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The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School

- PhD thesis abstract -

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The paper concerned here deals, as the title indicates, with the critical theory developed by the Frankfurt School. Since the purpose of the thesis was to follow its conceptual development, the accent was not so much set on the historical aspects which affected the Frankfurt School, even though these aspects cannot be altogether discarded – there has to be acknowledged the fact that the ascent of the national-socialist party in their native Germany was, of course, of harsh consequences for the thinkers rallied under this nomenclature as they originated, in the vast majority, from Jewish families. The personal level on which these events affected the critical theorists becomes one which is, in turn, integrated in the development of the theory itself. Moreover, the exile period that they had faced starting with the early thirties until after the war shows a shift in the direction of the critical theory as these thinkers are offered the “chance” to witness first hand the most advanced example of industrial society, which in its turn was a main target for the critical theory throughout its development. Until this point, however, there is the problem of the origin of the critical theory. When Max Horkheimer became the director of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* he was confronting the legacy that the previous director, Carl Grünberg, had entitled upon him – that of an exceedingly orthodox Marxism. However, this orthodoxy did not reflect one of method as Lukács had suggested in his *History and Class Consciousness*; instead, it was an apologetic approach to the teachings of historical materialism, one that attempted to safeguard them against criticisms of any sort and which looked upon Soviet Marxism as the realization in history of these very teachings. This was clearly not the case; Soviet Marxism was only an ideological reading of Marx, one which hid behind the party, and which implemented the same instrumental rationality which was specific to the capitalist society. These points were later exemplarily analyzed by Marcuse in his *Soviet Marxism*. At this early point, however, the project of the critical theory is yet to be articulated; until the programmatic essay *Traditionelle und kritische Theorie* which Horkheimer presented in 1937 there is still a little way to go. However, he already knows that an adequate critique of society requires a critical appropriation of its object, not merely a mechanical one. As a consequence, the heritage of historical materialism, which is undoubtedly critical theory's most important one, cannot become the object of an unreflected apprehension. When we add the major influence exercised by Max Weber, which permeates all the stages of the development of the critical theory, or of the Freudian psychoanalysis (which, to a lesser extent, is again encountered throughout its progress) we begin to understand the vast grasp of the critical theory.

For Marx, the task he identified in his works was the paving of the path towards human emancipation from relations of production which he regarded as being demeaning to the human nature; for the critical theory, the task comes to be one of indicating the manner in which humans can free themselves from an increasingly reified society, from continuously expanding relations of domination in a world which turns more and more rationalized and administered. When it is articulated, the project of the critical theory finds itself facing a much more complex society than the one Marx had encountered; as a consequence, critical theory cannot be restricted to a linear recording of the economic apparatus, which would then deplete the “hidden” meanings in society. On the contrary, in order to properly grasp the present complexities, critical theory becomes an interdisciplinary project, one which approaches society from an economical and historical standpoint, but which can not disregard a heavily valued input from psychology, aesthetics or philosophy. In the true nature of historical materialism, theory cannot develop without the appropriate connection to practice – the two have to condition each other mutually. Or, what does Horkheimer encounter at this level? He sees an excessive influence into all fields of knowledge of a mathematical approach; from the natural sciences, where such an approach appears natural, to the social ones, they all have come to turn facts to fetishes of quantity rather than quality in order to encompass a more and more expanded sphere. In the realm of the social sciences, however, this

influence which is articulated as the development of the Cartesian view on the status of deduction as the single appropriate method for any scientific inquiry, has turned into an assiduous collection of facts. They merely reflect, as all human sciences, the very rationality of the industrialized society¹. Social studies no longer try to reflect the practical side of society, having been completely absorbed by the idea of theory formation. The world appears mere as a sum of unreflected facts, leveled to sameness – a perspective which reflects, according to Horkheimer, the bourgeois *Weltanschauung* during which the traditional theory has flourished².

From the perspective of the critical theory, the social observer has to acknowledge his space within the realm of his questioning; thus, he internalizes the possibility of his own bias – research becomes valid only if it offers itself to the same critical criteria which are bestowed on the initial object. Critical theory cannot accept only a solitary subject; it targets society as a totality, as what Benjamin might have called a constellation – it doesn't exhaust itself as an identity, but is destined to overcome the moment in a new sphere in the progress of history. But, at the same time, it also addresses the individual which has to be recovered from the state of alienation that the bourgeois order instilled in him and which industrial society perpetuates to a whole new level. Thus, in contrast to the bourgeois conception which centered the economy as the ultimate destiny of both individual and society and for which “ist die Aktivität der Gesellschaft blind und konkret, die des Individuums abstrakt und bewußt”, Horkheimer seeks to affirm that society is also “ein wenn auch bewußtloses und insofern uneigentliches, jedoch tätiges Subjekt”³. Horkheimer admits that the project of the critical theory emerges from the abstract, having its origin in the economical categories which Marx posited. At the same time however, he infers the self-reference which this theory has to internalize – it is part of the subject-society, it is destined to evolve alongside it. The individual is targeted for recuperation from the unconscious realm where the administered society has abandoned him; he doesn't even possess the alleged economical liberty which the early bourgeois society bestowed upon him. Instead, “unter den monopolkapitalistischen Verhältnissen ist es jedoch auch mit solcher relativen Selbständigkeit des Individuums zu Ende. Es hat keinen eigenen Gedanken mehr. Der Inhalt des Massenglaubens, an den niemand recht glaubt, ist ein unmittelbares Produkt der herrschenden Bürokratien in Wirtschaft und Staat, und seine Anhänger folgen insgeheim nur ihren atomisierten und daher unwahren Interessen; sie handeln als reine Funktionen des ökonomischen Mechanismus”⁴. So, critical theory, starting by opposing the philosophical emergence of traditional theory, it confronts the leveling tendencies inherent in the natural sciences, as well as their influence on the social sciences without being able, however, to completely discard their input; it establishes at its base categories from studies on political economy while, at the same time, turns to society in a multidisciplinary approach – it might not be just that sociology was from the start a science marked by crisis as Habermas stated in his *Theory of Communicative Action*⁵, but that society itself is under the omen of a continuous crisis against which a single-faceted approach is, for a long time now, ineffective.

A fundamental direction for the first phase of the critical theory was represented by the critique of Enlightenment; during their exile, Adorno and Horkheimer were confronted with the extensive encompassing powers of instrumental reasoning. In the social sciences, this rationality forces an imposed leveling: “concepts have been reduced to summaries of the characteristics that several specimens have in common. By denoting a similarity, concepts eliminate the bother of enumerating qualities and thus serve better to organize the material of knowledge. [...] Any use of transcending auxiliary, technical summarization of factual data has been eliminated as a last trace of superstition. Concepts have become «streamlined», rationalized, labor-saving devices”⁶. They see

1 Cf. Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* Band 4, p. 165.

2 Cf. Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* Band 4, p. 173.

3 Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* Band 4, p. 174 for both quotes.

4 Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* Band 4, p. 211.

5 Cf. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, volume 1, p. 4.

6 Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p. 21.

critique overall and critical theory in particular in danger of succumbing to this type of rationality. Advancement on the levels of technology and science are translated into never before seen levels of control and domination, which hide behind economical and administrative control: “the individual is entirely nullified in face of the economic powers”⁷. The individual has become a function of the overall system which, as it tends to become more and more integrated and self-sufficient, also leads to an accentuated integration of the irrational. Enlightenment attempted to emancipate the individual from domination. Instead, it hid irrationality in itself, it only masked the barbarity it was meant to overcome. Enlightenment degenerates and leads to the perspective where the individual can be a “known” subject only to the extension he is determined – the qualitatively different is valid only in so far it can be “recovered” as a non-threat – that is, if quality can be negated and become an ontological non-differentiated quantity: “subjective reason [which Horkheimer equates with the instrumental one] conforms to anything. It lends itself as well to the uses of the adversaries as of the defenders of the traditional humanitarian values”⁸. The accent which is set on non-difference, on the character of quantifiable, on same-sameness, turns thought itself into a reified expression. The mathematical approach nullifies the world reducing it to a tautological relation with itself. Instrumental reason is “rigidly purpose-directed and as calamitous as the precisely calculated operations of material production, the results of which for human beings escape all calculation”⁹. Therefore, an instrumental approach stops in front of the non-mediated and merely repeats an already explicit mediation which is appropriated only under the sign of the similarities it might share with other known objects. Instead, Horkheimer and Adorno regard knowledge as a negative determination of what is presented to the senses. However, under the prevailing instrumental rationality, such an approach is derelict; critical power and self-reflexion are now obsolete – there is now no outside from where an autonomous thought might be supported. Reason is no longer a noble faculty, and its only criterion for success is its capacity of disposing both of things and people. Ideas and language suffer from the same degeneration – they are integrated into the apparatus of production and, beyond this, serve only as means for exercising domination. There seems – for now, at least, until the moment Habermas – no means of recovery; tradition has become invalid since advanced industrialized society “seems to have preserved but one function from those older times: it indicates that the consensus behind the principle that it seeks to reaffirm is economically or politically powerful”¹⁰. Reason, which has detached more and more from its objective extension, has turned to a mere artifact of recording facts and state of things. As a consequence, the very project of the critical theory seems now to have no critical background left since its activity was supposed to develop amidst this very milieu now consumed by instrumentality.

In his later works, Adorno tries to recover the power of dialectics under the sign of the negative; on the one side, he rejects the logical aspect of the Hegelian dialectics which forces identity between subject and object while, on the other, he rejects the radical separation between individual and society from Kierkegaard's existential dialectics. Instead, the explicitly negative side of dialectics concerns itself with the reconciliation between subject and object, between particular and universal, reconciliation which, in opposition to Hegel, seeks to liberate the non-identical¹¹. When the same-sameness is imposed forcefully, the object is fractured, it is lost for Hegel since he ignores its heterogeneity simply to comply with the perspective of the observer – that is, identity is conceptually posited even before the object is encountered. Against this movement in the Hegelian system, dialectics has to be recovered beyond the simple means of a method inherent in thought and thus in the liberation from the “almighty” dominance of the concept. In its negative form, dialectics emerges from the object as opposition against identity thinking. It comes to be marked under a

7 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Preface, p. xvii.

8 Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p. 21.

9 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Preface, p. 23.

10 Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p. 33.

11 Cf. Adorno, *Dialectique négative*, p. 14.

critical extension, it has to come back unto itself as to reassure that the subject-object opposition is not suppressed. Identity is always under the mark of suspicion, always targeted as false: “l’identité pure est ce qui est posé par le sujet et dans cette mesure apporté de l’extérieur. [...] Le sujet doit donner au non-identique réparation de la violence qu’il lui a faite”¹². If the relation between subject and object is expropriated to the power of thought, then it has to be reinvested on a different level. The primacy of the object which Adorno announces is by no means to be idealized; instead, it has to be appropriated under the conditions of its occurrence. Or, this contact is one which cannot be abstracted from the social space: “c’est objectivement et non pas seulement à travers le sujet connaissant, que le tout qui est exprimé par la théorie est contenu dans ce particulier qu’il faut analyser. La médiation des deux est elle-même une médiation du contenu, elle est produite par la totalité sociale”¹³. At the same time, the object is pre-articulated through its own particularity; however, this fact is not to be regarded as pertaining to the essence of the object – the object does not exist in order to be known. Since the particularities of the object predate the subject and his own thinking, the two are thus destined to remain separate from one another. The two of them are subjected to a process of mediation, a process which nonetheless retains the primacy of the object over the subject: “Vorrang des Objekts heißt vielmehr, daß Subjekt in einem qualitativ anderem, radikaleren Sinn seinerseits Objekt sei als Objekt, weil es nun einmal anders nicht denn durch Bewußtsein gewußt wird, auch Subjekt ist. [...] Von Objektivität kann Subjekt potentiell, wenngleich nicht aktuell weggedacht werden; nicht ebenso Subjektivität von Objekt. [...] Vermittelt ist auch Objekt, nur nicht dem eigenen Begriff nach so durchaus auf Subjekt verwiesen wie Subjekt auf Objektivität”¹⁴.

For logical dialectics, totality is destined to dissolve in the homogeneous background; however, when totality is reconsidered at the historical level, it turns to accepting the dual transformation of both subject and object as they will now reflect the historical-social transformation of meaning. This articulation is now negative; and, not to fall back on the primacy of the subject, he will now be regarded as a particular who owes his existence to the universal which, in turn, is mediated socially: “das besondere Individuum verdankt dem Allgemeinen die Möglichkeit seiner Existenz; dafür zeugt Denken, seinerseits ein allgemeines, insofern gesellschaftliches Verhältnis. Nur wird im Idealismus die eine Seite hypostasiert, die anders als im Verhältnis zur anderen gar nicht begriffen werden kann”¹⁵. Thought can no longer be regarded as the absolute determinant; absolute truth is an illusion which Adorno disregards in favor of a truly subjective condition – suffering – which “obéit au désir d’expression du sujet. Le besoin de faire s’exprimer la souffrance est condition de toute vérité. Car la souffrance est une objectivité qui pèse sur le sujet; ce qu’il éprouve comme ce qui lui est le plus subjectif, son expression, est médiatisée objectivement”¹⁶. The unifying tendencies of identity thinking turn it into a prey for ideology; for such a direction, only a transcendental critique would be available – an option which for Adorno is ludicrous. Instead, for the historical-social subject suffering is articulated over the moment to indicate the fact that men are yet to be free. The bodily is no longer a consequence of conscience, but it is here to remind it of its own unhappiness. And, since the reparation of suffering overcomes the task of the mere subject, it invites negativity within the social and attempts to instill its movement over the one of progress – the only “rational” direction of society is one where suffering is no longer a reality. Suffering is a constant invitation for critique, it is a continuous calling for liberty since suffering is to be seen “comme le négatif polémique de la souffrance engendrée par la contrainte sociale et la non-liberté comme l’image de cette souffrance”¹⁷. Thus, history rejects the

12 Adorno, *Dialectique négative*, p. 119.

13 Adorno, *Dialectique négative*, p. 44.

14 Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 10 zweite Hälfte, p. 746-747.

15 Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 10 zweite Hälfte, p. 746.

16 Adorno, *Dialectique négative*, p. 22.

17 Adorno, *Dialectique négative*, p. 176. Suffering is thus the indicator that one has to insist on what, for the moment, is unaccomplished: “die ungeminderte Dauer von Leiden, Angst und Drohung nötigt den Gedanken, der sich nicht

project of an imposed teleological end which would reflect the universal; instead, the purpose is sought after in the moment, in a non-continuous history, as suffering confronts the historical constellation and, for the moment, refuses to go away. It is the very motor of history which insists on the individual as opposed to the totalitarian tendencies which Adorno sees imminent in identity thinking: “le génocide est l’intégration absolue qui se prépare partout où les hommes sont nivelés, dressés comme on le dit à l’armée jusqu’à ce que, entorses au concept de leur complète inanité, on les extermine littéralement. Auschwitz confirme le philosophème de la pure identité comme morte”¹⁸. The type of identity thinking is also to be found in the neo-Freudian school – here we find the same frozen image of the individual which Adorno had critiqued when it came to Hegel or existentialism; according to him, the revisionist stipulations of individual personality sever all connection to the history of the individual, as well as the dual determination between him and society. Freudian revisionism loses all contact with the clinical basis of psychoanalysis and, as a consequence, is pure speculation, and “statt die Sublimierung zu analysieren, sublimieren die Revisionisten die Analyse selber”¹⁹. In a double move, Adorno sees the “hip” therapy as actually deepening man's dependence on society since it doesn't try to heal the patient but to integrate him within the anonymous identity of the mass. If psychoanalysis accepts the role of healing its patient, then it has to acknowledge, first of all, its own dependence on the social momentum and, secondly, dialectics as a method of inquiring its subject within the objectivity of the social milieu and not merely as an in-itself which follows a predetermined evolutionary path.

The impact of historical materialism is deepened in Marcuse's approach; in his *Philosophy and Critical Theory*, which was written the same year as Horkheimer's *Traditionelle und kritische Theorie*, he announces that philosophy has for a long time surrendered its pretexts at establishing a unifying theory of knowledge. Instead, it has to respond to the material conditions of life as they come to be articulated in the study of the economical structure of society. It is not only the misery of everyday existence that needs to be addressed, but most of all that of the people who are trapped under irrational structures of domination which tend to administer everyday life in its entirety. Moreover, Marcuse embraces the Marxian conception of a work dictated not by the actual status embodied in the relations between the means and forces of production, but by the actual needs of the human beings. Thus, critical theory has to start from the economic system. Meanwhile, philosophy is no longer centered on the faculty of reason in its classical form; it no longer raises pretexts of removing the veil from the whole. Instead, its focus has become a particular instance of reason which should now reflect “the rational organization of mankind” – when the transformations that critical theory envisions are finally accomplished, philosophy loses its object, it is rendered completely superfluous²⁰. But what is the status of contemporary society? Marcuse notices that the proletariat is no longer a viable agent as historical negativity since its interests have become anesthetized by the partial benefits it encounters in the advanced industrial society: “on the ground of the growing productivity of the economic-technical apparatus, that is to say, on the ground of increasing comforts under total administration, large sections of the laboring classes in the most advanced areas of industrial civilization are led from «absolute negation» to resignation and even affirmation of the system”²¹. It is not a change which occurs only on the social level; on the theoretical one, as well, industrialized society devalues language; it appropriates conceptual terms as “reason” or “liberation” under a technological rationality and this threatens the project of the

verwirklichen durfte, dazu, nicht sich wegzuwerfen”, cf. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 10 zweite Hälfte, p. 470.

18 Adorno, *Dialectique négative*, p. 284. Also, *ibid.* p. 288: “l’absoluité de l'esprit, auréole de la culture, était le même principe que celui qui infatigablement fit violence à ce qu'il feignait d'exprimer”.

19 Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften* Band 8, p. 28.

20 Cf. Marcuse, *Negations*, p. 100; also, *ibid.* p. 104: “There is no philosophy alongside and outside this theory. For the philosophical construction of reason is replaced by the creation of a rational society”.

21 Marcuse, *Towards a Critical Theory of Society*, p. 38 sq. See also *Schriften* Band 8, p. 194: “Was wir in der gegenwärtige Periode sehen, scheint so etwas zu sein wie eine Stillstellung der Dialektik der Negativität”.

critical theory itself. Marcuse claims that critical theory now comes to the danger of losing its empirical basis, and this would facilitate its descent into speculation. This, doubled by the fact that emancipation is still just a project, underlines both the necessity of the critical theory and the threat that technological rationality poses to it: “the existence of the proletariat thus gives living witness to the fact that the truth has not been realized. History and social reality themselves thus «negate» philosophy. The critique of society cannot be carried through by philosophical doctrine, but becomes the task of socio-historical practice”²². At the same time, “content” with the fact that “Marxian economic leaves no room for an independent philosophy, psychology, or sociology”²³, Marcuse acknowledges the fact that a straightforward appropriation of Marx is not possible; instead, one has to look at the contemporary conditions.

Or, what do these conditions show? Industrialized society has established itself over the political system; thus, late capitalism and Soviet Marxism mutually determine one another. On a ideological level, each embodies for the other the absolute worst which must, at all cost, be avoided. For instance, looking at the late capitalist structure one sees that “an der Basis der Pyramide herrscht Atomisierung. Diese verwandelt das *ganze* Individuum – Körper und Geist – in ein Instrument oder gar in der Teil eines Instrument: aktiv oder passiv, produktiv oder rezeptiv, in seiner Arbeit- und Freizeit dient es dem System”²⁴. And yet, no matter how much the protest against such a state of the individual, Soviet Marxism engages on the exact same lines. Moreover, from the point of view of their technical and economical bases, these systems are much to similar with one another – their targets overlap in the acceleration of industrialization. Thus, when they confront each other, they confront not only the limits of the other system, but their own as well. Their industrialized basis is not a mere fact of economics; for Marcuse, this basis articulates itself as the historical culmination of domination over fellow men: “wenn der Kapitalismus sich der Herausforderung des Kommunismus stellt, so stellt er sich seinen eigenen Möglichkeiten: eine beachtliche Entwicklung aller Produktivkräfte, nachdem die privaten Profitinteressen zurückgestellt wurden, die eine solche Entwicklung hemmen. Wenn der Kommunismus sich der Herausforderung des Kapitalismus stellt, so stellt auch er sich seinen eigenen Möglichkeiten: ein beachtlicher Komfort, Freiheiten und eine Erleichterung der Lebenslast. Beide Systeme enthalten diese Möglichkeiten bis zur Unkenntlichkeit entstellt, und in beiden Fällen ist der Grund dafür in letzter Instanz derselbe – der Kampf gegen eine Lebensform, die die Grundlage der Herrschaft auflösen würde”²⁵. Following this point, the opposition between the two systems is now one of flavor, not of essence – it is the confrontation between private and public ownership of the means of production, although even this difference is basically a virtual one: the Soviet Marxism “public” is not one of the masses, but one of the elites which embody the Party. Marcuse argues in both *Reason and Revolution*, as well as in *Soviet Marxism*, that the nationalization of the means of production is the same manifestation of the administrative character encountered in the case of capitalism; the proletariat can thus never achieve the role of a class “for itself”, and its role in the development of a properly liberated society, in the manner envisioned by Marx, is now an illusion. Instead, “both systems show the common features of late industrial civilization – centralization and regimentation supersede individual enterprise and autonomy; competition is organized and «rationalized»; there is joint rule of economic and political bureaucracies; the people are coordinated through the «mass media» of communication, entertainment industry, education” and both system share a common goal: “total industrialization seemed to exact patterns of attitude and organization which cut across the essential political and ideological differences. Efficient, «businesslike management», highly rationalized and centralized, and working on equally rationalized and coordinated human and technical material, tends to promote political and cultural centralization and coordination”²⁶. At the same time, however, even

22 Cf. Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, p. 261.

23 Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, p. 320.

24 Marcuse, *Schriften* Band 9, p. 22, author's emphasis.

25 Marcuse, *Der eindimensionale Mensch*, p. 95-96.

26 Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*, p. 81 and p. 195, respectively.

though capitalism left room for the individual to be *qua* individual in the private sphere, this space is negated under the Soviet direction of Marxism. The submission of the private sphere to the same ideological construct as the public one is its actual obliteration, a move which moves Soviet Marxism closer to Hegel than to Marx – only in the closed, self-sufficient Hegelian system can the individual be negated as a particular while he is integrated as merely a singular in the “universality” of the state. The individual has no longer a place to decide; his education, his “professional” training is already decided by the state, and in the end he is just as much here an extension of the machine as he would be under a capitalist organization. Reality has to fall into disarray since it is no longer the “real” but a matter for the direct decision of the state.

So, between this two organizations of economical and social life, has history failed concerning the emancipation of the individual? Marcuse says no, since he identifies a promise in the land of technology. The aspect of domination and control is doubled by the prospect of liberation. But a direct “reading” of evolution is not possible since it opposes critical thinking and it demands, above all else, that the individual has to adapt himself to technological mechanisms and that he becomes a function of the system. Marcuse adopts an oblique approach – he attempts to explain the technological tendencies in connection to vital forces, to the couple of Eros and Thanatos. It has just been mentioned that technology acts under the antagonistic couple of destruction – liberation and, thus, to re-appropriate the positive potencies inherent in technology. As such, “authentic technological rationality would be characterized by the unrestricted reduction of socially necessary labor, of toil, and of repression”²⁷. The means seem therefore to be already present; at the same time, one needs an actor – the individual to realize that his existence is one of alienation, and by this fact to be able to revolt against them – “the end of alienation and reification is the beginning of the individual: the new Subject of radical reconstruction”²⁸. It would be the task of these subjects to not only recover the power of negativity in reason and history, but to redirect technology towards its new ends, that is toward complete mechanization of labour – the individual is liberated from the context of repressive labour and, beyond this mechanization, “weiterer Fortschritt würde den *Bruch* bedeuten, den Umschlag von Quantität in Qualität. [...] die Vollendung der technologischen Wirklichkeit wäre nicht nur die Vorbedingung, sondern auch die rationale Grundlage, die technologische Wirklichkeit zu *transzendieren*”²⁹. Beyond this point, man would confront himself as man, and not as the part of an integrated system. Technological advance cannot be denied, but it has to be guided by the “old”, negative reason and not by the actual technological rationality. When man has achieved liberation from labor he will be confronted with interior autonomy and thus he will be facing a surplus of energy, the libido which is no longer altered by consummation on the surface. The transformation should thus entail not only a reaffirmation of the human potentialities which technological rationality managed to stun, but of man as a new historical subject. The whole of science and technology have therefore to be restructured from the point of view of human emancipation.

Habermas takes the project of the critical theory in a whole new direction. He tries to safeguard it, while acknowledging the shortcomings of industrialized society, by an appeal to a new stance of reason which should protect authentic social interaction amidst growing instrumentalization. The instrumental form of reason persists since it is inherent to an industrialized society. He doesn't, however, see instrumental reason as permeating intrusively the social space since, according to him, this type of reason is essentially nonsocial; instead, he acknowledges a social counterpart to the instrumental reason, the strategic one, which is as well governed by purposes. He clearly critiques his forerunners, but especially Horkheimer, due to their equating of purposive reason with the instrumental aspect: “the irony of this usage can be seen in the fact that «reason», which according to Kant referred to the faculty of ideas and included both practical

27 Marcuse, *Towards a Critical Theory of Society*, p. 84.

28 Marcuse, *Towards a Critical Theory of Society*, p. 146.

29 Marcuse, *Der eindimensionale Mensch*, p. 327-328, author's emphasis.

reason and aesthetic judgment, is identified with what Kant carefully distinguished from it, that is, with the «understanding» of the subject that knows and acts in accord with technical imperatives”³⁰. Habermas turns his sociological and philosophical projects towards the communicative reason: “a subjectivity that is characterized by communicative reason resists the denaturing of the self for the sake of self-preservation. [...] The utopian perspective of reconciliation and freedom is ingrained in the conditions for the communicative sociation of individuals; it is built into the linguistic mechanism of the reproduction of the species”³¹. From a philosophical point of view, the project of communicative action and communicative reason allows Habermas to overcome the previous philosophical systems centered on conscience and subject; from a methodological one, communicative reason serves for a methodological extension as well within the project of the critical theory. When Horkheimer and Adorno dismissed reason due to its increasing instrumentalization which permeated extensively the social cluster, they also threatened the theoretical space of critical theory itself. Horkheimer held as essential to the project of the critical theory an auto-reflexive concept, a theory that submits itself to the same critique as it does with its focal object of analysis – namely, the social space. Or, they didn't have a concept of reason on which they could fall back on³²; Habermas recovers this instance in the aspect of a reason which is at the same time transcendent and immanent, an instance which refrains from passing as an absolute and which at the same time accepts the contingency of its own conditions³³.

So, there is a necessity for the reclaiming of a meaningful intersubjective extension of social interaction; the subjects should “withdraw” from a world which invites manipulation and instead they should confront a world which, through communicative action, actively invites the subjects to participate in its “construction”. In this realm, the actors would be confronted with the medium of language as well as with their own lifeworld components on the subjective, objective and social scale: “speaker and hearer [...] adopt a performative attitude in which they encounter one another as members of the intersubjectively shared lifeworld of their linguistic community, that is, in the second person”³⁴. As a consequence, manipulation is de-subjectified; instead, interaction is guided by the attempt to establish a meaningful understanding with the other. In the same tone Habermas rejects Marcuse's proposal of liberation through technological means - his objection stems from the fact that he ties technical rationality exclusively with instrumentality; as a consequence, its “importation” within the space of human relations would necessarily lead to their instrumentalization. The technocratic process can only account for a “scientificized” (*scientificisée*) conscience which “détache la conception que la société se fait d'elle-même du système de références de l'activité communicationnelle et la soustrait aux concepts de l'interaction par des symboles, pour la remplacer par un modèle qui est d'ordre scientifique. Dans cette même mesure, une certaine conception de soi du monde vécu social, culturellement déterminée, fait place à une autoréification des hommes, qui se trouvent ainsi soumis aux catégories de l'activité rationnelle par rapport à une fin et du comportement adaptif”³⁵. In front of the over-development of technology against the social life, public opinion becomes threatened by a process of self-objectification. Self-reflection is destined to disappear and alienation to be assumed explicitly. Technology essentially displaces practical ends and replaces them with technical ones; in the emancipated society, both science and technology have to renounce this self-centering and, instead, invite a meaningful dialogue between technical ends and the daily social praxis³⁶. The subjects have to be recovered from the aspect of predictability that technological rationality imposes on the social life and instead one has to seek the recovery of affirming free and informed consensus. Therefore, the relation

30 Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, volume 1, p. 345.

31 Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, volume 1, p. 398.

32 Cf. Habermas, *Le discours philosophique de la modernité*, p. 152 sq.

33 Cf. Habermas, *La pensée postmétaphysique*, p. 179.

34 Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, p. 219.

35 Habermas, *La technique et la science comme “idéologie”*, p. 46.

36 Cf. Habermas, *La technique et la science comme “idéologie”*, p. 131.

between theory and practice has to be the product of an investigation made in the name of communicative action where the context of the lifeworld offers the practical background which makes mutual understanding possible.

So, how does Habermas' proposed project articulate social life? Since he is not content with simply recording this momentum of industrialized modern society and its expansion, he is looking instead to draw the sketch of resistance against the instrumentalization of human interactions. Therefore, his newly employed concept of reason will account for social interactions in their confrontations with the system – institutions, agencies, etc. There should be a lack of permeability between them and human life, the space which confers meaning to human actions within society, the space where humans manage to achieve their specific desires and which guarantees the outcome of mutual understanding – *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld). The lifeworld is the linguistically transmitted cultural baggage of a society; its resources cannot, at least, be considered as fixed, as completely determined. The lifeworld cannot be pointed to or indicated either as an element *belonging to* intersubjectivity, or as something that *is* intersubjective; people have to move within it and cannot step outside. The lifeworld can be seen as the something that makes understanding possible by laying down the forms of intersubjectivity. The other is no longer isolated as an absolute; with the linguistic turn operated by the communicative action, Habermas accomplishes “une interprétation déflationniste du «tout Autre»”³⁷ since the world is structured by a mutually accessible language and it allows for the understanding of the self and of the other as well. In all respects, the lifeworld is “the transcendental site where speaker and hearer meet”³⁸ while its “resources” can be accessed through the medium of communication – communicative action constitutes the medium “grâce auquel le monde vécu se reproduit dans son ensemble”³⁹. This space is, however, being more and more permeated by the specific areas pertaining to economics, politics, administration. In relation to the already mentioned space of technology, Habermas notices that “les informations strictement scientifiques ne peuvent pénétrer dans le monde vécu social que par le biais de leur mise en valeur technique, c'est-à-dire en tant que savoir technologique: et là elles servent à développer notre pouvoir de disposer techniquement des choses”⁴⁰. However, this “power of disposal over things” cannot become translated into a meaningful social process.

Within the modern industrialized society, the lifeworld appears to be in danger of succumbing to the type of reason Horkheimer and Adorno have previously warned against – a technical understanding that expands beyond the realm of the technical and threatens the objectification of human relations. Present day society is marked by an increased degree of complexity; as a consequence, it has become decentralized. It is not that its institutions are peripheral, but that the lifeworld as well becomes ordained by objectifying explanations. This occurrence is due to the fact that the economy and the administration have been permeating the horizon of the lifeworld. Habermas appears to be forced to admit what Adorno has stated in *Minima moralia*: authentic life has become displaced and a surrogate has usurped its place. For Habermas, however, this cannot be a mere problem of industrialization, but one of expansion. The range of modern institutions is expanding in order to accommodate the complexity of the society which they are supposed to manage. This occurs on a two-way street – the complexities of the lifeworld and those of society imply each other; care should be taken, however, in regard to the expansion of the latter in the detrimental development of the former: “The more complex social systems become, the more provincial lifeworlds become. In a differentiated social system the lifeworld seems to shrink to a subsystem. [...] [However] the opposite is true: increases in complexity are dependent on the structural differentiation of the lifeworld. [...] Every new leading mechanism of system differentiation must, however, be anchored in the lifeworld”⁴¹. The rationalization of the lifeworld is

37 Habermas, *L'avenir de la nature humaine*, p. 22.

38 Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, volume 2, p. 126.

39 Habermas, *Le discours philosophique de la modernité*, 354.

40 Habermas, *La technique et la science comme “idéologie”*, p. 78.

41 Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, volume 2, p. 173.

not viewed, however, as a direct process. It is true that subjects trying to build understanding permeate it with purposive-rational acts; however, Habermas notes that this process is only possible because two critical subsystems, those of economics (money) and administration (power), which are essentially rational, have managed to dislodge language from its scope of coordinating action and, implicitly, of making mutual understanding possible. This displacement has to be accounted for by flipping the order of implication – instead of having the lifeworld submitting to the subsystems of economics and administration, they should be integrated in the lifeworld beyond subjectivity and egocentrism: “It is these media [money and power], and not directly the purposive-rational action orientations themselves, that need to be institutionally and motivationally anchored in the lifeworld”⁴². When information pertaining to these external media infiltrate the lifeworld and the contexts of interaction, and if these media are left unchecked, they will dismiss the validity claims that genuine communicative action entail in favor of a purpose driven action. When this happens, even the selfish purpose of the actors comes to ruin; instead, the media themselves will instill their own purpose. In the case of money, for example, this purpose is the support and perpetuation of the market. The change that now occurs resides in the fact that purpose driven reason has been eliminated from the actions of the subjects and is now replaced by a functional reason which is inherent to self-regulating systems⁴³.

Critical theory will now confront alienation and the possibilities of its dismissal not from the point of view of historical materialism, i.e. as a consequence of the abstract character of labor within capitalism. Instead, the alienation of human relations is to be investigated from the perspective of the lifeworld which is no longer capable of withdrawing from the impact of external media. This move also offers, according to Habermas, access to a secure “autonomous” domain (that of the lifeworld in the context of communicative action) which the previous moment of the critical theory failed to maintain. Critical theory would thus distance itself from the attempts at social transformation restricted to a simple critique of ideology directed against the cultural heritage of the bourgeoisie. From the moment the appeal to the concept of communicative reason is secured, philosophy is once again invited to interact with social sciences from the perspective of a reevaluated rationality which overcomes a mere instrumental aspect. The distance between the theory of communicative action and a simple re-discussion of the context of the bourgeois society is underlined precisely in the foundations of this theory: it looks for the non-conditioned moment of establishing consensus around criticizable validity claims. Or, such claims are not seen as being limited to specific contexts, but overcoming them instead: “they transcend all limitations of space and time, all the provincial limitations of the given context”⁴⁴. Thus, we are approaching the end of this paper where we attempt a short reevaluation of the critical theory from the perspective of the accelerated integration of transnational constellations, as well as from the point of view of the recovery of the individual's authenticity by appealing to extra-economical contexts. Since the project of the critical theory is by no means a closed one, it is obvious that the present pages can in no way consider themselves as articulating a final point.

42 Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, volume 1, p. 342.

43 Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, p. 235.

44 Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, p. 399.