

On the concept of critique¹

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Allow me to start off by expressing my gratitude to the Ashford Program in Social Theory and to the Arts Faculty at Melbourne University for the invitation which has made this course of lectures and seminars possible. For someone like me, who has spent most of his professional life based at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, it is a constant source of amazement that ideas worked out by a tiny and persecuted group of intellectuals during World War II – much of it formulated during their exile in the US, some of it in occupied Europe – should in the intervening years have become so famous that there is not a Sociology or Philosophy department anywhere that has not heard of the ‘Frankfurt School’. In this ‘gypsy-scholar’ kind of existence which so much of academia has nowadays become, in which continents are no further apart than an airline ticket, it is a gratifying aspect of this material – not otherwise known for its light-heartedness – that there are few places in the world in which one cannot start off a perfectly lively discussion by launching into Fromm’s ‘The Art of Loving’, Marcuse’s ‘One-dimensional Man’, or Adorno’s dislike of Jazz. Not to mention Marx and Freud, or what in my own student days was called ‘the battle of the sexes’. Intimacy and politics, the mass media and the future, the mortgage and the rent, the boss and the work-place – who could maintain, in all honesty, that these do not loom large, sometimes all too large, in our daily lives?

The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. The original invitation to present this course was extended by the History and Philosophy of Science Department – it comes to you now instead under the friendly aegis of the

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School for Social and Environmental Enquiry. In this change of departmental heart one could see not only a sign of the (educational) times, as the universities re-tool for the globalized edu-market ahead, but of something else as well. The Frankfurt School stands for a conception of science, for a conception of truth and method, of ‘interdisciplinarity’, which fits awkwardly into the academic and scholarly mainstream of today. Is it Science? Is it Philosophy? Is it Literature? Is it a training ground, as some would have it, for that higher type of journalist called a ‘public intellectual’? In Europe, Frankfurt School themes are taught mostly in Sociology or Philosophy departments, in the Anglophone world more often in Literature, sometimes in the History and Philosophy of Science departments. Martin Jay, whose influential *The dialectical Imagination* first put the Frankfurt School on the academic map forty years ago, is a historian, (and still going strong), George Lichtheim – presenting Frankfurt School themes to the readers of the Times Literary Supplement even earlier still – was a journalist and political commentator. If Adorno is now being discovered by philosophers and musicians alike, he originally came to prominence as a social psychologist, as an advocate of the introduction of psychoanalytic principles in sociological theory, as a literary critic, as an adversary of Karl Popper, and as a point of reference for the Student Movement of the sixties.

One could go on in this vein for a while, dwelling on just how protean and multifaceted this tradition is, how difficult to find for it a common denominator that even halfway fits. Many a German Department or Performing Arts Department has the Benjamin of the *Passagenwerk* [*The Arcades Project*] or the *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels* [*The origin of German tragic Drama*] on its curriculum, and in a local university bookshop Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* has even been sighted on a shelf reserved for Social Workers. One could jump from Habermas’ work on the public sphere to post-modernist tendencies in literature and the arts, to the trend – noticeable at a number of universities in the former Eastern Block – to look to the Frankfurt School as a source for a ‘reconstructed’ Marxism. And then there’s that fascinating dialogue, with its astonishing agreement on some central points, between Habermas and Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI.

In short, if people coming from the Analytic tradition in Philosophy – just as George Lichtheim described it forty years ago – are still throwing up their hands in horror at Hegelians „who will insist on talking about every-

thing at once“², then all one can say is, they have a point. The origins of Critical Theory do indeed lie in a different ‘take’ on the central issues of ‘subject’ and ‘object’ – of ‘foundational’ issues in epistemology – from those that have taken root in the scientific establishment (and especially in the Social Sciences) since the War³. At the heart of the project of the Frankfurt School there is a set of concepts at odds as much with the positivism of the English-speaking mainstream as it was with the official Communism of the East European countries. Already in Horkheimer’s 1937 seminal „Traditional and critical Theory“ essay there is a combination of historical, epistemological and systematic arguments which not only survived the war, but became something akin to the semi-official self-interpretation of the ‘New Left’, at least on the Continent, from the 60s onwards.⁴ It is indeed difficult to reconcile with Analytic Philosophy, and it is the purpose of this course to try to throw light on this very venerable tension in the Western intellectual tradition.⁵

Let me say something about how we shall set about doing this. The procedure is simple enough, and in each of the five seminar papers that have been scheduled it is really a variation on the same theme. What is specific to the Frankfurt School is a combination of epistemological and historical studies, and there’s no reason why we should not apply this principle to the study of the Frankfurt School itself – the reflexive application of a particular methodology to the very people who, if they had not invented it, (this methodology) certainly applied it with consummate skill.⁶

2 George Lichtheim: *From Marx to Hegel*, 1971, p. 208.

3 c.f. my 2005 paper

4 Clemens Albrecht et. al.: *Die intellektuelle Gründung der Bundesrepublik – Eine Wirkungsgeschichte der Frankfurter Schule*, 1999.

5 In the literature there are two main responses to this astonishing universality of the themes covered by the FS, represented by Martin Jay and Tom McCarthy respectively. The former, from the aforementioned *Dialectical Imagination to Marxism and Totality*, uses the tools of the historian of ideas, McCarthy – translator of and commentator upon of some of Habermas’ central works – those of the philosopher charting and navigating his way around a new philosophical system.

6 Trent Schroyer: *The Critique of Domination – The Origins and Development of Critical Theory*, 1973, p. 103/104: „A methodologically reflexive critical theory – as distinguished from the objectivism of the Marxist tradition – appeared only in the twentieth century. While other theorists, such as Simmel and Lukács, are also important, the restoration of the reflective dimension to critical theory is, above all, the contribution of the Frankfurt school (e.g. Horkheimer, Adorno, Habermas, Wellmer). These theorists

2) In Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – which will be the subject of the next lecture – we shall deal with two aspects that have been central to Critical Theory since its inception: its determination not to relinquish that part of social theory which ties it to the Enlightenment ideals of autonomous subjectivity and a free society, and at the same time the reasons why these have 'turned into their other'.

3) Adorno's Negative Dialectic. This seminar will be, as it were, the most 'philosophical', concentrating on on the meaning of the concepts 'non-identical' and 'negative dialectics'.

4) Critical Theory and Dialectics. The lecture on 9th of May will deal with the epistemological origins of the dualism that is so characteristic of the entire tradition from Hegel to Habermas. If there is more to the currently popular distinction between 'Continental' and 'Analytic' Philosophy than a convenient label for the editors of philosophy readers, then it must be possible to give at least some account of the history of this venerable battle of the paradigms – between the advocates of 'apriorism' and 'innate ideas' on the one hand, those of 'induction' and natural science methodology on the other.

5) In the last paper, on 22nd of May, we shall dwell on the current, systematic formulation of Critical Theory to be found in Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action*.

Allow me to turn now to the term in the title of this paper, 'critique'.

It is one of those ubiquitous terms that is surprisingly difficult to pin down. If its etymology goes back to the Greek verb 'krino' (meaning to choose, decide or judge) some of its cognates are in wide use – as in critic, criticism, critique, critical thinking, critical rationalism, literary criticism, higher criticism. In the UK school system, 'critical thinking' is a subject which 16-18 year olds can take as an A-Level, the purpose of which is the stimulation and development of an independent frame of mind, for the ability to formulate one's own standpoint and to defend it against others – the very opposite in other words of obediently taking over the conventional opinions of one's peergroup on trust. Not much less subjective (in a sense

made explicit the methodology that Marx left unstated. The result was the systematic conception of a critical science which they used as the basis for a critique of the residual mechanical materialism in Marx ..."

which will become clear below) the use of ‘critical rationalism’ by Karl Popper and his followers, where it stands for a description of the way in which – confronted with the need to choose between alternative theories arising from new phenomena or new discoveries in the natural sciences – scientists go about sorting, by a process of ‘falsification’, the wheat from the chaff, the ‘objective’ theories that have withstood the discursive revision process, from the discarded hypotheses destined for the dustbin.

Critical Theory in the sense of Max Horkheimer has a quite different meaning and genealogy to any of those currently in vogue, and it is this that we want to examine.

That the term ‘critique’ turns up in Kant, and then in Marx’s *Critique of Political Economy* is a first hint of the breadth and scope of what it is that we’re dealing with – though, as anyone working in a multi-lingual environment will suspect, the translation of the word is accompanied by a shift in the semantics. (‘Kritik’, in German, bearing witness to Kant’s profound influence on German intellectual life to this day, associates much more readily with Kulturkritik, Literaturkritik, Gesellschaftskritik, Bibelkritik, [critique of culture, literary criticism, critique of society, critical Bible analysis] than it does with ‘critical’ in ordinary English usage.)

But the real background and origins of the problematic that Horkheimer confronts in his epoch-making 1937 „Critical and Traditional Theory“ go back to Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* a century earlier⁷, and the diagnosis and analysis contained therein of a specific weakness at the heart of all modern, democratic, secular societies. Hegel was not the first to have noted that the nations shaped and transformed by the French and Industrial Revolutions, nations whose constitutions and bodies of law were based on the entrenchment of individual rights, were heading for trouble if their governing institutions were not making provision, at the same time, to counter the power- and money-differentials that this exclusive emphasis on individual rights would inevitably bring in its wake.⁸ Edmund Burke had already done

7 Hegel: *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*: 1821

8 Tocqueville: *Democracy in America*, 1835

so in England⁹, and Hobbes' warning of a *bellum omnium contra omnes*¹⁰, „a war of all against all“, uttered in the face of Cromwell and his ‘godlies’, had in any case echoed down from the time of the English Civil War – as had related ideas from the Dutch war of independence.¹¹

But what put Hegel apart from his conservative predecessors¹² was his wholehearted support for the new and hard-won freedoms that the French Revolution had championed – while being at the same time perfectly realistic about the challenges this posed for the future.¹³ („This is the knotty problem that History is faced with, and which it is going to have to solve in future“ as he puts it¹⁴.) That is, he could hail, at one and the same time, freedom, individuality and popular democracy as the very foundation of Modernity, (the rejection of royal prerogative which this implied even got him charged with high treason at one point¹⁵) and be an unsparing critic of what

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- 9 Horkheimer, not long before he himself was forced to flee, quoting Hegel on Hobbes: „Hegel führt aus, Hobbes erkläre, der Naturzustand sei derart, ‘daß Alle den Trieb haben, einander zu beherrschen ... Den Willen, einander zu verletzen, Gewalt über die anderen Menschen auszuüben, haben Alle im natürlichen Zustande; jeder hat sich so vor dem Anderen zu fürchten.’ Hobbes nimmt so ‘diesen Zustand in seinem wahrhaften Sinne, es ist nicht das leere Gerede von einem natürlich guten Zustand; es ist vielmehr der thierische Zustand, der des nicht gebrochenen eigenen Willens’.“ (MH9:124) *Vorlesung über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, delivered 1927.
- 10 Leviathan, 1651
- 11 Justus Lipsius, (Joost Lips) whose re-interpretation of classic stoic sources influenced such names as Montaigne, Bossuet, Francis Bacon, Descartes, Leibniz and Locke, and who was a predecessor of Hegel at the university of Jena two centuries earlier. (Lipsius: 1572 Hegel: 1801)
- 12 "The occupation of an hairdresser or of a working tallow-chandler cannot be a matter of honour to any person – to say nothing of a number of other more servile employments. Such ... men ought not to suffer oppression by the state, but the state suffers oppression if such as they, either individually or collectively, are permitted to rule" – Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790.
- 13 "Das Prinzip der neuern Welt überhaupt ist Freiheit der Subjektivität, daß alle wesentlichen Seiten, die in der geistigen Totalität vorhanden sind, zu ihrem Recht kommend sich entwickeln. Von diesem Standpunkte ausgehend kann man die müßige Frage aufwerfen, welche Form, die Monarchie oder die Demokratie die bessere sey. Man darf nur sagen, die Formen aller Staatsverfassungen sind einseitige, die das Prinzip der freien Subjektivität nicht in sich zu ertragen vermögen und einer ausgebildeten Vernunft nicht zu entsprechen wissen." (Hegel, quoted in Maihofer, p. 378)
- 14 "Diesen Knoten, dieses Problem ist es, an dem die Geschichte steht, und den sie in künftigen Zeiten zu lösen hat." (Quoted in Maihofer, p 377.)
- 15 Maihofer, p. 379 & 353. C.f. Moritz Elsner: *Eine gegen Hegel gerichtete Anklage des Hochverrates aus dessen Schriften beantwortet*, 1839, p. 8f. The opposite caricature – leading up to Popper's nonsense of Hegel providing the „connection between Platonic and modern Fascism“ (*The Open Society and its Enemies*) can be traced back, at least in its political antecedents, to Rudolf Hayms: *Hegel und seine Zeit*, 1857. It is a reminder

he called „the problem of absolute democracy“ – putting him, seemingly, in the opposing camp, on the side of the Prussian State, and hence earning him the enduring enmity, in years to come, of both Marxists and Liberals.

What was it that was so problematic about what he called „absolute democracy“?¹⁶

With the benefit of hindsight, looking back over the last 200 years, one can say: that rather depends on whom one asks. The most influential answers to this problem of „unifying universality and particularity“ in public life have come from the Left and Right Hegelians respectively¹⁷. From the point of view of constitutional law (to start with the Right Hegelians) – it is the problem of political stability.¹⁸ A society based on formally free individuals and universal suffrage is soon faced with what Marx had already noted about the French Revolution: its tendency to slide into demagoguery and terror, leading in its turn to Bonapartism and restoration.¹⁹ A great deal of the thinking behind the formation of various European welfare states after 1945 – the European Union as such, for that matter – was based on the attempts made at overcoming the political instability so characteristic for the 19th, and then the 20th Century. When Habermas, as he does in so many of his recent publications, pleads for a strengthening of the European Union in the areas of welfare, foreign policy and integration, he’s really taking up this old theme of the Right Hegelians, this time at European level.²⁰

But the more interesting answer, at least from our present concern of tracing aspects of the history of the concept ‘critique’, comes from the Left Hegelians²¹, from Marx through to Lukács and the Frankfurt School. They are the ones who read into that famous dictum concerning the necessary unification of the ‘universal and particular’ not so much the Minister of the Interior’s mandate to maintain social order, (which Hegel assumed could be handled through a judicious application of education, social welfare legislation and the penitentiary), but rather the impossibility, under ‘bourgeois’

that the intellectual atmosphere after the failed rebellions of 1848 must have been pretty much like the highly politicised atmosphere a century later, during the Cold War.

16 Joachim Ritter: *Hegel und die französische Revolution*, 1965.

17 "Auf der Einheit der Allgemeinheit und Besonderheit im Staate kommt alles an." Maihofer 362. *Rechtsphilosophie*, 341.

18 Maihofer, Ritter. Under the much more authoritarian-sounding title of ‘problem of social order’ the same set of issues enters the post-war Sociology textbooks in the light of Talcott Parsons’ reading of Max Weber.

19 18th Brumaire ...

20 jh pub on this xxx

21 Feurbach – Bauer – Hess – Marx – Engels

conditions, of achieving such a unity at all. For to proclaim, as Marx did, production and the economy to be the basis of all else – rather than the Objective and Absolute Spirit in history – is to make two assumptions: firstly, that in a democratic society based on nothing more than the guarantee of formal freedoms (of opinion, association and the press), it is inevitable, under even the most favourable of circumstances, that the economically most powerful are going to be dominating the political process, skewing everything according to their particular and one-sided needs.²²)

Secondly, inasmuch as this is an international trend far beyond any single Nation's ability to counteract, it harbours within it a potential for social polarisation and 'class war' far beyond anything the Right Hegelians would ever be able to contain with *their* purely reformist measures. 'Capitalism', on this powerfully influential reading of it, would marginalise such substantial sectors of society from both the polity and the economy that the ensuing dynamic – the sheer scale of the resulting 'immiserisation', poverty, alienation – would be far beyond anything central governments were ever going to be able to get under control. If the State or its functional equivalent were ever to regain its legitimate authority as the true arbiter of universal needs it would have to free itself from the particularist embrace of 'capitalism' – and the illusion that public policy is something one learns at Business School. (And that was all formulated by a generation that had not yet had to mull over the arms race and the world wars that followed.)

But the gusto – the 'ca ira! attitude'²³ – with which especially Engels plunged himself into military matters²⁴ – and then the Russians later on – points to something else: an assumption which the Left Hegelians shared with Hegel himself, whatever the endless clichés of having put Hegel 'back on his feet' may suggest²⁵. That is: they may not have believed the unification of the 'universal and the particular' to be possible in the 'here and

22 As Horkheimer would put it a century later: „Production is not geared to the life of the whole community while heeding also the claims of individuals; it is geared to the power-backed claims of individuals while being concerned hardly at all with the life of the community.“ („Traditional and Critical Theory“ p, 212.)

23 "ca ira! les aristocrates a la lanterne" – French song.

24 Engels' Military Writings: *The Peasants' War in Germany*, 1850; *Prospects of a War of the Holy Alliance Against France*, 1851; *Revolutionary Spain: Guerilla Warfare* 1854; *The Armies of Europe*, 1855; *On Afghanistan*, 1857; *Mountain Warfare in the Past and Present*, 1857; *Po and Rhine*, 1859; *Lessons of the U.S. Civil War*, 1861; *The Prussian Military Question and the German Workers' Party*, 1865; *Notes on the Franco-Prussian War, July 1870-February 1871*; *The Role of Force in History*, 1887; ; *Letters on War and Military Science*, 1851 – 1863

25 Raddatz: „Where are the feet?“

now', under present historical conditions, but certainly as a future goal, under 'socialism'.

One could call their approach, to use a phrase of the French philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch, a „naturalisation of the transcendental“²⁶. Whereas in Hegel the Absolute Spirit had manifested itself (at least at the historical level) in times past, through its externalisations and then retractions, all the way from a barbaric state of nature in a distant past to the actualisation of freedom and autonomy under constitutional democracy, this is a retrospective view. The Owl of Minerva rises at dusk, when a way of life has grown old, settled in its ways and at peace with itself. What vouched for the universality and the direction of the process as a whole was the teleology of St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, as passed down by the Scholastics and then Leibniz²⁷ and Christian Wolff²⁸. Warfare and interminable struggle may have been mankind's fate in the past,²⁹ but once the 'identity of subject and object' had been achieved in a well-run constitutional democracy, in which spirit and freedom had been actualised both in reality and in the soul, that would be over. Once reason and spirit had come to prevail, „objective Spirit is [then] in itself complete, and the concept [Begriff] has come to itself in the system of Philosophy“³⁰. Thus Hegel.

26 *Der Tod*, (2005): p. 459

27 1646-1716

28 1679-1754

29 Schlachtbank

30 Horkheimer, as quoted by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr: MH2:461. It often counts as a devastating putdown of Hegel to say that in his system „history has come to an end“. (x) It would be worth having another good look at Lukács, whose Young Hegel has done so much to support the view that the transition from Hegel to Marx, from objective Idealism to historical Materialism, is a matter of both logical necessity and historical inevitability. (Also at Kojève, who was defending much the same position in France.) As the power-blocks were gearing up to create nightmares beyond the worst fears of the intellectuals, the FS at any rate was poring over the newly-published 'early' Marx, the '1848'-manuscripts and the *Grundrisse*, pondering this very question. In its way, Benjamin's „Theses on the Philosophy of History“ was an answer of sorts. Benjamin had a clear vision of where things had gone wrong: „The conformism which has dwelt within social democracy from the very beginning rests not merely on its political tactics, but also on its economic conceptions. It is a fundamental cause of the later collapse. There is nothing which has corrupted the German working-class so much as the opinion that they were swimming with the tide. Technical developments counted to them as the course of the stream, which they thought they were swimming in. From this, it was only a step to the illusion that the factory-labor set forth by the path of technological progress represented a political achievement. The old Protestant work ethic celebrated its resurrection among German workers in secularized form. The Gotha Program [dating from the 1875 Gotha Congress] already bore traces of this confusion. It defined labor as “the source of all wealth and all culture.” Suspecting the worst, Marx responded that human

But once Objective Idealism – this system of Hegel – is ‘naturalised’ and turned into an empirical method in historiography, (once it is the empirical side of Hegel’s system that gains the upper hand,) the ‘dialectic of class war’ becomes not just a regrettable feature of ages past, but a permanent fixture of the *conditio humana*; at any rate until that socialism is achieved which is supposed to give the struggle its meaning. („If the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the eating here is still in the future“, as Horkheimer would put it later, although the irony I’m here laying into his words is more typical of the later than the early Horkheimer, from whom this quote is taken.³¹) Marx at any rate was so convinced that he had discovered the real mechanisms of social evolution that he wrote several letters to Darwin offering to dedicate *Das Kapital* to him. (Darwin politely declined the honour.) Today, with hindsight, it must be said that they, the Left Hegelians, were closer to the social darwinists of fifty years later than many on the Left are prepared to concede even today.³²

being, who owned no other property aside from his labor-power, „must be the slave of other human beings, who... have made themselves into property-owners.“ Oblivious to this, the confusion only increased, and soon afterwards Josef Dietzgen announced: „Labor is the savior of modern times... In the... improvement... of labor... consists the wealth, which can now finally fulfill what no redeemer could hitherto achieve.“ This vulgar-Marxist concept of what labor is, does not bother to ask the question of how its products affect workers, so long as these are no longer at their disposal. It wishes to perceive only the progression of the exploitation of nature, not the regression of society. It already bears the technocratic traces which would later be found in Fascism. Among these is a concept of nature which diverges in a worrisome manner from those in the socialist utopias of the Vormärz period [pre-1848]. Labor, as it is henceforth conceived, is tantamount to the exploitation of nature, which is contrasted to the exploitation of the proletariat with naïve self-satisfaction. Compared to this positivistic conception, the fantasies which provided so much ammunition for the ridicule of Fourier exhibit a surprisingly healthy sensibility. According to Fourier, a beneficent division of social labor would have the following consequences: four moons would illuminate the night sky; ice would be removed from the polar cap; saltwater from the sea would no longer taste salty; and wild beasts would enter into the service of human beings. All this illustrates a labor which, far from exploiting nature, is instead capable of delivering creations whose possibility slumbers in her womb. To the corrupted concept of labor belongs, as its logical complement, that nature which, as Dietzgen put it, „is there gratis [for free].“ (Redmond translation.)

31 MH: „Traditional and Critical Theory“, p. 219.

32 Friedrich Engels in einem Interview im „Figaro“: „Aber wir haben kein Endziel. Wir sind Evolutionisten, wir haben nicht die Absicht, der Menschheit endgültige Gesetze zu diktieren. Vorgefaßte Meinungen in bezug auf die Organisation der zukünftigen Gesellschaft im einzelnen? Davon werden Sie bei uns keine Spur finden!“ (nach Raddatz, S. 120f.) Engels’ late work, *The role of force in history*, first published 1895, proved to be empirically all too accurate; whether he would have been so sanguine about its progressive function under conditions of industrialised warfare we shall never

But there is another link in the chain of argumentation that needs to be aired before we can get back to our theme of ‘critique’. Insight into the ‘present as history’, to invoke the old Paul Sweezy title, is not intuitive. Those of us imprisoned in the ‘positivism’ of our everyday lives – that natural state of mind we’re all born into – are oblivious to the real mechanisms of the historical process in which the role we play is a lot more that of unwitting and passive participant than conscious agent. Bit actors in a drama of which we have not read the script, we’re part of a ‘larger picture’ that remains beyond our ken – insight and reflection, that basis for critique in the subjective sense, needs to be worked at, it does not come naturally.

How one goes about seeing the big picture, what the motives and incentives could be to make that effort, is best studied in Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness*, the book that was so influential for many of the members of the Frankfurt School.³³

Let me try to characterise, briefly, Lukács’ position, since it anticipates quite a few of the themes of post-war Critical Theory.

Once an entire society – as is the case under Capitalism – is organised according to the principle of the means-ends manipulation of objects and processes, it is not just production that is subjected to ‘rationalisation’ in the usual sense of the term. (In the sense that people speak of ‘rationalisation’ in the automobile or airline industry.) Something analogous happens, according to Lukács (and the ‘reification’ theorists, then later the Freudians), at the level of the *psyche*. Since the modern Subject is incessantly confronted with mechanical and technical contrivances it gradually begins to see itself and its relationship to others as a thing, as an object akin to a machine that can be arbitrarily bought, exploited, manipulated, dismantled, replaced and scrapped.³⁴ The Subject loses the capacity to be able to distinguish between theoretical and practical reason, finds itself in a world in which human beings have become no more than raw material to be plugged in where necessary by the implacable dictates of economic efficiency. In this process they become so spiritually „crippled“³⁵, says Lukács, that they see the world only in the „phantasmagoric form of the relationship between

know – he died before the lights went out in those fateful weeks after 1st August 1914. („The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.“ – Sir Edward Grey.)

33 Schmidt-Noerr/Van Reijen picture: Pollock, Lukács, x

34 Nowadays: ‘plastinated’, courtesy of Gunther von Hagens.

35 ref x

things³⁶ to use a wellknown Marx formulation which Lukács quotes approvingly. The economy, – this is how Lukács sees it – produces not just goods and commodities but is just as good at producing ‘category-mistakes’ in the heads of employees and consumers, to the point where hardly anyone is able any longer to distinguish between theoretical and practical reason – that very distinction which Kant had shown to be the sine qua non for the subjective side of freedom and autonomy altogether. Not just production becomes atomised, ‘Taylorised’, stripped down to its component parts on an assembly-line, but perception itself has become fragmented and homogenised. The subject loses ‘the story’, is no longer able to see itself and the world as a unity, as something that ‘makes sense. The ‘end of the subject’ looms, the narratives are over, the world has become Kafka-esque.

But this world-historical process, based as it is in the economy, is not something that halts even at the portals of the academy, the university, the scientific institute. For a non-reified view would show:

„that the more intricate a modern science becomes and the better it understands itself methodologically, the more resolutely it will turn its back on the ontological problems of its own sphere of influence and eliminate them from the realm where it has achieved some insight. The more highly developed it becomes and the more scientific, the more it will become a formally closed system of partial laws. It will then find that the world lying beyond its confines, and in particular the material base which it is its task to understand, its own concrete underlying reality lies, methodologically and in principle, beyond its grasp.“³⁷

A last quote from Lukács:

„It is therefore evident that, on the one hand, the more the whole of reality is rationalised and the more its manifestations can be integrated into the system of laws, the more such prediction becomes feasible. On the other hand, it is no less evident that the more reality and the attitude of the subject ‘in action’ approximate to this type, the more the subject will be transformed into a receptive organ ready to pounce on opportunities created by the system of laws, and his ‘activity’ will narrow itself down to the adoption of a vantage point from which these laws function in his best interests (and this without any intervention on his part). The attitude of the subject then becomes purely contemplative in the philosophical sense.“ (Lukács, *ibid.*)

One could describe Lukács’ views at this time, during the European interbellum, as follows. (Note that this is now a long way from the Marx of

36 ref x

37 *History and Class Consciousness*, p. x

Das Kapital, in which science and technology are regarded simply as part of the ‘forces of production’.³⁸) The scientific and scholarly establishment suffers from the same (subjective) intellectual and emotional confusion that he’d diagnosed in the work-force. That complex of problems which the Frankfurt School would later subsume under terms like ‘authoritarian personality’ (anomic and rigid personalities, meaninglessness, ‘ticket’-thinking, childishness, narcissism, aggression, truculent subservience to authority) is not something that Lukács regards as class-specific backwardness – amenable to education and the establishment, say, of trade-union evening-classes. Reading Marx through eyes schooled by both Hegel and Max Weber, Lukács sees ‘false consciousness’ as something that afflicts capitalist society as a whole, right through to the universities.³⁹ Abstract rationalism – which Max Weber had shown to be the very foundation of the modern sciences – is, in this view, the spiritualised and sublimated echo of exactly the same crisis of orientation to be seen in the workforce and the electorate; it permeates scholar and scientist alike. Once science and scholarship reduces to empiricism and prediction, the ‘larger’ picture fades.

Now, whoever sets out, to use Albrecht Wellmer’s phrase, to ‘de-Hegelise’ Lukács⁴⁰ is going to have to deal with the question of how contemporary Philosophy of Science (for what else could be meant by ‘formal-rational, abstract conceptual schemes’⁴¹;) fits in with the evolutionary process of the human race in its entirety.

For Horkheimer and his group at any rate, the question became, increasingly, how Science and Philosophy were to relate to one another. The urgency of this program that the editors of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* had set themselves was obvious to anyone living in Weimar Germany: a rapidly polarising society was mirrored in the abstract, fatalistic ‘traditional’ theory of its intellectuals, and this in turn contributed to the general confusion and helplessness.

To quote Max Horkheimer, writing the year before the National Socialists would come to power:

„At the present time, scientific effort mirrors an economy filled with contradictions. The economy is in large measure dominated by monopolies, and yet on the

38 Alfred Schmidt: Marx’s Concept of Nature.

39 He was not alone in this: c.f. Husserl: „Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie“, 1934

40 ref. x

41 quote

world scale it is disorganized and chaotic, richer than ever yet unable to eliminate human wretchedness. Science, too, shows a double contradiction. First, science accepts as a principle that its every step has a critical basis, yet the most important step of all, the setting of tasks, lacks a theoretical grounding and seems to be taken arbitrarily. Second, science has to do with a knowledge of comprehensive relationships; yet, it has no realistic grasp of that comprehensive relationship upon which its own existence and the direction of its work depend, namely, society. The two contradictions are closely connected. The process of casting light on the social life-process in its totality brings with it the discovery of the law which holds sway in the apparent arbitrariness of the scientific and other endeavors. For science, too, is determined in the scope and direction of its work not by its own tendencies alone but, in the last analysis, by the necessities of social life as well. Despite this law a wasteful dispersal of intellectual energies has characterized the course of science over the last century, and philosophers of the period have repeatedly criticized science on this score. But the situation cannot be changed by purely theoretical insight, any more than the ideological function of science can be. Only a change in the real conditions for science within the historical process can win such a victory.⁴²

In this Horkheimer and his group had gone beyond Lukács' Hegel-Marxism, inasmuch as the modern sciences were now invested with two quite different attributes: on the one hand they were the only possible source of reliable knowledge, on the other, scientists and scholars were caught up, at the psychological and motivational level, in a worldview that had mythological elements. In this 'double' strategy', about which more will be said in a future lecture, – (immanent to the sciences, and at the same confronting them 'from outside', with their role in the wider society, even: in that of the future of the human race) – lies Horkheimer's specific interpretation of the Kantian dictum in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, according to which only the critical route is still open.

„The task of philosophy“, writes Horkheimer during the war, „is not stubbornly to play the one against the other, [subjective reason, tending to vulgar materialism, against objective reason and its inclination to romanticism – fvg] but to foster a mutual critique and thus, if possible, to prepare in the intellectual realm the reconciliation of the two in reality. Kant's maxim, 'The critical path alone is still open,' which referred to the conflict between the objective reason of rationalistic dogmatism and the subjective reasoning of English empiricism, applies even more pertinently to the present situation. Since isolated subjective reason in our time is triumphing everywhere, with fatal results, the critique must necessarily be carried on with an emphasis on objective reason rather than on the remnants of

42 "Notes on science and the crisis", 1932

subjectivistic philosophy, whose genuine traditions, in the light of advanced subjectivization, now in themselves appear as objectivistic and romantic."⁴³

In other words, by the time our tale reaches Max Horkheimer and the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*,⁴⁴ reflexion and critique lead not so much to the insight into one's 'class position', as it does in Lukács, but lead to an 'imminent critique' of the sciences, while at the same time making them aware – at least: some of them – of their fateful and dangerous role in reality, politically, in the objective world.

Perhaps one could put it this way: what had disappeared in the trenches of Verdun and the Somme and then with the victory of the various totalitarianisms is the conviction that „The role of force in history“, to use Engels' 1887 title, is something progressive, that this is the way forward. The notion of critique in Max Horkheimer and then in the Habermas of the Starnberg years has, on the one hand, retained the old meanings of a subjective movement to greater insight and an increase in autonomy and agency at the subjective level, but it now stands for insight into Positivism's double role in the contemporary crisis. Both as a kind of blindness, – its 'lack of historicity' – but aimed also at its Faustian pact with ever more potent WMD. This insight is not just a personal or even an artistic one⁴⁵ – but has to be fought out within the Social Sciences themselves; it has to be fought out in their *methodological foundations*⁴⁶. Since these are based on the Natural Sciences, and especially the Natural Sciences' self-interpretation as formulated by Analytic Philosophy (this „intellectual technology“, as Horkheimer terms it⁴⁷), it is the latter that now becomes an object of scrutiny. It is a line of thought that will eventually lead – although shorn of a lot of its passion – to Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action*.

43 "Conflicting Panaceas" in: *Eclipse of Reason*, OUP 1947

44 Lukács comes to Marx from Hegel and Max Weber – that's not the same as coming, as Horkheimer had, from the empirical social sciences – psychology and Grünberg's economic history – and the history of Philosophy. Horkheimer had been an early critic of Lukács. c.f. Furio Cerutti's characterisation of the relationship: „Monozentrische Einstellung auf den unmittelbaren Produktionsprozeß im Hinblick auf seine philosophischen Gehalte versus sozialwissenschaftlich abgestützte Durchleuchtung des ganzen Reproduktionsprozesses der Gesellschaft.“ („George Lukács und die Kritische Theorie“, *Links*, no. 195, 1986. Quoted in Schmidt, MH2, p. 458.)

45 one – (Dürrenmatt xxx)

46 Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, the physicist who had worked on nuclear energy under Hitler (brother of one-time German President Richard von Weizsäcker), and Jürgen Habermas, the Marxist. They must have been an odd couple, worthy of the attention of a Dürrenmatt... (Oppenheimer: I am Vishnu, destroyer of worlds..)

47 "TaCT", p.

From what has been said it will also be clear why the ‘Positivist Dispute’ of the Sixties, which takes up directly central themes from Horkheimer’s „Traditional and Critical Theory“, the clash between Popper and Adorno, in which Habermas first comes to public attention, was such a pivotal event for so many intellectuals at the time.⁴⁸

The Natural Sciences (that whole complex of Science and Technology that had been the intellectual and organisational core of the vast post-war expansion of tertiary education after 1945⁴⁹), was not, on this reading of it, what the ‘Analytic’ tradition from Russell to Popper had claimed for it, namely based on ‘objective knowledge’ – providing a foundation, a touchstone, a benchmark for everything else, right down to our intellectual and emotional lives. It was not reason ‘tout court’ at all, but merely derivative, secondary, ‘instrumental’ – not autonomous and free but itself deeply implicated, even corrupted, in and the wars that most had assumed lay mercifully behind us.

Allow me to conclude this paper, in which I’ve touched on a few of the semantic transformations which the term ‘critique’ has undergone in Continental Philosophy since Hegel, with a quote from Albrecht Wellmer:

„The early Horkheimer’s opposition to bourgeois science was also, as part of an actual political conflict, a struggle against this science: with a proletariat ready for battle and the wind of history bringing up the rearguard. Even if Horkheimer did not labor under any too great illusions regarding the degree of awareness of the proletariat of his time, he was still able – for good reasons – to incorporate it as a revolutionary force in his historico-philosophical estimate. Consequently, in contrast to a bureaucratically ossified socialism and to bourgeois science, he was able still to place his hopes entirely on a (so to speak) purely dialectical restoration of the basic Marx. His hopes were not borne out. The later extensions of critical theory by Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse therefore include a tacit avowal of the absence of any reference to praxis: critical theory conceives itself as a protest, but as a protest impotent in practice, against an apocalyptically self-obturing system of alienation and reification; and as the spark whose preservation in a self-darkening world will keep alive the memory of something quite different. The eventual irruption of this “something else” became the object of a hope that grew in wisdom but at the same time was touched with despair in the process of trying to make it out. Adorno’s musical and literary-critical essays are fascinating in the extreme as documentation of this phase of critical theory; at the

48 c.f. Fred R. Dallmayr: „Beyond Dogma and Despair: Towards a Critical Theory of Politics“ in: *American Political Science Review* (2000), 70, nr. 1, p. 64-79.

49 47 x

same time they are unmistakable evidence of its precarious double isolation: in the context of the sciences, and in that of politics.⁵⁰

We shall trace out, in the next lecture, how Horkheimer and Adorno, following the course of the war from their exile in California, react to this double isolation.