out in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972), originally written during the early 1940s, this standpoint became an essential component of critical theory and inaugurated a new discourse about the role of mass communication and culture in the constitution of contemporary societies. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industries were organs of mass deception which manipulated individuals into accepting the current organization of society. In their view, the culture industries were engaging in sophisticated forms of ideological indoctrination, using "entertainment" to sugarcoat oppression while eroding cultural standards in order to quell any forms of expression which might contest the given order.

During World War II, the Institute split up due to pressures of the war. Horkheimer and Adorno moved to California, while Lowenthal, Marcuse, Neumann, and others worked for the U.S. government as their contribution in the fight against fascism. Horkheimer and Adorno worked on their book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which contains implicit critiques of Marxism, as well as of fascism and consumer capitalism. Departing from the Marxian theory of history, they presented a philosophy of history that traced the fate of the Enlightenment from the beginnings of scientific thought among the Greeks to fascist concentration camps and the cultural industries of U.S. capitalism. They showed how Western rationality served as an instrument of domination and how "enlightenment" turned into its opposite: mystification and oppression. The book criticized enlightenment scientism and rationalism, and implicitly implicated Marxism within the "dialectic of Enlightenment."

After World War II, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Pollock returned to Frankfurt to reestablish the Institute in Germany, while Lowenthal, Marcuse, and others remained in the United States. In Germany, Adorno, Horkheimer, and their associates published a series of books and became a major intellectual force in their native land. At this time, the term "Frankfurt School" became widespread as a characterization of its version of supradisciplinary social research and of the particular social theory developed by Adorno, Horkheimer, and their associates. The Frankfurt school engaged in frequent methodological and substantive debates with other social theorists, most notably, in the "positivist dispute" in which they criticized more empirical and quantitative approaches to social theory and defended their own more speculative and critical brand of social theory (see Adorno, et al, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, 1976). The German group around Horkheimer and Adorno was also increasingly hostile toward orthodox Marxism and in turn were criticized by a variety of "Marxist-Leninists" and "scientific Marxists" for their alleged surrender of revolutionary and scientific Marxian perspectives.

The Frankfurt School eventually became best known for its theories of "the totally administered society," or "one-dimensional society," which theorized the increasing power of capitalism over all aspects of social life and the development of new forms of social control. This theory

included analyses of working class integration within contemporary capitalist societies and new techniques of capitalist stabilization which severely questioned the Marxian theory of revolution. According to many critical theorists, new forms of technology, new modes of organizing production, new configurations of class, and new methods of social control were producing a "one-dimensional" society without opposition. It also seemed that new forms of political, social, and especially cultural conformity, were becoming institutionalized (Marcuse 1964; Kellner 1984).

The development of a "totally administered society" led Adorno and Horkheimer to theorize "the end of the individual" and to stress the importance of preserving subjectivity in order to fulfill the goals of liberalism and socialism alike. The erosion of subjectivity, they believed, betrayed the promise of modernity which was itself predicated on the belief that the augmentation of science and technology would improve human control over nature and produce greater freedom, individuality, and happiness. Instead, the critical theorists argued, the institutions and practices of "advanced industrial society" were producing ever greater conformity and social domination. Ultimately, in his highly esoteric *Negative Dialectics and Aesthetic Theory* this situation led Adorno to attempt the resurrection of a repressed subjectivity against mass society and its philosophical expressions like existentialism and positivism. [7]

It was ultimately Marcuse who provided the most comprehensive formulation of the theory of one-dimensional society in *One Dimensional Man* (1964). In his now-classic analysis, advanced industrial society integrates and absorbs all forces of opposition so that the "subjective" conditions for conflict between classes, as well as between the individual and society vanish at the very time that the "objective" reality of exploitation and injustice intensifies. Marcuse analyzes the new forms of social control in "one-dimensional society" and the diminution of the "other dimension" of social critique, rebellion, and utopian thinking, which presents alternatives to the existing order. Against "one-dimensionality," he advocated the "power of negative thinking" and the "great refusal." These slogans found empirical referents during the 1960s in the New Left and the counterculture which, to some extent, embraced Marcuse as a theoretical spokesperson (Kellner 1984).

During the 1950s, however, there were divergences between the work of the Institute relocated in Frankfurt and Fromm, Lowenthal, Marcuse, and others who did not return to Germany and who frequently developed theories that were at odds with both the current and earlier work of Horkheimer and Adorno. Thus, it is misleading to consider the work of various critical theorists during the postwar period as members of a monolithic "Frankfurt School." Whereas there was both a shared sense of purpose and collective work on supradisciplinary social theory from 1930 to the early 1940s, thereafter critical theorists frequently diverge and during the 1950s and 1960s the term the "Frankfurt School" can really only be applied to the work of those associated with the Institute in Germany.

It is therefore impossible to characterize the "Frankfurt School" as a whole since its work spanned several decades and involved a variety of thinkers who later engaged in sharp debates

with each other. Rather, one should perceive various phases of Institute work: 1) the empirical-historical studies of the Grunberg era; 2) the attempts in the early to mid-1930s to establish a materialist supradisciplinary social theory under Horkheimer's directorship; 3) the attempts to develop a critical theory of society during the exile period from about 1937 to the early 1940s; 4) the dispersion of Institute members in the 1940s and the new directions sketched out by Horkheimer and Adorno; 5) the return of the Institute to Germany and its work in Frankfurt during the 1950s and 1960s; 6) the development of critical theory in various directions by Fromm, Lowenthal, Marcuse, and others who remained in the U.S.; 7) the continuation of Institute projects and development of critical theory in Germany by Jurgen Habermas, Oskar Negt, Alfred Schmidt, and others in the 1970s and 1980s; and, finally, 8) contributions to critical theory by a variety of younger theorists and scholars currently active in Europe and the United States.

In retrospect, one can see that a crisis of critical theory emerged with its fragmentation after World War II (Kellner 1989a). In effect, its social theory stopped developing, despite some empirical research projects and sustained metatheoretical analyses by certain of its members, especially Adorno. Consequently, while I believe that critical theory provides the most advanced theoretical perspectives within contemporary social theory from the 1930s through the early 1960s (Kellner 1989a), new socio-cultural developments since then have rendered obsolete some of its theses concerning one-dimensional society, the media, technology, and so on. In particular, critical theory has not continued to theorize new technologies, new developments in the media, changes in socialization practices, and new cultural developments. This is somewhat surprising since its earlier contributions were precisely in these areas. [8]

The reasons for the failure of most critical theorists to update and develop their substantive social theory are many and complex. Horkheimer seems to have burned out by the 1950s and provided few important contributions during his later years. Adorno did a great deal of work in social theory in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as turning out an incredible profusion of texts in the areas of literary criticism, cultural critique, philosophy, and aesthetics. But his work turned more and more from supradisciplinary research to philosophical reflections. Habermas also tended to focus his attention increasingly on philosophical theorizing, although his book *Legitimation Crisis* (1975) provides some important new perspectives for critical social theory, as do many of his later texts, especially *Theory of Communicative Action* (two volumes, 1984, 1987) and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987). [9]

In Germany and the United States, most of the work in critical theory during the last decade has followed Habermas in attempting to develop more adequate philosophical foundations for critical theory (see, especially, Benhabib 1986), or to delineate philosophical aspects of critical theory. Thus, there has been a deficit of social research and elaboration of new theoretical perspectives in the domain of social theory. Contributions of this sort have come, by contrast, from members of the postmodern camp who have attempted to theorize the impact of new technologies, new media, and other socio-cultural developments (see Kellner 1988 and 1989b and 1989c). The response of critical theory has been by and large to polemicize against

postmodern theory as a new form of irrationalism (Habermas 1987 and the discussion in Kellner 1989a). Yet if critical theory wishes to meet the postmodern challenge and win back its role as the cutting edge of radical social theory, it must seek new directions and provide theoretical accounts of contemporary developments in a wide range of domains.

New Directions: New Perspectives

With its fragmentation, trivialization, and academicization, social theory today is in acute crisis and needs new directions and new perspectives to which critical theory can contribute. While critical theory stopped developing and articulating new social conditions and developments, postmodern social theory and theories of postindustrial society lack the sustained commitment to social research, social critique, and political practice found in the best contributors to critical theory. While both schools provide a powerful challenge to mainstream theory, I believe that critical theory's sustained criticism of mainstream theory's presuppositions, methodologies, and lack of critical reflexivity, provides a more sustained critique than postmodern theory. Moreover, I believe that critical theory's traditional goal of providing a theory of the present age and radical politics provides superior perspectives to the often corrosive skepticism and nihilism found in much postmodern theory which disables both theoretical inquiry and political practice (Kellner 1989b).

But if critical theory seeks to contribute to finding the way out of the contemporary crisis of social theory, it must itself develop new perspectives. In opposition to the previous model of "one-dimensional society," critical theorists today should focus on the contradictions, conflicts, and crisis tendencies within contemporary capitalist societies. To the neglect of political economy and empirical research found in much critical theory, we should respond with theoretical analyses of developments within the capitalist economy and of changes in class stratification, the labor process, new technologies, the media, and politics. In opposition to the apolitical and even depoliticized versions of critical theory that continue to circulate, those who wish to revitalize critical theory should attempt to politicize it, to connect it with new social movements and existing political struggles. As we move into the 1990s and toward the end of the century, many theoretical and political tasks stand before us. If critical theory wishes to participate in the Left Turn needed to eliminate the current hegemony of the Right and to help to build a better society, it needs to develop both its analysis of the present situation and a new politics in order to become once again the cutting edge of radical social theory. [10]

Notes

1 On critical theory and the Institute for Social Research, see Jay (1973), Wiggershaus (1986), and Kellner (1989a). I shall draw upon this book here, as well as the introduction to Bronner and Kellner (1989) and Kellner (1989c).

2 Most of the early sections of this paper focus on Horkheimer because as Director of the Institute he generally presented the key methodological arguments defining critical theory during

the 1930s. Later, Marcuse, Adorno, and Habermas would develop somewhat different conceptions. To a reader wishing a first introduction to critical theory, I would suggest reading the aphorisms in Horkheimer (1978), the essays in Horkheimer (1972), Marcuse (1968), and Bronner and Kellner (1989).

3 I would reject Brunkhorst's claim (1985) that Horkheimer was at the time "anti-philosophy" (1985:357), or that he performed "a *sublation* (*Aufhebung*) of philosophy into science" (1985:379). Instead, I am arguing that *all* phases of critical theory are characterized by a synthesis, a dialectical mediation, of science and philosophy, although the relationship is portrayed differently at different stages and in different texts and theorists. For example, throughout his career, Horkheimer would present different, usually aphoristic, notions of philosophy and science and their relationships. (Compare, e.g., Horkheimer 1972:34ff., 182ff., and 188ff. Consequently, his concepts of philosophy, science, and their relationships are constantly shifting, though after *Dialectic of Enlightenment* he was generally critical of science, technology, and instrumental rationality.

4 For elaborations of this position, see Sohn-Rethel (1978) and Young (1977).

5 On varying conceptions of the concept of totality, see Jay (1984) and for a "war on totality," see Lyotard (1984). New French theory tends to draw semantic and theoretico-political connections between "totality" and "totalitarian" and to reject all totalizing modes of thought as inherently repressive, reductionist and totalitarian. Such broadside polemics erase differences between varying concepts and uses of totality, however, and are themselves totalizing and reductive, covering over the multiplicity of modes of totalizing theories.

6 For the Institute analyses of fascism see the articles collected in Bronner and Kellner (1989) and the discussion in Kellner (1989a).

7 On Adorno's contributions to critical theory, see Buck-Morss (1977) and Kellner (1989a).

8 See the documentation in Wiggershaus (1986) and Kellner (1989a).

9 Because of space considerations, I am omitting detailed discussion of Habermas' later methodological and substantive developments of critical theory which are discussed in McCarthy (1978) and Kellner (1989a).

10 I attempt to develop such an analysis in Kellner 1990.

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