

# BJCT

## Berlin Journal of Critical Theory

Volume 1, Number 1 (September, 2017)

---

### **Generations of Critical Theory?**

*William Outhwaite*

### **Critical Theory and the Struggle for Recognition**

*David Ingram*

### **Critical Theory American Style: C. Wright Mills and the Tradition**

*Stephen Eric Bronner*

### **Baudrillard and the Semiotic Aspect of the Culture Industry**

*Amirhosein Khandizaji*

### **Benjamin in Florence: Unintentional Truth and the Thematics of Restoration**

*Mary Caputi*

## Editors

**Amirhosein Khandizaji**  
**Wolfgang Sohst**

## Editorial Board

**C. Fred Alford**, University of Maryland.  
**Jay Bernstein**, The New School.  
**Geoff Boucher**, Deakin University.  
**Andrew Bowie**, Royal Holloway University of London.  
**Stephen Eric Bronner**, Rutgers University.  
**Ian Buchanan**, University of Wollongong.  
**Mary Caputi**, California State University.  
**Deborah Cook**, University of Windsor.  
**Dino Franco Felluga**, Purdue University.  
**Gary Genosko**, University of Ontario.  
**Stefano Giacchetti**, Loyola University Chicago.  
**Graeme Gilloch**, Lancaster University.  
**David Held**, Durham University.  
**Christopher Horrocks**, Kingston University London.  
**David b. Ingram**, Loyola University Chicago.  
**Martin Jay**, University of California, Berkeley.  
**Claudia Leeb**, Washington State University.  
**Stephan Moebius**, University of Graz..  
**Jeffrey T. Nealon**, Penn State University.  
**William Outhwaite**, Newcastle University.  
**Stefano Petrucciani**, Sapienza University of Rome.  
**Max Paddison**, Durham University.  
**Simon Susen**, City, University of London.  
**Fabio Vighi**, Cardiff University.  
**Richard Wolin**, City University of New York.

ISSN: 2567-4048 (print) / 2567-4056 (online)  
xenomoi Verlag, Heinersdorfer Str. 16, D-12209 Berlin  
Phone: ~49(30)755 11 712, Email: info@xenomoi.de

## Contents

<b>Generations of Critical Theory?</b>	<b>5</b>
<i>William Outhwaite</i>	
<b>Critical Theory and the Struggle for Recognition</b>	<b>29</b>
<i>David Ingram</i>	
<b>Critical Theory American Style: C. Wright Mills and the Tradition</b>	<b>47</b>
<i>Stephen Eric Bronner</i>	
<b>Baudrillard and the Semiotic Aspect of the Culture Industry</b>	<b>57</b>
<i>Amirhosein Khandizaji</i>	
<b>Benjamin in Florence: Unintentional Truth and the Thematics of Restoration</b>	<b>79</b>
<i>Mary Caputi</i>	



---

## Generations of Critical Theory?

*William Outhwaite*<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This article addresses the relation between early critical theory (Adorno and Horkheimer), the work of Habermas and that of what can be called a third generation (Honneth, Benhabib, Fraser). It is suggested that, despite the arguments that can be made for the more speculative approach of early critical theory, there were good reasons for Habermas's departure from it and that more recent critical theory essentially builds on this approach.

This journal is oriented to re-evaluating early critical theory and is therefore an appropriate place to pose some questions about the periodisation of critical theory as a whole. Whether or not one accepts a generational model with Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse et al in the first generation, Habermas, Apel and Wellmer in the second and Honneth, Fraser and a cluster of other German and North American theorists in the third, a model powerfully criticised in relation to Habermas by Stefan Müller-Doohm (2017), there is general agreement that Habermas's project has always been substantially different from that of the earlier critical theorists – themselves of course quite differentiated despite Horkheimer's somewhat managerial attempts to present them as a team.

But whereas Horkheimer's earlier opposition to Habermas was based on anxiety that he was too radical and outspoken (Müller-Doohm 2016: 80-88), later commentators have polarised roughly between those who see Habermas's project as a continuation of critical theory in a different mode, more adapted to the

---

1 William Outhwaite, FAcSS, taught at the universities of Sussex and Newcastle, where he is emeritus professor. His interests include the philosophy of the social sciences (especially realism), social theory (especially critical theory), political sociology, sociology of knowledge and contemporary Europe. He is the author of *Understanding Social Life: The Method Called Verstehen* (1975, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn 1986), *Concept Formation in Social Science* (1983), *New Philosophies of Social Science: Realism, Hermeneutics and Critical Theory* (1987), *Jürgen Habermas: A Critical Introduction* (1994), and *Critical Theory and Contemporary Europe* (2012). He edited "The Habermas Reader" (1996).

realities of postwar advanced capitalist societies with their apparently stable liberal polities, and those who see it as an abandonment of some of the more radical motifs of earlier critical theory.

Jay Bernstein (1995: 17), for example, in a book substantially concerned with Habermas, advanced a more ambitious specification of the basic motifs of critical theory. Bernstein argues that the “three demands – for a non-instrumental conception of cognition and reason, for a cultural Marxism, and for an internal connection between those two items – are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for a critical theory of society”. Bernstein, along with Gillian Rose, argued for a much more speculative model of critical theory, oriented more strongly to Adorno than to Horkheimer or Habermas, and thus, in his terminology, to issues of meaning and the problem of nihilism rather than to those of exploitation and justice. Rose steered a rather different course, focussed on law and a deep engagement with Hegel and ultimately with religion, but her critique of neo-Kantianism in the first chapter of *Hegel Contra Sociology* (Rose 1981) was intended inter alia to cut the ground from under Habermas’s project.

Rose’s turn to Hegel, and not to the close-to-Marx Hegel that I feel reasonably comfortable with but to an uncompromising Hegel oriented to the Absolute, was also a turn from Adorno, the subject of her PhD and her first book, and certainly from the neo-Kantianism which she hunted down, with an almost McCarthyite intensity, not just in Habermas but in sociology as a whole. Whereas in *The Melancholy Science* (Rose 1978: 2) she wrote of the Frankfurt School’s ‘particular fusion of the Idealism, which arose in opposition to neo-Kantianism, with the revival of Marxism’, three years later she was writing that ‘The very idea of a scientific sociology, whether non-Marxist or Marxist, is possible only as a form of neo-Kantianism’ (Rose 1981: 2). In Rose’s analysis, both Lukács and Adorno tried unsuccessfully ‘to break out of the neo-Kantian paradigm of validity and values. Their work has achieved renown as an Hegelian Marxism, but it constitutes a neo-Kantian Marxism’ (Rose 1981: 27). The following pages of her book brilliantly follow the story through Adorno to Habermas, who also ‘mistreats’ Hegel in order to establish his own methodologically oriented critical theory, which ‘has become such a unifying force in the international world of sociological reason’ (Rose 1981: 36).

In both of these rather different *démarches*, which could be paralleled by others in the German debates, there is a common line of critique which fits Habermas much more closely than either Horkheimer or Adorno. In a more polemical intervention, a conference report which was also a brief critique of the undeniable aridity of certain parts of the North American Habermas industry, Peter Osborne (1998) wrote that Habermasians celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ‘tied firmly to the mast’ (p.54), for ‘how are followers of Habermas to celebrate *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the wake of their forced marriage to functionalist sociology and Rawlsian political theory?’ (p. 53).

The Habermasian counter-argument, in essence, is that expressed by Habermas when he described his youthful response to reading Lukács, that it was enormously impressive but belonged to a different world. The critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno, especially after the postwar return to Frankfurt, pivoted uneasily between utopianism and sociological business-as-usual; what Habermas wanted was an engagement with the social sciences which underpinned the concept of critique, much as Marx had engaged with economics with the same underlying purpose. Habermas’ thought can be seen to steer a course between the twin poles of Kant and Hegel, constantly pursuing abstract systems of argumentation of a recognizably Kantian kind while remaining sensitive to the Hegelian (or sociological) reminder that formal systems of reasoning exist in a social and historical context. As Hauke Brunkhorst (2009: 219) puts it,

...the critical theory of society, to whose most important premises Habermas adheres, along with Kant, Marx and Adorno, must emerge out of what exists and out of its own autonomous development, in other words, thinking with Hegel against Hegel, must renew Kant’s radical, normative universalism.

I shall focus first on the concept of critique in earlier and later critical theory, before addressing some broader issues as they have played out from the 1930s to the present. It seems to me that, rather surprisingly, despite, or perhaps because of, certain connections between Critical Theory’s concept of critique and that of Kant, and its much more direct and obvious dependence on Marx’s conception, the term critique is very often used in Critical Theory in quite an informal and

everyday sense, as in the familiar contrast between ‘critical’ and ‘affirmative’ conceptions of culture or between a critical and an uncritical attitude to, say, Critical Theory. First, a word about Marx. Even if Marx wrote relatively little on metatheoretical issues he had, in practice, a fairly coherent conception of critique exemplified in *Capital*. There are of course rough edges to do with the relation between historical and systematic or structural aspects of the model, between what we have come to call social integration and system integration and so on, but the basic model in which the understanding of the object in its contradictory complexity leads to, or perhaps is identical with, an awareness of its historical limits and the need for its replacement seems to me reasonably clear. This model was developed independently by Roy Edgley and Roy Bhaskar in a notion of critique in which the criticism of a false theory in the social sciences sustains, *ceteris paribus*, a critique of the social conditions which account for belief in the false theory.

So much in parenthesis about Marxism. If I am right about this feature of critical theory, the kind of detailed discriminations made by Seyla Benhabib in her brilliant reconstruction of the concept of critique in *Critique, Norm & Utopia* are indeed reconstructive, I think, rather than something present in the self-understanding of the critical theorists – at least until Habermas. A lot of the work, in other words, is not done by the terms ‘critique’ and/or ‘criticism’, the two words by which Kritik is rendered in English and which enable a distinction between formal and informal usages (though at the cost of reifying ‘critique’ into some sort of special activity and banalising ‘criticism’ into what Drew Milne, at the conference where I first presented some of these ideas, nicely described as ‘polemical disagreement and sustained grumbling’). The burden is borne instead by related terms – notably the fairly closely interdefined terms dialectic(s) and totality – as well as, of course, a particular conception of the contemporary human predicament and of the possibilities of emancipation. I shall focus here on the concept of totality in order to defend a version of it which (*contra* the charge that it is tendentially totalitarian) is not only harmless but useful.

The debt of the early critical theorists to Lukács is of course not in doubt. He certainly helped their journey towards what he later nastily called the Grand Hotel of the Abyss, in which he sees them enjoying the best of everything while looking down on the poor sods down below and where, to his annoyance, they



trashed some of the older Marxist furniture in their rooms. What is perhaps less often emphasised, despite Martin Jay's characteristically comprehensive overview, is how much they owed in particular to the idea, clearly present in Marx but expressed most emphatically by Lukács, that the concept of totality is what distinguishes Marxism from 'bourgeois thought' and that 'the primacy of the category of totality is the bearer of the revolutionary principle in science' (Lukács 1971: 27). For Lukács, an orientation to the social totality, seen as a complex of fetishism and reification of social relations between people, is both necessary and, he implies, sufficient, for the adequate understanding of social phenomena such as economic processes. 'It is by virtue of this insight [into fetishism] that the dialectical method and its concept of totality can be seen to provide real knowledge of what goes on in society' (Lukács 1971: 15). As he put it a little later in Lenin (Lukács 1970: 18), "For every genuine Marxist there is always a reality more real and therefore more important than *isolated* facts and tendencies – namely, *the reality of the total process*, the totality of social development".

Something like this conception can also be found in a slightly more measured form in the work of Karl Korsch, as Martin Jay (1986) showed in chapter three of his *Totality* book. In his 'Introduction to *Capital*' (p.58, cited in Jay, 1986: 146), Korsch writes, Marx's use of 'contradiction' should be understood as metaphorical. "These tensions are all pictured as 'contradictions', and this can be thought of as a sophisticated kind of metaphorical usage, illuminating the profounder connections and interrelation between things."

Critical Theory from Horkheimer to Habermas adds some *ceteris paribus* clauses (e.g. Adorno pointing out that Mannheim's totalising approach was hardly revolutionary, and Habermas making the same point for the totalising conception of traditional German *gesamte Staatswissenschaft*; one might add also the Historical School of political economy). Critical Theory also brackets out Lukács's favouritism about the proletariat and his over-slick image of the identical subject-object of history, but it keeps the basic message. This is, I take it, that an account of a social object which pays proper attention to its context will more or less necessarily be led to an awareness of the conflictual or, if you like, contradictory nature of its relations with that context, of the context itself and indeed of the object itself.

Thus the problem, *pace* Goethe, is not so much that everything isolated is contemptible, but that things studied in isolation will not have their contradictions adequately exposed to the critique they require. What I want to suggest is that Horkheimer's becomes the mainstream conception of critique in critical theory. It coexists however with Adorno's quite substantially different conception, which focuses much more on particular concepts, in a curious anticipation of the analytic philosophy of language that got going in Oxford long after he'd moved out and on, and is driven by a Benjaminian impulse to blow things apart from the inside in a process of demystification, rather than to *pull* them apart by highlighting their complicated relations with and in their milieu. Very crudely, Horkheimer's conception is context-theoretic; Adorno's is concept-theoretic. As Wiggershaus (1994: 189) puts it,

For Horkheimer, dialectics in the first place meant thinking in relative totalities, and served a critical theory of the sciences as evidence that an alternative to the narrowness of the various scientific disciplines and metaphysics existed. For Adorno, dialectics meant the possibility of demythologizing and demystifying a broad spectrum of current phenomena. This linked him with Bloch and Benjamin.

The distinction is only a rough one, because Horkheimer of course also engages in demystificatory conceptual analysis and Adorno is also concerned to stress the social totality, not least in the form of totalitarianism and other pathological manifestations of *Herrschaft*. And a thinker like Marcuse is probably somewhere between these two ideal-typical poles.<sup>2</sup> For the moment I want to concentrate on Horkheimer's more inclusive and more influential conception, and to defend it against certain possible objections. Horkheimer took, I think, a sensible view of the possibilities of creative interaction between philosophy and the social sciences - a conception later developed more fully by Habermas in a number of articles about the role of philosophy and in his oeuvre as a whole. A neat illustration of this was the memorandum sent from California 'on parts of the Los Angeles Programme of work [i.e. Dialectics of Enlightenment] which could not be done by the philosophers' - i.e. an analysis of the trends of contemporary capitalism and class

---

2 Adorno's conception is of course the one with the closest affinities to deconstruction.

stratification. (Cited by Wiggershaus, pp.314f). In Adorno, the issue is sometimes too polarised for my taste, as in his implicit critique of Horkheimer in his essay on ‘The Actuality of Philosophy’ (p.120, cited Jay, 1986: 256): “the idea of science (Wissenschaft) is research; that of philosophy is interpretation”. Elsewhere, it is perhaps wrapped up in too much pathos, as in the opening sentence of *Negative Dialectics* that “Philosophy lives on because the moment for its realisation was missed”.

In view of Horkheimer’s subsequent disavowal of the heritage of earlier critical theory (he notoriously kept the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* out of reach in the re-established Institute for Social Research), and his later decline into rather reactionary positions, it is worth noting that in his speech at the reopening of the Institute he restated this interdisciplinary charter:

When I speak of the broader points of view that must be linked to individual studies, what I mean is that in every question that arises, indeed in the sociological attitude itself, there is always an implicit intention to transcend existing society. Without this intention, although it is hardly possible to describe it in detail, questions will neither be put in the correct way, nor will sociological thinking arise at all (Cited by Wiggershaus, p. 445).

It is this earlier interdisciplinary conception which gets somewhat effaced in post-war critical theory, and which Habermas attempts to reinstate. The ways in which he does so are fairly familiar, so I shall merely summarise them here.

First, in chronological order, a conception of Marxism (and by extension of critical theory, understood as a more reflective and self-conscious variant (in both senses of the word self-conscious – i.e. embarrassed (about Stalinism) as well as self-aware or *selbstbewusst*) as an empirically testable philosophy of history. Habermas initially attaches to this conception a fairly traditional conception of an expressive totality. Although he later, under pressure from the Popperian Hans Albert, abandons this conception in his second contribution to the *Positivismusstreit* [the methodological dispute between critical theory and Popperian critical rationalism in the early 1960s] in favour of a reliance instead on the concept of rationality, totality remains as a crucial reference-point (Jay,

1986: 473; 483). Habermas comes later to see this whole model as too traditional.

Second, the ‘cognitive interests’ model, in which empirically given interests of the human species (in the control of objective nature, in mutual understanding and in emancipation), are constitutive, in a quasi-transcendental manner, of natural science, hermeneutically oriented sciences and emancipatory sciences such as Freudian psychology and the Marxist critique of ideology respectively (The technical differences in the way these three groups of science are governed by cognitive interests need not concern us here). Here too, a conception of totality remains central to humanistic and critical sciences, whose theoretical concepts are necessarily selected with reference to what Habermas (1986 [1963]: 210) calls ‘an anticipatory interpretation of society as a whole’. This approach too, which Habermas now sees as a detour, founders on a paradox identified by Thomas McCarthy, that nature can hardly both be constituted and be the ground of constituting activity; more generally, it suffers from an excessively epistemological formulation.

Finally, after flirting with the idea of a linguistic foundation for social theory, Habermas settles in the late 1970s on a conception of critical social theory which spirals off from an analysis of the presuppositions embodied in linguistic communication to a broader concept of communicative action set alongside, and prior to, those standardly listed in social theory: normatively guided action (Parsonian functionalism), strategic action (*homo economicus* and rational action theory) and dramaturgical action as analysed by Erving Goffman and ethnomethodologists following Harold Garfinkel and Aaron Cicourel. Again, without going into details, one should note that a substantial part of the critical element in this conception is the totalising move from individual phenomena, or indeed from individual social or human sciences such as sociology, to a broader conception. The emancipatory movement in a more limited sense is driven by a form of counterfactual reasoning in which human collectivities reflect on whether the social arrangements with which they have ended up are capable of justification in universalistic normative terms or whether we have slipped or been dragooned into them against what ‘we’ now recognise as ‘our’ better judgement. In particular, to put the big question with caricatural brevity, could we have had modernity

without liberal capitalist exploitation and the wars and other authoritarian consequences of the bureaucratic nation state?

How defensible is such a conception, at least in its broad orientation? To the question raised in another context by Nancy Fraser, ‘What’s Critical About Critical Theory?’ (Fraser 1985), an apparently weak and partial response stressing the totalising movement of thought, where this necessarily implies also a critique of the idea that there is nothing other than instrumental or strategic reason, may be in the end not unuseful.

On the other hand, the parallel critiques of several of the foremost thinkers in the more recent critical theory tradition should give pause for thought. I can only briefly summarise these lines of criticism, concentrating on Axel Honneth, with whom I begin.

As is well known, Habermas rejected the alleged pessimism of post-war critical theory, of what had come to be called the ‘Frankfurt School’, and his principal work, the *Theory of Communicative Action*, published in 1981, aimed to provide the missing theory of social action as well as a normative foundation for social criticism and what he came to call a discourse ethics. For Honneth, this was the starting point, but he felt that it needed to be complemented by Foucault’s analysis of power and a more prominent *theoretical*, as opposed to merely political, focus on concrete social conflicts.<sup>3</sup>

An essay originally presented at the legendary Dubrovnik Center in 1981, ‘Moral Consciousness and Class Domination’, sets the substantive focus for Honneth’s subsequent work. Honneth begins with the central principle of critical theory, which goes back to Hegel’s critique of Kantian morality, that effective critique must not be grounded in abstract principles but must also have a social foundation.

If a theory is to do more than merely appeal to the ethical standards upon which it bases its critique, then it must prove the existence of empirically effective forms of morality upon which it can legitimately build. (*Disrespect*, p.80)

---

3 Habermas has of course always been a close observer of, and incisive commentator on, the contemporary political scene, but has tended to keep his political writings separate from his theoretical work.

This is of course a classically Hegelian trope. Honneth is not yet using the term recognition.<sup>4</sup> However, his focus on injustice contains the basic theme of his next major book, *The Struggle for Recognition*. Habermas, he suggests, has escaped the pessimistic trap of earlier critical theory by his notion, developed in his ‘reconstruction’ of historical materialism, of a process of moral evolution complementary to the evolution of the productive forces. But Habermas’s model, he maintains, ‘is constructed in such a way that it must systematically ignore all forms of existing social critique not recognized by the political-hegemonic public sphere’ (p.82).<sup>5</sup> Honneth, in other words, is concerned, like Heineken in the beer advertisement, to reach the parts which Habermas cannot: ‘all those potentialities for moral action which have not reached the level of elaborated value judgements, but which are nonetheless persistently embodied in culturally coded acts of collective protest, or even in mere silent “moral disapproval” (Max Weber)<sup>6</sup>’ (p. 83).

Honneth writes in the Introduction to *The Struggle for Recognition* (p.1), that he had reached the conclusion in his first book, *Critique of Power*, that any attempt to integrate the social-theoretical insights of Foucault’s historical work within the theory of communicative action has to rely on a concept of morally motivated struggle. And there is no better source of inspiration for developing such a concept than Hegel’s early, ‘Jena’ writings, with their notion of a comprehensive ‘struggle for recognition’.

As he summarised the theory in his inaugural lecture at Berlin,

I distinguished three forms of social recognition which can be regarded as the communicative presuppositions of a successful formation of identity: emotional concern in an intimate social relationship such as love or friendship, rights-based recognition as a morally accountable

---

4 The term had cropped up in Habermas’s speech of 1974 on receiving the Stuttgart Hegel Prize, ‘Can Complex Societies Construct a Rational Identity’. Here he writes of ‘a flexible identity in which all members of the society can recognize themselves [wiedererkennen] and acknowledge [anerkennen], i.e. respect [achten] one another’.

5 Here of course Honneth is implicitly referring to Habermas’s classic analysis of the public sphere and its deterioration under conditions of modern democracy.

6 Honneth is referring here, he says, to Weber’s *Economy and Society* (vol. 2, p. 929).

member of society and, finally, the social esteem of individual accomplishments and abilities (p.74).

What recognition is contrasted with is not misrecognition<sup>7</sup> but disrespect, seen as the motor and idiom of social conflicts. As the *Internationale* goes, ‘nous ne sommes rien, soyons tout’, or at least let us be acknowledged for what we are.

It cannot I think be denied that this concept captures a good deal of the notions of natural justice which motivate many social movements of exploited or suppressed people. Strikes, notoriously, often begin with an apparently trivial violation of some perceived right rather than the broader context of ongoing exploitation. Critics of the concept have however argued, with more or less emphasis, that there is something flimsy about it. Nancy Fraser, in particular, has argued for the importance of issues of redistribution, in a friendly critique of Honneth’s emphasis on recognition.<sup>8</sup>

The range of current social conflicts with which Honneth engages in his own work and in that which he encouraged at Frankfurt is enough to refute charges that the concept of recognition is in some way narcissistic and insubstantial, but it may be partly with these criticisms in mind that he tackled, in his Tanner Lectures at Berkeley in 2005, the grand Marxist theme of reification. Reification is of course Lukács’s term and *not* Marx’s, as Gillian Rose showed in the first of her brilliant books).<sup>9</sup> It is the practical and theoretical treatment of social relations between people as relations between things.<sup>10</sup> In his account of reification,

7 Recognition in German here would be 'wiedererkennen', rather than the sense of acknowledgement conveyed also by 'Anerkennung' (cf. Jay, 2008). Habermas, as quoted above (n.3), interestingly uses both terms, and 'Achtung' or respect, which in its negative form gives 'disrespect'. It is interesting that the term 'disrespect' plays such an important role in British street culture.

8 See, for example, Fraser and Honneth, 2003, and the more hostile critiques by Lois McNay (2007, 2008).

9 This has a lesson for all of us who pretend to some form of scholarship. Everyone she spoke to said that of course Marx used the term throughout his work; they couldn't of course say just where, off the cuff, and so on. One day I triumphantly pointed out to her a use of the term buried in volume 3 of *Capital* (which of course was published posthumously and therefore might not count), but this is very much the exception which proves the rule. (See *The Melancholy Science*, p. 167, n.20.)

10 I deliberately use the ambiguous term 'treatment', since what is at issue is not a purely cognitive process.

Honneth stresses the sense of ‘forgetting’ pointed to by Horkheimer and Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: ‘All reification is a forgetting’.<sup>11</sup> To say, for example, that I need to shed ‘jobs’ from my business in a period of austerity is to forget, in this sense, that these are the jobs of the people whose jobs they are. Honneth’s aim, in a nutshell, is to detach the notion of reification from its original productivist philosophical anthropology and to show its relevance to a wide range of social pathologies as well as the capitalist exploitation and its mystification which was the focus of Lukács’ critique.

Critical theory, for Honneth, is alive and well as resuscitated by Habermas;<sup>12</sup> it needs to be tweaked back into a direction which one could call post-marxist, if the term had not been attached to rather different intellectual and political projects, and which also recalls Marx’s early concern with a wide variety of social conflicts.<sup>13</sup> Most important of these, I think, is his bold rehabilitation of a strong notion of social pathology which had tended to be confined to seminar discussions of Durkheim’s distinction between the normal and the pathological, and journalistic phrases about our ‘sick’ or ‘broken’ societies. In the first essay in *Disrespect*, Honneth ties this to the tradition of ‘social philosophy’ which, as he notes, has withered away in the Anglo-Saxon countries into a sub-discipline of political philosophy. Against this current, Honneth aims to restore it in relation to ‘processes of social development that can be viewed as misdevelopments...’ (p. 4). The ‘diagnosis of the times’, a term introduced into Britain by Karl Mannheim, becomes specifically a diagnosis of social pathology. Thus, ‘In order to be able to speak of a social pathology that is accessible to the medical model of diagnosis, we require a conception of normality related to social life as a whole’ (p.34). In what he calls ‘a weak, formal, anthropology’ (p. 42)<sup>14</sup>, Honneth gestures towards ‘an ethical conception of social normality

---

11 This quotation appears as one of two epigraphs at the beginning of the lecture series; the other is from Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*: ‘All knowledge is based on acknowledgement’ (Anerkennung).

12 See for example Honneth 1985 and Chapters 3 and 5 in *Disrespect*.

13 See Lubasz, 1977. I do not of course mean to suggest that Marx lost, or Habermas lacks, these concerns; just that the focus on the proletariat in Marx’s later work, and a more diffuse notion of humanity as a whole in Habermas’, might be complemented by an approach which engages with a wide range of substantive conflicts.

14 In the sense, of course, of philosophical anthropology (see Honneth and Joas, 1980).



tailored to conditions that enable human self-realization' (p. 36).

This important initiative makes explicit something which had been latent in much of critical theory. The theme of suffering of misdevelopment and 'damaged life' (Adorno, 1951) pervades the work of the first generation of critical theorists, and Habermas' reworking in *Theory of Communicative Action* of Marxist, Weberian and indeed Parsonian theory (Holmwood, 2009) contains a substantial discussion of social pathologies. Honneth has however pushed this theme further, against the limits of the organic analogies and functionalist assumptions which he, like most of us these days, would find unacceptable.

This is brought out in what is more or less the title essay of the perhaps ambiguously titled *Pathologien der Vernunft. Geschichte und Gegenwart der Kritischen Theorie*. In this essay, 'A Social Pathology of Reason: On the intellectual heritage of critical theory', Honneth suggests that, although we are now a similar distance from the beginnings of critical theory as its protagonists were from the last representatives of classical idealism (p. 28), critical theory is still linked by its model of '... socially effective reason: The historical past is to be understood as a developmental process whose pathological malformation by capitalism can be overcome only by a process of enlightenment carried out by those affected' (p. 30). Critical theory therefore stands out in the present century against a context dominated by a liberal conception of justice which fails to ground its critique in social and historical explanation and by Foucauldian or hermeneutic lines of social criticism.

What Honneth offers, then, is not so much a critique of Habermas as an alternative programme lying in a similar line of development and engaging recently with, somewhat surprisingly, the work of Talcott Parsons and Jeff Alexander. Seyla Benhabib, by contrast, develops a critique inspired both by Hegel and by contemporary feminism, which had also underlain Nancy Fraser's classic piece 'What's critical about critical theory?' (1985); Benhabib's *Critique, Norm, and Utopia* came out the following year. Focusing on Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), Fraser argues that it

...fails to theorize the patriarchal, norm-mediated character of late-capitalist official-economic and administrative systems. Likewise, it fails to theorize the systemic, money- and power-mediated

character of male dominance in the domestic sphere of the late-capitalist lifeworld ... Thus, while Habermas wants to be critical of male dominance, his diagnostic categories deflect attention elsewhere, to the allegedly overriding problem of gender-neutral reification.

In her positive proposals, Benhabib, to summarise rather brutally, plays off Hegel against Habermas, as Honneth came to do, in the service of what she calls a ‘community ... of needs and solidarity’ (p.341). The phrase is in fact Habermas’s own, and solidarity, as Peter Dews perceptively stressed in the title of his edited volume of interviews, *Autonomy and Solidarity*, is a core concept for him, but Benhabib argues that his discourse ethics is shaped too much by a formalistic conception of rights – something which his engagement with legal theory in *Between Facts and Norms* (Habermas 1992) did little to mitigate. Her aim is ‘to situate reason and the moral self more decisively in the contexts of gender and community, while insisting upon the discursive power of individuals to challenge such situatedness in the name of universalistic principles, future identities, and as yet undiscovered communities’ (Benhabib 1992: 8). In Benhabib’s later work, this is a red thread running through to her analyses of the politics of multicultural Europe.

For Jay Bernstein, Benhabib does not go far enough. ‘The meaning of universality in the context of need interpretations will have to shift away from the paradigm of communication altogether since it will have an epistemic component equivalent to whatever is involved in *recognizing* others in their concrete articularity ...’ (Bernstein 1995, p. 154). Where Honneth turned to Hegel, Bernstein also argued for the relevance of Adorno, and particularly his theory of art – the main focus of his current work. Habermas’s sociological account of the colonisation of the life-world, Bernstein suggested in passing in 2001, in *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, p. 45, ‘... theoretically colonises the very existence it aims to protect. The aphoristic procedure of [Adorno’s] *Minima Moralia* can thus usefully be seen as a corrective to theoretical colonisation; it aims to express as well as reflect (on) the experience of the individual’. If this judgement sounds a little harsh, it is certainly true that Habermas briskly asserted, in a ‘Reply to my Critics’, that a historical materialist conception of progress, as he had reformulated it, or presumably any other, ‘does not at all touch the sensitive zones of

the good life – which are, in my view, beyond the grasp of theory'<sup>15</sup> (Thompson and Held 1982: 228).

I have been dwelling on these works of the 1980s and 1990s not for the sake of nostalgia, but because I think they continue to map out crucial aspects of contemporary social and political theory. As for the question of where all this leaves Habermas today, my inclination, *contra* Gordon Finlayson, Stefan Müller-Doohm and Habermas himself, is to stress the continuities in his thinking and his closeness to what I continue to think of as the first generation of critical theory. Habermas was for a long time reticent about discussing this relationship, and Müller-Doohm's superb biography adds some more material to the reasons for this distance.

Habermas has also not been keen to found a school. During his career as a full-time academic Habermas sponsored only two Habilitation theses, those of Albrecht Wellmer and Axel Honneth, and Claus Offe, who should know, doubts that one can speak of a Habermasian school (Müller-Doohm 2016: 206). Habermas declined to be considered for the Directorship of the Institute for Social Research, and when Adorno's chair was to be filled in 1970, he proposed Leszek Kołakowski and defended his suggestion, against critics in the Faculty, with a warning against seeing critical theory as 'a kind of institution which has to be preserved by recruiting true believers' (Müller-Doohm 2016: 165). When inviting Offe in 1970 to join him in the move to Starnberg he wrote that the situation at the Institute was desolate and that he was 'tired of bearing the social psychological burden of a substitute father' (Müller-Doohm 2016: 167-8). And yet he wrote in a letter to *SPIEGEL* in 1973, in response to the suggestion that his communication theory was a rejection of Marxism, 'One can 'distance' oneself from people or utterances, but not from scientific traditions which exist after all to be tested and revised' (Müller-Doohm 2016: 136). As he said in 1981, he was not a Marxist in the sense of a religious declaration, 'But Marxism gave me the impulse and the analytical means to investigate how the relationship between democracy and capitalism has developed' (*Kleine Politische Schriften I-IV*, 517). And when he returned to Frankfurt and said in his first lecture that he

---

15 As Simon Susen has pointed out, this hardly does justice to Marx's (admittedly rare) comments on a communist future.

‘did not intend to continue the tradition of a school’ he went straight on to say that he couldn’t ‘stand at this lectern without recalling the figure and the influence (Wirkungsgeschichte) of Adorno’ (*Die neue Unübersichtlichkeit*, p. 209).

I have written elsewhere about the continuities and discontinuities in Habermas’s relationship to historical materialism (Outhwaite 2014). More relevant, perhaps, is to ask how far he has responded to criticisms from the third generation and, incipiently, a fourth generation of critical theorists such as Rainer Forst in Frankfurt, Martin Saar in Leipzig, Simon Susen at City University in London, Robin Celikates in Amsterdam or Rahel Jaeggi in Berlin. There are several places to look. First, of course, his own main works, including prefaces to later editions of books such as *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Second, the various volumes of essays on his work to which he has contributed a response. Third, the interviews he has given and, fourth and finally, the secondary literature and biographies by Müller-Doohm and others.

Müller-Doohm’s biography provides useful signposts. One is a remark from Habermas himself (at the Wuppertal conference of 2012 on his relationship to historical materialism and now documented in Rapic 2014), which Müller-Doohm uses as an epigraph to the final section of his biography: ‘Wer kennt schon seine wirklich spekulativen Motive?’ (Who really knows the true motives of their speculations?) (Müller-Doohm 2016: 424). As Müller-Doohm goes on to spell out, Habermas is more conscious than most people of the creative tension between intuitions which emerge from one’s life and the demands of scholarship and truth.<sup>16</sup> As he said in an interview:

There is also a dogmatic core to my convictions, of course. I would rather abandon scholarship than allow this core to soften, for those are intuitions which I did not acquire through science, that no person ever acquires that way, but rather through the fact that one grows up in an environment with people with whom one must critically engage (sich auseinandersetzen), and in whom one recognizes oneself’ (Peter Dews (ed), *Autonomy and Solidarity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, p. 127; translation modified).

And yet, ‘When one is oriented to questions of truth...one should not try, as

---

16 See also Müller-Doohm 2014.

Heidegger and Adorno both did, to produce truths outside of the sciences and to wager on a higher level of insight... (Dews, p. 126). Truth emerges, then, from scholarly exchange.

Borrowing Göran Therborn's phrase 'Vorsprung durch Rethink' (*Marxism Today*, February 1989), we might consider some of Habermas's rethinks, in roughly chronological order. First, his abandonment of the model of what he called an 'empirically falsifiable philosophy of history' in favour of a kind of naturalised epistemology with the model of cognitive interests, followed by the qualifications he introduced in his 1973 'Postscript' to *Knowledge and Human Interests*. As he said in an interview, 'There is one difficulty ... which McCarthy showed me. Namely, once you accept that there is a category of sciences which I now...call reconstructive, where do you place them?' (Dews 1992: 193). (This paralleled also in his later turn from an anti-realist position in *Knowledge and Human Interests* to one which is much more sympathetic to realism and framed in terms of reconstructive science.

Then we might think of *Legitimation Crisis* (1973) and *The Reconstruction of Historical Materialism* (1976) as, among other things, a response to the rather strident Marxism of the 1968 years. By then Habermas was making the major turn in his thought, to his mature model of communicative action; when I edited the *Habermas Reader* in the mid-1990s he was distinctly cool about the idea of including a substantial amount of his earlier work, which he saw as superseded. By the time of *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), closely followed in 1984 by a volume of 'earlier studies and additions', Habermas was taking some rather ill-judged side-swipes at Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida, and his reconciliation with them, at least as people though perhaps not fully with their ideas (unlike, for example, Wellmer and Honneth, who were always much more open and conciliatory), is another modification of his initially harsh approach.

1989 brought Habermas up short, like all of us, and he had eventually to revise his rather negative initial response to the *Wende*, which at first he saw, unusually for him<sup>17</sup>, in rather parochial West German terms. It is worth noting that, although Habermas did not devote much of his published work before 1989 to an analysis of state socialist societies, his approach made possible some of the most

---

<sup>17</sup> See however Turner 2004; Hess 2017

creative work in the analysis of these regimes. Thus, whereas more orthodox Marxist approaches concentrated on the issue of how state socialist modes of production should be understood, Habermas and others, such as Andrew Arato, using a Habermasian approach, put these questions in a rather broader framework. 1989 was also the time when Habermas wrote a substantial preface to the new German edition of *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, which contains a number of qualifications about the way he had made the argument in 1961 (Calhoun 1992). In his more recent work on legal and democratic theory, Habermas has returned to this theme, stressing the interplay between law and democratic politics and the relation of both of these to more informal processes of public discussion. Just as important as the formal relations between the legal and political institutions of the constitutional state are the quality and extent of public communication. The public sphere, he writes in *Between Facts and Norms* (1992), should not be seen as an institution or organization, but as ‘a network’ in which ‘flows of communication are filtered and synthesized in such a way that they condense into public opinions clustered according to themes’. In the modern world, these processes of communication are increasingly mediated, in both senses of the word: they take place both at a distance and increasingly via the mass media. In other words, rational discussion of public issues is not confined to face-to-face encounters in larger or smaller assemblies, taking place in real time. What this might mean in practice for a political theory of communicative democracy remains an issue that clearly requires further exploration.

His focus on law and democratic theory, in the large research project culminating in *Between Facts and Norms* (1992) is not so much a rethink as a clarification, that the communication action model did not after all intend to present all politics as an eternal academic seminar or an anarchist utopia. If there is a rethink here, it is perhaps his rather problematic shift from a largely critical take on juridification (Verrechtlichung) in *Theory of Communicative Action* to what many critics have seen as an uncritical approach to law.

Perhaps the most significant modification of Habermas’s approach might however be a text which is easily overlooked: a volume of essays published in 1996 called *The Inclusion of the Other*. Although *The Inclusion of the Other* does not go as far in the direction of a greater openness to difference as the title

perhaps suggests, it does however contain a discussion of group rights in multicultural societies. Here he responds, among other things, to critiques of the formalism of his model. In the preface to *The Inclusion of the Other* he stresses that he is defending

...a morality based on equal respect for everybody and on the universal solidarity and responsibility of each for all. Postmodern suspicion of an indiscriminately homogenizing universalism fails to grasp the meaning of this morality...a universalism that is highly sensitive to differences.

This volume, like *The Postnational Constellation*, marks Habermas's engagement with globalisation and European integration, which has become the major focus of his public interventions. Here, as I have described elsewhere, there is a growing undertone of pessimism alongside a bold defence of the European project. I should also mention a turn *not* taken. Despite his engagement with religious belief and a conception of the 'post-secular' which annoys both secularists like me and believers like Hans Joas, he has stressed that he has 'become old but not pious'.

Finally, I should confront the real question at issue: where is Habermas today? More sharply, has his project come to an end, not just in the sense that he is old enough to ease off (he announced that his most recent (twelfth) volume of collected political writings, *The Lure of Technocracy*, would probably be the last), but that perhaps there is anyway little more to add and that the project has run out of steam? It is certainly possible to argue that you don't need two big volumes to explicate the idea of communicative action, or 667 pages to trace the links between law and democracy, nor however many books and articles to explicate and defend the moral point of view. For my money, though, these remain stupendous achievements which bear comparison, *sub specie aeternitatis* (or at least from the perspective of someone now also enjoying retirement), with those of an earlier generation of 'young Hegelians'.

\* \* \*

Note: This paper draws on a contribution to a conference on 'Critique and Deconstruction' at the University of Sussex in July 1998, a review article 'Recog-

nation, Reification and (Dis)respect', *Economy and Society* 38, 2, May 2009, pp. 360-7, and on my Gillian Rose Memorial Lecture, 'Habermas Today', also at Sussex, in December 2014.

### Bibliography

- Adorno, T.W. (1951) *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Benhabib, Seyla (1980) *Critique, Norm and Utopia*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Benhabib, Seyla (1992) *Situating the Self. Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bernstein, J. M. (1995) *Recovering Ethical Life. Jürgen Habermas and the Future of Critical Theory*, London: Routledge.
- Bernstein, Jay (2001) *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, Cambridge University Press.
- Brunkhorst, H., Kreide, R., Lafont, C. (eds) (2009) *Habermas-Handbuch*. Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler.
- Calhoun, Craig (ed.) (1992) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press.
- Fraser, Nancy (1985) 'What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender', *New German Critique* No. 35, Special Issue on Jürgen Habermas (Spring - Summer), pp. 97-131.
- Fraser, Nancy and Honneth, Axel (2003) *Redistribution or Recognition: A Political-Philosophical Exchange*. London: Verso.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1989) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. trans. T. Burger, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen [1963] (1986) *Theory and Practice*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1974) 'Können komplexe Gesellschaften eine vernünftige Identität ausbilden?', in J. Habermas and D. Henrich, *Zwei Reden*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1984) *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume 1, translated by Thomas McCarthy, Boston: Beacon.



- Habermas, Jürgen (1987) *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume 2, translated by Thomas McCarthy, Boston: Beacon.
- Habermas, Jürgen [1992] (1996) *Between Facts and Norms*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1971) *Knowledge and Human Interests*, translated by Jeremy J. Shapiro, Boston: Beacon.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1976) *Legitimation Crisis*, translated by Thomas McCarthy, London: Heinemann.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1979) *Communication and the Evolution of Society*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1998) *The inclusion of the other: Studies in political theory*, ed. Ciaran Cronin and Pablo de Greif. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1986) *Autonomy and Solidarity*, ed. Peter Dews, London, Verso.
- Habermas, Jürgen (2001) *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Habermas, Jürgen (2009) *Europe: The Faltering Project*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen (2012) *The crisis of the European Union: A response*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hess, Andreas (2017) 'Jürgen Habermas: Our European Hegel?', *open democracy* 15.3.17. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/andreas-hess/j-rgen-habermas-our-european-hegel>
- Holmwood, J. (2009) 'From 1968 to 1951: How Habermas turned Marx into Parsons', in Gurminder K. Bhambra and Ipek Demir (eds) *1968 in Retrospect: History, Theory, Politics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Honneth, Axel [1985] (1992) *Critique of Power*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Honneth, Axel (1994) *The Struggle for Recognition*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Honneth, Axel [2000] (2007) *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Honneth, Axel [2005] (2008) *Reification. A New Look at an Old Idea*. With Commentaries by Judith Butler, Raymond Geuss and Jonathan Lear. Edited and Introduced by Martin Jay. The Berkeley Tanner Lectures 2005. New

- York: Oxford University Press.
- Honneth, Axel and Joas, Hans [1980] (1988) *Social Action and Human Nature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jay, Martin (1986) *Marxism and Totality. The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jay, Martin (2008) Introduction. In Honneth, *Reification* (pp. 3 – 13 ).
- Lubasz, H. (1977) ‘Marx’s Initial Problematic: The Problem of Poverty’, *Political Studies*, Vol. 24, pp. 24–42.
- Lukács, Georg [1921] (1971) *History and Class Consciousness*. London: Merlin.
- Lukács, Georg [1924] (1970) *Lenin*. London: NLB.
- McNay, Lois (2007) *Against Recognition*. Cambridge: Polity.
- McNay, Lois (2008) ‘The Trouble with Recognition: Subjectivity, Suffering, and Agency’, *Sociological Theory* 26: 3, Sept., pp. 271-295.
- Müller-Doohm, Stefan (2014) ‘Der innere Kompass. Das Intuitive als geistige Quelle bei Jürgen Habermas’, in *Gründungsszenen soziologischer Theorie*, ed. Sina Farzin and Henning Laux. (Wiesbaden: Springer), pp. 80-89.
- Müller-Doohm, Stefan [2014] (2016) *Habermas. A Biography*, tr. Daniel Steuer. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Müller-Doohm, Stefan (2017) ‘Member of a School or Exponent of a Paradigm? Jürgen Habermas and Critical Theory’, translated by William Outhwaite, *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol 20, Issue 2, pp. 252-274.
- Outhwaite, William (2012) *Critical Theory and Contemporary Europe*, New York, Continuum.
- Outhwaite, William (2014) ‘Kontinuitäten und Diskontinuitäten in Habermas’ Auseinandersetzung mit dem historischen Materialismus’ in Smail Rasic (ed), *Habermas und der historische Materialismus*. Freiburg: Karl Alber-Verlag pp. 37-45. Based on a contribution to a conference with the same title, Wuppertal University, March 2012. Revised English version on <http://theoryculturesociety.org/william-outhwaite-on-habermas-and-historical-materialism/>
- Osborne, Peter (1998) ‘Anniversary blues’, *Radical Philosophy* 89, May-June, pp. 52-54.
- Rasic, Smail (ed) (2014) *Habermas und der historische Materialismus*. Freiburg: Karl Alber-Verlag.

Rose, Gillian (1978) *The Melancholy Science, An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*. Basingstoke: Macmillan. New edn. London, Verso, 2014.

Rose, Gillian (1981) *Hegel contra Sociology*, London, Athlone Press.

Thompson, J. B., and Held, D. (eds) (1982) *Habermas: Critical Debates*, London, Macmillan.

Turner, Charles (2004) 'Jürgen Habermas: European or German?', *European Journal of Political Theory* 3, 3, pp. 293-314.

Wiggershaus, Rolf [1986] (1994) *The Frankfurt School*, Cambridge, Polity Press.



# Critical Theory and the Struggle for Recognition

*David Ingram*<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** I focus on the recent attempt by Habermas to provide a formal criterion for testing the legitimacy of group rights. Habermas argues that group-rights are legitimate only when they protect groups from discrimination by other groups. Group rights that aim to preserve groups against their own members, by contrast, are illegitimate. In my opinion, this way of drawing the distinction overlooks the link between anti-discrimination and preservation. Furthermore, I argue that preservation of a group identity can be legitimate so long as the group in question allows freedom of exit from the group.

Indigenous peoples and old-order religious sects are often praised as proponents of sustainable collectivist economies that respect nature and community against the rapaciousness of capitalism. These groups sought – and acquired – special rights to self-governance and exemptions regarding education, property, and business. These rights, however, also protect cultural patterns that sometimes reinforce conformity to the group and patriarchal hierarchy. Therefore, they seem problematic from the standpoint of a critical theory that esteems individual emancipation and social equality.

Yet critical theory's recent preoccupation with multicultural struggles for recognition suggests a different assessment of group rights. My goal in this paper is not to retrace the vast literature on this topic that has been generated by Honneth, Fraser, Benhabib, and other critical theorists.<sup>2</sup> Instead I shall focus on the recent

1 David Ingram is Professor of Philosophy at Loyola University of Chicago. He is the author *Habermas* (Cornell University, 2010); *Habermas and the Dialectic of Reason* (Yale University, 1987); *Critical Theory and Philosophy* (Paragon House, 1990) and editor of *Critical Theory: The Essential Readings* (Paragon House, 1991) and *From Critical Theory to Structuralism: Volume Five. The History of Continental Thought* (Acumen/Routledge, 2010). His most recent books are *World Crisis and Underdevelopment: A Critical Theory of Poverty, Agency, and Coercion* (Cambridge University, 2018) and *The Ethics of Global Development* (Routledge, 2018).

2 A. Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge, MA: 1996); A. Honneth and N. Fraser, *Redistribution or Recognition:*

attempt by Habermas to provide a formal criterion for testing the legitimacy of group rights. Habermas argues that group-rights are legitimate only when they protect groups from discrimination by other groups. Group rights that aim to preserve groups against their own members, by contrast, are illegitimate. In my opinion, this way of drawing the distinction overlooks the link between anti-discrimination and preservation. Furthermore, I argue that preservation of a group identity can be legitimate so long as the group in question allows freedom of exit from the group.

### I. Critical Theory's Ambivalence Toward Groups

One might ask, why should critical theorists take group rights seriously in the first place? Marx's emphasis on class struggle as an engine of historical progress led him to advocate for the rights of the proletariat against the rights of the bourgeoisie. If we allow that the motivation underlying this struggle stems from a feeling of indignation and insult on the part of the oppressed, then one might follow Honneth in describing this dialectic in Hegelian terms, as originating in a failure to achieve mutual recognition. But Marx did not understand it that way. According to Marx, recognition of the humanity of the proletariat – or rather, recognition that the proletariat's interests embody the interests of humanity – does not entail reciprocal recognition of the bourgeoisie and its interests. Indeed, Marx believed that a fully emancipated classless society would abolish the kinds of economic differences that underlie Hegel's struggle for recognition entirely.

What Hegel may have had in mind by the famous struggle for recognition between master and slave discussed in the Jena *Phenomenology* and Berlin *Encyclopedia*, as well as his references to recognition in his discussion of objective spirit in such places as the *Philosophy of Right*, is certainly debatable. Robert Pippin, for one, argues that Hegel introduced recognition to capture what can only be characterized as an essential, ontological category of free agency.<sup>3</sup> Free

---

*A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (London: Verso, 2003); S. Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1992); *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

3 R. Pippin, *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

agency requires that one be capable, in principle, of justifying one's actions to others by appeal to reasons they would recognize as good reasons. Recognition here functions as a medium for obtaining self-certainty, or intersubjective validation of what one has done and what one has made of oneself. Such a conception of other-facilitated self-determination and self-ownership is undoubtedly related to how persons identify themselves and their actions, and so is related to notions of personal and social identity. However, Pippin insists that this conception of "recognitive politics," or politics of mutual justification and accountability, is but thinly related – if at all – to the struggle for recognition that animates what Charles Taylor<sup>4</sup> and Axel Honneth have separately addressed under the headings of a "politics of recognition" or (simply) "identity politics," wherein members of discrete groups seek psychological fulfillment and others' esteem.

Without entering into the debate between Pippin and Honneth on Hegel's notion of recognitive politics,<sup>5</sup> it bears repeating that whatever analogies commentators have drawn between Hegel's struggle for recognition and class struggle are probably overwrought or, as we shall, misplaced. Unlike class struggle, the Hegelian struggle for recognition aims at recognizing individuality and difference; in the framework of those contemporary discussions of "identity politics" that have been developed by Honneth, Taylor, and others, recognitive politics aims at preserving groups whose members share a distinctive religious, ethnic, national, or racial identity. Although Marx's early reflections on the Jewish question show that he was acutely sensitive to the right of particular religious groups

---

4 C. Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in A. Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25-73.

5 For an attempt at mediating the difference between Pippin and his critics, see my "Recognition within the Limits of Reason," *Inquiry* (forthcoming). Habermas and Honneth also differ from Pippin in arguing that it was *only* in Hegel's early writings, viz., in the *System of Ethical Life* and *First Philosophy of Spirit* (1802-04), that Hegel developed a fully *dialogical* account of recognitive politics of the sort that they, along with Robert Brandom, have developed. For Habermas's contribution to this discussion regarding the development of Hegel's thought, see J. Habermas, "From Kant to Hegel and Back Again," in *Truth and Justification* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2003), pp. 190-202; "Equal Treatment of Cultures and the Limits of Postmodern Liberalism" in *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), esp. pp. 293-96; "Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic State" in *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* (Cambridge, MA: 1998), pp. 203-36.

to protect their identity against those who would demand their assimilation, such reflections hardly constitute an unqualified endorsement of a right to be recognized. For Marx, such recognition rights reflect the limited standpoint of liberalism – a strictly political form of emancipation that cannot be dissociated from the egoism of a civil society constituted by private property.

Here one might chide Marx for collapsing recognition rights into property rights, especially since his critique of abstract notions of formal equality and formal right, which he continued to develop in later years, displays a keen sensitivity to the irreducible individuality of persons and their needs. It is precisely this appreciation of individuality that later critical theorists appropriated in confronting the hegemonic conformism of a capitalist society composed of consumer monads. Most important for our purposes, their grasp of the psychological and sociological dynamics underlying processes of individuation led them to develop a highly ambivalent attitude toward groups and their identities. On the one hand, critical theorists increasingly came to see specific groups – religious groups and counter-cultural groups, to name just a few – as embodying forms of communal solidarity that aspire to a utopian reconciliation with nature and the other. On the other hand, the psychological dynamics underlying group solidarity struck them as regressive and conformist. To restate the problem dialectically, it seemed to them that the psychodynamics of group identity extinguished the very individuality that groups were supposed to foster, in contradistinction to the abstract “atomistic” individualism of mass society.

This same ambivalence towards group solidarity continues to haunt the work of second- and third-generation critical theorists. Habermas, Honneth, and Benhabib – just to name a few – by no means dismiss the importance of group membership for healthy individuation, autonomy, and solidarity. Following their thought, it is reason – specifically communicative reason – that prevents groups from solidifying to the point where they stifle the autonomy and individuality of their members.

But how congenial is critical rationality to the continued survival of a group bound together by an inherited – that is to say, involuntarily acquired – identity? Might not the rational demand to open one’s doors to all manner of belief and practice threaten to so radically transform a group’s identity that it no longer makes sense to say that it remains the same group after this critical encounter?



This is indeed one of the possibilities entertained by Habermas, but it cannot be one that, without further qualification, he endorses, and for two reasons: first, it returns us to the postmodernist idea that culture is simply an assortment of detachable goods that can be voluntarily chosen for this or that reason – as if these goods did not constitute one’s innermost identity. Second, it runs counter to the liberal right to associate and communicate freely with those with whom one agrees. The democratic right to self-determination entails a protective group right to non-interference that effectively entitles the majority of a group to close its doors to outsiders and to expel heretical insiders. More importantly, it sometimes entails the official granting of exemptions and privileges that protect the group from discriminatory treatment at the hands of society.

## **II. Habermas on Multiculturalism**

Unlike many Leftists, Habermas seems untroubled by the fact that identity politics has assumed greater prominence than class struggle in many parts of the world. I will not here explore the reasons why this is so except to note that his main concern in this as in most of his recent discussions about the interface of law and democratic politics is theoretical rather than practical. While many critical theorists are keen on deconstructing group identity or raising questions about the very concept of recognition, Habermas, like Rawls, is concerned about the reasonable limits of multicultural pluralism in liberal society. The question of limits must be raised because different ideological groups vie for political power, thereby potentially threatening the neutrality of the state which is so essential for guaranteeing an equal protection of liberty. Habermas and Rawls assume that most cultural groups agree in their reasonable acceptance of liberal values. They also assume that reasonable groups will not only tolerate each other but will offer each other ideologically neutral arguments when discussing basic rights and other constitutional essentials.

But how unequally can the state treat the various groups that make up civil society without ceasing to be neutral? <sup>6</sup> On one hand, people expect to be treated

---

6 Habermas notes one important difference between multicultural struggles over identity and recognition and feminist struggles of the same kind: “. . . from the point of view of members of the majority culture, the revised interpretation of the achieve-

the same way in virtue of their humanity. On the other hand, they expect to be treated differently in recognition of their particular cultural identity. Protecting the cultural identity of a particular group with special privileges and protections, however, contradicts the principle of equality. Indeed, the contradiction only deepens when the groups clamoring for special rights are themselves illiberal and undemocratic.

Habermas denies that group rights necessarily contradict liberal equality. He insists that affirmative action policies, bilingual education programs, and laws that exempt members of pacifist religions from military service are properly understood as protections against forms of discrimination. These policies aim at ensuring the *equal inclusion* of persons who have different needs. For Habermas, cultural groups are not self-acting agents that claim rights over and above the rights of their individual members (BNR: 302). Rather, they designate conditions of agency to which their individual members claim a legal right. This right, in turn, derives from an individually held right to be treated with self-respect (BNR: 300).

---

ments and interests of others does not necessarily alter their own role in the same way that the reinterpretation of the relations between the sexes alters the role of men" (IO: 211-12). This assumption can be questioned. Although multicultural struggles for recognition can take the form of an *identity-preserving* politics that aims to resist assimilation, it is hard to imagine how this kind of politics does not also *transform both* how the minority group understands its identity and how the majority group, in recognizing the distinctive identity of the minority, understands *its own* identity). For example, the "politically correct" acceptance of African-Americans' expression of "Black Pride" versus the *un*-politically correct expression of "White Pride" by European-descended persons has led to a questioning among whites regarding the meaning of their own "whiteness." Habermas's tendency to underestimate the extent to which multicultural struggles for recognition can be "transformative" of the dominant majority's understanding of its own identity may stem from his failure to adequately distinguish between different types of identity struggles (for example, he lumps together the struggle "of oppressed ethnic and cultural minorities"). Struggles for racial (and sometimes ethnic) recognition directly involve struggles against racism and its entrenched social hierarchies; struggles for cultural recognition (as in the case of French-speaking Quebecois) typically do not. The latter's assertion of their own right to self-determination need not affect in any deep way the self-understanding of English-speaking Canadians. For further examination of the complex issues surrounding race, ethnicity, and culture as it pertains to the question of whiteness as an identity, see chapter two of *Rights, Democracy, and Fulfillment*. I thank Drew Pierce for bringing these difficulties within Habermas's text to my attention.

However, because culture is necessary for constituting personal identity, it is not merely instrumental to the pursuit of personal preferences.<sup>7</sup> In Habermas's words,

The concept of a person acting instrumentally who selects from fixed options according to culturally shaped preferences fails to clarify the intrinsic meaning of culture for an individual's way of life . . . Against this background it makes sense to derive cultural rights directly from the principle of the inviolability of human dignity (Article I of the German Basic Law): the equal protection of the integrity of the person, to which all citizens have a claim, includes the guarantee of equal access to the patterns of communication, social relations, traditions, and relations of recognition that are required or desired for developing, reproducing, and renewing their personal identities (BNR: 295-6).

According to Habermas, the distinction between culture as an involuntary condition of agency and culture as an instrumental good, or resource, that can be voluntarily acquired marks out a distinctive niche for "identity politics" (or the "politics of recognition"). Siding with Fraser in her debate with Honneth,<sup>8</sup>

---

7 See W. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 34-48. For a critique of Kymlicka on the concept of a societal culture, see my *Group Rights* (loc. cit.), pp. 80ff.

8 See N. Fraser and A. Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (London: Verso, 2003). Honneth argues that the struggle for recognition provides a unitary normative framework capable of explaining the struggle for economic justice (redistribution). Fraser, by contrast, sees these struggles as analytically distinct (but empirically intertwined). In her opinion, recognition involves positively affirming another person's distinctive identity, while the redistribution aims at securing parity of resources or capabilities. Still others, such as Brian Barry, reduce struggles for recognition to struggles for redistribution (voluntary access to and choice for goods), so that the injustice committed against Sikhs when they are forced by mandatory motorcycle helmet laws to remove their turbans is simply a "restriction in their range of opportunities for choosing one or another religious committee." In Hegel, the category of recognition (as developed in the master-slave dialectic of the *Phenomenology*) is linked to non-domination. Despite Habermas's earlier acceptance of Honneth's reduction of all political struggles to a struggle for recognition (see chapter 3) his position is close to Fraser's; rather than classify mis-recognition (or lack of recognition) as a simple form of domination or economic oppression, he understands it as an exclusion from equal citizenship. See B. Barry, *Culture and Equal-*

he clearly distinguishes struggles for social justice that revolve around social status and oppression – the unequal distribution of goods and resources – from struggles for recognition that revolve around domination and unequal inclusion.

The discussion of “multiculturalism” calls for a more careful differentiation within the concept of civic equality. Discrimination or disrespect, nonpresence in the public arenas of society, or a collective lack of self-respect point to an incomplete and unequal inclusion of citizens who are denied full status as members of the political community. The principle of equality is violated in the dimension of membership, not in the dimension of social justice. The degree of inclusion concerns the horizontal relations among members of the political community, whereas the scope of the system of statuses concerns the vertical relations among citizens of a stratified society. Social strata are conditioned by patterns of distribution of social wealth . . . whatever counts as economic exploitation and social underprivilege . . . and whatever counts as deprivation. . . The inequality lies in the dimension of distributive justice, not in the dimension of the inclusion of members (BNR: 294).

Habermas follows this passage with an important qualification: questions of distributive justice and cultural recognition, he notes, “are almost always empirically intertwined.” Indeed, his own account of cultural rights tends to blur these two aspects of civic equality, as when he observes that “[collective rights] empower cultural groups to preserve and make available the resources on which their members draw in forming and stabilizing their personal identities” (BNR:297). Now, Habermas’s conflation of culture as instrumental resource and culture as condition of identity is not without significance. Habermas’s emphasis on culture as “involuntarily acquired” identity leads him to stress the preservative function of collective rights while his treatment of culture as resource leads him to privilege the rights of individuals to appropriate culture according to their preferences.

Let us examine more closely the weaker current in Habermas’s thinking about group rights. If the language community into which we are originally socialized

remains, for most of us, a permanent part of our identity, whether we will it so or not, then protecting and preserving that identity – extending it into the future – will obviously be very important to us. Rights that “grant the representatives of identity groups to organize and administer themselves” also enable them to “police” the identity of the group by limiting membership to those who accept that identity. The right to associate with like-minded persons permits members of a group to exclude outsiders who reject that identity. Indeed dissenters are viewed no differently than outsiders.

The right of the group to preserve and protect its identity is acknowledged by Habermas when he asserts that a group can legitimately restrict the freedom of its own members if it permits them full freedom *to exit the group*. Citing William Galston,<sup>9</sup> he observes that “realistic” conditions for exit must include the following provisions: First, members must have the freedom to inform themselves of alternative lifestyles; second, they must have the freedom to reflect on these lifestyles; third, they must not be coerced in their thinking by group-programming; and finally, they must not be denied skills that enable them to live outside the group should they choose to do so. (BNR: 303).

As we shall see, Habermas uses these conditions to argue against “strong” multicultural rights on the grounds that they “violate” the rights of individual members. However, it is important to note that in this context his insistence on exit conditions implicitly acknowledges the right of groups to protect and preserve their identity even when it is not liberal or democratic.<sup>10</sup>

Although Habermas does not discuss the deaf culture movement (DEAF), its demand for protective group rights exemplifies the problem of exit noted above. The use of cochlear implants in deaf children threatens the survival of sign language around which deaf culture is based. The smaller this community becomes

---

9 W. Galston, “Two Concepts of Liberalism,” *Ethics* 105 (1995), p. 533.

10 Like Rawls, Habermas holds that principles of justice apply only *indirectly* to private associations (Rawls, but not Habermas, would say that they apply indirectly to the family, as well). Private associations, however, must respect the basic human and civil rights of their individual members. The Catholic Church is a hierarchical organization that excludes women from the priesthood as a part of its dogma; but women are not officially treated or recognized as inferiors. Hence, the Catholic Church merits a group right to be tax exempt - unlike Bob Jones University, which was threatened with losing its tax exempt status because of its racist admissions policy (BNR: 298).

the less political clout it has to get the resources it needs for its members, many of whom cannot speak or understand oral language with facility. At the same time, denying deaf children cochlear implants violates the capacity and fitness conditions for exit stipulated above, since acquisition of an oral language must occur at an early age if deaf children are to have a good chance of learning it.

The example of Deaf Culture also illustrates four conflicts between individual and group rights that Habermas expressly highlights. Three of these conflicts involve violations of equal protection. These violations occur “(a) when different identity groups dispute each other’s rights and privileges, or (b) when, as is typically the case with multicultural claims, one group demands equal treatment with other groups, or (c) when, as in a complementary case, nonmembers see themselves as disadvantaged in relation to members of privileged groups (white people, for example, by quotas for nonwhites)” (BNR: 297). Taking Deaf Culture as our example, we observe these conflicts reflected in decisions concerning whether (a) scarce resources should be diverted to signers and other resources for the deaf, (b) Deaf Culture – which arises from a disability – defines a genuine cultural group that has a *pima facie* right to exist; or (c) affirmative action hiring quotas for deaf people don’t discriminate against the hearing.

However, it is the fourth conflict between individual and groups rights that worries Habermas. This conflict arises whenever “elites use their expanded organizational rights and competencies to stabilize the collective identity of groups, even if it entails violating the individual rights of dissenting members of the group” (ibid). This last case, Habermas believes, is fundamentally different from cases in which claims advanced by different cultural groups conflict with each another. In these latter cases, protecting groups from *external* threats by other groups can be justified because respecting others in their individuality can scarcely be accomplished without also respecting their cultural identities. Habermas therefore concludes that group rights that *make available* particular cultural resources – such as providing bilingual education, easing burdens of religious practice, and so on – are thus wholly in keeping with liberal demands for equal inclusion and may even be necessary to combat the spread of a mass-consumer, Americanized mono-culture (PC: 75).

But it is the fourth case – involving a group’s right to protect its identity against *internal* threats – specifically against individual non-conformists – that Habermas thinks is most problematic. In this connection Habermas expressly takes issue with a number of landmark legal decisions, ranging from the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision to allow Amish parents the right to remove their children from school upon completing eight years of formal education<sup>11</sup> and the Canadian Supreme Court’s decision to allow patriarchal tribal councils to function as the last court of appeal for processing women tribal members’ legal suits against gender discrimination<sup>12</sup> to Quebec’s language laws, which require that

---

11 Writing for the majority in *Wisconsin v. Yoder* (1972) Chief Justice Warren Burger upheld the right of the Amish to remove their children from public school after the eighth grade on the grounds that doing so was necessary to protect their way of life from “worldly influences.” Citing evidence showing that “Amish are quite effective and self-reliant citizens,” Burger denied that the state had a sufficiently compelling interest in educating Amish children beyond the 8<sup>th</sup> grade (age 14) that would warrant impeding the Amish in teaching their children skills of farming and domestic labor essential to their way of life. Writing for the minority, Justice William Douglas argued that removing children from public school at this age would “forever (bar them) from entry into the new and amazing world of diversity,” thereby stunting and deforming them. Although this dissent explicitly addresses the absence of conditions – specifically the absence of knowledge regarding alternative lifestyles and the absence of reflective capacities- that would enable Amish children to exit their religious community (despite their option to take a one-year hiatus from the community upon turning eighteen) – it does not address what – according to Nussbaum – is perhaps the most salient concern: the inequality in education received by Amish boys and girls. Whereas Amish boys learn skills, such as carpentry and farming, that are highly marketable in the outside world (thereby satisfying the fourth exit condition of “fitness”) Amish girls learn domestic skills that are much less so. Studies have also shown that the psychological pressures faced by Amish children – knowledge that they will be shunned and will lose their inheritance should they choose to leave the community – conspire with lack of knowledge about the outside world (they are denied access to televisions, radios, and most telephones) and their unusual style of behavior and language to discourage children from exercising their option (studies show that 75% of Amish children and 95% of Hutterite children remain in their communities after adulthood). Given these facts, Habermas’s assertion that the Supreme Court “accepts a violation of the civil rights of juveniles to basic education that would enable them to make their way in complex societies” (BNR: 299) is not entirely implausible, despite the fact that it ignores important gender differences that suggest that the rights in question are “diminished” (but perhaps not violated) in different degrees. See Nussbaum (2000), pp. 232-34 and Ingram (2004), pp. 193-94..

12 Habermas has in mind a number of cases cited by Kymlicka (loc. cit., p. 38ff) in

French-speaking parents and immigrants send their children to French-speaking schools. According to Habermas, in these instances *preservation* of cultural identity was allowed to trump the rights of (a) children to an education that would have enabled them to competently function outside of Amish society, (b) women to non-discriminatory treatment, and (c) parents to choose whether their children go to non-French-speaking schools (BNR: 299ff).

With the sole exception of tribal rights – which Habermas treats as morally justifiable “reparations” for past violations of sovereignty that sometimes permit “illiberal” forms of patriarchal authority and collective property that are “alien” to the egalitarian and individualistic premises of liberal constitutional law<sup>13</sup> –

---

which patriarchal tribal councils denied women (but not men) who married outside the tribe the right to have their children included as members of the community in full standing. Another case not mentioned by Habermas involves Evangelical Christians who were denied access to their tribal threshing implements for refusing to participate in tribal religious ceremonies. In *Santa Clara Pueblo v. Martinez* (1978) the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of the patriarchal council’s decisions regarding patrilineal descent on the grounds that doing so “conformed” to the tribe’s tradition. In the latter case the Court ruled in favor of the Evangelicals. For further discussion of these and other cases involving Indian tribes, see Ingram (2000), ch. 5.

- 13 According to Habermas, states such as the United States, Canada, and Australia are “morally compelled” – out of “equal respect for all” – to “rectify the historical injustice to indigenous peoples who were integrated, forcibly subjugated, and subjected to centuries of discrimination” by conceding “broad autonomy to maintain or restore specific forms of traditional authority and collective property, even though in individual cases these conflict with the egalitarian principle and individualistic character of ‘equal rights for all.’ The result (see note 26) is that “an ‘illiberal’ social group is allowed to operate a legal system of its own within the liberal state” which “leads to irresolvable contradictions” (BNR: 304). In contrast to this interpretation – which holds that the conflict in question “is reflected in law but does not emerge from it” since, ostensibly the episodes of subjugation and integration “predate the legal system” (BNR: 305) – one might argue that the conflict in question does indeed stem from the liberal legal system “colonizing” the indigenous community from the very beginning. The history of incorporating tribal peoples into the dominant liberal legal system occurred over a period of one hundred and fifty years in which tribal peoples first “lost” their treaty status as full-fledged sovereign nations, then lost their distinctive cultural identity, including their communal ownership of tribal property (replaced by individually owned plots of land), and then lost their status as aboriginals, having gained the rights of citizenship. Although the process of forced assimilation did not result in dissolving all reservations – tribal governments were often created and maintained by the government in order to justify its control over the extraction of mineral wealth – it did result in the eventual subsumption of indigenous peoples’ tribal rights under the basic rights guaranteed by



non of these efforts to preserve a cultural group identity appears justified. More precisely, they all threaten the kinds of individual rights that discourse theory of law regards as most basic, namely rights to free and open communication. Any law that grants a group the right to resist changes in its identity by shielding the culture and language of its individual members from “contamination” by other cultures and languages seems to constrain the very communication by which persons, from adolescence on, undertake to voluntarily shape their identities in relations of free and undistorted mutual understanding. Responding to Charles Taylor’s defense of Quebec’s language laws, Habermas writes that:<sup>14</sup>

[T]he protection of forms of life and traditions in which identities are formed is supposed to foster the recognition of their members; it does not represent a kind of preservation of species by administrative means . . . . The constitutional state can make this hermeneutical achievement of the cultural reproduction of worlds possible, but it cannot guarantee it. For to guarantee survival would necessarily rob the members of the freedom to say yes or no, which nowadays is crucial if they are to remain able to appropriate and preserve their cultural heritage. When a culture has become reflexive, the only traditions and forms of life that can sustain themselves are those that bind their members, while at the same time allowing members to subject the

---

the federal constitution (in the United States this happened in 1968, in Canada it happened in 1982). Tribal law, then, cannot contradict basic individual rights. Contrary to Habermas’s interpretation (BNR: 305), the relationship between the federal government and semi-sovereign tribal governments seems more analogous to the relationship between the federal government and other private associations (including the family). That is to say, liberal principles apply indirectly to these associations, which have a right to limited self-determination – and therewith the freedom to adopt illiberal forms of governance and collective property – so long as they do not violate basic rights and permit dissidents a right to exit. For more on this, see Ingram (2000), chapter five.

- 14 C. Taylor, et. al. *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). According to Taylor, “one has to distinguish the fundamental liberties, those that should never be infringed and therefore ought to be unassailably entrenched, on one hand, from privileges and immunities [i.e., the right of francophone and immigrant Quebecers to send their children to English-speaking schools – D. I.] that are important, but that can be revoked or restricted for reasons of public policy – although one would need a strong reason to do this – on the other” (59).

traditions to critical examination and leaving later generations the option of learning from other traditions or converting and setting for other shores (IO: 222).

Quebec's language laws, Habermas fears, are designed to guarantee the preservation of Quebecois Francophone culture by denying parents the basic communicative freedom to say "no" to a particular kind of education (and therewith a particular kind of identity) for their children (BNR: 300). If we assume that parents ought to have a right to determine what cultural identity their children will initially acquire, so long as doing so doesn't deprive their children of the knowledge, critical aptitude, and psychological capacity that might enable them to later exit that cultural identity, then Quebec's laws must be deemed illegitimate.

The idea that parents shouldn't have this right against the community appears to rest on a deeply flawed analogy between cultural identity and species identity. It might be argued that cross-cultural "contamination" - either through cross-cultural marriage or cross-cultural exposure of some other kind - "dilutes" and thereby "weakens" the identity of a culture as much as cross-breeding "weakens" the genetic identity of a species. But any weakening of a form of life is bad for it and - given the value of diversity for the eco-system as a whole - bad for all of us. So cultural preservation - like species preservation - constitutes an overriding value that permits the dominant majority in a cultural group to limit the extent to which the group's members communicate with other groups.

Leaving aside the "preservationists" questionable assumption that cross-fertilization "weakens" rather than "strengthens" life forms and that the good of cultural preservation entitles groups to preserve their identity by whatever means, the very idea that cultural identities are self-contained and static - cut off from communication with other cultural forms of life - is deeply mistaken. As Taylor himself points out, members of any cultural group need recognition not only from their fellow members but also from members of other cultural groups. They need to know that their particular cultural identity is respected if not fully affirmed by others. More pertinent to our present concerns, Habermas argues that "the guarantee of the internal latitude necessary to assimilate a tradi-

tion under conditions of dissent is decisive for the survival of cultural groups.” To be precise, “a dogmatically protected culture will not be able to reproduce itself, especially not in a social environment replete with alternatives” (BNR: 303). Thus it is only by being freely interpreted – in dialog with other cultures – that a culture can be adapted to ever new and changing circumstances; and it is only through change in the face of new cultural challenges that a given culture’s practitioners relate to their own culture (and their own identity) with a degree of certainty.

### **III. Concluding Remarks**

To conclude, Habermas’s understanding of group rights seems ambivalent. On one hand, the right to free association justifies the right of a majority to “support the continued existence of the cultural background of the collectivity directly” and this need not always happen “above the heads of its members” in a way that “would promote internal repression” (BNR: 301). Even if we agree with Habermas and Brian Barry that, ontologically speaking, “cultures are simply not the kind of entity to which rights can properly be ascribed,” we can scarcely deny that “communities defined by some shared cultural characteristics (for example, a language) may under certain circumstances have valid claims . . . that arise from the legitimate interests of the members of the group”<sup>15</sup> (ibid). Perhaps it was this – wholly legitimate – democratic decision by the people of Quebec – and not, as Habermas contends, the postulation of Quebecois Francophone culture as an “intrinsic value” grounded in a “metaphysics of the good [that exists] independently of citizens . . . maintaining their personal identity” (BNR: 301) - that led them to want to preserve equal access to their provincial Francophone culture against the hegemonic incursion of the national Anglophone culture. These interests would have included maintaining a common political language against the threat of fragmentation, as well as protecting mono-lingual French speakers from potential discrimination in the workplace and in accessing public accommodations. Furthermore, the four “exit” conditions mentioned by Habermas would have been available to French-speaking and immigrant parents

---

15 Barry (2002), p. 67.

who preferred to leave Quebec or provide special tutoring so that their children would be assured of an Anglophone up-bringing.

On the other hand, Habermas's concern to preserve the open communication so essential to free and undistorted identity-formation leads him to embrace a very different kind of identity politics: not the identity politics that is oriented toward protecting access to cultural resources intrinsic to a group's already (largely involuntary) linguistic identity, but an identity politics of postmodern transformation and destabilization. As he puts it, "the aim of multiculturalism - the mutual recognition of all members as equals - calls for a transformation of interpersonal relations via communicative action and discourse that can ultimately be achieved only through debates over identity politics within the democratic arena" (BNR: 293). This identity politics has little to do with protecting, for instance, the group privilege enjoyed by Sikhs to be exempt from motorcycle helmet laws - a protective privilege designed to ensure equal religious freedom - but it has everything to do with changing the way Sikhs and non-Sikhs understand their own identities. Again, the awakening of "Black Pride" among African Americans and "sisterhood" among women in their struggle for recognition not only transformed how these misrecognized groups understood their own identities and needs, it also transformed how white people and men understood *their* own identities and needs.

In the end, Habermas is concerned that a politics of ensuring "equal access to cultural resources for any citizen who needs them to develop and maintain her personal identity" has already logically committed itself to a "politics of survival" in which the state undertakes to "ensure [the availability of these resources] in the future" (BNR: 300). However, the politics of cultural transformation which he offers as an alternative comes too close to abandoning the multicultural politics of equal recognition and equal protection that he himself regards as indispensable for maintaining a vibrant pluralistic society. Indeed, his criterion for a group's legitimacy - namely that it pass the critical threshold "of the autonomous endorsement of every single potential participant" (BNR: 302) - seems to retract the very thing that legitimates group rights in the first place, namely, that the cultural resources that such rights are supposed to protect are not voluntarily acquired and redistributed at will by individual members seeking to satisfy their own prefer-

ences, but are constitutive of identity, having been acquired involuntarily through socialization.

Finally, Habermas's distinction between legitimate "enabling rights" and illegitimate "protective rights" is impossible to maintain in practice. Habermas himself observes that "this distinction ceases to be useful when the same collective rights simultaneously serve both functions, as in the Amish case" (BNR: 299). But the point is not that collective rights sometimes serve both functions. The point is that internal dissenters are invariably regarded as external threats to group identity. It would therefore appear that what is most problematic is not that groups try to preserve themselves by policing their internal identities democratically but that they do so in a manner that fails to adequately respect their members' basic right to exit.<sup>16</sup>

---

16 The conditions for exercising this right robustly cannot always be met – as can be seen in the case of women who live in patriarchal religious communities and Evangelicals who live on tribal reservations. In some cases, exit strategies, even when formally available, may not be optimal for those who might take advantage of them. In these cases principles of self-determination and individual freedom may both have to be compromised in order to reach an equitable resolution. Indeed, there remains one striking case in which the conditions for exit are always problematic: persons who want to emigrate from their native community due to cultural persecution depend upon the hospitality of others to allow them to immigrate into their community under terms that are often uncertain.



## Critical Theory American Style: C. Wright Mills and the Tradition

For Stanley Aronowitz

*Stephen Eric Bronner*<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Critical theory is experiencing a crisis of character, with many of today's exponents retreating to metaphysical speculation over political commitment. This article attempts to recover the original emancipatory spirit of the Frankfurt School by examining the works of C. Wright Mills. Mills himself was not associated with the School. Nevertheless, this American thinker squarely took on the questions of power, alienation and reification, cultural hegemony, subjectivity, and the responsibility of intellectuals. His analyses thus provide valuable insights into the critical project for our time as well as the future.

When Max Horkheimer became Director of the Institute for Social Research in 1930, his inaugural speech highlighted the need for an interdisciplinary project that would link empirical research with normative ideals. His aim was the formation of a critical social theory. But critical theory has increasingly lost its social character. The critical enterprise has become enmeshed in metaphysics, textual exegesis, and an insular form of aesthetic-philosophical self-reflection. Its political character has been compromised along with its ability to interrogate core themes in concrete terms. Critical theory has lost its critical edge and much of its transformative commitment. Under such circumstances, it is becoming ever more apparent that C. Wright Mills might have something to

---

1 Stephen Eric Bronner is Board of Governors Distinguished Professor of Political Science and Director of Global Relations at the Center for the Study of Genocide and Human Rights at Rutgers University. He is the author of more than a dozen works, including *The Bigot: Why Prejudice Exists* (Yale University Press) and *The Bitter Taste of Hope: Ideals, Ideologies, and Interests in the Age of Obama* (SUNY Press). His *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press) and *Of Critical Theory and Its Theorists* (Routledge), both in 2nd editions, are generally considered standard works.

offer a new generation concerned with the legacy of the Frankfurt School.<sup>2</sup>

There is something ironic about this. Mills is a quintessential American intellectual. His major works stand squarely in the tradition of W. E. B. DuBois' *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), Thorsten Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1921), and Charles Beard's *The Economic Basis of Politics* (1922). Paul Sweezy considered Mills "the voice of an authentic American radicalism." But H.H. Gerth, who served as his mentor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and co-edited the fabulously successful selected writings of Max Weber (*From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (1946)) with him, put Mills in touch with most of the principal representatives of European social theory. Whether he explicitly cited them or not, there is a clear affinity between his ideas and those of major figures of the critical tradition like Siegfried Kracauer, Emil Lederer, and Franz Neumann. Mills also shared a number of preoccupations with Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse. Mills' materialism has a critical cast. In *The Marxists* (1962), he shows familiarity with important figures in the tradition and favors "plain Marxists" like Georg Lukács who highlighted the primacy of the critical method and a historical approach. Intellectual justification thus exists for viewing Mills' work as a source for reinvigorating critical theory with respect to certain of its core themes: the question of power, alienation and reification, cultural hegemony, subjectivity, and the responsibility of intellectuals.

*Power: With Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), it has become common wisdom that modernity is ever more surely generating a "totally administered society" in which ideological distinctions have been subverted and politics is no longer the dominant form of resistance. Lacking in the critical theory of society is a theory of power or, more precisely, the imbalance of power and the ability to identify the sources for those decisions that shape our world. Well known is the way in which critical theory no longer has a place for radical agency on the part of the proletariat. Less often considered, however, is the way in which it also no longer has a place for the capitalist class. What exists now is a kind of meta-the-

---

2 For an interesting take on the potential contribution of C.W. Mills, which highlights the outlook of the New Left, see Ben Agger, *Critical Social Theories: An Introduction* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2006).



ory in which power is exercised by the bureaucracy while the culture industry is seen as undermining the possibility of generating any radical alternative to the status quo. The present view is incapable of engaging in what Karl Korsch termed “historical specificity” with respect to the sources for those decisions that shape our world. In this respect, quite obviously, Mills has something to offer. Like the Frankfurt School, Mills believed that the illiberal trends that crystallized in the totalitarian regimes of the 1930s would reach into the future. But Mills also insisted that unaccountable power becomes concrete in the decisions made about the arrangements of society and the events of history. Social arrangements may “change without benefit of explicit decision. But in so far as such decisions are made, the problem of who is involved in making them is the basic problem of power. In so far as they could be made but are not, the problem becomes who fails to make them”—and, one might add, “why?”<sup>3</sup>

Mills is not concerned with power as an artificial social construct or a linguistic device. He distinguishes legitimate and illegitimate forms of authority from one another along with coercion from manipulation.<sup>4</sup> Important is rather his willingness to privilege the concept of a “power elite” as against a concept of the “ruling class.” His decision has given rise to much debate. Ultimately, however, what is decisive revolves around whether the power elite can be grounded in a theory of exploitation. This is not simply a matter of theoretical interest. It has practical implications. Only by making reference to a theory of exploitation is it possible to show that the exercise of power by the elite occurs at the expense of the disempowered.<sup>5</sup>

*Alienation:* Disempowerment is the function of bureaucratic rationality that has essentially subverted ideological distinctions between systems and turned the preservation of subjectivity into the dominant motif for a critical theory. But this, once again, leaves an indeterminate understanding of the phenomenon—and it produces a situation akin to Hegel’s “night in which all cows are black.”

---

3 C. Wright Mills, “The Structure of Power in American Society” *The British Journal of Sociology* Vol. 9, No. 1 (March, 1958), pg. 29.

4 Frank W. Elwell, “The Sociology of C. Wright Mills,” in *Macrosociology: Four Modern Theorists* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2006), pg. 8.

5 Clyde W. Barrow, “Plain Marxists, Sophisticated Marxists, and C. Wright Mills’ *The Power Elite*,” *Science and Society* Vol. 71, No.4 (October, 2007), pgs. 400ff.

Mills is less concerned with the extension of bureaucracy than the concentration of power in economic, political, and military institutions. Other institutions become increasingly secondary. The labor movement, whose degeneration was prefigured in *The New Men of Labor* (1948), is essentially excluded from decision-making and thus basically “reactive.” *White Collar* (1951), meanwhile, notes that the old middle class has been transformed into salaried professionals, and that these middle level managers are capable of asserting their interests only at the middle levels of power. *The Power Elite* (1956) suggests that the single “independent variable” lies in the relatively interchangeable leaders of the economic, political, and military sectors of society. These sectors retain a degree of autonomy—they do not fuse into a class. Which of them takes precedence in decision-making depends upon the particular decision under investigation. But it is striking how the economic, political, and military advances of the power elite at the expense of the disempowered generally occur in tandem. Greater privatization of the economy and an upward shift in wealth have political and institutional consequences, namely, the constriction of civil liberties, increasing power of the executive, and an emboldened use of military power.<sup>6</sup>

Alternatives exist. But they disappear if the system is stripped of its mediations or if society is simply seen as one-dimensional or totally administered. Hegel understood that, ultimately, “truth is concrete.” Mills would have surely agreed. The alienated society evidences institutional possibilities that are of greater or less service to the exploited and the disenfranchised. Power produces different “opportunities by those who occupy the command posts. Once such opportunities are recognized, men may avail themselves of them.”<sup>7</sup> The crucial political point for Mills is that the power elite is not “invisible”—shrouded in reified categories that preclude alternatives—but rather visible in how it operates. The response to it must prove visible as well.

*Cultural Hegemony:* Among the great contributions made by the Frankfurt School was its notion of the “culture industry.” The idea was simple enough:

---

6 Mills’ warnings about the growing power of the military are still salient. It was somewhat shortsighted to argue that Mills overestimated the use of military power in the post-Vietnam era. Cf. Alan Wolfe, “The Power Elite Now,” *The American Prospect* (May-June, 1999).

7 Mills, “The Structure of Power in American Society,” pg. 34

cultural works would now be treated like any other commodity. The culture industry maximizes profits by seeking the lowest common denominator and the largest public for its products. Aesthetic experience becomes standardized and genuine subjectivity is imperiled. An inevitable loss of cultural standards—or what Russell Jacoby once termed a “falling rate of intelligence”—takes place. Popularity assumes the integration of the work by the status quo. Its critical value and its ability to project an emancipated alternative supposedly diminish. “Mass enlightenment” of *whatever political persuasion* is thus little more than “mass deception.” Apathy and a “happy consciousness” tend to thrive. As for resistance to the existing order, it becomes identified with technically complex arts capable of eliciting repressed experiences of subjectivity against the commercialized products of mass culture.

Mills helps disentangle this discussion. There is little doubt that the culture industry has produced great works of art, whether one is discussing jazz, film, literature or even television. Mills clearly understands the connection between the “cultural apparatus” and support for the prevalent ideas of the existing order. His concern is less with the status of art, which is perhaps the weakest element of the culture industry argument, than with the erosion of the public sphere, apathy, and the inability to generate a genuine debate. His approach anticipates the work of Herbert Schiller, Ed Hermann, Noam Chomsky, and Michael Parenti. But more is involved than simply the mechanical fabrication of consent by the disempowered. Mills’ argument fits into a broader understanding of cultural hegemony and counter-hegemony. His views on the cultural apparatus, which was to be the basis for a book cut short by his untimely death,<sup>8</sup> called upon cultural workers to take back—or employ for progressive purposes—the apparatus that is alienated from them. What he specifically meant by this remains somewhat unclear. But there is little doubt that Mills sought to make the cultural apparatus a tool for the New Left. This is significant if only because the New Left was the first mass movement that, for better or worse, as E.P. Thompson noted, placed cultural transformation at the forefront of its politics. Mills’ concern was clearly

---

8 Note the fine discussion by Daniel Geary, “Becoming International Again: C. Wright Mills and the Emergence of a Global New Left, 1956-1962” *The Journal of American History* (December, 2008), pgs. 710ff.

less with the integrative power of the culture industry than with its ability to shape political solidarity and consciousness regarding the political issues of the day. His outlook anticipates the more radical contemporary understandings of alternative media and the role of new intellectuals capable of employing new technologies in new ways.

*Intellectuals:* Critical theory has become popularly identified with resistance to the totally administered society and its culture industry by an insular intellectual elite. Resistance occurs in the metaphysical realm whether through aesthetic or philosophical means. Emphasis is placed upon technically advanced artistic works that contest cultural commercialization and the “standardization of experience” (T.W. Adorno) or the ability to facilitate a utopian “longing for the totally other” (Max Horkheimer). Whether through aesthetics or philosophy, the aim is to secure the “non-identity” of subject and object or, more colloquially, the identification of the individual and society. There is a deeply bohemian quality to this. Institutional politics and the willingness to offer positive proposals for mitigating exploitation and oppression have fallen by the wayside. Critical intellectuals are no longer defined by their attempts to foster solidarity or influence mass movements. Gramsci’s “organic intellectual” is considered a thing of the past, reminiscent of a time when the proletariat was still an agent of revolution, while Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm have lost the enormous popularity they once enjoyed. Critical theory now calls upon its intellectuals to foster reflection on the ontology of false conditions in the name of the subjectivity it represses.

Mills has a different take on the intellectual.<sup>9</sup> He embraced the post-war ethos of “engagement” that emerged with Sartre and the existentialists in France, Gunter Grass and “group 47,” and other circles in other European nations. Mills, too, called upon intellectuals to participate in the political conflicts of their times. Despite his personal style, however, he was not a bohemian, and he was certainly not an artist. Mills was a social scientist, and he called upon other social scientists to concentrate on the concerns of ordinary people. It is ultimately mistaken

---

9 Note the fine intellectual biography by Stanley Aronowitz, *Taking it Big: C. Wright Mills and the Making of Political Intellectuals* (New York: Columbia University, 2012).

to suggest that Mills' thinking is pessimistic.<sup>10</sup> He assumes that intellectuals can provide insights and agency in an increasingly rationalized world.<sup>11</sup>

Mills was often misguided in the positions he took. He never really saw that insofar as the working class loses its status as a radical threat, the power elite will exhibit divisions in its ranks that allow for other progressive actors to intervene. Seeking an independent socialist force in the world, like Sartre and others, he romanticized the anti-colonial movements of his time in general and, in *Listen Yankee!* (1960), the Cuban revolution in particular. He mistakenly valorized Cuba and the third world revolutions. Mills embraced the idea of an independent socialist party in the United States, yet he underestimated the impact of new social movements, including the Civil Rights Movement. Mills was prescient in calling upon progressives to abandon the "labor metaphysic" that thrived well into the 1960s. But his sensibilities were still probably more directed to the "old" than the "new" left. Echoing *The Communist Manifesto*, and with an eye on Lenin, he believed that part of the ruling class would need to break off and join the oppressed. He also called upon the left, once again, to become international; it was a concern that would have particular resonance in the United States.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, there is a profound way in which the ethos of the New Left can be traced to Mills' writings.<sup>13</sup>

His view of the power elite and the military-industrial complex is ultimately based on populist assumptions. But it also evinces the democratic self-understanding of the New Left. Mills took the lead in confronting not only American pluralism with its validation of apathy but also the "end of ideology" arguments forwarded by Daniel Bell. In his famous "Letter to the New Left," moreover, Mills viewed young radical intellectuals as "real live agencies of social change."

---

10 Barbara H. Chasin, "C. Wright Mills, Pessimistic Radical," *Sociological Inquiry* Vol. 60, No. 4 (November, 1990).

11 Ira Katznelson, "The Professional Scholar as Public Intellectual: Reflections Prompted by Karl Mannheim, Robert K. Merton, and C. Wright Mills" in *The Public Intellectual: Between Philosophy and Politics* eds. Arthur Melzer et. al (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), pgs. 189-200.

12 Geary, "Becoming International Again," pgs. 710ff.

13 Michael Burawoy, "Open Letter to C. Wright Mills," *Antipode* Vo. 40, No. 3 (2008), pgs. 365ff.

Rather than concentrate upon the non-identity of subject and object, or the longing for the totally other, Mills called upon critical intellectuals to counteract the kind of ontological anxiety experienced by everyday people that occurs when they are faced with issues they do not understand and structural forces over which they lack all control. It is under these conditions that ordinary people withdraw into apathy or anxiety.<sup>14</sup> Critical intellectuals in general and critical social scientists in particular are seen as resisting domination and highlighting subjectivity in practical terms when they turn “private troubles into public issues.” Each of the new social movements took up this idea that Mills first articulated in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959): note, for example, the way in which the women’s liberation movement brought issues of incest and spousal abuse out of the closet or the emphasis on “hate crime” legislation. Here, indeed, Mills offers a standpoint that can help invigorate the transformative commitment that had originally played such a strong role in critical theory.

*Concluding Remarks:* Mills mirrored the original concern of the Frankfurt School: posing an alternative to metaphysical and rigidly systemic forms of “grand theory” no less than vulgar forms of materialism that (echoing Hegel) he termed “abstracted empiricism.” But Mills also offered a far more concrete understanding of subjectivity than the most famous representatives of the Frankfurt School. He saw the individual as inherently tainted by society rather than somehow juxtaposed against instrumental rationality or the existing system of domination. There is no pure and autonomous experience of subjectivity or “lifeworld” that is to be rescued. Rather, it is moral values and motivations that require transformation from within a new linguistic frame of reference. Mills’ ideas in this regard build upon Erich Fromm’s belief in the interpenetration social life and psychological attitudes that congeal in the “market character” of individuals living under capitalism and the “objective neuroses” (Sartre) that it brings in its wake. These socially induced roles and attitudes were what the critical intellectual would need to confront and perhaps redefine. Stanley Aronowitz was correct in praising Mills for being a “phrasemaker,” and here, again, the Frankfurt School has something to learn from him. Mills employed Aesopian

---

14 John D. Brewer, “Imagining *The Sociological Imagination* The Biographical Context of a Sociological Classic,” *The British Journal of Sociology* (Volume 55, Issue 3, 2004), pgs. 317ff.

language in a popular rather than an esoteric way to provide everyday people with a critical orientation to the alienated world of the “happy robot” and the dominance of “crackpot realism” in foreign affairs. Mills knew that “a thinker’s social and political ‘rationale’ is exhibited in his choice and use of words [and that] vocabularies socially canalize thought.”<sup>15</sup> The point for the critical intellectual is to uncover the “vocabularies of motivation,”<sup>16</sup> and expose the interests embedded within everyday events, so that everyday people might judge them—and respond. The same assumption runs through all of Mills’ work. As always, he stated it clearly and simply: “I am a political man. No one is outside society; the question is where you stand within it.”<sup>17</sup>

---

15 C.Wright Mills, “Language, Logic, and Culture” in *The American Sociological Review* Vol. 4, No. 5 (1939), pg. 678

16 C. Wright Mills, “Situated Actions and Vocularies of Motive” in *The American Sociological Review* Vol. No.1 (1940) 5: 904-13

17 C.Wright Mills, “Comment on Criticism” in *C.Wright Mills and the Power Elite* eds. G. William Domhoff and Hoyt C. Ballard (Boston: Beacon press, 1968), pg. 242.





## **Baudrillard and the Semiotic Aspect of the Culture Industry**

*Amirhosein Khandizaji*

**Abstract:** The culture industry, one of the main theories of the Frankfurt School, was neglected in the latter's second and third generations. This neglect happened while the culture industry began to work with a different mechanism from that described by Adorno and Horkheimer. People in our age can not only access the media but also respond to the messages they receive. Therefore, the main question is why the majorities, even after accessing their own media, are still following the values of the capitalist system? To answer this question I refer to Jean Baudrillard's discussions in his early works. By using his theories, I argue that the culture industry in our age is largely continuing its domination by controlling the semiotic system. As a result, as long as the majorities are following the dominant semiotic system even if they access the media, it is hard to expect a fundamental change in their condition.

### **Introduction**

The Frankfurt School mainly followed the tradition of Western Marxism to explain the failure of revolutionary movements in Europe. Therefore, in contrast to orthodox Marxists, who usually emphasize the material and economic aspects of capitalist society and believe that the capitalist system will inevitably collapse by a proletarian revolution, the Frankfurt School theorists emphasize the cultural and intellectual factors which prevent the masses from reaching class consciousness. Thus, studying the problem of cultural domination and distortion of consciousness was one of the main projects of the Frankfurt School. This means that the essence of the Frankfurt School is tied to the issue of cultural domination. But one of the major tools by which the capitalist system creates this domination and distortion of consciousness is the culture industry. So, it can be argued that the theory of the culture industry has a close affinity with the essence of the Frankfurt School. Since the problem is the cultural domi-

nation which prevents class consciousness, the theory of the culture industry that explains this kind of domination, is essential to the Frankfurt School's project.

The culture industry refers to the industrialization of culture. Culture is supposed to be created by people during their natural way of living. But a big part of the culture in the capitalist system is – consciously and purposefully – produced and controlled by dominant classes to secure their interests in society. It is just like an industry in which a particular product is produced in such a way as to make a maximum benefit for the producer. In such a system in which a big part of the culture is produced and controlled by the capitalist system, culture may lose its natural attachment with people. “In this regard, the culture industry is fundamentally subordinate to the demands of industry and government; culture must assume its place within a pre-established technological order of things”<sup>1</sup>. Since people's behaviors are usually directed by their beliefs and views, it might be possible to control them by manipulating their beliefs and views. Therefore, in a capitalist society, modes of thinking, ideals, values, life purposes, lifestyles, and even aesthetic criteria must be manipulated in order to ensure maximum profits and security for the capitalist system. According to the Frankfurt School, the culture industry by using tools like media prevents people from a true understanding of their condition. Besides, the culture industry, by standardizing people's beliefs and values, tries to weaken the possibility of different or independent thinking or acting. In order to reach this goal, the products of the culture industry must also be standardized. As a result, as Adorno and Horkheimer say, “culture today is infecting everything with sameness. Film, radio, and magazine form a system. Each branch of culture is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together”<sup>2</sup>. According to Adorno, in the capitalist system even art, which is supposed to be a tool for emancipation, can turn into a tool for domination. As a result, Adorno recognizes two kinds of art. The first one is high art which follows the ultimate ideal and purpose of culture which is the permanent objection to the existing condition. The second one is popular art which is pro-

---

1 Paul A. Taylor and Jan LI Harris, *Critical Theories of Mass Media: Then and Now* (New York: Open University Press, 2008), p. 69.

2 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment, Philosophical Fragments*. edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, translated by Edmund Jephcott (California: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 94.

duced by the culture industry as a commodity for sale in the market to ensure the interests of the capitalist system. In other words, whereas high art is willing to recognize and criticize the defects and injustices in society and to preserve subjectivity, the task of popular art is to ensure the domination and survival of the capitalist system. Besides, while high art is creative and unpredictable, popular art is repetitive and predictable. Adorno has the same view about music. According to him, serious music reveals and criticizes the problems and defects of society. The task of serious music is to create a better understanding of social conditions for people. But capitalist society produces a popular music that is a commercial commodity for sale in the market<sup>3</sup>.

Another tool of the culture industry, according to Adorno, is astrology. Astrology attaches our destiny to the stars. According to astrology's logic, all economic, cultural, social, and political phenomena in our world are controlled by rules of stars. As a result, what a person should do is to be aware of these rules and act according to them. The fortunate people are those who listen and follow what the astrologist tells them. In this way, astrology may lead to distortion of consciousness, and deprive people of understanding their real condition; secondly, it can take a person's subjectivity away. In other words, when everything is up to the stars, the only thing that a person should do is to obey the instructions of astrology. Sometimes astrology teaches its followers not to feel threatened by something that is going to happen to them. Because "the very same powers by which they are threatened, the anonymous totality of the social process, are also those which will somehow take care of them"<sup>4</sup>. In any case, it is important to know that the culture industry has a reciprocal relation with the capitalist system. This means that, on the one hand, the culture industry helps the capitalist system to get power and ensure its survival and, on the other hand, a powerful capitalist system can create a powerful culture industry to ensure its power and domination.

---

3 Theodor W. Adorno, *On Popular Music* in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and The Written Word*, edited by Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), pp. 302-304

4 Theodor W. Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*. edited by Stephen Crook, (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 77.

### **The Neglect of the Culture Industry in the Second and Third Generations of the Frankfurt School**

Although cultural domination was one of the main concerns of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, this concern was gradually replaced with other issues in the second and third generations. Under the influence of Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, who are known as the leading theorists of the second and third generations of the Frankfurt School, the Institute for Social Research shifted to an almost new direction in which the culture industry, as one of the most important issues of the Frankfurt School, lost its importance. Although Habermas and Honneth have kept the critical theory as the main heritage of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, they have almost forgotten to develop and extend the theory of the culture industry. But when I say they neglected the culture industry I mean they couldn't create a strong and systematic study of the culture industry and its new techniques. They didn't gather a group of intellectuals and encourage them to study new forms of the culture industry in our age. This neglect of the culture industry has caused not only a gap between the first generation and the second and third generations of the Frankfurt School but also some difficulties for the theories of Habermas and Honneth. In the capitalist system, communicative action and recognition can be influenced by the culture industry. In a society dominated by the culture industry, people might be reluctant to participate in communicative action or to construct a real public sphere. In other words, even if we can prepare a public sphere in which actors can take part in a free communicative action, it is still probable that under the domination of the culture industry they don't want to participate in a public sphere or communicative action. An example is the form of individualism which is intensified by some of the new technologies like smartphones. There are people who prefer to spend their time with their smartphones rather than with others. We all know some families whose members are sitting together but each of them is busy with his or her smartphone. Another example can be seen in the case of those who would like to spend their time in a hyperreal world instead of the real one. We are living in an age in which a large number of our young people are busy playing games on their smartphones. Besides, in a society dominated by the culture industry even communicative agreement or consensus may support the inter-

ests of the capitalist system. Examples include the case of those who get together to discuss fashionable and sexy outfits for women or those who want to choose the sexiest Hollywood actress. In this way, even the public sphere may support the existing system. The important point is that Habermas, by emphasizing the critical sciences, is hopeful that these sciences can eliminate all kinds of distortion and play the role of emancipators of society. But the problem is that when Habermas doesn't focus on new techniques of the culture industry he cannot be confident that the critical sciences are immune to the culture industry. In my opinion, Habermas doesn't see the fact that even the emancipatory interest and critical knowledge can be influenced and distorted by the culture industry. The fact is that the technical interest and empirical-analytic knowledge can influence not only the practical interest and historical-hermeneutic knowledge but also the emancipatory interest and critical knowledge. For example, power in the age of simulation and hyperreality is different from what Habermas described as "Herrschaft" in *Knowledge and Human Interests*. In a sense, there is not much power in the hyperreal world in which the emancipatory interests can take form and lead to critical sciences. For example, in a hyperreal world desires don't have to be repressed anymore. People can have whatever they want, wherever they want, and in any way they want. This means that the reality principle may not be necessary anymore since no one hurts others by satisfying his/her desires. There might be no power or constraint in a hyperreal world from which people want to emancipate themselves. In this way, the emancipatory interest might be weakened by losing its medium which is power. Besides, a person in a hyperreal world can even have his/her desirable communicative action with desirable hyperreal people and reach a desirable consensus with them. This means that in the future real social interaction and real communicative action might be in danger as a person can be isolated in a hyperreal world.

Even recognition, one of Honneth's main concerns, can be affected by the culture industry. This means that the culture industry may manipulate values and beliefs in society to make a distorted and artificial recognition which can support the interests of the dominant class. In other words, in a society dominated by the culture industry, even a person's effort to achieve self-respect and self-esteem might fulfill the goals of the capitalist system. Therefore, the question is how Honneth can be confident in this situation that achieved self-respect or self-esteem is not

distorted? In any case, it seems that Honneth is now aware of this defect in his theory. In one of his works, *Recognition as Ideology*, he tries to show how a false recognition is possible and how it can work as an ideology to support specific interests in society. According to Honneth, “the pride that “Uncle Tom” feels as a reaction to the repeated praise of his submissive virtues makes him into a compliant servant in a slave-owning society. The emotional appeals to the “good” mother and housewife made by churches, parliaments, or the mass media over the centuries caused women to remain trapped within a self-image that most effectively accommodated the gender-specific division of labor. The public esteem enjoyed by heroic soldiers continuously engendered a sufficiently large class of men who willingly went to war in pursuit of glory and adventure. As trivial as these examples may be, they do make strikingly clear that social recognition can always also operate as a conformist ideology, for the continuous repetition of identical forms of recognition can create a feeling of self-worth that provides the motivational resources for forms of voluntary subordination without employing methods of repression”<sup>5</sup>.

As can be seen, now Honneth is aware of the fact that the distortion of consciousness can lead to a false recognition which might be used for supporting particular interests. But the interesting point is that although Honneth is aware of false and distorted recognition, he still doesn’t pay enough attention to the culture industry and its new techniques as one of the main sources of this distortion. Besides, in a society in which the domination of the culture industry has turned some of our concepts and relations into signs of those concepts and relations, recognition can be achieved through the signs themselves. For example, in a society in which people with unequal rights may think that they have equal rights just because they have the signs of equality like TVs, laptops, or washing machines in their homes, recognition is distorted. This is a semiotic recognition or, in other words, recognition through the signs.

The other problem is that the culture industry, as a dynamic phenomenon, is always using new methods and tools to expand its domination. Therefore, by the growth of the capitalist system, the culture industry is growing too. The culture

---

5 Axel Honneth, *Recognition as Ideology* in *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and Tradition of Critical Social Theory*, edited by Bert Van Den Brink and David Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) pp. 325, 326.

industry in the 21st century is more sophisticated, advanced, and hidden than the culture industry during Adorno's time. Adorno and Horkheimer couldn't completely see how the culture industry would work in our age. Besides, by a current development of the culture industry, some of the ideas of Adorno and Horkheimer have lost their validity. For example, they usually considered the masses as passive creatures who only receive the messages which are made and distributed by a dominant class on top of the society. According to them, radio "democratically makes everyone equally into listeners, in order to expose them in authoritarian fashion to the same programs put out by different stations. No mechanism of reply has been developed, and private transmissions are condemned to unfreedom"<sup>6</sup>. But as we know today, by the emergence of advanced technologies, this argument of Adorno and Horkheimer is no longer valid. Nowadays, social networks such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have provided an opportunity for everybody's contribution and interaction through the media. This means that a receiver of messages can also be a producer and distributor of them. Adorno and Horkheimer had considered the culture industry a unilateral form of communication which only allows a monologue. But as we know, nowadays the culture industry is also a multilateral form of communication which also allows dialogue. As a result, the culture industry has a different mechanism in an age when people have their own media, and can produce their own messages. But if the reason for lack of class consciousness among the masses is that the dominant class can own and control the media and advertise its values and ideology, then why can't a large group of people with their own media, reach class consciousness and change the capitalist system? Why are they still following the values of the dominant class and the ideology of the capitalist system?

One of the theorists who can help us answer these questions is Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard's era let him see the technologies and new media that Adorno and Horkheimer couldn't see in their time. Although Baudrillard is usually known as a structuralist or post-structuralist, as we will see later, he is also close to the critical theory of the Frankfurt school. For example, the theory of reification, which influenced Western Marxism and the Frankfurt School, also has a

---

6 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment, Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 95, 96.

deep influence on Baudrillard's thought. The theory of reification explains the relationship between the object and the subject during which the former detaches from the latter and gains an independent power. It shows how during this process the object gradually dominates the subject<sup>7</sup>. This is something that we can clearly see in Baudrillard's early works. But Baudrillard takes reification to an even higher level: he argues that the whole semiotic system of society is reified. Baudrillard, especially in his early works, tried to combine Marxist theory with semiotics. According to Marx, each object has a use value which comes from its function and utility. But in capitalist society, this use value is eclipsed by exchange value which is determined by the market. Baudrillard talks about a third kind of value which is called sign value. According to him, each object is a sign of different things such as power, prestige, and status. Hence, objects can create social, cultural, political, and economic differences. In a consumer society, these objects create a system in which each object has a special meaning. This semiotic system can control people's tastes, needs, beliefs, and behaviors. Baudrillard's goal is to understand and explain this system of objects and its mechanism and consequences in society. This semiotic aspect of the capitalist system is not completely discussed by Adorno and Horkheimer. Revealing this aspect of the culture industry might help us to answer the question why the majorities, even after having access to the media, are still following the values of the capitalist system.

### **Baudrillard and Semiotics**

Baudrillard's Marxist view and his interest in semiotics helped him in his early works to extend the Marxist critique of the production system to other fields of social life. In *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard tries to study objects and their relations with each other and with our social world. These are the objects which we may see, use, buy, and collect every day but we don't often analyze them with a sociological view. Baudrillard is following two goals in this book; first, to understand the meanings of objects and the way they influence our minds and lives; second, to find out how these meanings and influences change by moving from

---

7 Charles Levin, *Baudrillard, Critical Theory and Psychoanalysis* in: *Ideology and Power in the Age of Lenin in Ruins*, edited by Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 172.



traditional to modern society. Thus, this book is about the relationship between the subject and the object. Baudrillard shows how a collection of objects together constitutes a system which may determine our thoughts, values, behaviors, desires, needs, and relationships. These ideas are mostly influenced by Marxist theories especially the commodification of everyday life in capitalist society, and by semiotic theories according to which each object is a sign that alongside other signs constitutes a semiotic system<sup>8</sup>.

According to Baudrillard, objects in the symbolic order receive their meaning through real relations and lived experiences. So, they symbolize those relations and concepts. Therefore, since each object is unique, it is hard to manipulate or replace it with another object. But in the modern world, the objects usually have no connection to real social relations and lived experiences. Rather, they are the abstractions of those relations. As a result, they are not usually symbols, but rather signs. Therefore, they have sign value. Signs “make living social relations into things, into units – they are, in a sense, the material of materialism. What this implies is that objects no longer possess essential values rooted in lived experience”<sup>9</sup>. Hence, modernity destroys the symbolic order. Consequently, in the modern world objects are floating as they are liberated from their symbolic and traditional meanings. Now that they can freely move, a modern man can manipulate them. In this way, the sign-object system brings a sort of freedom for modern man. But according to Baudrillard, this is just a false freedom which should be criticized. It is just an illusion that you are free in your decisions and your choices. In fact, it is the semiotic system which is managing and determining them. The sofa or jacket from your college days which was valuable for you may lose its attraction and importance by a change in fashion and the semiotic system. So, keeping such a sofa or jacket after a change in fashion can jeopardize your prestige in society. If you want to throw it out and get a new one, no traditional rule will stop you. You are free to change it anytime you want, but in fact, it is the semiotic system which tells you when and how you should replace your sofa or jacket. It should be noticed that both symbolic and semiotic systems

---

8 Douglas Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 8.

9 William Pawlett, *Jean Baudrillard* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 12.

are different forms of social discipline. There is no freedom in any of them. But in the symbolic order these limitations are vivid. This system doesn't claim that it brings freedom for man. On the other hand, the semiotic system claims and pretends that it presents a freedom. Furthermore, the difference between symbolic and semiotic relations is that symbolic relations are unique and irreplaceable. They are not "equivalent to anything". But this doesn't mean that symbolic and semiotic relations are binary oppositions. "Signs 'stand in' for lived relations; they refer to and express them in abstracted, coded and therefore reductive fashion. Both symbols and signs (and symbols are signs) mediate human experience. The important distinction is that the system of signs 'bars' or disallows the rich ambivalence of symbolic expressions. Signs actually replace the lived relation; they present a coded, stereotyped version of reality, one that is more manageable, less threatening but also less 'meaningful' or intense than the world of symbolic ambivalence. Signs suggest, claim or simulate symbolic relations; they are abstracted from symbolic relations"<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, according to Baudrillard, reification can also come from signs. In other words, signs take the place of social relations and human concepts. The object no longer has the symbolic value which used to come from real relations and lived experiences. Now, its meaning and value come from the semiotic system.

According to Baudrillard, the liberation of objects from the symbolic order and from their traditional meanings and attachments lead to more possibilities for their manipulation by man. This is why he believes that man in the modern world "is neither an owner nor a mere user – rather, he is an active engineer of atmosphere"<sup>11</sup>. He is able to manipulate objects, their positions in space, their relations with each other, and their roles. Now, "what matters to him is neither possession nor enjoyment but responsibility, in the strict sense which implies that it is at all times possible for him to determine responses"<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, instead of consuming the objects, his goal is to manage and manipulate them. This is how a modern man recognizes himself. It is in such a context that Baudril-

---

10 Ibid., pp. 14, 15.

11 Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*. translated by James Benedict (London & New York: Verso, 2005), p. 25.

12 Ibid., p. 25.

lard talks about the consumer society. According to him, consumption can be explained by two approaches. First, consumption “as a process of signification and communication” is a system of signs, exchange, and communication. Second, in consumption “as a process of classification and social differentiation”, consumer goods are the creators and indicators of social and hierarchical differences. According to the first view, consumption is a tool for sending messages to other people. Here, each consumer object is a sign that has a special meaning. Consumer society is a society in which everyone exchanges meanings through signs. In other words, signs work as words in a language through which people talk to each other. Therefore, everyone must have the same definition and interpretation of the products which are working as signs. But the second aspect of consumption is about the classification and differentiation which objects create among individuals, groups, and classes. Since people have different capabilities for buying goods and services, the objects create a hierarchy and differentiation among people. Each product which you use brings you closer to a special group and creates distance from others<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, according to Baudrillard, the modern consumer society, systematically and purposefully, produces not only products but also differentiations. Hence, the real differences among people are reduced to the differences among consumer goods which are possessed by people. As a result, most of the meanings and human concepts which must be based on real human relations and behaviors are determined by consumer objects and signs like clothing, cars, cologne, cigarettes, and houses. “In the past, differences of birth, blood and religion were not exchanged: they were not differences of fashion, but essential distinctions. They were not ‘consumed’. Current differences (of clothing, ideology, and even sex) are exchanged within a vast consortium of consumption. This is a socialized exchange of signs”<sup>14</sup>. Today, objects are usually evaluated according to their capacity for differentiation instead of their function and beauty. Since the lower classes are always trying to improve their status by possessing the products which are used by the upper classes, and since the upper classes have no passion for using the products

---

13 Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London & Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1998), p. 61.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

which are used by the lower classes, there is always a permanent replacement and change in consumer goods and their meanings<sup>15</sup>. It is clear that the conspicuous consumption plays an important role in differentiation. Baudrillard, with an almost similar approach to Veblen, believes that the conspicuous consumption and waste have a social function. But while Veblen considers the conspicuous consumption as a behavior which belongs to the upper classes<sup>16</sup>, Baudrillard believes that this is a pattern which can be found among all the classes in society through which people try to improve their prestige, social status, and social respect. The more a person is capable of possessing or wasting expensive and rare products, the more chance he has to get a higher position in the social hierarchy<sup>17</sup>. Thus, in a consumer society, consumption is one of the main elements for shaping a person's identity. In other words, people in the consumer society may define their own and others' identities according to their consumption patterns. The main purpose of the consumer society is to create an ideal consumer. An ideal consumer is the one who accepts, internalizes, and follows the dominant sign system of society. The ideal consumer doesn't consider this sign system as something external over which he has no control, but rather as something which is created by him. As a result, people's efforts for transferring the meanings and differentiating themselves from others by using the objects lead to reproduction of the system<sup>18</sup>. Although it seems that consumption comes from a need for concrete and direct utility of an object, in fact, it has other purposes like communication and differentiation. So, it is clear that consumption is not a singular and personal behavior, but rather a collective action. "Enjoyment is enjoyment for one's own benefit, but consuming is something one never does alone. ... One enters, rather, into a generalized system of exchange and production of coded values where, in spite of themselves, all consumers are involved with all others"<sup>19</sup>.

---

15 Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, p. 111.

16 See Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions* (New York: Macmillan, 1899).

17 Douglas Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond*, p. 21.

18 Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, p. 61.

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 78, 79.

In any case, according to Baudrillard, objects in the symbolic and traditional order are usually created through lived relations and experiences. Hence, they symbolize those relations. Because these symbols are unique, there is no substitute for them. In other words, it is impossible to manipulate or replace them with other objects. In modernity, the objects are transformed into signs and have sign values. Although these objects are trying to convince us that they signify real relations, in fact, they have no connection to real relations. They are just the abstractions of those relations. The suspension of objects makes it easy to manipulate and link them to different meanings and concepts in an arbitrary way<sup>20</sup>. Therefore, by consuming objects we are consuming meanings and relations which they connote. But in fact these are not real relationships. "Today every desire, plan, need, every passion and relation is abstracted (or materialized) as sign and as object to be purchased and consumed"<sup>21</sup>. As a result, today, for having any characteristic, transferring any meaning, and satisfying any desire, we should use the appropriate objects. In other words, now our emotions and desires can mostly be expressed and satisfied in the system of objects and through signs. When such a connection is made, then our emotions, desires, and needs can be controlled and determined by the system of objects<sup>22</sup>. Having a dining table or arranging the furniture in such a way that all the members of the family can sit next to each other indicates the family solidarity and unity even if they never get together to eat something. Patriotic pictures around the house indicate a person's patriotism even if, in reality, he/she has no sense of belonging to the country. Keeping a musical instrument in the living room indicates a person's passion for music even if he/she doesn't know how to play it or even if he/she is not interested in music. Affection, loyalty, humanity are concepts which in fact must be expressed in the real relations and lived experiences. But in the modern system of objects, these concepts are usually expressed through objects, each of which is a sign and has a special meaning.

---

20 Mark Poster, *Critical Theory and Technoculture: Habermas and Baudrillard*. in Baudrillard: A Critical Reader, edited by Douglas Kellner (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 78.

21 Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, in Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings. edited by Mark Poster (Stanford, CV: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 22, 23.

22 William Pawlett, *Jean Baudrillard*, p. 11.

### **The Semiotic Aspect of the Culture Industry**

As I discussed, Baudrillard in his book *The System of Objects* argues that in the traditional order objects are symbolic; since they come from the real relations and lived experiences they indicate those relations. This means that these objects are unique and irreplaceable. Therefore, it is clear that the culture industry doesn't want objects to stay in a symbolic order because as long as objects are attached to the real relations and as long as they refer to those real relations, there is no possibility for the culture industry to manipulate them. This means that in order to control and manipulate people's values and consciousness, the culture industry needs to manipulate and control objects and their meanings. As long as objects are in a symbolic order, a big part of the culture industry's domination, which comes from the semiotic system, cannot take place. As a result, one of the main goals of the culture industry is to release objects from their symbolic meanings and turn them into signs which can be controlled and manipulated. Because of this, today many aspects of our lives and even our social relations, emotions, and human concepts are taken into the semiotic world. They can only make sense in the dominant semiotic system. Today the culture industry, by using different tools like advertising and movies is trying to reduce human values and relations to consumable signs which can be easily controlled. Imagine a tribe which gives a special kind of necklace to a person for his/her participation in a war and his/her courage. This necklace is a symbol of his/her courage and his/her loyalty to the tribe; it represents a special relation between him/her and his/her tribe. As long as this necklace is in a symbolic order and comes from the real relations, the culture industry cannot manipulate or control it because this necklace and the relationship that it represents are irreplaceable. Only this particular necklace symbolizes those relations in the tribe. Besides, this necklace doesn't accept use value, exchange value, or sign value. But in the modern order the same form of necklace may refer to any relation in an abstract way even though it has nothing to do with it. Since the necklace is liberated from its symbolic meaning it can be manipulated by the culture industry. Now the culture industry can turn this necklace into a sign that indicates courage, beauty, prestige, and humanity which are also turned into signs. As a result, while in the symbolic order

it is impossible to buy an object which symbolizes a special relation, in the modern order you can buy objects which indicate any kind of relation in an abstract way. When all human relations, emotions, and concepts are reduced to signs in society, they can be controlled by the dominant semiotic system. Friendship and kindness can be indicated by a bottle of champagne; familial relations and loyalty can be indicated by a dining table even if family members never gather around it for eating their food; being attached to music can be indicated by a musical instrument in the guest room even if a person has no passion for playing it; being an intellectual can be indicated by a library full of books even if a person has never read any of them. Now our needs for the real relations or for creating special meanings can be satisfied by the signs which indicate those relations and meanings. In this way, the semiotic system can control most human needs and their satisfiers. But it is clear that a satisfaction which comes from consuming a sign, and not from the real relations, is just a semiotic satisfaction. Although by a semiotic satisfaction a person thinks that he/she has satisfied his/her need, in fact the need is still unsatisfied. Here the real satisfier might be unknown to him/her as the culture industry has replaced the real satisfier with a sign. For example, a person's need for kindness, love, happiness, and success can be satisfied by the signs of kindness, love, happiness, and success which are defined by the semiotic system and brought to us by the culture industry. Here, by using the semiotic system, the culture industry also creates a "repressive desublimation". When a person's need is satisfied not with the real relations but rather with the signs which indicate those relationships, he/she may lose the reason for confronting or changing the existing system. In other words, he/she gets what he/she wants but in the form of sign. But in fact, this is a false satisfaction through a sign. For example, love and kindness can be given or received by a perfume which refers to love and kindness in the semiotic structure. Success can be achieved by buying an expensive car. Freedom can take place through the signs of freedom which the semiotic system defines such as wearing a short skirt or bikini. Besides, in this condition a big part of joys and pleasures will be taken into the semiotic world. If I don't have a home next to the river so that I wake up every day with the sound of water I can get this feeling by playing the sound of water on my laptop. Therefore, by the semiotic satisfaction we are not directly enjoying real

things anymore. Rather, we enjoy the signs of those enjoyable things. This is why our pleasure is a semiotic pleasure. The advanced form of this semiotic pleasure can be seen in a hyperreal world. The next problem is that when the culture industry takes everything into the world of signs then the revolutionary movements for equality might be over when they achieve the signs of equality which are defined by the semiotic system such as having TV, laundry machine, cell phone, and laptop. Therefore, a big part of the forces, repressed desires, and unsatisfied needs which can turn against the dominant system might be canalized and neutralized by the semiotic system. As a result, there will be less potential for creating a critical thinking. When people accept the link between a sign and the relation which it indicates, then they can get satisfied with the signs of those relations. Here, the culture industry plays the main role in creating the signs and attaching them to meanings and human relations. The culture industry can convince us to accept and follow the dominant semiotic system. It tells us what the meaning of each product or sign is and what consequences it will have for us. The culture industry's success in controlling and manipulating the semiotic system gives it an ability to control our interests, needs, ideas, and behaviors. If you are exhausted by your overwhelming job, if you are exhausted of living in such a brutal system, lighting candles and drinking this special tee can help you to relax and calm down. In other words, instead of changing the real condition of your life you are recommended to relax by the signs of relaxation. In this way, your need for relaxation can be satisfied by the signs of relaxation. Today, this semiotic system has dominated our minds in many cases and it controls our interests and thoughts. Probably most people prefer to have a Ferrari whose engine has been replaced with a normal car's engine than a normal car with Ferrari's engine. This is because Ferrari itself is a sign of prestige. Besides, when the semiotic system dominates our minds, it can not only turn any kind of real pleasure into an unpleasant thing but also any neutral or even unpleasant thing into something enjoyable. A particular form of body might be sexually unattractive and unpleasant for us just because it is not fitting the Hollywood definition of a sexy body. A physically comfortable pair of shoes might be socially uncomfortable because it is not fashionable or a physically uncomfortable dress can be socially enjoyable because it is fashionable. In this way, the culture industry by manipulating the



signs and using a semiotic structure can control or manipulate our needs and the way that we have to satisfy them.

### **The Culture Industry and Consumption as a Tool for Communication and Differentiation**

I explained that according to Baudrillard modern consumption can be understood by two views. The first one is consumption as an instrument for communication by which people send and receive their messages and the second one is consumption as an instrument for differentiation<sup>23</sup>. Therefore, since the needs for communication and differentiation through objects are endless, the need for consumption will also be endless. The modern man/woman, who is lonelier than ever, can attach and relate him/herself to society by consumption. Here, the semiotic system works as a tool of the culture industry by securing its economic and political interests. But this is not the main or even important connection between the semiotic system and the culture industry. Today, the culture industry plays an important role in creating signs and determining their meanings. As objects are released from their symbolic attachments, the culture industry has complete freedom for manipulating them. The culture industry's position in society makes it capable of defining the meaning and value of each consumer object. In this way, the culture industry controls the system of communication and differentiation in society. By controlling the semiotic structure of society, the culture industry also controls our needs and the way that we have to satisfy them. It tells us what goals we should have and what we should consume to reach those goals. It tells us who we are, who others are, and what we should expect from each other. Therefore, the culture industry's power or domination is not merely dependent on media such as TV and radio but also based on the fact that here people are not just the consumers of the culture industry's product, but rather the actors, managers, and communicators in the semiotic system. They don't consider themselves as passive creatures, but rather as the subjects who are actively manipulating and controlling the signs. They know that their success in society is attached to the acceptance of the semiotic structure.

---

23 Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, p. 61.

As the signs and their meanings are changing all the time, the semiotic system is very fickle. As a result, people need to know about the latest changes in the semiotic system and the meaning of each sign. In the field of consumption, this is the best tool for the dominant system because by a permanent change in signs and their meanings a new consumption will be necessary. If up to this day sending a special message and creating differences have been possible by a special series of signs, from now on to send the same message and create the same differentiation we need new signs. But since it is mostly the culture industry which determines these signs and their meanings, following the culture industry in order to get information about the signs and their meanings is an essential need for everyone in a society. This is why, according to my idea, following the culture industry is the survival mechanism of people in today's modern world. In other words, people need to know about the signs and their meaning and since the culture industry is the main producer and the main source of information about the signs people need to accept and follow the culture industry. People need to know how others think about each consumer object. Otherwise, they may fail in their communication with others through signs. They need to tell others who they are and how they think. Through these signs, they also recognize others and the way they think. In short, the semiotic system plays an important role in social interactions. To use Erving Goffman's concept, it can be said that "impression management"<sup>24</sup> will not be possible without accessing the culture industry and understanding the semiotic system. Therefore, we need to use the culture industry to manage our social interactions. Besides, people need to know about the semiotic system and the meaning of each object in it because they always want to make themselves close to special groups and distant from others. In this case, the culture industry is the main reference for people to gain knowledge about those objects which can help them to reach their goals. But there is a mutual relationship between the culture industry and the semiotic system. On the one

---

24 See Erving Goffman, *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

hand, the semiotic system creates a need to reference the culture industry to gain information about signs and their meanings and, on the other hand, the culture industry legitimizes the semiotic system and gives it credibility. Therefore, the culture industry works as a notebook of codes to which people refer in order to gain knowledge about the signs which they need to use for managing their social relations. They know that the culture industry is the best and most valid source for understanding the rules of the game.

### **An Answer to Our Main Question**

Now after my discussion about the semiotic aspect of the culture industry I can answer the main question of this article. As it was mentioned before, the culture industry for Adorno and Horkheimer is a unilateral phenomenon by which the dominant class at the top of society sends messages for the masses at the bottom of society. This gives an opportunity to the dominant class to secure its interests by distorting the consciousness of the masses and preventing them from being revolutionary. But as I argued, today, in the new generation of media and social networks, first of all, the dominant class is not the only group that controls the media, and second of all, the new media make it possible for everyone to participate in producing messages and responding to them. Therefore, I asked the following questions: why is the culture industry still alive? Why are the majorities still following the values and ideology of the capitalist system? The answer is that domination was not only caused by the fact that the dominant group could control the media and the majorities couldn't. It was not because the majorities couldn't respond to messages. The main problem was, and still is, that the semiotic system dominates many people's minds. In other words, as long as people accept and follow the dominant semiotic system they will think and act in a way which secures the interests of the dominant groups even if they access all the media and produce their own messages. Today, by the domination of the semiotic system, some people are working as the agents of the culture industry. They are the main producers of the culture industry against themselves. Therefore, although they have found an opportunity for producing their own messages, they still work within the framework of the dominant semiotic system. This is why

their media products usually support the dominant system instead of changing it. For instance, if Ferrari and Bugatti are considered as signs of prestige, or if a particular type of body is considered sexy, the majorities will probably follow the same semiotic meanings in their products. As another example, although the majorities can use their own social networks against the dominant system, they may use them for advertising or admiring consumer products. They are instruments for domination over themselves. For example, those who have a large number of followers on social networks like Instagram are hired by companies to advertise their products. They are asked to wear the clothes of a special company and to take photos of themselves and share it with others. As a result, as long as this semiotic system is dominant on people's minds nothing will change. We are facing a phenomenon which I would like to call the "self-culture industry" or the culture industry which is produced by the majorities. This is a phenomenon by which people reinforce and expand the power of the culture industry. Because of domination by the semiotic system, each individual, who can access the media, may help the dominant system against himself. In addition, by using each consumer item and accepting its meaning we are legitimizing and reinforcing the existing semiotic system. Today, this semiotic system is the foundation of our modern society. Any fundamental change in society cannot happen without a change in the semiotic system. As long as we are thinking within the framework of the dominant semiotic system, it is hard to expect a real revolutionary movement. But a change in the semiotic system can challenge the whole system. Therefore, because a major part of the modern system's domination comes from its semiotic structure, only by challenging this semiotic structure may we have a chance to abolish this system. If one day no one gives value to luxury cars, then a part of the prestige of those who own these cars will be destroyed.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, I argued that the second and third generations of the Frankfurt school neglected the main concern of this school which was cultural domination. This neglect happened while the culture industry during the second and the third generations of the Frankfurt school became stronger and more sophisticated than that which Adorno and Horkheimer described. Therefore, it is important to study

the culture industry in our age, the age of new media. We are living in a time in which advanced technologies have changed some techniques of the culture industry. First, the dominant class does not exclusively control the media to secure its interests. This means that today the majorities can access their own media and produce their messages. For example, everyone can share his/her videos on YouTube or Facebook. Second, the new media allow people to answer the messages they receive. As a result, instead of a monologue, the new media present the possibility of dialogue for people. Therefore, the question was that if the cultural domination of the dominant classes comes from their exclusive control over the media, why many people with access to their own media, still follow the values and the ideology of the capitalist system? This was the main question that I answered in this study by revising the theory of the culture industry.

By reviewing Baudrillard's ideas, I argued that the culture industry creates its domination for the most part through a semiotic system. In other words, the culture industry, by creating a semiotic system and convincing people to accept it, is able to control the majorities. I have come to the conclusion that today we face a phenomenon that can be called the self-culture industry or production of the culture industry by the majorities. This concept refers to the fact that today many people are using their own media to support and secure the dominant system. In other words, as long as people accept the existing semiotic system they cannot endanger the capitalist system even if they access the media. Besides, since consumption is a tool for communication and differentiation through signs, gaining knowledge about the semiotic system and being aware of the meaning of signs is essential for someone who wants to live and survive in our society. Since the culture industry is the main source of this semiotic system, following its instructions is a survival mechanism and rational choice for people. This means that if a person in our modern society has no information about the dominant semiotic system and if he/she doesn't follow the culture industry to gain information about it, he/she may fail in achieving his/her goals. Therefore, any kind of critical theory should consider the semiotic system as one of the main factors of cultural domination. For abolishing the cultural domination of the capitalist system, we should also criticize and reject its semiotic system. If people give no value to luxury cars or brands, the owners of these kinds of products cannot

use them as a source of power and prestige. In this way, people have a chance to challenge one of the main weapons of dominant groups. But as long as people follow the existing semiotic system of capitalism there will be no fundamental change in their condition even if they control all the media. Today, some people, by accepting and following the semiotic system of capitalism, are working as a tool to advance and expand the domination of the culture industry for free. They may not realize that by accepting and using these signs and their meanings they are in fact supporting domination over themselves. As a result, to keep its domination alive, such a system has to reduce everything to the level of sign and incorporate everything into the dominant semiotic system. This is how the system can control our needs and thoughts. Today most of our human relations, concepts, and emotions are turned into sign. Therefore, they are controlled by the semiotic system. When everything has been taken into the semiotic system, then the satisfiers of our needs also turn into the signs which we can consume. A need for kindness in friendship will be satisfied by a gift like perfume, love by an expensive necklace, happiness with disco lights or birthday decoration, loyalty by a violet flower, and finally, the need for change and a better quality of life might be satisfied by their signs. This semiotic satisfaction of our needs weakens our potential for criticizing and changing the existing system. As a result, most of our needs, which should be satisfied by the real relations, might be satisfied by the signs of those relations. This is why I talked about a semiotic pleasure and satisfaction in our age.

Thus, as we saw in this study, the theory of the culture industry has a great potential for extension. We should not limit our view to the definition of the culture industry which Adorno and Horkheimer present to us. We should understand this theory according to the nature of the Frankfurt school. In this way, we can discover the new techniques used by the culture industry.

# Benjamin in Florence: Unintentional Truth and the Thematics of Restoration

Mary Caputi<sup>1</sup>

## Florence and the “Dialectics of Seeing”

In his writings, Walter Benjamin often draws on urban settings in order to deploy his unique admixture of dialectical materialism and messianic redemption. As seen in his writings about Paris, Berlin, Naples, and New York, cities operate as a tool for deciphering the imprimatur of the past which interpenetrates with modernity and confounds the latter’s pretensions.<sup>2</sup> Focusing on this interpenetration gives the lie to modernity’s audacious claims to “progress” and instead highlights the long list of calamities wrought by capitalism. Benjamin thus demonstrates how cities act as a rebus by allowing traces of the past to speak

- 
- 1 Mary Caputi is professor of political theory at California State University, Long Beach where she teaches courses in modern political thought, feminism, critical theory, and post-colonialism. Her research interests focus on the intersections of gender, first generation Frankfurt School scholars, modern French philosophy, post-colonial studies, and contemporary American politics. Her books include *Voluptuous Yearnings: A Feminist Theory of the Obscene* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), *A Kinder, Gentler America: Melancholia and the Mythical 1950s* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005), and *Feminism and Power: The Need for Critical Theory* (Lexington Books, 2013). With Vincent Del Casino, Jr., she also co-edited and contributed to *Derrida and the Future of the Liberal Arts: Professions of Faith* (Bloomsbury, 2013). Her current project looks at the politics of food with special attention given to Slow Food, USA.
  - 2 See, for instance, Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*,” translated by Howard Eiland, Belknap Press, 2006; “Central Park,” in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings*, Volume 4, 161-99; *Moscow Diary*, translated by Richard Sieburth, Harvard University Press, 1986; “Naples,” [www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=282500897151&story\\_fbid=292435857514539](http://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=282500897151&story_fbid=292435857514539); “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century” (1935), and “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” (1939) in *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, edited by Rolf Tiedmann, Belknap Press, 1999, 3-26.

of capitalism's harm via "dialectical images," images interpreted against themselves that, to the knowing critic, reveal "unintentional truth." In his unfinished *Arcades Project*, Konvolut N, he therefore confesses that "every city is beautiful to me" since each speaks a distinct and inimitable language: "all talk of particular languages having greater or lesser value is to me unacceptable."<sup>3</sup>

Streets, buildings, parks, and other urban markings can therefore be read as monads, fragments that encapsulate the whole and that unveil an entire cultural narrative as revealed in a single item. Monadic urban elements thus partake in a larger interpretation that disproves modernity's optimism; they form part of a cityscape whose features can be read, deciphered, and unpacked as though part of a hidden conversation. In similar fashion, ruins and dilapidated buildings hold a special place given their garrulous commentary on the past's relationship with the present. When read dialectically -- as the past's imprimatur on the present and the present's reaching back to the past -- these city-bound monads reveal the disastrous nature of modernity's repetitive, monotonous narrative: it is not linear progress that enlightens modernity, but a "pile of debris" fraught with violence and injustice.<sup>4</sup> To approach the city as a collection of dialectical images thus offers insights into the mendacious nature of the present, whose trajectory is not straight but circular, repetitive, disastrous; it "keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at [the observer's] feet."<sup>5</sup> For Benjamin, the city's dialectical images offer moments of insight into the urban "debris" that constitutes the city's distinguishing features. In "On the Concept of History," he avers that "[a]rticulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it 'the way it really was.' It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger."<sup>6</sup>

Recognizing the disjuncture between the claim to "progress" and the "dangerous" moment thus occurs amidst modernity's detritus which, importantly, is not recognized as such. To be sure, modernity's wreckage does always take the form

---

3 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, edited by Rolf Tiedmann, Belknap Press, 1999, 458.

4 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Volume 4, 1938-1940, translated by Edmund Jephcott and others, Belknap Press, 2003, 392.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 391.



of rubbish, but may exist as revered, often refurbished sites of national pride and cultural heritage. Even the most elegant urban markings offer unintended insights regarding capitalism's brutality and the hardships of lived experience. "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism," Benjamin famously asserts.<sup>7</sup> And if even the most elegant cities are filled with testaments to barbarism, the knowing critic attuned to these insights will discover not an academic appreciation of time-honored tourist attractions but various sites for political engagement. "A tension that comes to animate Benjamin's cityscapes has its origins here," writes Graeme Gilloch, "namely, the need to reconcile an approach that does justice to the phenomenon under consideration (immanent) with one that retains critical insight and power (redemptive)."<sup>8</sup>

The city of Florence readily invites the "dialectics of seeing" described here thanks to its status as the flourishing cultural center of Renaissance origins.<sup>9</sup> Because its architectural, artistic, and intellectual heritage is so well preserved, the city overwhelmingly suggests the ethos of the Renaissance period and keeps alive the trappings of daily life in 14<sup>th</sup> -17<sup>th</sup> century Europe. To visit its museums, churches, parks, and piazzas is to encounter a *Weltanschauung* that has been carefully preserved thanks to the ambitious restoration projects overseen by the Italian Minister of Cultural Heritage and Tourism.<sup>10</sup> Although native Florentines are known to complain of the city's being "*sciupata*" – derelict, broken-down – much effort is made to preserve and restore its famous monuments. Thanks to its careful preservation, Florence indeed allows the contemporary tourist to see the world through the eyes of a previous historical moment. We easily perceive a city dominated by powerful, rivaling families, a culture steeped in Catholic teachings and eager to revive ancient

---

7 Ibid., 392.

8 Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City*, Polity Press, 1996, 39

9 I take the expression "the dialectics of seeing" from Susan Buck-Morss's book by the same title: *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, 1989.

10 See Rosie Scammel, "Saving Italy's Cultural Heritage By Modern Means," [www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/19/saving-italys-cultural-heritage-by-modern-means](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/19/saving-italys-cultural-heritage-by-modern-means), accessed August 4, 2017.

learning, a thriving intellectual, innovative center whose literary Tuscan dialect ultimately became standardized Italian. “O Tuscan!...speaking so decorously,” Dante’s Farinata exclaims from the netherworld, “Thy speech clearly shows thee a native of that noble country.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet Benjamin’s insistence on dialectical images and monadic elements reveals the ultimate superficiality of this hackneyed approach to the city’s *Weltanschauung*. To him, this standard reading of the past proves unsatisfying. Using his insights, our efforts to reconstruct Florence “the way it really was” founder once we perceive the ability for city markings to reveal unintentional truth by unmasking history’s barbarism, that is, its failure to truly advance and its sad tendency toward repeating past mistakes. We behold the fact that humanity has not “progressed” or improved with time, and under capitalism has only allowed violence and injustice to prevail. Seen as monads, restored treasures impart a “danger” that the architect, artist, or author never intended, and their “unintentional truth” unwittingly displays the poverty of the present. Such an interpretive approach puts into play Benjamin’s belief in the power of immanent criticism, for even a famous work of art revered for its beauty chronicles our civilization’s calamitous history.

But how is it that a visit to the Uffizi Galleries, Piazza Michelangelo, or the Ponte Vecchio can recount not de’ Medici generosity permeated by Catholic salvation, but the violences of history now contained in capitalism’s brutality? How is it that Donatello’s David, Botticelli’s *Primavera*, and the ubiquitous rugged John the Baptist – patron saint of Florence – speak of danger rather than of talent, wealth, a society in its heyday? The answer lies in the creator’s *unintended* mission, the failure that in fact proves propitious as the cultural artifact assumes new meanings in a radically different setting. The artwork’s betrayal of original intentions in fact constitutes its “truthfulness;” the disconnect has stories to tell.

It is precisely the out-of-sync, dissonant quality that allows social truth to “escape” from the artwork, for the disconnect that it reveals proves significant. “One should never trust what an author himself says about his work,” Benja-

---

11 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, the Carlyle-Wicksteed translation, The Modern Library, 1950, 55.

min affirms.<sup>12</sup> Here, he refers not to the mendaciousness or duplicitousness of an artwork, but to his conviction that the “truth content” of art always illuminates its *immediate* surroundings, unleashing an “unintentional truth” about which its creator was entirely unaware. Out of step, perhaps out of fashion, the artwork comments on the present precisely because contemporary viewers see it so differently than earlier critics; in this way, they reveal social truth. We recall that Benjamin found the Parisian arcades meaningful precisely because they were, during his lifetime, in disrepair, “aborted and broken-down.”<sup>13</sup> In his day, they were “full of random items that ‘tell of all sorts of failures,’ items whose decrepit state functions as a ‘rebus... After all, nothing of the lot appears to be new.’”<sup>14</sup> And neither are Florence’s treasures. True, many are restored and refurbished, but do they capture the original meanings of the Renaissance? Rather, it is the restored shaggy Baptist in *today’s* Florence that proves garrulous; like Botticelli’s smiling Flora-turned-spring and the humble abode where Dante resided, the eccentric wilderness creature who lives on locusts and honey speaks to us about history’s failures even as he pontificates about conversion, baptizing at the River Jordan. But if people still flock to see him, how can he be called a failure? Newly restored and thoroughly cleansed, isn’t he a success story who helps boost tourism and bring in money? In order to answer this question, we must turn our attention away from the refreshed Baptist clad in hairy vestments and instead examine the crowd, the urban masses, the down-to-earth reality of the city that draws so many people to see him each year.

Florence offers an ideal setting in which to employ an oppositional Benjaminian reading of urban elegance. As a city rich in Renaissance culture and reminiscent of both the medieval and early modern periods, it today allows a multitude of time-honored art works, buildings, and monuments to comment in profound and unexpected ways on capitalism’s many contradictions in the twenty-first century. The numerous exponents of Renaissance Italy to be found in Florence bring to light “flashes” of political truths that indeed reveal “danger;”

---

12 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schwepenhäuser, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972-, V, 1046.

13 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 874.

14 *Ibid.*, 874-875.

as tourists we get more than we bargained for when, in gazing at a serene Madonna or chubby angel we detect dialectically the many problems the faces city today. This is especially true given that Florence invests heavily in restoration; it seeks to *preserve, prolong, and maintain* its great beauty by employing highly skilled restorers whose task it is to reclaim and recapture the life of damaged art works, be they paintings, sculpture, buildings, manuscripts, or other artifacts. To be sure, restoration pervades Florence; it is a city devoted to *preserving* the past and making it part of the present. And yet the more carefully the past is preserved, the more dramatically it sets in motion the dissonant contemporary context with which it is at odds.

Surely the intense training of those skilled in restoration focuses heavily on the *original* intentions of the artist. The elegant style that defines Renaissance culture cannot be severed from the spiritual convictions, rebirth in erudition, exponential progress in scientific knowledge, and embrace of humanism that characterizes that age. And surely no serious student of Renaissance Florence should remain unschooled in these matters. It is widely known that the pervasive thematics of the Renaissance center around a host of expansive, generative topics: a regained interest in learning, the rediscovery of ancient knowledge, economic revival, vast temporal power, spiritual providence and fulfillment. “The Renaissance” denotes affirmation and renewal, the flowering of a civilization whose impact on Western culture has been lasting and profound. Indeed, a city that claims St. John the Baptist as its patron is well disposed to speak the language of promise and optimism, redemption and renewal (despite the battery of problems that besiege it). For just as the Baptist speaks prophetically and with confidence of human salvation, so did the powerful Medici family offer a solid economic base, expansive political power, and a military security that allowed this culture to flourish. Despite the worldly troubles and considerable setbacks, prosperity nevertheless continues to keynote that society’s expression. Rediscovery, improvement, providence, fruition: these themes are ingrained in a city whose streets and interiors are graced by serene Madonnas cuddling the Christ child, reverent saints that stand in adoration, heroic mythological figures that ward off evil, and expressions of homage to powerful reigning patriarchs.

Nevertheless, the reality of anachronism causes us to reflect on these expressions within the current setting, and in this way “flashes” of truth are revealed via the beauties of Florence. However well restored and deftly rehabilitated, the splendid art works and architectural masterpieces of Florence today reveal unintended truths clustered around the topics of immigration, globalization, and the ethos of secular, commercial interests. Specifically, the backdrop of troubling demographic shifts, the uncertainty of the European Union, and many Florentines’ sense that their city is under siege by people of color cause us to wonder how the rugged Baptist’s wilderness experience speaks to us today. In a secular, commercialized world saturated with information technology and devoted to consumer goods, his many appearances around Florence in painting, marble, and stone surely take on different meaning. To many, “the Baptist” resonates with a chance to go shopping, a chance to earn a few euros; the Madonna invokes a place to buy gadgetry, to purchase shoes and handbags, to beg or bed down for the night. What does Mary’s calm expression of maternal devotion suggest as she looks down upon so many Chinese, North Africans, Sri Lankans, and Eastern Europeans streaming into Florence? What do manly Neptune with impressive pectorals and victorious Perseus displaying the head of Medusa invoke to wealthy tourists shopping at Ferragamo, or to so many destitute immigrants, many of whom don’t speak Italian much less claim familiarity with Greek and Roman mythology? The unintentional truth contained in their pronounced dissonance allows us to study Florence using immanent criticism.

### **Piazza del Duomo**

Santa Maria del Fiore and its surrounding *Piazza del Duomo* illustrates my point. On one level, the world-famous cathedral which took nearly 150 years to complete constitutes a monument to religious faith and a testament to architectural and artistic talent. The white, green, and pink hues of its lustrous marble paneling change color throughout the day, and go from clear to muted shades depending on the angle of the sun. The cathedral’s iconic octagonal dome engineered by Filippo Brunelleschi draws crowds of admiring visitors, as do the nearby Baptistery and bell tower designed by Giotto. As the central church in the Archdiocese of Florence, the cathedral continues to operate as a place of religious worship.

Yet the meanings that surround “Santa Maria del Fiore” clearly extend beyond its Catholic identity and its many connections to the de’ Medici family (in 1418, Cosimo de’ Medici supported Brunelleschi’s application to oversee the dome’s design; in 1478, Giuliano de’ Medici was stabbed nineteen times while receiving communion as part of the brutal Pazzi conspiracy). In keeping with Benjamin’s urban analyses, it simultaneously reveals the Madonna’s protective care *and* the harsh socio-economic realities of life in Florence; amazingly, it is both a treasured document of civilization and history’s debris, an expression of barbarism that signals danger. For many, the church has *commercial* importance and responds to tourist indulgences and dire immigrant needs. For them, Brunelleschi’s stupendous dome represents not an expression of faith or an architectural feat but the opportunity to pose, click, and send, or to eke out a living amidst dire hardship. It constitutes part an agenda of places to see for five minutes or a place to hover in hopes of remuneration selling selfie sticks and illuminated pinwheels. Indeed, needy immigrants or the local poor are known to follow tourists and even cling to their clothing in hopes of a handout; they ask their children to beg or have their crippled elderly relatives occupy space in the piazza, an empty hat beside them. Either way, whether wealthy tourist or indigent local, for them Piazza del Duomo = *the exchange of money*, and contains no spiritual, philosophical, historical, or civic-minded importance. Like Santa Croce, Borgo San Lorenzo, the Ponte Vecchio, the Pitti Palace, and numerous other attractions, it reveals the ways in which either the secular, consumerist values of shopping mania or the economic hardship of non-Christian, non-European populations weigh upon the contemporary Florentine experience. The traditional messianic mission of the cathedral undergoes renegotiation as Renaissance religion interpenetrates with capitalism’s barbaric impact.

To be sure, for a large number of non-European immigrants who seek employment in the city’s public squares, there is no cognate to link Renaissance meanings to the culture from which they come. They come from a different world upon which the Renaissance has left no mark and for which the Enlightenment was not a watershed. Hence to them da Vinci’s refreshed Madonna is just a woman with a child; the recently cleaned Baptistry features an unconventional man wearing camel hair; Ghiberti’s famous gilded bronze doors tell no stories

that they recognize. The incommensurate nature of the art work thus points to a gap in understanding that is also a fundamental truth in cotemporary Florentine society: the public sphere is as much an arena of strife, controversy, and suffering as it is the beautiful city it has always been. On the one hand, the abundant energy that Florence puts into restoration underscores how much the city's art-work and architecture is revered. Yet on the other, restoration puts into play the dialectical nature of the artwork as it begs the question of what is being restored and how it resonates today. While the object itself has been restored, the same does not always hold for the intentions of its creator.

These thematics of restoration parallel Benjamin's analysis of capitalism's detritus, the amassment of "hollowed out," depleted items whose value wavers depending on the whims of the market. Central to Benjamin's analysis of commodities for purchase is the manner in which their meanings fluctuate over time, leaving them devoid of innate meaning and dependent on cultural interpretation. The arcades highlight their status as transitory objects. ("Everywhere stockings play a starring role. Now they are lying under phonographs, across the way in a stamp shop; another time on the side table of a tavern, where they are watched over by a girl."<sup>15</sup>) Not labor value but consumer shopping patterns determine the commodity's worth causing their price to fluctuate wildly depending on what is in style. Consumer products thus speak a language as they recount capitalism's ability to deplete things – items for sale, human life? – of innate meaning. Alienation thus becomes capitalism's keynote. In Konvolut N of *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin writes:

With the vitiation of their use value, the alienated things are hollowed out and, as ciphers, they draw in meanings. Subjectivity takes possession of them insofar as it invests them with intensions of desire and fear. And insofar as defunct things stand in as images of subjective intentions...[d]ialectical images are constellated between alienated things and incoming and disappearing meaning....<sup>16</sup>

This socioeconomic interpretation of items that are arbitrarily assigned meaning echoes Marx's famous description of the commodity as "a very strange thing,

---

15 Ibid., 875.

16 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 466.

abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.”<sup>17</sup> With the passage of time, valuable objects are “hollowed out” and go for below cost; they become depleted and ruinous debris even if they were once quite expensive. This hollowing out affirms a materialist reading of history, insisting that cultural meanings emanate not from ontological truths but from economic relations and their socio-historical setting. Commodities are devoid of any enduring value and alternate depending on historical circumstances. “[E]strangement of the commodities from their initial meaning as use-values produced by human labor is in fact the prerequisite” of Marxian critique, Susan Buck-Morss explains.<sup>18</sup>

As we have seen, the centrality of the hollowed-out object carries over into Benjamin’s analysis of the city. Importantly, in Florence what becomes clear is that it is not only the innate value of everyday consumer items that vanishes (assuming that it ever existed), but even the interpretation of world-renown, revered works of art whose meanings were surely stable at the time of their creation. Even the city’s religious art stands depleted of original meanings when it operates as a lodestar for commercial relations, an announcement about where to shop or where to seek sustenance. While its original purpose was surely to invoke the enduring nature of Christian theology, it now denotes the possibility of money changing hands: buying, selling, bargaining, begging, swindling. The Baptist’s outstretched hand announces not the arrival of the Messiah but the spot where selfies are sold; flower-studded garlands that gracefully embower a passageway speak not of hollowed ground but of the place that displays Gucci handbags and where beggars might receive a handout. Hence the lack of stability that the cathedral, the statue, the painting now suffer demonstrates that they partakes of the “danger” to which Benjamin alludes: they speak not the artist’s original intentions, but of the human struggle of the artworks’ current setting. What was created as an affirmation of Florence’s enduring cultural contribution now allows danger to “flash up,” for it unveils the brutality lying just below the surface of capitalist societies. If read dialectically, the city’s famous cultural markings thus allow insights into our violent, consumerist, demographically shifting, spiritually bankrupt world.

---

17 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1, translated by Ben Fowkes, New York: Penguin, 1990, 163.

18 Buck-Morss, 181.



Nevertheless, the arbitrariness of meaning and its attendant dangers also contain a potential breakthrough. For even as Christian Messianism in its current setting either undergoes derision (by those more devoted to shopping) or is simply misunderstood (by non-Christian, non-Western foreigners), it is important to recall Benjamin's unique interpretation of messianism, that element that perceives redemption in catastrophe and that does not give up on the critical faculty. For however deadened and dulled the acumen – Konvolut D of *The Arcades Project* is titled “Boredom, Eternal Return” and describes boredom as “the sleep of the collective”<sup>19</sup> – its dormant ability to engage politically with the world endows Benjamin's writing with a redemptive dimension. Despite his Marxist leanings and insistence on the importance of immanent, socioeconomic reality, his adherence to a redemptive reading of history nevertheless introduces a messianic strain in his work that does not preclude religious overtones. “Benjamin was totally unwilling to give up the register of cosmic time as an axis for plotting both philosophy and political practice” writes Buck-Morss.<sup>20</sup>

Exactly to what degree this axis resonates with the Kabbalist tradition which surely informs his writing has been the topic of much debate. Rolf Tiedemann has emphasized Benjamin's claim that “no thought ... of a Messiah in the religious sense” sullies his oeuvre, for in “On the Concept of History” Benjamin affirms that “Marx secularized the concept of the Messianic Age. And that was as it should be.”<sup>21</sup> Yet Tiedemann and others ponder the repeated references to redemptive language in Benjamin's writings; why speak in redemptive tones at all? Yet this tendency is epitomized in his concept of *Jetztzeit*, “now-time,” that register of time that allows chronological history and cairological redemption to unite, causing reflection and intellectual work to translate into political engagement. *Jetztzeit* refers to that time wherein the deadening, anaesthetizing powers of capitalism have been vanquished in favor of a deeper wish for a new social order: when classlessness, in other words, replaces shopping, channel surfing, texting, emailing, tweeting, app appraising, facebook following, and our search

---

19 Ibid., 108.

20 Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, 1989, 247.

21 Quoted in Buck-Morss, 247.

for the latest gadgetry. (“Why does everyone share the newest thing with someone else?” Benjamin asks in *Konvolut D*. “Presumably, in order to triumph over the dead. This only where there is nothing really new.”<sup>22</sup>)

*Jetztzeit* thus introduces political engagement into Benjamin’s erudite reading of modernity; it connects his rarified aesthetic analysis to everyday power relations.

Indeed, the thematics of redemption interfuse Benjamin’s writings despite – rather, *because of* – his Marxist convictions. Messianic conviction and Marxist critique thus constitute the opposing poles of his thought and allow his insights into dialectical images to have an empirical impact: they reveal present-day “danger” and inspire political engagement. His positing of a collective unconscious as articulated in the “Exposé of 1935” clarifies the messianic strain that permeates his thought and its covert, obscured expression in every variety of cultural marker. He writes:

Corresponding to the form of the new means of production...are images in the collective consciousness in which the old and the new interpenetrate...In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its successor, the latter appears wedded to elements of primal history, “*Urgeschichte*” – that is, to elements of a classless society. And the experiences of such a society – as stored in the unconscious of the collective – engender, through interpenetration with what is new, the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions.<sup>23</sup>

Florence surely offers “enduring edifices and passing fashions” to all who visit, and wherever its creative energies have left their trace there exist both insatiable consumers and indigent immigrants or the local poor. Spirituality/commercialism/poverty all coalesce in a violent, incongruous manner that reveals capitalism’s dangers and the brutalities of contemporary global politics. It is not easy to read Florence’s beauty as an expression of capitalism’s ugliness, nor to read the Renaissance against itself as it unveils the poverty of the present. Yet if

---

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 112.

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin, “Exposé of 1935,” in *The Arcades Project*, 4-5.

we take Benjamin's dialectical images seriously, "the old and the new interpenetrate" and allow us to read the imprimatur of the Renaissance differently. We see both hollowed out images *and* the need to become politically active, all in the same item. The throngs of eager shoppers in search of name brand items, along with foreign-born émigrés selling selfie sticks and illuminated pinwheels endow the city's cultural markings with dialectical meaning. In this way, Benjamin's cultural critique allows the birthplace of Renaissance Europe to have *contemporary* importance. The Baptist indeed proclaims the need to get ready, change our lives and get involved as his Renaissance origins comment on the dangers of the present.

## The lively voice of Critical Theory

Berlin Journal of Critical Theory (BJCT) is a peer-reviewed journal which is published in both electronic and print formats by Xenomoi Verlag in Berlin. The goal is to focus on the critical theory of the first generation of the Frankfurt School and to extend their theories to our age. Unfortunately, it seems that most of the concerns and theories of the first generation of the Frankfurt School are neglected in its second and third generations.

We believe that the theories of the first generation of the Frankfurt School are still capable of explaining many social, cultural, and political problems of our time. However, in some cases, we need to revise those theories. For example, the culture industry in our time can also work with a different mechanism from that described by Adorno and Horkheimer. In our age, the majorities can access the media and even respond to the messages which they receive – this is something which was not possible in Adorno and Horkheimer's time. But this doesn't mean that the culture industry's domination is over. Thus, we may need to revise the theory of the culture industry to explain the new forms of cultural domination in our age.

Therefore, we are planning to link the theories of the first generation of the Frankfurt school to the problems of our age. This means that we are looking for original and high-quality articles in the field of critical theory. To reach our goals, we gathered some of the leading scholars of critical theory in our editorial board to select the best articles for this journal.

ISSN: 2567-4056 (online)

2567-4048 (print)

[www.bjct.de](http://www.bjct.de)

 xenomoi