

# Social Crisis and German Idealism – in search of the origins of Critical Theory<sup>1</sup>

*Frederik van Gelder*

The term ‘origins’<sup>2</sup> turns up in times of social and political crisis. The origins of democracy become an issue when the threat of totalitarianism in its various manifestations becomes real and obvious; the origins of peace and prosperity become topical when both are under pressure; the origins of love and inner tranquility become a theme when both are incessantly assaulted by ever more graphic, ever more intrusive representations of violence and eroticism in the media. The same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, when one looks at discussions on the origins of justice, of truth, of beauty, of freedom — all these ideals of which we once hoped, so many of us, after the disasters of

- 
- 1 Keynote address at the congress „The Future of Critical Theory“, University of Melbourne, 17-18 November, 2005, Ashworth Program in Social Theory.
  - 2 The use of the term ‘origins’ – when we are trying to pin down, in an intellectual/academic setting, a term as amorphous and multifaceted as ‘Critical Theory’ – has an established, and two or more less common meanings. The established, conventional meaning of ‘origins’ is that of historicism and the history of ideas. If we take this route, then we treat Critical Theory as a set of ideas originating in a group of intellectuals after the First World War in Europe, inspired by the hegelianised Marxism of the day, and then crafting a narrative using the technique of the biographer, the historian, the writer. Martin Jay’s *The Dialectical Imagination*, which was influential for so many of my generation, takes this approach. But this ‘back to the basics’ approach can also mean: scratching off the patina of conformism and obscurantism blurring our vision. For this also is a connotation – coming from Benjamin – of ‘Critical Theory’: that each generation is confronted anew with political ideologies capable of setting the world aflame; that it is the task of the intellectual to be able to keep reality and the public sphere’s distortions of this reality *apart*. At least *this*; at least analytically, as a minimum, as a basis for all else. To speak of origins presupposes in other words also an awareness of the pitfalls of a purely *historicising* approach. („Critical Theory“: an ominous, portentous, all-encompassing, impossibly ambitious lemma; confronting one immediately with the impossibility of its operationalisation.)

World War II, that they would be substantial enough to structure our lives and shore up our public institutions.

It turns up, in other words, this term ‘origins’, when a widely accepted, sometimes venerable moral/intellectual frame of reference begins to fray at the edges, begins to be questioned and unconvincing, begins to lose its persuasive power, begins to lose what could be called its ‘common-sensicality’.

\*\*\*

‘Origins’ of Critical Theory has in the first instance to remind us of the historical background and content of a set of ideas belonging to a generation of intellectuals which in some ways has now ‘become history’. A generation which sought, in the face of the dictatorial tendencies as obvious in the Bolshevism of the Russian revolutionaries as it was in the Fascism at home, to rescue a ‘Western’ Marxism more beholden to Enlightenment principles than to the grim civil and military bureaucracies consolidating their power everywhere, and culminating ultimately in the war. They failed<sup>3</sup>, that generation of Critical Theorists, and the consequences of that failure is the bitter legacy which the post-war generation inherited.

There is a second sense in which the ‘origins of Critical Theory’ kind of studies has become topical, over and above that bit of necessary historiography just touched upon: it too – ‘Critical Theory’ – shares in the general intellectual malaise; it too has become so amorphous, cacophonous, multifaceted, internally contradictory, that a rationalisation process in the sense of Max Weber is in order: in the sense of systematisation, of inventarisation, a ‘making explicit’ of points of difference, of inherent assumptions, of intellectual lineages. A Critical Theory in which Matthew Arnold and Karl Marx, Gershom Scholem and Louis Althusser, Freud and

3 One has to give an account of what it was about Horkheimer and Adorno’s program – namely to carry through, finally, what in Hegel had miscarried, an entirely modern logic, free of all Aristotelian and metaphysical remnants – that ultimately caused it, no less than the Hegelian and Marxian versions which preceded it, to fail. For that it indubitably did: namely fail in its intent. The world now is incomparably more dangerous, more threatening to all of its denizens than it was when the generation of theorists that subsequently came to be known as ‘critical theorists’ were born. (C.f. Russell Jacoby: *The Dialectic of Defeat: contours of Western Marxism*, New York, C.U.P., 1981) Only at the cultural level has it had some effect; c.f. Alex Demirovic: *Der nonkonformistische Intellektuelle – die Entwicklung der Kritischen Theorie zur Frankfurter Schule*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1999, and the upcoming reader by Peter Beilharz: *Postwar American Critical Thought*, Sage, 2005.

Derrida, Adorno and Heidegger, Kristeva and Foucault – not to mention music theory and globalisation, terrorism and human rights, feminism and post-colonialism, philosophy and religion – can all be mentioned in the same breath has lost the specific sensibility for philosophical and sociological principles on which this tradition was once based and which once gave it its sense of unity. It has become, to borrow a term from the psychoanalysts, a ‘crazy centipede’, no longer knowing which foot to put forward, in which direction, or why it should regard the effort worthwhile at all.<sup>4</sup>

There is a third sense in which we need to speak of the ‘origins’ of Critical Theory, in addition to its historical origins and its contemporary manifestations. The term ‘redemption’, which crops up in our congress poster – in the Benjamin quote – is a pointer to a world which contemporary analytic philosophy spurns. What Benjamin called Critical Theory’s ‘weak messianic force’ derives from what has been called its penchant for ‘Sphinx-Riddles’<sup>5</sup>, its as yet frustrated ambition to come up with answers. The wily Odysseus – allegorical hero of Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialektik der Aufklärung* – lives by his wits, and that means: he knows that a false answer will mean his death. Intelligence, the ability to break out of old habits and hallowed myths, the rethinking of old issues in new ways – one of the many meanings of the word ‘reflection’ – has survival value. We too, our generation, is faced with ‘Sphinx-riddles’ to which we’re going to have to find the answers. Global warming, WMD, terrorism, genetic engineering are a few of these riddles. The fascination for Critical Theory in the original sense, was based on this – as yet unfulfilled – promise: that there are answers, that they can be found, and that humankind need not be fobbed off, as has happened so often in the past, with a purely transcendental and virtual solace. Post-metaphysical reason, which is not the same as either positivism or cynicism, seeks a this-worldly embodiment for hopes which an earlier age expressed in the doctrines and symbolism of monotheistic religion. It is the ugly dwarf which in Benjamin’s well-known allegory of the historical process is hidden in the box under the chessboard of life, moving the pieces unbeknownst to the players, invisible embodiment of the hope in a more peaceful and humane future.

---

4 P. F. Galli: „Psychoanalyse: Der verrückt gewordene Tausendfüßler“ in: Psychoanalytisches Seminar Zürich (ed.): *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*. Freiburg im Breisgau, Kore, 1987.

5 Helmut Dahmer: *Soziologie nach einem barbarischen Jahrhundert*. Vienna, WUV, 2001.

Allow me now to proceed by approaching Critical Theory the way people do in the history of ideas. What brings us together at this congress is the shared conviction that Critical Theory is a great deal more than a ‘system of ideas’, but let us set up, to start with, a few points for discussion.

- The term ‘Critical Theory’ originates in the generation of European intellectuals that survived the First World War, who sought both to understand what it was that had just hit them and explanations for the forces of National Socialism, Fascism and Communism looming on the horizon. Initially ‘Critical Theory’ was simply, in the politically polarised atmosphere of the Weimar Republic, a circumlocution, a shibboleth for ‘Marxism’, an allusion to the ‘Kritik’ in Marx’s *Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, and through that associative chain to the conception of freedom<sup>6</sup> inherent in German Idealism.<sup>7</sup>

---

6 Which is not the same as romanticism, as is maintained by some authors. Manfred Frank is right to make the distinction: „I define Idealism as the conviction – made especially binding by Hegel – that consciousness is a self-sufficient phenomenon that, by virtue of its own means, can make comprehensible for itself even the prerequisites of its own existence. In contrast, what distinguishes early German Romanticism is the conviction that the very possibility of being a self is due to a transcendental ground that cannot be reduced to the immanence of consciousness. In this way the ground of being a self becomes a mystery that can never be revealed.“ In: John Rundell et al.: „Issues and Debates in Contemporary Critical and Social Philosophy“, p. 8. (Rundell et al.: *Contemporary Perspectives in Critical and Social Philosophy*, Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2004.)

7 "What is theory?" is the question with which Max Horkheimer opens his seminal paper „Traditionelle und Kritische Theorie“, published 1937 in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* – de facto by then already a journal of and by German exiles. It is one of those canonic texts – like the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the *Negative Dialektik* – which each generation has to read and interpret anew, and in which the hermeneutic level that it yields to the reader shifts, depending on the generation and the intellectual skills of the person doing the asking. The kernel of truth in the old myth of a locked and forgotten trunk in the basement of the Institut für Sozialforschung after the war, supposedly containing Horkheimer’s revolutionary pre-war tracts, is that Horkheimer was indeed reluctant to republish these texts in the sixties, but this was a reluctance that had less to do with the ostensible faithlessness of an old and newly pious renegade – as some in the SDS would have it at the time – than with fidelity to a conception of dialectics already discernable in his „Traditionelle und Kritische Theorie“, and which inured him as much to the orthodox Marxism of the twenties as it did to the romanticised version of the sixties. What is then this conception of dialectics, which Habermas too would later hold up as a model for emulation? Put differently: what is it that is involved in Marx’s critique of Hegel, and what is meant by the idea that this is a demystified ‘dialectic of subject and object’, and what is the basis for the critique which Critical Theory would in its turn formulate against Marx’s own position? One more of these questions easier in the posing than in the answering.

- Critical Theory is the name given to a research program associated with the group of theorists centered on Max Horkheimer and the Institute for Social Research, from the appointment of Horkheimer as director in 1931 to his retirement in 1963. A research program which found expression in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, in the various works published under Horkheimer's aegis during his time as research director of the „American Jewish Committee“ during the war, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (co-authored with Adorno), and in the publications of the Institut für Sozialforschung after its return to Frankfurt after the war. It is also associated with the work of Adorno, Benjamin, Fromm, Marcuse, Habermas, Alfred Schmidt, and a number of their followers.
- If 'Critical Theory' is not quite co-extensive with 'Western Marxism', it does represent the most detailed and differentiated corpus of work ever produced seeking to ground an analysis of the crises of the contemporary world on the methodological principles – one could also speak of 'Enlightenment' principles – first elaborated by Kant, Hegel and Marx. It includes, amongst much else, the most detailed and substantial analyses ever carried out on the causes of anti-semitism, of racism, and of other manifestations of popular prejudices – as well as on their potential for manipulability, via the mass media, for dictatorial and anti-democratic ends.
- Critical Theory assumes that the increasingly globalised system of production causes ever greater disparities in wealth and power, and that these bring with them political conflicts which become endemic and widespread<sup>8</sup>. Conflicts which in turn are exacerbated by the invention of ever more potent weapon systems – and the 'contextualisation' of all these in the history of the militant and increasingly militarised nationalism of the last century. And while we are at the 'macro'-level, at the level of the human race and its future, it assumes that we are heading for problems in the areas of ecological damage and genetic engineering which are quite beyond the ability of currently existing political institutions to ward off or address.
- Critical Theory assumes that the relentless commercialisation (and 'technification') of all walks of life in the contemporary world has a

---

8 C.f. Hans M. Enzensberger: *Aussichten auf den Bürgerkrieg.*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1993.

destabilising effect on the human psyche which is most evident in the areas of gender relationships, of sexuality, of the family, in education, and in voter-behaviour. Contemporary culture is awash with material which shows that what used to be called ‘the meaning of life’ has become a scarce resource, and the psychoanalytic literature is bulging with the therapist’s accounts of the damage this is causing.<sup>9</sup>

- Critical Theory assumes that the technocratic and formalistic mentality, represented at the most sophisticated level by Analytic Philosophy, has mythological elements which can be named and analysed in terms of its sociological and psychological functions. Formal logic and scientific methodology enable us, in an unprecedented way, in a way immeasurably superior to all older explanatory systems, to explore the objective universe – to explore the ‘without of things’ – but it does so through the ‘constitutive’ perspective of its potential manipulability. In the well-known dictum of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: „No Being exists in the world which cannot be penetrated by science, but what is penetrated by science is not Being.“<sup>10</sup>
- Critical Theory assumes that this technocratic/analytic mentality, in alliance with the mass media, does much to create and shore up a political atmosphere which makes it well-nigh impossible to gain the kind of public and scholarly attention for the abovementioned problems which would be commensurate with the challenges they pose for the future.
- Critical Theory assumes that there is something ‘one-dimensional’ about contemporary mass culture (about the ‘public sphere’) in the sense that commercialisation, the primacy of advertising as well as direct media manipulation has done much to create confusion and disorientation amongst the electorate – at a time when increasingly fateful decisions on war and peace, on public reactions to religious fundamentalism and other aspects of the current crisis are in the hands of that *same* electorate.

---

9 C.f. Paul Verhaeghe: *Love in a time of loneliness*, New York, Other Press, 1998. Also Agnes Heller: „Are we living in a World of emotional impoverishment?“ in: John Rundell et al. (eds.): *Between totalitarianism and postmodernity*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1992.

10 "Kein Sein ist in der Welt, das Wissenschaft nicht durchdringen könnte, aber was von Wissenschaft durchdrungen werden kann, ist nicht das Sein." T.W. Adorno: *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 3, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1981, p. 43.

- Critical Theory assumes that free trade and globalisation are two trivialising misnomers for a global process the real costs of which are being externalised onto the inhabitants of failed states, the victims of terrorism, inner-city crime, economic migrants fleeing unemployment and civil war, and the future victims (our own children) of global warming and other ecological disasters looming on the horizon.
- Critical Theory assumes that the human psyche is shaped in decisive ways in the earliest interactions with the parents, and that improvements in parenting and educational practices can do much to alleviate the ‘adolescent rage’ afflicting so much of the contemporary urban landscape.<sup>11</sup>
- Critical Theory assumes that society is polarising at all levels, nationally and internationally, between an obscenely rich elite, enjoying almost unimaginable luxury, and the rest of the human race, too many of whom are eking out an existence on a miserable and diminishing pittance. And then we haven’t even mentioned the millions trapped in civil wars, collapsing economies, natural disasters.

And a last point, on the more ‘subjective’ side of Critical Theory:

- ‘Critical’, in the sense of Critical Theory, has nothing to do with a carping mentality which finds fault with all and sundry, or with an abstract moralism which already in Hegel is counted under the manifestations of a purely subjective idealism. Nor, for that matter, does ‘critique’ have anything to do with that popular attitude which ‘historicises’, ‘relativises’, ‘genders’, ‘deconstructs’ everything in sight as a matter of principle, with the kind of playful destructiveness most of us left behind, hopefully, with adolescence.<sup>12</sup> ‘Kritik’ refers, rather, to an epistemic attitude of the Subject that can be learnt, which in Hegel is described under the well-known headings of reflection, mediation, and the ‘dialectic’ of subject and object, and which involves – philosophically speaking –

---

11 Jürgen Habermas, Rainer Döbert, Gertrud Nunner-Winkler: *Entwicklung des Ichs*, Cologne, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1977.

12 C.f. Peter Sloterdijk: „Cynicism – The Twilight of false consciousness“ in: *New German Critique*, 33, 1984, p. 190.

a reconciliation of the two central traditions of Western thought: the Aristotelian and the Judaic-Christian.<sup>13</sup>

\*\*\*

Now, a congress on Critical Theory does not need to be told that all of the above is highly contentious, and that anyone trying to defend the systematic aspect thereof does so in the face of a research establishment whose genealogy – in terms of its theory of knowledge – goes back to Descartes, Locke, Russell, rather than to Kant and Hegel. A research establishment whose pride is its ‘no-nonsense’ rejection of everything that smacks of the metaphysical, of the a priori, of the transcendental, professing to see in such a ‘total’ or all-encompassing approach to reality at best a ‘myth of total reason’, and at worst a dogmatic ideology whose adherents are – ostensibly – a threat to ‘the open society’ and in urgent need of having to be locked up.

---

13 ‘Kritik’ in Kant – a connotation which it retains right through Hegel and Marx, with echos through to Freud – implies not so much that knowledge is something ‘empirical’, something to do with objects in the ‘external’ world (nothing ‘intentio recta’, in the older terminology), but that ‘real’ knowledge, the ‘essential’ and higher regions of what it is that we can possibly perceive and gain insight into, has to do with the critique of the ‘merely’ empirical or the merely ‘given’; nothing less than the latter’s ‘sublation’ is what this ‘critique’ intends. Only indirectly, by reflecting both upon ‘thought’ and upon the concrete thinker (only ‘intentio obliqua’) is anything of any importance to be gleaned, namely the overcoming of illusion. This is the aspect that connects, for Max Horkheimer, the most recent efforts of ‘Ideologiekritik’ with the oldest critique of Paganism, the taboo on ‘graven images’ and the attack on those who would venerate the ‘golden calf’. (C.f. Avishai Margalit and Moshe Halbertal: *Idolatry*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP, 1992.)

Habermas on this: „Die gegenseitige Durchdringung von Christentum und griechischer Metaphysik hat ja nicht nur die geistige Gestalt theologischer Dogmatik und eine – nicht in jeder Hinsicht segenreiche – Hellenisierung des Christentums hervorgebracht. Sie hat auf der anderen Seite auch eine Aneignung genuin christlicher Gehalte durch die Philosophie gefördert. Diese Aneignungsarbeit hat sich in schwer beladenen normativen Begriffsnetzen wie Verantwortung, Autonomie und Rechtfertigung, wie Geschichte und Erinnerung, Neubeginnen, Innovation und Wiederkehr, wie Emanzipation und Erfüllung, wie Entäußerung, Verinnerlichung und Verkörperung, Individualität und Gemeinschaft niedergeschlagen. Sie hat den ursprünglich religiösen Sinn zwar transformiert, aber nicht auf eine entleerende Weise deflationiert und aufgezehrt. Die Übersetzung der Gottesebenenbildlichkeit des Menschen in die gleiche und unbedingt zu achtende Würde aller Menschen ist eine solche rettende Übersetzung.“ („Stellungnahme Professor Dr. Jürgen Habermas“ in: *Zur Debatte – Themen der Katholischen Akademie in Bayern*, vol. 34, Munich 2004, p. 4.)



So let me take my cue on this difficult question of a ‘total’ approach to the world from George Steiner, the most prominent representative today of that *other* Critical Theory, – I mean the one going back to Matthew Arnold rather than to Max Horkheimer – when he says, in a lecture some years ago:

„Hegel poses the question whether a certain kind of concentrated politics, of sociological and philosophical thinking, does not destroy the object of its reflections. This is an overwhelmingly important and interesting question. Hegel’s own form of thought seeks to be ‘total’, and we’re in need of a great historian to write the book capable of clarifying for us the relationship between ‘total’ and ‘totalitarian’. The relationship between these two words are complex and subtle, they are not vulgar, they are not simple. But when a philosophy of the state, of society, such as that of Auguste Comte or Marx and Engels seeks to be ‘total’, seeks to cover all aspects of human endeavour, of human history and human institutions, then that is a step from philosophical totality to political totalitarianism, a very essential step taken, out of free choice and affinity – out of an ‘elective affinity’ with the Absolute, as Goethe could have put it. Idealism seems to posit that not a single aspect of human action and experience may be left out of a systematic ‘summa’ – a ‘summa summarum’ of the kind we find in Hegel’s Encyclopaedia, in Hegel’s Phenomenology, but also in the Critiques of Kant. And this powerful demand of German Philosophy will gradually lead, quite unnecessarily, to the Marxist creed that the responsibility of man for fundamental economic and societal laws is an incontrovertible fact.“<sup>14</sup>

Now, one can regard this passage as a description of the task that Critical Theory has set itself – at least at the subjective level. Namely to defend, and perhaps re-attain, in the face of a purely atomistic and piecemeal approach within the Social Sciences, something of that persuasive power which characterised the great moral-theoretical systems of the past, while at the same time abandoning the hubris of that ‘First Philosophy’ which sees in the ‘merely empirical’ no more than ‘particular’ examples of eternal categories.<sup>15</sup>

14 George Steiner: *Door een spiegel, in raadselen. Huizinga-lezing 1987*, Amsterdam, Bert Bakker, 1987, p. 13/14 (own translation). The emphasis on the totality of things is anti-empirical, anti-clerical, anti-individualistic in the sense that it dwells on the origins of individualism and the conscience. Psychologically speaking: it moves in the realm of the mimetic-collective, of Durkheim’s ‘conscience collective’. Martin Jay (*Marxism and Totality*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984, p. 199) speaks of the „abstract antithesis between totalistic philosophy and analytic empirical research“ at the heart of Western Philosophy, and of Critical Theory’s self-imposed task of finding a means to reconcile these antitheses: the a priori and the empirical. (On this, c.f. his: „Can all Horizons be fused?“ in: *Intellectual History Newsletter*, vol. 20, 1998)

15 C.f. Martin Jay *ibid.*: *Marxism and Totality*.

How does it do that? That is one of those questions one can only approach asymptotically.

\*\*\*

Let me venture, at this point, as a kind of stock-taking of the above, the following thesis: Critical Theory has an objective historical and a subjective motivational side to it.

The objective historical aspect of the origins of Critical Theory is to be found in the crisis of European culture and society starting with the First World War. In a radicalisation of the German Idealist tradition, what only later would come to be termed 'Critical Theory' seeks both to rid 'traditional' theory of its contemplative and 'time-less' (Aristotelian) elements, and to mobilise popular democratic support in the face of National Socialism and Totalitarianism.

The subjective motivational aspect of Critical Theory consists in its radicalisation of Freudian Psychoanalysis, to the point where the old 'Enlightenment' ideal of 'free and autonomous subjectivity' can become actualised for child-rearing and educational practices – in such a way that, at least for future generations, the self-destructive and alienating aspects of popular culture can be contained.

These two aspects – the objective and the subjective – make up a 'unity' without the one being reducible to the other. In this necessary 'dialectic of object and subject' Critical Theory remains loyal to the foundational intuitions of the monotheistic religions: that a peaceful society, a universalistic morality and the harmonious inner life of the individual together make up a 'totality' in which each component part 'makes sense' both in itself and in relation to the 'whole'.

\*\*\*

Can we, on the basis of what has now been said, formulate some kind of 'demarcation criterion' of what it is that Critical Theory 'is'; something of use when trying to decide whether a particular theoretical approach is or is not inspired by what one could call the 'foundational' intuitions of Critical Theory? To say something, in other words, about the epistemological origins of this 'on the objective side/on the subjective side' type of argumentation which we find, despite the differences, in the entire 'dialectical' tradition from Kant and Hegel through to Habermas.

Let me try to illustrate this characteristic ‘double structure’ of argumentation by means of the following passage from Jürgen Habermas:

„It is within the lifeworld that the interpretative work of many previous generations is stored; it is the conservative counter-weight to the risk of dissent associated with the process of reaching an understanding. For those engaged in communicative action are able to reach agreement only on the basis of yes/no decisions with respect to validity claims. The more these weights shift, the less the need for agreement is covered by lifeworld convictions shielded from critique, and hence the more this consensus has to be based on the interpretive skills of the participants themselves... the more we can expect rational action orientations. Every form of rationalisation imbedded in the general structure of consensually orientated action hence lets itself be described in the dimensions ‘normatively prescribed’ agreement versus ‘communicatively achieved’ agreement.

The more cultural traditions predetermine which validity claims have to be accepted when, where, for what, by whom, and in respect of whom, the less do the participants themselves have the possibility or the potential grounds, on which to base their yes/no decisions, to make these decisions explicit, or to submit them for validation.“<sup>16</sup>

That is one of those passages from Jürgen Habermas which is met, on the part of the cognitive scientists and the analytical philosophers, with incomprehension, with vehement disagreement, or both. For the central terms are used in two quite separate meanings at the same time. Whether two or more actors – in the sociological sense of the word – have or have not agreed to something is after all an ordinary empirical observation. No different from all other situations in Sociology – or in our day-to-day lives for that matter – where empirical observations are in order. But the second meaning is quite different, invokes a quite different stance, and it helps to have read Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness* if one wants to understand what it means. In modernity (or globalised Capitalism, or whatever one wants to call the present world system) institutionalised decision-making processes are subject to specific constraints which become visible only when one takes a ‘historical’ or ‘species’ perspective. That is, at the second meaning-level, not objective events but ‘objectifiability’ as a ‘stance’, as something that has to be learnt during a socialisation process – as a ‘fundamental orientation towards the world’, in Habermas’ terminology, a „Grundeinstellung zur Welt“, is being thematised.

---

16 Jürgen Habermas: *Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung*, unpublished manuscript, p. 31 (own translation.)

How these two dimensions – ‘objective events’ in the usual empirical sense, and ‘objectifiability’ as a subjective ‘stance’, as a competence or a ‘know-how’ that needs to be learnt – how these two dimensions relate to one another is of course the topic of *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* and to probe this any further would mean to go into the fascinating question – on which I shall say a bit more below – of the extent to which this ‘immanent critique’ of Analytic Philosophy has succeeded.

Here it is my purpose merely to point to these dimensions, and suggest that it is here that the parallel is to be found to the theoretical/practical reason dichotomy of Kant, the object/subject dialectic of Hegel, and to the theory/practice dichotomy of Marx.

Where does that get us?

It gets us to that difficult debate about the ‘subject’ of Critical Theory.

The ‘subject’ in the above Habermas passage is clearly not the ‘subject’ of Cognitive Science or the ‘subject’ of Analytic Philosophy. In what this ‘more’ consists – and it is a ‘more’, not a ‘less’ – is not easy to formulate, since it touches on one of those things which mark off Continental from Analytic Philosophy, and hence gets us into an argument about objectivity in the natural science sense of the word. Whereas it is precisely the purpose of Critical Theory to show in what sense morality and even aesthetics are ‘objective’, and not just a matter for personal opinion.

The ‘subject’ of Habermas’ *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* – the ‘subject’ capable of undistorted communicative interaction with his/her fellow human beings – is in some sense an ideal construct: a composite of Kant’s autonomous individuality, Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, Marx’s combative public intellectual fighting for a more peaceful world, and Freud’s neurosis-free individual not incapacitated by the primal drive derivatives of fear, anxiety, aggression and lust. It is an ideal based on the conviction that reality in the natural science sense is morally intolerable; that every notion of ‘mental health’ not based on a collective quest for a more peaceful world is itself a bit of that cultural barbarism we see around us all the time. (That has formed us, and that we try to escape from.)

But it is also the skills of philosophical hermeneutics applied to the ‘ordinary language’ that all of us are immersed in most of the time. If the ‘subject’ of the *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* hardly exists today, it sure does sharpen our perceptions for the increasing distortions afflicting the popular culture around us. A concept like ‘systematically distorted communication’ not only circumscribes most usefully what it is that a psy-

choanalytic treatment seeks to overcome – without going into the difficult issue of its ‘methodology’ here – but is also a description of a mindset which for most people in the world today is a sine qua non for survival. Even if most people have an intuitive sense that if the circumstances had been different, if they had had the opportunities at the right time, then they would have been able to lead fuller and more compassionate lives. (Let alone make a contribution to the warding off of the ominous political trends we see all around us.<sup>17</sup>)

\*\*\*

I come to the last part of my paper. Let me discuss briefly two aspects which in the above I have only touched upon in passing, namely Critical Theory’s relationship to Analytic Philosophy and Philosophy of Science, and Critical Theory’s origins in the scarifying experiences of World War II.

---

17 There is this ambiguity in Horkheimer, in Adorno: the individual as the only arbiter; but an impossibly ‘virtuous’ individual, which has internalized the ‘universal’, has become the latter’s selfless champion, to the point of its own self-sacrifice on the altar of the ‘common wheel’. It is this conception of the fully emancipated individual (and that is the same as saying: the ‘revolutionary’, the classically ‘heroic’ individual) which the Lukács/Korsch/Pollock generation valorizes, which is presupposed by the classic ‘dialectic of the universal and the particular’, and is then abandoned – at least in its overtly political aspects – in the movement which ends with the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, *Negative Dialektik*, *Ästhetische Theorie*. For the analytic tradition, in which ‘subject’ is co-extensive with conventional individualism, most of this is anathema.

## I. Critical Theory and Analytic Philosophy<sup>18</sup>

From the Positivist Dispute of the sixties, through to Habermas' work forty years later, it has been clear that the 'critique of positivism' has been a central concern of all variants of Critical Theory, through to the present day.

With Hegel, and against Empiricism and Rationalism, Critical Theory aims at a phenomenology *sans phrase* in which the objects of daily experience are merely the starting point of a process of individual insight and 'reflection', a process of 'bildung' culminating in free individuals capable of autonomous judgement in both the rational and moral spheres of their lives. Liberated, well-motivated, well-informed human beings capable of understanding both themselves and the world around them. Or another way of putting it: in the subjective sense of 'Kritik' we're dealing with a philosophical position which is in direct opposition to theories of knowledge and theories of science based on that so-called 'copy' theory of truth, on that venerable *adaequatio rei et intellectus* which the Monotheisms have opposed for millennia. In the face of all such 'scientific' interpretations of what it is that happens in the world, Critical Theory insists that „concepts do not go into their objects without leaving a remainder“<sup>19</sup>, that an intelli-

- 
- 18 The 'critique of idealism' is not something different from a critique of what today we would call analytic philosophy, though it is bedeviled by two quite different definitions of Idealism in the literature – one coming from Russell, and one from Hegel. 'Idealism', at least in Analytic Philosophy (AP), is usually understood as an epistemological position which holds that there is no 'external world', that its 'all in the mind' in some way, and that everything that exists can be deduced from first principles. When Russell, one of the founding fathers of AP, argues against 'Idealism' in this sense, these are the points he emphasises: its putative dependence on 'a priori' argumentation, its emphasis on the 'totality' of things, and what seemed to him to be an unwarranted neglect of science and formal logic. Russell himself was much too good a philosopher not to be aware of the size of the literature on each of the points raised – in one sense these are the central themes of Western Philosophy as such. But in a polemic sense the charge of 'idealism' in Russell's sense has stuck. Idealism is held to be subjective, dogmatic, and indifferent to the empirical sciences – this is a common refrain in the secondary literature on Critical Theory, right through to the Positivist Dispute of the sixties. There are really two competing narratives within the philosophy of the last hundred years: the Anglo-Saxon, Kant and Hume-inspired one in which it is the autonomous individual occupying centre stage; and the Hegelian-inspired concentration on the forces shaping that individuality – not well rendered by the English term 'mediated'.
- 19 "Ihr Name [Dialektik, FvG] sagt zunächst nichts weiter, als daß die Gegenstände in ihrem Begriff nicht aufgehen, daß diese in Widerspruch geraten mit der hergebrachten Norm der *adaequatio*." Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1973, p. 16/17.

gent awareness of the gap between the *mundus intelligibilis* and the *mundus sensibilis*, between the world of the mind and the world of the senses, between the signifier and the signified, is the last hope we have of gaining insight into the causes of the social crisis we see all around us.

Habermas has shown that in the simplest of verbal exchanges, of the kind that each of us is involved in from morn to night, there are implicit processes at work which are much more promising candidates for what it is that we mean with the predicate ‘true’ than the formalisms of the rationalists and the empiricists, right through to the cognitive scientists of today.

In the parallelisms of the validity claims that we must of necessity presuppose for a speech act of even the simplest kind to succeed (that the claim is cognitively true; that the speaker has the moral-practical right to utter this particular sentence towards a particular ‘other’; that the subjective needs and desires of the speaker are accepted as legitimate) is reflected deep-seated anthropological universals. The anthropological universals of a biological species the survival of which is based on the:

- objectification of outer nature (as a *sine qua non* for its economic exploitability)
- creation of a ‘symbolic universe’ for all cohorts (as a *sine qua non* for adequate social integration)
- the projection of subjective needs onto ‘the other’ or onto ‘outer nature’ as a condition for adequate ego-integration on the part of the individual.

Habermas’ holds, as we know, that a ‘rational reconstruction’ of our use of the predicate ‘true’ in our day-to-day ‘ordinary’ language use requires of us that we make explicit aspects of communicative interaction which collectively (‘phylogenetically’) go back to the origins of a ‘social’ mode of life millions of years ago; and individually (‘ontogenetically’) back to our earliest interactions with our ‘significant others’.

At the epistemological level the problem becomes: how does one reconcile the form/content dualism coming from Kant and German Idealism, with the apodicticity (ahistoricity, substantialism) of the natural sciences.<sup>20</sup>

The same question posed from within the natural and social sciences: where and in which contexts, for what reasons, is one forced to re-introduce

---

20 Though ‘reconciliation’ smacks too much of the dubious notion of ‘theoretical integration’ of Analytic Philosophy. One has to keep the old Aristotelian ideal of a hypothetico-deductive system of argumentation, based on irrefutable axioms, apart from Kant’s proof of the ineluctability of some kind of form/content dualism or apriorism. („Einmal hinauf, einmal hinab.“ – Marx)

that very form-content dualism which empiricism rejects as a matter of principle.<sup>21</sup> Where one should also be clear just what it is that is at stake here: from the point of view of the *natural sciences* the necessity, at some point, in some way, of the (re)introduction of a form/content dualism involves no less than the re-admission, now in a modern guise, of the old bogey of metaphysics. For that is what it re-introduces, this ‘quasi-transcendentalism’ of Apel and Habermas. No less. In some ways that takes us back to the *intentio recta, intentio obliqua* of pre-Kantian epistemology.<sup>22</sup>

- 21 One could probe why in English there is no equivalent for what, in Hegel, goes under ‘Begriff’. That this is not adequately rendered by ‘concept’ is clear, no matter how many footnotes one inserts pointing out that in German the term has connotations going back to the Platonic ‘idea’. In English, in which the historic process of nominalisation has proceeded much further than it has in German and some other European languages, ‘concept’ is almost universally understood as a synonym for ‘word’. Horkheimer says somewhere: in English the words beauty, truth, justice are undergoing a shift – from being used as capitalised nouns standing for substances, to being used as adjectives or predicates. As ideals they are losing their meaning. In Adorno this crops up in the frequent references to ‘nominalism’. (c.f. Rolf Tiedemann on this: „Begriff Bild Name. Über Adornos Utopie von Erkenntnis“ in: Löbig and Schweppenhäuser (ed.): *Hamburger Adorno-Symposium*, Lüneburg, Zu Klampen, 1984.)
- 22 In the analytic tradition, starting with Russell, the ‘dialectic of subject and object’ is treated as a narrowly epistemological relationship, as a problem of ‘denotation’, a relationship of the words we use to describe what it is that we perceive; a kind of eternal philosophy-seminar conundrum which every student is required to ‘reflect’ upon, which authors like Passmore have used as the framework for an entire history of Philosophy, and which the methodologists think they have solved by erecting a Chinese wall between the ‘context of discovery’ and the ‘context of validity’. Russell’s strategy consists in declaring this entire tradition to be ‘idealist’ in a narrowly conventional sense of positing the non-existence of the external world, and then assuming that the plausibility of arguments rejecting the ‘there-is-no-objective-reality’ position will count as a refutation of German Idealism. Thus Russell’s ‘it-is-all-in-the-mind’ caricature of German Idealism, thus a great deal of analytic philosophy ever since.
- For Max Horkheimer, in contrast, the critique of Idealism (now used in the entirely different Kantian-Hegelian sense) was an ‘enlightenment’ quest in some ways as old as ancient Judaism’s battle against paganism. A quest which would remain Philosophy’s ultimate purpose even after it had become clear that Marx’s „Thesis Eleven“ wasn’t going to be achievable anytime soon. The idea that there is something subjective to modern logic and mathematics – an idea which inspired the whole of German Idealism, with consequences also for Marxism, Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory – can be traced back to Kant’s specific way of reconciling faith and reason, namely by declaring all ‘merely’ human knowledge to be ‘für uns’, thus leaving intact the large area called reality ‘an sich’, incomprehensible for mere mortals. Irrespective of the way one approaches this notion of Idealism – a version of which is present in the entire tradition from Hegel through to Freud and Habermas – it has little in common with Russell’s caricature of idealism as a negation of the ‘external world’.
- Horkheimer’s notion of critique really goes back to an alternative reading of Spinoza and Kant, in which consciousness and mortality – rather than the manipulation of the



## II. *Critical Theory and World War II*

A funny thing happened to me on the way to this forum, namely in the hotel in Singapore in which I was trying to sleep off my jetlag. I was thinking about the kind of books that I'd read as a schoolboy. About the fall of Singapore, about the end of the Dutch East Indies, about Leyte Gulf and the Battle of the Pacific, about the British Empire in its heroic stand against what in those days we schoolboys in a distant corner of that erstwhile British Empire used to think of – you will forgive me — as the red and yellow hordes. In the school library it was the history of World War II, a multivolume illustrated encyclopedia, that was the popular and dog-eared favourite of us all. Stories of heroism and gallantry, of R.A.F. pilots flying cheerfully to their fame and death, of the Battle of Britain, of El Alamein, of Stalingrad, of D-Day. History as a McInnes or Ian Flemming cliff-hanger, in which the world is saved at the last moment by courageous Secret Agents in Her Majesty's Service; defusing atom-bombs as the last seconds tick away; grabbing the vial of deadly toxin at the very moment that the villain — in those days they seemed always to look like Molotov or Curd Jürgens – was about to throw it out of the helicopter; Kubrick-like scenes of saving the world from mad scientists and evil dictators.

But in Singapore I realized just where the difference lay between post-war European and post-war Anglo-American sensibilities, and hence also — here is the point — between two different conceptions of the origins of Critical Theory.

The fall of Singapore. Invasion, occupation, the massacre of civilians, an unspeakable disaster simply not amenable for re-working as a stirring narrative for shiny-eyed schoolboys. Freud speculated, in his last work, *Man Moses and the Monotheistic Religion*, that historical disasters could, analogous to the way traumatic events in the lives of individuals have characteristic effects on memory, on recall, on one's ability to describe the past, have consequences also for our collective memory, for cultural narratives.

Critical Theory, in Germany, and to a lesser extent in other European countries, has taken on for a substantial part of the so-called '68-generation' the function of a substitute for the Nationalist narratives of other

---

'external world' – is the central theme. Or rather: the relationship between autonomous subjectivity, individuality, and the knowledge of one's own mortality.

countries<sup>23</sup>, a means for assimilating, at the emotional/intellectual level, the disasters of two World Wars, and for constructing collective ego-ideals injured to the corrosive memories of destruction and loss that were so all-pervasive. If we are talking about the origins of Critical Theory then this aspect can be ignored only at the cost of throwing out those parts of it which resonate with specifically European sensibilities.<sup>24</sup> Horkheimer, Benjamin, Adorno – to mention only these – are difficult to translate into English and difficult to discuss in English not only because the intellectual coordinates within which they move are no longer our own. The historical experiences which they articulate are those of a civilization in crisis, in which intellectual endeavour is as much a quest for integrity, for moral courage and a shared ethic in the face of danger and dissolution than it is for scholarly excellence on the Anglo-Saxon model.<sup>25</sup>

Habermas had some success, at the time that he was establishing his reputation, at the time that he was working on the *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, of positioning especially the work of Adorno (his own teacher) – to a lesser extent Benjamin and Horkheimer – under the twin categories of ‘traditionelle Philosophie’ and subjective pessimism. Book titles such as those of Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, Connerton’s *The tragedy of Enlightenment*, or even Martin Jay’s classic *The Dialectical Imagination*, are indicative of a tone that has been set for a ‘psychologising’ or ‘personalising’ reception of Adorno’s work which to this day has deflected intellectual attention away from pivotal texts – especially the *Negative Dialektik*, but also the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Only in recent years,

- 
- 23 C.f. Volkhard Knigge, Jan-Holger Kirsch: „Nationaler Mythos oder historische Trauer? Der Streit um ein zentrales ‘Holocaust’-Mahnmal’ für die Berliner Republik“, in: Moshe Zuckermann (ed.): *Geschichte und Psychoanalyse. Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2004.
- 24 In the Anglo-Saxon world ‘Democracy’ is mostly understood as something formal. Free trade, free press, free elections. (‘FFF’). The world is often seen dualistically: there is liberty, and there is dictatorship. For the Europeans on the other hand, with their entirely different ‘1914-experiences’, there is a much heightened sense for the fragility of the institutions based upon FFF; a keener eye for the processes capable of turning democracy into its ‘other’. Free trade has as its consequence unprecedented centres of power and wealth, innocent of as much as a vestige of democratic control; a free Press is worth the name only for as long as it resists privatization, intimidation, manipulation; free elections for as long as the individual voter has not been terrified or suborned into voting the next demagogue and PR-specialist into power.
- 25 On Adorno’s dream protocols Jan Philipp Reemtsma says: this is the pre-reflexive cogito of someone for whom „both, thought and existence, as well as their relationship, has become most questionable and fragile...“. Jan Philipp Reemtsma: „Nachwort“, in: *Theodor W. Adorno: Traumprotokolle*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2005.

since the Adorno Archive – itself a longtime object of university politics — has been publishing the important lectures from the *Nachlass*, from the literary estate, has this undeserved neglect of Adorno’s work begun to be addressed. Although even now the *Negative Dialektik* – hamstrung by an inadequate translation — has had less than its due. The theoretical constellation Adorno-Habermas has not even begun to be appreciated in its importance, despite some pioneering work by Axel Honneth<sup>26</sup>. Once this gets going there is no doubt that ‘origins of Critical Theory’ will acquire a new meaning, and that, amongst other aspects, that of the theoretical traces of the European disaster starting in August 1914 will come into their own.

Adorno’s central concepts and concerns – nonidentity, mimesis, Kulturindustrie, aesthetics and literature – are more than what on occasion they’ve seemingly become; a kind of grab-bag for generations of students seeking to hone their intellectual skills and finding a coat-hanger for their own quite disparate concerns.<sup>27</sup>

They also, these concepts of Adorno, provide us with insight into the inner life of what one could call intellectuals in dark times.<sup>28</sup> To hold onto the Enlightenment ideals of a democratic and free society at a time when one is oneself under threat and under pressure; when it is not at all clear where one’s own courage and integrity is going to come from, or from which direction succour is to be hoped for. It is the kind of stoic hunkering down and chipping away for which Adorno himself often used an expression from Wagner’s *Parcival*, and which itself has antique origins: „die Wunde schließt der Speer nur, der sie schlug“; the wound is healable only by the spear that inflicted it. Only by immersing ourselves in the alienation and the suffering of the world, by confronting it head-on, is the strength to be found that is necessary if something better is to prevail.

---

26 Axel Honneth: „Von Adorno zu Habermas. Zum Gestaltwandel kritischer Gesellschaftstheorie“ in: Wolfgang Bonß and Axel Honneth (ed.): *Sozialforschung als Kritik*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1982.

27 ‘Critical Theory’ is becoming a flag, a point of orientation, for all those who in one way or another are dissatisfied with Analytic Philosophy in the widest sense of the term; namely as an intellectual map laying down what truth ‘is’. Critical Theory says: if that’s truth, then it ain’t true, it isn’t enough. There is something out there which Adorno calls ‘the ontological need’. (*Negative Dialektik*: part 1: „Verhältnis zur Ontologie“.)

28 C.f. Martin Jay’s variation on this in the upcoming Beilharz reader, *ibid.*: „Women in Dark Times“.