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Generations of Critical Theory?

*William Outhwaite*¹

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What recognition is contrasted with is not misrecognition⁷ but disrespect, seen as the motor and idiom of social conflicts. As the *Internationale* goes, ‘nous ne sommes rien, soyons tout’, or at least let us be acknowledged for what we are.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

16 See also Müller-Doohm 2014.

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

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

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

1989 brought Habermas up short, like all of us, and he had eventually to revise his rather negative initial response to the *Wende*, which at first he saw, unusually for him¹⁷, in rather parochial West German terms. It is worth noting that, although Habermas did not devote much of his published work before 1989 to an analysis of state socialist societies, his approach made possible some of the most

¹⁷ See however Turner 2004; Hess 2017

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Critical Theory and the Struggle for Recognition

*David Ingram*¹

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

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

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

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

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

I. Critical Theory's Ambivalence Toward Groups

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

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

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

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

agency requires that one be capable, in principle, of justifying one's actions to others by appeal to reasons they would recognize as good reasons. Recognition here functions as a medium for obtaining self-certainty, or intersubjective validation of what one has done and what one has made of oneself. Such a conception of other-facilitated self-determination and self-ownership is undoubtedly related to how persons identify themselves and their actions, and so is related to notions of personal and social identity. However, Pippin insists that this conception of "recognitive politics," or politics of mutual justification and accountability, is but thinly related – if at all – to the struggle for recognition that animates what Charles Taylor⁴ and Axel Honneth have separately addressed under the headings of a "politics of recognition" or (simply) "identity politics," wherein members of discrete groups seek psychological fulfillment and others' esteem.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

II. Habermas on Multiculturalism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But it is the fourth case – involving a group’s right to protect its identity against *internal* threats – specifically against individual non-conformists – that Habermas thinks is most problematic. In this connection Habermas expressly takes issue with a number of landmark legal decisions, ranging from the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision to allow Amish parents the right to remove their children from school upon completing eight years of formal education¹¹ and the Canadian Supreme Court’s decision to allow patriarchal tribal councils to function as the last court of appeal for processing women tribal members’ legal suits against gender discrimination¹² to Quebec’s language laws, which require that

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

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

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

With the sole exception of tribal rights – which Habermas treats as morally justifiable “reparations” for past violations of sovereignty that sometimes permit “illiberal” forms of patriarchal authority and collective property that are “alien” to the egalitarian and individualistic premises of liberal constitutional law¹³ –

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

III. Concluding Remarks

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

15 Barry (2002), p. 67.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For Stanley Aronowitz

*Stephen Eric Bronner*¹

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

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

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offer a new generation concerned with the legacy of the Frankfurt School.²

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Baudrillard and the Semiotic Aspect of the Culture Industry

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Abstract: The concept of the culture industry, a central theory of the Frankfurt School, has been largely overlooked by its later generations. This neglect occurred as the culture industry evolved, adopting mechanisms different from those described by Adorno and Horkheimer. In contemporary society, individuals not only have access to media but can also engage with and respond to the messages they receive. Despite this increased interaction, a pressing question remains: why do the majority of people, even with their ability to access diverse media, continue to adhere to the values of the capitalist system? To address this, I draw upon Jean Baudrillard's early works. By applying his theories, I argue that the culture industry in the modern era maintains its dominance primarily through the manipulation of the semiotic system. Consequently, as long as the majority continues to follow the dominant semiotic framework—regardless of their media access—a significant shift in their societal condition seems unlikely.

Introduction

The Frankfurt School, primarily following the tradition of Western Marxism, sought to explain the failure of revolutionary movements in Europe. In contrast to orthodox Marxists, who emphasize the material and economic dimensions of capitalist society and assert that capitalism will inevitably collapse through a proletarian revolution, Frankfurt School theorists highlighted the cultural and intellectual factors that prevent the masses from achieving class consciousness. Consequently, the study of cultural domination and the distortion of consciousness became central to the Frankfurt School's intellectual project. In this sense, the core of the Frankfurt School's analysis is deeply connected to the issue of cultural domination.

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A critical tool used by the capitalist system to perpetuate this domination and distortion is the culture industry. Thus, it can be argued that the theory of the culture industry is intrinsically linked to the very essence of the Frankfurt School's framework. Given that the central problem lies in cultural domination—an obstacle to class consciousness—the theory of the culture industry, which explains this form of domination, is indispensable to the Frankfurt School's overall project.

The culture industry refers to the industrialization of culture, a process in which culture, traditionally created by individuals in the natural course of their lives, is instead produced and controlled by dominant classes to serve their interests. Much like any industrial product, culture in this system is consciously and purposefully manufactured to maximize benefit for the producers. In such a context, where a significant portion of culture is produced and controlled by the capitalist system, it risks losing its organic connection to the people. "In this regard, the culture industry is fundamentally subordinate to the demands of industry and government; culture must assume its place within a pre-established technological order of things"² Since people's behaviors are largely shaped by their beliefs and perspectives, it follows that their actions could be controlled by manipulating these beliefs and views. In a capitalist society, this manipulation extends to modes of thinking, ideals, values, life goals, lifestyles, and even aesthetic standards, all in service of maximizing profits and ensuring stability for the capitalist system. According to the Frankfurt School, the culture industry plays a pivotal role in this process by using tools such as media to prevent individuals from truly understanding their societal conditions. Furthermore, the culture industry works to standardize people's beliefs and values, thereby diminishing the potential for independent or divergent thinking and action. To achieve this, the products of the culture industry must themselves be standardized, reinforcing a uniformity of thought and behavior. As a result, as Adorno and Horkheimer say, "culture today is infecting everything with same-

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

ness. Film, radio, and magazine form a system. Each branch of culture is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together”³ According to Adorno, even art—traditionally seen as a means of emancipation—can become a tool of domination within the capitalist system. As a result, Adorno distinguishes between two types of art. The first is *high art*, which embodies the ultimate ideal and purpose of culture: a continuous challenge to the existing social order. The second type is *popular art*, produced by the culture industry as a commodity to be sold in the market, ensuring the interests of the capitalist system. In other words, while high art seeks to recognize and critique societal flaws and injustices, preserving individuality and subjectivity, popular art functions primarily to reinforce the dominance and survival of capitalism. Furthermore, while high art is characterized by creativity and unpredictability, popular art is repetitive and formulaic. Adorno applies the same logic to music. He argues that serious music reveals and critiques societal problems, aiming to foster a deeper understanding of social conditions. In contrast, capitalist society commodifies music, producing popular music as a marketable product designed for commercial sale.⁴

Another tool of the culture industry, according to Adorno, is astrology. Astrology ties an individual’s destiny to the movements of the stars. By its logic, all economic, cultural, social, and political phenomena are governed by the rules of celestial bodies. Consequently, individuals are encouraged to understand and align their actions with these astrological rules. The “fortunate” are those who heed and follow the guidance provided by astrologers. In this way, astrology can distort consciousness, preventing individuals from recognizing their true circumstances. Furthermore, it can strip individuals of their subjectivity. When everything is perceived as being determined by the stars, the only role left for the

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

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

individual is to passively follow astrological prescriptions. At times, astrology even encourages followers to dismiss concerns about impending events, teaching them not to feel threatened by what is to come.

Because “the very same powers by which they are threatened, the anonymous totality of the social process, are also those which will somehow take care of them”⁵ It is crucial to recognize that the culture industry has a reciprocal relationship with the capitalist system. On one hand, the culture industry aids in reinforcing the power of capitalism, contributing to its survival. On the other hand, a dominant capitalist system fosters the development of a powerful culture industry, which in turn ensures the continuation of its power and domination.

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

While cultural domination was a central concern of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, this focus gradually diminished in the second and third generations. Under the influence of prominent theorists such as Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, the Institute for Social Research shifted its attention to new intellectual directions, leading to the marginalization of the culture industry, once considered one of the most critical issues for the Frankfurt School. Though Habermas and Honneth maintained critical theory as the key legacy of the first generation, they did little to develop or extend the theory of the culture industry. By “neglecting” the culture industry, I mean that they failed to establish a rigorous and systematic study of its evolving techniques and forms. They did not assemble a collective of intellectuals to explore the contemporary manifestations of the culture industry. This neglect has not only created a rift between the first generation and later generations of the Frankfurt School but has also introduced challenges for the theoretical frameworks of Habermas and Honneth.

In the capitalist system, the processes of communicative action and recognition are susceptible to the influence of the culture industry. In a society dominated by the culture industry, individuals may become

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

reluctant to engage in communicative action or to contribute to the construction of a genuine public sphere. Even if a public sphere is established where free communicative action is theoretically possible, the dominance of the culture industry may still discourage participation. One clear example of this is the rise of individualism, which has been intensified by technologies such as smartphones. Many people now prefer to spend time on their smartphones rather than engaging with others. We are all familiar with situations where family members are physically together but are each absorbed in their individual smartphones. Another example can be found in the tendency of some individuals, particularly young people, to retreat into hyperreal worlds instead of engaging with the real one. In our current era, a large number of young people are absorbed in playing smartphone games, prioritizing virtual experiences over real-life interactions.

Moreover, in a society dominated by the culture industry, even communicative agreement or consensus can be co-opted to support the interests of the capitalist system. Examples include discussions centered around fashionable or sexually appealing outfits for women, or debates on selecting the “sexiest” Hollywood actress. In such cases, the public sphere itself may serve to reinforce the existing system. The crucial point here is that Habermas, by emphasizing critical sciences, remains hopeful that these sciences can eliminate distortions and act as agents of societal emancipation. However, the problem lies in Habermas’s failure to address the new techniques of the culture industry. Without considering these, he cannot be certain that the critical sciences are immune to the influence of the culture industry.

In my view, Habermas overlooks the reality that even emancipatory interests and critical knowledge are vulnerable to distortion by the culture industry. The technical interests and empirical-analytic knowledge of the culture industry can influence not only practical and historical-hermeneutic knowledge but also emancipatory and critical knowledge. For instance, the nature of power in the age of simulation and hyperreality is quite different from what Habermas described as *Herrschaft* in *Knowledge*

and Human Interests. In the hyperreal world, power, as Habermas understands it, may not manifest in the same way. In this context, there might be no traditional power structures to challenge or resist, as desires are no longer repressed. In a hyperreal world, individuals can have anything they want, whenever they want, and in whatever way they want, which diminishes the need for the reality principle. Since no one is harming others by fulfilling their desires, there may be little power or constraint from which individuals need emancipation. As a result, the emancipatory interest could be weakened, as it loses its central dynamic: the existence of power.

Furthermore, in a hyperreal world, individuals can engage in communicative actions with idealized, hyperreal people and reach a consensus with them, further distancing them from real social interactions. This poses a danger to authentic communicative action and real social interaction, as people may become increasingly isolated within a hyperreal world, unable or unwilling to engage meaningfully with the real world around them.

Even recognition, a central concern in Honneth's work, is vulnerable to manipulation by the culture industry. The culture industry can distort values and beliefs in society, producing a form of recognition that serves the interests of the dominant class. In other words, in a society shaped by the culture industry, an individual's pursuit of self-respect and self-esteem may ultimately align with the goals of the capitalist system. This raises a critical question: how can Honneth be confident that the self-respect or self-esteem individuals achieve in such a context is not distorted? It seems that Honneth has acknowledged this potential flaw in his theory. In his work *Recognition as Ideology*, he explores how false recognition can emerge and how it can function as an ideological tool to support particular societal interests.

According to Honneth, "the pride that "Uncle Tom" feels as a reaction to the repeated praise of his submissive virtues makes him into a compliant servant in a slave-owning society. The emotional appeals to the "good" mother and housewife made by churches, parliaments, or the

mass media over the centuries caused women to remain trapped within a self-image that most effectively accommodated the gender-specific division of labor. The public esteem enjoyed by heroic soldiers continuously engendered a sufficiently large class of men who willingly went to war in pursuit of glory and adventure. As trivial as these examples may be, they do make strikingly clear that social recognition can always also operate as a conformist ideology, for the continuous repetition of identical forms of recognition can create a feeling of self-worth that provides the motivational resources for forms of voluntary subordination without employing methods of repression"⁶.

As we can see, Honneth has acknowledged that the distortion of consciousness can lead to false recognition, which may, in turn, support specific societal interests. However, an interesting point is that, despite recognizing the potential for false and distorted recognition, Honneth still does not sufficiently address the role of the culture industry and its evolving techniques as a primary source of this distortion. Furthermore, in a society where the dominance of the culture industry has transformed many concepts and social relations into mere signs of those concepts and relations, recognition itself can become mediated through these signs. For instance, in a society where individuals with unequal rights may perceive themselves as equal simply because they possess symbols of equality, such as TVs, laptops, or washing machines, recognition becomes distorted. This represents what can be termed "semiotic recognition" — or recognition through signs — rather than genuine, substantive recognition.

Another issue is that the culture industry, as a dynamic and ever-evolving phenomenon, constantly adopts new methods and tools to expand its reach and control. As the capitalist system grows, so too does the culture industry. In the 21st century, the culture industry has become more sophisticated, advanced, and covert than it was during Adorno's time. Adorno and Horkheimer were unable to fully anticipate how the culture

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

industry would function in our age. Moreover, certain ideas of Adorno and Horkheimer have lost their relevance due to the developments in the culture industry. For example, they tended to view the masses as passive recipients of messages created and disseminated by the dominant class at the top of society. According to them, radio “democratically makes everyone equally into listeners, in order to expose them in authoritarian fashion to the same programs put out by different stations. No mechanism of reply has been developed, and private transmissions are condemned to unfreedom”⁷. However, as we know today, the argument put forward by Adorno and Horkheimer is no longer entirely valid. With the emergence of advanced technologies, social networks such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have opened up opportunities for widespread participation and interaction in the media. This means that, in contemporary society, a message recipient can also be a producer and distributor of content. Adorno and Horkheimer viewed the culture industry as a one-way communication process, where only a monologue was possible. But in the modern context, the culture industry has evolved into a more multilateral form of communication that facilitates dialogue. Consequently, the mechanisms of the culture industry have changed in an age where individuals have access to their own media and can create their own messages.

This raises a crucial question: If the lack of class consciousness among the masses is due to the dominant class controlling the media to spread its values and ideology, why, with access to their own media, have so many people not reached class consciousness or sought to change the capitalist system? Why do they continue to follow the values and ideology of the dominant capitalist class? One theorist who can help us address these questions is Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard’s work, emerging in an era of advanced technology and new media, allows him to address issues that Adorno and Horkheimer could not have foreseen. Though often categorized as a structuralist or post-structuralist, Baudrillard’s ideas bear significant affinities with the critical theory of the Frankfurt School.

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

For instance, the theory of reification, which deeply influenced Western Marxism and the Frankfurt School, also plays a key role in Baudrillard's thought. Reification explains the relationship between objects and subjects, illustrating how objects detach from their creators and acquire an independent power. This theory highlights how, over time, objects (or commodities) can come to dominate the subject (the individual)⁸. This development is clearly evident in Baudrillard's early works. However, Baudrillard advances the concept of reification to a new level by arguing that the entire semiotic system of society has become reified. In his early writings, Baudrillard attempts to synthesize Marxist theory with semiotics. According to Marx, each object possesses a use value, which is derived from its practical function and utility. In capitalist society, however, this use value is often overshadowed by exchange value, which is determined by the object's position in the market. Baudrillard introduces a third form of value: sign value. He argues that objects no longer serve merely functional or economic roles; instead, they act as signs representing power, prestige, status, and identity.

In this way, objects acquire symbolic meanings and contribute to the creation of social, cultural, political, and economic distinctions. In a consumer society, these objects form a semiotic system in which each item carries a specific meaning, thereby shaping people's tastes, desires, values, and behaviors. Baudrillard's goal is to uncover and analyze this system of objects—its mechanisms and its consequences in contemporary society.

This semiotic dimension of capitalism, as articulated by Baudrillard, is a significant addition to the critical framework of the culture industry and is not fully explored by Adorno and Horkheimer. By shedding light on this semiotic system, Baudrillard helps address the central question: why, even in an age where the masses have access to media and can produce their own content, do they continue to adopt and perpetuate the values of the capitalist system?

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

Baudrillard and Semiotics

Baudrillard's early works reflect a synthesis of Marxist critique and semiotic theory, allowing him to extend Marxist analysis beyond the realm of production into broader aspects of social life. In *The System of Objects*, he examines everyday objects—not only as tools we see, use, purchase, and collect, but as items deeply embedded in a symbolic system that shapes our social reality. Although these objects are part of our daily routines, Baudrillard urges us to analyze them through a sociological lens.

This work pursues two main objectives: first, to uncover the meanings of objects and how they influence our consciousness and daily lives; second, to explore how these meanings and their effects evolve as society transitions from traditional to modern forms. At its core, the book investigates the dynamic relationship between subject and object. Baudrillard demonstrates that objects do not exist in isolation but operate within a system—a network of signs that collectively shape our thoughts, values, behaviors, desires, needs, and social relationships.

These insights are rooted in Marxist ideas, particularly the commodification of everyday life in capitalist societies, and in semiotic theory, which views each object as a sign. When taken together, these signs form a semiotic system that not only reflects but also constructs social meaning and power relations.⁹

According to Baudrillard, in the symbolic order, objects derive their meaning through genuine social relations and lived experiences. They function as symbols, embodying the depth and uniqueness of those specific relations and concepts. Because each object is tied to a unique context, it resists manipulation or substitution. However, in the modern capitalist world, objects are increasingly detached from authentic social relationships. Instead of symbolizing lived experiences, they become abstractions of those experiences. Consequently, these objects no longer function as symbols but as signs—elements within a broader semiot-

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

ic system. In this context, their value is no longer based on utility or symbolic resonance, but on sign value—the capacity to signify social meanings such as prestige, status, or identity, often independent of their practical function. Signs “make living social relations into things, into units – they are, in a sense, the material of materialism. What this implies is that objects no longer possess essential values rooted in lived experience”¹⁰ Modernity, according to Baudrillard, destroys the symbolic order by severing objects from their traditional and lived meanings. In the symbolic order, objects are embedded in specific social and relational contexts, but in the modern world, they become “floating” signs—liberated from fixed meanings and traditions. This detachment allows modern individuals to manipulate and exchange objects more freely. However, Baudrillard argues that this apparent freedom is illusory. What seems like autonomy in consumer choices is, in fact, determined by an overarching semiotic system that governs tastes, preferences, and social values.

For instance, a sofa or jacket from one’s college years—once cherished for its symbolic value—may lose its significance when fashion trends shift. Retaining such items might now threaten one’s social prestige, even though no traditional norm explicitly prohibits keeping them. Although individuals may believe they are freely choosing to discard and replace these items, they are in reality complying with the dictates of the semiotic order.

Importantly, both symbolic and semiotic systems function as forms of social discipline, but they differ in transparency and honesty. The symbolic order openly acknowledges its constraints—rituals, customs, and tradition define clear expectations. In contrast, the semiotic system disguises its control under the guise of personal freedom and self-expression. Another key distinction is that symbolic relations are unique and non-substitutable, whereas semiotic relations are interchangeable and based on equivalence within a system of signs. However, this is not to say the symbolic and semiotic are absolute opposites; rather,

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

they represent different modes of organizing meaning and social regulation.

“Signs ‘stand in’ for lived relations; they refer to and express them in abstracted, coded and therefore reductive fashion. Both symbols and signs (and symbols are signs) mediate human experience. The important distinction is that the system of signs ‘bars’ or disallows the rich ambivalence of symbolic expressions. Signs actually replace the lived relation; they present a coded, stereotyped version of reality, one that is more manageable, less threatening but also less ‘meaningful’ or intense than the world of symbolic ambivalence. Signs suggest, claim or simulate symbolic relations; they are abstracted from symbolic relations”¹¹ According to Baudrillard, reification can also originate from signs, not just commodities in the traditional Marxist sense. In contemporary society, signs increasingly substitute for genuine social relations and human meanings. The object no longer derives its significance from symbolic value grounded in real, lived experiences or traditional relational contexts. Instead, its meaning and value are determined by its position within a semiotic system—a network of signs governed by codes, trends, and market logic.

This liberation of objects from the symbolic order—detaching them from fixed cultural and relational meanings—grants modern individuals more apparent freedom to manipulate and reassign value to them. However, Baudrillard warns that this is a false form of autonomy, as such manipulation is heavily regulated by the logic of the sign system itself. Objects become floating signifiers, and their value is not inherent but derived from how they signify prestige, fashion, or social distinction within a broader system of exchangeable signs.

This is why he believes that man in the modern world “is neither an owner nor a mere user – rather, he is an active engineer of atmosphere”¹². He is able to manipulate objects, their positions in space, their relations with each other, and their roles. Now, “what matters to him is neither

11 Ibid., pp. 14, 15.

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

possession nor enjoyment but responsibility, in the strict sense which implies that it is at all times possible for him to determine responses"¹³.

Therefore, in the modern world, the individual's goal is no longer merely to consume objects for their utility, but rather to manipulate and manage them as signs. This manipulation becomes a key component of modern identity construction. It is within this framework that Baudrillard introduces his theory of the consumer society. According to him, consumption can be understood through two interrelated lenses.

First, consumption functions "as a process of signification and communication." In this view, consumer goods are not primarily valued for their use but operate as signs within a system of symbolic exchange. Each object carries a specific meaning, allowing individuals to communicate social identity, taste, or values. Just as words function in language, objects function in consumer society: they are exchanged not just materially, but semiotically. Hence, consumer society becomes a language of objects, where shared understandings of the meanings of goods are essential for social communication.

Second, consumption operates "as a process of classification and social differentiation." In this dimension, consumer goods establish and reinforce social hierarchies. Because individuals have unequal access to economic resources, their ability to acquire certain objects varies, leading to visible markers of class, status, and group identity. Each product one possesses not only signals belonging to a particular social group but also distinguishes the individual from others.¹⁴ According to Baudrillard, the modern consumer society systematically and purposefully produces not only products but also social differentiations. In this system, real and substantive differences among individuals—differences rooted in human experience, behavior, and relationships—are increasingly reduced to the symbolic distinctions between consumer goods. Identity, status, and meaning are no longer anchored in lived social reality, but in the signs

13 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

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

attached to commodities. Consequently, human concepts and values that should emerge from genuine interpersonal relations are instead mediated and defined by consumer objects and their sign-value—clothing, cars, cologne, cigarettes, houses, and other markers of lifestyle. These objects function not merely as tools or possessions, but as semiotic indicators of social meaning, through which individuals attempt to construct identity and differentiate themselves within the system. “In the past, differences of birth, blood and religion were not exchanged: they were not differences of fashion, but essential distinctions. They were not ‘consumed’. Current differences (of clothing, ideology, and even sex) are exchanged within a vast consortium of consumption. This is a socialized exchange of signs”¹⁵. Today, objects are typically evaluated based on their capacity to create social differentiation, rather than their intrinsic function or aesthetic value. In consumer society, status-driven consumption fuels a constant cycle of imitation and distinction. The lower classes often attempt to elevate their social position by acquiring goods associated with the upper classes, while the upper classes, in turn, distinguish themselves by abandoning products once they become widely accessible. This dynamic results in a perpetual turnover of consumer goods and the meanings attached to them, as products are continuously redefined through their shifting positions within the social hierarchy.¹⁶

Conspicuous consumption clearly plays a central role in social differentiation. Baudrillard, in a way that parallels Veblen’s theory, views conspicuous consumption and waste as mechanisms with distinct social functions. However, while Thorstein Veblen primarily associates such consumption patterns with the upper classes¹⁷, Baudrillard argues that this behavior permeates all social strata. In his view, conspicuous consumption is not merely a display of wealth but a universal strategy employed across classes to enhance prestige, elevate social status, and gain recognition. The greater

15 Ibid., p. 93.

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

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

an individual's capacity to acquire—or even waste—rare and expensive commodities, the greater their perceived position within the social hierarchy¹⁸. In a consumer society, consumption becomes a central mechanism in the construction of individual identity. That is, individuals increasingly define both their own and others' identities through patterns of consumption. The consumer society's primary objective is to cultivate the figure of the "ideal consumer"—one who accepts, internalizes, and actively participates in the dominant semiotic system. This ideal consumer does not perceive the sign system as an external force imposed upon them; rather, they see it as something they themselves shape and affirm through their choices. Consequently, individuals' attempts to communicate meaning and establish social distinction through objects ultimately result in the reproduction and reinforcement of the very system they believe they are navigating freely.¹⁹ Although consumption may appear to stem from a need for the concrete and practical utility of an object, it actually serves other purposes, such as communication and differentiation. Therefore, consumption is not merely an individual and isolated act, but rather a collective behavior that is shaped by social dynamics and cultural meanings. "Enjoyment is enjoyment for one's own benefit, but consuming is something one never does alone. ... One enters, rather, into a generalized system of exchange and production of coded values where, in spite of themselves, all consumers are involved with all others"²⁰

According to Baudrillard, in the symbolic and traditional order, objects are typically shaped through lived relations and experiences, thereby symbolizing those relationships. These symbols are unique, making them irreplaceable; in other words, they cannot be manipulated or substituted with other objects. However, in modernity, these objects are transformed into signs that carry sign values. While these objects may appear to represent real social relations, they are, in fact, disconnected from any genuine

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

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

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 78, 79.

relationships. Instead, they serve as mere abstractions of those relations. The suspension of objects from their traditional contexts allows for their manipulation and arbitrary association with new meanings and concepts²¹. Therefore, by consuming objects we are consuming meanings and relations which they connote. But in fact these are not real relationships. "Today every desire, plan, need, every passion and relation is abstracted (or materialized) as sign and as object to be purchased and consumed"²². As a result, in contemporary society, to embody any characteristic, convey any meaning, or fulfill any desire, individuals must utilize the corresponding objects. In other words, our emotions and desires are primarily expressed and satisfied within the system of objects and through signs. Once this connection is established, our emotions, desires, and needs become subject to control and determination by the system of objects.²³ Having a dining table or arranging furniture in a way that allows all family members to sit together symbolizes family solidarity and unity, even if they never actually gather to share a meal. Displaying patriotic images around the house signifies a person's patriotism, even if they don't feel a genuine sense of national belonging. Keeping a musical instrument in the living room suggests a passion for music, even if the person doesn't know how to play or isn't actually interested in music. Concepts like affection, loyalty, and humanity, which should ideally be expressed through real relationships and lived experiences, are instead often represented through objects in the modern system. Each object serves as a sign, carrying a particular meaning.

The Semiotic Aspect of the Culture Industry

As discussed, Baudrillard in *The System of Objects* argues that, in the traditional order, objects are symbolic. They originate from real relations and lived experienc-

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

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

23 William Pawlett, Jean Baudrillard, p. 11.

es, and therefore, they represent those relations. This makes these objects unique and irreplaceable. The culture industry, however, does not want objects to remain in this symbolic order. As long as objects are tied to real, lived relations, there is no way for the culture industry to manipulate them. For the culture industry to control and manipulate people's values and consciousness, it must manipulate the objects and their meanings. If objects remain symbolic, a significant portion of the culture industry's domination through the semiotic system cannot take place.

One of the main goals of the culture industry, then, is to release objects from their symbolic meanings and turn them into signs—things that can be controlled and manipulated. Today, many aspects of our lives, even our social relations, emotions, and human concepts, are drawn into the semiotic world, where they only make sense within the dominant semiotic system. The culture industry, through tools like advertising and movies, is reducing human values and relationships to consumable signs that can be easily controlled.

Consider a tribe that gives a special kind of necklace to a person for bravery in battle. This necklace symbolizes courage and loyalty to the tribe, representing a unique relation between the person and the tribe. As long as this necklace remains part of a symbolic order, the culture industry cannot manipulate or control it because the relationship it signifies is irreplaceable. This necklace cannot be replaced by another, nor can it be reduced to mere economic or symbolic value.

However, in the modern order, the same type of necklace can be turned into a sign that abstracts the meaning of courage, beauty, prestige, and humanity, all of which are also turned into signs. Now, the culture industry can manipulate and control the meaning of the necklace, and in turn, control the representations of courage and loyalty. What was once a unique symbol of a personal relationship becomes just another commodity that can be bought and sold.

In the modern system, human relations, emotions, and concepts are reduced to signs that can be manipulated. Friendship and kindness are symbolized by a bottle of champagne; familial loyalty is signified by a dining table, even if family members never gather around it; love for

music is represented by a musical instrument in the living room, even if the owner doesn't play it; and intellectualism is indicated by a library of books, even if the person has never read any. These signs stand in for real relationships and meanings. In this way, the semiotic system controls human desires and satisfiers.

This is where Baudrillard's concept of *semiotic satisfaction* comes in. People are no longer satisfied by real relations but by the signs of those relations. For example, a person's need for kindness, love, happiness, or success can be met not by real experiences but by signs of these qualities, defined by the semiotic system and provided by the culture industry. This leads to a form of "repressive desublimation." When a person's needs are fulfilled not by real relations but by signs of those relations, the desire for change or revolution diminishes. People are content with the false satisfaction provided by signs.

For instance, love and kindness can be signified by a perfume that symbolizes these feelings; success can be attained through the purchase of an expensive car, and freedom can be experienced through symbols like wearing a bikini or a short skirt. The culture industry provides symbols of pleasure and satisfaction that are, in essence, divorced from real experiences.

As a result, people can experience the *illusion* of satisfaction, but their needs remain unmet on a deeper level. The culture industry, by manipulating these symbols, not only channels desires into controlled, consumable forms but also weakens the potential for critical thought and resistance. When the semiotic system dictates the meaning of relationships and concepts, people cease to seek real connections or real change. They are satisfied with the symbols of those things, and thus the system perpetuates itself.

Furthermore, the culture industry can transform any real pleasure into something unpleasant while making something neutral or unpleasant into something pleasurable. For example, a particular body type may be considered unattractive simply because it does not conform to Hollywood's ideal, while a pair of shoes may be socially uncomfortable but

fashionable, and therefore desirable. The culture industry, through its manipulation of signs, controls how people define and experience their desires, needs, and identities.

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

As I have outlined, Baudrillard offers two distinct perspectives on modern consumption. The first perspective views consumption as a tool for communication, through which individuals exchange messages and signify particular meanings. In this framework, consumer goods function as symbols that communicate specific ideas, values, or identities to others. Consumption, then, becomes a social act of conveying one's status, beliefs, and affiliations, aligning individuals with particular cultural or social groups.

The second perspective on consumption, as proposed by Baudrillard, emphasizes its role in social differentiation. Here, consumer goods are not just tools for communication but also instruments for distinguishing oneself from others. By acquiring specific products, individuals carve out their identity and status within the social hierarchy. In this sense, consumption functions as a mechanism of classification—where social differentiation is continuously reinforced through the products people choose to possess and display²⁴. Since the needs for communication and differentiation through objects are limitless, the demand for consumption is equally endless. In an increasingly isolated modern world, individuals seek to attach themselves to society through consumption. In this context, the semiotic system functions as a tool for the culture industry, supporting its economic and political agendas. However, this is not the primary or most significant relationship between the semiotic system and the culture industry.

Today, the culture industry plays a crucial role in creating signs and assigning meanings to them. As objects are liberated from their traditional symbolic connections, the culture industry gains full autonomy in manip-

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

ulating them. Its position within society enables it to define the meaning and value of consumer objects. In this way, the culture industry exerts control over the processes of communication and differentiation in society. By governing the semiotic structure, it also dictates our needs and the methods by which we satisfy them. The culture industry determines the goals we should pursue, the products we must consume to achieve those goals, and the roles we are expected to play in relation to others.

Therefore, the culture industry's power is not solely dependent on media such as television and radio. It also lies in the fact that individuals are not merely passive consumers of the culture industry's products, but active participants, managers, and communicators within the semiotic system. People no longer view themselves as passive subjects, but as agents who are actively involved in shaping and manipulating the signs that structure their lives. They understand that their social success is directly linked to their acceptance and engagement with the semiotic system.

As the signs and their meanings are constantly evolving, the semiotic system remains inherently unstable. Consequently, individuals must stay informed about the latest changes in the semiotic system and the evolving meanings of signs. In the domain of consumption, this fluidity serves as an advantageous tool for the dominant system. By continuously altering the signs and their meanings, the need for new consumption patterns is perpetuated. If, until now, conveying a specific message or establishing differences was achievable through a particular set of signs, future differentiation and communication will require a new set of signs.

Since it is predominantly the culture industry that defines these signs and assigns meanings to them, keeping abreast of these shifts is essential for individuals within society. In my view, following the culture industry has become a survival mechanism in the modern world. People must understand the latest signs and their meanings, and since the culture industry is the principal producer and primary source of information about these signs, adhering to it is necessary.

In this way, individuals must learn how others interpret each consumer object. Failure to do so could hinder effective communication through

signs. They need to be able to express who they are and how they think, and likewise, through these signs, they recognize others and their ways of thinking. In essence, the semiotic system plays a crucial role in shaping social interactions. To draw on Erving Goffman's concept of "impression management,"²⁵ it can be said that such management would be impossible without access to and understanding of the culture industry and the semiotic system.

Therefore, in the modern social sphere, individuals must engage with the culture industry to navigate and manage their social interactions. Additionally, people need to be well-versed in the semiotic system and the meanings associated with the objects within it, as they always aim to align themselves with particular social groups while distancing themselves from others. The culture industry serves as the primary reference for understanding the objects that help individuals achieve these goals.

However, it is important to note that there is a reciprocal relationship between the culture industry and the semiotic system. On one hand, the semiotic system creates a constant need for individuals to reference the culture industry in order to gain knowledge about signs and their meanings. On the other hand, the culture industry legitimizes the semiotic system, providing it with credibility. In this way, the culture industry functions as a "notebook of codes," a comprehensive guide that individuals turn to for understanding the signs they need to navigate and manage their social relations. People recognize that the culture industry is the most reliable and authoritative source for understanding the rules of this symbolic game. An Answer to Our Main Question

After discussing the semiotic aspect of the culture industry, I can now address the main question of this article. As previously mentioned, for Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industry is a one-sided phenomenon where the dominant class at the top of society sends messages to the masses at the bottom. This allows the dominant class to secure its interests by distorting the consciousness of the masses, preventing them

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

from becoming revolutionary. However, as I have argued, in the new generation of media and social networks, the dominant class is no longer the sole group controlling the media. Furthermore, new media platforms allow everyone to participate in producing and responding to messages.

Given these changes, I posed the following questions: why is the culture industry still relevant? Why do the majority of people continue to follow the values and ideologies of the capitalist system? The answer lies not in the control of the media alone, nor in the inability of the masses to respond to messages, but rather in the way the semiotic system continues to dominate the minds of many people. In other words, as long as people accept and follow the dominant semiotic system, they will think and act in ways that secure the interests of the dominant groups—even if they have access to all forms of media and can produce their own messages.

Today, the semiotic system still exercises control, and some individuals act as agents of the culture industry, producing culture for the culture industry against their own interests. Thus, while they may have the opportunity to produce their own messages, they still operate within the framework of the dominant semiotic system. This is why their media products often reinforce the dominant system rather than challenge it. For instance, if Ferrari and Bugatti are seen as symbols of prestige, or if a specific body type is considered attractive, the majority will likely adhere to the same semiotic meanings in their consumer choices.

Another example is social media. Although the masses have the ability to use social networks to resist the dominant system, they often end up using them for advertising or promoting consumer products. In essence, they become instruments of domination over themselves. For example, influencers with large followings on platforms like Instagram are hired by companies to advertise their products. They are paid to wear certain brands, photograph themselves, and share those images with their followers.

As long as the semiotic system dominates people's minds, nothing substantial will change. This phenomenon is what I refer to as the "self-culture industry"—a culture industry produced by the masses

themselves. In this system, individuals, even while accessing the media, unwittingly contribute to reinforcing the power of the culture industry. By consuming goods and accepting their meanings, we legitimize and strengthen the existing semiotic system. Today, this semiotic system is the foundation of modern society. Any significant societal change cannot occur without a transformation in the semiotic system. As long as we think within the confines of the dominant semiotic framework, a true revolutionary movement is unlikely. However, if the semiotic system changes, it has the potential to challenge the entire structure.

Therefore, since a major part of the modern system's domination stems from its semiotic structure, the only way to abolish this system may be to challenge its semiotic underpinnings. For example, if one day luxury cars lose their symbolic value, much of the prestige associated with owning these cars would be undermined.

Conclusion

In this article, I argued that the second and third generations of the Frankfurt School overlooked the central concern of their predecessors: cultural domination. This neglect occurred even as the culture industry, during this period, grew stronger and more sophisticated than Adorno and Horkheimer had initially described. As a result, it is crucial to study the culture industry in the context of our contemporary era, marked by new media and advanced technologies that have transformed certain techniques of cultural control.

Firstly, the dominant class no longer exclusively controls the media to secure its interests. Today, the majority has access to their own media and the ability to produce their own messages. For example, anyone can share their videos on platforms like YouTube or Facebook. Secondly, new media allows individuals to respond to the messages they receive, facilitating a shift from a monologue to a dialogue. Given these changes, a central question emerges: if the cultural domination of the dominant classes historically stemmed from their exclusive control over the media, why do many people, even those with access to their own media, continue to follow the values and ideologies of the capitalist system?

This was the central question addressed in this study, in which I revisited and revised the theory of the culture industry. Drawing on Baudrillard's ideas, I argued that the culture industry primarily achieves its domination through a semiotic system. The culture industry, by creating and imposing a semiotic system, convinces individuals to accept it, thus allowing it to control the masses. I concluded that we are witnessing a phenomenon that I have termed the "self-culture industry" or the production of the culture industry by the masses. This concept refers to the fact that many people today use their own media to support and reinforce the dominant system. In other words, as long as individuals accept the existing semiotic system, they cannot pose a serious threat to the capitalist system—even if they have access to media and the ability to create their own messages.

Moreover, since consumption serves as a tool for communication and differentiation through signs, acquiring knowledge of the semiotic system and understanding the meaning of these signs is essential for navigating and surviving in modern society. The culture industry, as the primary source of this semiotic system, thus serves as a survival mechanism for individuals. This means that in today's world, if a person lacks knowledge of the dominant semiotic system and fails to follow the culture industry's guidelines, they are likely to fail in achieving their goals. Consequently, any critical theory must consider the semiotic system as a core element of cultural domination. To dismantle the cultural domination of the capitalist system, we must also challenge and reject its semiotic system.

For instance, if people were to stop valuing luxury cars or brands, the prestige that their owners derive from these symbols would be diminished. This would enable individuals to challenge one of the culture industry's main tools of domination. However, as long as people continue to adhere to the dominant semiotic system of capitalism, no fundamental change in their situation will occur, even if they have control over media platforms. Today, some individuals—by accepting and following the semiotic system of capitalism—serve as unwitting instruments in advanc-

ing the culture industry's domination, often without realizing that by using these signs and their meanings, they are perpetuating their own subjugation.

To sustain its domination, the system reduces everything to signs and incorporates all aspects of life into its dominant semiotic framework. This is how it controls our needs and thoughts. Most of our human relationships, concepts, and emotions are now reduced to signs that are controlled by the semiotic system. Once everything is absorbed into this system, even the satisfiers of our needs become signs to be consumed. A need for kindness in friendship might be satisfied by giving a perfume, love by purchasing an expensive necklace, happiness by disco lights or birthday decorations, loyalty by a violet flower, and the desire for change or a better quality of life through their symbolic representations. This semiotic satisfaction weakens our capacity for genuine critique and meaningful change in the existing system. As a result, many of our needs, which should be fulfilled through authentic relationships, are instead addressed through the signs of those relationships. This is why I discussed the concept of "semiotic pleasure" in our contemporary age.

In conclusion, as demonstrated in this study, the theory of the culture industry holds significant potential for expansion. We should not confine our understanding of the culture industry to the original definition provided by Adorno and Horkheimer. Instead, we should interpret this theory in line with the broader framework of the Frankfurt School, which will allow us to uncover the new techniques employed by the culture industry today.

Benjamin in Florence: Unintentional Truth and the Thematics of Restoration

Mary Caputi¹

Florence and the “Dialectics of Seeing”

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

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 - 2 See, for instance, Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*,” translated by Howard Eiland, Belknap Press, 2006; “Central Park,” in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings*, Volume 4, 161-99; *Moscow Diary*, translated by Richard Sieburth, Harvard University Press, 1986; “Naples,” www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=282500897151&story_fbid=292435857514539; “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century” (1935), and “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” (1939) in *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, edited by Rolf Tiedmann, Belknap Press, 1999, 3-26.

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

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

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

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

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

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 391.

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

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

7 Ibid., 392.

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

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

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

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

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

But how is it that a visit to the Uffizi Galleries, Piazza Michelangelo, or the Ponte Vecchio can recount de’ Medici generosity permeated by Catholic salvation, but the violences of history now contained in capitalism’s brutality? How is it that Donatello’s David, Botticelli’s *Primavera*, and the ubiquitous rugged John the Baptist – patron saint of Florence – speak of danger rather than of talent, wealth, a society in its heyday? The answer lies in the creator’s *unintended* mission, the failure that in fact proves propitious as the cultural artifact assumes new meanings in a radically different setting. The artwork’s betrayal of original intentions in fact constitutes its “truthfulness;” the disconnect has stories to tell.

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

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

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

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

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

13 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 874.

14 *Ibid.*, 874-875.

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

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

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

Piazza del Duomo

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

15 Ibid., 875.

16 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 466.

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

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

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

18 Buck-Morss, 181.

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

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

19 Ibid., 108.

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

21 Quoted in Buck-Morss, 247.

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

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

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

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

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

22 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 112.

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

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

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