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Contents

Kittler's <i>Apophrades</i>: Marshaling McLuhan	5
<i>Richard Cavell</i>	
Conspiracy theory, in theory: from history and knowledge in theory to the production of nonknowledge and structural amnesia in theoretical explanation	35
<i>Peter Chambers</i>	
Recovering the Gender Dimension of Frankfurt School Critical Theory: A Feminist Analysis	77
<i>Barbara Umrath</i>	
Outwitting the Spirits? Toward a Political Ecology of Animism	127
<i>Michael Kleinod, Timo Duile and Christoph Antweiler</i>	
Towards a New Interpretation of Horkheimer's Stance towards Science and Technology in the Context of his Critique to Positivism	177
<i>Paula García Cherep and Adriana Gonzalo</i>	

Kittler's *Apophrades*: Marshaling McLuhan

Richard Cavell¹

Abstract: Kittler's complex relationship to McLuhan can be understood through Harold Bloom's notion of *apophrades*: a way of acknowledging one's predecessor that suggests the predecessor is derivative of his successor. Kittler invokes McLuhan at key points in his mediatic elaborations, only to undermine those references preposterously: that the "post" precedes the "pre." From his writings on war to his Hellenistic last phase, Kittler positions McLuhan as the ambiguous Kilroy who was "here," only to disappear when one looked again. The hinge of Kittler's complex relationship to McLuhan was Kittler's anti-anthropomorphism. This too was a Kittler construct; while McLuhan was concerned with the anthropocene at the end of his career, it was Kittler in his last phase who embraced the anthropomorphism of gods who acted like humans.

What difference does war make? – Imagine somebody who doesn't have a memory, who can't think of anything beyond what he sees, hears and feels. ... War doesn't exist for him. He sees the hill, the sky, he feels the dry membranes of his throat shrinking, he hears the boom of ... he'd need a memory to know what's causing it. He hears a booming sound, he sees people sprawled out here and there, three planes are practicing skywriting. Nothing going on. War doesn't exist.

Willem Frederik Hermans, *An Untouched House*²

Kittler agonistes

When Harold Bloom published *The Anxiety of Influence*³ in 1973, it was controversial not because its thesis proposed that poets seek

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 - 2 Willem Frederik Hermans, *An Untouched House*, trans. David Colmer, with an afterword by Cees Nooteboom (1951; Brooklyn: Archipelago Books, 2017), 9.
 - 3 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973; 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997).

to *outdo* their predecessors, but because Bloom applied this thesis to *poets*, who were thought to spend most of their time wandering lonely as a cloud, without an aggressive daffodil in sight. Had the book been about critics, no one would have batted an eye, since critique is based on overcoming one's critical predecessors, often as brutally as possible. Yet Bloom's thesis is illuminating when applied to the terrain of critique, given the multifaceted options he proposed for extending the Freudian Oedipus complex to writerly activities.

Bloom articulates his thesis according to "six revisionary ratios": *clinamen* is a poetic swerve from an avowed master; *tessera* involves the new poet treating his predecessor as a mere "token" of an idea that the new poet will bring to fruition; *kenosis* acknowledges the achievement of the predecessor but does so in such a way that the new poet's humbling paradoxically places them on a higher plane; *daemonization* proposes the sublimity of the predecessor but seeks to produce a counter-sublime as a way of critiquing the predecessor's apparent uniqueness; *askesis* is a form of self-purgation that paradoxically produces the uniqueness of the younger poet; and *apophrades* acknowledges the uniqueness of the predecessor but in such a way that the predecessor's achievement appears derivative of the later poet's work. It is particularly *apophrades* that provides a platform for understanding McLuhan and Kittler, in that it allows us to frame Kittler's anxious relationship to McLuhan while at the same time throwing light on aspects of McLuhan's work that would otherwise not be visible.

Bloom writes of the *apophrades* that "strong poets keep returning from the dead, and only through the quasi-willing mediumship of other strong poets. *How* they return is the decisive matter, for if they return intact, then the return impoverishes the later poets, dooming them to be remembered—if at all—as having ended in poverty, in an imaginative need they could not themselves gratify" (140-1). "Mediumship" draws attention to the fact that this dynamic is an act of remediation, and Bloom exploits the classical notion of *apophrades* to describe this dynamic: "[t]he *apophrades*, the dismal or unlucky days upon which the dead return

to inhabit their former houses, come to the strongest poets. ... For all of them achieve a style that captures and oddly retains priority over their precursors, so that the tyranny of time almost is overturned, and one can believe, for startled moments, that they are being *imitated by their ancestors*" (141). Dante achieved this with Virgil by making him his guide through hell and purgatory, but in this case, it was the son who engendered the father, only to dismiss him oedipally at heaven's gate. It is this Dante who appears on the cover of Kittler's *Aufschreibesysteme 1800 / 1900* (1985), but in this case a typewriter is engendering Dante.

Bloom articulates the Freudian dimension of the *apophrades* as being "akin to the mature ego's delight in its own individuality, which reduces to the mystery of narcissism. This narcissism is what Freud terms ... 'the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation.' The strong poet's love of his poetry, *as itself*, must exclude the reality of all other poetry, except for what cannot be excluded, the initial identification with the poetry of the precursor. ... The strong poet peers in the mirror of his fallen precursor and beholds neither the precursor nor himself but a Gnostic double, the dark otherness or antithesis that both he and the precursor longed to be, yet feared to become. Out of this deepest evasion, the complex imposture of the positive *apophrades* constitutes itself" (146-7).

Written in 1973, *The Anxiety of Influence* saw the light of day as McLuhan's career was drawing to a close (he published his last book in 1975) and Friedrich Kittler's was beginning (he published *Der Traum und die Rede* in 1977). The overview of McLuhan's and Kittler's careers is remarkably similar: both began as literary scholars who turned to media at a certain point in their careers, and the trajectory of their careers is informed by the foundational interest in the oral/literate dynamic⁴, Kittler's career ending—problematically—in the study of orality where McLuhan's be-

4 Steven Connor notes that "Kittler is in fact an historical writer principally in the sense that he projects into a historical form the terms of a conceptual opposition between voice and writing" (130). See "*Scilicet*: Kittler, Media and Madness" in *Kittler Now: Current Perspectives in Kittler Studies*, ed. Stephen Sale and Laura Salisbury (London: Polity, 2015), 113-130.

gan. However, while aligning himself with the fundamentals of McLuhan's media theory, Kittler appeared to reject everything else. He concurs in *Discourse Networks*⁵ with McLuhan that "[w]riting ... has its message only in the medium it constitutes" (185), although he would later refute this notion, and that "[f]ollowing McLuhan's law, ... the content of a medium is always another medium" (115), a notion he would antedate to a comment by Walter Rathenau (of all people!). He likewise claims in *Gramophone Film Typewriter*⁶ that he is theorizing "in strict accordance with McLuhan" that "[w]hat counts are not the messages ... but rather ... circuits, the very schematism of perceptibility" (xl-xli) while displacing perception from the human domain to that of mediation. Again and again in Kittler's work, at every major turning point, we find him alluding to McLuhan as fundamental to media theory, only to then undermine that priority through the process that Bloom describes as *apophrades*.

Der Vorname

The 2018 film *Der Vorname*—literally "The Forename" but jauntily titled *How About Adolf?* in its North American release⁷—is a contemporary comedy about a dinner party at an upper middle-class house in Bonn at which a guest casually announces that he and his partner have decided to name their unborn son "Adolf," and all hell breaks loose. Kittler showed a similar sensitivity to his middle name in one of his last interviews. Asked about his relationship to Martin Heidegger that seemed (to E. Khayyat, the interviewer) to be characterized by both intimacy and a distance that the interviewer characterizes as "humilty," or perhaps "political," Kittler replies:

if you allow me to read between the lines for a second, I have to say that I have difficulty understanding what you mean by

5 Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800 / 1900*, trans. Michael Metteer, with Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990). Hereafter *DN*.

6 Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999). Hereafter *GFT*.

7 *Der Vorname* (2018), directed by Söke Wortmann, from *Le Prénom*, a play that premiered in 2010, and was made into a French film of that title in 2012.

my 'political' connection to Heidegger. You are probably suggesting, already at the outset of our conversation, that there has to be a relationship between what people have come to describe as Friedrich Adolf Kittler's 'reactionary thoughts,' on the one hand, and a certain conservatism ascribed to Martin Heidegger, on the other. I can tell you in advance that the kind of 'political connection' you mention existed between Heidegger, Derrida, and, for instance, de Man, and perhaps one can read the traces of this political connection in their and also their allies' works. It was Derrida himself, actually, who wrote about 'our innocence' in his defense and/or refutation of de Man's conservatism. I would never consider myself a member of a club of innocents, even if I were considered one.⁸

Kittler goes on to reference Carl Schmitt—"since you want me to appear reactionary" (9)—to clarify his own sense of humility, which means that in understanding a topic such as politics, or "software architecture," we should "start bottom-up instead of top-down" (9).

Asked if this motivates his interest in the Greek alphabet, Kittler states that "such curiosities do not necessarily make us Hellenocentric," noting that his teacher Johannes Lohmann "wrote at length on the poetry of the Semitic languages,"⁹ albeit with "a little bit of ethnocentrism" (10).¹⁰

8 E. Khayyat, "The Humility of Thought," interview with Friedrich A. Kittler, *boundary 2* 39.3 (2012) 7-27; this quote 8.

9 Kittler's assertion that "'[e]veryone can speak Greek who merely knows the letters, but not Egyptian and Semitic'" has been read as a racialized statement by Ute Holl, who terms Kittler's comment "virulent." See Ute Holl, *The Moses Complex: Freud, Schoenberg, Straub/Huillet*, trans. Michael Turnbull (Zurich and Berlin: Diaphanes, 2017) 58-60. See also Richard Cavell, *Speechsong: The Gould/Schoenberg Dialogues* (Goleta: Punctum P, 2020) 67-76.

10 Kittler further clarifies in "Mousa or Litteratura" (2004) that "consonantic alphabets can easily be written and read by native speakers who know to orally supplement the missing vowels. It was precisely for this faculty that Johannes Lohmann, one of my greatest academic teachers, spoke of a specific poetry inherent in Semitic languages and alphabets. For strangers, however, purely consonantic alphabets tend to be as unreadable as they are unspeakable. The poetic wonder of saying and singing simply fails to occur." Archived at: https://monoskop.org/images/1/1e/Kittler_Friedrich_2004_Mousa_or_Litteratura.pdf

Kittler asserts that his research into the Greek alphabet could equally be undertaken with reference to Chinese culture or Arabic culture by looking at “their notation systems, their numeric systems” (10), which is what he sought to do for German in *Discourse Networks*. That research, he adds, “is the beginning of media history, not media theory, since media theory had started with McLuhan earlier” (10). Kittler adds that “[t]his is not resistance to theory. It is, rather, a suspension of certain modes of thinking. ... The point is not engineering some form or another of enclosure, but to make space for a new kind of history by attending to those little things, letters, which in the end are our only legitimate access to culture” (10). That “new kind of history” would focus on “scripts and writing systems [as] media technologies” (14), and Kittler argues that his attempts to draw attention to the importance of “vowels and consonants” (16) constitutes his “open field battle” that maps onto “a battle fought between Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew” (17). “It looks like we will never leave this war zone” (19), responds the interviewer, to which Kittler suggests that shifts in cultural history constitute a battle—the divide “between Greek letters and Latin letters ... has always been the bloodland” (20-1).

This metaphor of war is literalized in the essays collected under the title *Operation Valhalla*.¹¹ Heraclitus may have said that “war is the father of all and the king of all,”¹² but Kittler was more likely channeling Foucault’s comment in a 1977 interview about the notion of epistemic discontinuity that appeared to be crucial to works such as *The Order of Things*:

The problem is at once to distinguish among events, to differentiate the networks and levels to which they belong, and to reconstitute the lines along which they are connected and engender one another. From this follows a refusal of analyses

11 Friedrich Kittler, *Operation Valhalla: Writings on War, Weapons, and Media*, ed. and trans. by Ilinca Iurascu, Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, and Michael Wutz, with an introduction by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (Durham: Duke UP, 2021).

12 Diels-Kranz B53, from Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 9.9.4, as noted in “Heraclitus,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heraclitus>.

couched in terms of the symbolic field or the domain of signifying structures, and a recourse to analyses in terms of the genealogy of relations of force, strategic developments, and tactics. Here I believe one's point of reference should not be to the great model of language (*langue*) and signs, but to that of war and battle. The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning.¹³

The rejection of structuralism and semiotics, together with the notion of a history that "determines" us, needed only a small nudge from Kittler to become the mediatic ruptures that he would map onto war.

The connection between war and media had been made forcefully by F. T. Marinetti at the beginning of the twentieth century, earning him acknowledgement by at least one scholar as McLuhan's predecessor.¹⁴ The avant garde was itself a military term, aligning the aggressiveness of WW1 with a media onslaught that was only beginning to be understood. By the time of McLuhan's 1968 *War and Peace in the Global Village*,¹⁵ however—written at the height of the Viet Nam war, when, as McLuhan noted, battle took place every evening in one's home during the televised news hour—the connections had become clear. Kittler's acknowledgement of WPGV constitutes one of the most telling occurrences of his *apophrades* with McLuhan. Rather than the reference to how a "more or less successful extension of the United States" (as Kittler deems the global village) has the effect of "turn[ing] Marshall McLuhan on his head" with "pet dogs" becoming "wolves,"¹⁶ it is the reference to "the stirrup" (152)

13 Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," interview with Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino, in *Power / Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper (N.Y.: Pantheon, 1980) 109-133; this quote 114.

14 See Luciano de Maria's edition of Marinetti's *Teoria e invenzione futurista* (Milano: Mondadori, 1983), and the discussion in Richard Cavell, *Marinetti Dines with the High Command* (Montreal: Guernica, 2014). Kittler writes about the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature* in DN 363.

15 Marshall McLuhan, with Quentin Fiore and Jerome Agel, *War and Peace in the Global Village* (N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1968). Hereafter WPGV.

16 Kittler, "Of States and their Terrorists," *Operation Valhalla* 147.

in “Manners of Death in War” that takes an entire book and reduces it to a word. “I hope you will forgive me if, in the following, I will skip over the eras of the chariot and the phalanx, and the mounted posse and the stirrup, and instead concentrate on the recent historical moment whose techno-historical marker is the firearm” (152). In that word “stirrup” lies Kittler’s sole reference to McLuhan’s book, in which McLuhan draws on Lynn White’s account in *Medieval Technology and Social Change* of the role that the stirrup played in the evolution of war. The book has been heavily critiqued¹⁷—McLuhan himself found it “hilarious” (WPGV 26)—but he characteristically read White’s narrative in terms of the effects of “pho-
netic literacy” (26) and its tendency toward specialization, which is here embodied by the stirrups that gave rise to the profession of soldiering. What most attracted McLuhan to White’s history was White’s assertion that an entire social order could be disrupted by the sudden introduction of a new technology. As White writes,

‘the England of the later eleventh century furnishes the classic example in European history of the disruption of a social order by the sudden introduction of an alien military technology. ... Few inventions have been so simple as the stirrup, but few have had so catalytic an influence on history. The requirements of the new mode of warfare it made possible found expression in a new form of western European society dominated by an aristocracy of warriors endowed with land so that they might fight in a new and highly specialized way. Inevitably this nobility developed cultural forms and patterns of thought and emotion in harmony with its style of mounted shock combat and its social posture.’ (quoted by McLuhan 33)

McLuhan was also fascinated by White’s assertion that the connection of a human to a horse by a stirrup produced a new “organism” (quoting White, 33); McLuhan had made a similar argument about humans and their technologies. This leads him to assert that “information environ-

17 See Steven A. Walton, ed., *Fifty Years of Medieval Technology and Social Change* (London: Routledge, 2019). Walton and his contributors appear to be unaware of the connection to McLuhan. The general tenor of contemporary critiques of White focused on his “technical determinism.”

ments ... take over the evolutionary work that Darwin had seen in the spontaneities of biology" (36-7), a comment that anticipates the anthropocene: "the computer has made possible our satellites which have put a man-made environment around the planet, ending 'nature' in the older sense ... [E]lectric information systems are live environments in the full organic sense" (36).¹⁸

As these comments suggest, the major technological change that is McLuhan's focus in *WPGV* is computation, and he anticipates Kittler in his comment that "[e]very new technology necessitates a new war" (98) while moving in a different direction with his assertions that "war [is] education" (96) and "education [is] war" (148). By this, McLuhan meant that media change our perceptions, thus educating us to understand the world in different ways, and that this change in mediation was inevitably agonistic. In addition to construing the Viet Nam conflict as "our first television war" (134), McLuhan quotes Frantz Fanon's *Studies in a Dying Colonialism* with its suggestion that owning a radio in Algeria in 1956 was the sole means of entering into the Revolution (99). Most provocatively, he reads the atom bomb as the mediatic *a priori* of the software that is "swiftly undermining the entire industrial establishment so long devoted to hardware" (121). War, thus, is not a contained event for McLuhan; it is an ongoing concomitant of technology: "[c]ivilization" he writes "[is] the mother of war" (24). Hence, Napoleon and semaphores and right-hand traffic (102-111; cf. Kittler, "Free Ways" 55). Hence "[t]he First World War [as] ... a railway war, [was] enormously exaggerated in scope and destruction by the extension of industrialism and the enlargement of cities" (132)—or, as Kittler echoes, electronics "not only make large cities (*pace* Marshall McLuhan) into global villages; it also makes them just as easily destructible as villages" ("Playback" 107). WW2, writes McLuhan, "was a radio war as much as it was an industrial war" (132), the radio having the effect "of switching the vision of a whole population from

18 Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, in *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2017) cite McLuhan (60-1) as one of the first formulators of the concept as related to media.

visually conceived objectives to the total field of polarized energies that automatically goes with radio and auditory space” (133). Here Kittler and McLuhan appear to converge; as Geoffrey Winthrop-Young argues, for Kittler “[w]ar is not only the potential ground or origin but perhaps also the goal or vanishing point of accelerated human-machine interactions.”¹⁹ For McLuhan, the mediatic assault on identity—especially in the electronic era—would produce a perpetual state of violence. This strikes a different note from the one rung by Kittler, whose approach might be described as microscopic, as opposed to McLuhan’s macroscopic approach. As Winthrop-Young puts it, “you may well doubt whether there ever was a serious war [for Kittler] that did not involve Germany and the Germans” (2).

Over the rainbow

The most famous rainbow in American cultural memory is the one Judy Garland sings about in *The Wizard of Oz*,²⁰ which premiered on August 25th, 1939, as the rockets were being primed. The movie’s storyline is a media history that takes us from the “O” to “Z” of a two-drawer filing cabinet to the beginnings of black and white cinema and the introduction of Technicolor, and to the advent of television, where the film was remediated in 1956 to enjoy the success that had eluded it on its premiere. The second most famous rainbow in American cultural memory is Thomas Pynchon’s; as the title suggests, *Gravity’s Rainbow*²¹ seeks to bring Dorothy’s mediatic utopia down to earth (as the epigraph to part 3 suggests), and it does so through the medium of war, the V2 launched in Germany tellingly descending toward a Hollywood cinema at the novel’s end. Kittler’s obsession with this novel derived from his “almost pathological in-

19 Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, “Introduction: The Wars of Friedrich Kittler,” *Operation Valhalla* 23.

20 *The Wizard of Oz*, directed by Victor Fleming, starring Judy Garland, Frank Morgan, Ray Bolger, Bert Lahr, Jack Haley, Billie Burke, Margaret Hamilton and Charlie Grapewin; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939.

21 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (N.Y.: Viking Penguin, 1973). Hereafter GR.

tolerance of anthropomorphism" (37), as Winthrop-Young puts it; what *Gravity's Rainbow* offered him was an account of WW2 that was purely technological. This was the most far-reaching product of his *apophrades* with McLuhan, whom he constructed as the anthropomorphist par excellence.

If McLuhan's theories of technology were anthropomorphic they were not unproblematically so in terms of the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of ascribing "human personality or characteristics to something non-human." He argued that we were human *through* our technologies; that the printing press had produced "typographic" man; and that the ultimate trajectory of digitality was the uploading of human consciousness into the computer. It could be said that McLuhan's media theories were anthropocentric in precisely the same way that they were technologically determinist. As Anna Schechtman writes,

McLuhan's media theory is paradoxically deterministic and open to contingency, historical specificity and variability. One way he achieves the latter while retaining the vast explanatory potential of media determinism is by describing the content of any medium as another, previous medium. So, 'the content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print' (*Understanding Media*, p. 8). This formula allows for communication technologies to have diverse effects among diverse populations and cultures. If an electric medium like television arrives in an oral culture, for example, the effect is quite different from its effect in a print culture. Historical contingency and multicausality are likewise preserved by McLuhan's notion that every new medium is both an extension of one sense (the telephone is an extension of the voice) and an amputation, or numbing, of another.²²

To put it another way, McLuhan's understanding of technology was re-

22 Anna Schechtman, "Command of Media's Metaphors," *Critical Inquiry* 47 (2021) 644-674; this quote 660-61 n.45. John Durham Peters writes, in a similar vein, that McLuhan was "ever the meta-artist" who "could conjure *dissoi logoi*" as "the true *parrhēsiastēs*, the provoker of truth." See "'You Mean My Whole Fallacy is Wrong': On Technological Determinism," *Representations* 140.1 (2017) 10-26; this quote 24.

lational: humans were related to technology as technology was related to the human. As Sybille Kramer once observed,

Our senses are stimulated by media, which does not lead to the reciprocal case that media can be effectively described without reference to the senses. ... Kittler develops [this] concept of media in connection with, but especially in latent opposition to, the father of contemporary media debates, Marshall McLuhan. ... McLuhan's theories reflect the aspect of the escalating drive of media to surpass that is so crucial to Kittler in a way that does not exclude but rather incorporates man and the organization of his senses into this self-dynamism without thereby needing to fossilize man as the intentional subject of this wave of technologization.²³

Kittler's anti-anthropomorphism allowed him to pursue a trajectory that is clearly allied with McLuhan's while appearing to reject it, leading Kittler to the most telling aspect of his interest in war, and particularly WW2: the impulse to make the human into a machine.

It was in this context that Daniel Paul Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*²⁴ served as the leitmotif for Kittler's theory of discourse networks. If "Schreber's delusionary systems are a kind of unconscious parody of the preoccupations of philosophy,"²⁵ Kittler's discourse networks were a *conscious* parody of philosophy, especially in their eradication of "so-called Man."²⁶ For Kittler, the afflicted Schreber is "a single, highly complex information system" (DN 293), such that "[t]he *Memoirs* stand and fight in the war of two discourse networks" (297): "[t]hose who roar, howl, or whistle are not presenting lachrymose theories of Man in a technological world; rather, they aim at discursive effects" (302). Yet, as Elias

23 Sybille Kramer, "The Cultural Techniques of Time Axis Manipulation: On Friedrich Kittler's Conception of Media," *Theory, Culture and Society* 23.7-8 (2006) 93-109; this quote 105.

24 Daniel Paul Schreber, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, trans. Ida Macalpine and Richard A. Hunter, intro. Rosemary Dinnage (1955; rpt. N.Y.: New York Review, 2000).

25 Rosemary Dinnage, "Introduction" to Schreber, *Memoirs* xi-xxiv; this quote xix.

26 *GFT*, xxxix.

Canetti suggested in *Crowds and Power*,²⁷ there are considerable affinities between Schreber's paranoia and totalitarianism, the link, as Rosemary Dinnage notes, being Schreber senior's child rearing methods, including the *Geradehalter*, or posture corset, "the cold water health system, the system to cure harmful body habits, indoor gymnastic systems for health preservation, outdoor play systems, the lifelong systematic diet guide"²⁸ that have much in common with the hypermasculinity nurtured by National Socialism that reappears in the work of "metalised"²⁹ writers of this period, such as Ernst Junger and Ernst von Salomon.³⁰ Geoffrey Win-

27 Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (London: Gollancz, 1962). "It may be objected that this 'political' interpretation of Schreber is implausible; that his apocalyptic visions are inherently religious and that he claims no dominion over the living; that the power of a 'seer of spirits' is essentially different from political power; and that, since his delusion starts from the idea that all men are dead, there is no justification for attributing to him any interest in worldly power. The fallaciousness of this objection will soon become clear. We shall find in Schreber a political system of a disturbingly familiar kind. ... [Schreber's] God ... is a despot. ... [Schreber's] political system had within a few decades [of the publication of the *Memoirs*] been accorded high honour: though in a rather cruder and less literate form it became the creed of a great nation, leading ... to the conquest of Europe and coming within a hair's breadth of the conquest of the world. ... [T]he craving for invulnerability and the passion for survival merge into each other. In this, too, the paranoid is the exact image of the ruler" (443-462).

28 Dinnage, "Introduction" xii. The key word is "system." Dinnage adds that the link to "German totalitarianism ... may seem too far-fetched. ... And yet Hitler's generation was growing up at a time when Moritz Schreber's books of 'household totalitarianism' – [Morton] Schatzman's excellent phrase – were still popular" (xvii). Schatzman is the author of *Soul Murder: Persecution in the Family* (N.Y.: Random House, 1973), which details Moritz Schreber's child rearing systems.

29 The term is Mike Featherstone's in "Apocalypse Now! From Freud, through Lacan, to Steigler's Psychoanalytic 'Survival Project,'" *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law - Revue internationale de sémiotique juridique* 33 (2020) 409-31; this quote 415.

30 On von Salomon see chapter 2, "Ressentiment: Democratic Sentiments and the Affective Structure of Postwar West Germany," in Anna M. Parkinson, *Emotional State: The Politics of Emotion in Postwar West German Culture* (Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 2015). Parkinson states that von Salomon's "postwar subject is a rancorous figure, taking pleasure in converting his own guilt into what he sees as his suffering at the hands of others, while residing comfort-

throp-Young remarks that, in seeking to elaborate a WW2 that “has little to do with politics and ideology,” Kittler displays “more than a passing resemblance to another highly controversial author revered by Kittler, Ernst Jünger (1895-1998), whose essays ... similarly attempt to process the impact of the technological dimensions of World War I at the expense of the usual political and ideological accounts.”³¹ Mike Featherstone has argued that what these writers sought “was to become machines, because this was preferable to the weakness of the human that they wanted to eliminate” (415). While Kittler refers to several works of Junger in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, von Salomon is present only indirectly, via his implication in the assassination of Walter Rathenau, who figures in *Gramophone Film Typewriter* (and *Gravity’s Rainbow*).

Von Salomon is best known for *Fragebogen*,³² published in 1951, which takes the questionnaire distributed in 1945 by the Allied Military Government to all those suspected of collaborating with the Nazis and turns it into a combination autobiography, novel and movie script—von Salomon wrote screenplays during the war for the German film company UFA (Universum Film AG). Kittler remarks about this film company that “UFA, Germany’s feature film company, was created in 1917, as we all know, under the auspices of the General Staff’s Office for Image and Film (BUFA) and at the instigation of the First Quartermaster-General, Infantry General Erich Ludendorff. Small wonder that media wars never

ably in the perception that these others are responsible for his suffering” (69). Parkinson further notes that “[i]n the three years leading up to the National Socialist takeover in 1933, von Salomon released four militaristic books: ... *Die Geächteten* (The Outlaws, 1930), a novel based on his experiences in the Freikorps; *Die Stadt* (It Cannot Be Stormed, 1932); *Die Kadetten* (The Cadets, 1933); and *Putsch* (Coup d’état, 1933). These texts were not an anomaly, being part of a particular literary current—personified by Ernst Jünger—that glorified military experience” (75). Von Salomon, whose role in the Rathenau murder was procuring the car for the assassins, claimed to have read Rathenau’s works and to have been impressed by them.

31 Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, *Kittler and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011) 141-2.

32 Ernst von Salomon, *Fragebogen (The Questionnaire)*, trans. Constantine Fitzgibbon, with a preface by Goronwy Rees (N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955).

end."³³ Von Salomon's strategy in *Fragebogen* is to expand his answers to the questionnaire exponentially, thereby calling into question its naive assumption that a human being can be conjured via a set of programmatic questions; in the process, von Salomon completely disassociates himself from National Socialism, while demonstrating that rational questions cannot recuperate the madness of bellic discourse. The book became a bestseller in Germany, and appeared in English translation in 1954 to vitriolic reviews. In the course of *Fragebogen*, von Salomon provides an impenitent summation of WW2 that resonates with Kittler's notion that wars are occasioned by technologies: "[i]f it is machines that win wars, ... [i]f it is objects and not human beings that conquer, then there seems to be no reason why the conquered should not also be considered as objects" (454).

Klaus Theweleit argues that von Salomon's association with the *Freikorps* offered him "a welcome opportunity to become a man after all, at the trigger of a machine gun," and identifies von Salomon as "a male type who finds life without war and weapons unimaginable," adding that von Salomon was a body-machine—a "man of steel."³⁴ In 1922, von Salomon was party to the assassination of the German Foreign Minister, Walter Rathenau (for which Von Salomon served five years in prison). As both a litterateur and the chairman of AEG (*Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft*, one of Germany's major electronics corporations), Rathenau was prime fodder for Kittler, who, bizarrely, makes him into a predecessor of McLuhan:

In Rathenau's story 'Resurrection Co.,' the cemetery administration of Necropolis, Dacota/USA [sic], following a series of scandalous premature burials in 1898, founds a daughter

33 Kittler, "Romanticism—Psychoanalysis—Film: A History of the Double" in John Johnston, ed. and intro., *Literature, Media, Information Systems: Friedrich A. Kittler Essays* (1997; rpt. N.Y.: Routledge, 2012) 85-100; this quote 93.

34 See *Male Fantasies I: Women Floods Bodies History*, trans. Stephen Conway, with Erica Carter and Chris Turner (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1987), 18 and 24; and *Male Fantasies II: Male Bodies: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror*, trans. Erica Carter and Chris Turner, with Stephen Conway (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1989) 160.

company entitled ‘Dacota [sic] and Central Resurrection Telephone [and] Bell Co.’ with a capital stock of \$750,000. Its sole purpose is to make certain that the inhabitants of graves, too, are connected to the public telephone. Whereupon the dead avail themselves of the opportunity to prove, long before McLuhan, that the content of one medium is always another medium. (*GFT* 12)³⁵

Remediation is here metaphorized as the resurrection from the “realm of the dead” (13) of a previous medium by a new one—in this case, the telephone. The body is mute, but it is given voice electronically. As Louis Kaplan comments, “[m]odern media technologies always generate a site of resurrection and reproduction, a wave of feedback and playback, a ghostly dance of noise and signals. Operating in a simulated limbo, the electronic media transmit the haunting return of the absent in a veritable raising of the dead.”³⁶ This process would characterize Kittler’s last phase, in which digital media would resurrect Hellas.

Rathenau “is associated with a drastic and momentous reordering of economic discourse itself,” according to Markus Krajewski,³⁷ the death of one economic system and its resurrection as another. Rathenau’s relationship with his authoritarian father, Emil, was complicated in ways similar to that between Moritz and Daniel Paul Schreber, but whereas the younger Schreber’s madness was actuated by divine rays being sent to him from the beyond, Walter Rathenau’s monomania originated in the connections made possible by electronic communications. A doctoral student of Hermann von Helmholtz,³⁸ an innovator in wireless com-

35 “Die Resurrection Co.” is available in Louis Kaplan’s translation in *New German Critique* 62 (1994) 63-69. Rathenau published the story pseudonymously, as Hartenau.

36 Louis Kaplan, “Walter Rathenau’s Media Technological Turn as Mediated Through W. Hartenau’s ‘Die Resurrection Co.’: An Essay at Resurrection,” *New German Critique* 62 (1994) 39-62; this quote 40.

37 Markus Krajewski, *World Projects: Global Information before World War I*, trans. Charles Marcrum II (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2015) 137.

38 McLuhan notes in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1964) that “it was because of his conviction that Helmholtz had sent vowels by telegraph that [Alexander Graham] Bell was encouraged to

munications, admired by Edison and acquainted with Tesla,³⁹ Rathenau appears in Robert Musil's *Man Without Qualities* as Dr. Paul Arnheim, who muses at one point that "'empires would sooner or later have to be run just like factories.'" ⁴⁰ This increasingly became Rathenau's concern, which he helped to orchestrate by creating the War Materials Department of the Prussian war ministry (1914-15). That shift, as Krajewski puts it, would be from an economy dominated by "coal and iron" to one organized around "electricity, steel, and oil" (139). In order to achieve his goal of creating a vast economic organization, Rathenau converted all his economic needs into data,⁴¹ creating in the process a *systems* economy that would lead eventually to a corporate culture. Hence Rathenau's mythologization of the telephone. As McLuhan remarks, "[t]he pyramidal structure of job-division and description and delegated powers cannot withstand the speed of the phone to by-pass all hierarchical arrangements, and to involve people in depth. In the same way, mobile panzer divisions equipped with radio telephones upset the traditional army structure."⁴² Rathenau's career was carved out of this interface between media and war.

It is Rathenau himself who is resurrected in *Gravity's Rainbow*, at a Nazi seance where the "medium" is the indubitably anthropomorphic Peter Sachsa. Although the "corporate Nazi crowd" (GR 164) are seeking the "prophet and architect of the cartelized state" (164), whose memory they went to extremes to obliterate, including by burning his books, Rathenau calls their bluff, appearing as the re-mediator of mechanical culture via the AEG. "If you want the truth," he says, "you must look into the technology of these matters" (167); ultimately, the technological truth will be that "everything is connected" (703). War ceases to be an event

persevere in his efforts. It turned out that it was his inadequate German that had fostered this optimistic impression" (271).

39 Kaplan 46 n. 16, and 48.

40 Quoted by Krajewski from *Man Without Qualities* (1995, 553-54).

41 "[T]he new organizations of the war materials associations rely on the latest electric data processing on the basis of punch cards" (150).

42 *Understanding Media*, 271.

in “secular history” and becomes the constituent of technological mediation precisely through its tendency toward totalization. As Jeffrey Severs notes, “Rathenau’s vision gives way, as we progress through the Zone, to an idea of a state not served by military technology but controlled and, indeed, constituted by it: ‘a Rocket-state.’”⁴³ This is what Dorothy discovers when she returns to Kansas: that it was always already mediated. In the same way, the rocket aimed at Hollywood prophesizes nothing less than a transfer of technology from WW2 into the American mediascape contemporary with Pynchon’s novel, such that war aligns with media: history written with lightning bolts⁴⁴ — *Blitzkrieg*.

Siren song

Kittler’s last, musical and mathematical, phase, was inaugurated by his declaration that McLuhan was a media theorist, but that he himself was a media historian, thereby allowing Kittler to eschew McLuhan’s theory that electronic media were remediating acoustic space while embracing “song” as a historical reality: “one should not take the explosion of media of our times as theoretically as its prophets did.”⁴⁵ This assertion allowed Kittler to renounce his earlier comment that McLuhan’s “the medium is the message” constitutes the basis of media theory,⁴⁶ and to posit a historical reality that was at once in the present and in the classical past, as evinced by Roger Waters, of Pink Floyd fame, who once invoked McLuhan (preceding Kittler even here!) while trying to remember when he wrote “Shine On You Crazy Diamond”:

43 As noted by Jeffrey Severs, “Capitalism and Class” in Inger H. Dalsgard, ed., *Pynchon in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2019) 195-202; this quote 198. The GR reference is to 566.

44 Woodrow Wilson reportedly remarked, after a screening of D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (which he enjoyed immensely) that “[i]t is like writing history with lightning.” See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Birth_of_a_Nation.

45 Kittler, “The God of the Ears,” in *The Truth of the Technological World: Essays on the Genealogy of Presence*, trans. Erik Butler, with an afterword by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2013) 45-56; this quote 56. Hereafter *TTW*.

46 *GFT*, xl-xli.

My mind's just a scrambled egg, mate. I can't answer these questions. I don't know! ... I don't know the answers to the questions. I'll have to go home and study some more. I'm going to have to think about it all very carefully then I shall make a statement to the press about all this and that. ... I'm sorry. I wanted to do this interview. I wanted it to be good, coherent, friendly interview for the punters but my mind's scrambled ... no, my mind's not scrambled, I just can't get my mind round all that fucking nonsense ... all that bollocks about when, how and why ... you know, the medium is not the message, Marshall ... is it? I mean, it's all in the lap of fucking gods.⁴⁷

The medium here is the interview that demands factual accounts, a form of history or cultural memory associated with the "gods," who are invoked in their classical guise but also constitute the realm of electronic music, because electric instruments speak not with a human but an other-worldly electronic voice. In this bivalent temporality, metalised man returns, but as strings on an electric guitar. In the acoustic domain that Kittler sought to rediscover in classical Greece, the scribes would be programmers—"computers and Crete are connected."⁴⁸

Kittler described his "Greek turn" as "a shift from the historical study of warfare and its technology to the history of love."⁴⁹ It was to be a vast project—multiple volumes were projected—in the cultural memory of embodied mediation. As Kittler put it in his interview with E. Khayyat, "in Germany, this *Gedächtniskultur*, and memory studies in the United States, is almost always linked to the question of trauma and the Holocaust. I would propose, on the contrary, to base our understanding of *Gedächtniskultur* on the fact that nobody can really remember his or her orgasm" (27). This appalling formulation nevertheless encapsulates the paradoxical trajectory of Kittler's last phase, which sought to articulate a somatic history of media, except that *Musik und Mathematik* would

47 Nick Sedgewick, "A Rambling Conversation with Roger Waters Concerning All This and That," (9 October 1993) at: <http://www.pink-floyd.org/artint/100.htm>.

48 Kittler, "The Alphabet of the Greeks: On the Archaeology of Writing," *TTW* 267-274; this quote 268.

49 Interview with E. Khayyat, 26.

discover this sensory world in vowels—vowels that were written, and hence Kittler’s scribes are programmers. Homer’s “legends,” according to Kittler, “were written down from the very beginning. ... The singer sings; enchanted, we listen. The singer sings that his hero, too, enchants all his listeners when he sings. One, male or female, wrote along with the singer. And that was it.”⁵⁰ Homer’s poems are a totally enclosed feedback loop for Kittler, alphabetic sign and bardic song locked in an eternal embrace.

Kittler’s Greece of Eros and Aphrodite, of music and mathematics, is an enclosed world most tellingly through a discursive imperative: it is only via a fixed Homeric text that his readings of the *Odyssey* have purchase. Kittler’s claim that Odysseus lies about his visit to the Sirens is true only if we assume that the text of the *Odyssey* has come down to us unaltered over the millennia,⁵¹ and hence Kittler’s adoption of Barry B. Powell’s controversial notion of the adapter who created the alphabet in order to write down Homer’s verse. Yet, as Genevieve Liveley notes,

[Kittler’s] idea that ancient metre might function as a technological solution for recording and transmitting, storing and retrieving a particular dataset—in ways analogous to those in which the ancient Greek alphabet is considered to have made possible the recording and transmitting, storing, and retrieving of the oral sounds of speech—is certainly appealing for the media archaeologist. But Kittler’s media aetiology for metrical poetry overlooks the McLuhanian message here. The transmitting system—the rhythmic tick-tock of the metre—itself contributes noise, changing the signal-to-noise ratio of the channel

50 Kittler, *Musik und Mathematik I*, quoted and translated by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young in *Kittler and the Media* (112). Similarly apodictic is Kittler’s comment that the “Greeks did not distinguish between articulated speech elements and articulated alphabetic letters,” quoted by Winthrop-Young from “Towards an Ontology of Media,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 26.2-3 (2009) 23-31; quotation 113.

51 On the history of the Homeric texts, especially the role of the *scholia*, see Anthony Grafton’s edition of Friedrich August Wolf’s *Prolegomena to Homer* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2014). Of Wolf, Kittler remarks that “Friedrich August Wolf once robbed us of the singer [Homer]; [Barry B.] Powell has restored him to us.” See “Homer and Writing,” *TTW*, 259-266; this quote 259.

by adding greater information to the received signal. The medium also *always* speaks."⁵²

James Romm reminds us that Homer's "bards are always called 'singers' (*oidoi*) and their works 'songs' (*oidai*)."⁵³ It was *writing down* that made Odysseus a liar, just as it made Schreber a madman. Homer's "original" text is impossible to determine because there was no original, or, more precisely, the originality of the Homeric text was situational, as Walter Ong put it.⁵⁴ The essential story remained the same, but the details changed with the telling.

Nor does phonetic sound map unambiguously onto speaking, and it does even less so onto singing. This differentiation is inherent in the phonetic alphabet, which is a grossly inarticulate and inadequate mnemonic of sound, as the word "s-o-u-n-d" indicates. "Written" speech (or the "acoustic-written,"⁵⁵ as Kittler put it) is silent; it is a mnemonic device enabling speech. Kittler's phonetic alphabet is not anti-anthropomorphic; it is disembodied. Aristotle's deployment of the concept *τὸ μεταξύ* from physiological evidence was a crucial reminder of the embodiment of speech and, in a larger context, of the relationship between mediation and perception: *aisthetikos*.⁵⁶ It was embodiment as a relational concept

52 Genevieve Liveley, "White Noise: Transmitting and Receiving Ancient Elegy," in *Classics and Media Theory*, ed. Pantelis Michelakis (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2020), 237-265; this quote 254-5.

53 James Romm, "A Journey into Homer's World," review of *Hearing Homer's Song: The Brief Life and Big Idea of Milman Parry* by Robert Kanigel (N.Y.: Knopf 2021), in *The New York Review* (23 September 2021), 51- 53; this quote 51.

54 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), 49-54.

55 Kittler, "The Alphabet of the Greeks: On the Archaeology of Writing," in *TTW* 267-274; this quote 273.

56 Alexander Galloway comments that "the Greeks indubitably had an intimate understanding of the physicality of transmission and message sending." See "If the Cinema is an Ontology, the Computer is an Ethic," in *Kittler Now: Current Perspectives in Kittler Studies*, ed. Stephen Sale and Laura Salisbury (London: Polity, 2015), 173-190; this quote 180. See also Richard Cavell, "Marshall McLuhan," in *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly (2nd

that provided McLuhan with a basis for his critique of technology. For McLuhan, humans were the sex organs of technology, allowing technology to fecundate ever new forms;⁵⁷ in this formulation, humans are the prostheses of media, and not the other way around.

While both McLuhan and Kittler concluded their careers with a profound awareness that the end of a particular cultural moment was taking place and a profound concern about the advent of a new, all-embracing one, McLuhan's relational theory of remediation offered a counter-environmental⁵⁸ response: "[t]he scrapping of Nature by satellites ... is a *fait accompli*" McLuhan wrote in 1972. "We cannot go back to the natural state, with or without our innocence. Now that Nature has been discarded, [it] must be reinvented."⁵⁹ Unlike the McLuhanesque *anthropocenic*, Kittler's recidivist media universe lacks the relational element that allows for such a critical response. As Stephen Sale notes, "one of the major problems with [Kittler's] position [is that] it offers a circumscribed account of command and control within technical systems with little or no reference to their imbrication with other systems."⁶⁰ One such system is the human, and "[t]he larger narrative of Kittler's history of media is the removal of Man from the circuit of media, which henceforth speak directly to each other, without the mediation of human users or agents."⁶¹ There is no theoretical way out, except by a regressive "return" to a Hellas that never existed. Kittler's Greece of music and mathematics,

ed. N.Y.: Oxford UP, 2014), 4: 283-286.

57 McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1964) 46. "Extension" functions in McLuhan's media theory in the way that *ampliatio* functions in rhetoric, as a deferral of meaning.

58 McLuhan, with Harley Parker, *Through the Vanishing Point: Space in Poetry and Painting* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1968) 2.

59 McLuhan, with Barrington Nevitt, *Take Today: The Executive as Dropout* (Toronto: Longman, 1972) 294. See also Richard Cavell, "Marshall McLuhan's Echo-Criticism" in *Remediating McLuhan*, 109-114.

60 Stephen Sale, "Thinking by Numbers: The Role of Mathematics in Kittler and Heidegger," in *Kittler Now*, 43-69; this quote 66.

61 Steven Connor, "*Scilicet*: Kittler, Media and Madness," in *Kittler Now*, 113-130; this quote 120.

however, was not the mediatic *a priori* of contemporary digital media; it was recidivist, a return to a Greece that was part of “the long history of a European phantasm spanning vocalic and consonantal script, song and voice, knowledge and thought, and leaders and followers of signs,” as Ute Holl has put it.⁶² Kittler's Greece, in the words of Claudia Breger, is “a realm of cultural purity.”⁶³

These were the lineaments of Kittler's final phase. Elisabeth Weber has commented that the two books of *Musik und Mathematik* “start and end with the sirens. Love coincides here with music in the truth event of the sirens whose name Kittler translates as muses and as incarnations of Aphrodite, thus as lovers.”⁶⁴ Kittler must have known, however, that the concept of anthropomorphism was coined by Xenophanes precisely to *critique* Homer's attribution of human qualities to the gods.⁶⁵ Kittler's Aphrodite is thus compelled to make love as a cultural technique⁶⁶—she is the first mechanical bride, the avatar of her husband's robots.⁶⁷ If the cyber-hellenism of *Musik und Mathematik* had held out the promise to Kittler that he would finally free himself from the anthropomorphic body through a cybernautic embrace of digital delirium, the anthropomorphic gods intervened. The promise of *ex stasis* was an out of body

62 Holl, *Moses Complex* 58.

63 Claudia Breger, “Gods, German Scholars and the Gift of Greece: Friedrich Kittler's Philhellenic Fantasies,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 23.7-8 (2006) 111-134; this quote 125.

64 Elisabeth Weber, “Nightblack: Formatting Love,” in *The Technological In-ject: Friedrich Kittler between Implementation and the Incalculable*, ed. Jeffrey Champlin and Antje Pfannkuchen (N.Y.: Fordham UP, 2018), 46-65; this quote 58.

65 See chapter 4 of Catherine Osborne, *Presocratic Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004).

66 “—And if you ask me what became of love? ... -To which the only answer can be that cultural techniques are always also body techniques.” Kittler, “Unpublished Introduction to *Discourse Networks*,” trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, *Grey Room* 63 (2016) 90-107; this quote 106.

67 “And in support of their master / moved his attendants. / These are golden, and in appearance like / living young women.” Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (1951; rpt. Chicago: U Chicago P, 2011) bk. 18 lines 417-18.

experience that combined the tragedy of being with the self-annihilation that was the ultimate goal of metalised man. But with the loss of the self, freedom becomes just another word for nothing left to lose, as Janis Joplin—immortalized in the erotomaniac catalogue Kittler includes in *Musik und Mathematik*⁶⁸—compellingly put it. In Kittler’s account of Eros and Aphrodite, beauty presides over becoming, which is both birth and death, “divine battles”⁶⁹ having led to the birth of Aphrodite herself. Music and numbers merge in this new world order,⁷⁰ even and odd numbers producing “the innumerable forms (*morphai*) between the heavens and earth—the same as with computers today.”⁷¹ Pathos gives way to eros, but as in the Wagnerian operas Kittler adored, love and death are conjoined in a *Liebestod* sung by a world breath that leads inevitably to apocalypse, at which point the only freedom left is to pull out the plug: “*Alle Apparate ausschalten.*”⁷²

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68 As noted by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, “Siren Recursions,” in *Kittler Now* 71-94; this quote 83.

69 Kittler, “Eros and Aphrodite,” *TTW* 254.

70 Kittler, “Homer and Writing,” *TTW* 259-268, especially 263.

71 “Homer and Writing” 264.

72 Reputedly the last words of Kittler, as noted by Gill Partington, “Friedrich Adolf Kittler 1943-2011: ‘Switch Off All Apparatuses,’” *Radical Philosophy* 172 (March/April 2012).

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Conspiracy theory, in theory: from history and knowledge in theory to the production of nonknowledge and structural amnesia in theoretical explanation

Peter Chambers¹

Abstract: This paper develops a critical argument about the generation of non-knowledge and structural amnesia arising from a prevalent American style of theoretical explanation of conspiracy theories. As a re-examination seeking a better starting point for how conspiracy theories have been known in theory, this is taken to be about what's at stake when we take our analytic purview, who gets attended to and cited, what gets forgotten. Of greatest critical concern is how this 'conspiracy theory theory' has led to structural amnesia – a culturally privileged US-centric way of nonknowing that, this paper argues, persists in the face of strong empirical continuities and readily available sources and comparisons. Among these forgotten theories is Franz Neumann's testable hypotheses about false concreteness, the presence of societally grounded anxieties wherever they resonate, and that conspiracy theories are a structural feature of fascist politics, then and now.

Introduction: continuity and novelty in the apparent resurgence of conspiracy theories

This paper evaluates novelty and continuity in the social theory and conceptual history of conspiracy theories. It does so by re-examining a set of scholarly understandings of a slightly earlier past that is held to inform, shape, constrain and explain it. This paper's way of opening

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this up is by re-considering the historical starting points, cultural focus and theoretical fascinations of what has been awkwardly yet accurately phrased as ‘conspiracy theory theory’². This metatheoretical inquiry is about what’s at stake when we choose our purview, how that constructs constitutive blindspots³ for conceptual understandings of conspiracies, and how a more critical theory went missing as a result. In the literature under analysis in what follows, this has demonstrably led to a pattern of structural amnesia in theoretical explanation – even in the face of empirical continuities, such as the persistence of conspiracy theories as a structural feature of far right and fascist politics, for more than a century. I now begin by laying out this paper’s epistemological assumptions.

**Knowing history in theory: chance, contingency, novelty
– or false concreteness**

Franz Neumann makes the assertion that all conspiracy theories partake of a view of history characterised by false concreteness. This is because they’re always grounded in variants of the following co-assertions:

1. there are no accidents in history, and;
2. everything happens for a reason – and is connected⁴.

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- 2 This author was alerted to the term by this blog post, ‘Mapping Conspiracy’, *Cartographies of the Absolute*. (<https://cartographiesoftheabsolute.wordpress.com/2010/05/08/mapping-conspiracy/>). The phrase is also attributed back to Jeff Kinkle (that blog’s author), although it is used by Matthew R.X. Dentith in *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2014, 7–22. Readers could also try the following adjacent, complementary, distinct approaches to this paper’s purpose. Stef Aupers, “‘Trust no one’: Modernization, Paranoia and Conspiracy Culture”, *European Journal of Communication*, Vol.27, No.1, 2012: 22–34, Ole Bjerg and Thomas Presskorn-Thygesen, “Conspiracy Theory: Truth Claim or Language Game?”, *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 34, No.1, 2016: 137–159.
 - 3 On observer positions and constitutive blindspots, see Heinz Von Foerster, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth Has No Name: Seven Days with Second-Order Cybernetics*, New Yorker: Fordham University Press, 2013.
 - 4 Franz Neumann, “Anxiety and Politics”, *The Democratic and Authoritarian State: Essays in Political and Legal Theory*, The Free Press, 1957: 279. Interestingly, Barkun reproduces a similar theorization, but does not cite Neumann’s work. See Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions*

Understanding conspiracy theories via Neumann's two assertions here expresses an epistemological commitment: it is a way of seeing, knowing, and refusing the seductive concreteness and false comforts of easy meaning and total explanatory causes. Neumann invites us into an ethical opposition to false concreteness, in favour of a political theory with an antifascist purpose opposed to the distillation of conspiracy thinking's falsely concrete philosophy of history. For Neumann, this was grounded in his work in critical theory that, in turn, was shaped by how he learned from his formative experiences: as the SPD's chief labour lawyer in Weimar Germany, interned by the Nazis, who lived the trauma of exile, displacement, and war, wrote one of the first significant books on Nazism, worked with the OSS, contributed to the rebuilding of the West German education system, and taught political theory at Columbia, until his untimely death in a car crash in 1954⁵.

I open with Neumann's assertions about false concreteness for three reasons. Firstly, because they speak to what he contends to be a hallmark of *all* conspiracy theories, which leads to the immediate recognition that the way groups handle past, present and future, and so tell stories about themselves and their political opponents, is central to how conspiracy theories work. Secondly, I begin with Neumann's assertions because they can generate counterfactuals any reader can use, both to

in Contemporary America, Oakland: University of California Press, 2003: 3–4. For another empirical distillation with similar supporting findings, see J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood, "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion", *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 58. No.4, 2014, 952–966.

- 5 See: Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism 1933–1944*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009, Franz Neumann, Herbert Marcuse, Otto Kirchheimer et.al., *Secret Reports on Nazi Germany: The Frankfurt School Contribution to the War Effort*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, David Kettler and Thomas Wheatland, *Learning from Franz Neumann: Law, Theory, and the Brute Facts of Political Life*, London: Anthem Press, 2019, Volker Heins, *Beyond Friend and Foe: the Politics of Critical Theory*, Leiden: Brill Press, 2011, and William E. Scheuerman (ed.), *The Rule of Law Under Siege: Selected Essays of Franz L. Neumann and Otto Kirchheimer*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, as well as Scheuerman's work generally.

check against everything that follows, and as a simple heuristic tool for evaluating other theories in this field. Thirdly, I begin with Neumann's assertions because this paper leads to the argument that Neumann provides us with a better theoretical starting point for understanding conspiracy theories, by offering us a more adequate social theory than his far more cited colleague, Hofstadter – who this paper also re-examines in detail.

Following Neumann's co-assertions for a moment longer here, the implication of his philosophy of history is of course that *there are* accidents in history, that *not everything* happens for a reason, and that *not everything* is causally connected. Even this small set of epistemological claims beckons a normative approach to theorizing conspiracy theories, one that is not only avowedly antifascist (for Neumann at least), but has to be about a critical theoretical orientation toward history and culture. The sum of Neumann's voicing of critical theory says: we can't understand novelty and continuity in the political uses of conspiracy theories, nor how we tend to understand and explain conspiracy theories now, without going against the grain of false concreteness⁶. False concreteness: Neumann invites us to observe it taking place, oppose it in our thinking, and reconstruct the historical sequences in which it continues to emerge.

To show fidelity to and revivify this critical theoretical task, I follow Neumann's lead and give analytic primacy to the roles of chance, contingency, and time sensitivity⁷. This can help begin to set up, identify and so avoid the ensuing patterns of explanation that some of very influential theoretical explanations of conspiracy theories fall into, as will be explored. Our philosophy of history must be different to that of The

6 This aligns with Adorno's conception of 'open thinking' in Theodor Adorno, "Resignation", *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005: 293.

7 On time sensitivity, see Andrew Abbott, *Time Matters: on Theory and Method*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Thousand Year Reich, or Breivik and Eurabia⁸, or, *pace* Neumann, it has the whiff of yet another conspiracy theory.

Koselleck's reflections on historical causality parallel Neumann's insights by asking us to begin knowing history in theory by thinking carefully and directly about contingency – by focusing on chance and novelty⁹. How and why do specific things happen, and what makes an emergent possibility or constraint new and different – in a way that matters, to us, now? Why did *that* happen (but not this), and why did it matter, for us, now (or not)? When a volcano arises from the abyssal trench of the ocean floor, this can be read as an event in the geological history of this earth, but it means something different to the people of Hawaii when it happened just this morning, and something else again to certain hypothetical others who believe it was secretly caused by the Bilderberg Group, or at a cosmic distance, by Xenu.

Following Koselleck's reading of Aron's *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, we're trying to grasp the specificity of contentions or facts taken *together*. History is a set within which an emergent fact might fit while still being irreducible to the set of which it is nonetheless a part, but breaks apart from, for '[t]he historical fact is essentially irreducible to order: *chance is the foundation of history*'¹⁰. All history is a theory in which

8 On Breivik, see especially Stephen J. Walton, "Anti-feminism and Misogyny in Breivik's "Manifesto"", *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2012: 4–11, Andreas Önnersfors, "Between Breivik and PEGIDA: the absence of ideologues and leaders on the contemporary European far right", *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2017: 159–175. On Eurabia, see: Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, "When the Elders of Zion relocated to Eurabia: conspiratorial racialization in antisemitism and Islamophobia", *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 52 no. 4, 2018, 314–337 and Andrew Brown, "The myth of Eurabia: how a far right conspiracy theory went mainstream", *The Guardian*, 16 August 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/16/the-myth-of-eurabia-how-a-far-right-conspiracy-theory-went-mainstream>

9 As Koselleck was Carl Schmitt's postwar correspondent, and Franz Neumann one of Schmitt's staunchest Weimar antagonists, this makes for a strange triangulation of intellectual history. See: Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: on the Semantics of Historical Time*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

10 *Op.cit.*, 115, italics in Koselleck. Tribe's translator's note also explains that,

we recognise the set as the pattern and the event as the chance which breaks with and yet fits within it.

Irreducibility to order in the context of an observed set, placed in sequence, means thinking simultaneously about novelty. The tensioned attunement that then arises in our historical thinking is about the relation between now, what's meaningfully different about it for us, and why it must be put into a relation with a certain 'then'. The following comment by Guy Debord seeks to get even closer to some implications I take from this point.

Novelty sits alongside the possibility of chance that gives rise to the emergence of events, as a difference we're capable of recalling and communicating. That is: in looking back, we have to grasp that the past was different to the present *somehow*; something new emerged in the world, in ways we can remember and know as meaningful, or use to explain how change happened. Debord's articulation of this tension between the memorable and novelty inserts chance into a mobile field in which it is remembered as a narrated event, a domain in which true novelty could be observed and known:

'History's domain was the memorable, the totality of events whose consequences would be lastingly apparent. And thus, inseparably, history was knowledge that should endure and aid in understanding, at least in part, what was to come: "an everlasting possession", according to Thucydides. In this way, history was the *measure* of genuine novelty'¹¹.

This measure prompts a key question, folding in a few of the contentions raised so far in this section: how then shall we take the measure of a conspiracy theory's genuine novelty, while avoiding false concreteness – by affording chance and contingency their proper mutual tension? To concretise with a few examples from the political present: what's new and different about Pizzagate, compared to Watergate; in what way are

"[a]ccording to context, "chance," "accident," and "coincidence" are used interchangeably here to translate the original *Zufall*", 291.

11 Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, London: Verso, 1998: 15

they both ~gate scandals, or why are they regarded as such, by whom, for what reasons? In what sense might Trump's use of conspiracies in the 2010s hark back to those of the National Socialists in the 1920s and 1930s; how then might Trump's patterns or followers need be regarded as fascist, neofascist, aspirationally fascist, fash, or *not* fascist¹²? For if we're ever to say that conspiracy theories seem to be controlling politics in frighteningly new *and different* ways to the past, we need to have some adequate measure of this novelty of in the political present. To do so, we need to be able to ascertain the degree to which the seeming pervasion and mainstreaming of conspiracy theories is anything new under the sun – in some discernible way. Interestingly this implies that a key skill of any theorist using historical methods redounds to discernment, which is more art than method. To approach this, I begin to zero in on the topic by venturing two grounding epistemological observations about conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories are unevenly distributed. This is a key point that Fenster recovers from Hofstadter's 'Paranoid Style', which, Fenster notices, 'always exists but dominates only occasionally and under certain conditions'¹³. Barkun's work, likewise, consistently reminds us that con-

12 For a prominent, broad characterisation of Trump as fascist, see Masha Gessen, Donald Trump's Fascist Performance, *The New Yorker*, 3 June 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/donald-trumps-fascist-performance>, as well as bestsellers such as Madeleine Albright, *Fascism: a Warning*, New York: Harper, 2018, and Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*, New York: Random House 2018. For scholarly-theoretical treatments of Trumpism and authoritarianism, see perhaps Wendy Brown, Peter E Gordon and Max Pensky, *Authoritarianism: Three Inquiries in Critical Theory*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018, William Connolly, *Aspirational Fascism: The Struggle for Multifaceted Democracy under Trumpism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017 and the seemingly promising but underwritten Christian Fuchs, *Digital Demagogue: Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter*, London: Pluto Press 2018. For two scholarly treatments of fascism in English, see Robert Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* New York: Knopf, 2004 and Michael Mann, *Fascists*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

13 Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2008): 8. Richard Hofstadter,

spiracies in his field, the US, tend to spend long periods bubbling away on the fringes. But so notably, they're only pervasive and gripping to some groups and individuals at certain conjunctures – but not others. Ironically or indicatively, read over the *longue durée* it is this basic pattern of uneven distribution that many sets of studies observe to be very persistent. For understanding conspiracy theories in history and theory, then, it matters a lot how, why, where and for whom the appearance, intensity and causal weight of a conspiracy theory is unevenly distributed. How we discern and evaluate uneven distribution matters, it is integral to how we explain and what is explained.

This principle of uneven distribution can also generate counterfactuals. Neumann argues, counterintuitively, that Germany was one of the least anti-Semitic societies in the half century leading into the European 1930s: why then did National Socialism take hold in Germany, but not *quite* France¹⁴? Analogously, Germany and the United States have both had significant cohorts of demobilised troops, returning from wars of aggression, who formed militias with powerful group identities based around conspiracy theories: how were the Freikorps and SA¹⁵ so different

The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996.

- 14 Neumann writes: “the German situation can be understood only when one becomes aware of the fact that in Germany before 1933 spontaneous antisemitism was extremely weak. As early as 1942 I wrote, in opposition to an almost unanimous opinion: ‘The writer’s personal conviction, paradoxical as it may seem, is that the German people are the least anti-Semitic of all.’ I still hold to this view today; for it is precisely the weakness of spontaneous antisemitism in Germany which explains the concentration of National Socialism on it as the decisive political weapon”, Neumann, “Anxiety and Politics”: 286. Arendt is also curious about this comparison, see Hannah Arendt, “From the Dreyfus Affair to France Today”, *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 4, No.3, 1942” 200–201. On the French case generally, see Kevin Passmore, *From Liberalism to Fascism: The Right in a French Province, 1928–1939*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- 15 On the Freikorps, see the kooky and fascinating psychoanalytic work of Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Vol. 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

to Posse Comitatus and the Oathkeepers¹⁶, and why were the former so aligned with the state and nation, while the latter, though in specifically US-libertarian senses nationalistic, are so staunchly suspicious of all government, and especially the US federal government?

As we can see by pulling the implications from these examples, the contents of any given conspiracy are peculiarly cultural: this makes cultural understanding a necessary component of any adequate response to questions like those just posed. This gives a rough starting point for framing analysis, for the discernment we're after comes from a knowing attunement to cultural knowledge that one must risk taking a position on, that must be checked against that of our peers, yet that really becomes knowledge by transcending context through comparison or in the act of a synthetic re-evaluation¹⁷. This redounds to Aron's point on the difference between experience and understanding¹⁸. Only a very select cohort of people will be able to experience what it was to live through the reign of Kaiser Wilhelm II or the decade of the X Files. However, it is usually only another, later group who might be able to discern, evaluate and convey and so understand the influence of each factor on the conspiracy theories of those respective cultural milieus – and only after a certain time has passed.

This paper now turns to read the following set of influential US-centric accounts, remaining on the level of social reality as it is historically intelligible, and holding itself and the theories under examination to account, on the epistemological basis generated from Neumann's twinned assertions in this section.

16 See Sam Jackson, *Oath Keepers: Patriotism and the Edge of Violence in a Right-Wing Antigovernment Group*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2020 and a journalistic overview by David Niewert, *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump*, London: Verso, 2017.

17 See Raymond Aron, *Politics and History*, London: Routledge, 1983.

18 Op.cit., xxx.

**Conspiracy theory theory, '84, '00, '08:
the cognitive mapping of impossible totality, information
overwhelmed, anxious certainty-seeking subjects, or a
durable feature of modern democratic societies?**

The most cited theoretical works *in English* on conspiracy theories of the past two decades emerged from the United States of the post-Cold War 90s¹⁹. Timothy Melley, one such author, makes a very telling comment about that era's framing power: '[w]hether the postwar era is really an 'age of conspiracy' seems uncertain at best; the important fact is that many people believe it is such an age'²⁰. Melley's belief is indicative²¹: the immediate critical point is that he is also offering a clear example of false concreteness. With Neumann in mind, I therefore push against the reification of the postwar US as a critical way into all the works analysed in this section.

However, the broader and more important point is that, as the US postwar has been taken by the most heavily cited scholars to be the *sine qua non* of conspiracy theory cultures, *so it is*. In that sense, Melley is correct. Although he is merely performing the relevance of his own work, the US postwar remains the *de facto* historico-cultural 'starting point' that very many papers and monographs in English continue to use, although other ones are readily available, from the same materials. Thanks to the power and influence of the postwar US era on scholarly accounts of conspiracy

19 But see Bale's exhaustive list of scholarly accounts, which includes widely-cited works outside the monolingualism of Anglophone scholarship. Jeffrey M. Bale, "Political paranoia v. political realism: on distinguishing between bogus conspiracy theories and genuine conspiratorial politics", *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol 41., No. 1, 2007: 49.

20 Timothy Melley, 'Agency panic and the culture of conspiracy', in Peter Knight (ed.), *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*, New York: NYU Press, 2002: 57.

21 To this author, Melley's logic is homologous to Zizek's re-telling of the horseshoe Neils Bohr kept above his holiday house. Asked by his incredulous friend if he believed in such superstitious nonsense, Bohr replied: "I don't believe in it either. I have it there because I was told that it works even when one doesn't believe in it". Slavoj Zizek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, London: Verso, 2009: 51.

theories, this a literature that any theoretical understanding of conspiracy theories in English must pass through – especially if we wish to get past it by getting at its forgotten past, as this paper seeks to.

Jameson's very influential 1984 essay for *New Left Review*, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* provides the critical theoretical denominator of this era, with the following still insightful notion:

‘conspiracy theory (and its garish narrative manifestations) must be seen as a degraded attempt – through the figuration of advanced technology – to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system’²².

Alongside Hofstadter, toward whom everything and everyone in this section will eventually point back to, Jameson's ‘cognitive mapping of impossible totality’ is the durable insight that this group of US-centric studies responded critically to, elaborated, or built upon.

Large historico-cultural waypoints of this cultural milieu include Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) and *The X Files* (1993-2002) and *Millennium* (1996-9), with *Whitewater* (90s), *Ruby Ridge* (1991), the *Waco Siege* (1993) and *Oklahoma City Bombing* (1995) as its headline events. DeLillo's *Mao II* (1991) and *Libra* (1988) heralded the literary tone of that zeitgeist; Melley's *Empire of Conspiracies* examines Pynchon, Atwood, Burroughs, Didion and others as earlier exemplars. Major works responding, in different ways, from in this milieu are Mark Fenster's *Conspiracy Theories* (1999), Jodi Dean's *Aliens in America* (1998), Timothy Melley's *Empire of Conspiracy* (2000) and – adjacently – Michael Barkun's *A Culture of Conspiracy* (2003)²³. In 2000, Jodi Dean wrote a

22 Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”, *New Left Review*, August, 1984, 80.

23 See Fenster 1999 (op.cit.), Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1998), Timothy Melley's *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1999) and Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, (Berkeley: University of California Press 2003). I describe Barkun as adjacent insofar his approach is self-understood as political science, his analytic framework is less self-consciously theoretical, and he is far more interested in descriptive analyses of the contents of specific conspiracy theories, and their adherents. Slightly less cited, especially to the present, but vaguely in this set are: Robert Alan

theoretical review essay drawing out the links and gaps she noticed in and between Fenster and Melley, alongside a collection edited by George Marcus²⁴. Dean's essay provides an excellent entry point for re-examining this body of conspiracy theory theory, for the following reasons.

'Theorizing Conspiracy' synthesised the main reasons why scholarly interest in conspiracy theories seemed new and resurgent, precisely two decades from this paper's time of writing. There is a time-sensitive opportunity here that is worth pursuing. The year of publication of Dean's essay is also loaded with contingencies replete with historical ironies Dean could not possibly have foreseen: there are elements in her work that convey her experience, but that we can understand in a way she could not. Following the epistemological setup above, we can discern novelties and continuities here that she could not yet have done. 2000 was the year after 'pre-millennium tension' and the Y2K bug, but it was also the final year in which the American 90s could be conceptualised via fuzzily optimistic projections about how the 00s would play out – dotcom and the Democratic Peace, the information society and globalisation – without the unforeseen interposition of 9/11 and the Global War on Terror, Katrina, the GFC, Obama, the Tea Party, and Trump and the alt right. In the year 2000, the twenty years to the time of writing was supposed to have been about two decades of American pre-eminence; as of writing, it is more frequently read as two decades of ruinous war, economic crisis, societal entropy, and political-institutional decay. The time-sensitive emergence of Dean's essay, already a synthesis of many others, thus points back to a dense set of historical theoretical contingencies and their ironies – only observable as a set from

Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*, (Yale: Yale University Press 2001) and Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to the X-Files*, (London: Routledge 2000). In a parallel track is Daniel Pipes, *Conspiracy: The Power of the Paranoid Style in History*, (New York: Free Press 1997): quite notably, all of the above give short shrift to Pipes' substantive argument – an aggrandisement of Hofstadter's essay – even when cited.

24 Jodi Dean, *Theorizing Conspiracy*, *Theory & Event*, Vol. 4 No.3, 2000; George Marcus (ed.), *Paranoia Within Reason: A Casebook on Conspiracy as Explanation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

the vantage point of hindsight. Dean also offers a theory-led explanation for this whole state of affairs in a strong style that is very of its time: as postmodern conspiracy theory theory in full late 90s style, it is exemplary.

Bringing in Hofstadter a section early, but for just a moment, Dean's theorization is *about* style. This is because Dean gives precedence to 'the way in which ideas are believed and advocated', over and against 'the truth or falsity of their content'²⁵, which she gives less weight to. Moreover, Dean's theoretical construction is stubbornly uncurious toward substantive international, historical and empirical comparison – though she relies on evoking them. From this observer position²⁶, this is about how the world of conspiracies seemed to a prominent American scholar of conspiracies at that time, a fascinated absorption in then-fashionable postmodern assumptions about social reality and the historical past. The time-sensitive opportunity of two decades' water under the bridge therefore also gives a contrasting sense of 'everything since', in light of the many case studies on conspiracy theories we also now have²⁷. Most importantly for the contention this section is developing from this paper's epistemology, and as Fenster and Barkun both notice, Dean makes her strongest claims by asserting 'a radical break with an incommensurable past'. In other words, where Jameson was trying to describe the impossible cognitive mapping of totality that characterised postmodernity in 1994, fifteen years on, in 1999, Dean was at great pains to theorise her political present by describing novelty *against* continuity: but, again, using the theoretical resources of Lyotard and Baudrillard, whose heyday was the 70s and 80s. To do this, she subsumes the many contingencies of the disjunctive 'new time' under the two following structural causes.

25 Hofstadter, 5.

26 See Von Foerster 2013.

27 See among others Bale 2007, Zia-Ebrahimi 2018, Jovan Byford and Michael Billig, "The Emergence of Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories in Yugoslavia During the War with NATO", *Patterns of Prejudice*, Volume 35, No. 4, 2001: 50–63 and John Pollard, 'Skinhead Culture: the Ideologies, Mythologies, Religions and Conspiracy Theories of Racist Skinheads', *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 50, Nos. 4-5, 2016, 398–419.

Dean's work attributes the then resurgent interest in theorizing conspiracy theory to the information society and postmodernity. In her work across the 2000s, the information society is about how information infrastructures *and* psychosocial experience feedback into and drive one another, especially around the axis of secrecy and publicity²⁸. Drive theory, pun intended. Dean's nodal 'short circuit' in 'Theorizing Conspiracy' is the overloaded human subject. In line with the theories of feedback and drive she went on to develop across the 00s, Dean's millennial theorization posits a structural fact to explain a shared psychic state that then prompts social practices of agentic linking and thinking, which have cultural effects. Herein, information overload generates uncertainty, and this prompts overwhelmed, anxious human subjects to build and share explanations. These manifest as culturally patterned conspiracy theories, which restore a sense of order, causation and certainty to the world – by sharing understanding of how power circulates globally today. For all these reasons, for Dean, as for Fenster in the first edition of his book (see below), conspiracy theories, and their pervasion, were fundamentally about power and political agency.

Dean timestamps this society of overwhelmed and anxious certainty-seeking subjects by way of postmodernity, invoking Lyotard's incredulity toward metanarratives. For Dean, the time around the millennium was marked by 'a growing realization that the presuppositions of... the bounded political normal, the rational, discursive, procedural public sphere, are fictions that have lost a plausibility they never really had'²⁹. On Dean's reading, if the years before and after 2000 were destabilisingly novel in ways that conjured an effervescence of conspiracy theories, as well as scholarly attention to them, it's because they were so very different to Hofstadter's 60s. In her telling, this was a contrasting time when

28 Dean 2000, 5 of 18. Jodi Dean, *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002 and *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*, Malden: Polity Press, 2010. On secrecy see generally the excellent work of Eva Horn and especially, 'Logics of Political Secrecy', *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 28, No. 7-8, 2011: 103–122.

29 Dean 2000, 7 of 18.

'American historians and social scientists... wanted to give an account of ordered political disagreement capable of avoiding... ..the irrational extremes of paranoid and authoritarian personalities...'³⁰. These concerns did animate Hofstadter's work, and are re-elaborated thoroughly in the first chapter of Fenster's *Conspiracy Theories*³¹. However, this evocation of Hofstadter's milieu is where we can see clearly how Dean's theoretical construction, and its handling of the historical past, begins to push and pull her purview, inducing her to strongly assert one set of concerns – about the difference between past, present and future – *by* studiously underexamining others.

Dean harks back to Hofstadter's 1960s, but without a full and direct examination: there is a lot of gestural evocation, but no substantive analysis. On re-reading Hofstadter, this is a curious move, because what is so striking about his November 1964 essay is that it was such a time-sensitive, targeted intervention made in US politics, a year after JFK's assassination³², in the year of Goldwater's presidential campaign, and in the wake of McCarthy. That moment, Hofstadter argued, was one definite time – among a number he carefully specifies – when the paranoid style became pervasive in American politics. But this begs a question for Dean: if the 60s was a kind of 'before time' of political unreason, as Dean would have it, what was Hofstadter able to pinpoint in the 'angry minds of the right', how could he have denounced their paranoid style, their imputation of conspiracies everywhere, with such scornful derision, in a way that resonated so much, to the point where Hofstadter's essay became a classic that transcended the context it encapsulated? In its evocation of Hofstadter's era, Dean's account dips into pastiche and nostalgia³³; as it does, it is deeply postmodern.

30 Dean, 6 of 18.

31 See Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture (Revised and Updated Edition)*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2008), 23–52.

32 The November 1964 Harper's essay was originally delivered as the Herbert Spencer Memorial Speech, in London in 1963, the same month as JFK's assassination.

33 Jameson 1984, 64–67.

In Dean's defence, 'Theorizing Conspiracy' purports to be examining Fenster's reading of Hofstadter, not Hofstadter. But this too is actually especially problematic, for Dean fails to notice those of Hofstadter's framing insights – raised earlier – that Fenster also underlines as crucial: 'the paranoid style always exists but dominates only occasionally and under certain conditions'³⁴. Dean's interpretation of Hofstadter's milieu is also yoked to a somewhat flippant dismissal of an earlier generation of theorists grappling with conspiracy theories, which, as I also return to in a moment, appears to be a passing dig at Jameson. She writes,

'even if once upon a time conspiracy theorists offered totalizing systems mapping the hidden machinations of Illuminati, Freemasons, Bilderburgers, and Trilateralists (and, in fact, I don't think they ever did but won't argue the point here), the defining feature of the conspiratorial haunting of the present is doubt, uncertainty, and the sense that if anything is possible, then reality itself is virtual (or at least as variable as neurotransmitters and computer effects)³⁵.

At this moment, Dean's account slides into its own metanarrative about the information society's postmodern culture: a false concreteness, like Melley's, with a strong cultural style. For this reader, also thinking about the far right of the 2010s in light of the 1940s and 1930s, Dean's essay now reads as uncritical about her own presuppositions, a little too confident and breezy in its assertion against Jameson, and seems remarkably uncurious about the historical past of Hofstadter that the argument nonetheless needs to conjure – but can only do so cursorily in order to sustain plausibility. Was intellectual postmodernism just a credulity to its own metanarrative, and a degraded attempt to map totality, written in a garish discursive style? History provides us with a vantage point to observe this irony.

Dean's theorisation imputes a past held together by a belief in reason and progress. Was there a 'before time' in which many people did not

34 Fenster 2008, 9.

35 Dean 2000, 9 of 18.

feel alienated, anxious, paranoid, and overwhelmed³⁶? Was there a Goldilocks age of information; was modern politics *ever* rational and civil? Of course not, Dean contends, such stories were always fictions, it's only that now they've 'lost a plausibility they never really had'³⁷. Notably, to build on this paper's epistemological basis, Dean's whole argument hinges on how the postmodern present is not just different, but really *other* to the modern past. The crucial point is that Dean's 'lost phantasm' phrasing – we lost an 'x' we never had, but we believed we had it, because of our credulous belief in metanarratives, which we're now incredulous of – works by positing a historical discontinuity, which enables Dean to eat her cake and have it. For on the one hand, as argued, Dean's assertions rely on evoking the norms and values animating Hofstadter's 60s, in order to grasp what's disjunctively novel about the present. Yet on the other, Dean casts doubt on the veracity inhering in *any* such past (and, by implication, on anyone taken in by such dusty fables). Dean then uses her own rhetorical construction to cast scorn back on Hofstadter and his milieu: those days when historians still believed that political discourse could be steered between conformism and extremism. Very much in passing, she also appears to cast a similarly dismissive light on any scholars who, again following Jameson, would believe conspiracy theory is trying to think totality or be cognitively mapped in relation to it. She does not argue this point, saying only: 'I think this emphasis on totality is mistaken'³⁸.

In Dean's eagerness to chalk up the millennial prevalence of conspiracy cultures to the information society and postmodernity, Dean has cause to doubt everything – except of the acuity of her own theoretical construction of the past and its breezy assertion of a profound break with

36 For example, Neumann writes: "Germany of 1930-33 was the land of alienation and anxiety. The facts are familiar: defeat, a tame, unfinished revolution, inflation, depression, non-identification with the existing political parties, non-functioning of the political system – all these are symptoms of moral, social, and political homelessness", "Anxiety and Politics": 287.

37 Dean 2000, 7 of 18.

38 Dean 2000, 11 of 18.

it as the unique signature of her time. This speaks again to Dean's preoccupation with style, for her essay is replete with cool distanciations from a grandfathered past whose value can just be dismissed without meriting examination. For Dean, Hofstadter's is a past 'we know' is past, so we know we don't need to really know it. History is bunk.

Bringing Neumann to bear here once more, what's interesting is how Dean's own theoretical construction of the past traps her into a false concreteness that is used to explain everything: as if the information society, globalisation and postmodernity explained the whole world, and the prevalence of conspiracy theories. As Dean believed herself to be living through a radical break with a past that was always guided by a fiction (we no longer believe), so she obviated the felt need to invite scholars of conspiracy theories to look into that past, precisely because her account deprives the historical past of moral seriousness, cultural comparability, and politically constraining causal-effectivity. For Dean, the past really is past, but wasn't really real. In remembering her present as so very different and novel, her theoretical construction keeps inducing a tendency to fail to see the past as continuous. Dean's work, evoking and performing her interpretation of 90s Baudrillard, is haunted by spectres 'lodged somewhere within the endless proliferation of images and reports'³⁹, but does not feel the need to see them as animated by the living politics they still were. Unwittingly, this is deeply of its time.

Dean's review essay is far more helpful when it emphasises how, by 2000, conspiracy theorising tended more and more to notice how increasingly online groups were going about re-building sense and agency in what was experienced as an overwhelming, confusing 'global' world. Her essay points to how, by 2000, US-based culturally-oriented scholars were moving away from interpreting conspiracy theories as being about plots, styles and pathology, towards accounts about agency (and its absence), power (and its global circulation) – and secrecy⁴⁰. On this, Dean

39 Dean 2000, 2 of 18.

40 Although it is interesting that she says very little about trust; on this, see Aupers 2012.

resonates in sympathy with Melley, Fenster, and what she recovers from the contributors to the Marcus-edited collection. In recovering this approximate sociological consensus from the time, we can peer back at how this broad web of late 90s US scholarship – armed with poststructuralist assumptions – was able to think about conspiracies in the postwar US in ways which, yes, were new and different, compared to Hofstadter's generation. In reminding us to think again and again about how power and agency worked through groupings, these works also point enquiry in a more helpful direction than the pejorative excesses of Hofstadter's rhetorical flashes, which are marred by a sometimes snide tone, and the odious implication that 'we' (the pluralist professors) know better, think more rationally, because 'we' are less paranoid and ugly in 'our' thinking⁴¹. Some progress, then, and something new. This brings us to Fenster, his own reflexive revision of his theory, and its bridge back to Hofstadter.

In its decade-long drift between the first and second edition – 1999 and 2008 – Fenster begins to question if we can even have a general theoretical explanation of conspiracy theories at all, even one that only covers the postwar USA. Fenster's reflection on his own published work a decade earlier implies an overarching analytic choice: between power and interpretation. In the 1999 edition of *Conspiracy Theories*, Fenster asserted that '[a]bove all, conspiracy theory is a theory of power'⁴². This is one of the points Dean takes to aligning his work with Melley, her own, and those in the Marcus collection she focuses on. However, a decade's hindsight generated a new observer position, from which Fenster became capable – and felt it necessary – to reflect on the impossibility of finding 'an underlying causal agent' for something as pervasive and overdetermined as the political communities of his case studies, and their theories alike. Fenster's

41 Pipes 1997 has this in spades, and this rhetorical 'sneer' has been remarked on, both in his treatment of Middle Eastern 'threats' to democracy, and especially in his treatment of the crack epidemic. See Fenster 2008, 4–5 and Jeffrey A. Hall, "Aligning Darkness with Conspiracy Theory: The Discursive Effects of African American Interest in Gary Webb's 'Dark Alliance'", *Howard Journal of Communications*, Vol. 17, No, 3., 2006: 205–222.

42 Mark Fenster 1999, xiv.

second edition in fact makes a clear and surprising decision to abandon the explicit search for an explanatory cause of conspiracy theories altogether, because of a growing realisation that only something ‘cognitive *and* something cultural can help explain conspiracy theory, and that in this process of overdetermination, all of the identified causes play some role’⁴³. This drift from power to interpretation in Fenster’s thinking is a significant revision, and might prompt a more open scholarly curiosity about how the past, including our own past works, continues to affect the present, and might be amended as a corrective to the future in mind. If the paradox my critical reading of Dean shows us toward is that only a theory sceptical enough of itself to be open to contingent others can lead us to a theory that understands the theories that purport to explain, Fenster’s hindsight revision of his own work goes a step further – realising that, perhaps, we cannot have a theoretical *explanation* if we wish to *understand* conspiracy theories. This can generate a potentially useful reflection. We wish to have a theoretical explanation of conspiracy theories, but perhaps we should not want one; if we are to have a good theoretical explanation, it can no longer be a general theory. This is interesting.

And yet: Fenster’s book retains its title. In a win for the work’s argument and its author, in the age of search, it transpired that *Conspiracy Theories* is highly search-engine optimised. As Fenster’s latterly excellent choice for contemporary-dominant patterns of library-based research has tended to be cited and used to the time of writing, Fenster is usually cited or summarised as the scholar who is offering a cultural theory interpreting conspiracy theories as ‘durable features of modern democratic cultures’. The generalisation to modernity is a strong one, and may be welcome and salutary, but of course requires commensurate evidence. But even before this leap: is it even plausible that conspiracy theories are features of democracies, specifically, however defined?

Outside the shibboleths of Democratic Peace Theory⁴⁴, postwar Ameri-

43 Fenster 2008, 19, italics mine.

44 See the excellent critical analysis of Christopher Hobson, “Towards a Critical Theory of Democratic Peace”, *Review of International Studies*, Vol 37, No. 4,

ca is not synonymous with ‘modern democratic cultures’ *tout court*. Postwar American democracy is not all of modern democracy – and after Iraq, Trump, and the corrosive tactics of electioneering by the main parties, how democratic is the US: still, even, really? More recent collaborative studies on conspiracy and democracy here show us, once again, how much each conspiracy precisely mirrors the cultures of the polity of which it is a part⁴⁵. Thus any given conspiracy theory might tell us important things about *that* democracy at that conjuncture, but not about ‘democracy’; nor can democracy be used as a cogent basis for a theoretical explanation of conspiracy theories. Just glancing outside the postwar US shows immediately that many non-American, non-*democratic* political cultures have also evinced persistent, uneven, and at specific times pervasive political uses of conspiracy theories – especially, but not only, populist, authoritarian, autocratic leaders, parties and movements. In sum: conspiracy theories just aren’t explained by thinking about how power and agency works in postwar or postmodern America, as Fenster concedes of his earlier attempt. But nor does American democracy, which Fenster shifts toward by 2009, explain much beyond itself. As with Dean, there is a kind of credulity toward this self-referential narrative. Again, we hit false concreteness.

US foreign policy, geopolitics and demobilisation may have the explanatory power Fenster is seeking, as may transformations of capitalism; yet these factors are relatively absent, although their regretted absence or failure has come to be what many scholars think about when they think about American democracy since 2001. This set of points about democracy also reveals the central tension in Fenster’s work which

2011: 1903–1922.

45 See Alfred Moore, “Conspiracy and Conspiracy Theories in Democratic Politics”, *Critical Review: A Journal of Politics and Society*, Vol. 28, No.1, 2016: 1–23, and relatedly the many scholars and studies associated with Conspiracy and Democracy, Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities, University of Cambridge, 2013–18, <http://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/programmes/conspiracy-democracy> and <http://www.conspiracyanddemocracy.org> and <http://www.conspiracyanddemocracy.org/index.html>

opens a critical question about its full usefulness for us, a decade on – the American decade of Trump and the alt right, precisely where American democracy broke down or showed itself as never having been, not quite, or no longer democratic.

To what extent is Fenster talking about conspiracy theories as interpretive practices enacted by specific *American* communities, or, more broadly, modern democracies across the world? Fenster is circumspect about the broader claim, but he does venture it, seeing conspiracy theories as ‘an integral aspect of American, and *perhaps modern and postmodern*, life’⁴⁶. This is where we bump up against the final problem in this set of US-centric theories, appearing here in Fenster, but also at work in all the works explored in this section. How has the postwar US come to be read back as the (only) context that can explain conspiracy theories to (all of) us? Have the conspiracy theory theorists been trying to presumptuously cognitively map totality for ‘the world’? How could the postwar US’ explanatory power be known – as, in a sense, *being* modern and postmodern life – in the absence of any good faith attempt at historical, international, or cultural comparison, even a cursory one? None of the works explored in this section show more than a passing interest in the worlds ‘before and outside’ the US.

This curious lack of curiosity can, finally, point us toward the outline of a historically cogent explanation for the would-be meta explanations on offer, for it says two things: firstly, it says that each of the theories discussed in this section is at least as telling of its time as it is of conspiracy theories; secondly, it speaks to how unreflexively self-absorbed the United States could be in the 90s and 00s. Yet recursively, this section has noted that the reflexive awareness absent in these works also timestamps them very precisely: they are not speaking as Hofstadter could and did about his 1960s, but nor do they show substantive concern with intersectionality or their own white privilege. This speaks to the epistemological vantage points possible from some observer positions not others. In the conspiracy theory theories examined in this section, wherever a theoretic-

46 Fenster 2008, 9.

cal generalisation tends to be made, we are left in a circle of self-reference that is always pointing back to the postwar US, without ever explaining why this need be the case. To come back to the quote from Melley that this section began with, the postwar US is a huge, rich and fascinating period in human history that has had an outsized influence on global culture, due to American hegemony. But whether or not the postwar US *was* the age of conspiracy, or was capable of explaining that, it was believed by its explainers to be so and do so – and so it did. The baseball World Series includes the United States and Canada, and so it does. To return to Neumann with Luhmann: every style of false concreteness that constrains its purview *must* remain unexamined for these works to retain their own totality.

In hindsight, we can also observe that period – the 1990s and 2000s – as a clear geopolitical era that is now over. This was the age of US-led ‘structural adjustment packages’ ‘full spectrum dominance’, and ‘systemic risk’: neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and the finance capital of Wall Street, unrivalled and unimpeded between 1989–2008. For all of those ‘inside’ this era examined in this section, the United States was widely read back as, in a sense, *being* the model of the world, and so explaining or measuring it: *the* means of history, as much as *The End of History*. In those years, America was either how ‘today’s global world’ was, or would become, once it caught up. Dean’s years of postmodern tension were also the lead up to the far-too-certain ‘one day soon’ of democratic Iraq, or the presumptuous casting of 00s China as some ‘enormous Taiwan’ a country that was going to be rich and powerful but still want to stitch Nikes, solder phones, and send the goods promptly to their point of onshore consumption, for us.

An alternative explanation of conspiracy theory theory is that it was simply about failing to get a read on actually existing globalisation, in an academic division of labour in which tenured scholars with a cultural focus need not bother engaging with political economy, need only cite the cited works in their discourse, need only follow the speculations that

come from following their preferred theorists⁴⁷. Thus the imputed failure – of others – to cognitively map totality could just be about how a certain division of labour in America’s competitive individualist society absolved one group of specialists from the felt need to understand how geopolitics and finance capital worked as globalisation in those decades. Or it could also be about how concrete communities rendered precarious by all of this made sense of their situation, in groups. Neumann might say: as a way of handling their anxiety and alienation, the anxieties of that society, caused primarily by the loneliness, fears, wounds and scars of competitive individualism. But leaving this aside, what’s curious is that Fenster, a usually attentive reader of the Hofstadter’s text, also walked past an alternative historico-cultural explanation of conspiracy theories that was readily available to him – via a simple and direct re-read of ‘The Paranoid Style’.

**Re-reading the Paranoid Style, after the Information Society,
Postmodernism, and Trump: recovering an outline of a critical theory
of conspiracy theories with an antifascist purpose**

Richard Hofstadter’s ‘Paranoid Style’ remains consistently and widely cited, like the major works just explored. Hofstadter’s insights on conspiracy theories are taken to have a general explanatory value and theoretical meaning that transcends authorial intention and cultural context. Most of all, Hofstadter is read back as origin, inception, progenitor; the man who started it all. As Fenster writes, Hofstadter’s essay, or, at least, the notion of the paranoid style, has ‘dominated academic and intellectual approaches to political extremism and populist fear of conspiracy’, to the point where ‘[n]o serious consideration of conspiracy theory can avoid’⁴⁸ his work. These are large claims, but Fenster reaches further, contending that ‘Hofstadter at once created and cleared the field, establishing ...that extremist political movements and thought were import-

47 And see Andrew Abbott, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

48 Fenster 2008, 8.

ant objects of research...'⁴⁹. In this spirit, the field of theory we have been examining regards itself as, in a sense, footnotes to Hofstadter. But does Fenster give a fair assessment of Hofstadter's intentions, influences and theoretical acuity here; and is it true that it was Hofstadter who was first to take political extremism seriously as a topic? If not, even if he meant to give a theorization proper, can Hofstadter's paranoid style – a speech worked into a magazine essay – provide an optimal or even valid starting point for a theoretical understanding of conspiracy theories now?

Hofstadter's essay was about the paranoid style in *American* politics, as its title tells us. And, like Melley or Dean, it is very American and of its time, stylistically and substantively. Yet unlike Melley or Dean, Hofstadter evinces no particular commitment to the explanatory value of his cultural context, and does not reify nor hypostasise the American 60s he was writing from and passionately involved in as unique, different, incommensurably novel. Hofstadter chose 'American history to illustrate the paranoid style only because I happen to be an Americanist, and it is for me a choice of convenience'⁵⁰. His avowed concern was to 'establish the reality of the style and... illustrate its frequent historical recurrence'⁵¹. Hofstadter's basic point aligns with those of this paper, insofar as it is about persistent uneven recurrence across contexts, building an observable set we can discern based on a patterned cultural style. To this observer, in light of the time of writing and what has been developed from Neumann's twinned assertions, Hofstadter's strongest work is in showing us how the style effervesced in the US in 1798, the 1820s-30s, 1865, 1895, 1939-45, and 1951. His contribution can point to and explain how and why the paranoid style emerged, and show that it did at very specific moments (but not others), for discernable reasons amenable to historical methods.

Hofstadter also broadens his claim beyond the context of modern American history. As he continues to frame the ambit of his essay, Hofstadter clearly recognises the paranoid style episodically at work in

49 Fenster 2008, 24.

50 Hofstadter 1996, 6.

51 Hofstadter 1996, 7.

'many countries throughout modern history'⁵². He even asserts that '[i]t is a common ingredient of fascism'⁵³, elaborating that 'the single case in modern history in which one might say that the paranoid style has had a consummatory triumph occurred not in the United States but in Germany'⁵⁴. These are all strong, large points. Hofstadter's *identified* source for all of them is Franz Neumann's 1957 'Anxiety and Politics'.

Hofstadter borrows nearly as much from 'Anxiety and Politics' as he leaves. To begin with, Hofstadter adapts Neumann's fundamental evaluation of the *political* nature of conspiracy theories stated up front in this paper. What we ought to be concerned about, Hofstadter argues, and this should be sounding familiar, is the uneven persistent recurrence of a political phenomenon, though one 'no more limited to American experience than it is to our contemporaries'⁵⁵. In this vein, Hofstadter notices that the 'famous Stalin purge trials incorporated... a wildly imaginative and devastating exercise in the paranoid style'⁵⁶. Neumann explores this precise point, alongside a number of other historical examples, as part of what he interprets as Caesarist manipulation. In fact, if read closely alongside 'Anxiety and Politics', Hofstadter seems he may be paraphrasing many of Neumann's examples.

However, Neumann's analysis for this political state of affairs and its modern emergence is full of inter-active 'mechanical' parts. In *Anxiety and Politics*, this includes his threefold conception of modern alienation (psychological, social, *and* political) and a schematic description of how and when contingent conditions tend to trigger anxiety, as well as the thresholds that render this politically dangerous. Yet Hofstadter removes the patiently assembled and complicated engine of Neumann's explanation, replacing it with the phrase 'paranoid style'. As mentioned above, Hofstadter offered this work as a speech, and it was then worked into the

52 Op.cit., 6

53 Op cit., 7.

54 Op cit., 7.

55 Op.cit., 6.

56 Op. cit., 7.

famous essay. Yet for this paper's purposes, and as the basis for a proper theoretical explanation of conspiracy theories, a phrase could hardly be adequate. Hofstadter's choice to assert the presence of the paranoid style – *in lieu* of the many historical moments where Neumann beckons us to think carefully about and closely study the historical causes and societal conditions engendering alienation and anxiety – generates the following serious theoretical problems. I first touch on psychoanalytic social theory.

Were Hofstadter doing psychoanalytic social theory with an open hand, the distinction between his and Neumann's theoretical models, and their sources of interpretation, would have to be tackled head on. We can see this wrestling on display wherever serious scholars have contended with the massive implications of Freud's drive theory⁵⁷; as we know this drove factions and led to huge fallings out among the key thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School⁵⁸. Hofstadter does not include these influences in 'The Paranoid Style'. Again, for an essay in Harper's, he surely needn't have, and may have been wise not to (I will return to this latter point). However, the omission of other Frankfurt School thinkers and sometime Columbia colleagues in the later published version of the essay could well have been a 60s pragmatic choice, given we know Hofstadter cited his sometime-Columbia Colleagues in his 1950s work⁵⁹, and that he was very influenced by their findings at that time: especially Adorno and Horkheimer and *The Authoritarian Personality*⁶⁰.

57 See Wilhelm Reich's 1930s work for a to-the-letter Freudian account; Adorno and Marcuse continued to hew to variants of drive theory. For his part, Neumann displays his archive of influences, carefully yet circumspectly selecting insights from Freud, Jung, Adorno, Marcuse, Fromm, Schiller, Hegel, Marx, Bettelheim, and Harold Lasswell, "Anxiety and Politics", n.295–300.

58 For a thorough account of one such stoush, see John Rickert, "The Fromm-Marcuse Debate Revisited", *Theory and Society*, Vol.15, 1986: 351–400.

59 Richard Hofstadter, "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt", 43.

60 See David S. Brown, *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2008: 90–93. Brown also quotes Hofstadter's notable student Christopher Lasch: "*The Authoritarian Personality* had a tremendous impact on Hofstadter and other liberal intellectuals, because it showed them how to conduct political criticism in psychiatric categories, to make those categories bear the weight of political criticism. This procedure

Beyond these points, we are left with speculations best left to specialists in intellectual history here, or perhaps nonknowledge that can only remain as such. Perhaps for Hofstadter's purposes in composing a polemical piece as a public intellectual of the time, all this did not matter to him. It could also have been a 60s hangover from the McCarthy period, a wish not to be freighted with associations to Marxian Jewish intellectuals who were, by then, actually in Frankfurt. Retroactively, Hofstadter may have made a wise pragmatic choice, given that by 1980, the right *was* imputing communist conspiracies against left liberals at Columbia⁶¹, a culture war tactic actively pursued since by Paleoconservatives, Breitbart, and the Alt Right, and that appears in Breivik's manifesto copy/pasted from William S. Lind. However, given the prevalence of the Cultural Marxism conspiracy theory during the 2010s, a curious irony we can note is that, in a sense, the Frankfurt School *were* actually behind what Hofstadter wrote about paranoia in the Paranoid Style – but aside from the footnote given to Neumann, none of this is cited⁶².

For a theoretical understanding of conspiracy theories capable of grappling with the political present, what Hofstadter did not recover from Neumann really should matter. Hofstadter left out: Neumann's lynchpin idea of a falsely concrete view of history at the heart of all conspiracy theories; Neumann's developed argument that conspiracy theories become politically dangerous through their manipulative use by Caesaristic leaders; Neumann's observation that the historical threshold for the falsely concrete view of history is the political literacy of groups whose support for a cause must be won through persuasion, and; Neumann's

excused them from the difficult work of judgment and argumentation. Instead of arguing with opponents, they simply dismissed them on psychiatric grounds", in Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 90.

61 See Thomas Wheatland, "The Frankfurt School's Invitation from Columbia University: How the Horkheimer Circle Settled on Morningside Heights", *German Politics & Society*, Vol 22., No. 3, 2004: 1–32.

62 Of course, the probable irony here is that he deleted it out because he anticipated politically embroiling allegations of conspiracy by the right, not because he was engaged in a conspiracy theory.

hard-won explanation that the susceptibility of groups to conspiracy theories is best explained by closely examining the combined co-presence of social, political and psychological alienation at a specific conjuncture, which generates anxiety that can – and demonstrably has been – manipulated for dangerous, corrosive political effect⁶³.

So: thanks to the constraints in Hofstadter's work and how his work has mostly been used, anxiety went missing, and it's mostly stayed lost and forgotten in explanations of conspiracy theories. For critical theory more broadly this is also regrettable, as the many examples in 'Anxiety and Politics' – as far back as Athens and Rome in the West – *must* lead us back to analyses 'of the historical situations in which *anxiety* grips the masses'⁶⁴. Yet Hofstadter makes no use of anxiety, nor observes its manifold causes, and says nothing of alienation. Again, this is of course a choice, and Hofstadter makes it. For this reader, these are not disinterested choices, because paranoia is conventionally levelled as a pejorative label and accusation, while anxiety and alienation point to societal pathologies that implicate *us* in something deeply wrong, an unreason inside our polities and societies, as well as 'in' other human subjects. In place of anxiety in Hofstadter is *only* the repeated phrasing of the paranoid style – *their* distorted style, likened to ugliness, that venerable pathology of the American right (but not us, the pluralist left). By dint of repetition and resonance, Hofstadter landed a memorable, pathologizing

63 The only analyses that apprehend the sum of the argument's parts and induces an excellent interpretation from them appear in Volker Heins "Critical Theory and the Traps of Conspiracy Thinking", *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, Vol. 33, No.7, 2007: 787–801 and Volker Heins, "Seduction, Alienation, Racketeering", *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory*, 12, 2006: 59–73. Axel Honneth's reading ignores Neumann's authorial intentions, context, and nuanced revision of drive theory, before seeking to make Neumann into a kind of liberal political theorist who Honneth then excoriates for failing to do what he never set out to – the solution to which coincidentally turns out to be how Honneth prefers to go about psychoanalytic social theory. Axel Honneth, "Anxiety and Politics: The Strengths and Weaknesses of Franz Neumann's Diagnosis of a Social Pathology", *Constellations*, Vol 10., No. 2, 2003: 247–255.

64 Franz Neumann, "Anxiety and Politics", 287.

phrase on his political opponents; US-centric conspiracy theory scholarship gained a sticky label and a phrase in every literature review. Hofstadter, long dead, accrues H factor on Google Scholar; this would have delighted Bentham, but we can only imagine what Hofstadter and Neumann would have made of it. What's lost is substantive for Neumann: the many schematic elements of his antifascist critical theory. This might have framed an analytic starting point for explaining conspiracy theories – including throughout the postwar US, including in all fascist politics; yet it did not. US-based conspiracy theory is haunted by spectres, yes: the spectre of Neumann, lodged somewhere within its endless proliferation of theorizations and self-referential explanations. Paraphrasing Baudrillard, against Dean and Melley, in the postwar era, the US' self-image became its true sex object⁶⁵.

Why does Germany disappear from nearly everyone's use of Hofstadter since?⁶⁶ How can this remain possible after a 2010s that elicited so many – still of course questionable – scholarly comparisons to the German 1920s? For anyone citing Hofstadter to the present, tracing the theorization of conspiracy theory back to Hofstadter, arguing for his originary or foundational role, or claiming he was the first person to take political extremism seriously, this is the question. Germany is never substantively addressed by Dean, Fenster, Barkun or Melley – although

65 Strangely, this is precisely DeLillo's logic in *White Noise* with 'the most photographed barn in America', which is also arguably the most discussed scene in arguably the most postmodern American novel. Here, tourists routinely go out to photograph said barn, to the point where no one sees the barn anymore: "[w]e see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We've agreed to be part of a collective perception. It literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism. Another silence ensued. 'They are taking pictures of taking pictures'". Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, London: Penguin, 1985: 12–13. On Baudrillard and DeLillo's barn, see David Allen and Agata Handley, 'The Most Photographed Barn in America': Simulacra of the Sublime in American Art and Photography', *Text Matters*, 8, 2018: 365–385.

66 Pipes 1997 does notice and use it extensively, and also takes those of Neumann's observations about Stalin and Hitler's Germany that appear in Hofstadter's essay. Interestingly for this paper, none of the works examined here notice Pipes noticing it in Hofstadter.

Hofstadter clearly directs his readers' attention back to its central importance. Neumann is uncited in the same set of works, although, as shown above, Hofstadter was clearly influenced by his colleague's work and included a citation. In the previous section, this paper has suggested that this has transpired because of the spell cast by a certain cultural imaginary of the postwar US, and how it functioned as a font of explanation and theory-generating world for those under it. In a critical vein, I've suggested that this kind of self-absorption was only possible by a group of scholars privileged enough not to need to see the world outside their world, that this is a failure of a felt need to reckon with the geopolitics and political economy of globalization in the era of American dominance that *was* that past, and that this is no longer persuasive or explanatory, for an observer position which has only latterly emerged. The first generation of the Frankfurt School, however, radicalize this set of points, in the following ways.

For Neumann, Adorno, Marcuse, Horkheimer, and Fromm, 1950s America and 1940s, 1930s and 1920s Germany were fundamentally continuous modern political realities⁶⁷. Thus 'what's missing' is about the disappearance of a fundamentally more critical theory observing 'the same' political modernity, how it disappeared, and the emergent barbarism that replaced it. Disquieting as it is for many Americans⁶⁸, for the thinkers of that generation of the Frankfurt School, Nazi Germany and postwar America were both expressions of capitalist modernity. For those German Jewish Marxian exiles, the postwar US differed from Weimar and Nazi Germany, but they were not other. To them, modern Germany and modern America were both oppressive, violent, racist, and willing to deploy the full force of industrial capitalism to expropriate

67 Heins 2006, 2007, 2011 re-tell this, and it is also emphasized in Stuart Jeffries, *Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School*, London: Verso, 2016.

68 Most notably, the central chapters in the memoir of Andrew Breitbart, *Righteous Indignation*, New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2011, as well as throughout the work of William Lind, such as 'The Scourge of Cultural Marxism', *The American Conservative*, May/June, 2018.

and dominate populations, control territories, and destroy enemies. For Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse, the US was simply more advanced, less unevenly developed, and 'delivered the goods' with consumerism⁶⁹; for Fromm, it was just as profoundly alienating, precisely *because* its capitalism was so materially successful⁷⁰. The analytic point, as should be clear, is that, simply by observing a deeper continuity, an entirely different, and more critical, disquieting, implicating theoretical reading of American history emerges. Moreover, it is one that would begin to locate the uneven prevalence of conspiracy theories, at any point they emerge, as something within any given society and its culture, implicating everyone and everything. The conspiracy theories of postwar America are not the unreason that has befallen postwar American democracy, they are the unreason of America in capitalist modernity.

**Conclusion: persistent uneven presence in political practice,
structural amnesia in social explanation**

For this paper, the following two concluding points from this are surely crucial for re-framing a theoretical understanding of conspiracy theories for the political present, overcoming the US-centric 1960s of Hofstadter, and the reified postwar of the 90s and 00s conspiracy theory theorists.

It is time to recognize and remember that the paranoid style, a notion that has 'dominated academic and intellectual approaches to political extremism and populist fear of conspiracy'⁷¹ was developed by reading Adorno and Horkheimer, and that Hofstadter cited Neumann as a source for key ideas. As Hofstadter argued, borrowing from Neumann, conspiracy theories are political phenomena that recur, with uneven persistence,

69 Duke Ellington's 'air-conditioned jungle', or 'the air-conditioned nightmare', to borrow Henry Miller's phrasing. Following Marcuse's key point from 1955, this itself was the tragedy, as it removed any impetus for emancipation through class struggle, by successfully transforming the industrial proletariat into pacified consumers, then globalizing this model of pacified domination, via the B-29, Cadillac, Fender Stratocaster, Marlboro, and Coca Cola.

70 Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society*, London: Routledge & Kegan, 1955.

71 Fenster 2008, 8.

across history. Secondly, as Neumann argued in 'Anxiety and Politics', conspiracy theories are 'a common ingredient of fascism'⁷². Re-examined from 2021, this latter claim seems like the huge point to have kept missing in all this. Given the continued – though different and specific – possible danger of such politics, a primary case study *must* continue to be the anti-Semitic conspiracies of National Socialism, and their modern lineages, which Neumann's work shows us back to, and which are still with us. For as recent scholarship also brings back to its proper emphasis, Nazism was driven by a falsely concrete conspiracy view of history and the world⁷³: strategic decisions, involving the lives of hundreds of millions of people, were made on the basis of it. Moreover, Neumann's deeper lesson for us is that fascism, in all its forms, is not something we are safe from nor separate to; it is a part of the shared history of political modernity that continues to impinge causally on the political present. We need to stop being surprised when fascist tics, tactics and politics continue to employ conspiracy theories. It is time to begin considering conspiracies as structural features of fascist politics – including those of our time.

What can be distilled after unfolding this paper's contention via its epistemology is as follows. Conspiracy theories are an uneven, persistent emergence in our politics, co-present with a falsely concrete view of history, that emerges in a number of constellations, and is a structural aspect of fascism. Beyond this, on the level of historically intelligible social reality, conspiracy theories tend to have extrinsic explanations that are not amenable to a unified conception: in all the examples examined here, both the conspiracy theories and the theoretical explanations given them said a lot about many facets of the conjunctures of which they were a part. They sought to explain, but actually they conveyed experience that was amenable to this later understanding. Paradigmatically with figures like Lombroso and Spencer, 'bad' theories always point back to their own context as much as they struggle to explain the world beyond

72 Hofstadter, 7.

73 See Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy*, London: Penguin 2007 – especially the concluding chapter.

their world, or they explain the obsessive nature of that world's purview by unintendedly showing its constitutive blindspots to a later audience. Dean's postmodernity and the information society, like Fenster's modernity and American democracy, are bad theories of conspiracy theories in this way. Jameson's 'cognitive mappings of impossible totalities', is a justly influential evocative phrasing, and beckons explanation as much as it attracts citation; Hofstadter's paranoid style is more synecdoche than social theory. For a deeper and more critical theoretical understanding of any given conspiracy theory, and the theories and theorists who purport to explain them, this paper has urged us look to false concreteness as a critical tool and counterfactual generator. It has also urged we may productively follow Neumann in looking to the societal sources of anxiety and alienation to explain a theory's resonance, discern them in relation to an attuned understanding of that culture, carefully compare that case with other conjunctures, and strive for some reflexive humility that might enable the observer to glimpse beyond itself seeing.

On the level of history and culture, surely the instructive lesson of the conspiracy theory theorists, and their strong focus on their own vision of the postwar US, is that all of us, as theorists and as scholars, would do better to constellate a theoretical position that includes points beyond our own historical and cultural contexts, and return to the work of earlier generations. The conspiracy theory theorists might have generated more interesting social theories that pointed beyond themselves, had they only been more curious about the causal-effective existence of possible continuities and earlier antecedents – at least before discounting them in favour of finding a conceptual label to lead an argument around by its nose.

Granted one might be looking for novelty *and* discontinuity in one's time. But for doing theoretical work that takes history and culture seriously, this paper has argued that one more cogent way of trying to know it is by treating the larger past as if it truly continues to matter for us now, because it influences and constrains how things are, because it contains intelligible patterns that intimate discernable structures. Upon examination, these pasts and lines and structures may – or may not – prove capable

of fruitful comparisons, contrasts, and counterfactuals. Theorisation that gives itself over to historical enquiry uses more words, requires more patience, and yields fewer neologisms and unambiguous explanations. It is less concrete; it may be less false. Yet by enquiring more openly and more curiously into deeper continuities, we become capable of apprehending the discontinuities that mark the political present as distinct, new, and meaningfully different. This style of work could be far more productive than most of 90s postmodernism has turned out to be.

How is it that Anglophone theorists of conspiracy theory have continued to cite and read Hofstadter, yet keep neglecting fascism and Germany? Moreover, how have the American theorists of conspiracy seen fit to keep making do with Hofstadter as progenitor, although we have another set of earlier starting points whose breadcrumbs are right there in the footnotes of the 'Paranoid Style'? In sum: why does American conspiracy theory keep remembering Hofstadter, but keep forgetting Neumann, and his key points about false concreteness, and about the structural correlation between conspiracy theories and fascism⁷⁴? Mary Douglas wondered about a similar problem as she re-read Merton's 60s work on scientific knowledge, in the 80s: 'Merton asked why scientists keep forgetting something that is very obvious and why they are so surprised when it is brought to their attention'⁷⁵. Douglas was interested in how this was structured as 'institution', and how 'institutions create shadowed places in which nothing can be seen and no questions asked'⁷⁶. Nietzsche called this active forgetting; Douglas followed Evans-Pritchard in calling it structural amnesia. Met with the persistent uneven presence

74 This decade see the increasingly cited work of Joseph E. Uscinski and especially the edited collection Joseph E. Uscinski, *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2018). Here, Neumann is not mentioned, Adorno rates a cursory mention alongside Lasswell as a 'political psychologist'; Hofstadter, as usual, is read back as the flawed progenitor. Mentions of China, Germany, and Russia (for example) are cursory, and are not substantively treated.

75 Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think*, (New York: Syracuse University Press 1986), 70.

76 Op.cit., 69.

of practice, the theorists of conspiracy theory this paper has analysed have evinced structural amnesia in explanation, the eternal sunshine of an American postwar without Marxist Jews and Nazis. Yet they were and are all there inside postwar America too; the alt right rediscovered them.

The scholarly problem that structural amnesia engenders for us, by its conclusion, is Douglas' one of institutional forgetting⁷⁷: neither the absence of evidence nor the infoglut of the information society⁷⁸, but a knowable past most authors tend not to examine when they're weighting their discourse with the cited authority of the scholars they believe preceded them, or who they know they must cite to pass peer review. For us, as theorists working with these discursive forms, in this division of labour, theoretical explanations of conspiracy theories, at heart, are less about loose theories and bad explanations corroding a supposed-once rational political past, and more about how we build bounded thought worlds by carefully remembering some things and forgetting others. Remembering Jean Baudrillard *means* forgetting Franz Neumann⁷⁹. From the infinite possibility of starting points, we choose a purview, based on our value commitments. Postmodernity, which seemed to Dean to be the most fascinating and explanatory aspect about the time in which Dean was living, now seems only to date the work as of another time.

We could chalk up the structural amnesia in explanation identified in this paper to the power law implied in 'nothing succeeds like success'. Hofstadter's speech was given in the month of JFK's assassination; 'the paranoid style' was a hugely resonant phrase, so it was the phrase that

77 Op.cit., 81–91.

78 Mark Andrejevic expands upon and in a sense updates Dean's argument in 'Theory Glut: From Critique to Conspiracy', creating the same repertoire of issues as noted here in Dean's essay. Curiously, they both rely on Žižek, the notion of the information society, and use self-referential examples from US culture. In this case, what becomes clear is the extent to which the analysis mirrors early 2010s tech-positive media theory and uses a set of examples which became redundant, or had an entirely different valence, the moment Trump was elected. Mark Andrejevic, *Infoglut: How Too Much Information Is Changing the Way We Think and Know*, (London: Routledge (2013).

79 See Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, (New York: Semiotext(e) 1998).

resonated, and so was cited, and so it is cited, and continues to be cited. This too is a historical fact, irreducible to the contingent explanatory order that this author, who has argued for a different lineage, would like to give back to the past⁸⁰. In a parallel contingent unfolding, a discourse whose key proponent thinks of everything since as ‘footnotes to Hofstadter’ could be ‘footnotes to Neumann’ – because of a footnote *in* Hofstadter. Perhaps this is fine if we construe this as intellectual meta-history, footnotes to footnotes in Hofstadter. But by the 2020s, any theoretical explanation of conspiracy theories that does not help, or even try to help, explain the prevalence of conspiracy theories in contemporary China, India, Russia, Brazil, or Egypt – or continues to read them by way of postwar America – is of limited use as a starting point, and might continue to just be about how the 90s US, that parochial hegemon, thought it was ‘today’s global world’ in those days. Having passed this era, it is a fresh time to deepen and broaden our thinking about conspiracy theory; returning to the past in the ways this paper has suggested is one way to begin building this future.

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80 Koselleck 2004, 115.

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Recovering the Gender Dimension of Frankfurt School Critical Theory: A Feminist Analysis¹

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Abstract: Compared to other theoretical traditions, first-generation Frankfurt School Critical Theory has been a relatively marginal reference point for feminist theory. There is a widespread sense that the Frankfurt School theorists either did not say much about gender or when they did, it was traditional rather than critical. In this paper, I will argue that analyses of gender, family, and sexual relations were a central component of the Frankfurt School's efforts to develop a critical social theory of bourgeois society. This, however, has mostly been overlooked by the secondary literature. It is only by reading the Frankfurt School from a perspective informed by contemporary feminist theory that one is able to recover this lost dimension. Such a feminist reading not only contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the Frankfurt School's original work, but also enables us to identify limitations in its social theory that require updating in order to keep Critical Theory self-reflexive and indeed critical.

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- 1 A first, short version of this paper was presented at the 2019 International Critical Theory Conference in Rome. I am grateful to discussants for their feedback. In addition, I would like to thank Blair Taylor from the Institute for Social Ecology who not only provided me with opportunities for discussing my work with international groups of participants, but also took the time to comment a later version of this paper and eventually edit it.
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The so-called first generation of the Frankfurt School continues to be an important point of reference for many scholars across the social sciences and humanities.³ At the same time, it is striking that within the fields of gender studies and feminist theory, other traditions of critical thought far outweigh the Frankfurt School's influence. Equally noteworthy is that questions of gender, family, and sexuality are rarely addressed in discussions of the Frankfurt School's original approach. No matter if one consults detailed studies of its history and development, intellectual biographies and studies of individual members, or shorter paperback introductions – one is left with the impression that critical analysis of gender relations (Geschlechterverhältnisse) was not part of the Frankfurt School's project of developing a critical theory of society (Gesellschaftstheorie).⁴ Considering that intellectual histories and introductions are likely to be not only the first, but in many cases also the last point of contact with a particular theorist or theoretical tradition, this subgenre of secondary literature not only tells us what the Frankfurt School 'was all about,' but also yields considerable influence over how the tradition of Frankfurt School Critical Theory is understood and updated in the present.

- 3 It is common to distinguish various generations of Frankfurt School Critical Theory. In this paper, I am concerned only with the founding generation represented by Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and others. Whenever I use the terms 'Frankfurt School' or 'Critical Theory' with upper-case letters and without further qualifications, I refer to this group of intellectuals. In contrast, when talking about theories with a critical impetus in the broader sense, I will use 'critical theory' with lower-case letters.
- 4 See e.g., Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination. A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950* (London: Heinemann, [1973] 1976); Rolf Wiggershaus, *Die Frankfurter Schule: Geschichte. Theoretische Entwicklung. Politische Bedeutung* (Munich/Vienna: Carl Hanser Verlag, [1986] 1988); Detlev Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno. Ein letztes Genie* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 2003); John Abromeit, *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Christoph Türcke/Gerhard Bolte, *Einführung in die Kritische Theorie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994); Helmut Dubiel, *Kritische Theorie der Gesellschaft: Eine einführende Rekonstruktion von den Anfängen im Horkheimer-Kreis bis Habermas* (Weinheim/Munich: Juventa, 1988); Michael Schwandt, *Kritische Theorie. Eine Einführung* (Stuttgart: Schmetterling Verlag, [2009] 2010).

Gender, family, and sexuality, in turn, are peculiar objects of inquiry. Mediating our relation to the human and non-human world as well as to our psychic and bodily selves since early childhood days, gender, family, and sexuality seem something all too familiar. Human beings are not imaginable to us other than as gendered beings. This condition is commonly comprehended as, in the last instance, rooted in nature, more precisely: in our corporeal, bodily existence which we have learned to think of and relate to in binary terms.⁵ Thus, the commonsense perspective is to understand gender as something simultaneously self-evident and not quite social. Similarly, all too often family and sexuality are still taken as simply given and/or primarily private matters, decades of scholarly controversy, political contention and activism around these issues notwithstanding. Such ideas about gender, family, and sexuality as somehow pre-social or less-social-than-other-phenomena need to be comprehended as deeply rooted within bourgeois societies.⁶ Whether by reference to nature, the main strategy until well into the 20th century, or more recently by viewing gender, family, and sexual relations as primarily a result of individual choice and inclination, the fundamentally social character of gender, family, and sexuality all too often goes unacknowledged.⁷

5 This, of course, does not preclude the possibility that people relate to themselves and/or others in non-binary terms – as the (self-)identifications of people as genderqueer, trans* or inter* clearly show. My emphasis here, however, is with the hegemonic ways of relating to ourselves and others that one cannot escape but is constantly exposed to simply by living in today's society.

6 On this, see German-speaking feminist theorist Andrea Maihofer, *Geschlecht als Existenzweise. Macht, Moral, Recht und Geschlechterdifferenz* (Frankfurt: Ulrike Helmer Verlag, 1995) and Andrea Maihofer, „Dialektik der Aufklärung – Die Entstehung der modernen Gleichheitsidee, des Diskurses der qualitativen Geschlechterdifferenz und der Rassetheorien im 18. Jahrhundert“, in *Die andere Hälfte der Globalisierung. Menschenrechte, Ökonomie und Medialität aus feministischer Sicht*, ed. Steffi Hobuß/Christina Schües/Nina Zimnik (Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 2001).

7 More precisely, what seems characteristic for our time is the coexistence of individualization and naturalization. Whereas gender, family, and sexual relations in the sense of relations to concrete others and/or social relations tend to get individualized, the commonsense understanding of our cor-

This commonsense understanding is not limited to everyday interactions and practices, or to what, following Max Horkheimer, we can call “traditional theory”. Rather, the distinction between traditional and critical theory, between everyday knowledge and scientific knowledge frequently breaks down when it comes to gender, family, and sexual relations. Traditional or everyday knowledge then functions as a taken-for-granted starting point that informs the production of critical theory and scientific knowledge – in social sciences and the humanities as well as in the fields of natural sciences and engineering.

In contrast, the insight that what seems to be eternal and/or natural phenomena has come into existence only in the course of historical processes, that seemingly private matters on closer inspection reveal their intrinsically social character can already be found in the work of Karl Marx. It is what, at a very fundamental level, characterizes a historical-materialist perspective. Taking up this tradition was key to first-generation Frankfurt School Critical Theory. Consequently, these thinkers time and again insisted that what *appears* as mere facts is ultimately the result of congealed social relations and thus a restriction of historical possibilities.

This raises a series of questions regarding the fact that gender, family, and sexuality are rarely discussed by influential secondary literature: What sense are we to make of this? Is it that the first generation of Frankfurt School critical theorists, writing mostly in the decades *before* the emergence of feminist theory as a field of scholarship in its own right, did not reflect on gender relations in any substantial way? Could it be the case that Adorno, Horkheimer and other Frankfurt School protagonists failed to break with the bourgeois understanding of gender, family, and sexuality as simply given and/or private matters? In other words, was

poreal, bodily existence is still that of an immediately given. Rather than comprehending our gendered and sexualized existence as socially mediated ways of *relating* to our bodies, desires, and drives, an understanding of sexual dimorphism as directly rooted in nature and, hence, of heterosexuality as somehow more natural or normal than other forms of sexual orientation, continues to be widespread.

the Frankfurt School's approach to gender, family, and sexuality rather traditional than critical?⁸

In this paper, I will argue that it is only by engaging contemporary feminist theory that we are in a position to answer these questions. Such an approach allows us to see that analyses of gender, family, and sexuality are far from absent in the work of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and other first-generation Frankfurt School theorists. Rather, these discussions have been sidelined within influential secondary literature. Yet, as I will argue, a reading informed by contemporary feminist theory enables us to understand that analyses of gender, family, and sexual relations were a genuine part of the Frankfurt School's efforts to develop a critical social theory of 20th century bourgeois society. Indeed, nothing less than first steps towards a critical theory of gender can be found in the Frankfurt School's work. Moreover, a reading informed by contemporary feminist theory puts us in a position to assess both the strengths and limitations of the founders' discussions of these themes. Thus, engaging contemporary feminist theory on the one hand contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the Frankfurt School's original work. At the same time and maybe even more importantly, by enabling us to identify limitations in the Frankfurt School's approach, a feminist perspective proves indispensable for keeping Critical Theory self-reflexive and updated.

In the first section of this paper, I will analyze how gender, family, and sexuality have been accounted for so far across the vast body of work on first-generation Frankfurt School Critical Theory. Starting with seminal studies and frequently consulted introductions, I will then turn to feminist contributions. In this context, I will introduce the analytical distinction between a women's studies perspective and a gender studies perspective in the narrower sense. In the main section of the paper, I will revisit the Frankfurt School's work in more detail by drawing on insights and concepts developed over the course of several decades of women's

8 If this was the case, it would explain why references to the Frankfurt School are rare in contemporary gender studies and feminist theory.

and gender studies scholarship. While in my book I have done so by discussing a broad variety of authors associated with the Frankfurt School and considering sources that range from the 1930s to the 1970s, for the sake of this paper I will focus on the first major research project of the Institute for Social Research under Horkheimer's direction, the *Studies on Authority and the Family* (1936).⁹ I will conclude by pointing out in what respects our understanding of the first generation of Frankfurt School Critical Theory is in need of reconfiguration.

1. Shifting Perspectives: From Sidelining to Analyzing Gender, Family, and Sexuality in the Frankfurt School

When it comes to describing the Frankfurt School's overall approach, short paperback introductions as well as more detailed studies paint a fairly similar picture.¹⁰ Emphasis is placed on the Frankfurt School's efforts to move beyond economic and deterministic understandings of Marxism, i.e. readings of Marx that take societal developments, at least in the last instance, to be deducible to economic tendencies and class struggle, and see history as 'by necessity' giving rise to a classless, communist society. Against such dogmatic versions of Marxism which dominated the labor movement and its parties well into the twentieth century, secondary literature highlights the Frankfurt School's break with traditional Marxism and its insistence that Marxian theory can only be continued via reflectively updating and expanding it. Whereas traditional Marxism is predominantly concerned with relations of productions, it is stressed

9 Barbara Umrath, *Geschlecht, Familie, Sexualität. Die Entwicklung der Kritischen Theorie aus der Perspektive sozialwissenschaftlicher Geschlechterforschung* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2019).

10 For the following, see Abromeit, *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School*, 141–247; Olaf Asbach, *Kritische Gesellschaftstheorie und historische Praxis. Entwicklungen der Kritischen Theorie bei Max Horkheimer 1930–1942/43* (Frankfurt: Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1997), 35–144; Hauke Brunkhorst/Getrud Koch, *Herbert Marcuse zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius Verlag, [1987] 1990), 28–29, 33–40; Dubiel, *Kritische Theorie der Gesellschaft*, 17–23; Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, 31–142; Schwandt, *Kritische Theorie*, 18–27; Wiggershaus, *Die Frankfurter Schule*, 49–146.

that the Frankfurt School's critical social theory put the *relation* between economy, culture, and psyche at its center, paying particular attention to how societal relations marked by exploitation and domination are internalized by and reproduced within the individual. Thus, Marx's critique of political economy was supplemented by a critical theory of culture and the formation of subjectivity.

While all of this is indeed characteristic for the Frankfurt School's approach, from a feminist perspective, though, equally noteworthy is what influential secondary literature at best mentions in passing – namely the Frankfurt School's analyses of gender, family, and sexual relations. When the latter are addressed as objects of the Frankfurt School's social criticism, this is usually the case with reference to Herbert Marcuse.¹¹ Apparently, he is the one protagonist whose reflections on sexuality, patriarchy, sexual and women's liberation are deemed in need for mentioning at more detail. Given that dogmatic readings of Marxism tend to hierarchize social relations into 'major' (read: economic and 'objective' like class) and 'minor' (read: cultural and 'subjective' such as gender and race) contradictions and considering that the Frankfurt School's approach is frequently described via contrasting it with said versions of Marxism, this sidelining of discussions of gender, family, and sexuality by influential secondary literature is more than striking. With or – what seems more likely to me – without intention, the impression is created that critically reflecting on gender, family, and sexual relations was not integral to the Frankfurt School's project of developing a critical theory of bourgeois society. At best, relevant discussions are portrayed as a particular concern of Marcuse, but not of his longtime intellectual companions and the Frankfurt School in general.

The tendency of influential secondary literature to sideline analyses of what, from a feminist perspective, must be comprehended as genu-

11 See Brunkhorst/Koch, *Herbert Marcuse zur Einführung*, 67–82 a. 93–106; Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (London: MacMillan, 1984), 154–196, 276–319; Schwandt, *Kritische Theorie*, 113; Wiggershaus, *Die Frankfurter Schule*, 553–565.

ine objects for critical inquiry becomes particularly visible regarding the 1936 *Studien über Autorität und Familie* (*Studies on Authority and the Family*), a voluminous anthology of more than 850 pages.¹² With the family, an institution considered ('merely') private in bourgeois societies figures prominently in the first major research project of the Institute for Social Research under Horkheimer's directorship. While this suggests an important break with traditional understandings of the family, secondary literature quickly passes over the Frankfurt School's analyses of the family. Instead, the focus is clearly on Erich Fromm's famous concept of the authoritarian or sadomasochistic character. A good case in point here is Helmut Dubiel's introduction to the Frankfurt School, *Kritische Theorie der Gesellschaft: Eine einführende Rekonstruktion von den Anfängen im Horkheimer-Kreis bis Habermas* (1988). In it, the family vanishes from the title of the chapter that discusses the *Studies*. The section simply reads: "The Authoritarian Social Character".¹³ Something similar happens in Martin Jay's seminal study, in which the title of the corresponding chapter reads "The Institut's First Studies on Authority".¹⁴ Rather than describing the *Studies* as an inquiry into the *relation* between authority and the family, the tendency within influential secondary literature is to present them as the beginning of the Frankfurt School's concern with authoritarianism – an early venture which allowed for gaining experience with empirical methods and thus made possible the more 'mature' later study on *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). This overall thrust comes out most clearly in Gerhard Bolte's and Christoph Türcke's introduction

12 For the presentation of the *Studies on Authority and the Family*, see Bolte/Türcke, *Einführung in die Kritische Theorie*, 23 – 26; Dubiel, *Kritische Theorie der Gesellschaft*, 47–49; Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, 124–133; Wiggershaus, *Die Frankfurter Schule*, 173 – 177. Unfortunately, until today only parts of the Frankfurt School's first major research project are available in English.

13 Dubiel, *Kritische Theorie der Gesellschaft*, 40. As with further quotes from work published in German, all translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

14 Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, 113. To be fair, one has to add that in the chapter itself Jay's discussion of the family can qualify as quite detailed, at least compared to the marginal attention Rolf Wiggershaus pays to the family in his equally influential study.

to the Frankfurt School, *Einführung in die Kritische Theorie* (1994). The detailed historical and sociological analyses of the family that constitute the major part of the anthology are barely mentioned. Described as mere “collection of data and material”, they seem without analytical and theoretical value in themselves. At best illustrative, but obviously not worthy of further consideration.¹⁵

Accounts of the *Studies on Authority and the Family* are for the most part limited to Max Horkheimer’s and Erich Fromm’s contributions, i.e., the first 130 pages or roughly one sixth of the whole anthology, with some authors reading these texts alongside rather brief discussions of the family in later writings by Frankfurt School theorists. Without considering the Frankfurt School’s analyses of the family in detail, secondary literature goes on to argue that the authoritarian character was understood as the result of a *demise* of patriarchal authority *within the family*. Moreover, it is suggested that the Frankfurt School theorists took this to be equivalent to a *decline of patriarchal structures within society at large*. Thus, according to this literature, the Frankfurt School theorists unambiguously identified the authoritarian character as the product of what psychoanalyst Alexander Mitscherlich (1963) later described as a “fatherless society”.¹⁶

In contrast, feminist scholars turning to the *Studies on Authority and the Family*, were less interested in Fromm’s concept of the authoritarian character.¹⁷ Instead, their main focus was with Horkheimer’s discussion

15 Bolte/Türcke, *Einführung in die Kritische Theorie*, 25.

16 Dubiel, *Kritische Theorie der Gesellschaft*, 61–62; Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, 127, 324; Wiggershaus, *Die Frankfurter Schule*, 176–177.

17 For the following, see the essays by Jessica Benjamin (1978), “Authority and the Family Revisited or, A World without Fathers?” in *The Frankfurt School: Critical Assessments. Volume II*, ed. Jay Bernstein (London/New York: Routledge, 1994) and Jessica Benjamin, “Die Antinomien des patriarchalischen Denkens. Kritische Theorie und Psychoanalyse,” in *Sozialforschung als Kritik. Zum sozialwissenschaftlichen Potential der Kritischen Theorie*, ed. Wolfgang Bonß/Axel Honneth (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982); Mechthild Rumpf (1989), „Ein Erbe der Aufklärung. Imaginationen des ‘Mütterlichen’ in Max Horkheimers Schriften,” in *Feministische Studien*, 7(2), 55–68 and Mechthild Rumpf, „Mystical Aura: Imagination and the Reality of the Maternal in Horkheimer’s Writings,” in *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives*, ed. Seyla

of the family and, in particular, of women's role within the family. While Horkheimer's 1936 essay was usually read in conjunction with his later piece on "Authority and the Family Today" (1949), further contributions to the *Studies* are rarely considered in feminist secondary literature and limited to brief discussions of Erich Fromm.¹⁸ In other words: Similar to the readings discussed above, feminist scholars focused only on a small section of this voluminous anthology. Moreover, feminists agreed with the interpretation that the Frankfurt School understood the authoritarian character as the result of a wholesale demise of patriarchal structures. What they objected to, though, was the characterization of 20th century society as 'fatherless' or post-patriarchal. As Jessica Benjamin suggested, "patriarchy without the father" might be a more apt description.¹⁹ Thus, it was not so much that feminists differed in their reading of the concept of the authoritarian character. Nor did feminists put forth a more nuanced interpretation of the Frankfurt School's *Zeitdiagnose*. Rather, agreeing that the Frankfurt School described a demise of patriarchal structures, feminists rejected the seemingly uncritical character of its analysis of 20th century bourgeois society.

Horkheimer's discussions of the family were neither the first nor the only works by Frankfurt School theorists that came under feminist scrutiny. In the context of the so-called New Left and the emerging women's movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Marcuse's "Marxism and Feminism" (1974) had already been the subject of controversial debates. Since then, feminist theorists have turned to more and less well-known

Benhabib/Wolfgang Bonß/John McCole (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993); Karin Windaus-Walser, „Autorität und Geschlecht – Eine Dialektik der Verklärung,“ in *Kritische Theorie und Kultur*, ed. Rainer Erd/Dietrich Hoß/Otto Jacobi/Peter Noeller (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989). See also the corresponding sections in the monographs by Patricia Jagentowicz Mills, *Woman, Nature, and Psyche* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 93–122 and Mechthild Rumpf, *Spuren des Mütterlichen – Die widersprüchliche Bedeutung der Mutterrolle für die männliche Identitätsbildung in Kritischer Theorie und feministischer Wissenschaft* (Frankfurt/Hannover: Materialis Verlag, 1989), 15–51.

18 Windaus-Walser, „Autorität und Geschlecht“, 236–241.

19 Benjamin, "Authority and the Family Revisited", 300.

writings by central Frankfurt School protagonists, among them Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and the seminal *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944/1947) co-authored by Adorno and Horkheimer.²⁰ The main thrust of these readings can be summarized as follows: Overall, feminists called attention to and acknowledged that all major protagonists articulated a critique of patriarchal domination. At the same time, it was argued that this critique fell short because of its androcentrism. For example, Patricia Jagentowicz Mills found a discussion of "(t)he unique development of the female psyche" missing in Horkheimer's critical account of the patriarchal family.²¹ Similarly, Mechthild Rumpf pointed out that

20 For discussions of Herbert Marcuse, see e.g. Silvia Bovenschen/Marianne Schuller, „Weiblichkeitsbilder. Gesprächsteilnehmer: Herbert Marcuse, Silvia Bovenschen, Marianne Schuller,“ in *Gespräche mit Herbert Marcuse*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978); Xenia Rajewsky, „Die zweite Natur – Feminismus als weibliche Negation?“ in *Spuren der Befreiung - Herbert Marcuse: Ein Materialienbuch zur Einführung in sein politisches Denken*, ed. Lothar Bailer/Detlev Claussen (Darmstadt/Neuwied: Hermann Luchterhand Verlag, 1981); Nancy Chodorow (1985), „Beyond Drive Theory: Object Relations and the Limits of Radical Individualism,“ in *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory*, ed. Nancy Chodorow (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1989); Jagentowicz Mills, *Woman, Nature, and Psyche*, 150–168, 195–200; Barbara Brick, „Marcuses Rekurs auf das verdrängte Weibliche. Feministische Implikationen seiner Freud-Kritik,“ in *Kritik und Utopie im Werk Herbert Marcuses*, ed. Institut für Sozialforschung (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992) and „Überlegungen zu Herbert Marcuses Begriff einer mütterlichen Moral,“ in *Zwielicht der Vernunft. Die Dialektik der Aufklärung aus der Sicht von Frauen*, ed. Christine Kulke/Elvira Scheich (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1992).

For feminist assessments of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, see Regina Becker-Schmidt, „Identitätslogik und Gewalt. Zum Verhältnis von Kritischer Theorie und Feminismus,“ in *Fragmente kritischer Theorie*, ed. Joachim Müller-Warden/Harald Welzer (Tübingen: edition diskord, 1991) and „Adorno kritisieren – und dabei von ihm lernen. Von der Bedeutung seiner Theorie für die Geschlechterforschung,“ in *Die Lebendigkeit der kritischen Gesellschaftstheorie. Dokumentation der Arbeitstagung aus Anlass des 100. Geburtstages von Theodor W. Adorno*, ed. Andreas Gruschka/Ulrich Oevermann (Wetzlar: Büchse der Pandora, 2004); Annette Kuhn (1992), „Kritische Theorie und Frauenforschung,“ *Neue Gesellschaft/Frankfurter Hefte*, 39 (11) and the respective section in Jagentowicz Mills, *Woman, Nature, and Psyche*, 182–191. A recent overview of feminist readings of the Frankfurt School with additional references can be found in Umrath, *Geschlecht, Familie, Sexualität*, 48–58.

21 Jagentowicz Mills, *Woman, Nature, and Psyche*, 121. Jessica Benjamin and Nan-

when talking about 'man' in general, what Horkheimer actually refers to is the experience of the male subject.²² Jagentowicz Mills in a succinct way wraps up what many feminists found. She grants that the Frankfurt School "offers a framework for understanding patriarchal domination but obscures this understanding through silence and the distortion of woman's experience".²³ Not breaking with an epistemological tradition that substitutes "a view of the female ... for a view by the female", she concludes that the Frankfurt School "against its own intentions, often reflects and reinforces woman's domination".²⁴

Concern with women's experience and the representation of women is a recurrent theme in feminist engagements with the Frankfurt School. With respect to readings originating between the 1970s and early 1990s, it can even be described as the main focus of feminist analysis. In comparison, feminists paid significantly less attention to the Frankfurt School's discussions of men and masculinity.²⁵ As a consequence, the feminist secondary literature not so much presents us with an analysis of how *gender*

cy Chodorow made a similar argument with respect to the social psychology of Adorno and Marcuse, respectively. See Jessica Benjamin (1977), "The End of Internalization: Adorno's Social Psychology," in *The Frankfurt School: Critical Assessments. Volume III*, ed. Jay Bernstein (London/New York: Routledge, 1994); Nancy Chodorow, *Beyond Drive Theory*.

22 Rumpf, *Spuren des Mütterlichen*, 26.

23 Jagentowicz Mills, *Woman, Nature, and Psyche*, xii.

24 Jagentowicz Mills, *Woman, Nature, and Psyche*, xix; italics in the original.

25 For an early exception see Mechthild Rumpf, *Spuren des Mütterlichen*. In general, however, discussion of men and masculinity is restricted to more recent readings. See e.g. Andrea Maihofer, *Geschlecht als Existenzweise*, 109–120; Andrea Trumann, *Feministische Theorie. Frauenbewegung und weibliche Subjektbildung im Spätkapitalismus* (Stuttgart: Schmetterling Verlag, 2002); Tina Schönborn, "... und je größer die Lockung wird, umso stärker läßt er sich fesseln – Kritische Männlichkeitsanalyse in der Kritischen Theorie," in *Zentrum für transdisziplinäre Geschlechterstudien. Bulletin Texte 41* (2014), https://www.genderopen.de/bitstream/handle/25595/10/BulletinTexte41_Sch%C3%B6nborn_Tina.pdf?sequence=1 [Last accessed: November 1, 2021]. These more recent readings comprehend Horkheimer's and Adorno's interpretation of the Odyssey in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a critical exposition of the masculine character of the bourgeois subject.

figures within the Frankfurt School, but of how *one* particular gender, women, is addressed. Following Andrea Maihofer (2006), the majority of feminist readings can be characterized as informed by a *women's studies perspective*.²⁶

In contrast, what Maihofer describes as a *gender studies perspective in the narrower sense* implies a series of epistemological shifts which increasingly gained ground in feminist theorizing over the course of the 1990s. First of all, a gender studies perspective pays equal attention to women *and* men. Moreover, it problematizes the category gender as such and in entirely new ways: No longer conceptualizing sex as antecedent gender, the idea of the body as 'qua nature' either male *or* female, i.e. a *binary* concept of the sexed body, is comprehended as, in itself, a social and cultural phenomenon. Last but not least, by increasingly reflecting the role of desire/sexuality, class, and race/ethnicity for constituting gender, the epistemological shift towards a gender studies perspective implies that feminist thought moves beyond theorizing 'only' gender (relations) towards social theory in the broader sense.²⁷

It is important to note that Maihofer stresses the *analytical* character of this distinction and rejects attempts to dismiss a women's studies perspective as simply outdated. She explicitly acknowledges that the emergence of the field of women's studies from the late 1960s onwards was groundbreaking: In its context, the need for making gender the object of *system-*

26 Andrea Maihofer, "Von der Frauen- zur Geschlechterforschung – Ein bedeutsamer Perspektivenwechsel nebst aktuellen Herausforderungen an die Geschlechterforschung", in *FrauenMännerGeschlechterforschung. State of the Art*, ed. Brigitte Aulenbacher/Mechthild Bereswill/Martina Löw/Michael Meuser/Gabriele Mordt/Reinhild Schäfer/Sylka Scholz (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2006).

27 Maihofer, "Von der Frauen- zur Geschlechterforschung", 69–73. Epistemologically, then, the shift from a women's to a gender studies perspective not 'only' requires paying equal attention to men and masculinity, as Maihofer notes in 2006, but also to gendered ways of existence that do not abide by a binary concept of gender. While remaining implicit in her 2006 essay, more recently Maihofer explicitly reflects this when characterizing the hegemonic gender order as a 'cisheteropatriarchal' one.

atic investigation was articulated for the first time.²⁸ Following Maihofer, my intention is not to dismiss readings of the Frankfurt School informed by a women's studies perspective. Quite to the contrary, these readings can significantly deepen our understanding of the Frankfurt School's approach: Highlighting the latter's failure to discuss women's experience in its complexity, they draw attention to the fact that criticizing patriarchal domination is not enough, and point out the need for more sophisticated analyses of gender relations. At the same time, women's studies readings leave us with an incomplete picture of how gender, family, and sexuality were accounted for by first-generation Frankfurt School Critical Theory for two reasons. First, as long as we neglect discussions of men and masculinity, it seems premature to conclude that the Frankfurt School's lack of a nuanced discussion of women's lives and realities is the result of a failure to break with one-sided and misogynist images of women and femininity. If, instead, we take discussions of gender in the broader sense into account, this allows us to see that a preoccupation with stereotypical ideas of femininity *and* masculinity is consequential from the Frankfurt School's perspective, and is embedded in its basic understanding of critique. According to these theorists, in order to avoid the unwarranted optimism about the development of history typical of certain versions of Marxism, critique needs to first and foremost explain how domination is reproduced, not so much how it is challenged. Second and related to this, a gender studies perspective enables us to reevaluate the Frankfurt School's concern with the family. While women's studies readings were right to point out that discussing women only in relation to the family tends to reproduce stereotypical representations of femininity, in hindsight it also becomes clear that feminist readings of the 1970s and 1980s were not really interested in further theorizing the family. Influenced by a then vibrant women's movement that aimed at opening up spaces for women *beyond* their traditional place in the family, feminist theory could rest content with a critique of the family as perpetuating women's subordination. In contrast, a gender studies perspective requires us to take

28 Maihofer, "Von der Frauen- zur Geschlechterforschung", 66.

a closer and broader look at the Frankfurt School's work on the family. This approach allows us to see that, for first-generation Frankfurt School Critical Theory, analyzing an institution considered ('merely') private was indispensable for developing a critical understanding of authoritarianism in particular and bourgeois society in general.

With this in mind, in the next section I will engage contemporary feminist theory in order to reassess the Frankfurt School's 1936 *Studies on Authority and the Family*.

2 Revisiting the Frankfurt School's *Studies on Authority and the Family*

2.1 Starting Points for a Critical Social Theory: From White-Collar Workers to the Family

In the winter of 1930/1931, Max Horkheimer became director of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt.²⁹ In his inaugural lecture, he declared that analyzing

the connection between the economic life of society, the psychological development of individuals, and the changes in the realm of culture³⁰

would stand at the center of forthcoming activities. For this purpose, Horkheimer continued, the Institute would focus on "a particularly significant and salient social group, namely ... the skilled craftspeople and white collar workers in Germany".³¹

However, archival sources accessed during research for my book indicate that, once it came to translating this programmatic vision into concrete research activities, the concern with a particular social group was to recede to the background. Instead, an early research proposal available

29 Wiggershaus, *Die Frankfurter Schule*, 49-51.

30 Max Horkheimer, "The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research," in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings* (Cambridge: MIT, [1931] 1993), 11.

31 Horkheimer, "The Present Situation of Social Philosophy", 12-13.

at the archives of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt makes the case for focusing on a particular social *institution*: the family. From a feminist perspective, it is remarkable how this document challenges bourgeois notions of the family as simply private. Stressing its role as a *nexus* of economy, culture, and psyche, the research proposal concludes that the family represents a particularly promising starting point for developing a non-economistic, comprehensive critical social theory.³²

In other words, what was eventually published as *Studies on Authority and the Family* (1936) and is routinely portrayed as the Frankfurt School's first studies on authoritarianism in the secondary literature, in fact started out as a research project on the family. This reading is further supported by a letter Horkheimer wrote to Andries Sternheim, then director of the Swiss-branch of the exiled Institute. In his letter, Horkheimer describes that it was only in the course of the research process and unfolding political events that the major protagonists came to see the relevance of authority.³³ Consequently, the project developed into an inquiry into the *relation* between authoritarian structures within the family and society at large. Contrary to what the secondary literature all-too-often suggests, the family was anything but incidental to the Institute's first major research project. Nor is it the case that the analyses of the family, which make up a huge part of the anthology, are without socio-theoretical significance. Rather, it is precisely by focusing on the family that the Frankfurt School theorists expanded on Marxian theorizing and gained a fuller understanding of how, with the emergence of bourgeois society, structures of authority did not simply disappear, but assumed new forms.

2.2 Max Horkheimer: The Reification of (Gendered) Authority in Bourgeois Society

In his opening essay to the *Studies on Authority and the Family*, Horkheimer describes how, with the rise of the bourgeois class, the old feudal author-

32 Institut für Sozialforschung, "Kollektivarbeit Familie" (Archive of the Institute for Social Research, Frankfurt, no date).

33 Max Horkheimer, "Letter to Andries Sternheim. VI 41.112-13" (Max Horkheimer Archives, Goethe-University Frankfurt, 1934).

ities eventually get dethroned and the individual is declared free.³⁴ Taking up Marx's critical discussion of the bourgeois concept of freedom, he points out that while declared free, the individual finds itself confronted with societal relations that appear as beyond its own control: To the atomized individual of bourgeois society, societal relations do not present themselves as the result of collective human practice. They are not understood as something that, at least in principle, could be transformed by deliberate *social* action informed by substantive reason. To the contrary, social relations are taken as 'facts' and 'givens' to be accepted; the human capacity for reason is degraded to a mere instrument for registering the status quo. Rather than representing the direct antithesis to authoritarianism, Horkheimer thus argues that an authoritarian tendency is inherent in the bourgeois mode of relating to the world.

Considering that Horkheimer gets to this insight by heavily drawing on the Marxian critique of fetishism and reification, it cannot come as a surprise that he pays particular attention to the congealed and hierarchized relation between classes.³⁵ Building on Marx's critical discussion of the *abstract* equality of entrepreneur and worker, Horkheimer argues that the labor contract indeed *appears* as a relation between equals entered by free will. At the same time, he insists that this real appearance needs to be comprehend as a "camouflaging of authority as it actually operates".³⁶

34 Max Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, ed. Stanley Aronowitz (New York: Continuum, [1936] 2002), 72–83. From the perspective of contemporary feminist theory, one would have to add: the individual as long as it was male and white. Interestingly, in his later essay „Authoritarianism and the Family Today“ (1949) Horkheimer makes a first step towards reflecting the androcentric subtext of this concept of the individual, when pointing out that it was not „the individual *per se*“ (359; emphasis in the original) who was emancipated, not human beings in general, but „Man, (who) liberated from serfdom in alien households, became the master in his own“. See Max Horkheimer, "Authoritarianism and the Family Today," in *The Family: Its Function and Destiny*, ed. Ruth Nanda Anshen (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 359–360.

35 Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," 77–87.

36 Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," 85.

However, Horkheimer does not rest content with simply echoing Marx. Instead, he also renders Marx's approach productive for a critical understanding of the relation between husband, wife, and children in bourgeois society. In his essay, the separation of public and private realm and what has later been called the breadwinner-model, i.e. a gendered division of labor, are reflected as social conditions for what he describes as a reification of patriarchal authority.³⁷ The father-husband appears as "master of the house" because of his "seemingly natural characteristic" of earning or at least possessing the money.³⁸ With respect to the family as well, Horkheimer thus highlights that what at first glance appears as unalterable 'facts' is in reality the result of historically specific, yet *congealed* social practices. The nuclear family ruled by the patriarchal father-husband is treated as something neither 'natural' nor 'eternal'. Quite the contrary, this particular form of the family is understood as socially mediated, more precisely: as a result of the gendered division of labor and the separation of public and private sphere characteristic for bourgeois society.

Reading Horkheimer's discussion of gender relations as simultaneously informed by and yet expanding on the Marxian critique of fetishism and reification already raises questions about the Frankfurt School's alleged *Zeitdiagnose* of a simple decline of patriarchy. By taking into account the often-neglected historical, economic, and legal analyses of the family, a more nuanced interpretation comes into full view.³⁹

2.3 Ernst Schachtel: *The Tendency Towards and Limitations of Abstract Gender Equality*

Written in the 1930s, Ernst Schachtel's study "Das Recht der Gegenwart und die Autorität in der Familie" ("Contemporary Law and Authority in

37 Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," 105–108.

38 Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," 105.

39 Unfortunately, unlike Horkheimer's and Fromm's essays which have been translated into English years ago, until today the major chunk of the *Studies on Authority and the Family* is available in German only. Whether this is to be interpreted as *contributing* to the reading problematized in this paper and/or, at least in part, as the *result* of never truly considering the possibility that these contributions might be of analytical significance, remains open to debate.

the Family") in many ways anticipates later feminist critical legal theory.⁴⁰ For Schachtel, understanding how gender relations are regulated by law in contemporary society requires comparing the latter with feudal times. Taking this as his analytical starting point, Schachtel concludes that the overall tendency of law in bourgeois societies at the beginning of the 20th century is to grant women the same rights as men. Yet, he argues, this must not be conflated with a wholesale decline of patriarchal authority.⁴¹ For one, the occasional legal regulations which license husbands to act 'on behalf of' their wives without giving women similar rights over their male spouses still persist.⁴² Second, Schachtel renders Marx's distinction between the formal equality characteristic for bourgeois society and a more substantial notion of equality productive for analyzing the legal regulation of gender relations. Equipped with this distinction, he problematizes that as long as law abstracts from the very different material conditions women and men face and as long as freedom is defined mostly in negative terms, i.e. as freedom from the state interfering with so-called private matters of its citizens, women's capacities to assert their rights remain far more limited.⁴³

Thus, Schachtel's conclusion is that contemporary law in bourgeois societies must not be understood as representing a clear break with patriarchal domination. Rather, it achieves the same end by different means: By putting forth an abstract, formal understanding of gender equality which, in an ideological turn, is equated with equality as such, bourgeois law at the same time cloaks patriarchal inequalities and allows them to persist.

40 Ernst Schachtel, "Das Recht der Gegenwart und die Autorität in der Familie," in *Studien über Autorität und Familie. Forschungsberichte aus dem Institut für Sozialforschung*, ed. Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse et al. (Lüneburg: zu Klampen, [1936] 1987), 587–642.

41 Schachtel, "Das Recht der Gegenwart und die Autorität in der Familie," 593.

42 Schachtel, "Das Recht der Gegenwart und die Autorität in der Familie," 587–588, 604.

43 Schachtel, "Das Recht der Gegenwart und die Autorität in der Familie," 588, 593–594, 599, 688.

2.4 Ernst Manheim: *The Separation and Gendering of Public and Private Sphere*

Whereas Schachtel focuses on the legal aspects of patriarchal authority, Ernst Manheim's 337-pages manuscript "Beiträge zu einer Geschichte der autoritären Familie" ("Contributions to a History of the Authoritarian Family") gives a detailed account of the historical transformations of household, kinship, and family structures.⁴⁴ For Manheim's analysis, the disintegration of the household community is decisive: Well into the Middle Ages, across social sectors the household had represented a unity organizing both production and consumption, consisting of blood relatives as well as servants who worked and lived together under the roof of the patriarchal head of the household. In a certain sense, then, male supremacy was built into this social order. Guild membership, for example, was reserved for men, with the master representing his household. In the case of his death, however, in many places his widow gained the privilege to follow in his footsteps and found herself authorized to continue the trade without a legal custodian.⁴⁵ In other words, what Manheim describes is a world in which privileges (or the lack thereof) were intricately tied to one's gender, estate, and family status. As long as the social order and its hierarchies were ultimately comprehended as something God-given, patriarchal structures were equally hegemonic and flexible enough to leave room for pragmatic exceptions.

In the centuries to follow, however, the established social order gradually made room for a new, bourgeois one. While patriarchal structures

44 Ernst Manheim, "Beiträge zu einer Geschichte der autoritären Familie," in *Studien über Autorität und Familie. Forschungsberichte aus dem Institut für Sozialforschung*, ed. Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse et al. (Lüneburg: zu Klampen, [1936] 1987), 523–574. A summary of Manheim's manuscript as well as condensed versions of two chapters – one discussing reallocations of authority structures during the Middle Ages, the other reconfigurations of household and family relations in nascent capitalism – were published as part of the 1936 *Studies on Authority and the Family*.

45 Manheim, "Beiträge zu einer Geschichte der autoritären Familie," 546, 566–569.

were challenged in this process, feminist analyses have pointed out that gender difference and female subordination at the same time became more general in character: a matter of principle, not simply of tradition.⁴⁶ Manheim's analysis makes first steps toward critically describing this. What he highlights is a process that first takes place with the merchant stratum in the commercial centers of the Renaissance, extending from there to other societies and social strata: the ever-increasing tendency to put income-generating activities on a contractual basis. With the integrated household economy becoming more and more dispensable, the distinction between blood relatives and servants was accentuated, and a new model of the family was eventually born: the nuclear family. It is only with the dissociation of income-generating activities from the household, Manheim points out, that the latter comes to be seen and experienced as a private realm and the place of one particular gender: women. And it is only then that the modern concept of the public sphere emerges and with it its gendered connotation as men's space.⁴⁷

In a nutshell, Manheim comprehends the separation of public and private sphere as a decisive and inherently gendered feature of bourgeois society. Moreover, he addresses how specifically bourgeois notions of masculinity and femininity emerge in this context: a masculinity characterized by competitiveness, the willingness to take risks and a relentless striving for economic success and power, complemented by an idea of femininity characterized by quiescence, tranquility, and renunciation of one's own initiative.⁴⁸ Following Manheim, these notions function as a means

46 On this, see Maihofer, *Geschlecht als Existenzweise* and "Dialektik der Aufklärung", who in turn draws on the work of historians Thomas Laqueur, Barbara Duden, and Claudia Honegger.

47 Manheim, "Beiträge zu einer Geschichte der autoritären Familie," 563–569.

48 Roughly four decades later, similar observations would lead Karin Hausen, one of the pioneers of German-speaking women's and gender history, to conclude that the separation between a domestic and an income-generating sphere was accompanied by an increasing polarization between masculinity and femininity which, in 18th and 19th century sources, was discussed as 'gender character'. See Karin Hausen, "Family and Role-Division: The Polarisation of Sexual Stereotypes in Nineteenth-Century," in *The German Family*.

by which the emerging bourgeois class distances itself from both the aristocracy and the proletariat.⁴⁹ He thus anticipates, what feminist theorist Andrea Maihofer has argued more recently: that specific notions of masculinity and femininity play an important role in the (self-)stylization and self-affirmation of the bourgeois class – both historically and today.⁵⁰

*2.5 Economic Analyses: Between an Androcentric and a
More Comprehensive Understanding of Labor*

By explicitly addressing concepts of masculinity and femininity, Manheim's analysis stands out in the *Studies of Authority and the Family*. In contrast, several contributions to this anthology take a closer look at the economic dimensions of patriarchal authority. While the manuscripts by Hilde Weiss, Karl August Wittfogel, Ernst Schachtel, and Andries Sternheim differ with respect to their main foci and the material they draw upon, all of them address the question to what extent property ownership and the division of labor can explain patriarchal family structures.⁵¹

Essays on the Social History of the Family in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Germany, ed. Richard J. Evans/W. R. Lee (New York: Routledge [1976] 2015), 51–83.

49 Manheim, "Beiträge zu einer Geschichte der autoritären Familie," 566–574.

50 Maihofer, *Geschlecht als Existenzweise*, 109–136. To put it another way, what Manheim suggests and Maihofer argues in a more straight-forward way is that one important way of how the bourgeoisie establishes itself as the ruling class is by championing certain concepts of masculinity and femininity. The extent to which these notions become hegemonic (or challenged) is therefore an important indicator of its (un-)challenged aspiration to rule. This perspective opens up important routes for inquiry regarding the significance of debates around gender, family, and sexuality in contemporary right-wing populism.

51 Hilde Weiss, "Materialien zum Verhältnis von Konjunktur und Familie," in *Studien über Autorität und Familie. Forschungsberichte aus dem Institut für Sozialforschung*, ed. Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse et al. (Lüneburg: zu Klampen, [1936] 1987), 579–581; Karl August Wittfogel, "Wirtschaftsgeschichtliche Grundlagen der Entwicklung der Familienautorität," in *Studien über Autorität und Familie. Forschungsberichte aus dem Institut für Sozialforschung*, ed. Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse et al. (Lüneburg: zu Klampen, [1936] 1987), 473–522; Ernst Schachtel/Andries Sternheim, "Sachverständigenerhebung über Autorität und Familie," in *Stu-*

As scholars in the Marxian tradition, they critically describe the class character of bourgeois society and, consequently, insist on the need for a class-specific analysis.

With regard to early 20th century society, Wittfogel as well as Schachtel and Sternheim come to the conclusion that the economic dependency of women is particularly pronounced in the so-called middle classes because bourgeois women, at least when married and in contrast to peasant and proletarian women, usually do not partake in the process of production. The economic dependency of children, in turn, is discussed as a feature typical for bourgeois and peasant families, given that in these classes (male) children can hope to one day inherit the father's fortune. At the same time, Wittfogel, Schachtel and Sternheim acknowledge that patriarchal domination is not limited to one social class, but rather a general feature of bourgeois society.⁵² Thus, these economic analyses comprehend property ownership and a gendered division of labor as important, but not the only sources of power relations within the family. In Wittfogel's as well as in Schachtel's and Sternheim's contribution, focusing on the economic dimensions and applying a class-specific approach serve as analytical starting points. This way, the authors arrive at a deeper understanding of patriarchal domination as simultaneously class-specific *and* an overarching feature of bourgeois society.

Engaging contemporary feminist theory, however, not only helps us see that critical analyses of family and gender relations were integral to the Frankfurt School's project of developing a critical social theory. It also enables us to critically assess these discussions. With respect to economic aspects, this means asking whether an androcentric, and thus limited concept of labor underlies the Frankfurt School's analyses. Unfortunately, this is mostly the case. When labor comes into view, it is pri-

dien über Autorität und Familie. Forschungsberichte aus dem Institut für Sozialforschung, ed. Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse et al. (Lüneburg: zu Klampen, [1936] 1987), 292–350.

52 Wittfogel, "Wirtschaftsgeschichtliche Grundlagen der Entwicklung der Familienautorität," 518–521; Ernst Schachtel/Andries Sternheim, "Sachverständigenhebung über Autorität und Familie," 303–309, 323–334.

marily waged labor. By contrast, domestic and care work is mentioned in passing, e.g. when Wittfogel and Weiss briefly address the situation of proletarian women as experiencing a double burden.⁵³

The one exception to this rule is a 59-pages manuscript by Andries Sternheim that the editors of the *Studies on Authority and the Family* unfortunately chose to include only in the form of a short summary.⁵⁴ In his manuscript, Sternheim discusses literature that pays particular attention to women's domestic and care work. By doing so, his references come to the conclusion that, on the average, working-class women's economic contributions to the household by far exceed those of their husbands.⁵⁵ Furthermore, Sternheim quotes and summarizes authors who stress the significance of activities like cooking, cleaning or child-rearing, while problematizing the lack of social recognition accorded to such tasks.⁵⁶ From the perspective of contemporary feminist theory, two aspects seem particularly interesting. For one, Sternheim notices a shift within Marxist-socialist debate: In contrast to older positions, which tended to dismiss women's labor in the household as not-productive and backwards, he finds more recent Marxist-socialist authors argue that women's domestic and caring activities must not be deemed any less than other occupations.⁵⁷ Second,

53 Wittfogel, "Wirtschaftsgeschichtliche Grundlagen der Entwicklung der Familienautorität," 520; Weiss, "Materialien zum Verhältnis von Konjunktur und Familie," 580.

54 This decision might be interpreted as in itself telling. In my view, it suggests that the editors were not fully aware of the analytical significance of certain parts of Sternheim's contribution. I am grateful to Rainer Funk, the literary executor of Erich Fromm, for granting me access to the full manuscript which has been preserved as part of the Erich Fromm papers. See Andries Sternheim, "Die Rolle des ökonomischen Motivs in der Familie der Gegenwart," (Archives of the New York Public Library, Microfilm Reel 11, no date).

55 Sternheim, "Die Rolle des ökonomischen Motivs in der Familie der Gegenwart," 14–16, 18–20.

56 Sternheim, "Die Rolle des ökonomischen Motivs in der Familie der Gegenwart," 44–47. The surnames suggest that most of the authors quoted by Sternheim are female. Differences in wording indicate that only some of the analyses mentioned by Sternheim are informed by Marxian concepts and debates.

57 Sternheim, "Die Rolle des ökonomischen Motivs in der Familie der Gegen-

Sternheim mentions attempts that seek to explain why, although indispensable, women's household labor is routinely disregarded. According to his sources, this lack of social recognition must be comprehended as the result of the peculiar position of the housewife, whose services are not offered on the labor market and thus not compensated by wages. As one of Sternheim's references, Hildegard Kneeland, a researcher with the US Bureau of Home Economics, put it, the "priceless" position of the housewife needs to be understood in the context of a "money economy".⁵⁸ In this framework, the lack of a price automatically suggests less value and, consequently, less prestige is accorded to such activities.

Written in the first half of the 1930s, Sternheim's manuscript thus touches upon questions that, several decades later, should become focal points of (Marxist-)feminist theory and debate: the need for a broader understanding of labor, what adequate analytical concepts for this purpose might look like, and, last but not least, the social significance and organization of housework in particular and care work in the broader sense.⁵⁹

2.6 Erich Fromm's Concept of the Authoritarian Character

2.6.1 Historical-Materialist Understanding of the Family and the Oedipal Complex

The detailed historical, economic, and legal analyses of the family described so far eschew simplistic assumptions about capitalism as entailing a straightforward decline of patriarchy. Instead, they paint a more

wart," 47.

58 Hildegard Kneeland, "Women's Economic Contribution in the Home" (1929) quoted from Sternheim, "Die Rolle des ökonomischen Motivs in der Familie der Gegenwart," 45.

59 On Marxist-feminist theorizing see e.g. Mariarosa Dalla Costa's influential analysis "Women and the Subversion of the Community," in *Women and the Subversion of the Community. A Mariarosa Dalla Costa Reader*, ed. Camille Barbagallo (Oakland: PM Press, [1972] 2019), 17–50. For more recent Marxist-feminist work see e.g. Gabriele Winker, *Care-Revolution. Schritte in eine solidarische Gesellschaft* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2015) and Tine Haubner, *Die Ausbeutung der sorgenden Gesellschaft. Laienpflege in Deutschland* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2017).

nuanced picture, according to which patriarchal structures both within and beyond the family persist in bourgeois society precisely by undergoing certain transformations. This insight represents the backdrop against which Erich Fromm unfolds his famous concept of the sadomasochistic or authoritarian character.⁶⁰ His concept does not stand on its own, nor is it simply psychological in nature. As a *socio-psychological* concept, it is developed in close contact with the aforementioned analyses and can only be adequately comprehended if those are taken into account.

While Fromm draws heavily on Freud, especially on the psychoanalytic concept of the oedipal complex, he time and again stresses the need for a historical-materialist understanding of the family, which, in turn, allows him to comprehend Freudian concepts as referring to the particular social context of bourgeois society. This historical-materialist approach to the family and Freudian psychoanalysis is already present in his programmatic essay “The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology. Notes on Psychoanalysis and Historical Materialism” (1932).⁶¹ There, Fromm argues that the whole structure of the family, “all its typical internal emotional relationships and the educational ideals it embodies, are in turn conditioned by the social and class background of the family; in short, they are conditioned by the social structure in which it is rooted”.⁶² This fundamental insight leads him to challenge Freud’s assumption of the oedipal complex as a universal phenomenon that structures human psychic life in general. Objecting to what he considers to be an inappropriate “absolutizing of the Oedipus complex”, Fromm argues that this core concept of Freudian psychoanalysis needs

60 Erich Fromm, “Studies on Authority and the Family. Sociopsychological Dimensions,” transl. from German by Susan Kassouf ([1936] 2020), available under <https://www.fromm-gesellschaft.eu/images/pdf-Dateien/1936a-eng.pdf> (last accessed: November 7th, 2021).

61 Erich Fromm, “The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology. Notes on Psychoanalysis and Historical Materialism,” in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato/Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, [1932] 2005), 477–496.

62 Fromm, “The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology,” 483.

to be comprehended as a “particular emotional relationship” which in all likelihood is “typical only of families in a patriarchal society”.⁶³

These seminal insights are informed by Fromm’s appropriation of debates about the mother right – a discourse that dates back to Johann Jakob Bachofen’s (1861) classical account of the mother right.⁶⁴ Subsequently, the idea of societies structured according to mother, not father right, was turned into a tool for criticizing the patriarchal structure of bourgeois society by prominent socialists like August Bebel and Friedrich Engels. In the 1920s and 1930s, it was further substantiated by ethnological research on non-patriarchal societies. Two literature reviews, archival sources and above all his 1934 essay “The Theory of Mother Right and Its Relevance for Social Psychology” show that Fromm repeatedly returned to this idea and related research of his time.⁶⁵ For him, the mother right was an important point of reference when developing his overall approach to social psychology.⁶⁶ Even more, as I have shown elsewhere, he devel-

63 Fromm, “The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology,” 485.

64 On this, see Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs, *Das Mutterrecht von Johann Jakob Bachofen in der Diskussion*, (Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 1987).

65 Erich Fromm, “Rezension zu Sir Galahad (1932),” in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung. Photomechanischer Nachdruck der Erstaussagen 1932–1941*, ed. Alfred Schmidt (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, [1932] 1980), 427; Erich Fromm, “Robert Briffault’s Book on Mother Right,” in *Love, Sexuality, and Matriarchy: About Gender*, ed. Rainer Funk (New York: Fromm International Publishing Corporation, [1933] 1997), 76–84; Erich Fromm, “Zur psychologischen Struktur der Autorität,” Typoscript with 73 pages (Archives of the New York Public Library, Microfilm Reel 9, 1933); Erich Fromm, “The Theory of the Mother Right and Its Relevance for Social Psychology,” in *Love, Sexuality, and Matriarchy: About Gender*, ed. Rainer Funk (New York: Fromm International Publishing Corporation [1934] 1997), 19–45.

66 Following the socialist tradition, Fromm builds on ethnological findings which attest to the existence of non-patriarchal societies for developing a critique of patriarchy. With respect to gender relations, thus, his reliance on ethnological research is motivated by a critical impulse. Yet, from a contemporary feminist perspective informed by postcolonial criticism, it seems important to point out that he fails to reflect whether his sources reproduce a Eurocentric perspective. As I have argued elsewhere, this limitation also applies to other Frankfurt School theorists’ reference to ethnological research, see Umrath, *Geschlecht, Familie, Sexualität*, 182–186.

oped his own understanding of emancipation, gender (in-)equality and gender difference via a critical analysis of contemporary debates about mother and father right.⁶⁷

Unfortunately, the significance of the mother right for Fromm is not always accounted for in the secondary literature.⁶⁸ This, in turn, contributes to a failure to see how integral a social and historical understanding of gender relations is for Fromm's social psychology. Indeed, it was his ongoing concern with the mother right that enabled Fromm to understand that the father's function as simultaneously an almighty authority and a sexual rival is neither determined by biological constitution nor a prerequisite for social life as such. He was quite clear that the father only assumes this psychic function within a particular socio-historical context, namely: the nuclear family of a patriarchally structured society.⁶⁹

Put into contemporary feminist terms, we can say that Fromm's historical-materialist approach to social psychology does no less than 'situate' Freudian insights in patriarchal societies. In this spirit, he warns against inappropriately universalizing the concept of the Oedipal complex. At the same time, this does not lead him to a wholesale rejection of

67 Umrath, *Geschlecht, Familie, Sexualität*, 87–105.

68 Scholars focusing on the work of Fromm tend to mention the significance of the mother right for Fromm's work, see e.g. Rainer Kaus, *Psychoanalyse und Sozialpsychologie. Sigmund Freud und Erich Fromm* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1999), 42; Douglas Kellner, „Erich Fromm, Feminism, and the Frankfurt School,“ in *Erich Fromm und die Frankfurter Schule*, ed. Rainer Funk/Michael Kessler (Tübingen: A. Francke Verlag, 1992), 114–116; Rainer Funk, „Einleitung des Herausgebers,“ in *Erich Fromm. Gesamtausgabe, Bd. 1*, ed. Rainer Funk (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1980), XIII. In contrast, secondary literature on the Frankfurt School more in general is quick to dismiss this part of Fromm's work. A point in case here is Alfred Schmidt's introduction to the 1980 reissue of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. While Schmidt emphatically recommends Fromm's essays from the 1930s, citing the title of each individual contribution, the one piece not mentioned in this context is the essay on the mother right. When Schmidt goes on to further describe Fromm's approach, he again fails to address the relevance of the theory of mother right for Fromm. In effect, Schmidt thus abstracts from the gender dimension built into Fromm's social psychology.

69 Fromm, „The Theory of the Mother Right,“ 38; Fromm, „Studies on Authority and the Family,“ 19.

Freud. Rather, he insists that when it comes to illuminating the psychic dynamics of patriarchal societies like the bourgeois one, Freud's concept is indeed crucial. Consequently, the Oedipal complex plays an important role in his understanding of the authoritarian character.

2.6.2 The Gendered Origins of the Authoritarian Character

In Fromm's socio-psychological account, the patriarchal structure of the family in bourgeois society is decisive for the formation of the psyche and, more precisely, for the development of sadomasochistic character structures. Unlike Freud's hypothesis of the primal horde, which tends to understand the patriarchal father as the *model* for societal authority, Fromm instead argues that the father's authority must be comprehended as "ultimately grounded in the authority structure of society as a whole".⁷⁰ While for the child, the patriarchal father represents the first contact with societal authority, Fromm argues that in his professional and social life, this very authority figure more often than not finds himself in a dependent position where he is unable to control the conditions of his own existence.⁷¹ In this context, he suggests that for "the simple man of the street" the relation to wife and children become important outlets: In the family, the average man can realize his desire to command and dominate which he has to repress in other parts of daily life.⁷²

Consequently, Fromm characterizes the father-child-relationship as highly ambivalent. On the father's side, a loving and caring attitude co-exists with the desire to "exercise power and issue commands".⁷³ The child's emotional reactions are similarly marked by ambivalence. More precisely, the fear of the father, on whom the child depends and who is the child's superior, exists alongside the desire to be loved by the father. This tension is resolved by the child via giving up on immediate drives

70 Fromm, "Studies on Authority and the Family," 18–19.

71 Fromm, "Studies on Authority and the Family," 19.

72 Fromm, "Studies on Authority and the Family," 43, 20–21.

73 Fromm, "Studies on Authority and the Family," 20.

(in particular the desire for the mother) and instead seeking indirect gratification through identification with the patriarchal father and the societal norms he represents. Thus, the psychic agency Freud calls super-ego is developed.⁷⁴

In Fromm's reading, however, the formation of a particular psychic agency is not the only result of this process. Rather, what the child learns by submitting to the arbitrary demands of the patriarchal father is to not question the way things are. In the relationship to the patriarchal father, the psychic ground is prepared for a more general disposition: the readiness to bow to those perceived as strong and tread on the supposedly weak.⁷⁵ This disposition is then reproduced at later points in life, and finds its actualization in relation to authorities beyond the family. According to Fromm, the typical reaction when confronted with a powerful authority is submission (the masochistic component of the authoritarian character). Feelings of hostility, aggression, and contempt which must be repressed in the relation to authority in turn find their regular object in those perceived as less powerful and inferior (the sadistic component of the authoritarian character).

2.6.3 Significance and Limitations from a Contemporary Feminist Perspective

In the context of contemporary feminist debates about intersectionality, Fromm's discussion of potential objects for sadism seems particularly interesting. There, he stresses the "extremely important social-psychological role" played by "(w)omen, children and animals" but also by "slaves or imprisoned enemies, classes or racialized minorities".⁷⁶ By doing so, Fromm calls attention to how different ideologies of inequality, e.g. sexism and antisemitism, provide similar benefits at the emotional-psychic level – which, to a certain extent, makes them interchangeable. Moreover, arguing that in "authoritarian societies" like the bourgeois one "(e)very-

74 Fromm, "Studies on Authority and the Family," 14–16.

75 Fromm, "Studies on Authority and the Family," 14–16, 39–45.

76 Fromm, "Studies on Authority and the Family," 43.

one is enmeshed in a system of dependencies from above and below", Fromm cautions against binary notions of dominators and dominated, arguing that societal structures and their psychic counterparts are more complex.⁷⁷

Although developed in the 1930s, Fromm's concept thus resonates with current debates about how to understand the relations between and co-constitution of analytically distinguishable systems of domination, power, and oppression. More precisely, Fromm offers a socio-psychological perspective informed by a critical appropriation of psychoanalytic theory to contemporary feminist theorizing. Understanding emotional-psychological dynamics as mediated by societal structures and bourgeois society as characterized by the interplay of various forms of domination, such a perspective allows us to account for that the 'simple woman of the street', in so far as her class and gender are concerned, might become the object of (male) sadism, while, as an 'Aryan' or 'white' woman, she might also act out her own sadistic tendencies in relation to those she perceives as Jewish or non-white. Similarly, approaching the dynamics of domination through Fromm's socio-psychological perspective, we can comprehend racism as simultaneously structural and psychological, always already unfolding in the context of broader power relations. At the emotional-psychological level, thus, racism can be deciphered as a specific form of sadism, without losing sight of how those who experience racial discrimination might also act in aggressive ways towards those perceived as e.g. sexually deviant. In other words, Fromm can draw our attention to how crucial these emotional-psychological dynamics are for reproducing social structures of domination.

A feminist perspective, however, not only enables us to identify certain aspects of Fromm that are still relevant. It is also crucial for understanding the limitations of his concept of the sado-masochistic character. As feminist discussions informed by a women's studies perspective have pointed out, while frequently speaking of 'the child' in generic terms, Fromm and the Frankfurt School's social psychology more generally cen-

⁷⁷ Fromm, "Studies on Authority and the Family," 42–43.

ter the particular experience of the son. As a consequence, Fromm's concept of the authoritarian character does not offer an explanation of how, in the context of the family, the daughter might develop a sado-masochistic character structure. Moreover, by centering the figure of the patriarchal father, Fromm fails to address the significance of the one who, then even more than today, functions as the primary care-giver: the mother.⁷⁸

From a more recent gender studies perspective, we might add that Fromm's concept all too often generalizes in a manner that abstracts from gender and gender difference. To be sure, gender relations are accounted for in so far as Fromm critically depicts the father's authority as resting on patriarchal social structures. This, however, is where it ends. While Fromm moves beyond Freud by situating the Oedipal complex in particular historical and social conditions, he simultaneously falls behind Freud by ignoring an important dimension of this Freudian concept. In Freud, the Oedipal complex does not only stand for identification with social norms in general (represented by the father), but also more specifically for the development of gender identity and sexual orientation. By contrast, Fromm pays no attention to identification with the father specifically *as a man*. He is not interested in the Oedipal complex as a hypothesis about gender and sexual identification. Rather, what Fromm seeks to explain is the ambivalent relation to authority. For him, the patriarchal father does not so much represent (a particular form of) masculinity, but power and authority 'in general'.

With his concept of the sado-masochistic character, Fromm opened up new avenues for a critical understanding of domination. Instead of comprehending domination as simply upheld by force which therefore remains more or less external to the dominated, Fromm suggests that domination is internalized and leaves its mark in a specific formation of the psyche. His insight that only by accounting for this emotional-psychic dimension can we understand the persistence of hierarchy and social inequality is as valid today as it was in the 1930s.

78 Jagentowicz Mills, *Woman, Nature, and Psyche*, 97, 112–113, 120–122; Rumpf, *Spuren des Mütterlichen*, 26; Windaus-Walser, "Autorität und Geschlecht".

3 Reconfiguring Our Understanding of the Frankfurt School

Thus far, this paper has focused on how the 1936 research project *Studies on Authority and the Family* is discussed in influential accounts of the Frankfurt School and feminist secondary literature, and revisited the anthology in greater detail from a contemporary gender studies perspective. To conclude, I want to highlight how such a reading contributes to a more reflexive and thus more critical understanding of first-generation Frankfurt School Critical Theory. For this purpose, in addition to the material already discussed, I will draw on my book *Geschlecht, Familie, Sexualität. Die Entwicklung der Kritischen Theorie aus der Perspektive sozialwissenschaftlicher Geschlechterforschung* (2019), which not only provides in-depth analyses of the Frankfurt School's writings on the family from later decades (chapter 4), but also discusses in detail its reflections on gender and gender relations (chapter 3) as well as its analyses of sexuality and sexual morality (chapter 5). I will first show that, compared to feminist readings informed by a women's studies perspective, a gender studies perspective allows for a more nuanced appreciation of the Frankfurt School's theorizing of gender and gender difference. For the remainder of this essay, I will discuss how such a reading challenges interpretations frequently found in the secondary literature. Addressing a) the Frankfurt School's alleged *Zeitdiagnose* of a decline of patriarchy, b) the portrayal of the 1936 *Studies on Authority and the Family*, and last but not least, c) accounts of the Frankfurt School's overall approach, I will show that reading the Frankfurt School from a contemporary feminist perspective thoroughly reconfigures our ideas of what is critical about first-generation Critical Theory.⁷⁹

79 I borrowed this phrase from Nancy Fraser, who made a similar argument with regard to second-generation Frankfurt School theorist Jürgen Habermas. See Nancy Fraser, "What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender," *New German Critique*, 35 (1985), 97–131.

3.1 *The Frankfurt School Approach vis-à-vis Women's Studies and Gender Studies Perspectives*

In my book as in this paper, I follow Andrea Maihofer in analytically distinguishing between two different feminist perspectives: a slightly older women studies and a more recent gender studies perspective. Approaching the Frankfurt School from a gender studies perspective, my reading pays equal attention to discussions of women/femininity *and* men/masculinity. Moreover, I reconstruct how the category of gender was comprehended by the first generation of Frankfurt School theorists. Thus, I am able to show that the Frankfurt School's understanding of gender and gender difference was in fact more sophisticated than women's studies scholars had suggested. Focusing on discussions of women and femininity, feminist critics like Patricia Jagentowicz Mills and Regina Becker-Schmidt concluded that the Frankfurt School theorists reproduced stereotypical images of women.⁸⁰ Some, like Doris Kolesch, went as far as attributing this to a 'typically male' inability or unwillingness to break with androcentric ideas of women.⁸¹ However, once one includes reflections on men and masculinity, the picture shifts significantly. It then becomes clear that the Frankfurt School's preoccupation with stereotypical notions of femininity and masculinity is very much in line with its overarching understanding of critique. For the first generation of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, critical analysis – whether of gender relations or other subject matters – first and foremost had to proceed by denouncing the status quo.⁸²

Moreover, by bringing together discussions of gender and gender difference from various authors and decades, my research demonstrates

80 Jagentowicz Mills, *Woman, Nature, and Psyche*, xii-xx; Becker-Schmidt, "Identitätslogik und Gewalt," 70–73.

81 Doris Kolesch, „Sich schwach zeigen dürfen, ohne Stärke zu provozieren. Liebe und die Beziehung der Geschlechter,“ in *Die Gesellschaftstheorie Adornos. Themen und Grundbegriffe*, ed. Dirk Auer/Thorsten Bonacker/Stefan Müller-Doohm (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998), 196–197.

82 Umrath, *Geschlecht, Familie, Sexualität*, 79–81, 106–111, 115–126.

that all major Frankfurt School protagonists, as early as in the 1930s, were aware that a critical social theory must not rely on traditional, commonsense knowledge with regard to gender.⁸³ Committed to a historical-materialist understanding of the world, their intuition was that a critical social theory requires an equally critical theory of gender. To be sure, developing such a theory was not explicitly stated as an objective, nor was it something that the Frankfurt School theorists went about in a systematic way. Yet, all major protagonists made nothing less than first steps towards exactly this: a critical theory of gender.⁸⁴

This critical theory of gender inherent in the Frankfurt School can be characterized as follows.⁸⁵ First of all, it rejects naturalizing and essentializing notions of masculinity and femininity, emphasizing instead their socio-historical character or, in contemporary language, their social constructedness. Taking up the non-normative dimensions of Freudian psychoanalysis, major Frankfurt School protagonists even went as far as suggesting that the *binary* character of gender was nothing natural or innate, but rather a product of culture. Second, first-generation Frankfurt School Critical Theory was aware that the bourgeois concept of gender difference does not simply posit difference as such, but rather hierarchical, more precisely: *patriarchal* difference. Its protagonists critically reflected that in the bourgeois understanding of gender difference, masculinity represents the norm while femininity becomes the less valued other. Third, the Frankfurt School's historical-materialist theory of gender accounts for how notions of femininity and masculinity are produced through concrete socio-historical processes, making them more than (collectively shared) illusions or fleeting constructions. It suggests that masculinity and femininity are best understood as what Marx called

83 Umrath, *Geschlecht, Familie, Sexualität*, 71–81, 127–128, 130–133, 144–145 for Horkheimer, 89–105 for Fromm, 106–111 for Löwenthal, 111–115, 126–127, 139–144 for Adorno, 129–130, 133–139 for Marcuse, 115–126 for the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* co-authored by Adorno and Horkheimer.

84 Umrath, *Geschlecht, Familie, Sexualität*, 147–148.

85 For an extended discussion, see Umrath, *Geschlecht, Familie, Sexualität*, 148–150.

a 'real appearance' and feminist theorist Andrea Maihofer later described as a socio-historical way of existence'.⁸⁶

These insights are in fact quite remarkable considering that the need for a *critical* theory of gender was not explicitly articulated until the emergence of women's studies in the context of second-wave feminism in the 1960s. Only then did feminist scholars set out to systematically develop such theories. The Frankfurt School's achievements in this regard seem even more striking when considering that, several decades of feminist scholarship notwithstanding, (critical) social theories are still too often informed by 'traditional', common sense understandings of gender.⁸⁷ At the same time, when compared to more recent feminist theorizing, the Frankfurt School's nascent critical theory of gender and gender difference ultimately falls short.⁸⁸ For one, it exists only in bits and pieces. Second, similar to early women's studies and in contrast to more recent gender studies, the Frankfurt School still presupposes a binary concept of sex. In other words, the hegemonic perception and experience of the body as either male or female is not yet comprehended as itself a result of socio-historical processes.⁸⁹

Just as the Frankfurt School did not systematically elaborate a critical theory of gender, its analysis of gender, gender difference, and gender relations must be characterized as episodic, rather than systematic. In one moment, gender, gender difference, and gender relations are explic-

86 On Marx's concept of 'real appearance' see e.g. John Holloway, "Read Capital: The First Sentence Or Capital Starts with Wealth, not with the Commodity", *Historical Materialism*, 23 (3), (2015). For Andrea Maihofer's understanding of sex/gender as a socio-historical way of existence see Maihofer, *Geschlecht als Existenzweise*, in particular 79–108.

87 On this, see Heike Kahlert/Christine Weinbach, *Zeitgenössische Gesellschaftstheorien und Genderforschung. Einladung zum Dialog* (Wiesbaden: VS, 2012).

88 What an elaborated historical-materialist account of gender would look like can best be seen in Andrea Maihofer's book *Geschlecht als Existenzweise. Macht, Moral, Recht und Geschlechterdifferenz* (1995). There, she suggests conceptualizing gender as a 'bourgeois-hegemonic discourse' and a 'socio-historical way of existence'.

89 Umrath, *Geschlecht, Familie, Sexualität*, 100–105, 134–135, 148.

itly addressed; in the next, these dimensions disappear from their analysis altogether. This tendency can be seen, for example, with Fromm's concept of the sadomasochistic character. While Fromm describes its origins in patriarchal family relations in quite some detail, for the most part his concept abstracts from gender and processes of gender identification. As women's studies readings were right to point out, his primary attention is with the situation and experience of the male child. This seriously limits his concept of the sado-masochistic character. It cannot adequately explain the development of authoritarian character structures for girls and women, in other words, within roughly 50% of the population.

It is important to note, however, that the need to *systematically* take gender into account was not articulated until the emergence of women's and gender studies as distinct fields in the 1960s. Even today, it is mostly in these fields, not in critical (social) theory more generally, where systematic considerations of gender and gender relations are to be found. Writing between the 1930s and mid-1970s, the first generation of Frankfurt School theorists could not yet draw on concepts and insights that would only become available in later decades. Understanding what is critical about the early Frankfurt School thus requires taking into account the intellectual context of their time. This, in turn, enables us to see that one important way in which first-generation Frankfurt School Critical Theory distanced itself from what Max Horkheimer had called 'traditional theory' was precisely its attention towards gender and gender relations. Critically discussing patriarchal domination in the family as an important source of domination, the Frankfurt School reversed then-common theories which explicitly endorsed the patriarchal nuclear family as the foundation of social and political order. By describing how male domination structures bourgeois society as well as bourgeois forms of subjectivity, the early Frankfurt School realized that critically analyzing gender and gender relations is a genuine requirement for a critical social theory.

Unfortunately, these crucial insights are not taken up in influential accounts of the Frankfurt School. It is only by approaching the first genera-

tion's writings through a perspective informed by contemporary gender studies that these aspects come into full view. For the remainder of this essay, I will therefore address three interpretations frequently found in the secondary literature on the Frankfurt School. As I will show, in each of these cases a gender studies reading significantly reconfigures our understanding.

3.2 *Towards a More Reflexive Account of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*

As pointed out in section 1, it is common in secondary literature to understand the Frankfurt School's *Zeitdiagnose* of 20th-century bourgeois society as a straightforward decline of patriarchy. At an analytical level, this suggest that when it comes to understanding the nexus between capitalist relations of production and patriarchal gender relations, the Frankfurt School basically follows what can be described as a traditional Marxist approach. Within traditional Marxism, patriarchal structures are frequently not only conceptualized as preceding capitalism, but therefore also 'by necessity' eroding with the advent of capitalism.⁹⁰ Yet, as I have shown in section 2 and in more detail in chapter 4 of my book, the Frankfurt School's understanding is more complex. In this respect, too, the Frankfurt School demonstrates a commitment to reflectively updating the Marxist tradition and moving beyond simplistic theorizations.⁹¹

To be sure, first-generation Frankfurt School Critical Theory does comprehend patriarchal gender and generational relations as historically older than the capitalist mode of production. However, it resists the

90 Traditional Marxist accounts frequently take their cues from Friedrich Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) and brief discussions of the family in the "Manifesto of the Communist Party" (1848). For a recent feminist discussion of similarities and differences between Marx's and Engels' understanding of gender and the family see Heather A. Brown, *Marx on Gender and the Family: A Critical Study* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, [2012] 2018).

91 As John Abromeit has pointed out, these commitments are the very foundations of Max Horkheimer's Critical Theory. See Abromeit, *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School*.

conclusion that with the unfolding of capitalism patriarchal structures simply wither away. Instead, the 1936 *Studies on Authority and the Family* trace how patriarchal structures both within the family and society at large persist beyond the emergence of capitalism precisely by assuming specifically bourgeois forms. It is through a gendered division of labor, the separation and gendering of 'public' and 'private' spheres, and last but not least, via binary and hierarchical notions of masculinity and femininity that male domination continues to shape 20th century capitalist society. Writings from later decades also reflect continuities in transformation: On the one hand, the legal and economic foundations of patriarchal authority are described as to some extent hollowed out in comparison to 19th-century bourgeois society. Yet at the same time, all major Frankfurt School protagonists point out that male domination persists as do hierarchical cultural concepts of masculinity and femininity.⁹²

Thus, in contrast to what the secondary literature suggests, the Frankfurt School does not diagnose a unilinear decline of patriarchal gender relations. Rather, its *Zeitdiagnose* of 20th-century bourgeois society emphasizes the *contradictory* character of social development. This, however, only becomes visible if one pays close attention to discussions of gender and family in the Frankfurt School's work and considers writings by different authors from various periods.

As treatment of the 1936 *Studies on Authority and the Family* by influential accounts of the Frankfurt School suggests, this has often not been the case. In fact, my book provides the first comprehensive reconstruction of the gender dimension of this voluminous anthology. Discussing previously neglected contributions alongside more well-known essays and archival resources, I am able to show that by presenting this collaborative work as simply the beginning of the Frankfurt School's concern with authority, these readings miss crucial aspects. While from a methodological point of

92 For this, see my close reading of Adorno's and Horkheimer's reflections on the family from the 1940s and 1950s in Umrath, *Geschlecht, Familie, Sexualität*, 253–269 and my discussion of Marcuse's 1974 paper on "Marxism and Feminism" in Umrath, *Geschlecht, Familie, Sexualität*, 133–139.

view the 1936 *Studies* might seem like an early, still premature precursor to the 1949 study on *The Authoritarian Personality*, its significance goes far beyond this. From a contemporary feminist perspective, equally noteworthy is the understanding of the family as a *nexus* of economy, culture, and subjectivity found there – and the Frankfurt School’s conclusion that the family therefore represents an ideal starting point for developing a non-economistic critical theory of society.⁹³

Again, the significance of these insights only comes into full view from a perspective informed by contemporary gender studies. Such a perspective enables us to appreciate that by critically analyzing how relations of domination and inequality *outside* the family are simultaneously reproduced and upheld by specific structures within the family, the Frankfurt School moves beyond a rather descriptive, ‘positivistic’ sociology of the family.⁹⁴ In other words, what appears in bourgeois society as a private realm was comprehended as an arena of fundamental social conflict by first-generation Frankfurt School Critical Theory.⁹⁵ Thus, a feminist perspective highlights that one important way the early Frankfurt School distinguished itself from ‘traditional theory’ was by rejecting bourgeois notions of the family as simply private. Advancing a *critical* theory, these theorists insisted that the family’s privatization has to be understood as itself the result of developments that are fundamentally social in character. Echoing the popular slogan from the women’s movements of the 1960s, we might say that for the Frankfurt School the private and personal were thoroughly social, and therefore political.

These important insights tend to get lost in accounts which present the first major research project of the Institute for Social Research under

93 Umrath, *Geschlecht, Familie, Sexualität*, 162–166, 269–270.

94 Umrath, *Geschlecht, Familie, Sexualität*, 269–270.

95 On this, see Gudrun-Axeli Knapp, “Konstellationen von Kritischer Theorie und Geschlechterforschung,” in *Zeitgenössische Gesellschaftstheorien und Genderforschung. Einladung zum Dialog*, ed. Heike Kahlert/Christine Weinbach (Wiesbaden: VS, 2012), 175–192. There, Knapp also calls critical attention to that much recent (critical) social theory still neglects analysis of seemingly private realms.

Horkheimer's directorship as primarily an inquiry into authority. As my careful reconstruction suggests, what is needed is nothing less than a fundamental reappraisal of this important milestone: The *Studies on Authority and the Family* are most adequately characterized as an analysis of the *relation* between authoritarianism on the one hand, and gender/generational relations on the other. Moreover, the insight that first-generation Frankfurt School Critical Theory realized that understanding authoritarianism requires critically analyzing gender and generational relations might significantly reconfigure contemporary attempts to use their framework to analyze authoritarian tendencies today. More precisely, it might remind scholars how crucial it is to pay attention to anti-feminist and anti-gender discourse to make critical sense of present-day authoritarianism.⁹⁶

So far, I have described how a gender studies reading reconfigures our understanding of the Frankfurt School's *Zeitdiagnose* as well as its first major research project. However, I want to suggest that a contemporary feminist analysis ultimately demands nothing less than a reappraisal of the Frankfurt School's approach more in general.

In my book, I trace the Frankfurt School's discussions of gender, family, and sexuality from the 1930s to the 1970s. As my detailed reconstruction of primary sources shows, the first generation of Frankfurt School critical theorists dedicated considerable efforts to critically understanding gender, family, and sexual relations. While influential secondary literature tends to treat these reflections as irrelevant when it comes to characterizing the Frankfurt School's general approach, my research indicated quite the opposite: The critical analyses of gender, family, and sexuality are intricately linked to the Frankfurt School's broader critical theory of bourgeois society and subjectivity. Therefore, they need to be comprehended as integral components of its overall social theory.

96 On this, see Barbara Umrath, "A Feminist Reading of the Frankfurt School's *Studies on Authoritarianism and Its Relevance for Understanding Authoritarian Tendencies in Germany Today*," in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 117 (4), 861–878.

This, in turn, has implications for how we characterize the Frankfurt School's approach on a more general level. Based on a reading informed by contemporary gender studies, the following reconfigurations are required. First of all, when describing the Frankfurt School as reflexively updating the Marxian tradition, it needs to be mentioned that this included reflexively taking up 19th-century socialist criticisms of patriarchy and sexual morality.⁹⁷ Second, with regard to the integration of Freudian psychoanalysis, it is not enough to point out in general terms that the Frankfurt School's turn towards subjectivity and psychic dimensions was informed by Freud. While this is certainly true, no less important are the specific insights of Freudian theory regarding gender, family, and sexuality. With its hypothesis of infantile, polymorphous sexuality and the family as a crucial realm for the formation of the psyche, Freudian psychoanalysis affirms the importance of family and sexuality. Thus, the integration of Freud's insights significantly contributed to the Frankfurt School's understanding that seemingly private matters like family and sexuality are highly relevant for a critical social theory. Moreover, it is through Freudian psychoanalysis that non-normative notions like a 'primordial bisexuality' or 'polymorphous' desires found their way into the Frankfurt School's discussion of gender and sexuality.⁹⁸ Last but not least, as long as characterizations of the Frankfurt School rest content with highlighting only its break with economistic versions of Marxism and its integration of cultural and psychic dimensions into Marxian theory, the full critical implications of its social theory remain unrealized. Indeed, this overlooks just how groundbreaking the Frankfurt School was. In contrast, a reading informed by contemporary gender studies brings into view that the Frankfurt School's break with traditional approaches

97 Umrath, *Geschlecht, Familie, Sexualität*, 72, 282–284, 369–371. The importance of a critique of patriarchy and sexual morality can first be seen in works by early French socialists like Charles Fourier and Claire Démar. Towards the end of the 19th century, it was popularized in the labor movement by the work of such influential theorists as Friedrich Engels and August Bebel.

98 Umrath, *Geschlecht, Familie, Sexualität*, 104, 145, 148, 285–286, 333–338, 371–372.

towards gender, family, and sexuality are in fact equally seminal.⁹⁹ To the extent that the secondary literature fails to address this, it misses crucial aspects of what makes Frankfurt School Critical Theory critical.

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Outwitting the Spirits? Toward a Political Ecology of Animism

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Abstract: This paper seeks to mediate a recent version of the longstanding idealism/materialism divide in the form of political ecology vs. the anthropology of ontologies, with regard to animism namely in the region of Southeast Asia, using the Frankfurt School notion of the “outwit[ting] of the natural deities” as vantage point. Focusing on the recent “plural ecologies” argument regarding Southeast Asian animism, we problematize an epistemic rift between “economy” and “culture” that fails to fully account for the political-ecological implications of animism. We suggest that this rift is conceptually bridged by a notion of practice as irreducibly socio-ecological; and, more specifically, by a “reflexive-materialist” notion of animist sacrifice as “idea-tool” to secure wellbeing on the capitalist resource frontier. Empirical case studies from firsthand research in Laos and Indonesia demonstrate the analytical value of this approach.

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1 Introduction

Scholarly engagements with capitalism's manifold crisis continue to run up against epistemic-institutional demarcation lines that were complicit in bringing this crisis about. While some self-claimed historical materialists,⁴ in their excited concern about imminent climate breakdown, identify with the aggressor, as it were, by explicitly embracing the Nature/Society dualism that brought us here, kindred dualisms trouble even explicit attempts at overcoming them. Recent discussions around "animist ontologies" are a case in point. Taking our lead from Frankfurt School insights, we discuss the issue of animism and its political-ecological implications. Because of our research experience in Laos and Indonesia, and for the prevalence of animism throughout Southeast Asia, our main focus will be on this region. We hold that this example is telling for the broader discourse in the social sciences. We first identify and problematize an epistemic rift between "economy" and "culture" regarding animism in Southeast Asia that reproduces the idealism/materialism as well as the modern/nonmodern divide which, in turn, fails to grasp the full political-ecological significance of animist "ontologies" in the region and beyond (2.1). We then (2.2) suggest bridging this rift by grounding economy and culture in actual practice building on world-ecology,⁵ Bourdieusian praxeology⁶ and the Frankfurt School.⁷ Here, we mediate contrasting notions (in terms of the rift) of sacrifice as a paradigmatic

4 Such as: Andreas Malm, *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London: Verso, 2018).

5 Jason W. Moore, "Transcending the Metabolic Rift: A Theory of Crises in the Capitalist World-Ecology." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38 no. 1 (2011), 1-46, and Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015).

6 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

7 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002).

animist “onto-praxis,”⁸ interpreting sacrificial practice with Horkheimer and Adorno as a pragmatic “outwitting” of the spirits in order to secure survival and wellbeing under frontier capitalism. This condensed theoretical examination lines out our overall argument, which is subsequently (section 3) applied in two related empirical case studies from Laos and Indonesia (Kalimantan) that critically examine “environmental animist” presumptions around a spirit forest, and in the “neo-animism” of indigent activists, followed by a focused discussion of these cases (section 4). A final section (section 5) outlines a political-ecological approach to animism in Southeast Asia before we conclude on the prospects of “cosmopoliticizing” animism studies in times of global ecological disaster.

2 Ecologizing Animist Ontologies

Animism was classically defined by Edward B. Tylor as “the belief in the animation of all nature.”⁹ Such “belief” is a ubiquitous element in Southeast Asian life-worlds, rural and urban; and it takes many forms, such as, ancestor worship; cults directed at tutelary masters of localities and regions; or fear of many kinds of malevolent spirits in forests and fields. Such ubiquity implies that a huge variety of practices is informed by an animistic outlook, which, in turn, suggests that animism should be of utter interest to political economy and ecology. Yet, it regularly falls outside the scope of current political ecologies of Southeast Asia and instead gets relegated, as it were, to the department of culture, i.e. cultural anthropology, where it is largely stripped of its political and ecological implications. This epistemic rift continues to trouble attempts at bridging it from both sides, as we will argue mainly with regard to Sprenger and Großmann’s promising approach to “bringing together political ecology

8 Michael W. Scott, “The Anthropology of Ontology (Religious Science?),” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 no.4 (2013), 859-872.

9 Edward B. Tylor, 1871. *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, Vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1871), 258.

and the anthropology of ontologies.”¹⁰ For further advancement, we offer a praxeological stance based on world-ecology and Critical Theory to better integrate both camps and account for the political-ecological *implications* of animist ontologies, in Southeast Asia and beyond.

2.1 An Epistemic Rift

An epistemic rift between “economic” (political-ecological, materialist...) and “cultural” (ontological, constructivist...) accounts of Southeast Asian (and other regions’) realities hampers, we argue, a comprehensive understanding of animism and its role in socio-ecological dynamics. Political ecology has a strong root in the more radical sections of human geography (many if not most political-ecological studies on Laos or Kalimantan are done by geographers) and focuses on hierarchy, conflict and inequality in and around “politicized environments”¹¹, explicit in its critique of capitalist nature relations. Capitalist ecology – the appropriation and exploitation of humans and nonhumans for the accumulation and valorization of capital – finds geographical expression in the systemic division between centers of capitalization and vast zones of appropriation, or frontiers.¹² Many parts of Southeast Asia, like Kalimantan and the Lao uplands, are conceived in terms of resource frontiers.¹³ This optic highlights the objective “attractions” and “attritions”¹⁴ for actors, as power structures materialize in environments (and bodies). Importantly, polit-

10 Guido Sprenger and Kristina Großmann, “Plural Ecologies in Southeast Asia,” *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 33, no.2 (2018), xii.

11 Raymond L. Bryant and Sinead Bailey, *Third World Political Ecology* (London: Routledge, 1997); see also Richard Peet, Paul Robbins and Michael Watts. “Global nature,” in *Global Political Ecology*, edited by Richard Peet, Paul Robbins, and Michael Watts (London/New York: Routledge, 2010), 15-62.

12 Jason W. Moore, “Transcending the Metabolic Rift;” and Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*.

13 Keith Barney “Laos and the Making of a ‘Relational’ Resource Frontier,” *The Geographical Journal* 175 no. 2 (2009), 146–159.

14 Oscar Salemink, “Development Cooperation as Quasi-Religious Conversion,” In *The Development of Religion, the Religion of Development*, edited by Oscar Salemink, Anton van Haskamp and Anata Kuma Giri, 121–130 (Delft: Eburon, 2004).

ical ecology is, “a field that stresses not only that ecological systems are political, but also that our very ideas about them are further delimited and directed through political and economic process.”¹⁵ Yet, it sidelines with remarkable regularity the ways in which environments (and bodies) get produced and politicized in practices informed by local “ontologies.”¹⁶ Animism tends to count here as religion, i.e. the quasi-natural subject for cultural anthropologists, at best a boundary condition of sorts for political ecologists. Animism and ritual practice rarely enter the political-economic picture except occasionally, such as, when Goldman¹⁷ bemoans the effects of neoliberalism’s “ongoing reification process” on spirit territories which, he implies, can only be alienating and undermining. More hard-headed materialists even go as far as advising animists to convert to a modernist frame of mind (i.e. Nature vs. Society) since the “warming condition [...] is as universal as any can be.”¹⁸ We follow the general political-ecological line of argument, but find its rather uninformed treatment of animism unsatisfying and incomplete.

In cultural anthropology, in contrast, the topic of animism got revived in the wake of the “ontological turn” initiated, among others, by Bruno Latour’s¹⁹ increasingly popular social philosophy. In the “anthropology of ontologies,” animism is not any longer conceptualized as belief, or symbolic representation, but as a holistic way of being in and of a world

15 Paul Robbins, *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*. Second Edition (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 20.

16 We largely follow here the established terminology of recent animism studies and thus do not discuss the overall problem of ontologies as criticized by Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*. Although some of this criticism would also apply to the ontological turn (we hint at this presently), this strand of thought does not deal with ontology in a strict philosophical sense (see Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)).

17 Michael Goldman, “Constructing an Environmental State: Eco-Governmentality and Other Transnational Practices of a ‘Green’ World Bank,” *Social Problems* 48 no.4 (2001), 508.

18 Malm, *The Progress of this Storm*, 173-174.

19 e.g. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

where intentionality and sociality are inherent in what “moderns” (in this register) regard as objects or environments. The methodological point made by the ontological turn is crucial: to not impose the observer’s ontology on that of the research subjects; the aim is not anymore to “grasp ‘the native’s point of view,’” but to “be grasped *by* it.”²⁰ The implications of this are of course complex and profound, but one reason why the political-ecological *implications* of animism are hardly grasped on these grounds, as we shall presently see, appears to lie in what might be called a cultural reductionism resulting from the ontological turn’s radicalization of anthropology’s alterity project.²¹ To make a long story as brief as possible, we suggest that, through the radicalization of the culturalist alterity project, onto-anthropologies rest on a sociological category mistake par excellence. Essentially, “naturalism,” “animism,” “totemism,” and “analogism” (to follow the by now classic taxonomy of ontologies by Descola)²² are Weberian ideal-types in a rather strict sense, i.e. constructed with “highest possible degree of adequacy on the level of meaning.”²³ They are abstractions from concrete reality and, as hypothetical types of symbolic orders, they are ahistorical and apolitical, as well as distinct and mutually exclusive;²⁴ animism is posed as the opposite of naturalism, i.e. the ontology according to which Nature (nonhumans) and Society (humans) are imagined as distinct, pure ontological spheres. Animism, in contrast imagines also animals, plants, rocks etc. as agential, to which humans can have social relations.

So far so good: constructing ideal-types is considered a legitimate and essential aspect of explanation in the social sciences. The crux lies in how

20 Holbraad and Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn*, 7, emphasis added.

21 Martin Holbraad, “Ontology is just Another Word for Culture: Against the Motion (2),” *Critique of Anthropology* 30 no. 2 (2010), 179-185.

22 Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

23 Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 20.

24 See Bruce Kapferer, “Back to the Future: Descola’s Neostructuralism,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4 no.3 (2014), 389-400.

Weber goes on: “[...] it is probably seldom if ever that a real phenomenon can be found which corresponds exactly to one of these ideally constructed pure types.”²⁵ In fact, the more perfectly ideal-types distill from observed reality such logical integration of meaning, the more “abstract and unrealistic”²⁶ they necessarily become. Actual reality only approximates certain pure types rather than others and can usually be described as a certain mixture of various types. What onto-culturalists tend to do, however, is to project these abstractions back onto actual reality and people, who then tend to turn into “peoples” that are most favorably “indigenous,” or animist.²⁷ The result is a transformation of ideal-types into stereotypes of others as bearers of some cultural programming, leading to the “attribution of fixed-essence characteristics that so often seems to return through the back door in many writings of the ontological turn.”²⁸ At the same time the analytical distinction between conceptions of nature and actual, practical, metabolic relations to nature²⁹ is willingly and programmatically collapsed, and actual life-worlds become equated with language games.

25 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 20.

26 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 21.

27 To be fair, many ontologists would certainly reject an all too explicit projection of this kind and refrain from designating actors as “animists” or “non-moderns.” However, this merely shifts the problem of defining ontologies as different because when ontologies get enacted, practices and thus practitioners become “animist” to the extent that they are informed by an animist cultural program (or “context of meaning”), even where it is supposed that “social actors socialized into [...] ontological multiplicity have learned to contextualize the social validity of these mutually exclusive forms of life without producing cognitive crises.” (Benjamin Baumann, “Reconceptualizing the Cosmic Polity: Outlining the Social Ontology of the Thai *Mueang*.” In *Social Ontology, Sociocultures and Inequality in the Global South*, edited by Benjamin Baumann and Daniel Bultmann, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 58).

28 Magnus Fiskesjö, “The Limits of ‘Ontology’ and the Unfinished Work of ‘Ideology’,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7 no.2 (2017), 243.

29 Egon Becker, “Social-Ecological Systems as Epistemic Objects,” In: *Human-Nature Interactions in the Anthropocene: Potentials of Socio-Ecological Systems Analysis*, edited by Mario Glaser, Gesche Krause, Beate Ratter, and Martin Welp (New York/London: Routledge, 2012), 55-77.

To the extent that the ontological turn, “is at its core a *methodological* intervention” by and for ethnographers, “as opposed to a metaphysical or indeed philosophical one,”³⁰ much of this would not have to concern us here. But some onto-culturalists make it an explicitly political project, and on quite praxeological grounds that much align with our approach of ontologies as “world-making projects;”³¹ thus, Blaser considers a take on ontology, “in which the heuristic device contributes to enact the ‘fact’” allowing for “a foundationless foundational claim;” that is, ontology as “a way of worlding, a form of enacting a reality.”³² However, on the basis of Latourian philosophy, a notion of “political ontology” is derived that appears rather apolitical or abstract: as “a commitment to the pluriverse [...] in the face of the impoverishment implied by universalism;” and “as the dynamics through which *different* ways of worlding sustain themselves even as they *interact*, interfere, and mingle with each other;” as well as ontology as “reality making, including its own participation in reality making.”³³ While we, as mentioned, go along with the third aspect, we are skeptical about the “political” value of abstractly pitting plurality against universalism, while a priori siding with the former and equating the latter with “hegemony;” and of the image of “interaction” of “different” ontologies, which does not allow for grasping animism’s political-ecological *implications*. Indeed, it appears that while “political ontology is concerned with telling stories that open up a space for, and enact, the pluriverse,”³⁴ the concrete politicality – that the power of “stories” to make worlds is the delegated power of institutions and

30 Holbraad and Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn*, 4, emphasis original.

31 Michael Kleinod, “Social Ontologies as World-Making Projects: The mueang-pa Duality in Laos,” in *Social Ontology, Sociocultures, and Inequality in the Global South*, edited by Benjamin Bauman and Daniel Bultmann. (London/New York: Routledge, 2020), 119-135.

32 Mario Blaser, “Ontological Conflicts and the Stories of Peoples in Spite of Europe: Toward a Conversation on Political Ontology,” *Current Anthropology* 54, no.5 (2013), 551f.

33 Blaser, “Ontological Conflicts,” 552, emphases added.

34 Blaser, “Ontological Conflicts,” 552f.

their legitimacy, depending on the relative positions of the tellers in social fields³⁵ – tends to fall outside the scope. Although the coloniality of modernity is stressed throughout, it seems that the major political content consists indeed in the, traditionally anthropological, claim to mere “radical alterity” as such, for ontologies as “different worlds [...] cannot be wrong.”³⁶ The alterity presumption already constitutes the problem definition where “the present conjuncture” is framed as “contest over modernity” involving “a contest over, and with, the non-modern” manifesting “as ontological conflicts”, i.e. “the non-modern manifests itself as something that escapes the ‘radar screen’ of modern categories.”³⁷ In this view, therefore, animism would a priori figure as a way of worlding

35 Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant: *Reflexive Anthropologie* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2006), 182f.

36 Blaser, “Ontological Conflicts,” 551. It is indeed notable how, in ontological turn literature, extraordinary reflexivity, with at times intriguing proximity to Frankfurt School tenets, ends up openly embracing what has been intricately discussed before. Viveiros de Castro, for example, notes that: “The most Kantian of all disciplines, anthropology seems to believe that its paramount task is to explain how it comes to know (to represent) its object” (Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere: Four Lectures Given in the Department of Social Anthropology*, Cambridge University, February–March 1998. HAU Masterclass Series Vol. 1 (2012), 152), and he sees „[n]o way out of this maze of mirrors and this mire of guilt. Reification or fetishism is our major care and scare: we began by accusing savages of doing ‘it,’ now we accuse ourselves (or our colleagues) of doing ‘it’: confusing representations with reality” (153). Earlier in this lecture series, he states: “But once the blame games and guilt trips are over, what is left? The present writer, probably because he is stuck in anthropology’s second stage, does believe there are striking differences between our modern official, hegemonic ontology [...] and the cosmologies of many ‘traditional’ peoples, such as those I am most familiar with: Amazonian Indians” (62). This reflexive indulgence in othering parallels Latour’s (debatable) criticism of critical thought, which ends up embracing the commodity fetish on the ground of personal feelings, taking on the role of an outspoken advocate of “naïve believers”: “One thing is clear, not one of us readers would like to see our own most cherished objects treated in this way [i.e. criticized]” (Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30 no. 2 (2004), 240; emphasis original).

37 Mario Blaser, “Political Ontology: Cultural Studies without ‘Cultures?’,” *Cultural Studies* 23 no.5-6 (2009), 876 and 879f.

that is first of all radically different from modern “universalism” and can only have, it seems, an external relation to its other. Blaser finally cautions against “a re-edition of the myth of the noble savage” that “in our desperation to find a way out we take whatever we consider ‘Other’ as the panacea;” still, however, “recognizing that this is a problematic move should not blind us to what is ‘Other,’” and demands to relate to that Other “in non-hierarchical ways.”³⁸

To be sure, there is much to learn from the writings of Viveiros de Castro, Descola, Ingold and so on, specifically because they challenge received problematic modes of a modernist world-relation. Viveiros de Castro’s elaborations on Amerindian perspectivism are a veritable stretching exercise for thinking habits gone lazy.³⁹ We do see and appreciate the political implication of this. We also see the political intention in saving the possibility of an Other – an intention in line with Frankfurt School thinking – and it is obvious that political ecology and political ontologies meet in the disillusionment with capitalism, or “naturalism.” The “ontological need” is thus understandable, i.e. “[...] the will of people to be safe from being buried by a historical dynamic they feel helpless against”⁴⁰ – yet it presents an epistemological flaw to try and think “the transmissions of our subjectivity [...] out of the world.”⁴¹ The taking of worldviews for worlds as such, which constitute some opaque “pluriverse,” tends to purge politics and ecology from investigation because it is “culture” – as alterity and as opposed to economy etc. – which is ontologized. In the notion of “political ontology,” the political content of ontologies is consequently reduced to the supposedly radical onto-cultural difference of the “nonmodern.” Notions of politicality, such as, domination, exploitation, inequality or ideology tend to be excluded⁴² as

38 Blaser, “Political Ontology,” 892.

39 Viveiros de Castro *Cosmological Perspectivism*.

40 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1973), 93.

41 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 79.

42 David Graeber, “Radical Alterity Is just Another Way of Saying ‘Reality’: A Reply to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro,” in *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5 no.2 (2015): 1-41; Fiskesjö, “The Limits of ‘Ontology,’” 243-247.

a priori inadequate to “flat” ontologies,⁴³ and actual humans tend to be reified, even glorified,⁴⁴ as enactors of some cultural programming. Thus, ontologizing culture-as-alterity appears to thwart from the outset any attempt at conceptually integrating economy and culture. Since culture (or ontology) is defined *a priori* according to cultural anthropology as essentially a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, ritual, that is, as a realm of its own apart from economy and politics, it becomes the basis for a profound de-politicization of the material, even where it presents itself as political ontology.

Within the essentialist optic of political ontologies, the distance also collapses between researcher and researched, so that we are left unclear about whose “ontology” we are actually learning:⁴⁵ how much does perspectivism, for example, owe to the data and how much to the ontological need on the part of the anthropologist? The scientific object of study, that is, the ontic assumptions of a people and the analyst’s assumptions converge. But any analysis and any understanding requires the establishment of an analytical distance. So how is this blurring justified? While ontologies are distilled from and projected onto real life, actual philosophical positions remain unclarified: where should the ontological turn be located, for example, among those ten to fifteen different positions about the mind-body-problem?⁴⁶ All of this suggests that political ontologies remain, though they might claim otherwise, firmly located within occidental thinking in their executing some sort of Orientalism. As the debate on human universals demonstrates, however, it might be argued theoretically as well as empirically that members of different human cul-

43 See Bruno Latour, “On Recalling ANT,” In *Actor Network Theory and After*, edited by John Law and John Hassard, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 20, on actor-network theory as decidedly not “a theory of the social or even worse an explanation of what makes society exert pressure on actors.”

44 See Lucas Bessire and David Bond, “Ontological Anthropology and the Deferral of Critique,” in *American Ethnologist* 41 no.3 (2004), 440-456.

45 also see Blaser, “Ontological Conflicts, 547-568.

46 E.g. Herbert Feigl, Michael Scriven, and Grover Maxwell, eds., *Concepts, Theories, and the Mind-Body Problem*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958).

tures do not live in different worlds but differently in one world.⁴⁷ Therefore, for us, ontologies (as in the sense of the turn) strictly remain ways to get to know one world instead of constituting worlds as such; the fact of the impossibility for any human to get beyond meaning does not by itself allow it to be equated with what is meant.

The problem appears to become somewhat less pronounced when turning to our focus of Southeast Asia: animisms there are distinguished from the symmetrical perspectivism of Amerindian hunter-gatherers⁴⁸ in that they are characterized as hierarchical, asymmetrical and based on the “domestication paradigm.”⁴⁹ The hierarchical (or transcendental) character of Southeast Asian animism is seen “against the background of the shift from a hunter’s world to [...] settled village culture, crop cultivation and livestock rearing.”⁵⁰ This speaks directly to political ecology, but the wording is programmatic: political-ecological issues tend to figure as “background,” not, as we suggest, as *implication*. Similarly, Sprenger and Großmann’s concept of “plural ecologies” treats “political ecology and the study of ontologies” as “complementary theoretical approaches,” or “axes,” suggesting some external relation of animism and political ecology.⁵¹ Thus, although representing a conceptual advancement immensely relevant to our endeavor, the scope of “complementarity” – as derived from the ontological alterity presumption – ends up at a point very similar to that of the other epistemic camp: the application of the “plural ecologies” approach concludes, for example, that aspects of Lao modernity,

47 See Christoph Antweiler, *Our Common Denominator. Human Universals Revisited* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2018).

48 Viveiros de Castro, *Cosmological Perspectivism*.

49 Kaj Århem, “Southeast-Asian Animism: A Dialogue with Amerindian Perspectivism,” In *Animism in Southeast Asia*, edited by Kaj Århem and Guido Sprenger (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 279-301.

50 Århem, “Southeast-Asian Animism,” 298.

51 Sprenger and Großmann. “Plural Ecologies in Southeast Asia”; Benjamin Baumann’s account of “animist collectives” in Thailand constructs similar relations between animism and “naturalism” in terms of the “ontological multiplicity” of “mutually exclusive forms of life” (Baumann, “Reconceptualizing the Cosmic Polity,” 58).

such as, “permanent land tenure, cash cropping and Buddhism” have created “a network of new actants and relationships that *restricts* the operation of the animist ecology without replacing it entirely.”⁵² Animism appears as *a priori* external to modernization, by which it can only be “restricted” (while it remains rather unclear why it should not be replaced entirely...). In short, the *integration* of ontologies and political ecology by “plural ecologies” is likely to fail to the extent that it is shaped by the gap between the cultural reductionism of the ontological turn and the economic reductionism of political ecology. In a sense, “complementarity” or “multiplicity” at the same time address and mystify the relation between ontology and political ecology.

Aside from these more theoretical issues, the category mistake of ontologizing animism has problematic political implications as it tend to turn people into peoples that are preferably indigenous, i.e. tied to and in harmony with a certain patch of land. Individuals are thus virtually reduced to bearers of an ideological blood-and-soil link that is fundamentally xenophobic, potentially ethno-nationalist. That is, the contrived apolitical politicality of political ontologies might have anti-emancipatory implications that run counter to their initial intention. The trope of the environmentally noble animist, a subspecies of the “ecologically noble savage,”⁵³ is a case in point: the idea that animists, due to their cultivation

52 Guido Sprenger, “Buddhism and Coffee: The Transformation of Locality and Personhood in Southern Laos,” *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 33 no. 2 (2018), 280; emphasis added.

53 Notably, Blaser critically reflects on the idea of “the ecologically noble savage” as lending an “aura of naturalness to the positions and arguments associated [...]” – however, assuming “that self-representations through established categories [cannot] exhaust the radical differences that may or may not be at stake,” so that “those self-representations tell us more about the status of the hegemony of the categories being used, and the asymmetrical relations between worlds, than about the existence of those radical differences” (Blaser, “Ontological Conflicts,” 558). We are not suggesting that all ontological turn proponents subscribe to such ideological ideas, but rather that the epistemic gap between “materialist” political ecology and “idealist” political ontology can hardly refute such political framings in a consistent manner on the grounds of alterity.

of spirit forests, for example, should be by nature, as it were, quasi-environmentalists, gains strength in recent sustainable development, and the gap between political ecology and political ontology tends to deliver scholarly justification. As indigenous or animist people are constructed as embodying a superior way of living above or beyond modernist hierarchical dichotomies, they become emblematic of actually existing un-alienated nature relations. Indigenous groups are presented as fully integral to “a dynamic equilibrium produced by the synergistic interaction of human (indigenous) technical ingenuity and the sui generis ingenuities of the sundry organisms that live there.”⁵⁴ The term indigenous appears to fetishize and ontologize a perceived relation of certain cultures to certain territories as supposedly direct and primordial, implicitly or explicitly presupposing some quasi-natural environmentalism encoded in that culture. To the extent that animism might be part of such a culture, it is seen as environmentalist as well. The equation of indigeneity and/or animism with environmentalism, however, sits uneasily with observations of conflicts among “indigenous peoples,” such as those arising regularly around development projects (e.g. in Bolivia’s Isiboro Securé Indigenous Territory and National Park). Subsequent section 3 will investigate the problematic political implications of such politicization of essentialisms, which we will term indigenism, as well as challenge the neat typological distinctions of onto-culturalism in case studies in Laos and Indonesia.

2.2 Bridging the rift

But first: how to mediate the gap? Put bluntly, the epistemic rift in relation to the study of Southeast Asia treats the same people *either* as “peasants” (i.e. political-economic actors) *or* as “animists” (i.e. onto-cultural actors) when they are, of course, both at same time. Sociologically put, the one camp is concerned with Durkheimian and Marxian objectivities,

54 Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Economic Development and Cosmopolitical Re-involvement: From Necessity to Sufficiency,” in *Contested Ecologies: Dialogues in the South on Nature and Knowledge*, edited by Lesley Green (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2013), 35.

the other with Weberian ideal-typical constellations of (inter)subjective meaning. Following Bourdieu, we suggest that such “subjectivism” and “objectivism” are mediated in social practice.⁵⁵ Despite above criticism, the ontological stance is invaluable for a praxeology in its insistence on the fact that practical logics are determined by ontological presumptions; it qualifies Bourdieu’s notion of a fundamental, pre-reflexive belief (original doxa) in a social-symbolic order naturalized by embodiment.⁵⁶ Partly beyond Bourdieu, our notion of social practice stresses its ecological, metabolic dimension: the investment of “human brains, muscles, nerves, hands etc.,”⁵⁷ into appropriating (the work of) other humans, nonhumans and oneself within a capitalist world-ecology.⁵⁸ Such a perspective enables an understanding of the ways in which animism is essentially political-ecological and, conversely, how the appropriation of humans and nonhumans at resource frontiers, such as in Laos and Indonesia, is mediated by animistic “onto-praxis.”⁵⁹ We thus argue, and demonstrate below, that animism may shape and be shaped proactively as well as counteractively by the region’s socio-ecological transformation in frontier contexts. In this view, onto-praxis expresses ontological principles in practices that are irreducibly socio-ecological, that is, involving symbolic and material relations of humans to themselves, to other humans and to nonhumans. In this sense, ontologies are “world-making projects.”⁶⁰

To make our point most clearly, we narrow down the argument to a

55 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

56 See Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

57 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), 134.

58 Christoph Görg, *Regulation der Naturverhältnisse. Zu einer kritischen Theorie der ökologischen Krise* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2003); Moore, “Transcending the Metabolic Rift;” Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*.

59 See Scott, “The Anthropology of Ontology;” Marshall Sahlins, “The Original Political Society,” in *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7 no. 2 (2017), 91–128.

60 Kleinod, “Social Ontologies as World-Making Projects.”

paradigmatic kind of animist “onto-practices,” sacrifice. In Arhem’s account, sacrifice in hierarchical animism “has the character of an asymmetric exchange” which consists in the submission and continuous unconditional giving by human subjects “in the hope of spiritual blessings and earthly rewards (in the form fertility and prosperity).”⁶¹ This stresses the complex of meaning which illuminates the intersubjective sense of animist practice as geared towards prosperity, and the mentioned ritual asymmetry is crucial: the power of the spirit over human life and death is practically relevant. Still, animist practice is restricted here to the boundaries of ritual symbolism sidelining the socio-economic functions of such rituals, e.g. in the context of resource extraction. This notion of asymmetry thus appears to tell only half the story as it leaves unanswered how “domestication,” i.e. appropriation of nonhumans, is thereby secured on a reliable basis. In fact, in many instances capitalist development is enabled by ritual, for example, when land is cleared for development by relocating the local tutelary spirit, when mining operations employ ritual specialists to get workers underground, etc. In turn, many rituals, such as the prominent Lao *soukhwān* (“calling the souls”), are increasingly commercialized and commodified (Ladwig, personal communication). Put differently, how does the ritualistic take match with the idea that sacrifice,

[...] should not be understood as being of a different logic than economic activities. For people who perform sacrifices, it is no more than a business deal. The objective [...] is to purchase a good or service in exchange of another and make it a profitable and beneficial exchange.⁶²

While Arhem’s interpretation reduces sacrifice to its symbolism of ritual “submission,” this one reduces ritual to economics treating humans and spirits as formally equal business partners. We argue that both views are valid and important but, as they stand, they are mutually exclusive.

61 Århem, “Southeast-Asian Animism,” 281.

62 Grégoire Schlemmer 2001. *Integrated Biodiversity Conservation and Community Development in Nam Et - Phou Loei NBCAs, Lao PDR: Community Livelihoods Analysis*. (IUCN Consultant Report, 2001), 75.

Notably, they entail *contrary notions of asymmetric exchange* which we seek to synthesize in the remainder of this subsection.

Because the epistemic rift can be seen as rooted in the classical materialism/idealism divide, a praxeology of animism may be usefully rooted in a “reflexive materialism” as expressed in the Critical Theory of Frankfurt School,⁶³ and we take our lead from keywords provided by the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.⁶⁴ Ontologically inclined readers will suspect in this twist of argument an attempt (out of some opaque admiration perhaps) to apply an outdated philosophy to funny places. For, what could be more obviously evolutionist, Eurocentric, functionalist, naturalist – and thus utterly inadequate to the subject matter?⁶⁵ A comprehensive rebuttal would naturally surpass the scope of this paper, so we will focus on how Frankfurt School represents a promising attempt at resolving the rift in question.⁶⁶ In our view, the whole outlook of Frankfurt School thinking

63 See Görg, *Regulation der Naturverhältnisse*.

64 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). Adorno’s *Negative Dialectic* is certainly the most systematic account of Frankfurt School’s “reflexive materialism” which assimilates the constructivist-idealist critique of realist-materialism without giving up on the materialist position, an account seen as valuable to the comprehension of the recent ecological crisis (Görg, *Regulation der Naturverhältnisse*; M. Stoner, “Sociobiophysicality and the Necessity of Critical Theory: Moving beyond Prevailing Conceptions of Environmental Sociology in the USA,” in *Critical Sociology* 40 no.4 (2014), 621–642; Ryan Gunderson, “Environmental Sociology and the Frankfurt School 1: Reason and Capital,” in *Environmental Sociology* 1 no.3 (2015), 224–235; Ryan Gunderson “Environmental Sociology and the Frankfurt School 2: Ideology, Techno-Science, Reconciliation,” in *Environmental Sociology* 2 no.1 (2016), 64–76).

65 E.g. Boike Rehbein, *Critical Theory after the Rise of the Global South: Kaleidoscopic Dialectic*. (London: Routledge, 2015); Benjamin Baumann, “Das animistische Kollektiv: Lévy-Bruhl, soziale Ontologien und die Gegenseitigkeit menschlicher und nicht-menschlicher Wesen in Thailand,” in *Zeitschrift für Kultur- und Kollektivwissenschaft* 4 no.2 (2018), 129–166.

66 For instance, the charge against “evolutionism” – the proposition that societies evolve from “low” primitive to “higher” complex stages – points to the judgmental hierarchical ordering of societies, and it will be difficult to flatly deny Frankfurt School’s part in such thinking. However, it seems as difficult to deny also for ontologists that societies do develop, and not just randomly

amounts to a radical critique of modern “naturalism” very much in the spirit of the ontological turn.⁶⁷ We will treat its philosophical propositions as keywords that are “good to think with” rather than a neatly crafted system to pack up Southeast Asian realities.

The *Dialectic* famously posits that “myth is already enlightenment,” a specific way to “narrate, record, explain” the world.⁶⁸ Also animism is, first of all, a form of reflexivity by means of which humans “distance themselves from nature in order to arrange it in such a way that it can be mastered;” it is an “*idea-tool*” to separate the world into “chaotic, multiple, and disparate” vs. “known, single, and identical”.⁶⁹ Animism and naturalism thus can be seen as essentially alike in their function as idea-tools to order and master the world. They differ in that modern rationality radicalizes the instrumental aspect of thought in service of the “exploitation of the labor of others, ‘capital’.”⁷⁰ In contrast, neither the modern unity of (nonhuman) nature nor that of the modern (human) subject “was presupposed by magical incantation”.⁷¹ This speaks to ontological themes of the “dividual”⁷² and the sociality of nonhuman nature.

so, see Århem, “Southeast-Asian Animism,” 298. But this issue is more complex since the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (our main point of reference here) also reverts the evolutionist logic: not only are “primitive” modes of knowledge and modern instrumental reason subject to criticism to the same extent. The progress the authors do see in the development of (Western philosophical) reason necessarily entails crucial regressions and downsides.

67 It is essential to bear in mind that Frankfurt School cannot be simply “applied” due to its skepticism regarding identity and system thinking and, consequently, an aphoristic style of thinking in “constellations” (see Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*). Nor does the *Dialectic* speak without further ado to our topic as it refers neither to the region of Southeast Asia specifically nor to a definite notion of animism, using “(pre)animism,” “myth,” or “magic” rather interchangeably.

68 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 5.

69 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 31; emphasis added.

70 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 6.

71 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 6

72 McKim Marriott, “Hindu Transactions: Diversity without Dualism.” In *Transaction and Meaning: Directions in the Anthropology of Exchange and Symbolic Behavior*, edited by Bruce Kapferer, 109-142 (Philadelphia: Institute for the

Already in the mid-1940s the authors of the *Dialectic* argued very much in the way of Bird-David or Viveiros de Castro against anthropomorphism as an explanation for animistic world relations:

At the magical stage dream and image were not regarded as mere signs of things but were linked to them by resemblance or name. The relationship was not one of intention but of kinship. Magic like science is concerned with ends, but it pursues them through mimesis, not through an increasing distance from the object. It certainly is not founded on the “omnipotence of thought,” which the primitive is supposed to impure to himself like the neurotic, there can be no “over-valuation of psychical acts” in relation to reality where thought and reality are not radically distinguished.⁷³

Thus although critical theorists do regard magic as “bloody untruth,”⁷⁴ mimesis is also seen as a mode of cognition superior to, or at least as legitimate as, instrumental reason – found today in the field of art. There still lies some hope in animistic mimesis as an alternative to instrumental reason in that “domination is not yet disclaimed by transforming itself into a pure truth underlying the world which it enslaves.”⁷⁵ The alterity of myth’s mimetic mode of apprehension– which imitates and seeks to make itself similar to its object rather than putting it at neutralizing distance – is regarded by Adorno, following Benjamin, as resisting identity thinking in its “passive receptivity that avoided domination of otherness.”⁷⁶ Against the ontological claim of real-existing radical alterity,

Study of Human Issues, 1976), 109-142.

73 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 7.

74 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 6.

75 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 6.

76 Martin Jay, “Taking on the Stigma of Inauthenticity: Adorno’s Critique of Genuineness,” *New German Critique* 97 (2006), 21. For an account of mimesis in Lao Buddhism as well as of the concept’s history and Frankfurt School’s position in it, see Patrice Ladwig, “The Mimetic ‘Representation’ of the Dead and Social Space among the Buddhist Lao,” *Tai Culture* 7 no.2 (2002): 120-134, and Patrice Ladwig, “Mimetic Theories, Representation, and ‘Savages:’ Critiques of the Enlightenment and Modernity through the Lens of Primitive Mimesis,” in *The Transformative Power of the Copy: A Transcultural and Interdisciplinary Approach*, edited by Corinna Forberg and Philipp W. Stockhammer (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, 2017), 37-66.

however, Frankfurt School proponents would stress the political and ecological determinations of nonmodern ontologies – namely, that they evolve in and reproduce a state of existence that, instead of dominating nature, is dominated by it;⁷⁷ that is, animism is a historical product of subsistence moral ecologies dependent on a “capricious nature.”⁷⁸

Such a reflexive-materialist perspective enables an integration of the opposing views on sacrifice just mentioned in that it a) recognizes spirits and their power over humans as well as b) the economic character of ritual transaction. This is most clearly expressed in the *Dialectic's* idea of *cunning*. Homer's *Ulysses*, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest, “survives adventures” by “throwing [him]self away in order to preserve [him]self;” he “outwits the natural deities as the civilized traveler was later to swindle savages, offering them colored beads for ivory.” This may happen practically through sacrifice, which “appears as a human contrivance intended to control the gods, who are overthrown precisely by the system created to honor them.”⁷⁹ Importantly, such notion of “outwitting” takes seriously the perceived power of spirits over the life and death of humans. It is exactly this relation of asymmetry in Arhem's terms of a “submission to the spirits on the part of the human sacrificer”⁸⁰ that warrants some kind of trickery, so as to secure “a profitable and beneficial exchange” in Schlemmer's terms. “Throwing oneself away in order to preserve oneself” is facilitated by the substitution and gradation of the sacrifice: the giver does not sacrifice herself but someone else (who is usually regarded nonhuman). This substitution of the sacrificer's own life with a (“cheaper”) one already involves a profitable abstraction from, and equalizing of, individual alterity, “exchange represents the secularization of sacrifice.”⁸¹ This constitutes an abstraction from con-

77 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 25; Görg, *Regulation der Naturverhältnisse*.

78 Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Resistance in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 26.

79 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 39f, emphases added.

80 Århem, “Southeast-Asian Animism,” 281

81 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 40.

crete qualities that is realized in the *act* of exchange.⁸² That is to say, the appropriation of domestic animals as equivalent substitutes for the sacrificer's life includes already the logic of market exchange which becomes foundational in fully capitalized regions. Such an approach thus helps explain how animism persists, even blossoms, in contexts of capitalist transformation.

In this light, it is furthermore essential to recall that the ontological turn tends to turn away from "an entire generation of anthropologists"⁸³ who have treated animism as political and ecological. It has long been stated, for example, that "spirits of the place" are already, as such, expressions of politics and ecology. Following Mus, Holt observes, for instance, that Tai-Lao concepts of tutelary local spirits are "centered on a concept of power [...] that accounts for the dynamism of life associated with that locality."⁸⁴ Local rulers legitimize their position through ritual relations with such spirits of the place, whose hierarchies parallel mundane socio-political relations.⁸⁵ Tutelary spirits also legitimize expropriation and displacement, as historically the case for Luang Phabang.⁸⁶ Jonathan Friedman's view on sociality among the Kachin sees spirit cults as "a kind of religion of productivity [...] to control that which the society seems objectively powerless to control beyond certain limits, i.e.,

82 E.g. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (London: Macmillan, 1978).

83 Bessire and Bond, "Ontological Anthropology and the Deferral of Critique," 441.

84 John Clifford Holt, *Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture*. (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009), 24f.

85 See Charles Archaimbault, "Une Cérémonie en l'Honneur des Génies de la Mine de Sel de Ban Bo, Moyen Laos: Contribution à l'Étude du Jeu de Ti-K'I," in *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* 48 no.1 (1956), 221-231. On these issues with regard to tutelary village spirits (*phi ban*) in Laos see Georges Condominas, Georges, "Phiban Cults in Rural Laos," in *Change and Persistence in Thai Society: Essays in Honor of Lauriston Sharp*, edited by William Skinner and Thomas Kirsch, 252-273, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 252-273); also 4.1.

86 Holt, *Spirits of the Place*, 36.

prosperity,"⁸⁷ recalling above-related idea of being dominated by "nature." Or recall Michael Taussig's classical examination in *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism* of how cosmologies based on a subsistence economy transformed radically to codify unequal exchange in the process of capitalist commodification.⁸⁸ With regard to animism in Southeast Asia, the active connection of ontologies to prosperity and wellbeing calls for attending to the ways in which capitalism and the "domestication paradigm" entangle in resource frontiers.

Such a reflexive-materialist praxeology of animism lets us see how animism and capitalism stand in a tenuous yet productive relation. It is sensitive to the fact that interpretations of animistic lore vary widely according to the respective interests of (in)dividuals and collectives situated in dynamic contexts of appropriation (see 3). Rather than merely a belief system or religion, animism is a *practical operator* involving "doubt as much as belief, guesswork and experimentation, as much as tradition and convention"⁸⁹ in the concrete and messy metabolic practice of human individuals and groups navigating the insecurities and opportunities of frontiers; that is, places where capital accumulation is secured via cheap appropriation of natural resources and human labor power. Such dynamics reproduce subsistence livelihoods⁹⁰ so that within capitalism's ambivalent enclosures the persistence of animism is not too surprising.⁹¹ Animism's persistence in this ontological as well as ecological transition is thus explained less by its abstract "alterity" to, and "complementarity" with "naturalism;" rather, it is a practical *idea-tool* in making a living "at

87 Jonathan Friedman, *System, Structure, and Contradiction: The Evolution of "Asiatic" Social Formations*. (Altamira: Rowman, 2000), 64.

88 Michael Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); see Conclusion.

89 Guido Sprenger, "Dimensions of Animism in Southeast Asia," in *Animism in Southeast Asia*, edited by Kaj Århem and Guido Sprenger (London: Routledge, 2016), 32.

90 e.g. Robert Cole and Jonathan Rigg, "Lao Peasants on the Move: Pathways of Agrarian Change in Laos," *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 30 no. 12 (2019), 160-180.

91 Kleinod, "Social Ontologies as World-Making Projects," 119-135; see section 5.

the mercy of a capricious nature"⁹² as well as an equally capricious and unaccountable world-market and its shaky "invisible hand."

3 The environmental animist: Cases from Southeast Asia

A major upshot of above examination is that both epistemic camps, political ecology and the anthropology of alternative ontologies, appear to reproduce modernist presumptions, however implicit and ambivalent, about animism's otherness *vis-à-vis* modernity's destructivity. This is not very surprising if our initial observation about the academic division of labor has something to it: the underlying schism between Nature and Culture (or: Society) is the mainstay of what both, political ecology and new animism, criticize for very good reason in "naturalism" or capitalism.⁹³ Although contradictory, both camps suggest that animism is somewhat purely "nonmodern" and, therefore, principally at odds with capitalist appropriation and valorization. This also comes out in rare attempts at bridging the rift from the political ecology side, such as Sullivan, who observes "an emplaced correspondence" between animist ontologies and "the actual flourishing of environmental parameters" as well as a "conscious antagonism, resistance and banishment *vis à vis* the strongly hierarchical and instrumental powers associated with the modern state and capitalised markets."⁹⁴ Although certainly valid to some extent, the idea that animism could only be antagonistic to modernity is taken to imply that animism is *per se* somewhat naturally environmentally benign. The following case studies demonstrate why and how this conceptual preset of the "environmental animist" stands in the way of an adequate comprehension of animist ecologies and may have problematic political implications.

92 Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, 26.

93 See Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*.

94 Sian Sullivan, "What's Ontology Got to Do with It? On Nature and Knowledge in a Political Ecology of the 'Green Economy'," *Journal of Political Ecology* 24 no.1 (2017), 217-242.

3.1 Laos: De-Foresting the Sacred?⁹⁵

The example of a spirit forest exemplifies how the epistemic rift in question escapes the full reality of animism in Southeast Asia. Situated in a National Protected Area (NPA), this forest of around 180 ha is held “sacred” (*maheesak*) by two surrounding communities of the Katang ethnic group because the tutelary spirit of the area (*phi mueang*) is believed to reside here. Its flora and fauna are thus subject to certain taboos, namely: trees thicker than an arm are not to be cut; and, two monkey species (Silvered leaf monkey and Red-shaked douc) are not to be hunted or killed. The breaching of these taboos is punished with death (not necessarily of the perpetrator). This seems to be an example for the intrinsic environmentalism of animism, thus much in line with what the epistemic rift would imply.

So let us contextualize: even though this forest and the communities are located in a protected area, the terrain around this place is only scarcely forested. This seems, at least partly, due to the violent logging of precious timber: Siamese rosewood was logged to extinction in the province by 2014; subsequent waves focus on the next most precious species such as Burmese Padauk. According to rumor, monkeys as well are hunted and traded. Villagers obviously capitalize on this illicit trade, as manifested in the mushrooming of relatively opulent houses as well as in big cars and shiny new motorbikes, in a region which is peripheral even for Lao standards. Padauk also grows inside that forest where, in fact, chainsaws do fell trees thicker than arm, as observed firsthand.

Now, this extractive context itself does not need to confuse the “environmental animist” assumption because of a further element in the forest’s complex symbolic-material setting: evangelization. Illicit missionary activity from abroad has gained momentum since 2009. Religious rights

95 Also see Michael Kleinod, *The Recreational Frontier: Ecotourism in Laos as Ecotourism Instrumentality*. (Göttingen: Universitätsverlag Göttingen 2017). Data for this section was gathered during fieldwork between 2011 and 2014. Further empirical work on animism in Laos has been conducted in early 2019.

organizations have reported on religious-political conflicts in the subsequent years: local and district authorities apparently forced Christians to renounce their faith or else face expulsion. Research by the first author was severely restricted, explicitly for reasons of “religious conflict.” Animist village elites confirmed that converts were threatened with being treated as generalized culprits for any local problems, and that Christians were excluded from certain economic activities such as tourism (see below). Although some converts remain in these villages, most of them got pushed out to a third village nearby (but further removed from the spirit forest). For the “environmental animist” fixation, this seems to settle the problem: if the spiritual taboos are *per se* environmentally benign, extraction (within the spirit forest at least) is explained by conversion to a foreign ontology. A further dynamic fully picks up on this logic: a conservation project targeted at the monkey species just noted (which are locally sacred as well as endangered by global standards). A report by the Lao Wildlife Conservation Association notes:

[This] forest has been long protected by traditional practices [...]. Any killing of wildlife and cutting down trees in the forest area were not allowed. [...] However, [some] villagers [have] changed a religion from animism to Christian, some villagers poached some trees (may also hunt the animals) [...] they got no problem. This is now a key challenge for securing the long-term conservation of this monkey in its natural habitat. Therefore, immediate interventions are highly required to focus on a control of poaching trees and wildlife by outsiders.⁹⁶

One central aspect of the interventions deemed conducive for forest protection is, consequently, the strengthening of “traditional” animist attitudes, not least among the younger generation. This passage exemplifies the logical automatism that a spirit forest can only become deforested as a result of the decline of animist belief and, by implication, Christian

96 Chanthavy Vongkhamheng, *A Final Report on Conservation Initiative of Indochinese Silvered Leaf Monkey (Trachypithecus Germaini) in Dong Phouvieng National Protected Area, Savannakhet in the Central Lao PDR* (Lao Wildlife Conservation Association, Unpublished Project Report, 2013), 7.

evangelization. It seems that both epistemic camps, as they stand, do not have much to offer in order to question this *a priori* singling-out of representatives of a different faith as quasi-natural threats to a spirit forest. The conclusion here – not necessarily intended but consequential, and conceptually as well as politically problematic – could be that trees and monkeys would be best protected if Christian Katang renounced their faith. The crucial question thus is: Would it be conceivable that animists deforest their sacred forest?

Firsthand observation will give some hints. Although animist Katang were constantly preoccupied with not offending all kinds of spirits, it was also them who profited most obviously from trade in precious woods. But would they profit from extraction in their spirit forest, too? That part is admittedly tricky to verify, but a close look at the *practical* intricacies of local “belief” provides further clues. Firstly, taboo is, as mentioned, not simply “any killing” (as in above quote) but only that of the monkeys as well as the cutting down only of trees thicker than a man’s arm; other animals (such as wild pigs) are hunted, just as herbs and plants are gathered on an everyday basis. Secondly, the monkeys may be killed if found outside the tiny patch of sacred territory. If monkeys are not to be killed inside, they can surely be scared up and chased, for instance, to create photo ops for ecotourists.⁹⁷ Thirdly, the taboos themselves are negotiable: a proper and timely sacrifice to the forest spirit may allow for all kinds of development, including the cutting of trees.⁹⁸ Furthermore, the position of ritual specialist (*chao cham*) – the central agency dealing with the forest spirit master on behalf of the villages – was given up by the

97 The ecotourism scheme in the area includes a morning walk through the spirit forest. If tourists spot monkeys, they will have to pay an extra bonus to the local guides, spurring the guides’ eagerness. Whether this is in line with monkey conservation wisdom seems questionable – which in turn demonstrates that while conservation and ecotourism overlap strongly in general, they may be at odds in practical details.

98 That taboos are negotiable was held by inhabitants of one village, while people from the other village maintained that there is no dealing with the spirit. Felled trees were observed in their part of the forest as well, and village elites proudly presented to me chunks of Padauk accumulated under their houses.

last position holder at the time of visit as villagers' ritual disobedience increasingly put the man's life in danger. This vacancy is bound to result in a decentralization and individualization of sacrifice as villagers now deal with the spirit master on their own. This goes in hand with another fact that cannot be overstressed in the context of our general argument: that there is practically no unanimous consensus on the lore itself. Information varied widely with the individuals, but also the same individual would give contradicting statements at different points in time – and the confused researcher is advised to just pick the best version. This pragmatic attitude seems a central feature of animism, not only here.

An increasing carelessness in observing traditional taboos is further reflected in certain spiritual beings imagined to reside inside that forest: so-called *bang bot* (roughly: “invisible”) have been involved in long-term exchange relations with Katang villagers, repairing or lending tools or clothes in return for honest behavior. This relationship is seen by many villagers as in decline since humans are becoming increasingly dishonest: according to some people, *bang bot* do not show themselves anymore, according to others, they have left; both interpretations may be interpreted as a way of judging the morality of environmental degradation and one's own involvement in it.⁹⁹ This imaginary parallels local ideas about the monkeys who (like *bang bot*) can only be seen if they choose to. This logic is at odds with certain tenets of conservation activities, such as, when villagers regard the counting of monkey individuals to gather baseline data, a project they themselves participated in, as essentially a fruitless endeavor – “Sixty? It could be two thousand!” Monkeys are also perceived (again like *bang bot*) to increasingly “leave” the forest (so that they can be hunted), which is attributed to the will of the forest master

99 For a separate treatment of *bang bot* as “spirits with morality” in the context of environmental plunder and nature conservation in Laos see Michael Kleinod and Sypha Chanthavong, “Spirits with Morality: Social Criticism and Notions of a Good Life in Laos through the *bangbot* Imaginary,” in *Positions: Asia Critique – Special Issue: The good life in late socialist Asia: aspirations, politics and possibilities*, edited by Minh T.N. Nguyen, Phill Wilcox and Jake Lin (forthcoming).

and thereby legitimized and affirmed. These observations, we believe, complicate the “environmental animist” automatism. Taking into account further evidence from comparable upland places in Laos, it does not seem too unlikely that also animists are, in principle, just as able to conserve a sacred forest as to deforest it, without necessarily ceasing to be animist or the spirit master to vanish.¹⁰⁰ That is to say: How animism will actually play out, is an empirical matter and not deducible from *idées fixes* such as the “environmental animist.”

In our discussion (4), we will revisit certain aspects of this case, namely that of sacrifice and of animism’s social power as observable in the case of Christian converts. Before, our following case study brings into even sharper relief the political and ecological implications of the “environmental animist” as it examines “neo-animism” among indigenous activists in Kalimantan.

3.2 Indonesia: Animism and indigenous activism¹⁰¹

With the emergence of indigenous activism in places like Kalimantan the “environmental animist” takes on a political form of its own that we call “neo-animism.” This case demonstrates how the “environmental animist” gains political traction with the global rise of indigeneity as symbolic capital in political-ecological struggles. During the authoritarian Suharto regime, indigenous communities in Indonesia were labelled as “isolated” or “backward communities” by both Indonesian mainstream society and the regime.¹⁰² The systematic distinction between a “civi-

100 A Makong *chao cham* related, for instance, that his village had to turn its sacred forest (*pa saksit*) into a swidden field due to land shortage within another National Protected Area, but the spirit is still the master of that land.

101 A 6-months fieldwork on this topic was conducted in 2014, with several follow-up visits since that time. During that time, participant observation was carried out among Dayak activists and in the activist’s trips to rural communities. Additionally, the author also has spent some time in a Dayak village without activists. Additionally, the research also was concerned with publication of the activists.

102 Christian Erni, “Country Profile: Indonesia,” In *The Concept of Indigenous People in Asia: A Resource Book*, edited by Christian Erni (Copenhagen: Inter-

lized" mainstream society in urban centers and "backward" peripheries of seemingly abundant resources and cheap labor has turned Kalimantan into a conflict-laden resource frontier. Indigenous activists today criticize this ideology retrospectively as hostile to indigenous communities and their autochthonic beliefs. This criticism is embedded in struggles of local populations over land and resources, and it evokes a separate ontological space in which indigenous people supposedly live in some sort of aboriginal animism.

Since indigenous identities have gained importance in struggles for political power and resource access, especially after the downfall of the Suharto regime,¹⁰³ Indonesia has experienced a mushrooming of NGOs representing particular indigenous identities. Some of these NGOs have their roots in the time of the Suharto regime. One of the first was the West Kalimantan-based Institut Dayakologi. Initially concerned with rather apolitical folklore, in the 1990s it increasingly engaged in land conflicts and became a firm opponent of palm oil production.¹⁰⁴ The Institut Dayakologi aims to revitalize Dayak culture and empower local communities vulnerable to land dispossession. Members of the institute are well educated, and so they intentionally combine transnational discourses on environmentalism and indigeneity with "autochthonous" Dayak animism to gain political force on the national and international level. Dayak activists portray Dayak engagement with nature as harmonious, referring to pre-*pembangunan* ("development") when the island was covered with dense forest. Sustainability is regarded and heralded as a basic character-

national Work Group for Indigenous Affairs/Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact Foundation, 2008), 377.

103 Jamie Davidson and David Henley, eds., *The Revival of Tradition in Indonesian Politics: The Development of Adat from Colonialism to Indigenism*. (London: Routledge, 2007).

104 Leslie Potter, "Oil Palm and Resistance in West-Kalimantan, Indonesia," in *Agrarian Angst and Rural Resistance in Contemporary Southeast Asia*, edited by Dominique Caouette and Sarah Turner. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 106; Taufiq Tanasaldy, *Regime Change and Ethnic Politics in Indonesia. Dayak Politics of West Kalimantan* (Leiden: KITLV-Press, 2012), 284-285.

istic of Dayak ecology, in contrast to capitalism.¹⁰⁵ Interestingly, “nature” is a central reference informed by activists’ scientific education, yet it carries a surplus meaning, as it were: that of a sublime entity-in-balance including Dayak, and which gets unbalanced by capitalist destruction. The similarities of such neo-animism to deep ecology are remarkable. Its ideas are informed by global discourses used by Dayak activists to find a common language of negotiation within transnational NGO networks, where they stress animist beliefs in order to portray themselves as true indigenous people.

For Dayak communities, in turn, environmental transformation is often both desirable (because of the promise of development) and a threat (because it often comes with dispossession). Thus if indigenous peoples are in charge of their own land, it is never clear how they will shape it. Animism does not necessarily keep Dayak from selling land to transnational companies or engaging in deforestation and oil palm cultivation. Neo-animist activists tend to deny this, however. When engaging with Dayak people in the villages, the activists conduct rituals and stress the importance of paying attention to the spirits. In their view, spirit needs and palm oil monocultures are mutually exclusive while shifting cultivation is seen as adequate for engaging with a landscape inhabited by non-human persons. The existence of invisible, non-human original inhabitants with human-like characteristics (*penunggu*, “someone who is waiting”) forms the common base of the animism of the local population and neo-animist positions. Dayak activists highlight as crucial those ritual practices in which Dayak engage with such spirits.¹⁰⁶ While many Dayak pragmatically fuse animism and development in their daily prac-

105 John Bamba, “Seven Fortunes versus Seven Calamities: Cultural Poverty from an Indigenous Peoples’ Perspective,” in *Indicators Relevant for Indigenous People. A Resource Book*, edited by Mara Stankovitch, (Baguio City: Tebtebba Foundation, 2008), 241-249.

106 Before establishing a swidden, for instance, shamans ask the local spirits whether they approve or disapprove of the intended endeavor. When the spirits’ homes are destroyed without their consent, they can turn vengeful, cause sickness and accidents.

tices, for instance by moving *penunggu* when establishing a palm oil plot, Dayak activists insist on their ecological version of animist concepts, combining deep ecology with local forms of animism.

There is thus no simple difference or relation between local and neo-animism if animism serves as a hinge between discourses on sustainability and indigeneity. The concept of *penunggu* allows for appointing a person-like entity as guarantor for sustainability from outside the frame of Western science. Moreover, neo-animism is reproduced in inter-Dayak debates on identity or land tenure. Both the concrete, pragmatic animism of local Dayak communities, which allows them to move spirits for the sake of profit, and environmentalist neo-animism provide different arguments for the Dayak; these arguments are used in accordance with the concrete political and ecological situation.¹⁰⁷ Both animisms are differing interpretations of *penunggu* and how they are to be approached. Both forms of animism are therefore not simply contradictory but rather alternative versions of animism situated in dynamic relations of power and discourse. Moreover, neo-animism is an expression of the disbelief of many in the unfulfilled promises of modernization: “development” continues to be a pervasive motif all over Indonesia but leaves many people, especially at the frontier, in poverty and with low cultural self-esteem. Thus, the desire for cultural belonging (e.g. to animist collectivities) points to the unfulfilled promises of economic development.

We argue that neo-animism is, again, rather ill-conceived from within the epistemic rift because it represents a “modern” re-adaptation and politicization of animism that would be either frowned upon as inau-

107 To provide another example, villagers in China confronted with economic opportunities from reforestation projects that promote animism as environmental ethic recognize that “this ideology is different from the local animistic ideas found in our own rites and sacrifices;” yet they will still join these projects and “talk in terms of animism as an ideology because this brings money to the village,” in turn “caricaturing themselves as the age-old forestry managers” while neo-animist ideology is assimilated by “especially the younger generations” (Katherine Swancutt, “The Art of Capture: Hidden Jokes and the Reinvention of Animistic Ontologies in Southwest China.” *Social Analysis* 60 no. 1, 87 and 75).

thentic or lumped together with “original” animism. We suggest a more nuanced reading of neo-animism as an epistemic device, or idea-tool, in indigenous struggles over land. Its difference from local animisms lies not so much in this functionality as both seek to practically organize humans and nonhumans to attain or maintain wellbeing. They differ, however, in their respective relation to modern environmentalism and its vision of the “environmental animist.” Coming to grips with neo-animism and local animisms alike thus calls for tracing their origins in the political and economic struggles within which indigenous communities and their advocates are practically embedded. Thus, while land conflicts are the material roots of neo-animism, its symbolism is rooted in both animist and naturalist ontologies (environmentalism being a naturalist ideology). Neo-animist politicization of animism entails a depoliticization akin to notions of political ontologies (2.1) because political-economic issues are translated into cultural-ontological terms. The activists’ argument is based on the assumption of radical cultural-ecological difference so that distinct animistic culture is maintained by maintaining traditional land tenure. That approach leads to the concept of a plural state (*negara majemuk*) common among indigenous activists in Indonesia, which challenges the sovereignty of the nation state as land should be in the hands of the indigenous.¹⁰⁸ Thus economic contradictions are addressed by fragmenting society and state under the banner of diversity, opposing capitalism to some sort of authentic, original, static inherence. If that approach might seem appealing to some anthropologists, it does not work without essentialization and construction of radical difference, potentially undermining prospects for common, progressive and equal citizenship. Difficult to attain from either side of the rift is thus animism’s involvement in “exclusion’s double edge” as expressed in the counter-ex-

108 Greg Acciaoli, “From Customary Law to Indigenous Sovereignty: Reconceptualizing Masyarakat Adat in Contemporary Indonesia,” in *The Revival of Tradition in Indonesian Politics: The Development of Adat from Colonialism to Indigenism*, edited by Jamie Davidson and David Henley (London: Routledge, 2007), 303-307; Derek Hall, Philip Hirsch and Tania Murray Li, *Powers of Exclusion: Land Dilemmas in Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011).

clusions of “indigenous territories” and the “underlying conundrum – that people want the right to exclude, but don’t want to be excluded.”¹⁰⁹

4 Discussion

An integrated view of sacrifice as “asymmetric exchange,” as discussed in 2.2, accounts best for our cases: rituals both to *phi mueang* and *penung-gu* are often motivated by economic concerns, such as extraction or land access, implying the unconditional submission to the tutelary spirit (with Arhem) to make it a profitable exchange (with Schlemmer). The ecological implications are rather obvious in our examples. More generally, Southeast Asian animism is marked by a duality of civilized and uncivilized space; while domestic animals attain a major ritual function as substitutes for humans in ritual transactions, wild animals are dismissed as sacrifice for not being “subjects in their own right” but “animals hunted for food.”¹¹⁰ This domestication prerogative seems to allow neither for a simple opposition of animism and naturalism, nor for the simple equation of animism and environmentalism. As idea-tool to attain well-being and prosperity, animism is therefore not completely at odds with resource extraction and land development; it mediates capitalization instead of merely representing some kind of “nonmodern” other.

Such “spirited ecologies” not just mirror but *imply* political hierarchies. Since spirits of the place are perceived in political-economic terms (e.g. in Lao *chao*, “master”, “owner”), the ritual relation is essentially a political relation between subject and ruler maintaining a given territory’s dynamism of life. Sahlins even suggests that, “[i]n conventional terms, it could justifiably be said that the spirits own the means of production” and that “access to ritual positions amounts to a certain control

109 Hall, Hirsch and Li, *Powers of Exclusion*, 188; also: Nancy Lee Peluso and Peter Vandergeest, “Genealogies of the Political Forest and Customary Rights in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand,” in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60 no.3 (2001), 761-812.

110 Århem, “Southeast-Asian Animism,” 281 and 299.

of ‘the means of production’.”¹¹¹ Prosperity is safeguarded by communal rituals, such as in Laos, the semi-annual “feeding of the village spirit” (*liang phi ban*) to which each household is required to contribute or otherwise group membership will be in doubt. This “collective sacrifice” to the entity, which controls “the natural ecological system that nurtures its members,”¹¹² is thus intrinsically political-ecological. In our Lao case, local elites in charge of communal wellbeing were most vocal, and outright angry, regarding the disruption that Christian converts allegedly bring to the dynamism of life in their locality, because their political power rests, partly at least, on such animist institutions. The fact that most Christians were kicked out suggests their reluctance to contribute to such festivities. Moreover – and this is where local animist politics links up with global preconceptions of the “environmental animist” – these apostates, as it were, become pre-destined scapegoats also when it comes to deforesting a sacred forest for valuable timber. The equation of animism and environmentalism by conservationists becomes a convenient political tool for diverting the responsibility for ecological degradation, while the wealth thereby amassed was most obvious among animist elites. This is despite the fact that Christians in Laos (just like Buddhists) do not necessarily stop being animist: Lord Jesus is often the most powerful spirit.¹¹³ If this *could principally* lead to Christians partaking in illicit timber trade, repression by animists makes them, from a practice viewpoint, rather unlikely to profit (more than animists) from deforesting land held sacred by the local majority. In turn, as should have become conceivable by now, animists may principally be just as able to deforest a sacred forest – without necessarily ceasing to be animist.

Our Indonesian case brought out clearly the ambivalent relation between local animisms and the neo-animism of indigenous activists. Of course, our whole argument questions the distinction between “nonmodernity” and “modernity” already in local animisms: to the degree that

111 Sahlins, “The Original Political Society,” 113 and 119.

112 Condominas, “Phiban Cults in Rural Laos,” 262 and 273.

113 Holt, *Spirits of the Place*, 237f.

these are productively involved in frontier processes they must be considered every bit as modern as the chainsaws used to extract valuable timber.¹¹⁴ In this vein, local animisms are just as political as their neo-animist revaluation. Yet, the ontologies of animism and neo-animism differ in that the latter fuses nonmodern and modern ontologies, referring at once to global concepts of Nature and Indigeneity as well as to the spirits of the place (*penunggu*) in order to organize resistance against plunder through a discourse of the environmental animist.

The mentioned casting of animism in terms of deep ecology is also highlighted in Nikolas Arhem's dissertation on Katu spirit forests in the context of "high modernist development" in Vietnam, which discusses at length commonalities between Katu ontologies, concepts of deep ecology and the Batesonian concept of mind, reading the movie *Avatar* as expression of animist ecology.¹¹⁵ Thus, in a sense, it is possible to regard neo-animism as a popularization of sorts of animism studies. The quasi-environmental element in animism, its *moral* ecology, gets exaggerated to animism's alleged harmony with the rest of ecosystems. The refashioning of animism as ticket in national and global environmental politics under the heading of indigeneity is thus neither a true reproduction of the traditional animism, nor is it simply its modern distortion.

In sum, a practice approach to animism enables attention to the political and ecological implications of rituals and, more generally, to the ways in which animism persists, even blossoms, in contexts of capitalist transformation. Sacrifices are part and parcel of accessing land and resources in Southeast Asia, be it for a swidden, a palm oil plot, or a hotel in the

114 Note here, too, McCann & Hsu's observation on the relation of disease and spirit forests in Northern Cambodia that, far from being at odds with one another, "the modern explanations [about diseases] proved the power and the reality of the spirit mountains to be true beyond a shadow of doubt." (Gregory McCann and Yi-Chung Hsu, "Haunted Headwaters: Ecotourism, Animism, and the Blurry Line between Science and Spirits." *SHS Web of Conferences* 12 (2014), 3).

115 Nikolas Arhem, *Forests, Spirits and High Modernist Development: A Study of Cosmology and Change among the Katuic Peoples in the Uplands of Laos and Vietnam* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2014).

capital city. Against any hypostasis of the “environmental animist” such an approach thus attends to the morality as well as to the detrimental potentials of animist ecologies. Not least, Frankfurt School’s pronounced anti-essentialism provides for a critical take on the ambivalence of counter-exclusions as effected by neo-animism’s recasting of local animisms: the emancipation connected to struggles for “indigenous territories” is bought with an essentialist “jargon of authenticity:”¹¹⁶ indigeneity as political strategy may be emancipatory to an extent; yet it also presents a powerful “sublimation of the brutal, barbaric lore whereby he who was there first has the greatest rights.”¹¹⁷

5 Outline of a political ecology of animism in Southeast Asia

It should by now be easy to see that a political-ecological approach to animism in Southeast Asia needs to leave behind the ideal-type schema of mere oppositions where political ecology is a priori the devalued other of animism, an unbearable naturalism. We thus take our stance not in ontologies but in social practice, i.e. the socially organized symbolic-material doing by living beings. From that perspective, ontological accounts of animism are what Bourdieu criticizes as synoptic theory that is blind to the logics of practice.¹¹⁸

Animism, in Southeast Asia as well as elsewhere, developed generally in pre-capitalist conditions, being integral to state ideologies and religions as well as to the moral economies of subsistence peasant communities. As aspects of moral economies, animisms reflected and mediated a form of economic existence that was precariously at the mercy of a “capricious nature,” which posed a constant existential threat due to limited technological means to control natural forces. Animism, in short, is historically a product of society being an “appendage” of nature.¹¹⁹

116 Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity* (London: Routledge, 2013).

117 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005), 155.

118 Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice*.

119 See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*

Spirits are part of subsistence struggles, and sacrifice is a survival tool. Relations to certain spirits, such as tutelary “spirit-masters” of localities, may thus be understood as intrinsically political-economic, such that the relation between humans and such “masters” is conceivable as a form of patron-client relation within a moral economy, in which powerful patrons are required to honor and safeguard subsistence and well-being in exchange for tribute.¹²⁰ Understanding animism as an element in the concrete and messy metabolic practice of human individuals and groups also seems better suited than onto-culturalist approaches to account for the fact that local explanations for particular aspects of certain animist attitudes vary depending on the person asked and the respective situation for ecologically detrimental potentials of animism.

The value of our incantation of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* for a political ecology of animism in Southeast Asia should be clear. First of all, the above considerations, “Eurocentric” and “evolutionist” as they may appear, allow for a way out of the epistemic-political trap of the environmental animist (Ch.3) and make understandable, for example, how a sacred spirit forest among the Katang people in Laos can become deforested without a necessary decline in spiritual fear. The dialectical relation of animism and economic instrumentality potentially fluidizes the way in which the former’s role in transition is conceptualized and comprehended, such as when tutelary spirit-masters are moved for the establishment of a palm oil plantation or other frontier investment projects. The transformation of a landscape from forests and swiddens to palm oil plantations displeases environmentalists and indigenous activists, and thus they find their own way of interpreting animism. Yet, the neo-animism of the indigenous activists in our example also aims to shape land tenure for the benefit of a certain people. Animism in rural Kalimantan, on the other hand, appears to be a pragmatic way of dealing with spirits:

(London: Penguin, 2009), 465; Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: NLB, 1971), 82.

120 James C. Scott, “Patron-Client Politics and Political Change in Southeast Asia,” in *The American Political Science Review* 66, no. 1 (1972), 91-113; Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*.

Rituals function as a mode of getting access to land and resources, be it for a swidden or a palm oil plot, or a mine. In short, while the ontological turn posits naturalism and animism as two radically different sets of ontologies, the *Dialectic* lets us see how both stand in a relation of difference and similarity: both are distinct yet related idea-tools for self-preservation. The animist mode of relating to nature is conditioned by economic insecurity and lack of self-determination in a global capitalist society.

That Southeast Asian animisms are part of a logic of nature appropriation – and thus not totally alien to the civilizing, expansive rationale of global capital – is already suggested by the fact that, for example in Laos, the wild is traditionally seen as a realm of mystical potency, which can be appropriated by humans.¹²¹ In Southeast Asian animism, not unlike in the naturalism of the West, a duality of civilized village space and wild forest leads to a domestication paradigm. In the asymmetrical ritual relation discussed in 2.2 we might see a regional version of the cunning survival move of throwing oneself away in order to preserve oneself via the substitution and gradation of the sacrifice, which seeks to make such a spiritual business deal a beneficial exchange.

We find an explanation for animism's persistence within the logic of capitalist socialization in the fact that the latter prolongs subsistence survival struggle and an alienation of social subjects from their means to autonomy. More specifically, the frontier type of capitalism appropriates work and resources cheaply¹²² only by outsourcing certain reproductive functions to un-capitalized traditional forms of social organization, such as healers, or moral-economic networks of mutual help partly maintained by ritual. In fact, economic security or gain (there might be an important difference here) is certainly a major motive behind animisms across the world. We could interpret it as a specific part of local knowl-

121 E.g. Andrew Turton, "Introduction to Civility and Savagery," in *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States*, edited by Andrew Turton (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000), 3-30; Sarinda Singh, *Natural Potency and Political Power: Forests and State Authority in Post-Socialist Laos* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012); Kleinod, "Social Ontologies as World-Making Projects."

122 Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*.

edge that is largely geared toward survival, albeit not necessarily due only to capricious nature, but to a capricious, abstract, unaccountable world market as well: animism is a function of being existentially at the mercy of someone or something. From a world-system or world-ecology perspective, regions like Kalimantan or Laos are part of resource frontiers where capital accumulation is secured via cheap appropriation, primarily of natural resources and, secondarily, of human labor power. This means, for example, forceful removal and dispossession of people (“animists”) to isolate resources for extraction, using cheaply paid labor to effect such extraction (by “animists”), a lack of public investment in education and healthcare, a double movement of legality and illegality to exclusivize resource access (“corruption”), etc. It is via marketization that many people in Laos and Kalimantan, rural or urban, are kept at the subsistence margin, caught in a context of primitive accumulation. Within this enclosure they are largely without individual control of their socio-economic fate. In this context, the persistence of animism as a survival tool is not very surprising if animism is seen as “being entirely dominated by the concern to ensure the success of production and reproduction, in a word, survival, [...] oriented towards the most dramatically practical, vital and urgent ends” in “an uncertain struggle against uncertainty.”¹²³ The persistence of magic as a weapon of the weak might be explained by the persistence of social conditions of socio-economic weakness – be it insecurity in the face of a capricious nature or regarding an abstract, yet equally capricious, world-market. Relatedly, according to Marx and Critical Theory, humans are alienated under capitalism, not in charge of their own lives and conditions, experiencing existence as blind fate. The Frankfurt School interpreted this in a Freudian way as a narcissistic wound so that narcissism describes the basic psychological make-up of individuals socialized in the core zones of capitalization. We might hypothesize that animism may be or becomes an alternative way of psychologically compensating for the disempowerment of the individual in peripheral zones of appropriation and plunder: the “animation

123 Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice*.

of things with souls” not only reflects this disempowerment but also a quest for self-empowerment via ritual outwittings of the spirits.

6 Conclusion: Animism re-revisited

An integration of Southeast Asian animism into a political-ecological approach should examine animism as an aspect of social practice, since that is where politics and ecology are situated, not in ontologies. To advance a political ecology of animism in Southeast Asia, we revisited relevant sections of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to suggest the thought-image of an outwitting of the spirits in order to secure survival in “an uncertain struggle against uncertainty” at the capitalist resource frontier.

Certainly, the concept of indigenous peoples might go some way with regard to practical resistance to capitalist appropriation. But in their creating exclusive “ethno-territories”¹²⁴ such strategic essentialisms endow us with a double-edged sword, at least from the emancipatory perspective that seems to be the intention of political ecologists as well as political ontologists. As we have argued, however, the ontological optic takes synoptic ideal-types, or language games, for the whole practical reality.¹²⁵ In that picture, an argument like ours can only come across, and be consequently refuted, as a rationalistic language game that is a priori inadequate to the supposed subject matter. We believe that such a conceptual grid is hardly enable the integration of political ecology and animism.

From our perspective at least, animism makes sense only as part of a pragmatic muddling through of actual human beings, rather than as some abstract meaning system (or ontology, cosmology, etc.) of which individuals are mere representatives. Further, as part of Southeast Asian pragmatism, animism cannot be in an a priori fashion equated with (quasi-)environmentalism: although belief in spirits or the personality of non-humans might in certain contexts play out as environmentally conducive, in other contexts the opposite might be the case. In fact, animism’s

124 Hall, Hirsch and Li, *Powers of Exclusion*, 175.

125 See Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Reflexive Anthropologie*, 182f.

pragmatism may involve animists deforesting a sacred forest without necessarily ceasing to be animist. Similarly, animism might be discouraged in certain constellations, e.g. in cash crop livelihoods, but encouraged in others.

If it can be said that the specific form of animism varies with the economic context, can we expect the emergence of new types of animism in frontier regions where the relation between wage labor and capital (e.g. ownership of land) is increasingly established? Is there an animism specific to this process of capitalization, urbanization and increasing transformation of peasants into “entrepreneurial farmers”? Michael Taussig has convincingly argued with regard to colonial mining in Bolivia that ritual transformation goes along with the introduction of capitalism in the following way:

Whereas the mountain spirits presided over a reciprocating system that ensures redistribution and a basic minimum of social insurance, the more abstract Christian deity was part of the ritual regulation and codification of unequal exchange [...]. Alienability and profitability take over, and the commodity rises transcendent, freed from the strictures that in a use-value economy bind goods to people, ritual and cosmology. As a liberated object, the commodity stands over its subjects, evolving its own rites and its own cosmology. [...] the apotheosis of commodities engenders the apotheosis of evil in the fetish of the spirit owner of the mine. With this reaction to capitalist development, indigenous iconography and ritual portray the human significance of market exchange as an evil distortion of gift exchange and not as a self-evident law of nature [...].¹²⁶

If the resource frontiers of Laos and Indonesia fundamentally refashion symbolic and material relations with the environment, how can we expect hierarchical animism to develop? Will it represent a similar comment on market exchange as evil distortion or even be able to embrace and legitimate these destructive tendencies, as we have suggested possible? With this paper, we sought to encourage further, more systematic and grounded inquiries into a political ecology of animism in Southeast Asia.

126 Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*, 213.

This paper did not seek to establish a mere counter-narrative to the “environmental animist,” or to argue that animism and capitalism go together smoothly all the time. Animist moral ecology may work well, environmentally speaking, in some contexts and detrimentally in others. How practices will exactly play out is therefore an empirical matter rather than deducible from fixations such as the “environmental animist.” We argued that animism should be seen as an idea-tool in the pragmatic muddling-through of individuals and collectives making a living on the frontier. Put differently, animism is essentially a way of *dealing with* concrete political-ecological conditions, spirits included.

The course of our argument leads us to ask: What if animist attitudes are not only found in the “exotic” places of the global peripheries but also in the capitalist centers of “the West?” Indeed, if, as Bird-David argued in her seminal article on the Nayaka, “cutting trees into parts” epitomizes modernism and “talking with trees” epitomizes animism,¹²⁷ then we are left to wonder not only how Nayaka (or Amerindians, Katu, Rmeet...) build their houses, but also where this leaves post-material tree-huggers, or just passionate gardeners and hikers. We further observe that neo-animism “ontologizes” (and idealizes) local animisms in political discourse very much like the anthropology of ontologies does in academic discourse. Thus, in a sense, neo-animism can be seen as a popularization of ontological arguments and, in turn, the ontological turn can be seen as academic neo-animism.¹²⁸ Our proposed take on animism would thus ask for how rather “modernist” concerns with the “wood-wide web” and *The Hidden Life of Trees*¹²⁹ are expressive of (neo-)animist thinking, and what this may tell us, for better or worse, about human-nonhuman

127 Nurit Bird-David, “‘Animism’ Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology,” *Current Anthropology* 40 no. S1 (1999), 67-91.

128 As might be gauged from the outlook of Latour’s philosophy which ascribes agency to matter and explicitly refuses to draw the “modernist” lines and hierarchies.

129 Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate – Discoveries from a Secret World* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2016).

relations that are more appropriate in times of socio-ecological disaster. Thus, if the initial observation is correct that political ecology and ontology share a concern for the devastating implications of capitalism, both might be joining hands on reflexive-materialist praxeological grounds to more fully appreciate the potentials of animist ecologies for addressing the most pressing issues of our times.

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Towards a New Interpretation of Horkheimer's Notions of Science and Technique in the Context of his Critique to Positivism

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Abstract: This paper discusses scholarly interpretations according to which in 1937 a radical shift in Horkheimer's thought can be observed. This shift consists of a growing mistrust in science and technology, and a pessimistic view concerning the possibilities of social transformation. Our purpose is to refute this interpretation and to defend the hypothesis of absence of a negative perspective of the role of science and technology in that period. We aim to contrast the criticism of the position of positivism in relation to science and technology and the one defended by Horkheimer. For this purpose, we will examine a set of Horkheimer's texts from the forties. We focus on the topics related to his stance on science and its demarcation from metaphysics, the role of science and technology in capitalist society, and the possibility of scientific progress and social transformation. In relation to the last topic, we argue that even if Horkheimer has always been faithful to a social transformative goal, he does not defend this goal from a blindly optimistic perspective. We will also consider the role of technology in Horkheimer's thought regarding the social task of critical theory. In this sense, we will point out that Horkheimer's view of science should be interpreted as neither negativist nor hopeless but must be considered in light of a new position regarding the relationship between the human being and nature. The last part of the article intends to be a contribution upholding the thesis that the notion of reason emerging from Horkheimer's analysis is linked to a new idea of science based on a relation of non-domination of nature.

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1. Introduction

Scholarly works which focus on Horkheimer's texts from the thirties and forties³ usually assert that a radical shift in his thought can be observed. This shift consists of a growing mistrust in science and technology, and a pessimistic view concerning the possibilities of social transformation. This pessimism would also extend among other authors of the first generation of the *Institut*. The interpretation is usually approached without the consideration of other texts written by Horkheimer, particularly those written before 1937. The lack of a comprehensive approach to Horkheimer's writings from the early 1930s leads scholars to think that it is in 1937 – with the articles “The Latest Attack on Metaphysics”⁴ and “Traditional and Critical Theory”⁵ – that a radical change took place regarding what was expressed in “The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research”⁶, in which Horkheimer appreciated the importance of empirical methods in social research.

In order to criticise the interpretation mentioned, our strategy will begin (part 2) with an analysis of Horkheimer's critique against positivism in his early texts (from 1931 to 1937). We will focus on the topics related to his stance on science and its demarcation from metaphysics, the role of science and technology in capitalist society, and the possibility of scientific progress and social transformation. Our purpose is to contrast the

3 For example, Postone in *Time, Labor and Social Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and Habermas in “Remarks on the Development of Horkheimer's Work” included in Seyla Benhabib, Wolfgang Bonss and John McCole (eds.) *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives* (MIT Press, 1993).

4 Max Horkheimer, “The Latest Attack on Metaphysics”, in *Critical Theory. Selected Essays*, Max Horkheimer. (New York: Continuum, 2002) 132–187.

5 Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory”, in *Critical Theory. Selected Essays*, Max Horkheimer. (New York: Continuum, 2002) pp. 188–243.

6 Max Horkheimer, “The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research” in M. Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Sciences*. (Massachusetts: MIT Press), 1993, pp. 1–14.

criticism of the position of positivism in relation to science and technology and the position of Horkheimer himself.

For this purpose, we will examine (part 3) a set of Horkheimer's texts from the forties (from 1940 to 1947) to defend the hypothesis of absence of a pessimistic perspective of the role of science and technology in that period. We will thus disavow the assertion that a radical change towards these topics occurred in Horkheimer's thought after 1937.

We argue that even if Horkheimer has always been faithful to a social transformative goal, he does not defend this goal from a blindly optimistic perspective. Although he sees progress of knowledge as important and necessary for the purpose of social transformation (which in this aspect is not too different from the positivist conception), he understands that science alone cannot guide that change without a supplement of critical philosophy.

Linking science and social transformation (part 4) we will also consider the role of technology in Horkheimer's perspective regarding the social task of critical theory. In this sense, we will point out that Horkheimer's view of science should be interpreted as neither negativist nor hopeless but must be considered in light of a new position regarding the relationship between the human being and nature (in the sense that the concept also includes the human himself). This perspective enables us to reinterpret the particular role of technology regarding social transformation.

Finally, we will point out that, in opposition to the interpretation which evaluates Horkheimer's view on the role of science and technology as pessimistic, a historical revision of Horkheimer's stance towards science and its role in capitalist societies will reveal which aspects of that comprehension are actually new and can contribute to a contemporary approach to these themes. The last part of the present article intends to be a contribution upholding the thesis that the notion of reason emerging from Horkheimer's analysis is related to a new idea of science based on a relation of non-domination of nature. This perspective would be contrary to an interpretation of a completely negative view of the role of science and technology in what Horkheimer calls the "traditional" interpretation.

2. Horkheimer: the critique of positivism and the configuration of his own position towards science

2.1 *Positivism, empiricism and logicism.*

Horkheimer's interpretation and its implications

In "The present situation of social philosophy and the tasks of an institute for social research", the author holds the thesis that social investigation was characterised at that moment by a cleavage between philosophical and positivist methods of research. According to Horkheimer, positivism represented individualistic tendencies, distinctive of contemporary European capitalist societies which strove for a close collaboration between science, technology, and industrial production, in order to attain constant, unending progress.

In opposition to this positivist view, Horkheimer estimated that the recovered basis of the Hegelian system of thought could establish a new social philosophy, one which would enrich empirical investigations without setting aside the role of subjectivity in the process of constituting knowledge. Horkheimer thus claims that "social philosophy in particular, was ever more urgently called to carry out the new the exalted role ascribed to it by Hegel. And social philosophy heeded this call."⁷

According to his view, positivism proposes a fragmented inquiry which only approaches facts from a naturalistic perspective and is unable to transcend mere facticity. In opposition to this absolutisation of the given, Horkheimer estimates that philosophy considers facts in relation to "ideas, essences, totalities, independent spheres of objective spirit, unities of meaning, "national characters", etc., which it considers equally foundational indeed, "more authentic" elements of being."⁸ Horkheimer's proposal seeks to develop a theory which does not judge

7 Horkheimer, "The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research", p.6.

8 Horkheimer, "The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research", p.7.

these two perspectives as mutually contradictory but rather a theory that can profit from the progress of the sciences and integrate empirical research in view of the whole.

Horkheimer's texts from 1937 show some affinity regarding the critique of the empiricist model of 20th century positivism. Horkheimer traces the origins of present-day positivism to Humean sceptical empiricism on the one hand, and to Leibnizian rationalised logic on the other.⁹ He also states that "Insofar as this traditional conception of theory shows a tendency, it is towards a purely mathematical system of symbols."¹⁰

Furthermore, Horkheimer repeatedly points to empirical observation, a distinctive characteristic of the positivist conception, which is treated as the sole way to acquire and justify scientific knowledge. In "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics" he examines the empirical character of the positivist conception of science – and later in the same text, with respect to logicist or rationalist aspects of scientific research – establishing some similarities and differences with regard to modern empiricism. What is common to both positivism and empiricism is the idea that "all knowledge about objects derives from facts of sense experience."¹¹ But unlike Locke's and Hume's empiricism, Horkheimer states that contemporary positivism has the singularity of not acknowledging the relationship between facts and the knowing subject through sensorial impression, but through the statement of that impression, so that science and consequently scientific philosophy have therefore to deal with the given world only in the form of sentences about it. (...) He [the scientist] reckons solely with what has been duly recorded in a protocol.¹²

According to the *Institut's* director, although "their [Locke and Hume's] philosophy contains at least this dynamic element – the relation to a knowing subject,"¹³ in modern empiricism "the individual was

9 Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics", p.138.

10 Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics", p.190.

11 Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics", p.141.

12 Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics", p.142.

13 Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics", p.142.

shown that physics and all the other sciences were nothing but the condensed expression, the purified form of his own everyday experiences."¹⁴ Without that dynamic dimension, the positivist conception of science operates solely on an abstract form of knowledge, detached from experience, from which it is extremely hard to determine the importance knowledge has for people's lives. In this sense, Horkheimer claims that theory should recover a more immediate connection with facts. Regarding this, Horkheimer takes into account what from a positivist conception appears to be a strategy for preserving theory from the persistence in an abstract conception detached from reality: "empiricism, it is true, untiringly avows its willingness to set aside any conviction if new evidence should prove it false."¹⁵ Nevertheless, Horkheimer considers that claim insufficient, because the sort of evidence positivism is willing to admit in order to question scientific hypotheses must itself satisfy positivist criteria of scientificity. The demand to solely take into account scientific criteria leads, according to Horkheimer, to a view in which "the structure of knowledge and consequently of reality – as far as the latter can be known – is as rigid for him as it is for any dogmatist."¹⁶ As he reconstructs the rationalist or logical root of contemporary positivism, Horkheimer reaches a conclusion similar to the one addressed above, although from another path. According to him, in order to gain universality and precision, positivism operates with concepts following the idea that there are actually pure forms, completely lacking content. Horkheimer goes against this conception of formal logic, considering it illusory that a radical separation could be made between form and content.¹⁷ He understands that such a separation is only possible on the basis of extra-logical considerations which, in the end, drive logic away from the formalism in which it believes it operates.¹⁸

14 Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics", p.141.

15 Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics", p.144.

16 Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics", p.146.

17 Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics", p.169.

18 Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics", p.169.

But a mere rejection of science does not follow from Horkheimer's critical observations. What the philosopher sees as problematic about this view is that contemporary positivism proceeds as though it ignored that such a distinction requires extra-logical considerations, which in the end inevitably leads it to adopt a certain philosophical position. For example, Horkheimer accuses positivism of holding a naïve notion of logic, because it is not aware of the material significance the postulation of pure forms acquires, therefore keeping a distance from "the material logic of Aristotle and Hegel which it so bitterly attacks."¹⁹ Horkheimer regards Aristotelian and Hegelian logics as much more efficient than positivism in maintaining an anti-metaphysical point of view, as they do not ignore their dependence on extra-logical motives.

2.2 Positivism, objectivism, and value neutrality

According to Horkheimer, positivism stands for a model of scientific objectivity which hides the constitutive role of subjective and socio-historical factors regarding scientific knowledge. One of the aspects of the critique of the model characterised as "traditional theory" has to do with its understanding of the absolute objectivity of knowledge. According to this, the sensitive world appears to the researcher as a compendium of external facts which have to be organised without any mediation of interpretation or value judgments, since these are considered subjective elements. In opposition to this idea, Horkheimer conceives "Critical Theory" as an heir of the critical tradition inaugurated by Kant, according to which knowledge is inseparable from the active participation of the subject. Opposing the "idolatry of facts", the critical perspective sees events not just as simple given data, but also as a product of human activity. Following Hegel and Marx, Horkheimer observes that neither pure forms of perception nor that which is perceived is natural, but rather historical, constituted by human activity.²⁰

19 Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics", p.172.

20 Leyva Gustavo and Miria Mesquita Sampaio de Madureir. "Teoría Crítica: el indisoluble vínculo entre la teoría social y la crítica normativa", in Gustavo Leyva and Enrique de la Garza Toledo (eds.) *Tratado de metodología de las*

Another aspect which Horkheimer addresses in his critique is that “the traditional idea of theory is based on scientific activity as carried on within the division of labour at a particular stage in the latter’s development”,²¹ but does not acknowledge its own socio-cultural background. Once again, we can see that Horkheimer does not disregard science in general, but questions what he considers a biased conception of scientific activity. In contrast to the positivist’s understanding of theory, the critique addresses the role of the researcher and its active unfolding:

the scholarly specialist ‘as’ scientist regards social reality and its products as extrinsic to him, and ‘as’ citizen exercises his interest in them through political articles, membership in political parties or social service organizations, and participation in elections.²²

Horkheimer’s statement continues as follows: “critical thinking, on the contrary, is motivated today by the effort really to transcend the tension.”²³

Addressing this purpose as the *telos* of the theory, the traditional scientist is seen as a contributor in the unending reproduction of the present form of society, since neither his descriptive and explanatory interest nor his acritical analysis of given categories could lead towards social change. Against these limitations, Horkheimer expresses the bound of critical theory to social transformation when he argues:

the concerns of critical thought, too, are those of most men, but they are not recognized to be such. The concepts which emerge under its influence are critical of the present. The Marxist categories of class, exploitation, surplus value, profit, pauperization, and breakdown are elements in a conceptual whole, and the meaning of this whole is to be sought not in the preservation of contemporary society but in its transformation into the right kind of society.²⁴

ciencias sociales: perspectivas actuales. (México: Fondo de cultura económica, 2012), p.37.

21 Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory “, p.197.

22 Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory “, p.209.

23 Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory “, p.210.

24 Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory “, p.218.

From Horkheimer's position, as 20th century positivism seeks to erase every subject-related element from theory, the link between knowledge and experience is lost. He also interprets this from that particular perspective

science is no more than a system for the arrangement and rearrangement of facts, and it matters not what facts are selected from the infinite number that present themselves. (...) This process, which was previously identified with the activity of the understanding, is unconnected with any activity which could react on it and thereby invest it with direction and meaning. (...) There is no mode of thought adapted to the methods and results of science and entwined with definite interests which may criticize the conceptual forms and structural pattern of science, although it is dependent on them.²⁵

Moving closer to an epistemological understanding of the distinction between materialism and positivism, in 1935 Horkheimer had already arrived at the reasoning, which he would further develop later in 1937, about the neutrality of values in scientific investigation: "the unconditional duty of science toward truth and its alleged freedom from values, which of course play an immense role in the positivism of the present age, are irreconcilable."²⁶

Horkheimer also takes distance from the positivist concept of truth. In "On the problem of truth", he states that this view determines that "the truth of theories is decided by what one accomplishes with them."²⁷ This understanding of truth "corresponds to limitless trust in the existing world".²⁸ For this reason, even if some supporters of the positivist understanding of science – such as Neurath – may intend to orient theory towards emancipatory ends, they cannot – as Horkheimer sees it – help falling into a contradiction caused by their adoption of a perspective which is

25 Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics", p.145.

26 Max Horkheimer, "Remarks on Philosophical Anthropology" in Max Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Sciences*. (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993) p.158.

27 Horkheimer, "On the Problem of Truth", p.195.

28 Horkheimer, "On the Problem of Truth", p.196.

not per se revolutionary; if the revolutionary aims do not belong to theory itself, but should be added to it, as an interest coming from elsewhere, the possibility of actually accomplishing that end is dependent on mere luck.

2.3 Positivism. Scientific knowledge and metaphysics

Horkheimer (1931), claims that positivism intends to eradicate metaphysics from science; nevertheless, he says it is necessary for empirical sciences to undertake an investigation in which philosophy is involved.:

This conception according to which the individual researcher must view philosophy as a perhaps pleasant but scientifically fruitless enterprise (because not subject to experimental control), while philosophers, by contrast, are emancipated from the individual researcher because they think they cannot wait for the latter before announcing their wide-ranging conclusions is currently being supplanted by the idea of a continuous, dialectical penetration and development of philosophical theory and specialized scientific praxis.²⁹

The same idea appears in later articles. According to Horkheimer, the typical inflexibility of the positivist conception lies in that it believes itself to be sufficient to judge theories as metaphysical and objects as relevant or irrelevant for scientific analysis. Behaving this way, the positivist conception demarcates the field of validity of scientific investigation and decides to be indifferent to everything which cannot be studied by the usual methods. Horkheimer argues that the weakness of positivism lies in its inability to achieve a competent critique of what it considers archaic forms of thought:

not only logistic but every other theory lacks the ability to overthrow the old philosophy, no matter how thorough its acquaintance with the traditions combated. Idealistic philosophy or metaphysics cannot be 'shaken to its foundation' by mere theoretical rejection.³⁰

Horkheimer holds that, by rejecting every other form of reasoning

²⁹ Horkheimer, "The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research", p.9.

³⁰ Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics", p.178.

which does not coincide with scientific criteria, the positivists "are opposed to thought, whether it tend forward with reason, or backward with metaphysics."³¹ Although Horkheimer's position can be traced throughout his whole work, his rejection of metaphysics is especially clear in the last text cited, evidencing that, even though he stands against positivism, he is not willing to defend a metaphysical perspective. He also points out that logical empiricism and his own position can be coincident with respect to the negative valuation they both have of metaphysics, but he also critiques modern positivism as being far from the transformative goals of science shared by nineteenth-century positivists. Once again, the philosopher expresses his commitment towards a science that does not sacrifice the idea of social transformation. According to Horkheimer, positivism does not only – and justly – confront metaphysics, but it also unjustly characterises other theoretical points of view as "metaphysical" simply because they do not coincide with the positivist concept of science.

Horkheimer draws attention to the fact that positivist opposition to every other point of view betrays positivism's own emancipatory aims. Particularly, its critique of metaphysics does not allow positivism to elaborate a critical reflection through which to really understand and supersede it. By so doing, contemporary positivism allows metaphysics not only to stay untouched, but also to keep developing and gaining increasingly more power – most of all in those domains which are not of interest to a scientific approach, resulting in an important influence of metaphysics in political and social fields. This is the reason why Horkheimer refers to positivism as "the accredited science, the given structure and methods of which are reconciled to existing conditions,"³² through which knowledge participates "passively in the maintenance of universal injustice."³³ Horkheimer's insistence on what he conceives as the passiveness of positivism shows that he is not willing to relinquish science's emancipatory ends.

31 Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics", p.186.

32 Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics", p.144.

33 Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics", p.151.

2.4 Becoming metaphysical through antimetaphysics

Horkheimer observes that the distinction between materialism and positivism lies firstly in the separation between essence and phenomenon, and secondly in the way they relate to the idea of essence: "Positivism as such, however, is proud of the fact that it is not concerned with the 'nature' of things but only with appearances and thus with what things actually offer to us of themselves."³⁴ To illustrate the positivist point of view, Horkheimer quotes Auguste Comte, Henri Poincaré and John Stuart Mill and arrives at the conclusion that positivism "reduces all possible knowledge to a collection of external data."³⁵

He accuses positivism of holding a metaphysical conception. For example, when he states that in the pretension of gaining knowledge of the essences, "nonpositivist metaphysics must exaggerate its own knowledge,"³⁶ he slips in the idea that there is another sort of metaphysics, namely, a positivist one. If positivism falls into a metaphysical position, even against its own ideals, it is due to its disregard for the fact that a contradiction with such a position underlies the positivist prudence of attaining solely to the study of phenomena, since it presupposes – metaphysically – that such thing as a difference between essence and phenomena exists, and also that it is possible to characterise reality solely as phenomena.³⁷

Many consequences follow from positivism's metaphysical position. One of them is that positivism tends to be "more impartial and more tolerant"³⁸ than other points of view towards the fact that there are certain things that cannot be known. Horkheimer thus indicates that "positivism

34 Max Horkheimer, "Materialism and Metaphysics" In Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory Selected Essays* (Continuum: New York, 2002), p.37.

35 Horkheimer, "Materialism and Metaphysics", p.38.

36 Horkheimer, "Materialism and Metaphysics", p.38.

37 Horkheimer, "Materialism and Metaphysics", p.38.

38 Horkheimer, "Materialism and Metaphysics", p.39.

has knowingly made its peace with superstition,"³⁹ not just because it assumes a metaphysical position in pointing to essences as an inaccessible realm, but also because it concedes total freedom to metaphysical and religious thought to develop where science has no interest at all. Hence, a positivist notion of science allows metaphysics to grow stronger where science dares not enter, and finally allows scientists to adopt a religious or metaphysical belief about certain topics.

Another consequence of this positivism's undercover metaphysics is the belief in the existence of abstract conceptual entities. Under this construct, Horkheimer relates contemporary positivism to Bergson's intuitionist metaphysics.⁴⁰ He points out that, in regard to this belief, positivism differs from materialism:

positivism is really much closer to a metaphysics of intuition than to materialism, although it wrongly tries to couple the two. (...) positivism and metaphysics are simply two different phases of one philosophy which downgrades natural knowledge and hypostatizes abstract conceptual structures.⁴¹

3. Horkheimer: Science and social transformation

3.1 Anti-scientism, but not anti-science

It is important to point out that Horkheimer neither defends metaphysics, nor stands for a non-scientific perspective. This double rejection is articulated in the last passages of "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics". On the one hand, metaphysics appears as a source of vain hopes because it attempts to give certainty to a state of affairs which is scientifically unverifiable, while on the other hand, Horkheimer states that "it is also true that science becomes naïvely metaphysical when it takes itself to be the knowledge and the theory,"⁴² meaning that science makes an import-

39 Horkheimer, "Materialism and Metaphysics", p.39.

40 Horkheimer, "Materialism and Metaphysics", p.40.

41 Horkheimer, "Materialism and Metaphysics", p.40.

42 Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics", p.183.

ant mistake when it disregards non-scientific forms of thought, including those which could adopt a critical attitude towards science.

The dependence of critical theory on scientific progress, which had been mentioned in the most programmatic texts Horkheimer wrote in the early 1930s, becomes evident once more when he affirms: “it is true that any position which is manifestly irreconcilable with definite scientific views must be considered false” and “even constructive thought”, which differs from “absolute metaphysical intuition” because it does not underestimate science, “must get much of its material from the special sciences.”⁴³ Critical theory articulates the results from various scientific disciplines in view of the totality in order to approach a particular issue, which – according to Horkheimer – enables a more positive connection with science than that achieved by positivist notions of science.

Before proceeding, we would like to stress that social change is a goal for critical theory as well as for many positivist philosophers. The key to grasping the big difference between these two traditions lies in the way in which each of them understands the nexus between science and social transformation. While positivism sees the sole increase of knowledge as favourable for the establishment of more equitable politics, Horkheimer seeks a transformation of both politics and science in order to change society. This last point will be the focus of the next section.

3.2 The transformative role of science. Limits of contemporary conceptions

As we have already observed, both of Horkheimer’s texts written in 1937 problematise the positivist demand for neutrality of values, from an analysis of the role of interests in social research: “there is likewise no theory of society, even that of the sociologists concerned with general laws, that does not contain political motivations.”⁴⁴ Insofar as no theory can develop in the absence of interests, Horkheimer urges the scientist to be aware of the value content and meaning of science, and to adopt a critical position with regard to it.

43 Horkheimer, “The Latest Attack on Metaphysics”, p.183.

44 Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory”, p.222.

Horkheimer reckons that positivism's motivation to defend the employment of empirical and logical methods lies in the relation it maintains with technological and scientific progress. But Horkheimer argues from his practical and political interest that the naïve optimism of positivist positions can only lead to the perpetuation of what is already given. According to Horkheimer, positivism "assigns supreme intellectual authority to the accredited science, the given structure and methods of which are reconciled to existing conditions."⁴⁵ The problem is that one of the more serious consequences that follow from positivist optimism is the lack of tools to distinguish the dangerous consequences that constant scientific progress can have in the context of capitalist society. According to Horkheimer, science is led by instrumental rationality and by bourgeois rationality, based on the idea of domination as the basic relation between subject and object.

Positivist optimism leads not only towards the perpetuation of the use of the current methods of domination, but also to the constant attempt to expand them in as many realms as possible. In this sense, Horkheimer questions the ideal of unified science, as well as he reckons that it claims to achieve unity through a language purified of all subjective and ideological aspects, guaranteeing science's empirical objectiveness. Here, Horkheimer's epistemological argument carries an ethical-political interest towards science's emancipatory possibilities: "the naïve harmonistic belief which underlies his ideal conception of the unity of science and, in the last analysis, the entire system of modern empiricism, belongs to the passing world of liberalism."⁴⁶ In Horkheimer's view, logical empiricism builds an interpretation of science and of its social role which contributes to the mere acceptance of the status quo, perpetuating existing social injustice:

If science as a whole follows the lead of empiricism and the intellect renounces its insistent and confident probing of the tangled brush of observations in order to unearth more about

45 Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics", p.144.

46 Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics", p.147.

the world than even our well-meaning daily press, it will be participating passively in the maintenance of universal injustice.⁴⁷

What follows from this argumentation is that Horkheimer evaluates that positivism cannot in and of itself become the motor of social transformation which will actually challenge oppression and social injustice. In contrast, in Horkheimer's thought it must acquire a transformative role.

3.3 *Critical Theory and social transformation*

As we have remarked, Horkheimer's interpretation of science and its nexus with social transformation differs radically from the way positivism understands it. Horkheimer observes that "the defense of science against theology by means of epistemological and logical argument was a progressive movement in the seventeenth century,"⁴⁸ but the current persistence of the very same attitude, as if the most substantial issue continued to be the struggle between science and metaphysics, is nowadays absurd. Horkheimer acknowledges that, as scientific progress was once tied to the promotion of the bourgeoisie as a ruling class, it performed an actual emancipatory function in the modern era. However, once the bourgeoisie succeeded in becoming a ruling social class, thus establishing a new social structure, its emancipatory function ended, and the settlement of scientific knowledge no longer focused on liberating those who suffered, but on maintaining the new power structures. In "Beginnings of the bourgeois philosophy of history" he affirms: "In its origins, bourgeois science is inextricably linked to the development of technology and industry, and cannot be understood apart from bourgeois society's domination of nature."⁴⁹ He argues that at the beginning of the bourgeois era, the direction taken towards a form of scientific investigation that was unrelated to social or religious subjects constituted a moment in the lib-

47 Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics", p.149.

48 Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics", p.186.

49 Max Horkheimer, "Beginnings of the Bourgeois Philosophy of History" in Max Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Sciences* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 316.

eration from earlier theological tutelage of thought. The transformation of the social structure made the rational relation to production – in every aspect of life, in science as well as in agriculture and industry – become retrogressive and reactionary. This abstraction and apparent independence of the scientific sphere developed into a mass of individual empirical research projects, detached from each other, which lacked conceptual and categorical theory and praxis.

If the detachment of scientific investigation from socially relevant affairs was – from Horkheimer's perspective – rational in the context of the bourgeois struggle against feudalism, it was because it made it possible to grasp the possibility of successful science that was not accountable to religious thought. But Horkheimer holds that this very same scientific attitude became conservative the moment theological tutelage of thought was overcome. Once the bourgeoisie has established itself as a ruling social class, the development of a scientific form of research which neglects its nexus to the social whole is no longer revolutionary.

Horkheimer claims that, as a consequence of the above, reason has become a mere instrument in contemporary society, and critical and reflexive thought that aims to transcend utility is therefore condemned as superstitious. Given that there is practically no more thought than that oriented towards usefulness, ideas are treated as if they were mere things or even machines, which makes them incapable of producing anything new, not governed by the dominant way of reasoning.

Horkheimer argues that the scientific requirement to uphold technical efficiency as the supreme value is the mechanism through which instrumental rationality pursues to perpetuate the established order, perpetuating a blind technical development towards social oppression and explosion. He considers that if science continues to develop in this sense, then technical progress cannot be an index for the progress of humanity, but rather of barbarism.

Apart from stating that "it is not technology or the motive of self-preservation that in itself accounts for the decline of the individual,"⁵⁰ but the way in which it develops in present society, Horkheimer also affirms

50 Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*. (New York: Continuum, 2004), p.103.

we are the heirs, for better or worse, of the Enlightenment and technological progress. To oppose these by regressing to more primitive stages does not alleviate the permanent crisis they have brought about. (...) The sole way of assisting nature is to unshackle its seeming opposite, independent thought.⁵¹

We are now able to note the similarities to the arguments used in reference to positivism's critique of metaphysics. The philosopher understands that the broadening of knowledge, in the way it has occurred since the beginning of the modern era, cannot contribute in the present to anything other than the reinforcement of already existing oppressive societies. Nevertheless, total neglect of the positive role of science and its potential importance in a new and more just social configuration would likewise be inhuman. He also admits that while the support of metaphysics helped to maintain feudal society, the refusal to approach scientific and metaphysical perspectives does not contribute to altering archaic forms of knowledge.

If current social injustice is not caused by science and technology themselves, but by the way in which they are developed today, it is possible to foresee from Horkheimer's perspective that a transformation in the habitual form in which scientific research takes place in the context of capitalist society might contribute to ending social exploitation.

4. Science. The domination of nature and the domination of men by men

As stated above, in *Eclipse of Reason*, Horkheimer considers the problem of the exploitation of nature to be inseparable from the problem of the domination of nature, as it is exercised in the contemporary model of science. It was this particular idea that led Moishe Postone⁵² to observe a possible shift in Horkheimer's thought, from an interest in social oppression to a concern about the domination of nature. Following Postone, this shift might have been responsible for a distancing from the Marxism

51 Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p.86.

52 Moishe Postone, cited above.

that had characterised Horkheimer's earlier work. Nonetheless, as many other authors have pointed out – for example, Marcuse⁵³ – the problem regarding the exploitation of nature is inseparable from that of social exploitation in the context of Horkheimer's thought. In its attempt to dominate nature, science needs to understand nature as something distinct from the human being – that is to say, as an object that differs from a subject. This ever-increasing differentiation between human beings and nature – which in the work written with Adorno⁵⁴ was conceptualised in terms of *disenchantment of the world* – implies a denaturalisation of what is human. This denaturalisation is “built not only on the repression of drives, but also on the repression of ‘inner nature’ – or human sensuousness – and ‘outer nature’ – or the natural world and all its infinitely varied sentient and insentient constituents.”⁵⁵ Furthermore, the expansion of scientific rationality, based on the domination of nature, not only results in degrading what is human through the domination of the self, it also tends to operate a transformation of the subject towards a leader:

The principle of domination, based originally on brute force, acquired in the course of time a more spiritual character. The inner voice took the place of the master in issuing commands. The history of Western Civilization could be written in terms of the growth of the ego (...). The ego within each subject became the embodiment of the leader.⁵⁶

Because nature is not just something that surrounds the human being, it also constitutes the human being itself; expanded domination of nature leads to human beings being dominated by other humans. This means that each subject becomes the object of oppression, while at the same time developing characteristics of leadership. As it arises unexpectedly

53 Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (London: Routledge, 2002).

54 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (California: Stanford University Press, 2002).

55 Sapporah Weisberg, “Animal Repression: Specism as Pathology”, in John Sabonmatsu, *Critical Theory and Animal Liberation*. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), p. 168.

56 Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p.72.

from the increasing expansion of modern science, self-domination is a repressive, i.e., irrational, consequence that follows from the ever-expansive domination of nature. Nonetheless, the nexus that Horkheimer establishes between the domination of nature and the repressive domination of human beings should be not interpreted as an aversion to science in general or as a pessimistic view of emancipatory aims.

To achieve a better comprehension of this particular theme in Horkheimer's argument, it can be emphasised that the role of science is not essentialised, as it is defined by its place in the configuration of social relations at any specific time. As Helen Denham points out,

that he simultaneously objected to naturalizing socially created class relationships and that he acknowledged that even pure nature could not appropriately be called a 'suprahistorical eternal category', demonstrates his sensitivity to the existence of an ongoing and ever-changing relationship between humans and nature.⁵⁷

This becomes evident in Horkheimer's historical interpretation of the development of modern science: Although it performed a main function in the social emancipation led by the bourgeoisie, it was later unable to contribute to a rational way of life. On the contrary, it went in the direction of more oppressing forms of life. For this reason, Horkheimer is unwilling to affirm that social emancipation could arise either from the expansion of science or from the democratisation of scientific knowledge. However, this does not lead him to assume an anti-scientific point of view. The philosopher does not consider that science itself suffices to justify the degradation of social relations, but it is actually the reduction of science to a mere function of domination which produces the denounced conditions of exploitation. As William Leiss holds, Horkheimer argues that the ideological reflex of bourgeois society can be seen in the philosophical absolutisation of the methodology of the natural sciences, not in the sciences themselves.⁵⁸

57 Helen Denham, "The Cunning of Unreason and Nature's Revolt: Max Horkheimer and William Leiss on the Domination of Nature" *Environment and History*, 3, No. 2, (1997), 153-154, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20723038>

58 William Leiss, *The Domination of Nature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Uni-

It is also important to observe that Horkheimer's optimism does not equal a blind faith towards the effective possibilities of achieving social transformation. On the contrary, he holds what could be dubbed a critical optimism in this sense. Regarding this, a tension between the constant longing for what he calls *a rational society* and the reiterated warning about the difficulties in achieving it can be found in Horkheimer's texts, even in those written after 1940. This tension should not be interpreted as an expression of a hopeless consideration of human destiny, but as the condition for this much desired transformation.

The absence of any unconditional optimism in Horkheimer's thought, which is considered by his critics as the expression of nothing more than pessimism about the possibility of social transformation, constitutes for the philosopher a characteristic that prevents critical theory from an idealist position regarding the philosophy of history. We would also like to emphasise that, according to Horkheimer, complete certainty about this possibility could only correspond to an idealist and fatalist philosophical conception, according to which history must necessarily go through predetermined stages. This idea, already expressed in some of the author's early writings, is also evident in "The Authoritarian State"⁵⁹, where the philosopher points out that both Hegel and Marx share the view that history obeys a fixed law.⁶⁰ Horkheimer holds, that fatalism at that time was expressed in the idea that the required state of maturity to change society had not yet been reached: "present talk of inadequate conditions is a cover for the tolerance of oppression."⁶¹ The inconvenience Horkheimer sees in this idea has to do with the assumption that a necessary unfolding of stages must be given and that the transformation cannot therefore be realised until the middle stages have taken place. That fatalist idea "was at

versity Press, 1994), pp. 133-134.

59 Max Horkheimer, "The Authoritarian State", in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (eds.), *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. (New York: Erizen Books, 1978).

60 Horkheimer, "The Authoritarian State", p.105.

61 Horkheimer, "The Authoritarian State", p.106.

the time an inversion of theory and politically bankrupt.”⁶² Against this, Horkheimer affirms that “for the revolutionary, conditions have always been ripe. (...) A revolutionary is with the desperate people for whom everything is on the line, not with those who have time.”⁶³

Unlike fatalist theories which describe reality as if it were only a “historical painting to be gazed upon” or a “scientific formula for calculating future events”,⁶⁴ Horkheimer states that “critical theory is of a different kind. It rejects the kind of knowledge that one can bank on. It confronts history with that possibility which is always concretely visible within it.”⁶⁵ Consistent with his critical optimism, in “The Authoritarian State”, Horkheimer claims that “not only freedom, but also future forms of oppression are possible”,⁶⁶ meaning that the assertion about society already being mature enough for a rational transformation does not suffice to guarantee that such a transformation will definitely take place. What could hamper social change is the continuity of the reproduction of the given: “as long as world history follows its logical course, it fails to fulfil its human destiny.”⁶⁷ However, Horkheimer states that even the global expansion of authoritarianism – plainly evident in the dreadful Hitlerian model – would not suffice to obstruct resistance against it.⁶⁸ The idea that the logics of domination – expanded though they may be – has so far not been able to eliminate the still existing possibilities of transformation is also visible in “The End of Reason”⁶⁹ when Horkheimer states that, in spite of the decline of reason, its destiny cannot be reduced solely to “the persistence of that horror”.⁷⁰ On the contrary,

62 Horkheimer, “The Authoritarian State”, p.106.

63 Horkheimer, “The Authoritarian State”, p.106.

64 Horkheimer, “The Authoritarian State”, p.106.

65 Horkheimer, “The Authoritarian State”, p.106.

66 Horkheimer, “The Authoritarian State”, p.109.

67 Horkheimer, “The Authoritarian State”, p.117.

68 Horkheimer, “The Authoritarian State”, p.112.

69 Max Horkheimer, “End of Reason” in Max Horkheimer (ed.) *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. (München, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1980).

70 Horkheimer, “End of Reason”, p.387.

Reason has borne a true relation not only to one's own existence but to living as such; this function of transcending self-preservation is concomitant with self-preservation, with obeying and adapting to objective ends. Reason could recognize and denounce the forms of injustice and thus emancipate itself from them. (...) In the inferno to which triumphant reason has reduced the world it loses its illusions, but in doing so it becomes capable of facing this inferno and recognizing it for what it is. (...) Mutilated as men are in the duration of a brief moment they can become aware that in the world which has been thoroughly rationalized they can dispense with the interests of self-preservation which still set them one against the other.⁷¹

Besides taking into account that the expansion of rational domination has not managed to annul every single force confronting it, this quote evidences that Horkheimer sees liberation as a possibility that could not be realised in the absence of reason. What is necessary in this respect is for reason to change its social role and give up its eagerness to dominate while attempting to realise more solidary goals, preserving a relationship with "the living as such",⁷² namely, with those realms of nature that go beyond the human. Horkheimer notes that the end of social domination requires a limitation to the expansion of that reason oriented towards dominating nature.

Also, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and in spite of the apocalyptic readings that have been made of the book, it is possible to find many traces of hope about the possibility of achieving a transformation, one that keeps up with the technical state of development according to its present time. Having stated in *The Authoritarian State* that "the improvement of the means of production may have improved not only the chances of oppression but also of the elimination of oppression"⁷³ the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* make a similar statement when they affirm that "the thing-like quality of the means, which makes the means univer-

71 Horkheimer, "End of Reason", pp. 387-388.

72 Horkheimer, "End of Reason", p.387.

73 Horkheimer, "The Authoritarian State", p.106.

sally available, its 'objective validity' for everyone, itself implies a criticism of the domination from which thought has arisen as its means."⁷⁴ In other words, what Horkheimer and Adorno notice is that, although technology as an instrument for domination embodies the objectification of the progress made by reason, instruments do not perform a task solely by themselves, they require a subject to employ them. In the utilisation of objects conducted by subjects, it is possible to set aside the motive for which those instruments have initially been designed. The progress of civilisation in the context of capitalist society keeps enlarging "real suffering" proportionally to the "means of abolishing it".⁷⁵ That is to say, the more technical instruments – which could bring real suffering to an end – develop, the deeper exploitive situations become. This circumstance, which for the authors constitutes clear evidence of the decline of reason, cannot be stopped by any means alien to reason itself: "a true praxis capable of overturning the status quo depends on theory's refusal to yield to the oblivion in which society allows thought to ossify."⁷⁶ The authors, far from neglecting the possibility of a transformation towards a better social situation, or the relevance of technology in the process, do claim that the role assumed by theory and reason must be modified in order to break the one-sided orientation social progress has had for centuries.

Finally, we can point out that Horkheimer continues to foresee the possibility of social transformation in *Eclipse of Reason*, in many passages of which he observes the persistence of signs of resistance against oppression. As long as these signs differ from the characteristic logic of the given social form, they could contribute to orienting society in some other direction. In this sense, Horkheimer points out that "there are still some forces of resistance left within man",⁷⁷ and that "the masses, despite their pliability, have not capitulated completely to collectivization".⁷⁸ Also, it

74 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.29.

75 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.32.

76 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.33.

77 Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p.95.

78 Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p.97.

is to be observed that “the profoundly human resistance to irrationality tends to be a resistance that is always the core of true individuality”.⁷⁹ This optimism, nevertheless, is still nuanced by the idea that there can be no conclusive guarantee that the desired transformation would take place anyway. Horkheimer states that, “although the unbearable pressure upon the individual is not inevitable”,⁸⁰ “nobody can predict with certainty that these destructive tendencies will be checked in the near future”.⁸¹ In this sense, towards the end of the last chapter of the referred article, he reminds us once again that the critical function of theory is to be at the service of an emancipatory goal: “the method of negation, the denunciation of everything that mutilates mankind and impedes its free development, rests on confidence in man. (...) denunciation of what is currently called reason is the greatest service reason can render.”⁸²

5. Final observations

We have analysed some aspects of Horkheimer's interpretation of positivism and pointed out that Horkheimer's stance on science and technology, and their role in social transformation, differs radically from the positivist point of view. Although some philosophers – such as, for example, Neurath – share Horkheimer's longing for social emancipation, the *Institut* director's position differs from theirs in that he does not consider scientific progress a secure path towards emancipation. We have shown that Horkheimer holds a broader idea of social transformation, in which scientific and technological progress play a role, but are not determining for that transformation.⁸³

79 Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p.109.

80 Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p.108.

81 Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p.108.

82 Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p.126.

83 It is worth noticing some parallels between Horkheimer's critique of positivism and his stance towards social progress with that of Habermas. Furthermore, Habermas's idea of progress involves the moral-practical dimension of communication and interaction. In this way, it becomes relevant to reconsider what Horkheimer and Adorno have referred to as the domination of

Furthermore, we have argued that Horkheimer's position does not lead to pessimism regarding science, technology and social transformation, but the philosopher is aware of the difficulties of a mere scientific and technological view, and he adopts another point of view which we have designated as *critical optimism*. At the same time, we have claimed that this position can be found throughout different periods of Horkheimer's work – although not always through the same arguments and conceptualisations. It is therefore not feasible to state that a shift of perspective has occurred since the texts from 1937. As we have shown through the central works of the author until 1947, it is possible to foresee that the interdisciplinary project Horkheimer proposed as the Institute's main task,⁸⁴ in which empirical research would converge with the philosophical basis of social research, was not left aside, in the same sense that the judgment on the relevance of science for social change was not abandoned.

Horkheimer reckons that positivism, encouraged by the usefulness of the results at which science arrives, is optimistic with respect to scientific and technological progress and seeks to enlarge them as a strategy towards social change. Against this view, Horkheimer states that positivism does not make it possible to acknowledge the context of exploitation and domination underlying social order, and that its optimism with regard to the role of science and technology in capitalist society contributes to the perpetuation of the present situation.

Horkheimer affirms that positivism fails in its way of achieving knowledge of the social reality. Although he admits that empiricism proved its capacity for developing useful methodological strategies, he holds that in most cases non positivist methods can go deeper in their understanding of reality. Horkheimer's concern is rooted in the fact that in the name

man by man, even when many differences may be observed between both generations of critical theorists. These themes of the philosophy of Jürgen Habermas are addressed in Craig Browne, "Social Practices and the Constitution of Knowledge: Critical Social Theory as a Philosophy of Praxis", Berlin Journal of Critical Theory, vol. 4, No. 1 (January, 2020), 37–156.

84 Horkheimer, "The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research", pp.1–14.

of (useful) scientifically attained results, other forms of thought are usually underestimated, so that theory ends up losing sight of the conditions of social domination which are proper to the capitalist system. Positivist social investigation is therefore not able to account for the submission to which humans are submitted or for the oppressive mechanisms that operate in current society. Positivist theory is therefore unable to put an end to them.

Nevertheless, from Horkheimer's judgment of positivism, it is not feasible to conclude that he is pessimistic about the role of science and technology in the desired process of social change. What is important in this sense is to notice that he does not believe that science and technology alone can lead towards that possible social change. Instead, Horkheimer claims that the given form of scientific activity must be subject to critique in order to contribute to political practice.

Although Horkheimer is not pessimistic towards technology as such, he is unwilling to place hope on the hypostasis of a certain aspect of reason, namely, instrumentality, which has become the distinctive characteristic of the bourgeois model of science. The sort of technology developed upon that hypostasis establishes a one-sided relation to nature, solely based on domination. From this relation follows, on the one hand, the essentialization of nature as an object that has to be ruled by reason, and on the other, the totalitarian conception of reason as the only way to relate to both nature and society.

What we have argued about the role of science in historical social change aims not only to contextualise Horkheimer's understanding of science, but also to illustrate its absence of essentialisms, at least with regard to this subject. In this sense, we would like to state once more that Horkheimer did not subscribe to a pessimist conception of science, in which it is considered to be the source of the degradation of humanity. Although Horkheimer notices that science cannot nowadays perform the same revolutionary role it already did in the decline of feudalism, this is not sufficient to lead him to adopt an anti-scientific position or to give up critical theory's transformative aim.

Finally, Horkheimer's historical reconstruction of the configuration of instrumental rationality does not lead to a renouncement thereof. On the contrary, the desired form of society would allow for instrumental rationality. It is crucial to understand Horkheimer's idea of reason in order to grasp the possible transformation he foresees. His understanding of rationality is not limited to the idea of domination or limited to enlightened reason, which implies the idea of reason as a means to freedom through the autonomy of human beings and control over the self. On the contrary, it implies a new role for the subject, understood both as social and individual, not only as reason, but also as a natural being. At the same time, Horkheimer's idea of reason denotes a particular conception of nature. He claims a more reasonable relationship between reason and nature so as not to reduce it to mere domination. Finally, his position is oriented towards the configuration of a future social form: the rational society. Because of its broadness, this last issue will be thematised in future works.

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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.

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