

The materiality of Reason

On the possibility of Critical Theory today

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„The materialistic frame of mind doesn't contribute to one's sense of wellbeing in the least. Quite the contrary: a recent study shows that it is the materialism itself that leads to unhappiness.“ „One needs to be beyond the merely materialistically-minded if one is going to do voluntary work in an old age home.“ „When a couple kiss, according to the experts, what they're really doing is testing each other's leucocyte-antibodies. If these are compatible, it means healthy offspring.“

It is in quotes like these, taken at random from the popular media, that one can trace out both the continuities and shifts in meaning, in the language of today, of what was originally the philosophical notion of materialism.

The word itself, 'materialistic', originating in 17th-Century England, meant *firstly* moral criticism of a mental attitude set on material possessions and material well-being at the expense of conflicting ethical values. *Secondly* it stands for an ontological position that reduces Mind and the Psyche to their real-world – scientifically testable – underpinnings.

Both of these meanings are really as old as Western philosophy itself. Compared to this Idealist mainstream, Materialism, to use a phrase of Ernst Bloch, has been more in the nature of „an embarrassment in search of an explanation“ than anything else.¹

1 Ernst Bloch, *Das Materialismusproblem. Seine Geschichte und Substanz*. In: *ibid.*, *Gesamtausgabe* vol. 7. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1972, p. 130.

It was with the Ionian philosophies of Nature of the Sixth and Fifth centuries BC, with their quest after the origins of Being, (replacing the older mythical-religious narratives), that we encounter immanent-material explanations of nature for the first time. The Atomists of the fifth to the third centuries BC continue this process of ‘disenchantment’ of the world, and it was levelled against them that we find, already in Plato, the charge that all that *they* are really after is a purely this-worldly rush for comfort and the good life. This morally pejorative meaning of the word has in other words come down to us across the millenia more or less intact, though accreting along the way a few additional connotations like questioning the existence of God or the immortality of the soul.

Much the same can be said for materialism in the *ontological* sense. Like the atomists of old, the neurobiologists of today argue that subjective states of mind are ‘essentially’ reducible to causal processes ‘in the world’, in this case in the brain, with the implication that any differences between subjective and objective are inconsequential.

But it is with a *third* meaning of the word materialism – alluded to in my title – that I shall be concerned today, namely in the sense of *historical* materialism.

Materialism in this sense is first of all a questioning of conventional ethical judgements – not so much of the judgements themselves, as the underlying assumption of an *a priori* primacy of the spiritual over the real. It doesn’t so much question the Good, the True, the Beautiful in themselves, as much as it asks after the price that has been paid, in terms of exploitation and oppression, for the realization of these cultural values across the centuries. It sees itself as the expression of a social and political struggle for the abolishment of hardship and need. In this conception of the historical process, culture is regarded not as something autonomous, but as an expression of material forces of production – which under Capitalism have developed in an uncontrolled and chaotic manner. ‘Expression of’ here implying an unconscious correspondence between cultural ideas on the one hand, political power constellations on the other. This is why Historical Materialism is, in the first instance, an *economic* materialism. In the words of the *German Ideology*:

„The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. [...] Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process. [...] Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of con-

sciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.“²

This Marxian insistence on consciousness as something rooted in objective societal reality is however – as Critical Theory has emphasised from the outset – to be understood not in a metaphysical-ontological, but in a critical-empirical sense.³ It is formulated from the point of view of having its descriptions of reality ‘falsified in practice’ – its aim is to aid people’s self-empowerment and self-awareness, putting them in a position to approach their societal reality with consciousness and insight. Its purpose is to facilitate them in transforming the economic dynamic of the times into a more just and equitable state of affairs. In response to the usual (Idealistic) charge of it being morally questionable, Historical Materialism counters that morality as it is embodied in the capitalist economy is itself immoral.

The concept ‘materialism’ became, in Horkheimer’s programmatic essays in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in the early Thirties, the core notion of the highly unorthodox version of Marxism founded by the *IfS*. In his essays *Materialism and Metaphysics* (1933) and *Materialism and Morality* (1933), Horkheimer’s prime concern is to distantiate himself from two competing positions: materialism in the sense of metaphysics, and materialism in the sense of a *weltanschauung*. By ‘materialism’ is meant, in the early phases of the Frankfurt School, neither a totality of Being nor an epistemological realism, but rather a form of thought – an approach to reality – that corresponded, in the historical situation of the time, to a collective effort aimed at a more just and rational social order: „Today therefore, the struggle for a better order of things has been cut loose from its old supernatural justification. The theory appropriate to the struggle today is materialism.“⁴ In the corresponding research program, renamed a few years later to ‘Critical Theory’, psychology and a theory of culture received noticeably

2 Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *Die deutsche Ideologie* (1845/46). In: *MEW* vol. 3, Berlin 1983, p. 26 f.

3 I distinguish here between ‘Critical Theory’ in the sense of Horkheimer’s original ‘materialism of practice’, and ‘Critical Theory’ as the self-appellation of the ‘Frankfurt School’.

4 Max Horkheimer, „Materialism and Metaphysics“ (1933) in: (ibid.) *Critical Theory – Selected Essays*, transl. Matthew J. O’Connell and others. Herder and Herder, 1972, p. 22.

more emphasis than had been the case with the founders of historical materialism some sixty years earlier. What was aimed at, as Horkheimer put it in his inaugural address of 1931, was

...the connection between the economic life of society, the psychical development of individuals, and the changes in the realm of culture in the narrower sense (to which belong not only the so-called intellectual elements, such as science, art, and religion, but also law, customs, fashion, public opinion, sports, leisure activities, lifestyle, etc.)."⁵

With that, Horkheimer had revised the more strictly economistic notion of materialism predominant at the time in the direction of a more comprehensive ‘materialism of social practice’, aiming at cultural and psychological reactions to historical circumstances altogether. Whereas in Marx the Hegelian ‘Spirit’ had been reduced more or less to a derivative of the forces of production, here now the realms of the psychological and the cultural had gained autonomy as research fields in their own right, albeit still embedded in a more all-encompassing societal diagnosis of the times.

By analysing the dynamics of unconscious psychological factors, cultural institutions and meaning-systems – that was the program of the *IfS* at the time – the hope was that it would be possible to find in these areas an explanation for the way in which the massive pauperization that had already *then* been a concomitant of industrialisation and economic crises had led, contrary to Marx’s own expectations, not to a revolution by the working classes, but instead to enthusiasm for world war and National Socialism. What this meant was that they focussed, first of all, on the function of culture as a societal ‘cement’, or what the sociologists would later call ‘social integration’. In all this, ‘high’ culture was assumed to be a buttress strong enough to resist the destructive forces operative in society, and to foster an autonomous (or ‘anti-authoritarian’) frame of mind generally. Culture as ‘counter-culture from below’ hence became the theme also of other and later trends within Historical Materialism, such as, for instance, the ‘cultural materialism’ of Raymond Williams and the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies.

5 Max Horkheimer: „The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research“ in: (ibid.) *Between Philosophy and Social Science – Selected Early Writings*. Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought. Transl. Frederick Hunter, Matthew S. Kramer, John Torpey. MIT Press, 1993, p. 10.

What are the prospects, today, of revitalising materialism in this now classical sense once championed by Critical Theory? Alfred Schmidt, who has analysed the history of materialism in great detail, comes to the equivocal conclusion:

The Marx-Engels conception of history, inasmuch as it sees itself as social science, and to the extent that it has shaken off its penchant for political instrumentalisation, retains heuristic validity in the area of Sociology of Knowledge, as well as areas of Psychology and the History of Ideas. It converges with History as it is practiced today to the extent that this, in turn, moves away from traditional historiography and comes to see itself more and more as a critical social science.⁶

He shows that many of the all too abrasive and partisan formulations to be found in Marx and Engels need to be contextualised against the background of the political struggles and historical situation of the time, and have only limited validity for our own day and age. Should one take the same relativising stance to Critical Theory and the Frankfurt School today? The downgrading of ‘materialism of social practice’ to little more than a method within the sociology of knowledge is at any rate an embarrassing retreat from the much more ambitious program that Horkheimer once intended with his ‘Theory of historical change concerning contemporary reality’.⁷ How best to characterise this program of a processual theory of society? Axel Honneth formulates, in a 2010 discussion with Christoph Türcke on *Kritische Theorie im Wandel*, three ‘central premises’ of Critical Theory, respectively going back to Hegel, Marx and Freud: the idea that reason unfolds itself in history is a premiss going back to Hegel; the idea that Capitalism obstructs this development goes back to Marx; and the idea that the individual, suffering from his or her psychological deformations has, despite everything, a genuine interest in the actualisation of his or her sane ego-powers is a premiss that goes back to Freud.

Honneth now asks – and this is the crux of the matter – whether this program of Critical Theory is still valid today. He expresses doubt, asking whether it is possible at all to present Critical Theory „plausibly enough to-

6 Alfred Schmidt, „Materialismus“. In: Reinalter, Brenner, *Lexikon der Geisteswissenschaften*, op. cit., p. 511.

7 Horkheimer, „Vorwort“ of vol. 1/2 *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. In: *ibid.*, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 3, op. cit., p. 38.

day for it to be anything more than an antiquated theme from a century ago.“⁸

I would like to take issue with him on this – most especially with the first of his premises, regarding the Hegelian heritage – and show that the objections which Honneth raise, with regard to the very possibility of such a critical-materialistic conception of reason, are not quite so convincing when one goes back to the underlying antimetaphysical assumptions on which critical materialism was originally based. It throws a rather different light on the possibility and topicality of this idea of a materialistic ‘decyphering’ of reason in history.

On Honneth’s reading of it, the Hegelian influence in Critical Theory is to be found in the

idea that human reason is anchored historically and is at the same in a process of historical development. This conception, going back to Hegel and German Idealism, differs very considerably from Kant’s original notion of human reason being characterised by a few (transcendental, universal) properties that don’t develop historically, but are rather part of our transcendental heritage. The Frankfurt School [...] reckons with a historically anchorable Reason the structures and contours of which need to be determined, manifesting a developmental process that needs to be describable. [...] This basic structure of human reason is supposed to guarantee something along the lines of the General Good, or the general consensus of individuals finding themselves in a collective situation. [...] Reason enables [according to this idea] a cooperative – communally facilitated – self-actualization of all individuals.⁹

Hegel’s original conception can be summed up with the lines from his introduction to the *Philosophy of History*, according to which „Reason rules the world, and hence History [Weltgeschichte] is rational.“ As well as: “History [Weltgeschichte] is progress in the consciousness of freedom – a progress which we need to recognize in its necessity.”¹⁰ Reason is hence, for Hegel, not just a subjective cognitive faculty, but an objective substance and at the same time an active Subject, or ‘Spirit’. Marx interprets this notion of a supernatural ‘Spirit’ *materialistically* as ‘labour’. By this he means, in the first instance, that the entire ‘metabolism’ between humankind and the natural environment around it, in the course of which it (we) –

8 Honneth, S. 214.

9 Ebd., 203 f.

10 Hegel, *Philosophie der Geschichte*. In: *Werke* vol. 12, p. 20 and 32.

the human race – develops both its own (inner) nature, as well as the ‘world’ of society and culture altogether.

Here also there is a collective Subject – the human race in its entirety – which is why the result of this ‘labour’, when seen from the point of the *individual*, appears extraneous and alien. As members of society, on the other hand, individuals have the prospect – on the basis of a progressive domination over nature – of attaining their freedom from and within socially organized labour.

In emphasising the ‘rational’ aspect – the inherently progressive-emanipatory aspect – of the labour process, Marx was doubtlessly thinking of the social dynamic inherent in industrialization and of the emerging labour movements of his time. These are however tendencies that have gone, in the intervening century-and-a-half, in a radically different direction from the one Marx was observing, with a corresponding effect on what it is that Critical Theory has now come to stand for. In his retrospective of these altered realities and assumptions Honneth sums up the different conceptions concerning the basic structure of human reason as follows:

Horkheimer [...] still shared Marx’s view that the structures of human reason are to be located in labour. [...] Marcuse’s view is rather that reason is to be found in human aesthetic practice. [...] Adorno has [...] this notion of practice as non-instrumental [zweckfreier] communication. [...] According to Habermas, on the other hand, the structures of human reason are to be found neither in work nor in art, but rather in the communicative processes of reaching a consensus, as a ‘potential of reason’ that develops historically.¹¹

Well, yes. But who’s to say, in the search for this „reason in history“, in the search for what it is that drives the historical process onwards, whether there were not entirely acceptable reasons – of both a historical and theoretical kind – for focussing on all of these different areas of material existence at the same time, without all that emphasis on treating them as logically incompatible ‘theories’. In Horkheimer’s programmatic „Traditional and Critical Theory“ essay of 1937 at any rate, one reads:

The viewpoints which the latter [Critical Theory] derives from historical analysis as the goals of human activity, especially the idea of a reasonable organization of

11 Honneth, 204.

society that will meet the needs of the whole community, are immanent in human work but are not correctly grasped by individuals or by the common mind.¹²

On the face of it, Horkheimer seems here to be invoking Marx's idea that Capitalism, through the forced development of industrialisation, would at the same time be creating conditions that themselves soon enough were going to result in the end of private property. Other interpretations are however also worth pursuing. For instance, that further progress in the domination over nature contains within it, per se, a potential for social progress, or – another possibility – that a free and rationally organised society is hardly conceivable were it not to avail itself of the most advanced technology and the most advanced traditional theory attainable. Horkheimer doubtlessly meant the latter. For, as he emphasises, the rational universality expressing itself in the work process must first of all be recognized by those affected by it, and then be adequately put into practice. These expectations were however, in the epoch in which they were supposed to have become realized, not only dashed, but much worse was to come: „The fully enlightened Earth“, we read in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 1944/47, radiates „under the sign of disaster triumphant“.¹³

This was reason enough to take another, this time rather more jaundiced look, at those tendencies within the ‘forces of production’ (the industrialisation process, the economy), on which those past hopes had been pinned and which were supposed to have led to a more rational organisation of society – as well as expanding this line of thought to other areas in which such „(un)reason in history“ seemed to be manifesting itself.

But whatever the latitude of interpretation may be that it is necessary to concede here, not all are to be taken equally seriously. By no stretch of the imagination is it possible to ascribe to ‘work’ or ‘labour’ in the sense of Marx or Horkheimer what Honneth makes of it: „something in the way of a guarantee [!] of Reason unfolding itself in history.“¹⁴ Horkheimer is quite adamant that even the most general theses within Materialism contain no ‘ultimate’ ontological verities whatsoever, but must be seen as the result of experience.

12 Horkheimer: „Traditional and Critical Theory“ in: (ibid.) *Critical Theory – Selected Essays*. op. cit. p.212.

13 *HGS* 5, S. 25.

14 Honneth, op. cit., p. 204.

But, for the materialist, judgments which embrace all reality are always questionable and not so important, because far removed from the kind of activity which generated them.¹⁵

This holds all the more for formulations such as those that refer to the ‘anchoring of Reason in the structures of work’. Marx, in the aftermath of the French Revolution, could point to the economy and plausibly see in it the emancipation of material production from its feudal constraints. But that is very far from asserting that the French Revolution was „nothing but“ a break with antiquated forms of production. In fact, he saw the French Revolution as a result of the interplay of objective and subjective contradictions, or, in a formulation of Alfred Schmidt, he saw in it the „subjective-objective double-structure of the historical process.“¹⁶

A materialist *concept of reason* is in some ways a *contradictio in adiecto*, inasmuch as ‘Reason’ stands for the ability to make knowledge and moral claims self-transparent through the provision of ‘good grounds’ for what it is that is being asserted, whereas materialism reduces this intellectual side of things to natural, social or psychological *forces* or to political and economic *structures*. Very much aware of this, Horkheimer ventures a synthesis with the notion of a ‘rational interest’ or an ‘interest in rational conditions’. The ‘vested interests’ dominating society are a reality that stands in the way of an interest in a rational totality that is, as he puts it, „universal, but not however universally recognized“.¹⁷ Horkheimer links the potential for a critique of society to the cognitive and moral interests of the individual. They may form groups with others in order to be successful in their endeavours, but these groups are no warrant for an objectively guaranteed truth:

For all its insight into the individual steps in social change and for all the agreement of its elements with the most advanced traditional theories, the critical theory has no specific influence on its side, except concern for the abolition of social injustice. This negative formulation, if we wish to express it abstractly, is the materialist content of the idealist concept of reason.¹⁸

15 Horkheimer, *Materialismus und Metaphysik*, op. cit., p. 80.

16 Schmidt, *Geschichte und Struktur. Fragen einer marxistischen Historik*. Munich: Hanser 1971, p. 14

17 Horkheimer, „Traditionelle und kritische Theorie“ (1937). In: *ibid.*: *GS* vol. 4, Frankfurt a. M. 1988, p. 192.

18 *Ebd.*, S. 216.

When however the emancipatory interest in the abolition of what has become, in the meantime, technologically preventable suffering and injustice does not really have „some specific entity or secular power to back it up“, – as Horkheimer says – then even the most inspired societal diagnosis cannot provide a ‘guarantee’ that what is so obviously right and necessary ‘in theory’ is also going to take place in *reality*. Horkheimer’s theses of the Thirties, according to which the idea of a rational society is both ‘immanent to labour’ but not ‘present’, was hence not in the least a historico-philosophical guarantee of progress, but rather the expression of experiences and hopes that were to be so bitterly dashed in the Second World War.

But even today it’s not that difficult to identify ‘rational’ structures of societal work containing within them an emancipatory potential that is being obstructed by vested and power interests. The most obvious point would be world-wide poverty and hunger in the face of a global economy entirely capable, in principle, of producing the goods and services necessary for a life of dignity – for everyone on the planet.

And that’s not the only area of social practice embodying a ‘really existing potential’ that is decipherable as the anticipation of a more rational future. Another example – I can only touch upon it here – is Adorno’s conviction, expressed in the *Aesthetic Theory*, that the work of Art attains its moral and societal relevance not through its content, but through its ‘formarbeit’, its ‘working at’ the appreciation and realization of ‘really existant (mental-objective) forms’. A fully formed and constructed work of art, simply by resisting our everyday utilitarian and instrumental habits of thought, becomes the model for a kind of life in which the strange and the unfamiliar are not automatically subsumed under the Ego, made ‘identical’ with it, but are accepted in their autonomy and alterity.¹⁹

As far as the notion of ‘reason’ that is presupposed here is concerned it would be a mistake to try to locate it in a *single* foundational structure, whether this be work, language, art or the subjective world altogether. More appropriate seems to be to regard the ‘materiality of objective reason’ as a kind of multicentric network, in which no single institution or form of praxis lays down the coordinates or takes the measure of the others, but that they all interact with one another without anyone really knowing where it is all going to end.

19 Vgl. dazu Wolfgang Iser, „Ästhetik. Ethische Implikationen und Konsequenzen der Ästhetik.“ In: *Ethik der Ästhetik*. ed. Christoph Wulf, Dietmar Kamper and Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht. Berlin: Akademie 1994, p. 12 ff.

In this conception of materialism at any rate, ‘critical’ thought receives its ‘object’ from whatever the societal problems may be at that particular juncture in time. Though one should add right away that ‘problems’ here does not mean, as it does in the individual social sciences, the improvement of methodologies or techniques, but rather those involving the general conditions of life – that is, they relate to that universal need for self-fulfilment and self-actualization that is frustrated at every turn by the existing structures of domination. Critical Materialism is, on the one hand, the effort at conceptualizing the societal contradictions and exposing those ingrained habits of thought and action that ‘behind our backs’ as it were nail down all the more securely the existing state of unfreedom. On the other hand it is the expression of a subjective interest in a just society. For fundamental social change to be possible at all, both elements need to convene, the subjective interest in the improvement of conditions with that which is objectively possible, with what it is that realistically attainable. In this way the whole enterprise of Critical Theory should be seen not only as a consequence and a reflection of the expansion of productive resources generally, but also as a reflection of social conflicts and the struggle against injustice and discrimination.

This parallelism is by no means, as is sometimes claimed,²⁰ proof of indecision with regard to alternate theories of a materialist concept of reason – rather, they are two sides of the same coin. They correspond with what Bloch, in a suggestive metaphor, called the „cold stream and hot stream [...] simultaneously.“ The cold stream of materialism consists in the demystification of the ideal, and in its sober reference back to the crudely material side of production; the hot stream in trust in the non-ideological obstinacy of the qualitatively new, in subjective enthusiasm in the face of prospects for a better world. The one-sided reduction of the rationally new to economic structures *alone* is tantamount to historico-philosophical objectivism, while the one-sided concentration on merely *subjective* knowledge and interests would be utopianism. This parallelism within ‘critical’ thought is itself an aspect of the objective contrariness of the world.

A partly historical, currently relevant example of the above, which I would like to dwell on for a moment, by way of elucidating these ideas, is

20 Honneth, Institut für Sozialforschung (Hrsg.), *Schlüsseltexzte der Kritischen Theorie*. VS, Wiesbaden 2006, S. 231 f.

that of the information- and communication media. One reason why Historical Materialism has in the meantime reached a stage beyond that of Marx and Engels involves the vexing question of what's to be understood by a *materialistic* interpretation of the now vastly expanded mass media. We might recall that Walter Benjamin in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936/39) regarded the new technologies of photography and film as something potentially revolutionary, whereas Horkheimer and Adorno, in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, could make out in the new media, on the contrary, very little potential for progress at all – hence their neologism ‘Culture Industry’. Though at the same time, underlying these differences, there was for all that unanimity that such a project of decyphering the societal and political meaning of film was to proceed in the first instance by an examination of the material means and economic conditions pertaining in the industry, rather than confining oneself to the intentional contents that were of course *also* to be found there.

The black irony of Benjamin's media theory, I need hardly add, is that at the very time that he was writing this „first materialist theory of Art [...] worthy of the name“²¹ someone like Leni Riefenstahl was placing her advanced motion picture technology in the service of Nazi propaganda, while Hollywood was demonstrating the effectiveness of *its* ‘dream factory’. Benjamin's despairing optimism and Adorno's hermetic pessimism need perhaps to be approached, in our own day, as mirror opposites in which the ‘rational’ potential of the mass media is either over- or underestimated.

In his analysis of film Benjamin made an extensive study of those techniques that seemed to be extending or enhancing potentials for perceptions and actions. Slow-motion shots, time-lapse, close-ups, high angle or landscape shots, montage as well as other cinematographic innovations brought entirely novel, previously hidden aspects of reality into focus – analogizing from Psychoanalysis he spoke of an ‘optical-unconsciousness’ – with which the audience rapidly familiarized itself.

The public's approach to film, as Benjamin saw it, was now no longer – as it had been in the time of auratic art – a mixture of veneration and incomprehension, but more akin to that of the critical connoisseur. A public that Benjamin regarded at the same time as the possible precursor of a politically self-organising mass movement. The immanent logic of the new me-

21 Walter Benjamin, „Brief an Alfred Cohn vom 21.10.1935“. In: *Gesammelte Briefe* vol. V, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1999, p. 184.

dia of photography and film, the very way it was organized, were all pushing in the direction of appropriation by a mass audience, which – on Benjamin’s assumption – would at the same time be ‘immunised’ against – Fascism. Though Benjamin would soon enough be forced to concede – and this then became Adorno’s theme of the ‘Culture Industry’ – that the masses can just as easily be manipulated, with exactly those self-same mechanisms, to quite different ends. That was what then indeed happened with the so-called „aestheticisation of politics“. Fuehrer-cult and the glorification of war became staples of a cinema industry perverting what had started out as a desire for a higher meaning in life. With which, according to Benjamin, the „self-alienation [of humanity] had reached a pitch at which aesthetic pleasure of the highest order had become the anticipation of its own demise.“²²

In this new view of things the latent desire for autonomy and the receptivity to cooperatively agreed to goals were in *reality* being corrupted by the media and channelled in the direction of purely virtual, fictional, pseudo-satisfactions. Since the 1940’s the audio-visual media have of course been vastly expanded, to be augmented even further by the computerisation of everything at the end of the last century. Compared to the Cinema, the use of the different audio-visual media has broadened, intensified, and have now become ubiquitous in our everyday lives. TÜRCKE, in his *Philosophie der Sensation* has shown convincingly how the advertising industry – on which the whole culture industry is based – is in the process of reshaping the entire communicative culture of society, right down to the psychological structure of the individual:

When advertising becomes communicative action per se, it is no longer distinguishable from a public persona. [...] This comes to affect all forms of interpersonal relations: *Not* permanently drawing attention to oneself, *not* causing a stir, means risking being ignored.”²³

It is for all that an open question whether and to what extent the new electronic media are inherently destructive – seen psychologically and socially – and what’s to be done about it. Inherent in their technical development was from the outset a unidirectional transmitter-receiver pattern that, from

22 Benjamin, „Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit“ (1936/39). Zweite Fassung. In: *Gesammelte Schriften* Bd. I, 2. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1980, p. 508.

23 TÜRCKE, *Erregte Gesellschaft. Philosophie der Sensation*. Munich: Beck 22010, p. 36.

Brecht to Baudrillard, was seen as the main cause of their stultifying, mindless and incapacitating effect.

Nowadays, with the newest media, every recipient is potentially also a transmitter – although there is nothing inherently emancipatory – from the point of view of Critical Theory – in this. On the contrary, being permanently ‘on air’, could also mean that the unrelenting exposure to competition and advertising becomes internalised and compulsive, turns into one more ‘second nature’.

Then again: when „the whole of society has turned conformist, then that’s not the end of, but rather the beginning of something new.“²⁴ Though this new chapter does not necessarily mean, as Türcke suggests, an unbroken identification with economic rationality. The role of the new media in the ‘Arab Spring’ of 2011, in the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, seem to point in a different direction.²⁵ To be sure, to speak here of a ‘Facebook revolution’ is misleading, since the rebellion of a disillusioned generation against paternalism and disenfranchisement had real economic, social and political causes, and was more than just a ‘virtual reality’ event.

For all that, without the new TV, internet and mobile telephony networks, and hence without such a radically altered political communication, these upheavals would have been inconceivable. The social networks formed virtual communities, enabling, by permanent feedback, the rapid dissemination and consolidation of information. It enabled decentralized and yet co-ordinated organisational forms of collective action.

What we learn from this is that the potential for Reason inherent in the media certainly can become operative, just as soon as its isolation from everyday reality – so powerfully fostered by the culture industry – is overcome, and the bogus needs, desires and demands there created are suspended.

It becomes effective when, in conjunction with centres of Reason in other areas of society, they lead to the augmentation of meaningful forms of action. Which must not however be confused with a revolutionary romanticisation of the media. For on the one hand, the social media are exposed to all the usual dangers of surveillance and arrest by organs of state security, and

24 Ebd.

25 c.f. Asiem El Difraoui, *Die Rolle der neuen Medien im Arabischen Frühling*. Website of the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung: <http://www.bpb.de/internationales/afrika/arabischer-fruehling/52420/die-rolle-der-neuen-medien>. Accessed: 23.5.2012.

on the other, such revolutions typically set in motion political dynamics in which the original goals are superseded and repressed. As was already the case in 1789, this revolution too could turn out in the end to be no more than the stimulus for a lengthy process of change, not excluding any number of relapses. Given this paradoxical nature of the mass media, it is hence a valid question to ask, in the sense of a critical materialism of practice, after the criteria necessary to clarify what it is about the media that fosters such a repressive conformism, and what it is, on the other hand, that is more conducive to emancipation.

Hegel ascribed to the institutions of the family, the justice system and the state an ‘objective reason’ because he saw in them crystalization points of the historical process. Conservative social theorists like Arnold Gehlen followed him in ceding to these institutions much greater authority than to the merely subjectively motivated opinions of individuals. In contrast to this, a materialism of practice asks, here once again, after the subjective price to be paid for this seemingly ‘objectively reasonable’.

A rational reflection on the basic structure of society requires, as Adorno argued against Gehlen, nothing less than „to change that which keeps people – which keeps everyone – from living their lives according to their possibilities, within the given circumstances, in such a way as to realize the potential that they know they are capable of.“²⁶

The rationality or irrationality of institutional practices is measured, hence, according to whether the specific opportunities that they provide for the individual are enhanced or placed under limitations, in a situation where both the individual and the community have their objectifiable rights. Within a historical form of life the various institutions stand to one another in a complex relationship – laying down, for the individual, *its* horizon of possible choices. With this in mind, one could characterize a rational form of life as one in which these institutions relate to one another as a multi-centric totality, having the purpose of facilitating and encouraging the self-actualization of each individual.

By way of conclusion, let me summarize all this in the following theses:

26 Theodor W. Adorno, Arnold Gehlen, *Ist die Soziologie eine Wissenschaft vom Menschen? Ein Streitgespräch* (1965). In: Friedemann Grenz, *Adornos Philosophie in Grundbegriffen*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 21975, S. 246.

- The materialism of social practice has, according to Critical Theory, nothing ontological about it, but is, on the contrary, aimed at education and enlightenment in the ‘real’ world. It opposes the ideologically motivated denigration of material needs, and aims, at the same time, at the strengthening of autonomy in the face of authoritarianism and injustice.
- Compared to the theory of Marx, Critical Theory cedes greater independence to the spheres of the Psyche and of Culture, placing them alongside – but not subordinate – to that of the Economy.
- Materialist statements of a high order of abstraction – like those which hold that the idea of a rational totality is inherent in societally organized work – are based on experience, not on ontology. The scope of their validity is historically circumscribed.
- It does not claim to be the sole source of truth – it does not claim that the idea of a rational totality cannot have other sources as well. For a materialist notion of reason the metaphor of a multicentric network is useful, in suggesting emancipatory forms of praxis that influence each other reciprocally.
- The materiality of Reason has a subjective and an objective side to it. Critical Theory is motivated by the subjective interest in the abolition of societal injustice. At the same time it sees itself as the expression of objective-political contradictions. This parallelism is no expression of indecisiveness – the two necessarily go hand in hand.
- The audiovisual media – starting with film – through to the computers and mobile phones of today, always had inherent in them, from the outset, the potential of fostering both autonomy and heteronomy in the user. The most serious cause of heteronomy is the creation of illusory and bogus needs.
- In opposition to this, the facilitation of autonomy through the communication media – and by societal institutions more generally – can be thought of as an augmentation of the choices and

responsibilities available to the individual, where the different institutions involved in this need to complement each other.

transl. Frederik van Gelder