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The Frankfurt School's Critical Theory: A Discussion

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Although works of individual writers such as Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm, have been influential in the United States for the last ten to fifteen years, the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory as an overall approach has only recently received more widespread attention. Based on the German philosophical tradition, on Freudian and Marxian theories, the School presents a thoroughgoing critique of contemporary society, its effects on individuals, and of certain philosophies such as positivism underpinning the contemporary social order. At the same time Critical theory attempts to outline directions for social change more in line with its view of human nature. The following presents basic themes as formulated by different critical theorists over the past three decades.

The Frankfurt School, proponents of what has come to be known as the "Critical Theory of Society" was born in the social and intellectual turmoils following in the decade after the Russian Revolution, particularly during the late 1920's and early 30's. The crucial point of departure for the ensuing debates concerned the 'correct' interpretation of Marx: Were his writings to be understood in terms of materialism and naturalism, in which case revolution would occur and succeed on the basis of historical necessity or laws of nature, or was the crucial element in the occurrence of such an event the moment of consciousness in men, particularly the



working class. The Leninist interpretation followed the first line of argument and was incorporated in the official doctrine as derived from Moscow. On the other hand, the view that proletarian class consciousness was the essential ingredient in social change, was taken by Georg Lukacs and Karl Korsch in their influential works Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein and Marxismus und Philosophie, both published in 1923.¹

These publications provided a new impetus to the Institut für Sozialforschung² created specifically with the aim of a searching re-examination of the foundations of Marxist theory. Established in 1923 as adjunct to the University of Frankfurt, the Institut's combined scholarly output in time crystallized into the distinctive approach of Critical Theory, most representative of which are the writings of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm. After its exile from Germany from 1934 to 1950, a period of which most was spent at Columbia University, the Institut's work was continued by a second generation of Critical theorists, prominent among whom are Jürgen

¹Georg Lukacs' work has been translated by Rodney Livingstone as History and Class Consciousness, (Cambridge, Mass. 1971). The English title of Karl Korsch's book is Marxism and Philosophy.

²Translated as 'Institute for Social Research'. The most extensive documentation of the Institut's history and work has been carried out by Martin Jay; see bibliography. Following Jay, reference to this organization will be made by using the German word 'Institut'.



Habermas, Albrecht Wellmer, and Alfred Schmidt.

Critical Theory and Critical Theorists

Critical theory is not a unified approach. From its inception contributions have been interdisciplinary including such fields as economics, history, philosophy, psychology, and sociology. Its primary intellectual roots, however, are based in the writings of Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Freud.

Among Frankfurt School's basic theoretical concerns are the critique of modern society, its tendency to rationalize all spheres of life, and the effects of this order on individuals and their relations to each other. Freedom, autonomy, and self expression are some of the dominant themes stemming from an emphasis on Marx's early writings, the period in which the Hegelian influence is most pronounced rather than his later ones. Critical Theory also opposes all closed philosophical and theoretical systems because of what is regarded as their inhibiting effect on intellectual inquiry and reflection. In line with this basic tenet, Critical Theory itself is constantly evolving; it denies the possibility of absolute knowledge and the finality in social organization. Yet, it argues against the practical and theoretical paralysis produced by extreme relativism, itself an absolute principle (Horkheimer, 1947).

Although in disagreement with Marx on such points as the centrality of labor and the primacy of the economic base over the cultural super-



structure, social relationships and processes are viewed in terms of a dialectical model. Leading back to Lukacs' and Korsch's interpretation of Marx, the centrality given to human consciousness entailed a concern with the connection between theory and action or, as Marx termed it, with theory and practice; that is, theory should be manifested in self-creating action. The goal of social change, therefore, is the unifying of theory and practice (Breines, 1972:77).

The radical analysis of contemporary society was presented in its most incisive form in a number of works published in the late 1940's and early 1950's (e.g. Horkheimer and Adorno, 1947; Horkheimer, 1947; Adorno, 1951). In his book Eclipse of Reason, Max Horkheimer, one of the Institut's central figures and its director for a number of years, bases his critique on the prevalence of a particular type of reason in contemporary society. His distinction is between subjective reason which chooses means and ends to serve the subject's interests in terms of self-preservation, and objective reason which postulates rational connections not only in the individual mind but also in the objective world so that the reasonableness of means and ends can be determined in relation to a totality. The increasing subjectivization of reason characterizing the modern era has the consequence of emphasizing means rather than ends, so that actions become instrumental and manipulative; reason is employed almost exclusively in order to establish the adequacy of procedures while



the purposes or goals themselves are largely taken for granted and remain unexamined.

Subjective reason is manifested in man's quest for the mastery over nature, progress and technological achievements. Philosophies such as positivism and pragmatism and various forms of religious dogma further underpin the dominance of subjective reason by predisposing individuals to adapt to a reality outside themselves, a reality the existence of which is postulated by these very philosophies. Adaptation to external conditions rather than self-creating activity has become a positive principle of survival.

In typical dialectic fashion, Horkheimer outlines the historical process whereby man, seeking to emancipate himself from the domination of nature, has come to be dominated by his knowledge so that now he must submit to the view of the world he himself has created and to which he must adapt in order to survive. In Horkheimer's words, "Domination of nature involves domination of man. The more devices we invent for dominating nature, the more must we serve them if we are to survive" (Horkheimer, 1947:97). The individual, more or less consciously, perceives this gap between the totality of his being (ideals) and adaptive requirements (the reality principle), but fundamentally only two reactions are possible: submission, whereby the subject loses his individuality and becomes part of mass society and mass culture, or resistance leading at best to social isolation.



Taking Max Weber's concepts of rationality and rationalization as points of departure, Herbert Marcuse argues more concretely than Horkheimer, that in the name of rationality a specific form of unacknowledged political domination has been realized in capitalist societies. This kind of domination derives its legitimacy from the growth of the forces of production, from scientific and technical progress. Existing relations of production are now regarded as the necessary organizational form congruent with the developed productive forces. What is historically new, Marcuse contends, is that the forces of production, having reached the stage of scientific-technical development, themselves become the basis of legitimation rather than serve as critical standard for judging prevailing legitimations. According to Marcuse, abolition of this form of political domination requires different modes of theory formation and a different scientific methodology, one which would be based on affinity and harmony with nature rather than on control and mastery over it.³

It is at this point that Habermas takes issue with Marcuse by pointing out that a change in the direction as envisaged by Marcuse is only possible on the basis of a changed human nature because technological development corresponds logically to the structure of purposive-rational action, that is,

³A summary of Marcuse's argument can be found in Habermas' essay, "Technology and Science as Ideology," in "Toward a Rational Society," 1970, Pp. 81-90.



to the structure of work as linked to man's motor apparatus (Habermas, 1970:81-122).

Habermas contends that neither Weber nor Marcuse has satisfactorily accounted for the rationalization of society as an historical process. He advances a framework in which work is distinguished from symbolic interaction, the two concepts referring to two alternative structures of action. "Work," corresponding to purposive-rational action, is based on technical rules, the validity of which is derived from empirically true or analytically correct propositions; communicative action, on the other hand, takes place in terms of intersubjectively shared norms. According to the two types of action two levels of the social system can be distinguished: the institutional framework of a society or the socio-cultural life world, and the subsystems of purposive-rational action.

Based on this distinction, Habermas argues that at the stage of advanced capitalism, traditional normative legitimations have been replaced by the purposive-rational ethos, or science and technology, as legitimating ideology with the consequence of increasing depoliticization of the mass of the population. Because of increasing state intervention in the market mechanism and the growing interdependence of research and technology making science the leading productive force, Marx's principles of political economy as formulated for liberal capitalism no longer apply at the present stage of historical development. Class



conflict becomes latent and protest from underprivileged groups ineffective because the system does not live off the latter's labor.

The process of rationalization as reformulated by Habermas, consists in the expansion and encroachment of purposive-rational action into the institutional framework of society at the expense of the maintenance of intersubjectivity and mutual understanding.

Another facet of the Frankfurt School is its attempt to synthesize Freud and Marx.⁴ Although several members of the 'inner circle'--especially Horkheimer--had been interested in psychoanalysis for some time, not until Fromm joined the Institut did specific work in this direction proceed. The choice of Freud's theories as a psychological base for Critical Theory was influenced not only by his stature as a thinker but also by the fact that Pavlovian behaviorism presented the only alternative at the time, an alternative which was incompatible with the Frankfurt School's interest in human consciousness.

Fromm's aim was to integrate psychology and sociology. Although he disagreed with Freud's view of human nature, his metapsychology of life and death instincts and the libido theory, he accepted Freud's fundamental concept of the unconscious and the dynamic concept of character. In

⁴For a lengthy discussion of the Frankfurt School's use of Freud's theories, see Martin Jay, The Dialectical Imagination, 1973, chap. 3.



contrast to Freud who concurred with the traditional doctrine of man as basically evil and antisocial, Fromm, while accepting the potency of biological drives, argues that man's character is molded by society; it is the product of social processes and not part of a fixed human nature (Fromm, 1941). While society does have a suppressive function; it also has a creative one. Human nature is a combination of biologically fixed and innate drives and cultural patterns. Human nature, like society, is the product of human evolution. Historically, this evolution can be characterized as progressive individuation; man now has more individual freedom but is at the same time also more isolated. Only by connecting to the world through love and work can this aloneness be overcome.

Fromm identified social character in man as that part of a person which is common to most members of his group; it develops as the result of basic experiences and modes of life shared by group members. Social character and social structure stand in dialectic relationship to each other and are, at any point, the result of historic evolution.

Fromm disagreed with other members of the Institut over the use of Freud's libido theory. He argued that each society has its own libidinal structure the social functions of which change as the socio-economic base of a society changes. Horkheimer and Adorno, on the other hand, regarded this view as an attempt to sociologize the individual. Instead, they held to the view that Freud's formulation of the libido implying that realm of the



individual inaccessible to social control, was indispensable for the prevention of a premature reconciliation of society and the individual. Their position on this point is based on a rejection of identity theory which maintains the belief in the ultimate one-ness of subject and object. It was for the very reason that Freud's theories implied non-identity that he appealed to them. Non-identity, they argued, prevented men from accepting social conditions without protest.

In view of the many revisions both Freud's and Marx's theories have undergone during the development of Critical Theory, it is doubtful whether one can still speak of a synthesis between these two thinkers rather than the formulation of new frameworks which admittedly utilize many of these theorists' fundamental concepts.

Epistemology was one area which had been neglected by Critical Theory as well as by Marx, and it is here that Habermas made his specific contributions. Based on diverse sources, his complicated argument (Habermas, 1971) denies the possibility that there is only one way of knowing. Instead, he posits an epistemological pluralism within which certain ways of knowing seem to be linked to basic human needs, or what Habermas prefers to call basic life-interests of the species. These life-interests are the reproduction and self-constitution of the human race and their satisfaction requires certain cognitive orientations, three of which Habermas examines.

The first of these is technical, that is, it operates on the basis of



purposive and instrumental action; however, the relationship between means and ends can never be entirely objective because of the connection this orientation has with life-interests. Thus, positivism and its assumption that objective reality can be known independently of the subject is naive. Scientific investigation, Habermas argues, always occurs for the purpose of specific human ends. Thus, knowledge is gained through our technical interest in the mastery and control of nature.

The second cognitive orientation is the hermeneutic; it is always context-bound because it refers to intersubjectivity and culturally mediated communication and behavior. Whereas the technical orientation refers to an instrumental relationship between subject and object, the hermeneutic orientation refers to the moral and normative realm. The third orientation, the emancipatory, aims at achieving undistorted communication to be realized through reflection. Indeed, self-reflection is the only way to discover the unity between knowledge and interest or between theory and praxis, a unity which has been disrupted by the dominance of positivism.

Habermas' basic position is, however, not so much a rejection of positivism as it is a rejection of its claim to universality. The proper place of science and the scientific method is, therefore, in the realm of labor or instrumental action because the aim of such action is to control nature.

By utilizing Freud's concept of the unconscious, Habermas sees



psychoanalysis as a means of aiding self-reflection and uncovering distortions and neuroses which impede communication.

Relationship between Critical Theory and Traditional Theory

Horkheimer addresses this issue as early as 1937. The basic dividing line between the two is whether the theory assists in the process of social reproduction or whether it is subversive to it. Traditional theory, Horkheimer pointed out (1937), is basically concerned with describing the world, no matter whether such descriptions are generated deductively, inductively or phenomenologically. Furthermore, it is concerned with pure knowledge rather than with action. In contrast, Critical Theory does not see knowledge as superior to action, nor does it believe in the possibility of disinterested and objective scientific research. The researcher's values necessarily influence his work. Horkheimer argued for the unity of knowledge and interest some thirty years before Habermas was to attempt a demonstration of this connection (Habermas, 1968).

Critical Theory does not exclude any valid human experience from its subject matter, thus its truths are unverifiable. It sees man as the creator of history and takes the subject's viewpoint.

Therborn (1970:69-70), a critic of the Frankfurt School, is somewhat less sympathetic than Horkheimer on this issue. He states that epistemologically, the difference between critical and traditional theory is simply that between classical philosophy and modern science. According to his



viewpoint, the epistemological basis of critical theory is metaphysical humanism.

On the other hand, neither Horkheimer nor Therborn specifically address themselves to the issue of what they mean by "traditional theory." Taking hints from Habermas (1968) in this connection what seems to be included under this category is all theory from Comte to Parsons. Obviously critical theory cannot be counterposed to traditional theory as polar opposite in such facile manner. Rather, Critical Theory is one approach among many and the differences between them are to be found in differing emphasis rather than in the inclusion or exclusion of certain elements. Furthermore, the potency of Critical Theory derives from its Marxian roots, itself presumably part of Traditional theory.

Appeal of Critical Theory

One may speculate that Critical Theory, in C. W. Mills's terms (1959), specifies and makes explicit the reasons for the "deadly and unspecified malaise" experienced by many young people as apparently undefinable uneasiness and anxiety. The appeal to young radicals, particularly the New Left, is based primarily on their common critical stance and rejection of modern social organization. Gouldner (1970:409) concludes that they "reject the ethic of responsibility and keeping up appearances." They want to "do their own thing." The Frankfurt School's analysis which points to the restriction on individual spontaneity, the



overemphasis on means, and the shrinking orbit for self-determined action in contemporary society appeals to the young, particularly those of affluent middle strata, because of their subjective experiences. At the same time they see a continual deterioration of conventional conceptions of morality, utility as criterion for value, and institutional hypocrisy. Success is achieved by "playing the game" and has thereby become meaningless. These experiences have led to moral outrage and disgust.

As Gouldner (1970) points out, modern radicalism of the New Left variety has its base in those who, having been included in the system want out, rather than of those who, marginal or excluded, want in.

Critical Theory has put the subjectively felt anxieties into a coherent analytical context. The lack of meaning in life and work now becomes comprehensible.

Gouldner (1970:409) predicts that on the basis of factors subjectively experienced and recognized by Critical Theory, there is likely to be a drift toward an anti-utilitarian sociology, one which will not engage itself for practical and applied purposes at the expense of interest on the scholar's part or quality of scholarship.

Personal Assessment

As might be expected, the Frankfurt School has been criticized for a number of reasons from a variety of camps.

Students of New Left persuasion, the very group whom Habermas has



regarded as possessing the greatest potential for bringing about change, have attacked it for its inability to generate practical imperatives (Jay, 1973-1974:25-44). Therborn (1970) has charged it with reducing both science and politics to philosophy, and positivists in the tradition of Karl Popper have assailed its epistemological base.

There is much validity in these charges. While not denying the timeliness and subjective plausibility of the critical analysis of contemporary society, it leaves unanswered the question "Where do we go from here?" The belief in the possibility of an objective social science has been eroding and it is recognized that only a certain category of social phenomena can profitably be studied from an 'external' point of view. Yet it is doubtful that Habermas' epistemology can serve as an alternative to positivism. Rejecting the reliance on objective criteria of validity, Habermas' argument regarding the linkage between certain ways of knowing and basic life-interests can be accepted or rejected depending on its plausibility to the reader. Furthermore, the connection between self-reflection, intersubjectivity, and the realization of emancipatory interests remains unclear.

One can also disagree with Critical Theory's historicist conception of man's development and the evolution of society. It is by no means certain, for example, that a disjuncture between ideals and the 'reality principle' has not existed at other times and places as well. Critical



Theory, like more orthodox Marxism, proceeds from a critical analysis of present condition to postulating a utopia, a future society in which man's hermeneutic and emancipatory predispositions can be realized because restrictions on communication in the form of domination and lack of self-reflection have been removed. As with Marx, while one can resonate with the critical analysis and with the projected utopia, the path from one to the other remains uncharted and problematic; precisely the point at which one-time enthusiasts become disillusioned.

There is considerable truth in Therborn's charge that Critical Theory is a regression rather than an advance insofar as, by not participating in scientific discourse but relying on classical philosophy, it cannot create any new scientific concepts and consequently leaves everything as it is (Therborn, 1970:70).

On the other hand, Critical Theory has once again brought into sharp focus some fundamental issues the discussion of which had lost its momentum. It is essentially correct in stating that by concentrating on objective dimensions of social reality, considerations of social change are of secondary importance. It is precisely because social orders do not strictly conform to "immutable laws of nature," that social change is possible. However, a way out of the dilemma posed by objective and subjective dimensions has yet to be found.

Critical Theory, despite its call for unifying theory and practice has



remained on the theoretical level. On questions such as: What kinds of action would emanate from the results of self-reflection? and, What would it look like? Critical theorists have remained remarkably silent and even become conservative.

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