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Social Theory and the Public Sphere

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In recent years, the public role of sociology has been defined increasingly in terms of applied social science. Providing statistical support for public policy analysis, predicting demographic trends, and assisting in social engineering have all been offered as central to sociology's mission beyond the academy. However useful the specific contributions of empirical social research and applied sociology, however, the dominant emphases have been one-sided, slighting both the nature and potential of public life and the importance of other, more critical and theoretically informed versions of sociology. The public role of sociology (both theoretical and empirical) can include informing democratic public discourse, not only the technical activities of experts. It can also include subjecting the concepts, received understandings, and cultural categories constitutive of everyday life and public discourse to critical theoretical reconsideration. This is not a matter of purely abstract critique, to be pursued at the expense of empirical research. Rather, it is an agenda for theory that can be deeply interwoven with empirical scholarship and new research without rendering social knowledge mere affirmation of existing conditions or understandings.

This was the agenda of the Frankfurt School of critical social theorists in the middle of the twentieth century. Led by Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and others, and building on a rich intellectual tradition including especially Marx, Freud, German idealists, and their critics like Nietzsche, the Frankfurt theorists developed among other things a strong conception of the potential role of critical social theory as part of the self-reflexive public discourse of a democratic society. Their own substantive theory has been far from the last word in this endeavor. It has been shown to have a variety of failings. In addition, theorists stressing other themes – perhaps most notably feminist theorists stressing gender as a constitutive social category – have developed alternative and comparably rich traditions of critical theory. I will not attempt to review all varieties of critical theory in this chapter. Rather, I shall focus on the "Frankfurt School," which offers I think the best occasion for grasping both what critical theory is, and how it can work as part of potentially transformative public life. In addition to reviewing the contributions of Horkheimer,

Adorno, and other key figures, I shall discuss the more recent contributions of Jürgen Habermas both to developing social theory for public discourse and to conceptualizing the public sphere itself. Since the Frankfurt School does not "own" the idea of critical theory, however, and since as I have suggested a range of other theoretical traditions can be at least as important in the contemporary public sphere, I will try to suggest some general desiderata for social theory as public discourse.

The Facts Are not Enough

A philistine has been defined as "someone who is content to live in a wholly unexplored world" (Davies, 1968: 153). The philistine is not necessarily passive, for he or she may be quite actively engaged in making objects or gaining position in the world, but the philistine is unreflective, primarily utilitarian in orientation. The biblical association suggests an enemy superior in numbers and into whose hands one might fall, and Hannah Arendt (1954 (1977: 201)) tells us that the term was first used in its modern sense to distinguish between town and gown in the student slang of German university towns.[1] But if this reproach was initially just intellectual snobbery (combined perhaps with genuine fear of attack), the notion of the philistine took on more subtle colorings as non-intellectuals began to manifest a substantial interest in "culture," particularly as part of the construction of a new form of elite status.[2] Non-academic interest in the life of the mind and even in matters of culture more generally has been intermittent and uneven. The fear that cultural objects and intellectual products would be reduced to mere use values or commodities through an insensitive appropriation by those outside universities has proved exaggerated. But at the same time, a certain philistinism has grown within universities themselves. Not only is academic life far from exclusively a life of the mind, the use of cultural objects (e.g. publications) as means of professional advancement exerts a distorting, perhaps even transformative, effect. I do not mean to point to the crassness of this new philistinism, but to the way in which it undermines critical thought. To the extent that cultural production is remade into the means of accumulating a kind of academic-professional capital, cultural producers are encouraged to accept commonplace understandings of the world. To challenge these too deeply would be to court detachment from those whose "purchase" of their products enables them to accumulate capital.[3] The point, thus, is not that intellectuals lie to serve illegitimate masters, which they seem no more likely to do under contemporary conditions than at other times, but that in the spirit of professionalism they betray the calling truly and openly to explore the world.

Despite recurrent disappointments, one wants to hope that a social scientist could never in this sense be a philistine. Indeed, at some level all social scientists, like all novelists and a great many others, are engaged in exploring the world. Yet for most of us, and for social scientists more than novelists, our explorations are limited by the boundaries of the known world of convention. We discover new facts, to be sure, but they are already tamed within schemes of

knowledge that we take as self-evident and beyond question. One of the enduring challenges for social science is to go beyond the affirmation and reconstitution of the familiar world to recognize other possibilities. New perspectives, new theories, and new empirical information all can enable us to see how things can be different from the ways they first present themselves to us, and how things even could be different from the ways they are. Seizing such possibilities, however, means rejecting the notion that either we must accept nearly everything as it is or we must enter into a radical disorganization of reality in which we can claim no bearings to guide us.[4]

Most social science is description of the familiar social world with slightly differing contexts and particulars – like romance novels that rehearse fairly standard plots in new settings and with new characters. We industriously accumulate facts, test them to be sure of their solidity, sort them into identifiable patterns.[5] For the most part this sorting is limited to taxonomy, rather like pre-Darwinian orderings of the biological universe in terms of phenotypic characteristics. Only occasionally do we systematize in a more theoretical way, one that argues for an underlying order that cannot be found in any of the surface characteristics of its objects. Nothing presses this theoretical venture on us more firmly than the experience of historical change and cross-cultural diversity.

Theory, in this sense, lies never in the facts themselves, not even those that demonstrate the statistical connection between various occurrences. In his distinction of mere correlation from true causality, Hume showed – almost despite himself, or to Kant rather than to himself – the essential place of theory and the limits of empiricism as a source of certain knowledge. At the same time he suggested the indeterminacy of theory, the impossibility of ever arriving at definite proofs based on empirical evidence. Hume turned away from theory to history as a guide for human understanding and action. Theory, after all, is not the only way to provide orientation to action; language and everyday culture provide us with enormous classificatory abilities, though as we move into analysis we become at least implicitly a bit theoretical. This is commonly equated with causal reasoning, but our idea of theory needs to make room also for the reasoning involved in narratives. Narratives need not be simply statements of progression or sequence. They can also be accounts of how prior events or actions limit and orient subsequent ones. Analysts can theorize variation of "plot" structures without introducing notions of causality *per se*.[6] Theory is important as the systematic examination and construction of knowledge – in the case of social theory, knowledge about social life. This may be causal or narrative in form, with each form suggesting different approaches to generalization and specification. While causal reasoning may be applied to discrete events, it is more commonly used in social science to refer to classes of phenomena, treated as internally equivalent, that influence other classes of similarly equivalent phenomena (any instance of x can be expected to produce an increase in y in the absence of intervening factors). Narrative, conversely, is often described as inherently particularizing but (1) the particularities may be

global (as in narratives of world history), and (2) comparisons among narratives facilitate a form of general, cross-situational knowledge.

The world that social theorists seek to understand is not just empirical, constituted of facts and propositions; it is the world also of phenomenological experience, reflective judgement, and practical action. Recognizing this makes more difficult, but perhaps more interesting, the key challenge theorists have faced ever since Hume: to develop systematic ways of understanding the world that are true to that world as the object of experience and action as well as of observation, and which are rigorous yet recognize their own embeddedness in history.

This suggests that some common conceptions of theory are misleading. It is a mistake in particular to imagine that theory is altogether abstract while empirical knowledge is somehow perfectly concrete. This is wrong on both counts.

First, social science theories are always partly inductive, they depend on at least some information about how the world works and also on an orientation to the world induced from the culture and experience of the theorists (but usually left inexplicit). More than this, many of the best theories are "empirically rich." That is, they are compilations not solely of formal propositions or abstract speculations but of concrete explanations and narratives. They work very largely by empirical analogies, statements of similarity and contrast, rather than law-like universal statements.[7] The extent to which the most compelling theories are richly, densely empirical can be seen easily by a quick reflection on the theories that have proved most enduringly influential – those, for example, of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Freud.

Second, the idea of a theory-free, totally concrete empirical sociology is equally misleading. Even when empirical researchers leave their theoretical orientations completely inexplicit, and claim – like Sherlock Holmes – to be working with "nothing but the facts," they rely on concepts, ideas about causality, and understandings of where to look for empirical relationships that cannot be derived entirely from this realm of facts, and that are necessary to constitute both facts and explanations. One of the major jobs of theoretical sociology is to make explicit, orderly, consistent – and open to critical analysis – these "orientations" that are usually taken for granted by empirical researchers.

Perhaps it is useful to clarify the ways in which the term "theory" is used by sociologists – and indeed by social scientists generally – in order to see why our habitual ways of thinking about theory sometimes obscure understanding both of what is going on in academic science and how theory is important in the public sphere. First, "theory" is sometimes understood in a strongly empiricist fashion to refer to an orderly system of tested propositions. In such a usage of theory, the main elements are (1) potentially generalizable propositions, and (2) scope statements about where they do and do not fit. Generality and cumulation are key goals of theory thus conceived. This is often called positivism, by both critics and proponents, but that is really a misnomer. The

"positivism" label comes from the scientism of early French social theorists like Comte, and Hegel's critique of "mere positivity" – seeing the surface existence of the world but not its internal tensions. The Frankfurt theorists, especially Horkheimer and Adorno, combined their appropriation of Hegel's dialectics (stressing the role of "determinate negation") with their critique of both social science empiricism and the philosophy of the Vienna Circle (which called its work "logical positivism").[8]

Logical positivism was far from a summation of tested propositions. It turned on the search for consistency and power of logical (usually quite formal) expression, not just empirical generalization. Many logical positivists were (and are) interested in the theories of physics and mathematics, which are hardly empirical generalizations. The theory of relativity, for example, yields some testable propositions, but achieved recognition as a "beautiful" and powerful theory before very many of its key propositions could be tested. As Karl Popper (1968), though only ambiguously part of the positivist grouping, summed this up in a neat phrase, scientists should be interested in "conjectures and refutations," not mere generalizations. This leads, then, to the second sense of "theory," a logically integrated causal explanation. It is only for this second sort of theory that criteria of praise like parsimony or power or completeness become relevant.

Finally, there is a third sense of theory, one Robert Merton (1968) tried to distinguish from the first two (but without distinguishing those altogether adequately from each other). He called this third sort theoretical orientations or perspectives, rather than theories. He meant, I think, something like approaches to solving problems and developing explanations rather than the solutions and explanations themselves. While Talcott Parsons tried to consolidate functionalism as an integrated general theory, thus, Merton's own use of functionalism in middle-range theories was as an orienting perspective; so too has been most use of the broad traditions associated with Max Weber or Karl Marx. During the last 30 years, however, we have become aware that this third sense of theory cannot be kept altogether in the background of the first two. This is so for two reasons. First, we realize that the language our so-called theoretical perspectives provide for talking about various issues is itself dependent on theories. In other words, if we say that we think power and conflict play a larger role than functional integration in establishing social order, we presume understandings of what social order is that can only be achieved on the basis of some level of theorization, and which may not be the same as other understandings. Second, and for partly similar reasons, most of what we take to be the "facts" of social science, and indeed the criteria for evaluating both facts and explanations, are themselves constituted in part through theory. Theory does not only follow from and attempt to explain an inductively pre-given world of empirical observations, theory enables us to make observations and thus convert sensory impressions into understandings we can appropriate as facts. Theories thus offer us ways to think about the empirical world, ways to make observations,

and ways to formulate tests, not just ways to explain the results of the tests and the correlations among the empirical observations.

Each of these three widespread senses of theory offers us insight into the ways sociological theory informs both scientific research and public life and practical action outside academia. Theoretical writings offer repositories and syntheses of empirical knowledge; they offer explanations, and they offer methods for thinking up new explanations. But this makes things seem too simple; and it obscures the potentially transformative role of theory in both academic sociology and public life. The three conventional ideas about how theory works, to put this another way, assume that all science is normal science in Kuhn's (1970) sense (that is, science which seeks to solve explanatory problems within established paradigms but not to change the paradigms). They leave no room for revolutionary science or even for smaller challenges to paradigms that we might not want to claim are revolutionary even though they bring significant changes to the way we see the world.

Consider, for example, the empiricist notion of theory I listed first. This rightly grasps the extent to which theory needs to be rich with empirical knowledge, but misleadingly presents empirical knowledge as though it could be simply an orderly summation of tested propositions. In the first place, this involves imagining that the empirical propositions can be constructed in ways that do not depend on theoretical (or metatheoretical) assumptions, that are not embedded within particular theoretical orientations and thus sometimes difficult to translate across theoretical discourses. More basically, this understanding fails to leave room for anomalies and lacunae that structure our knowledge alongside tested certainties and that perhaps do much more to drive knowledge forward. And last but not least, it misses the extent to which the best theories are not simply assemblages of propositions but analogical constructs comparing, constrasting, and identifying similarities among cases of various sorts.

Even when we speak with more sophistication of theory as explanation and methods for constructing explanations, we fail to do justice to the role of theory in *constituting* our very access to the social world, including the facts about which we theorize and the practical actions through which we test propositions and understanding. Theoretical ideas – like, for example, the ideas of democracy or class – also become part of the world we study, changing it so that we are never able to achieve the complete closure envisaged by our conventional textbook notions of theoretical cumulation or the relationship between theory and research. And especially with regard to the relationship of social theory to the public sphere, but also in relation to the most academic science, we need to recognize that our theoretical innovations respond to problems in our efforts to achieve understanding or to offer normative guidance, but that in fixing one set of problems they may create new ones, or new ones may emerge as the social world changes. We do not move simply from false propositions to true ones; for the most part, we move from less adequate accounts to more adequate accounts, with our criteria of adequacy always

shaped in part by the practical problems that command our attention.[9] Weber's and Durkheim's theories, thus, cannot be compared simply on the criterion of truth, as though with some imaginable data we could decide that one is right and the other wrong. Rather, they are best compared in terms of their potential usefulness for achieving different kinds of understandings or understandings of different issues.[10]

In this connection, one of the most important roles of theory lies in enabling us to ask new and different sorts of questions. A host of important questions arise from Marx's theories, for example, that would not arise from those of either Durkheim or Weber. Marxist theory urges us to study to what extent interests rooted in material relations of production shape people's identities and actions, and whether recognition of such interests makes for an international class consciousness strong enough to triumph over nationalism. We may learn more from Marx's questions in some cases than from his answers. Moreover, theories enable us to ask questions that didn't occur to the originating theorists themselves – as, for example, Marx's theory of alienation produced such insistent questioning of the conditions of communist societies that allegedly Marxist governments attempted to suppress its use.

But the fact that theories enable us to ask new questions is not just a sign that our knowledge grows progressively better. It is, rather, a result of the many possible vantage points that one might achieve in consideration of a single set of social phenomena. Theories remain multiple not because we are confused or have not yet reached correct scientific understanding of the problems before us, but because all problems – like all people – can be seen in different ways. Or put another way, it is generally not possible to ask all the interesting questions about any really significant phenomenon within the same theory or even within a set of commensurable, logically integratable, theories. Noting this was one of the breakthroughs of modern physics, linked to theory of relativity. As Heisenberg (quoted in Arendt's (1954 (1973: 44)) interesting discussion of the concept of history) remarked:

> The most important new result of nuclear physics was the recognition of the possibility of applying quite different types of natural laws, without contradiction, to one and the same physical event. This is due to the fact that within a system of laws which are based on certain fundamental ideas only certain quite definite ways of asking questions make sense, and thus, that such a system is separated from others which allow different questions to be put.

For this reason, we cannot expect theoretical cumulation to result in the development of *the* single, completely adequate theory. The field of sociological theory necessarily – and indeed happily – will remain a field of dialogue among multiple theories, each offering aspects of truth and none of them commanding truth entirely. This means also that theory needs to be seen crucially through its role in the process of interpretation, and that its empirical content is often best deployed not as universal truths or law-like generalizations but as analogies, contrasts, and comparisons.

The Idea of Critique

To combat the cosy contentment of the philistine (or positivist-empiricist cousins), critical social theory makes the very givenness of the world the object of exploration and analysis. This suggests another reason why theory has a complex relationship to facts. It cannot merely summarize them, or be neatly tested by them, since theory of some sort is always essential to the constitution of those facts. Theory is not only a guide to action in the way in which engineering principles guide the construction of bridges. It is an aid in thinking through changed circumstances and new possibilities. It helps practical actors deal with social change by helping them see beyond the immediacy of what *is* at any particular moment to conceptualize something of what could be. This is not the same as utopian or any other kind of normative theorizing, though the same capacity facilitates normative theorizing. Rather, this is a crucial analytic ability that shows the limits of sheer empiricism.

The point is conceptualized differently but equally clearly by dialectical theorists following Hegel and by theorists in the structuralist movement emanating from the work of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. For the former, the key is the tensions and contradictions that underpin existing reality and point both to its situation in a larger historical reality and the possibilities of its transcendence. For the latter, the key is to be able to see an underlying pattern of causes and constraints, not merely the more contingent surface pattern of actual occurrences. Actual occurences always reflect elements of chance and arbitrariness, and thus are imperfect guides to the underlying structure of possibilities. This is why empirical knowledge needs to be complemented with theory and why theory cannot be a mere summation of empirical knowledge. The logic of the point is not entirely different from the logic of statistical representation. As sociologists we are familiar with the difference between an anecdote and a statistical pattern – and sometimes frustrated with students, colleagues, and politicians who insist on thinking in terms of particular cases rather than overall patterns and probabilities. But even a well-constructed statistical sample does not necessarily reach to underlying causality; it simply represents accurately the empirical pattern at one point in time. Causality always depends on inference that goes beyond the "facts" or numbers themselves. And in the deeper, theoretical sense, it depends on recognizing that the facts could have been otherwise.

The old contrast between idiographic (particularistic or singular) and nomothetic (generalized or typified) reasoning doesn't quite capture this point. It grasps, accurately, the extent to which typical history writing gives the story of a chain of particular events that lead to a singular result. History, thus, is the story of what has happened. We seek in addition, however, an account of what *could* have happened because this is crucial information for consideration of our current decisions. But nomothetic reasoning doesn't offer this either. It offers – at least in most versions and in the terms of the *Methodenstreit* – a generalization of the many specific cases of what has happened.[11] An additional

step beyond mere generalization is involved in the move from empirical history to theory. It is said of generals that, based on experience, they are always preparing to fight the *last* war. One of the roles of theory is to enable us to recognize in what ways our future wars may be different.

None of the complexity in the relationship of theory to facts should be taken as license to make theory less empirically rich. Reaching to underlying causality is not simply a matter of abstraction. Moreover, if theory is not constantly opened to revision in the light of empirical inquiry, it is likely to become brittle, or to fall into disuse, or to become simply a repository of ideology. But the same is true not only of empirical investigation as organized by social science, but of experience and practical action which are also sources of the inductive content, meaning and flexibility of social theory. Using theory to challenge the givenness of the social world and to enable researchers to see new problems and new facts in that world requires recognizing that knowledge is a historical product and always at least potentially a medium of historically significant action.

Since to theorize is to open up vistas of understanding, it can never be altogether neutral; it is necessarily perspectival. This obligates the theorist to take seriously both the historical sources of his or her theory and its orientation to the future. Arendt invoked a parable from Kafka to describe this necessary situation of theory – indeed of thinking – in a tension between past and future. It posits an individual:[12]

> He has two antagonists: the first presses him from behind, from the origin. The second blocks the road ahead. He gives battle to both. To be sure, the first supports him in his fight with the second, for he wants to push him forward, and in the same way the second supports him in his fight with the first, since he drives him back. But it is only theoretically so. For it is not only the two antagonists who are there, but he himself as well, and who really knows his intentions? His dream, though, is that some time in an unguarded moment – and this would require a night darker than any night has ever been yet – he will jump out of the fighting line and be promoted, on account of his experience in fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each other. (Arendt, 1954 (1977: 7))

The protagonist gains his specific and determinate identity from his position in this conflict. The dream of being promoted to umpire over it is a somewhat dangerous one to which many thinkers have succumbed, the dream that theory can be set apart from both a retrospective analysis of the past – including its own past – and from a prospective engagement with the future. It is not surprising that theorists should have this dream, this hope of achieving perfect knowledge, but it is crucial that they should resist it. To leave the field of struggle for the umpire's chair is to try to adopt the Cartesian view from nowhere. Instead of a triumph of reason, this is simply a misrecognition. Instead of knowledge free from biased origins and undistorted by any practical purposes, it offers knowledge that cannot understand its origins or take responsibility for its effects.

A great deal of even very good social theory is produced and presented as though written from the umpire's chair. Its failure to take seriously both its own historical conditions of production and its implications as a practical action not

only annoy those who call for more critical theory, but contribute to the frequent disappointments of traditional, mainstream, or positivist theorists who expect a kind of straightforward cumulation in social science knowledge. Philosophical self-understandings rooted in empiricism or other metatheories of the sort loosely termed positivist actually lead many social theorists to keep bad faith with their own genuine accomplishments. Placing their hopes in the "discovery" of timeless and perspectiveless truths, they watch helplessly – or sometimes in bad humor lash out defensively and destructively – as their truths are overtaken by others. They are unable to appreciate the importance of their own work as more time-bound contributions to a process of practical reason rather than pure knowledge, to a conversation in which the construction of new understandings is continual. It is as though they identify only with the Socrates of the later dialogues (or the Plato of the non-dialogic writings) who insists on dominating the whole discussion and stating the whole truth; they don't see the virtue of Socrates' greater modesty in the early dialogues when his voice is only one, however brilliant, among several, each of which speaks aspects of the truth and alters the implications of what the others have to say (the image is drawn from Gadamer, 1975).

As this metaphor suggests, the issue is not only historical change but the multiplicity of voices, the differences among an indefinite range of different subject-positions and subjective identities. The very fact of natality, as Arendt called the unceasing renewal of the human world through the production of beings both mortal and unique, means that each child comes into the world as the potential source of radical novelty. In the common – but never fully common – world of human history, this is also the beginning of cultural diversity, though this flourishes only with the transmission of new ideas that allows some of them to become traditions.

Since so much theory seeks the umpire's chair, it seems useful to have a special term for theory that is self-conscious about its historicity, its place in dialogue and amid the multiplicity of cultures, its irreducibility to facts, and its engagement in the practical world. Deferring to Kant, and not just to Horkheimer and Adorno, we can call it critical theory.

Kant firmly placed his philosophy in contrast both to Hume's skepticism and to the dogmatic rationalism of Leibniz. It was as untenable to reject the project of increasingly secure understanding and theoretical knowledge as to imagine it settled prematurely. Instead, Kant sought as systematically as he could to explore the limits as well as the grounds of different forms of reason, knowledge, and understanding, taking seriously not only pure reason but practical reason and esthetic judgement. Kant was perhaps not fully successful in his quest, and indeed underestimated the extent to which his theory, like all others, was embedded in rather than able to leap beyond or beneath history and culture. Hegel sought to historicize – and socialize – Kant in one way; Durkheim in another. In our own day, it is no accident that both Pierre Bourdieu (in "The Categories of Professorial Judgement, or The Conflict of the Faculties") and Michel Foucault (in "What Is Enlightenment?") should have

chosen to evoke Kant in their titles as well as aspects of their thought.[13] And in his more recent work especially, Jürgen Habermas appears increasingly as a neo-Kantian ethicist.

Kant is a useful figure to remind us also of the error involved in drawing oversharp boundaries between the Enlightenment and the Romantic movement (or the modern and the postmodern). Kant, who helped to name as well as complete the Enlightenment, admired no one more than Rousseau, whose bust he kept on his desk. Yet of all eighteenth-century thinkers, Rousseau most anticipated Romanticism. In an era when self-declared postmodernists scourge the Enlightenment as the foundation of a repressive modern consciousness, it is worth remembering that, in their day, the *philosophes* were as surely the enemies of philistine complacency as the Romantics were a generation or two later. And if critical theory has as its focus the exploration of the social world beyond the dimensions which can be taken for granted as part of the contemporary consciousness of any era, then it must be a broad enough house to welcome – albeit not uncritically – the descendants of Romantics and Enlighteners alike, while avoiding both utter skepticism with its suggestion that we have no sources of intellectual security but tradition, and dogmatism with its affirmation of the positivity of the intuited world.

The Frankfurt School

The idea of critique is obviously an old one in philosophy, but also a hard one to pin down. In many usages it stands on the side of "analysis" against "substance," on the side of discovering our limits rather than affirming our possibilities. I appropriate the term, however, not so much as to open these old discourses as to evoke and at the same time broaden a more recent one. Critical theory was the name chosen by the founders of the "Frankfurt School" in the period between two world wars to symbolize their attempt to achieve a unity of theory and practice, including a unity of theory with empirical research and both with an historically grounded awareness of the social, political, and cultural problems of the age. The attempt held an attractive promise, and remains important, but it also ran into problems that proved insurmountable, at least for those who initially undertook it.

Key figures in the first generation of the Frankfurt School included Max Horkheimer, the charismatic leader and academic entrepreneur who held the group together to the extent anyone did, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Friedrich Pollock, Franz Neumann, Leo Lowenthal, Erich Fromm, and – sometimes at arm's length – Walter Benjamin. The prominence of these figures within the group waxed and waned, and some eventually severed ties completely. Other significant scholars were also linked in various ways to the core Frankfurt group, both in Germany and through its years of exile in America: Moses Finley, Alexander Mitcherlich, Paul Lazarsfeld, Karl Korsch. Aside from the endowment by which Felix Weil and his father created the Institute for Social Research, the group was held together by loyalty to

Horkheimer and interest in a project that would bridge philosophy and the emerging human sciences.

The thought of the Frankfurt group combined influences from many quarters, including Marxism, psychoanalysis, German idealist philosophy and theology, the Romantics, and thinkers of the "dark side" of Enlightenment like Nietzsche. As Horkheimer (1982) suggested, they wanted to distinguish critical theory from the sort of "traditional theory" that accepted the self-definition of the familiar and failed to look more deeply at how the categories of our consciousness were shaped and how they in turn constituted both the world we saw and what we took to be possible. In this sense, it is useful to recall that theology was among the important influences in their background, and to note how it too analyzed the existing world as the "proto-history" of a possibly better world to come, and as the surface reflection of contradictory underlying forces. But above all, the idea of critical theory as a distinctive project, and a project that would distinctively combine traditionally abstract and universal philosophy with historically concrete and empirical knowledge of the social world, is rooted in Hegel and in the responses to Hegel begun by the "Young Hegelians" including Marx and Kierkegaard.

It was Hegel, most specifically, who conceived of a "dialectic of enlightenment" in which reason that had turned against enlightenment might be deployed to redeem the potential of enlightenment. His philosophical project turned on achieving a reconciliation of modern life – as Habermas (1987: 4) reminds us, "Hegel was the first philosopher to develop a clear concept of modernity."[14] This encompassing reconciliation included several more specific aspects of reconciliation: among the competing sorts of reason, among the fragmented pieces of the social whole, and among the disconnected moments of individual identities. In Hegel's terms, modernity was constituted by several "diremptions" in what had been whole; there was no attractive way to go back to previous unity, and therefore one must move forward to create out of the conditions of the historical present a new kind of social totality.

Working through the dialectic of enlightenment, then, was a way to try to achieve a capacity to make sense of and potentially bring transformation (or unification) to the modern age. Central to this modern age, for Hegel, were a subjectivity which he conceived both on the plane of individual freedom and on that of the singular subjectivity of the ideal social totality, and a critical awareness based on the tensions and contradictions introduced into social life and consciousness by the basic diremptions. Although reason helped to produce these diremptions through Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment (and implicitly through enabling the revolutions of increased material productivity as well), reason remained the necessary way out. It was reason that could transform the mere longing for previous unity into a recognition of all the basic changes that had severed people from one another and reason which could lead these alienated people to see how the nature of each was denied in the split-off existence of the other. The young Hegel approached this in a way close to that of later critical theory, seeking a resolution that would combine freedom with

societal integration, and one rooted in a sort of intersubjectivity rather than a philosophy of the subject as such.[15] But the mature Hegel accepted the necessity of one crucial social division – the differentiation of state and society. Granting the state a kind of higher level subjective rationality, he at the same time gave up the capacity for radical critique of existing conditions.

A number of other thinkers tried in various ways to recover the capacity for critique within schemes of thought influenced by Hegel. Karl Marx was undoubtedly the most important. Marx's critique of political economy followed the basic design of approaching the future through a history of the present which took the concrete specificity of its categories seriously – indeed, he did this more consistently than Hegel.[16] Marx shared with the young Hegel an attempt to conceptualize the absolute creativity of the human being through the example of art, but unlike Hegel he extended this into a more general analysis of labor. This is not the place to try to work out the nature or implications of Marx's analysis. The crucial connection to the tradition of critical theory came through Marx's defetishizing critique (developed especially in chapter 1 of *Capital*) of the way the historically specific and humanly created categories of capital – labor, commodity, value – came to appear as quasi-natural, and indeed to dominate over the apparently more contingent quality of human life. The reified categories of capital transform qualitatively differentiated human activity into oppressive uniformities and identities. This is the crucial basis for Lukács's early-twentieth-century extension of Marx's critique, one which placed the emphasis more firmly on overcoming reification and which relied more consistently on esthetic criteria for establishing what non-reified life could be like.[17]

The Frankfurt School pioneers drew on this line of critical theory, and retained the central reliance on esthetics. To this they coupled Max Weber's analysis of bureaucracy as the completion of instrumental rationality. This aroused in them a fear of a totally administered society in which the very disunity and alienation that Hegel and Marx thought must lead to the transcendence of modern society would instead be stabilized. "What is new about the phase of mass culture compared with the late liberal stage is the exclusion of the new" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972: 134). At the same time, Horkheimer and Adorno linked the notion of dialectical critique to a more positive appreciation of non-identity, not just as the tension in every subject's relation to itself, but as the source of creativity and autonomous existence for the human individual.

At both the level of theory and the level of biographical motivation, the Frankfurt theorists were deeply concerned that transcendence of alienated society not mean the fixation of the individual as mere moment of an administered totality. "The perfect similarity is the absolute difference. The identity of the category forbids that of the individual cases . . . Now any person signifies only those attributes by which he can replace everybody else: he is interchangeable, a copy. As an individual he is completely expendable and utterly insignificant" (1972: 145–6). They challenged the traditional philosophy

of individual consciousness, the reliance on the presumed absolute identity of the individual as knower embodied famously in the Cartesian cogito ("I think, therefore I am"). Influenced by Freud, Romanticism, and thinkers of the "dark side" of Enlightenment like Nietzsche and Sade, they knew the individual person had to be more complex than that, especially if he or she was to be the subject of creative culture. They also saw the individual as social in a way most ordinary theory did not, constituted by intersubjective relations with others, all the more important where they furthered a sense of non-identity, of the complexity of multiple involvements with others, that enabled a person to reach beyond narrow self-identity. They challenged the idea that works of art or literature should be interpreted in terms of seamless singularity of purpose or smooth fit with the patterns of an age, seeking instead tensions and projects that pushed beyond the immediately manifest. They challenged what they took to be the increasing and increasingly enforced sameness of modern society – both a conformism among its members and a difficulty in bringing underlying tensions, even contradictions, to public attention and action. They challenged recourse to ideas of human nature that were unmediated by understandings of what was specific to an era – above all the modern capitalist era – and to different pasts and social positions.

This did not mean abandoning the idea of human nature, but, rather, seeing it as always historically embedded. Human nature meant, for example, the pursuit of happiness, the need for solidarity with others, and natural sympathies. From human nature in this sense emanated, according to Horkheimer, a form of reason implicitly critical of civilization. Marcuse would perhaps extend this line of argument most substantially by analyzing modern society in terms of the excess repression it required of its members. Capitalism and the instrumentally rational state posed demands against eros, against nature, that went beyond what Freud had theorized as general.[18]

The existence of such tensions made possible a critical theory that sought to expose them. But critical theory was (and is) more than that effort at exposure. It is an effort to show that such tensions are present not only between civilization and nature (human or external), but that they appear also as contradictions internal to civilization and its specific cultural products (e.g. philosophies). Indeed, basic to critical theory is the argument that a kind of non-identity, a tension with itself, is built into social organization and culture. One cannot have grasped the sources of events and dynamism without grasping this underlying level of contradictions and differences.

Such a view was and is predictably anathema to those who demand a straightforward empiricism or the kind of theory-testing envisaged by logical positivism. As Horkheimer wrote in "Der neueste Angriff auf die Metaphysik," in 1936:

> "The view that thought is a means of knowing more about the world than may be directly observed . . . seems to us entirely mysterious" is the conviction expressed in a work of the Vienna Circle. This principle is particularly significant in a world whose magnificent exterior radiates complete unity and order while panic and distress prevail beneath. Autocrats, cruel

colonial governors, and sadistic prison wardens have always wished for visitors with this positivistic mentality. (Quoted in Wiggershaus, 1994: 184)

We are familiar with "traditional," non-critical theory not just from the past but from most contemporary "positivist" and "empiricist" accounts of the accumulation of knowledge and even from those hermeneutic accounts that make a sharp fact/value distinction and maintain faith in the notion that intellectuals can be set apart from or even above the ordinary workings of society. Horkheimer's traditional theory was a broad category including much of the Kantian tradition as well as more empiricist social science. What distinguished these many sorts of work from critical theory was the conception that theory – and science generally – should somehow be understood as a thing apart from the rest of social practice, the province of a group of free-floating intellectuals as Mannheim saw it or simply the province of the individual knower in the tradition of Descartes and Kant.

"The traditional idea of theory," Horkheimer (1982: 197) wrote, "is based on scientific activity as carried on within the division of labor at a particular stage in the latter's development. It corresponds to the activity of the scholar which takes place alongside all the other activities of a society but in no immediately clear connection with them. In this view of theory, therefore, the real social function of science is not made manifest; it speaks not of what theory means in human life, but only of what it means in the isolated sphere in which for historical reasons it comes into existence." This view of theory is linked not only to social irresponsibility but to a misleading, if flattering, self-image for theorists. "The latter believe they are acting according to personal determinations, whereas in fact even in their most complicated calculations they but exemplify the working of an incalculable social mechanism" (p. 197). The most important result of such a self-misunderstanding, a failure both of reflexivity and of accurate empirical analysis of the conditions of theorizing, is a tendency to treat the existing social conditions as the only conditions that could exist.

Because the theorist is unable to see his or her own activity as part of the social world, and because he or she simply accepts into theoretical self-awareness the social division of labor with its blinders, he or she loses the capacity to recognize the contingency and internal contradictions of the empirical world. "The whole perceptible world as present to a member of bourgeois society and as interpreted within a traditional world-view which is in continuous interaction with that given world, is seen by the perceiver as a sum-total of facts; it is there and must be accepted" (Horkheimer, 1982: 199). The theorist, like most individuals within society, thus, fails to see the underlying conditions of social order (or chaos), and exaggerates the illusory coherence offered by the standpoint of individual purposiveness. The theorist is also led mistakenly to affirm the treatment of those basic social conditions that cannot readily be understood through purposive rationality, especially those results of human activity that are alienated from the control of conscious human beings, as though they were forces of nature. Theory accepts the products of historical

human action as unchanging and fixed conditions of human action, and thus cannot articulate the possibility of emancipation from these conditions.[19]

Even the sociology of knowledge, derived from the tradition of more critical theory, could fall into the habits of traditional theory, Horkheimer argued. Mannheim reconstructed the sociology of knowledge as a specialized, disciplinary field with its own narrower objects of study, cut off from analysis of the totality of social relations. While this sort of sociology might produce more or less interesting findings – e.g. regarding the relationship between intellectual positions and social positions – it lost its capacity critically to locate either the theorist himself or herself, or the conditions of the production of the facts under study.

The project of critical theory, thus, became for Horkheimer the recovery for human beings of the full capacities of humanity; it was in this regard a direct extension of Marxism. Drawing both on the early Marx and the first chapter of *Capital*, and influenced by Lukács's analysis of reification, critical theory aimed to show how human history had produced an alienation of human capacities such that social institutions and processes that were creatures of human action confronted people as beyond their scope of action. The mode of critique was thus "defetishizing," it located the recovery of human capacities and thus the possibilities for social transformation in the restoration of truly human relationships in favor of inhuman relationships in which people were just the mediations between things, commodities. External nature had to remain "other" to human beings, but this "second nature" did not. Theory could play a central role because the reified relationships of capital were constituted and maintained by a form of consciousness. Seeing them for what they were was already a step towards overcoming their dominion over human life.

The reification and alienation to be combatted were grasped by Horkheimer and his early associates especially in the "opposition between the individual's purposiveness, spontaneity, and rationality, and those work-process relationships on which society is built" (Horkheimer, 1982: 210). This was linked to the critique of "positivism" which occupied Horkheimer and his colleagues through much of their careers.[20] Positivist social science accepted the world as it existed, indeed even precluded recognition of the possibilities for fundamental change, by reproducing rather than challenging the reification through which the human content – the original activity of human creation – was removed from the institutions and processes of the social world. This reification made it possible to treat these aspects of humanity as though they were merely aspects of nature, to treat social facts as things, in Durkheim's pithy phrase.[21]

The exaltation of the apparently isolated individual subject – the idealized knower – and the reification of the social world were linked. Moreover, this was not just an academic problem, it was a systematic elimination of the sort of consciousness that might recognize the tensions, conflicts, exploitation, and oppression built into existing social arrangements. Critical theory would be different. "Critical thinking is the function neither of the isolated individual nor of a sum-total of individuals. Its subject is rather a definite individual in his real

relation to other individuals and groups, in his conflict with a particular class, and, finally, in the resultant web of relationships with the social totality and with nature" (Horkheimer, 1982: 210–11). To treat the individual as an asocial, ahistorical, objective starting point for knowledge, "an illusion about the thinking subject, under which idealism has lived since Descartes, is ideology in the strict sense" (p. 211).

Writing in the 1930s, Horkheimer was still able to retain an optimism that this sort of critical theory would be linked to more or less Marxist revolution. Narrowing the gap between intellectual understanding and concrete material practice was crucial to achieving the capacity for humanity to order its social relations in the new order that was about to emerge. Critical theory was not just an extension of proletarian thought, but a means of thinking about the social totality that would aid in the movement from the empirical proletariat's necessarily still partial view of society from its own class position to the achievement of a classless society, one not structured by injustice. Where fascists just expressed as ideology the underlying motives of certain segments of society, advocates of value-free science claimed to speak from an intellectual position outside all social conflicts. But, wrote Horkheimer (1982: 223–4), "critical theory is neither 'deeply rooted' like totalitarian propaganda nor 'detached' like the liberalist intelligentsia." Critical theory took the starting point not of the proletariat in itself, or of any other specific social group, but of the kind of thinking – necessarily done by individuals – that addressed the most categorially basic structure of the whole society, that which made it whole, gave it its basic dynamism, and pointed to the possibilities for its transcendence. "The critical theory of society is, in its totality, the unfolding of a single existential judgment. To put it in broad terms, the theory says that the basic form of the historically given commodity economy on which modern history rests contains in itself the internal and external tensions of the modern era; it generates those tensions over and over again in an increasingly heightened form; and after a period of progress, development of human powers, and emancipation for the individual, after an enormous extension of human control over nature, it finally hinders further development and drives humanity into a new barbarism" (p. 227).

Horkheimer's critical theory, in short, remained at this point clearly a species of Marxism. But the seeds of its later crisis were already apparent. First, applied to the contemporary empirical situation, the theory pointed more directly towards a new barbarism than towards its transcendence (and indeed, in 1937 this was perhaps not surprising). Second, Horkheimer steered clear of establishing a clear account of the agents of potential revolution just as he steered clear of active political involvement on the side of the proletariat or any other group. His Marxism remained abstract. Third, while Horkheimer was able to give a clear positive account of the contributions of critical theory in most intellectual regards, when it came to locating the theory socially, he was able mainly to offer negative comments on what it was not.

All these problems would return to produce a crisis in critical theory after the war. The fear of barbarism would remain acute even after Nazism was defeated.

Critical theorists would search in vain for social agents with the capacity to succeed in projects of real transformation – and after considering not only the proletariat, but Jews, students, and the Third World poor, would remain convinced that whatever the justice on the side of each, none had the capacity, and possibly none even had the inclination, for such revolutionary transformation. This was, indeed, part of the crucial, disturbing significance of the early Frankfurt studies on authority, especially the collective work *Studies in Authority and Family*.[22] Empirical research suggested that members of the German proletariat (and for that matter the supposedly free-floating intellectuals) were more prone to authoritarian attitudes than to opposition. Not least of all, the particular version of critical theory for which Horkheimer and Adorno were key figures retained a negative orientation that was only exacerbated as its leading figures gave up their early utopian ballast in the name of hard-headed self-discipline.

Part of the trouble was that Horkheimer and especially Adorno had largely abandoned the attempt to offer a historically and culturally specific account of the contradictions of modern capitalist society. In much (though not all) of their earlier work they had attempted to develop what Benjamin called "proto-histories," analyses of the present in terms of the historical dynamics producing it. These involved the location of crucial epochal changes, both at the large scale with the coming of capitalism and more specifically, as when both Adorno and Benjamin tried to work out the origins of modernism in the nineteenth century. In his early work on bourgeois philosophy, as the term suggests, Horkheimer had sought to locate the specific relations of schools of philosophy to their social conditions and therefore to their periods – above all to the era of capitalism.[23] But Horkheimer and Adorno were ambivalent about historical specificity in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and in Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason*, the last vestiges of this historically specific approach gave way to a more transhistorical, weakly periodized critique of the depredations of instrumental reason.[24] Since instrumental reason in some form could be traced back intellectually to the Greeks, and in practice was presumably universal, it was hard to see from what historical groundings its progressive hyper-development and growing dominion could be critically challenged.

> If one were to speak of a disease affecting reason, this disease should be understood not as having stricken reason at some historical moment, but as being inseparable from the nature of reason in civilization as we have known it so far. The disease of reason is that reason was born from man's urge to dominate nature, and the "recovery" depends on insight into the nature of the original disease, not on a cure of the latest symptoms.[25] (Horkheimer, 1947: 176)

At the heart of critical theory lay the notion of "immanent critique," a critique that worked from within the categories of existing thought, radicalized them, and showed in varying degrees both their problems and their unrecognized possibilities.[26] "Philosophy confronts the existent, in its historical context," wrote Horkheimer, "with the claim of its conceptual principles, in

order to criticize the relation between the two [ideas and reality] and thus transcend them" (1947: 182). Thus it was that Adorno spoke repeatedly of exploding bourgeois thought from inside and of bursting idealism open from within. As he praised Mahler's "symphonic reason," "Mahler leaves what exists in its place, but burns it out from within. The old barriers of form now stand as allegories not so much for what has been but for what is to come" (quoted in Wiggershaus, 1994: 187; see also pp. 188, 531 among many).

Immanence by itself was not enough; one could not just trust to history to realize the possibilities embodied in the forms of culture or in material social relations. Critique was required as a tool for finding and heightening the tensions between the merely existent and its possibilities. For the first-generation Frankfurt theorists, this meant especially that critical theory depended on a dialectical analysis of the contradictions internal to every epoch, or social formation, or situation, or text. An immanent critique was particularly effective as a historically specific critique.

This is one reading of Horkheimer's and Adorno's famous exploration of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Reason flourished in and through Enlightenment, but its development was contradictory. On the one hand, it brought the enormous progress of critical thought, including modern philosophy. On the other hand, it brought dehumanizing rationalization of society (more familiar to sociologists through Weber's image of the "iron cage") and the progress of technology that both enslaved human beings, stunting their creativity, and distanced humanity from both internal and external nature. "In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972: 1). Simply to defend the Enlightenment meant to defend bureaucratization, out of control technology, and even the horrors of Nazi science. A critical engagement with the Enlightenment required recognizing how reason could be deployed, as it were, against itself and against the human subjects of reason. Yet this did not mean simply abandoning reason, both because the irrational contained as many horrors as the rational, and because reason alone offered an approach to the recovery of an opportunity for coherent practice. Social and cultural forces – science, capital, mechanisms of political power – had become autonomous, according to Horkheimer and Adorno; they had gained the capacity to dictate the course of social stability and change. Extending the argument Marx had offered in the first chapter of Volume 1 of *Capital*, they showed how human subjects were reduced to objects by the very forms of social relations they had created.[27]

This manner of reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment* suggests that Horkheimer and Adorno still thought that engaging capitalism (which they avoided naming out of political anxieties) and other specifically modern social conditions could offer some hope of transformation, even redemption. Neumann, Pollock, and other Frankfurt School associates who wrote directly on political economy were

clearer in locating historically specific causes for current crises – the collapsing distinction between state and society, for example, and the erosion of the autonomy of the market under state capitalism. Although Horkheimer and Adorno would continue a more historically specific criticism of "the administered society" that emerged after World War II, at its deepest their critical theory worked after the war at the level of transhistorical tendencies of reason in relation to nature. At best, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was ambiguous on this point. Was it enlightenment (the progress of reason) in general that had led down the path to disaster, or was it the Enlightenment, with its historically specific institutionalization of bourgeois reason that had caused the trouble? Passages support each reading, but one offers more hope of a way out.

The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was written in exile at the end of World War II by two German Jews, one-time lovers of Enlightenment and German high culture. Perhaps it is not surprising that the authors were not able to seize with any conviction on sources of optimism. "Enlightenment," they wrote (1972: 6), "is totalitarian." They meant not only the manifest political totalitarianism of Nazi Germany, but the reduction of human autonomy implied by a "culture industry" which mass produced what later thinkers would call the "simulacra" of art, music, and literature, reducing potentially creative human beings to passive consumers of entertainment. When Horkheimer and Adorno tried to find the basis for hope, the sources of a "better" enlightenment, a more positive concept of reason, they found themselves increasingly at a loss. They could not imagine a progress not guided by reason, yet rationality seemed to have betrayed its positive potential.

"When the idea of reason was conceived," wrote Horkheimer, "it was intended to achieve more than the mere regulation of the relation between means and ends; it was regarded as the instrument for understanding the ends, *for determining them*" (1947: 10; original emphasis). But reason seemed to have abdicated the realm of ends; by common agreement, decisions about basic values – about value itself – could not be the result of purely reasonable understanding.[28] Reason had been reduced to the merely instrumental; it – and even the specific institutions of science – could be placed at the service of the Nazi death industry as readily as turned to the task of eliminating poverty and suffering. As institutionalized, reproduced, and deployed not just by Nazi Germany but by modern society generally, reason seemed destined to nullify individual autonomy rather than to realize it. As Horkheimer (1947: 13) remarked, the expression "to be reasonable" had taken on the meaning of adopting a conciliatory attitude rather than that of exercising one's capacity for rational judgement.

The problem was not limited to politics. In religion, for example, an anti-theological spirit had challenged the value of reason as a source of basic insights (a view that continues today among many "fundamentalists"). This allowed religion to be compartmentalized away from the corrosive force of reason, the threats of science, because its truths were held to be based on sources other than

those of reason. But this protection was achieved at the cost of radically reducing religion's capacity to engage critically with modern society let alone to apprehend its totality. The reduction of reason to a mechanism for subjective choice among means rather than objective determination of ends was no historical accident, Horkheimer argued; it reflected the material course of social change and accordingly could not be reversed simply by recognizing that it was a problem.

The existing state of society, Horkheimer and Adorno feared, allowed no truly transformative criticism, provided no bases for revolution or other practical action that would end the reproduction of a dehumanizing, repressive, and dangerous social order. The most they thought their theoretical work could do was to preserve critical thought – no longer in its strongly integrated form as critical theory, but as a "message in a bottle" for a future generation. This marked the onset of what has been called the "pessimistic turn" of the Frankfurt theorists.[29] Both in America – where McCarthyite anti-communism added to their gloom – and especially in the repressive environment of a Federal Republic of Germany where ex-Nazis could return to power and present themselves as mere realists while socialists and even left liberals were excluded (even from universities) as ideological – it appeared to Horkheimer and Adorno as though the most that could be done was to keep alive in purely intellectual form the seeds of critical thought so that they might grow anew if conditions ever became more favorable. Even this was not to be easy, they thought. The subjectivization of reason and for that matter the growth of "free enterprise" capitalism seemed to empower individuals, but this was deceptive. "All the monads, isolated though they were by moats of self-interest, nevertheless tended to become more and more alike through the pursuit of this very self-interest" (Horkheimer, 1947: 139). Conformism as ideology was thus matched by a genuinely increasing sameness among people insofar as each responded strictly to the self-interests of a consumer in a world of corporate capitalism and mass culture. Similarly, modern psychology built on a tradition stretching back to the Thomists to declare "adjustment" the highest goal of an individual; rather than seeing truth and goodness as critical values that might motivate discontent and even social change, they were implicitly identified with existing reality by those who held adapting to that reality to be the basis of individual health.

No social group – proletariat, intellectuals, artists – seemed altogether immune from this deadening of capacity to use reason to grasp the ends of social processes. At first, Horkheimer and Adorno thought that some crisis might be extreme enough to lay bare the antagonisms of modern society (and between that society and the nature it attempted to dominate). Horkheimer spoke of "the possibility of a self-critique of reason" when he could no longer believe in such a critique being carried out by any specific agents. But even that possibility came to seem more and more remote as instead of lurching into crisis the society of the 1950s and early 1960s marched forward in its combination of prosperity and repression.

A New Generation

When crisis came, in the 1960s, the aging critical theorists were generally unprepared. Of the first-generation Frankfurt theorists, only Herbert Marcuse was still able to think radical action possible when student protests thrust open politics back onto center stage. Though the media lionized Marcuse as a guru to the New Left, and though he did engage with student activists directly and positively, he also disappointed them. For Marcuse did not see the potential for real revolution as lying in the hands of European or American university students; he did not even agree that they were really an underprivileged class. Theirs was not the standpoint from which to grasp the crisis of the social totality, the successor to the proletariat. If any social group could claim that mantle, and also claim the social strength to wage real revolution, Marcuse (like Sartre) thought it was Fanon's "wretched of the earth," the oppressed masses of the Third World and their counterparts, the permanent unemployed of the First World (see Fanon, 1963, and Sartre's introduction). He thought still within the Frankfurt paradigm that expected radical social change to emerge from radical negativity, from those most objectively disempowered by existing arrangements, those whose existence was most opposed to the established order. This had arguably been the proletariat at one time, and Horkheimer had argued it was the Jews in 1940; though students in 1968 might support the radically disenfranchised, they were not that group.

On the other hand, Marcuse had grasped as well as any contemporary theorist some of the sources of the student protest. He saw the ways in which certain forms of repression – including erotic repression – could become the basis for political action even amid affluence. Commoditization, with its fetishizing reduction of human relationships to a single dimension, violated natural human potential in a way that necessarily occasioned resistance. Most centrally, perhaps, he expressed one of the key intuitions of the student protests in his more or less romantic argument that "to the denial of freedom, even of the possibility of freedom, corresponds the granting of liberties where they strengthen repression" (1964: 244). This anticipated his more radical argument about the repression inherent in a tolerance that refused to engage the genuine needs and demands of human subjects (Wolff, Moore, and Marcuse, 1969).

Student critiques of postwar society were varied, of course, combining systemic analysis with pacifism and psychological and cultural concerns or personal politics. In their condemnation of an abstract, impersonal, and violent society, students indeed followed the path of the earlier Frankfurt School critical theory. But at the same time there was a much more substantial concern with facilitating directly interpersonal relationships and profound immediate experience. As Oscar Negt (an activist who had been Habermas's assistant in Frankfurt and later became a sociology professor) summed up (1978: 65): "The anti-institutional and anti-authoritarian element in the revival of critical theory fused with the attempt, via politicization of interests and needs, to accomplish three things: 1) to break through the compulsive and pervasive mediations of

commodity exchange; 2) to break through the violence latent in the mechanisms of instrumental reason and structurally inherent in the sublimation and repression of basic instincts; 3) to establish meaningful immediacy, in which the split between communication and experience is in turn eliminated."[30] This critique drew on Wilhelm Reich and other radical inheritors of the psychoanalytic tradition in shifting the balance not only more towards the personal than the systemic, but also more towards an account of the virtues of immediacy itself. This was not without connection to more traditional critical theory's account of abstract commodifed society, of course, but it also marked a shift in emphasis, anticipating the "new social movements" that grounded a personal politics in direct interpersonal relations and experience, with much less reference to high culture. This Habermas would come to analyze as the practice of resistance rooted in "the lifeworld" against impersonal, "delinguistified," systemic rationality.[31]

While Marcuse's willingness to join directly in the passionate politics of the 1960s shocked and worried Adorno and Horkheimer, who preferred to stay not just on the sidelines but secluded from the fray, it was also true that the theory of the earlier Frankfurt theorists had helped to make possible the students' political and cultural analyses in both Germany and America. Frankfurt theory once again became all but synonymous with critical theory, indeed with theoretical critique.

The theorist who perhaps mattered most, however, was not a member of the first Frankfurt generation, but a sometime student of Adorno's named Jürgen Habermas. Deeply influenced by the early work of Horkheimer and Adorno, Habermas had moved to Frankfurt after his Ph.D. and begun to work in the Institute for Social Research. He initially sought to take his *Habilitation* (a higher doctorate or university teacher's qualification) under Adorno, but was blocked by opposition from Horkheimer (and Adorno's own caution). The objections were that he was too left wing, insufficiently critical of Enlightenment, and excessively willing to take critical theory directly into open political debate.

In his early work, Habermas pursued two basic agendas, each designed to re-establish the possibility of politically significant critical theory. Each was oriented, in other words, by the problem of linking theory and practice. The first sought to recover the resources of previous theory and to show how conventional social science failed to develop their critical potential.[32] The second pursued an immanent critique of the actual historical institutions within which rational critical discourse achieved political significance.

Inspired by Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958) and the transformations of the Aristotelian tradition, among other sources, Habermas sought to locate the possibility of a unity of theory and practice in the classical doctrine of politics. The issue was not just a use of theory in the service of political ends – a version of instrumental reason – but, rather, the development of a broader sense of political practice as the constitution of ways of living together that enabled the full realization of human potential. Critical theory, in

this context, responded directly to political needs, it was "a theory of society conceived with a practical intention" (Habermas, 1973: 1).

All knowledge, Habermas (1971) argued, had to be understood in terms of the interests which led practical actors to create it.[33] This meant that when a critical theorist examined earlier theory, his task was to locate the relationship among the knowledge-forming interests that led to theoretical production, the historical conditions within which the theory was set, and the epistemic content of the theory. This was an elaboration, worked out in a series of studies of major modern philosophies, not only of Habermas's argument in his earlier studies, but of Horkheimer's in "Traditional and Critical Theory" and "The State of Contemporary Social Philosophy and the Task of an Institute for Social Research." Like the earlier Frankfurt theorists, Habermas drew on Freud as well as Marx to develop a conception of theoretical critique as a way of establishing how "objective" knowledge – that which approached the world as a series of external *results* – could be reconnected with intersubjectively constituted meaning and capacity for action. A psychoanalytic patient cannot at first recognize the full meaning of his or her own life history, and cannot take fully responsible and effective action in regard to it, precisely because of systematic repression of key aspects of that meaning and of the interpersonally effective interests that constituted those life experiences. Psychoanalysis itself provides an intersubjective relationship in which physician and patient work through the barriers to communication and make previously repressed motivations accessible to conscious understanding and control. Analogically, critical theory – itself an intersubjective, communicative enterprise – was to perform this function for a society that was similarly trapped in a systematic incapacity to recognize the true sources of its own history. Human capacities were repressed without recognition and could be liberated with movement towards fuller and freer communication (see also Habermas, 1970). Drawing on this image of psychoanalysis as a communicative process, Habermas envisaged "an organization of social relations according to the principle that the validity of every norm of political consequence be made dependent on a consensus arrived at in communication free from domination" (1971: 284). Moreover, "theories which in their structure can serve the clarification of practical questions are designed to enter into communicative action" (1973: 3).

In his second agenda, Habermas approached this same goal with a historically grounded, immanent critique of the institutions of the bourgeois public sphere. The key work here was the very *Habilitationschrift* that Horkheimer had resisted, seeing Habermas's orientation as entirely too optimistic.[34] Indeed, one of the organizing features of Habermas's work was a determination not to fall into the same incapacitating pessimism as Horkheimer and Adorno. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), Habermas examined the origins, development, and degeneration of the distinctive political institution that made bourgeois democracy genuinely radical in its day.[35]

The public sphere of bourgeois, liberal society came into being on the foundations of earlier literary public arenas, Habermas argued (somewhat surprisingly neglecting science and religion).[36] Both salon culture and print media contributed. Discourse in the public sphere was, at least in principle, based on rational-critical argumentation; the best argument was decisive, rather than the identity of its proponents or opponents. Only relative elites were admitted to the public sphere, but these elites were of diverse statuses. Master craftsmen might rub shoulders with landed gentry in coffee houses, nobility mix with commoners in Parliament and salons alike. The discourse of the public sphere did not so much negate or challenge these differences as "bracket" them – Habermas specifically used the phenomenological term – making them irrelevant for the purpose of discourse itself. The public sphere addressed and could influence affairs of state and of the society as a whole, although it was not part of the state but of civil society. Citizens entered into the public sphere on the basis of the autonomy afforded them both socio-psychologically and economically by their private lives and non-state civil relations.

The importance of the public sphere for Habermas was that it offered a model of public communication which could potentially realize the rational guidance of society. The potential of this communication had not been fully realized, of course, but the categories of bourgeois democracy were not thereby made irrelevant as some Marxists and more pessimistic critical theorists assumed. On the contrary, an immanent critique could make the ideals of rational-critical discourse, like those of rights, once again politically effective. These ideals had been reduced to ideology by their incorporation in a discourse designed to affirm rather than challenge existing institutions. But critical theory could make citizens aware of their still unrealized potential, and enable them to use these ideals in struggle with those who nominally adhered to them but did not in fact want to build on them.

That Habermas's account of the public sphere presented an eighteenth-century golden age followed by decline and degeneration was thus not immediately incapacitating. Probing further, Habermas sought to locate the social roots of the transformations that had deprived the public sphere of its initial strength of rational-critical discourse. The procedure of immanent critique could then presumably be combined with the identification of historical subjects capable of putting into practice the possibilities uncovered by theory.

Heavily influenced by the mass society theories of the 1950s, however, Habermas's account of the twentieth century undermined his own initial optimism.[37] He showed a public sphere that was not only deradicalized but fundamentally diminished by two major processes. The first was the progressive incorporation of ever larger numbers of citizens into the public. This followed the genuinely democratic logic of the early public sphere which could not sustain its own exclusiveness against recurrent demands that its democratic ideals be taken more seriously. But as the public sphere grew in scale, it degenerated in form. Even if the new participants had been as well prepared for its rational-critical discourse as their predecessors, which they were not on

Habermas's view, their discourse would have been distorted by the necessity of reliance on mass media and the opportunities for manipulation of communication presented by advertising, public relations, and similar institutions. Second, the public sphere lost some of the basis it had once had in a civil society clearly distinct from the state. In the twentieth century, and especially after World War II, the boundaries between state and society had increasingly collapsed, Habermas thought, as government intervention in the economy increased, as welfare states were formed, as giant corporations took on political functions, and citizens were organized into (or represented by) interest groups. Social decisions were increasingly removed from the rational-critical discourse of citizens in the political public sphere, and made the province of negotiation (rather than discourse proper) among bureaucrats, credentialed experts, and interest group elites.

Habermas followed directly in the footsteps of his Frankfurt predecessors in adducing the scale and mediated communication of mass society and the collapsed state/society distinction of "administered society" as the basic transformations in the structural foundations of the public sphere. Like his predecessors, this pushed him towards increasingly pessimistic conclusions, and the tone of the last part of his book differed markedly from that of the first. Though his immanent critique was able to locate unrealized emancipatory and rational potential in the forms of bourgeois democracy, he was unable to locate the material social bases for action to realize those potentials in the late twentieth-century public sphere.[38]

Accordingly, Habermas abandoned the project of a historically immanent foundation for critical theory. Instead of seeking critical purchase in the comparison of historically and culturally specific social formations, he sought it in the elaboration of universal conditions of human life. He grounded his critique not in historical developments as such but in a broad idea of evolutionary progress in communication. During the years of the student movement he theorized potentials for concrete transformation, based especially on the idea that contemporary states were undergoing a legitimation crisis because they relied on cultural foundations that were undermined as more and more of social life fell under the sway of administrative planning (Habermas, 1975). Habermas retained his interest in seeing the public sphere reinhabited by genuinely political discourse, and it was on this basis that he welcomed the student movement (even while he decried its more extreme tendencies as "left fascism"). But at a deeper level, Habermas did not base his critical theory on social institutions of discourse, but on the potential for unimpeded communication suggested by the rationality implicit in speech itself, rather than by actual institutions or histories. His "universal pragmatics" started from a primordial split between communicative and instrumental reason, and even within communication between speech oriented to understanding itself and speech oriented to practical effects. Though the increasing "autonomization" of instrumental reason – treating it as self-sufficient and adequate to a range of practical projects – was the source of social disasters and alienation, the

countervailing tendencies were inherent in the transcendental characteristics of speech itself. Thus every communication was based on the presumption of certain standards of validity – e.g. that speakers spoke not only the truth, but truthfully, without manipulative intent. Even where not articulated, these validity claims were always open to potential discursive redemption. Processes of social and cultural transformation could (and perhaps in evolutionary fashion would) move in the direction of making more and more communication live up to these immanent potentials.[39]

Habermas's later work on communicative action retained one crucial theme from his early work. He sought ways to realize the unfinished potential of the project of enlightenment or modernity (see Bernstein, 1985, including Habermas's chapter). With the shift to universal pragmatics, he found a more reliable basis for an optimistic orientation to critical theory than he had in his historically specific account of the public sphere. This was, indeed, a path that Horkheimer had anticipated, though not in published work. "To speak to someone basically means recognizing him as a possible member of the future association of free human beings. Speech establishes a shared relation towards truth, and is therefore the innermost affirmation of another existence, indeed of all forms of existence, according to their capacities. When speech denies any possibilities, it necessarily contradicts itself."[40] Adorno agreed with Horkheimer's insight, but faced with the manifest contradictions of World War II and Nazism they proved unable to build on it and focussed rather on the ways in which language had been robbed of its very meaning.

Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Habermas had started with an interest in historically specific immanent critique and had moved increasingly towards a transhistorical theory. Unlike his predecessors, he was able to maintain a positive orientation to action. Indeed, paradoxically, Habermas shifted away from history to recover a basis for optimism while Horkheimer and Adorno moved away from history in a kind of radicalization of their despair.

Neither the first-generation Frankfurt theorists nor Habermas have been altogether blind to the issue of difference. Indeed, we have seen the centrality of the "dialectical" themes of non-identity, resistance to a conforming, reconciled society, and contestation of a social science reduced to affirming the existing conditions without recognizing their contradictions. Adorno in particular was inspired by Hölderlin's aphorism, "what differs is good." Much of Adorno's work was devoted to challenging the solipsism and absolutism of "identitarian thinking," the implicit subjectivism and resistance to difference of non-dialectical thought (1973: especially 183). Yet this universalized account of non-identity and difference is a far cry from a capacity for making sense of concrete particularities. As Habermas wrote, "socialized individuals are only sustained through group identity" (in Adorno et al., 1976: 222). Yet group identity has not been his interest and he has pursued a theory of communicative action grounded in the universal presuppositions of language and the potentials of individuals. In their accounts of the universal conditions of human life, Habermas and his predecessors failed to come adequately to terms with the basic and constitutive

importance of collective and individual difference for human beings. More recent theoretical traditions, above all feminism, have played a central role in showing the missed implications of human difference.

Shifts in Public and Private

The very distinction of public from private took on new meaning in the early modern era with the notion that outside the immediate apparatus of state rule there existed both a realm of public discourse and action that might address or act on the state, and the private affairs of citizens that were legitimately protected from undue state regulation or intervention. Persons existed in dual aspects, just as the private affairs of office holders came increasingly to be distinguished from their public roles.[41] The notion of a public realm is accordingly almost always ambivalent, referring to the collective concerns of the political community and to the activities of the state that is central to defining that political community. This two-edged notion of the public inscribes its parallel notion of the private. The private is simultaneously that which is not subject to the purview of the state and that which concerns personal ends distinct from the public good, the *res publica* or matters of legitimate public concern.

The idea of "public" is central to theories of democracy. It appears both as the crucial subject of democracy – the people organized as a discursive and decision-making public – and as object: the public good. This has become a focus of intense critical theoretical attention recently, especially in the English-speaking world, partly because the English translation of Jürgen Habermas's major book on the subject (1989; see also Calhoun, 1992) coincided with the fall of communism and attendant concern for transitions to democracy. As Habermas develops the theoretical problematic of the public sphere, for example, the basic question is how social self-organization can be accomplished through widespread and more or less egalitarian participation in rational-critical discourse.

Yet, as analyses of the exclusion of women from public life have shown most sharply, the conceptualization of public has also worked in anti-democratic ways. In the first place, women were simply excluded from the now-idealized public spheres of the early bourgeois era. They were excluded from the English Parliament and the French National Assembly in ways they had not been excluded from aristocratic salon culture and were not excluded from popular political discourse (Landes, 1988; Eley, 1992). The issue of "democratic inclusiveness" is not just a quantitative matter of the scale of a public sphere or the proportion of the members of a political community who may speak within it. While it is clearly a matter of stratification and boundaries (e.g. openness to the propertyless, the uneducated, women, or immigrants), it is also a matter of how the public sphere incorporates and recognizes the diversity of identities which people bring to it from their manifold involvements in civil society. It is a matter of whether in order to participate in such a public sphere, for example, women must act in ways previously characteristic of men and avoid addressing

certain topics defined as appropriate to the private realm (the putatively more female sphere). Marx criticized the discourse of bourgeois citizenship for implying that it equally fitted everyone when it in fact tacitly presumed an understanding of citizens as property-owners. The same sort of false universalism has presented citizens in gender-neutral or gender-symmetrical terms without in fact acknowledging highly gendered underlying conceptions.

All attempts to render a single public discourse authoritative privilege certain topics, certain forms of speech, and certain speakers. This is partly a matter of emphasis on the single, unitary whole – the discourse of all the citizens rather than of subsets – and partly a matter of the specific demarcations of public from private. If sexual harassment, for example, is seen as a matter of concern to women, but not men, it becomes a sectional matter rather than a matter for the public in general; if it is seen as a private matter then by definition it is not a public concern. The same goes for a host of other topics of attention that are inhibited from reaching full recognition in a public sphere conceptualized as a single discourse about matters consensually determined to be of public significance.

The alternative is to think of the public sphere not as the realm of a single public, but as a sphere of publics. This does not mean that the flowering of innumerable potential publics is in and of itself a solution to this basic problem of democracy. On the contrary, democracy requires discourse across lines of basic difference. It is important that members of any specific public be able also to enter into others. Political efficacy in relation to highly centralized states requires some organization of discourse and action on a very large scale. But even the most centralized states are not unitary; different branches of their bureaucracies can be addressed independently and often are most effectively addressed by publics organized on a narrower scale than the polity as a whole. Thus an environmentally focussed public discourse better monitors what governmental regulatory agencies do with regard to the environment than could an altogether general public discourse. This does not eliminate the need for a broader discourse concerned, among other things, with the balancing of different demands on states or different interests. But this discourse can be conceptualized – and nurtured – as a matter of multiple intersections among heterogeneous publics, not only as the privileging of a single overarching public.

Once we begin to think in terms of such alternative understandings of publics, however, we confront resistance stemming from the way notions of the public sphere have been rooted in the discourse of nationalism. Ideas of the public commonly draw from nationalist rhetoric both the capacity to presume boundaries and an emphasis on the discourse of the whole. As a way of conceptualizing political communities, nationalist rhetoric stresses, among other tropes, an understanding of the individual as directly and immediately related to the nation, so that national identity is experienced and recognized as personally embodied and not the contingent result of membership in intermediate groups. Because the nation is understood as unitary and integral,

nationalist thought discourages notions of multiple and multifarious publics; it typically rejects claims to the quasi-autonomy of subnational discourses or movements as divisive. To the extent that our commonplace and politically effective understandings of public life depend on nationalist presumptions, a bias towards a homogenizing universalism is apt to appear. Where nationalism or any other cultural formation represses difference, however, it intrinsically undermines the capacity of a public sphere to carry forward a rational-critical democratic discourse.

The problem arises largely from an inadequate appreciation of the extent to which difference – what Hannah Arendt called "plurality" – is basic not only to human life in general but specifically to the project of public life and therefore to democracy.[42] Plurality is not a condition of private life or a product of quotidian personal tastes, in Arendt's view, but, rather, a potential that flowers in creative public achievements. Arendt accepted the classical Greek restriction on public participation precisely because she thought few people could rise above the implicit conformity imposed by a life of material production to achieve real distinction in the realm of praxis. But we need not agree with this exclusionary premise in order to grasp that the reason for a public discourse lies partly in the potential that various members will bring different ideas into intellectual consideration.

Part of the point of linking the distinction of public from private to that of praxis from mere work or labor is to present the public sphere as something more than an arena for the advancement or negotiation of competing material interests. This image is carried forward in Habermas's account with its emphasis on the possibility of disinterested rational-critical public discourse and his suggestion that the public sphere degenerates as it is penetrated by organized interest groups. To presume that these will be only different policies for achieving objectively ascertainable ends – let alone ends reducible to a common calculus in terms of a lowest common denominator of interest – is to reduce the public sphere to a forum of Benthamite policy experts rather than a vehicle of democratic self-government. This is clearly not something Habermas intends to praise. Yet it is not as sharply distant from his account of the public sphere as it might at first seem. One reason is that Habermas does not place the same stress as Arendt on creativity. He treats public activity overwhelmingly in terms of rational-critical discourse rather than identity-formation or expression, and somewhat narrows the meaning of and significance of plurality and introduces the possibility of claims to expertise more appropriate to technical rationality than communicative action.[43] Part of the background to this problem lies in the very manner in which public is separated from private in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century liberal public sphere which is the basis for Habermas's ideal-typical construction.

The liberal model of the public sphere pursues discursive equality by disqualifying discourse about the differences among actors. These differences are treated as matters of private, but not public, interest. On Habermas's account, the best version of the public sphere was based on "a kind of social

intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether" (1989: 36). It worked by a "mutual willingness to accept the given roles and simultaneously to suspend their reality" (p. 131). This "bracketing" of difference as merely private and irrelevant to the public sphere is undertaken, Habermas argues, in order to defend the genuinely rational-critical notion that arguments must be decided on their merits rather than the identities of the arguers. This was as important as fear of censors for the prominence of anonymous or pseudonymous authorship in the eighteenth-century public sphere. Yet it has the effect of excluding some of the most important concerns of many members of any polity – both those whose existing identities are suppressed or devalued and those whose exploration of possible identities is truncated. In addition, this bracketing of differences also undermines the self-reflexive capacity of public discourse. If it is impossible to communicate seriously about basic differences among members of a public sphere, then it will be impossible also to address the difficulties of communication across such lines of basic difference.

The public sphere, Habermas tells us, is created in and out of civil society.[44] The public sphere is not absorbed into the state, thus, but addresses the state and the sorts of public issues on which state policy might bear. It is based (1) on a notion of public good as distinct from private interest, (2) on social institutions (like private property) that empower individuals to participate independently in the public sphere because their livelihoods and access to it are not dependent on political power or patronage, and (3) on forms of private life (notably families) that prepare individuals to act as autonomous, rational-critical subjects in the public sphere. A central paradox and weakness (not just in Habermas's theory but in the liberal conception which it analyzes and partly incorporates) arises from the implication that the public sphere depends on an organization of private, pre-political life that enables and encourages citizens to rise above private identities and concerns. It works on the hope of transcending difference rather than the provision of occasions for recognition, expression, and interrelationship.

The resolution of this issue depends on two main factors. First, the idea of a single, uniquely authoritative public sphere needs to be questioned and the manner of relations among multiple, intersecting, and heterogeneous publics needs to be considered. Second, identity-formation needs to be approached as part of the process of public life, not something that can be fully settled prior to it in a private sphere.

Recognizing a multiplicity of publics, none of which can claim a completely superordinate status to the others, is thus a first step (Eley, 1992: Fraser, 1992). Crucially, however, it depends on breaking with core assumptions that join liberal political thought to nationalism. It is one of the illusions of liberal discourse to believe that in a democratic society there is or can be a single, uniquely authoritative discourse about public affairs. This amounts to an attempt to settle in advance a question which is inextricably part of the democratic process itself. It reflects a nationalist presumption that membership

in a common society is prior to democratic deliberations as well as an implicit belief that politics revolves around a single and unitary state. It is normal, however, not aberrant, for people to speak in a number of different public arenas and for these to address multiple centers of power (whether institutionally differentiated within a single state, combining multiple states or political agencies, or recognizing that putatively non-political agencies like business corporations are loci of power and addressed by public discourse). How many and how separate these public spheres are must be empirical variables. But each is apt to make some themes easier to address and simultaneously to repress others, and each will empower different voices to different degrees. That women or ethnic minorities carry on their own public discourses, thus, reflects not only the exclusion of certain people from the "dominant" public sphere, but a positive act of women and ethnic minorities. This means that simply pursuing their equitable inclusion in the dominant public sphere cannot be either an adequate recognition of their partly separate discourses or a resolution to the underlying problem. It is important to organize public discourse so that it allows for discursive connections among multiple arenas.

Recognizing the existence of multiple public spheres thus is not an alternative to asking many of the questions Habermas asks about *the* public sphere, i.e. about public discourse at the largest of social scales and its capacity to influence politics. It simply suggests that these questions need to be answered in a world of multiple and different publics. It is a political exercise of power to authorize only one of these as properly "public," or of some as more legitimately public than others which are held to be "private." In other words, determining whose speech is more properly public is itself a site of political contestation. Different public discourses commonly invoke different distinctions of what is properly "private" and therefore not appropriately addressed in the public discourse or used to settle public debates. There is no objective criterion that distinguishes private from public across the range of discourses. We cannot say, for example, that either bank accounts or sexual orientations are essentially private matters. Varying public/private distinctions are potential (and revisable) accomplishments of each sphere of discourse.

A great deal of the discourse that takes place in public, and that is accessible to the broadest public, is not about ostensibly public matters. I do not mean simply that people take very public occasions like television appearances to talk about what is customarily considered private, like their sex lives. I mean that many topics of widespread concern to the body politic – like childbearing and childrearing, marriage and divorce, violence of various sorts – are brought into discussions that are public in their constitution but that do not represent themselves as public in the same way the newspaper editorial pages do, and are not taken equally seriously by most participants in the more authorized public sphere. These matters are discussed in churches and self-help groups, among filmgoers and on talk-radio, among parents waiting for their children after school dances, and those waiting for visiting hours to commence at prisons. How much the discourse of these various groupings is organized on the

rational-critical lines valorized by Habermas's classical Enlightenment public sphere is variable – as is the case, of course, for any other public discussion. But it would be a mistake to presume *a priori* that one can only be rational-critical about affairs of state or economy, and that these necessarily comprise the proper domain of the public sphere. Conversely, relegation to the realm of the private can be in varying degrees both a protection from public intervention or observation and a disempowering exclusion from public discourse.

The differences among public spheres are important. Simply to treat all these different more or less public discourses as public spheres in Habermas's sense would be to miss the center of his theoretical project, to treat as entirely arbitrary his emphasis on discourse that attempts to work on a rational-critical basis, to include people different from one another while making arguments rather than the identities of arguers the basis of persuasion, and to address the workings of the state. It would fundamentally undermine the contribution of the analysis of public spheres to democratic theory. But Habermas invites some of this problem by employing a problematic distinction of public from private. This appears especially in his relegation of identity-formation (and therefore interest-formation) to the realm of the private.

Habermas presumes that identities will be formed in private (and/or in other public contexts) prior to entry into the political public sphere. This sphere of rational critical discourse can work only if people are adequately prepared for it through other aspects of their personal and cultural experience. Habermas briefly discusses how the rise of a literary public sphere rooted in the rise of novel-reading and theater-going publics contributed to the development of the political public sphere, but he does not follow through on this insight. He drops discussion of the literary public sphere with its nineteenth-century incarnation, that is, as soon as it has played its role in preparing the path for the rise of the Enlightenment political public sphere. He does not consider subsequent changes in literary discourse and how they may be related to changes in the identities people bring into the political public sphere.

More generally, Habermas does not adequately thematize the role of identity-forming, culture-forming public activity. He works mainly with a contrast between a realm of private life (with the intimate sphere as its inner sanctum) and the public sphere, and assumes that identity is produced out of the combination of private life and the economic positions occupied in civil society. Once we abandon the notion that identity is formed once and for all in advance of participation in the public sphere, however, we can recognize that in varying degree all public discourses are occasions for identity formation. This is central to the insight of Negt and Kluge (1993) in their appropriation of the phenomenological notion of "horizons of experience" as a way of broadening Habermas's approach to the public sphere. Experience is not something exclusively prior to and only addressed by the rational-critical discourse of the public sphere; it is constituted in part through public discourse and at the same time continually orients people differently in public life.[45] We can distinguish

public spheres in which identity-formation figures more prominently, and those in which rational-critical discourse is more prominent, but we should not assume the existence of any political public sphere where identity-formation (and reformation) is not significant.[46] Identity-formation and topical debate are hard to keep entirely separate.

Excluding the identity-forming project from the public sphere makes no more sense than excluding those of "problematically different" identities. Few today would argue (at least in the broadly liberal public spheres of the West) against including women, racial and ethnic minorities, and virtually all other groups clearly subject to the same state and part of the same civil society. Yet many do argue against citizenship for those who refuse various projects of assimilation. It is not just Germans with their ethnic ideas about national citizenship who have a problem with immigrants. The language of the liberal public sphere is used to demand that only English be spoken in Florida, for example, or that Arabs and Africans conform to certain ideas of Frenchness if they wish to stay in France. And for that matter, many other arguments – e.g. that only heterosexuals should serve in the military – have much the same form and status. They demand conformity as a condition of full citizenship. Yet movement of people about the globe continues, making it harder to suppress difference even while provoking the urge. In a basic and intrinsic sense, if the public sphere has the capacity to alter civil society and to shape the state, then its own democratic practise must confront the questions of membership and the identity of the political community it represents. These questions cannot be settled "objectively," but only through the politically charged – but potentially also theoretically informed – discourse of publics both large and small. And the extent to which these various publics themselves manage to be inclusive of different voices will be crucially telling for their practical significance.

Rethinking Critical Theory

To sum up, the Frankfurt theorists neither invented critical theory nor retain any sort of property right in the venture. They did, however, play a crucial role in bringing together key intellectual traditions to inform critical theory, and in developing a vision of how serious social theory could engage the discourse of the public sphere. Critical theory today is carried on not just by Habermas and his associates, but by a wide range of others working in varying approaches: feminist theorists, poststructuralists, theorists of practice, etc.

Critical social theory can be defined as the interpenetrating body of work which demands and produces critique in four senses:

1 a critical engagement with the theorist's contemporary social world, recognizing that the existing state of affairs does not exhaust all possibilities, and offering positive implications for social action;
2 a critical account of the historical and cultural conditions (both social and personal) on which the theorist's own intellectual activity depends;

3 a continuous critical re-examination of the constitutive categories and conceptual frameworks of the theorist's understanding, including the historical construction of those frameworks; and
4 a critical confrontation with other works of social explanation that not only establishes their good and bad points but shows the reasons behind their blind spots and misunderstandings and demonstrates the capacity to incorporate their insights on stronger foundations.

All four of these forms of critique, it seems to me, depend on some manner of historical understanding and analysis. The first calls for "denaturalizing" the human world, recognizing it as a product of human action, and thus implicitly as the product of some actions among a larger range of possibilities. Beyond this, a theoretically serious critical engagement with one's social world calls for an account of that world in terms of its salient features for practical action, and an ability to place it in relation to other basic patterns of activity (e.g. other epochs as well as culturally or socially different contemporary settings).

The second calls for an account of the accomplishments and the particularities of history that make possible the vision of the contemporary theorist. This is not just a matter of the giants' shoulders on which one may stand, but of the entire social formation which grants one the opportunity for theoretical reflection and conditions and shapes one's theoretical outlook.

The third calls for historical analyses of the ways in which ideas come to take on specific significances, to be embedded in different intellectual contexts and projects, and to be invested with certain sorts of references to the world of experience and practice. If we are to be seriously critical of the concepts we incorporate into our theories – such as the various "keywords" that Raymond Williams analyzed, like "individual" or "nation" – we need to see them in their historical creation, and to see that no attempt at operational specification will ever escape the impact of that history.

Finally, a truly critical confrontation with other efforts at explanation involves an attempt to grapple seriously with the historical embeddedness of all theory, approaching past theories not just as exemplars, partial successes, or sources of decontextualized insights, but as works bounded by or based on different histories from our own. Even more basically, we need to see that confrontations between theories are seldom resolved by the victory of right over wrong, truth over falsehood. Theorists do not work in a world of right answers but of what Charles Taylor has called "epistemic gain," movement from a problematic position to a more adequate one within a field of available alternatives (rather than epistemology's mythical movement from falsity to truth).[47] This is not a movement well understood in atemporal, abstract terms. Individual theorists do not simply change their minds while they and the world remain otherwise unchanged. Rather, their environments and personal habituses change, they change, and their minds (being indissolubly a part of them) change with them.

That critical theory (in these four senses) depends on historical understanding is not unrelated to its situation in the public sphere. Seriously critical theory cannot accept the claims to objectivity or "the view from nowhere" that encourage some theorists to believe that their work can reach completion, can be free enough from historical change to merit withdrawal from public discourse. No theory is finished; none is free of social location; all therefore must be open to revision based on critical discourse. By the same token, all public discourses are necessarily conducted in categories that carry prejudices and partialities; they too must be open to revision based on critical discourse. At least, this would seem to be crucial to a vision of democracy rather than social engineering.

Notes

1 See also Arendt's comments (1954 (1977: 215)) linking the modern idea of the philistine not only – or even primarily – to the biblical root of the term, but to the Greek notion of a "banausic spirit," an orientation to life common to mere fabricators.

2 "In this fight for social position," Arendt wrote 20 years before Bourdieu's *Distinction*, "culture began to play an enormous role as one of the weapons, if not the best-suited one, to advance oneself socially, and to 'educate oneself' out of the lower regions, where supposedly reality was located, up into the higher, non-real regions, where beauty and spirit supposedly were at home . . . culture, more even than other realities, had become what only then people began to call 'value,' i.e. a social commodity which could be circulated and cashed in in exchange for all kinds of other values, social and individual" (1954 (1977: 202, 204)).

3 Though not with the same emphases, this is one of the morals to Pierre Bourdieu's story in *Homo Academicus* (1988). Bourdieu presents this aspect of academic culture as more universal and unavoidable, less a matter of degree, than I would choose to do.

4 Rorty (1982) comes close to this sort of dualism in positing an analogy to Kuhn's account of normal v. revolutionary science. Taken too strongly (as by a number of postmodernists and, for purposes of critique, in Habermas's somewhat tendentious reading (1987: 206)) this would be a hindrance rather than a help in achieving an adequate openness to the world.

5 This is by no means useless. The world changes in innumerable small ways and for the reproduction of a host of daily activities we require new descriptive knowledge of the variations in social pattern – shifts in population distributions, changing returns to educational investments, or new relations between market conditions and organizational structure. At the same time, each of us comes into the world ignorant and must learn anew – and sometimes more than once – basic insights that shed great light on our familiar world, though they do not challenge it. So I do not mean to suggest either that only the production of knowledge capable of transforming world views is to be valued, or that only radically new knowledge can be transformative in human life.

6 Attention to narratives is also important because narratives of various sorts exercise a more basic grip on the imaginations and decisions of most sorts of actors throughout the world. See Ricoeur (1984–6) and the sociological discussions of narrative in Somers (1992), Somers and Gibson (1994), and Abbott (1990; 1992).

7 This is something Arthur Stinchcombe (1978) demonstrated pointedly, though he limited the term "theory" to the universal, propositional formulations and treated analogies as something other than theory, which I think is misleading.

8 See Adorno et al. (1976). The confusion of empiricism and positivism was all the easier, perhaps, because the most important empirical researcher in the direct experience of the first generation of the Frankfurt School was Paul Lazarsfeld, who had been influenced by the Vienna School before his emigration to America.

9 This line of argument has been developed most importantly by Hans-Georg Gadamer (esp. 1975) and Charles Taylor (1989; 1995).

10 Michel Foucault is commonly taken to have posed a radical assault on truth by arguing that "effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false" (1980: 118). Whether or not Foucault also posed such a radical challenge, however, we can also read in this comment a recognition that specific truth claims can only be offered within broader discourses that cannot be reduced to structures of truth claims. Thus both Weber and Durkheim offer broad theoretical discourses – and serve sociology by helping to ground broad theoretical discourses – within which "truth effects" may be produced and more specific propositional truth claims offered. But it is meaningless to assert in general that Weberian sociology or Durkheimian sociology as a whole is either true or false. Similarly, the discourse of nationalism helps to make possible a variety of truths or truth effects, and ways of posing possibly true propositions and arguments, without itself being either true or false.

11 The struggle over methods made famous by the late nineteenth-century German *Methodenstreit* continues, of course, but it is no longer grasped by the categories that came to the fore when history still had realistic pretensions to be an encompassing, identity-providing discipline of predominant public importance.

12 See also Bernstein's (1992: 15–30) discussion of Arendt's work including her use of this metaphor.

13 Allan Megill (1985) also reminds us that Kant was the point of departure for the tradition running from Nietzsche through Heidegger to Foucault and Derrida. In particular, the tension introduced by Kant's sharp division of the realms of understanding (pure reason), moral action (practical reason), and esthetics (judgement) was deeply troubling, especially insofar as the disjuncture between Kant's first two critiques could not be seen as adequately mediated by the third. This was of course also Hegel's basic concern with regard to Kant. See both Hegel (1977) and (1978) for ways in which this reflection of Kant as the paradigmatic modern philosopher shaped his early work.

14 This book is perhaps the best guide to the place of Hegel in the tradition of critical theory, as well as to the more general theme of its title. I am indebted to it, and to Charles Taylor's (1975) reading of Hegel in the following paragraphs.

15 This is one reason for the attraction felt for the young Hegel by Georg Lukács (see 1976), himself in turn a crucial influence on the Frankfurt School.

16 Perhaps the most sustained argument for the historical specificity of Marx's categories appears in Moishe Postone (1993).

17 The crucial text is "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," the central chapter in *History and Class Consciousness* (1922), though the themes weave in and out of Lukács's work as a whole. Marx had drawn on similar ideas of esthetic unity and especially of the unity of the craft producer's thought, labor, and productivity, but he did so more consistently in his early work. In his mature work his increasing recognition of the systematicity of capitalism makes him (apparently) more doubtful of the continuing validity of this critique rooted in pre- or early capitalist production; though the critique of alienation does not quite disappear, it ceases to be the organizing principle of the later work. This paves the way for critical theorists and others to greet the delayed publication of Marx's early texts (recovered to scholarship in the 1930s though not immediately widely known) as both the occasion for an extraordinary reorientation in Marxist thought and as the occasion for a Marxist critique of actually existing socialism (that is

to say, of Stalinist communism – and later, after 1976, of Maoist communism as well).

18 Marcuse (1955) is thus in a sense a recasting of Freud (1962) as a historically specific critique of capitalist modernity.

19 A particularly compelling instance of this is the analysis of nationalist violence (such as that in Bosnia in the early 1990s) as simply the unavoidable, if regrettable, result of primordial ethnicity and ancient conflicts rather than (1) seeing ethnic identities and tensions as themselves created, and (2) seeing preexisting ethnicities as subject to very recent and ongoing manipulations. The "traditional" view, when articulated by prominent political leaders (like US Secretary of State Warren Christopher) becomes a rationalization for inaction, an affirmation of the world as it is – no matter how regrettable – rather than a basis for seeing how it could be otherwise.

20 As we saw above, Horkheimer, Adorno, and later Habermas would persist in using "positivism" as a convenient catch-all term for those approaches to social science which affirmed the simple positive facticity of the social world, those that failed to uncover its creation by human beings and its related internal contradictions. They did not mean more narrowly the Vienna circle of logical positivists, and still less dissidents like Karl Popper whom they recognized as having a more critical stance at least with regard to the nature of theory and its categorial distinction from empirical generalization.

21 Though the Durkheimian version of this positivism was not the immediate object of Horkheimer's critique and it is relevant that the Weberian emphasis on interpretative understanding, *Verstehen*, which is typically counterposed to Durkheim's approach in sociology courses, was no guarantee of a challenge to reification. On the contrary, as Horkheimer made clear in his critique of Mannheim, an interpretative approach could remain focussed at the level of individual subjectivity in such a way that the social world remained opaque to it and while the meaning to contemporary individuals of historically created institutions was assessed, the seeming autonomy of the individual and the reification of the social realm could go on unchallenged.

22 This was the most important early work in which the Frankfurt theorists – the associates of the Institute for Social Research – attempted to put into practice their vision of the interdisciplinary unity of theory and empirical research. In addition to Horkheimer, others involved included Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, and Karl Wittfogel. The more famous *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al., 1950), in which Adorno played the central role, was in many ways an extension of this early project, reshaped by a more central focus on anti-semitism.

23 English-language readers can now see this better with the publication of Horkheimer (1993).

24 Indeed, Horkheimer and Adorno had long been ambiguous about the question of historical specificity. They had treated Marx's idea of labor generally as a transhistorical category of work, for example, rather than as a specifically constitutive category of modern capitalism. See Postone (1993).

25 Similarities to much of today's "deep ecology" are apparent; in the latter case, a transhistorical account equally undermines historically concrete purchase on the dynamics of the depredations of nature.

26 On the different ideas of critique and their relationship to Frankfurt School critical theory, see Seyla Benhabib (1986).

27 This is a theme that comes up recurrently in work of the Frankfurt School; in addition to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, see especially Adorno (1973) which seeks to elucidate a positive concept of enlightenment – reflective enlightenment – to counter the negative one developed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

28 See also Hannah Arendt's (1951; 1954) nearly contemporary analyses of the same issue.

29 In addition to the works of Jay and Wiggershaus already cited, see Postone and Brick (1982). It should be noted that this pessimistic turn affected Horkheimer and Adorno more deeply than some other members of the senior generation of the Frankfurt School (though in a sense a version of this pessimism had already taken the life of their associate Walter Benjamin who so resisted the need to leave Europe that he waited too late, and thinking he had failed in his attempt to escape occupied France committed suicide). Most notably, Herbert Marcuse never surrendered to it and continued to seek the possibilities for radical social transformation and to support social movements in a way Horkheimer and Adorno were afraid to do, seeing the likely end of all such movements as either repression or new terrors.

30 Negt's collaboration with Alexander Kluge (1993) was a major attempt to work out this multifaceted development of critical theory in the context of the student movement.

31 Something of the same issue – addressed in a radically different way – informs Derrida's criticism of philosophies and artistic practices that pursue presence, and thinking that presumes speech to offer a ground of immediacy from which we are distanced by writing. In treating writing – with its non-immediacy and differences – as primary, Derrida responds directly to what he seems to see as the illusions and dangers in the pursuit of immediacy.

32 In addition to work directly on the relationship of theory to practice, thus, in this first agenda Habermas also took on debates about the methodology of the social sciences, trying to establish both the importance of going beyond a mere hermeneutics and the fallacy of positivist beliefs in a sharp separation of objective knowledge from interested human action. See Habermas (1988) and (1969).

33 As Habermas summed up (1973: 9) "the technical and practical interest of knowledge are not regulators of cognition which have to be eliminated for the sake of the objectivity of knowledge; instead, they themselves determine the aspect under which reality is objectified, and can thus be made accessible to experience to begin with."

34 Habermas took his *habitation* at Marburg under Wolfgang Abendroth, perhaps the only publicly active socialist professor in Germany at the time.

35 In addition to *Structural Transformation* itself, see the essays in Calhoun (1992) including the exposition and contextualization of Habermas's book in the introduction.

36 On the neglect of science and religion, see Zaret, in Calhoun (1992). On the way in which scientific discourse has remained intertwined with the political public sphere, see Yaron Ezrahi (1990).

37 Mass society theory itself grew partly out of the work of the earlier Frankfurt School, though the idea was broad and its roots older.

38 I have summarized Habermas's argument, and theoretical predicament, in more detail in the introduction to Calhoun (1992).

39 The key source here is Habermas (1987); a variety of later works have refined the basic theory presented there. The field of ethics has been a particularly important focus of attention; see Benhabib and Dallmayr (1990).

40 Letter from Horkheimer to Adorno, 1941, quoted in Wiggershaus (1994: 505). Habermas (1987) traces this theme back to a path of seeking the communicative redemption of free subjects broached, but abandoned, by the young Hegel.

41 Like the separation of family finances from business finances, this is of course part of the Weberian story of modernization as rationalization.

42 Arendt's (1958) exploration of the idea of a public sphere both influenced Habermas and stands as an important (and importantly different) contribution to this line of theory in its own right. See the comparison in Benhabib (1992).

43 The last phrase of course borrows terms from Habermas's later work that are not in use in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

44 Though Habermas is influenced by Arendt, thus, he takes a very different position from her account of the public realm when he situated the public sphere in civil society. She had seen public life as sharply opposed to private (which in general she devalued as a realm of mere reproduction of life's necessities), and, idealizing the Greek polis, had not much considered the relation of the public realm to modern state structures; see Arendt (1958).

45 This formulation should be read as equally distant from Habermas and from the approach to experience common to many "new social movements," in which experience is made the pure ground of knowledge, the basis of an essentialized standpoint of critical awareness. See the sympathetic critique in Scott (1990).

46 Habermas's sharp exclusion of identity-formation from the public sphere is one reason he is left with no analytic tools save an account of "degeneration" and "refeudalization" when he turns his attention to the mass-mediated public sphere of the postwar era.

47 Taylor (1989) has helpfully discussed this idea (which has provenance in Gadamer among other sources) in his "Excursus on Historical Explanation."

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