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## On Critical Theory

*Abstract:* I propose a conception of critical theory that is an alternative to that of the Frankfurt School and Habermas. It is based on the assumptions that critical theory is not unique but started off with the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC movement of the sophists that aimed at an understanding of society free from superstition and prejudice, can be better understood by considering the history of social thinking, does not look for knowledge for knowledge's sake but for solving practical problems, distinguishes basic social problems from dependent problems, looks for and defends a value to guide it both in its research and its solutions, prefers the value of capability development to that of happiness.

### 1. An Alternative to the Frankfurt Conception of Critical Theory

Thirty years ago, critical social theory boomed. The Frankfurt school of Horkheimer and Adorno, and its continuation by Habermas, were regarded as critical theory's most authentic realization. Some people, however, such as the founders and friends of *Analyse & Kritik* (and myself), had a different conception of critical theory, or critical thinking on society. We were convinced that analytical philosophy and philosophy of science were no less a good basis for critical theory than the Frankfurt School. In Marx they found an adherent of a scientific method that was closer to Popper than to Habermas.<sup>1</sup> They flirted with the idea that critical theory might be modelled after physics. This was an illusion (I say why in the next section); Habermas has been right in rejecting it. Yet what was not an illusion, as I want to argue for in this paper, is that critical theory cannot be conceived of in the way the Frankfurt School did.

Rather than criticising the Frankfurt School interpretation I'll propose an alternative conception of critical theory. When Habermas adapted the Frankfurt conception to the philosophical expectations of his time, he rightly presumed that neither the Frankfurt School nor any other group or individual has a monopoly on using the term *critical theory* for its own approach to social science. We have to start with the basic question: what can and should the term '*critical theory*' be used for?

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<sup>1</sup> Steinvorth 1976; 1977; 1977b; 1977c and 1979 are a result of this interest.

Max Horkheimer (1982) used the term for a kind of thinking about social problems and their solution that he missed in the prevailing social science of his time. He found in Marx an author who had come close to his ideas of critical thinking, but did not identify Marx and critical theory. He stated that critical theory aims for everyone's emancipation. Yet he eschewed unambiguous statements on whether critical theory accepts the idea that scientific truth is independent of class interest, what the norms or values are that critical theory follows, and what it bases its claims to universal or perhaps only particular consent on.

These questions need unambiguous answers if critical theory is to be used in practice. At his time, Horkheimer may have seen no practical use for critical theory. His interest may have been rather in protecting the idea of emancipation from oblivion and adulteration than in fighting for it. At the latest since the 1980s, when globalisation started shaking the expectation of Western citizens to find a job that fits them, critical thinking has become more immediately needed in political practice. But it cannot contribute to spreading emancipation if it cannot clarify its relation to truth and norms. Any alternative to Horkheimer's conception of critical theory needs to clarify this relation. Let me state an alternative in the form of theses.

*First*, critical theory is not unique. It is an effort at solving practical problems by critical thinking and the use of knowledge that is free from superstition and prejudice. Such efforts started not with Marx but the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC movement of the sophists. At the same time that physicians became convinced they needed teachable knowledge, young Athenians from the ruling classes became convinced that for the success of their political careers they needed the knowledge that the sophists sold them.<sup>2</sup>

The sophists have not been social revolutionaries (nor have been Horkheimer or Adorno). What they share with later critical theorists is the idea that practical problems cannot be solved without a specific kind of knowledge that can be found by using one's reason and rejecting the authority of tradition and religion.

*Second*, the aim of critical theory is to solve basic social problems. Such problems are different at different times. The specific knowledge critical theory looks for is needed to understand what the basic problems of a society or epoch are. Social theory presumes that we cannot solve social problems unless we find out basic problems that other problems depend on. Marx and the Frankfurt School regarded economic problems as basic. Critical theory must not follow their view without checking it. For instance, it must be ready to ask whether it is not inequality of intellectual influence rather than economic inequality that is at the basis of contemporary social problems, even though it will be hard for theorists to think that it is, as they are privileged in intellectual influence (Frankfurt theorists no less than others).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Without referring to critical theory, this has been shown by de Romilly 1992. Zeus' 'civic art' (cp. below n. 32) corresponds to the idea of a critical social theory. Protagoras' famous thesis that man is the measure of all things (Diels-Kranz, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* B1) should be understood as the basic methodological claim of critical theory that infallibility is unattainable rather than, or in addition to, relativism.

<sup>3</sup> Cp. Taleb 2007, 227: "The disproportionate share of the very few in intellectual influence is even more unsettling than the unequal distribution of wealth—unsettling because, unlike

*Third*, critical theory is in need of an unambiguous specification of the value it follows in solving practical problems. Horkheimer and Habermas have found it in the idea of emancipation. I agree, but it is a standard that can be differently interpreted. Habermas would not deny this; rather, we may understand his *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) as an explication of the rules by which to decide whether an action is emancipative. What is common to such rules, according to Habermas, is that they are found and justified by the rational consensus of those who are concerned by them. Their consensus is regulated and prevented from being arbitrary by principles of communication. Depending on the weight given to these principles or to the consensus, Habermas' theory oscillates between a positivist conventionalism and a natural right theory of rationality. Perhaps there is no better solution to the problem of how to recognise universally binding principles than the Habermasian way. What it still fails to achieve is an argument on the moral standard of critical thinking that can be used in the everyday fights for spreading emancipation (I'll be happy if a Habermasian proves me wrong by demonstrating how easy it is to apply Habermas' theory in everyday practice).

More particularly, there are two opposite directions in the interpretation of the idea of emancipation, a utilitarian and an Aristotelian one, between which Habermas' theory does not decide. Emancipation, as conceived by the adherents of critical theory, may be described as the state of an individual in which she is capable of independent judgment on how to live her life. According to the utilitarian, an individual is emancipated if she is capable of judging how to find her happiness. According to the Aristotelian, she is emancipated if she is capable of developing her capabilities or talents. The difference may seem practically irrelevant, but it is not. People may be capable of judging on their own happiness and, for the sake of their happiness, prefer a traditional form of life that stunts the capabilities of women. For the utilitarian, they would still be emancipated. For the Aristotelian, they would not, as they would not be capable of using and developing their capabilities. Following the one or the other of these directions leads to incompatible decisions on all levels of public affairs.<sup>4</sup>

*Fourth*, since the aim of critical theory is the solution of practical problems, it must not develop theories for theory's sake. It must do with as little theory as possible. It needs a moral theory to justify its normative standard and its judgments on what the basic practical problems of a society are. But it must beware of the dangers of theorising that have become particularly clear in contemporary philosophy and economics: sterility, irrelevance, illusoriness.<sup>5</sup>

Because both are oriented toward practical problems and need a normative criterion to distinguish good solutions from bad ones, critical theory can be compared with medicine. Traditional natural science (in distinction to technology) starts with a theoretical interest in learning about nature; critical theory and

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the income gap, no social policy can eliminate it." I do not agree that no social policy can eliminate it. See my 2009.

<sup>4</sup> One of them is that between utilitarians and the 'social democratic Aristotelians' in development economics. Cp. Nussbaum 2000; Sen 1999; 1999b; Sen, 'Equality of What?'

<sup>5</sup> This point is emphasised by Taleb 2007, 182, and nicely 285: "A theory is like medicine (or government): often useless, sometimes necessary, always self-serving, and on occasion lethal."

medicine look for scientific knowledge, knowledge that is free from prejudice and superstition, with the practical interest of solving practical problems. However, there are also important differences. The problems medicine wants to solve are not basic social problems but health problems of individuals. It is easier to find out, and agree about, what health problems are than what the basic problems of a society are.

Moreover, ideas of health may depend on views that reflect basic problems. Last not least, medicine has a generally recognised normative criterion for distinguishing good from bad solutions of health problems and good from bad medicine, namely, whether they contribute to the health of individuals. Critical theory does not. True, health can be differently interpreted, and true, emancipation has been recognised by many adherents of critical theory as its normative criterion and does give some orientation. Nevertheless, more reflection, argument and theory are needed to establish the criterion in critical theory than in medicine and to specify emancipation than to specify health.

The first objection to my alternative to the Frankfurt conception of critical theory will be: it is the abolition of critical theory. True, it drops the ideas that critical thinking starts with Marx and can be identified with anti-capitalism, whatever this may mean. But it sticks to the Frankfurt ideas that the first and constitutive aim of social science is the practical interest in solving social problems, that we have to distinguish basic problems from dependent ones, that social science has not yet found the universal moral norm it needs for its practice, that it is necessary for human emancipation to find such a norm, and that today it is possible to find it. Presuming without critical thinking that capitalism is at the basis of social problems would be a case of authoritarian thinking that the Frankfurt School has rightly rejected. Locating its birth in Marx is personality cult, another case of authoritarianism. Marx built on ideas of predecessors that start with the sophists. Therefore, before describing the content of critical theory, which is, how we can find out the basic problems of a society and what the normative standard is that critical theory must follow, I'll give a historical sketch to support my alternative conception.

Yet before turning to history, I'll give a short argument for why a social theory that aims for the knowledge necessary for solving social problems cannot follow the model of natural science, as both Marx and—30 years ago—some friends of *Analyse & Kritik* believed.

## 2. The Limited Model of Natural Science

Social theory, whether critical or not, lacks the property essential for natural science, falsifiability by prediction. The objects of social theory, people, are different from the objects of natural science, bodies. Unlike bodies, humans are influenced by predictions.<sup>6</sup> Predictions about our actions that are told to us become recommendations or warnings as soon as we understand them, since we can

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<sup>6</sup> Yet because of their interaction, bodies may be unpredictable, as became known by the three body problem.

both accept and reject them. But warnings and recommendations are normative and not value-free. Because the truth of predictions in social theory depends on the agents' responses to the predictions, the critical Popperian and financial speculator George Soros talks of the inevitable *reflexivity* of social theory. The insight into this character of social theory is not new. It was known as the Thomas theorem that "the situations that men define as true, become true for them".<sup>7</sup> It is implied in Robert Merton's notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy 1948; 1949, and it has been discussed in the philosophy of science.<sup>8</sup>

Instead of the reflexivity of social theory we might also talk of *freedom of the will*. Reflexivity is based on our capability of saying *yes* as well as *no* to a proposition (either a thought or a possible action). Up until the time of Locke and Hume<sup>9</sup> this capability was called freedom of the will. The discovery of social theory's reflexivity implies a rediscovery of man's free will. Only when people are treated like cattle by concealing predictions from them can a social theory follow the model of a natural science—but then it is not critical (presuming, as I do, that we follow the standard of emancipation).

Statements about future actions are predictive only as far as we presume that the agents will invariably stick to the norms or values that we ascribe to them. Yet we may abandon the norms, if only for the reason that we want to prove that we are free to choose our principles.<sup>10</sup> Hence, any social theory necessarily lacks universal descriptive statements on what people do, as such statements would include predictions. Yet there are value-neutral social theories on specific topics. Behaviour on the market and the exchange, betting and wagers, military deterrence, all forms of actions defined by their aims and norms, can be explained value-neutrally, as far as the aims are taken as a given. Such theories are used in economics and game theory and are neither falsifiable nor empirical. Rather, they explicate the conditions that define a specific kind of behaviour. Behaviour that is not subject to our will, such as learning and making errors, responding to unexpected events, the development of trust or aggression, can even be explained by theories that are both falsifiable and value neutral. But these theories do not explain actions (behaviour subject to our will) and hence lack universal scope. So only if it restricts itself to explaining past actions, to actions whose aims are taken as a given or to behaviour that is not subject to our will can public social science have the value neutrality of a natural science. Value neutrality is paid for by lack of universal scope.

This fact also disqualifies rationality theories that are modelled on game theory or a utility calculus. We can always find a reason to decide against acting in any rational form, although we cannot thus decide without a reason. We can

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas 1923; Thomas/Thomas 1928. Curiously, most theorists think only of predictions becoming a reason for making them true, not of their becoming a reason to refute them. Spite seems to be little developed among them. Popper is a refreshing exception.

<sup>8</sup> In particular by Nagel 1961, but also by Popper 1957 under the name of *Oedipal effect*.

<sup>9</sup> Locke 1975, bk.2, ch.21, §8; Hume 1978 bk.2, pt.3, sec.2. This definition of free will (and of free action as the faculty of acting voluntarily) originates in Ockham and even Aristotle. Cp. Steinvorth 2009, ch. 3.

<sup>10</sup> This is Descartes' argument for the ascription of free will to men. Cp. Steinvorth 2009, ch. 3.

because we can act for proving our independence from any predetermination. For instance, I take another drink before driving home although I am fully aware that another drink will raise the risk of my killing people with my car. I choose the drink not because I have an irresistible desire for drinking but because I enjoy the feeling of sovereignty when I reject my subjection to rational rules or just want to prove my independence of any predetermination. Yet for the same reason I might also choose to freely subject myself to rules. Our unruly minds exclude any specifiable form of rationality. Nonetheless, they do not exclude a universal social theory. But to include future actions, as I will argue in section 6, it needs a normative principle.

This does not imply that it is not falsifiable at all and value-laden in any respect. Rather, a critical theory must be empirically falsifiable, even though not by prediction, and value-laden only in its relation to the future. Testing by prediction needs to be replaced with testing by historical knowledge and the knowledge of specific social theories. Although the physicalist ideal of value-neutrality is wrecked on the fact that statements about future actions are necessarily normative, statements of critical theory about the past need to be value-neutral. The physicalist model of empirical testability and value neutrality is to be restricted but not completely abandoned.

### **3. Happiness or the Development of Capabilities? The Greeks and Locke**

The role of the sophists for all critical thinking on man and society is recognised by experts like Jacqueline de Romilly, but often overlooked. One reason is that most of what we know of them we know from Plato. His entire philosophy was a critique of them that intended to prove their falsity and documented their importance. Their importance consists in their questioning all traditional views on man and society and attempting to build up a kind of knowledge that relied on reason and experience only. While the Ionian natural philosophers started natural science, the sophists started social science in a way that is still a paradigm for critical theory.

This does not imply that any of their theses can still be upheld. Modern science cannot uphold any of the Ionian views either. The idea that not tradition or religion but only reason and experience decide on truth makes them the starting point of social science. In particular, although the sophists' view that humans necessarily strive after happiness or the satisfaction of their desires has been followed by Socrates, Plato and a lot of modern theorists until today, critical theory cannot accept it.

The sophists did not identify happiness with a moral state and therefore had to prove that people cannot prefer a moral but unhappy future to a happy one. This is not plausible, since we know cases that people have sacrificed their happiness for moral reasons; at least this is what they seem to do. Socrates and Plato identified happiness as the necessary object of human action with a moral

state.<sup>11</sup> But this is still less plausible, since we know even better that people can prefer an immoral future to a moral one.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, Plato deduced two influential consequences from their view.

The first is that whoever acts wickedly mistakes what is bad for good and pleasant. Vice is error, virtue knowledge. This intellectualism leaves no place for conflicts that arise from equally rational (or deliberate) decisions on how to respond to a situation. It resonates in the entire history of philosophy and science. Contemporary rational choice theory is one of its last echoes. The second consequence is that if we always act for something attractive, our aims must be different from what they seem. When, say, we want to help a friend it seems we want him to be better off. Yet this aim may entail that we do something that harms us. How can we nevertheless sacrifice even our life for a friend? Plato's theory of ideas gives the answer, implicit in Socrates' intellectualism: what we truly aim for is not the friend's well-being, but our participation in a Platonic idea, here, in the idea of friendliness). I think this contorts the facts.

Philosophy and critical theory would be superfluous if they did not deviate from common sense. Common sense is often imbued with the arbitrariness and stupidities of tradition. But Socrates deviated from common sense by a theory that can—and did—divert attention from the ordinary world with its ordinary conflicts and direct it to an illusionary realm where only stupid people do not pursue their own good that is also good for everyone else. Rather than leading critical thinking to understanding what might be the basic problems of a society, he put social theory on a track bound for pseudo-problems.

Aristotle redirected social theory by rejecting both Socrates' thesis that we aim only for the morally good and Plato's theory of the forms. He replaced them by two theses. The *first* seems little different from Socrates' thesis. It claims that people always strive for *eudaimonia*, better understood as *successful life* rather than as *happiness*, the usual translation. The *second* one claims that *eudaimonia* consists in our use and development of our capabilities.<sup>13</sup> It allows for assuming (though Aristotle did not assume) that we are capable of acting for mere wickedness, as doing evil for the sheer pleasure of doing so is the use of a capability, that of doing evil for evil's sake. If we find happiness in using our capabilities, as Aristotle says we do, we can explain the case of the party guest who has another drink although she knows she does not choose her good. All of us can choose what we know is bad for us since we delight in using our capability of rejecting even the most convincing reason for an action. It is this capability that excludes Socratic intellectualism. We are rational when we deliberate, but our deliberation can end with choosing the reason that we want to prove our

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<sup>11</sup> Plato, *Republic* VI 505e, seems to define the good as something "every soul pursues and does whatever it does for its sake", excluding, like Socrates, that one might do something just because it is bad. But he also gives, in Rep. X 608e, an explanation of the good as "what preserves and benefits" (transl. G. M. E. Grube).

<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless Socrates argues in Plato, *Protagoras* 355c–d; transl. Benjamin Jowett, that "the argument is absurd which affirms that a man often does evil knowingly, when he might abstain, because he is seduced and overpowered by pleasure; or [...] that a man knowingly refuses to do what is good because he is overcome at the moment by pleasure."

<sup>13</sup> Aristoteles, *Nicomachean Ethics* I 7, 1097 a34–b20 und 1098 a3–18.

capability of acting in independence even of the most convincing reason. This possibility wrecks both public predictions of actions and rational choice models.

Aristotle's second thesis is his great contribution to social theory, even though Plato to some extent anticipated it in his thesis that in the ideal *polis* everyone uses their specific capabilities. In contrast, Aristotle's first thesis, that we strive for happiness, is compatible with the thesis that we always strive for the good. Aristotle played an ambivalent role in social theory by both seeming to confirm an old error<sup>14</sup> and yet rendering the means for its rejection. He also suggested the model of medicine for social theory. He did not look for laws and value neutrality. He looked for a kind of knowledge that allows for diagnoses and therapies of social dysfunctions.<sup>15</sup>

Aristotle's reorientation of social theory from conceiving actions as aiming at happiness to conceiving them as the use of the agent's capabilities was confirmed by Locke. Locke, an arch-bourgeois thinker who justified private property, the private appropriation of natural resources and the unrestricted use of money, had a sense for class interests that enabled him to see how little is understood of actions and history if we explain them by a striving for happiness rather than by an interest in using and developing capabilities. His contribution to critical social theory shows clearly when we compare him with Hobbes.

Hobbes uses the idea of a state of nature as a conceptual construct to demonstrate how "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" life is without an absolute state (1968, ch. 13). Locke interprets it as a historical state, one that at his time still existed among the American Indians;<sup>16</sup> moreover, as a "*Golden Age* (before vain Ambition, and *amor sceleratus habendi*, evil concupiscence, had corrupted Mens minds into a Mistake of true Power and Honour)" (§ 111) and money had not yet been "invented" (§§ 36, 48). Once money emerges, social differences increase,<sup>17</sup> "Incroachment on the Right of others" (§ 51) (that is, the encroachment of the poor on the rights of the rich) spreads, and institutions become necessary whose general task is the enforcement of justice and whose specific task is to secure to the rich "*the Preservation of their Property*" (§ 124). This approach implies the rejection of the understanding, shared by sophists, Platonists and Hobbes, of social phenomena by invariable interests or ideal aims.

Locke replaces invariable interests and ideal aims by the variable interest of historical agents in using capabilities that are shaped by social conditions. The normative standard he connects with this interest is that actions and institutions are justified as far as they contribute to the development of capabilities. This is why, unlike Rousseau, he recognises a right to the private appropriation of natural resources. He argues that they are more rationally and efficiently used when they are privately appropriated than when they remain in common. So the rich,

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<sup>14</sup> As is shown by his defence of slavery, *Politics* I i, 1254a14–55b3, Aristotle was a reactionary. So is his economics, imbued with class prejudice. Still, Marx praised it. Reactionaries can contribute to critical theory.

<sup>15</sup> Cp. Jaeger 1957, and de Romilly 1992 on medicine and the sophists.

<sup>16</sup> Locke 1988, II §§ 101–12; references to 'America': §§ 105, 108.

<sup>17</sup> Locke § 49: "Find out something that hath the *Use and Value of Money* amongst his Neighbours, you shall see the same Man will begin presently to *enlarge his Possessions*."



whom he identifies with the rational and efficient, have a right to appropriate natural resources:

“God gave the World to Men in Common; but since he gave it them for their benefit [...] it cannot be supposed he meant it should always remain common and uncultivated. He gave it to the use of the Industrious and Rational, (and Labour was to be *his Title* to it;) not to the Fancy or Covetousness of the Quarrelsome and Contentious.”  
(§ 34)

Private property is superior to the commons because it provides the opportunity for industry and rationality. Locke also contributed to the use of utilitarian standards, as he also holds that industry and rationality produce benefits for all.<sup>18</sup> But his first and immediate measure for moral progress is whether a society makes an industrious and rational use of its resources. The natural resources God gave men include the capabilities he gave each of them. When the industrious and rational use the world, they most rationally use not only the resources of the world but also the resources of their capabilities. Using one’s capabilities is the more important of the two, because the value of the natural resources, as Locke is eager to demonstrate, is negligible compared to that of labour, which is a use of our talents. It is “not 1/1000” of the value of labour invested in a product (§ 43). As an economic thesis this is false, as has become obvious at the latest when elementary resources like fresh water and (in many cities) air, arable land and oil have become scarce. But as a normative thesis that requires of us to consider our productive capabilities our highest good it is well defensible.

Locke’s sharp eye for historical conditions also drew attention to the dependency of the existence of states on historical conditions. He makes clear that as soon as states become incapable of enforcing justice, or less capable than other institutions would be, they lose their right of existence. He is explicit that we need states only when social differences are so deep as to cause social unrest. The consequence is that states are superfluous when there are no such differences.<sup>19</sup> Like Marx, he took states to be dependent on historical economic conditions.

Locke’s historical approach, though, put his German followers on a wrong track. They believed that an understanding of the functioning of societies and the aims people are heading for would enable them to produce predictions rather than diagnoses and therapies, and laws rather than moral recommendations. It would also rid them of any question about a moral standard for measuring historical actions as good or bad. Rather than people, history would decide and prescribe what to do. Historiography would be the physics of society. Nonetheless, this mistaken idea produced insights into what the basic problems in a society are.

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<sup>18</sup> He did so in particular by the argument that in Indian America, where class and wealth differences were weak, “a King of a large and fruitful Territory [...] feeds, lodges, and is clad worse than a day Labourer in *England*” (Locke § 41). John Rawls has taken up this argument by his “difference principle” that legitimises social differences under the Lockean condition that the worse off are better off than they would be if everyone were equal.

<sup>19</sup> E.g., when justice enforcement is achieved by the people themselves. Cp. Locke §§ 8–13.

#### 4. History as Physics of Society: Kant and Hegel

Somewhat paradoxically, the physics of society was started by the philosopher of the categorical imperative—Kant, who might be expected to insist on the historical importance of morality. In fact, this is no paradox, as Kant understands morality as an affair outside time and space and leaves history to the principles of physics. He presented what he predicted for mankind's future as a "plan of nature",<sup>20</sup> even "Nature's secret plan" (1963, *Eighth thesis*).<sup>21</sup> Hegel followed suit when he talked of "the cunning of reason" that "sets the passions (of historical agents) to work for itself", even though the agents do not think of working for the predicted future at all (1970, 49).<sup>22</sup> When Marx said of the communist revolution that it develops "with the inexorability of a law of Nature", he wrapped the same idea up in scientific terms.<sup>23</sup> The Frankfurt School's flirtation with Hegel was a love not with Hegel's strong sides (that lie in his social analyses) but his worst idea inherited from Kant: that history would prescribe to people the goals they had to follow. It is on it that Horkheimer and Adorno built their critique of the distinction of facts and values. This influence alone should be sufficient to relieve the concept of a critical theory from its Frankfurt ties.

Kant considered nature's plan the consequence of a "secret mechanism" (1963, *Ninth thesis*).<sup>24</sup> It consists in a dependency relationship between princes who strive for power and glory and bourgeois who humbly want to live in peace and comfort. For the money princes need to satisfy their craving, they are dependent on their countries' economy ("culture", as Kant calls it), hence on the bourgeois. For promoting the economy they have to admit "civic freedom", which Kant thinks entails "enlightenment, and with it a certain commitment of heart which the enlightened man cannot fail to make to the good he clearly understands". Enlightenment and commitment "must step by step ascend the throne and influence the principles of government". Thus the "secret mechanism" of princes promoting economy levers up universal enlightenment and morality, perpetual peace and an association "wherein all the original capacities of the human race can develop" (1963, *Eighth thesis*). Though he does not use the term, he understands the core of his mechanism as the use of *technology*. For it is only by it that on one hand productivity and on the other civic freedom and enlightenment is increased.

Kant was biased for his idea of the workings of history because he found in it a "justification [...] of Providence" (1963, *Ninth thesis*). History is a tale that "we turn our eyes from [...] in disgust", as long as we do not believe in

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<sup>20</sup> Kant 1963. Beck uses "natural plan" or "natural [...] goal" for Kant's "Naturabsicht"; cp, *ibid.* *Introduction*.

<sup>21</sup> "verborgener Plan der Natur".

<sup>22</sup> English transl. Robert S. Hartman.

<sup>23</sup> Marx 1971, ch. 32 ('Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation'). However, there are statements in Marx's writings that contradict or are not well compatible with this deterministic view of history.

<sup>24</sup> Beck translates "working" for "Veranstaltung"; I prefer 'arrangement'.

the secret mechanism that turns “this idiotic course of things human”<sup>25</sup> into a story with sense and meaning. Moreover, the mechanism provided Kant with the preconception that he thought necessary for rendering history an object of science. A science of nature was possible, according to Kant, only after scientists preconceived of nature by non-empirical concepts that require of all natural processes to follow the principles of causality and conservation of substance. Similarly, a science of history is possible only if we have a preconception of it, and such a preconception is his secret mechanism.

Another reason why Kant loved his idea is its similarity with the view of society developed by Mandeville, Pope and Adam Smith. Their view, too, delivered a theodicy. But they thought of it as a revolutionary *morality* that works the better the more conscious people become of it. When in 1714 Mandeville republished his *Fable of the Bees* under the subtitle *Private Vices, Publick Benefits*,<sup>26</sup> he thereby marked out the fable’s claim to reform our moral ideas: what traditionally have been considered vices—egotism, lavishness, exploitation, pride and aggressiveness—are vices only in private. In public, they are benefits, since it is they rather than the contrasting virtues of altruism and modesty that promote the wealth of a nation.<sup>27</sup> Similarly Smith, though he tried to distance himself from the reviled Mandeville, taught that the wealth of nations is promoted by a morality not of “benevolence”, but of “self-love”.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Introduction*. Beck translates “natural purpose” and “natural plan”, which deviates from Kant’s words.

<sup>26</sup> Mandeville published his rhymed fable first in 1705 under the title *The Grumbling Hive: or, Knaves Turn’d Honest*. Cp. Mandeville 1924.

<sup>27</sup> Cp. *The Fable of the Bees* first edition of 1705, line 409–416; partly corrected by the 1714 edition text: “Then leave Complaints: Fools only strive /To make a Great an honest Hive. / T’ enjoy the World’s Conveniencies, / Be famed in War, yet live in Ease / Without great Vices, is a vain / Eutopia seated in the Brain. / Fraud, Luxury, and Pride must live; / Whilst we the Benefits receive.”

<sup>28</sup> Smith 1986, 119: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.” Smith, though, avoided praising “great Vices” as did Mandeville; cp. preceding note.—The effect of these ideas was tremendous. In 1733, Alexander Pope put forth the same idea in the now-famous words: “All Nature is but Art unknown to thee; All chance direction, which thou canst not see; All discord, harmony not understood; All partial evil, universal good; And spite of Pride, in erring Reason’s spite, One truth is clear, *Whatever is, is right*.” (Pope, *Essay on Man*, End of First Epistle) In 1739, Hume 1978, 492, remarked that the virtue of sociability was motivated by the “passion of self-interest”, adding that whether it “be esteemed vicious or virtuous, ‘tis all a case; since itself restrains it: So that if it be virtuous, men become social by their virtue; if vicious, their vice has the same effect.” Kant followed them when in his *Idea* he praised men’s “unsocial sociability” and thanked nature for planting in men “the insatiable desire to possess and rule”, since only by this vice are men spurred “to the manifold development of their capacities”, “thereby perhaps showing the ordering of a wise Creator and not the hand of an evil spirit” (Kant 1963, *Fourth thesis*). Casanova 1966, 26, wrote in 1797 “that both in this physical world and in the moral world good comes from evil as evil comes from good”. Goethe makes the devil Mephisto introduce himself by the description that he is “part of the power that always strives for evil and ever creates the good”; “*Ein Teil von jener Kraft, die stets das Böse will und stets das Gute schafft*.” (*Faust*, Studierzimmer) Hegel echoed Pope in his notorious statement that *What is rational is real; And what is real is rational* (Hegel 1970b, 24, Preface; transl. S. W. Dyde), but he was also Smith’s pupil in his description of political economy; cp. *ibid.* § 189.

But there is an important difference between Kant and the British authors. For them, the mechanism that turns vice into virtue is an institution we ought to act in but might refuse: the capitalist market. For Kant, it is technology, understood as the cunning of reason we cannot escape. Technology would produce “public benefits” regardless of a capitalist market. He believed that because technology is a product of reason and reason cannot but produce order, in history no less than in nature, therefore technology cannot but produce order.<sup>29</sup> He states that reason is the faculty by which we invent and use technology, and describes it thus:

“Reason in a creature is a faculty of widening the rules and purposes of the use of all its powers far beyond natural instinct; it acknowledges no limits to its projects.” (1963, *Second thesis*)

This is a wonderful description of technological reason. By technology, reason widens our powers beyond instinct and acknowledges no limits indeed. But much faith in reason is necessary to believe that such an unruly faculty can impose order on history. Actually, technology is the source of both good and evil. It can even incite to evil; for morality prohibits doing evil, and reason, not only in its technological form, does not only dislike limits; it is even challenged by them to do just what is forbidden. Yet technology does deliver a key to understanding history. It gives history direction by increasing our forces of production and creating more opportunity for enacting our capabilities. It even suggests how we may find the basic problems of a society: by considering whether our forces of production are used in a way that allows everyone the development of their specific capabilities. Though illusionary for the prediction of progress,<sup>30</sup> Kant’s secret mechanism is useful for understanding society.

Hegel recognised the destructive power of reason in technology. To the order-imposing character of Kantian reason (calling it “position”) he added the contrary of order-denial (calling it “negation”). He defined will, the practical form of reason, by these two characters (1970b, §§ 5–9), thus creating the basis of his dialectics. But he stuck to Kant’s expectation of a happy ending of history by declaring that the “*final goal of the world* [...] the only aim [...] for which have been brought all sacrifices to the wide altar of earth and over the course of man’s existence”, is “mind’s consciousness of its freedom and for this very reason the reality of its freedom” (1970, 32f., my translation).

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<sup>29</sup> Already Protagoras taught that technology does not produce morality, when in his myth on the beginnings of mankind, reported by Plato in his dialogue called after him (322b), he states that the arts given men by Prometheus did not suffice to save their lives and only Zeus’ *politike techne* (civic art) did; cp. Romilly 1992, 164. Yet still today many believe that if governments increase production their respect of human rights will follow.

<sup>30</sup> Hayek 1945 and Popper 1957, authors that are still wrongly regarded as enemies of critical theory, have shown the impossibility of historical predictions. Technology allows saying what has been said by Taleb 2007, 211: “In the end we are being driven by history, all the while thinking that we are doing the driving.”

## 5. Marx

Marx, too, predicted history's happy ending, but did so in a way that gives substance to critical theory. First, he re-interpreted Hegel's contradiction within reason of order-denial and order-imposition as a contradiction by which he described commodity production, the production for a market. He described it as the contradiction of the commodity producer's interest in realising an exchange value and the consumer's interest in consuming a use value.<sup>31</sup> By replacing Hegel's reason with commodity production, he provided the historian with a more specific conceptual framework for understanding history. Rather than looking for the infinite and indefinite expressions of reason in history, the historian could now concentrate on commodity production, because, by its contradiction and the forms by which it temporarily solves the contradiction, this is what pushes societies to modernity. Today though, since Marx thinks in the end its contradiction proves unsolvable, this motor has to be replaced by a communist form of production. I cannot present here the way Marx has conceived the basic contradiction of commodity production and its development through temporary solutions.<sup>32</sup> What we have to look closer at is the idea of history it implies and is motivated by.

This idea can be described as follows. Societies differ, first, in the stage of development of their productive powers and, second, in how their use is socially organised. Although productive powers are capabilities of individuals, they can be efficiently used only in social cooperation, which may include forms of property and of command over how to use capabilities. Those who decide how the capabilities are used are the rulers; those who are decided about, the ruled ones. To become rulers it is necessary for a group to prevail over its competitors by organising productive forces more efficiently. The perpetual struggle for power entails a tendency toward more efficient forms of production and, by progress in these forms, a tendency toward a more intensive and extensive use of capabilities in general. One particularly successful organisational form is that of commodity production. Therefore, it has become the vehicle of progress that led to modernity.

The successful organisation of capabilities leads to the detection of new capabilities. They require new rules for their use that are incompatible with the old organisation. Therefore, social forms and the classes who, to the advantage of society, have introduced them, after some time, precisely because of their success, turn into fetters of development. Only after struggles between the rulers and those who represent the new capabilities can more adequate forms be introduced by those who are capable of better organising the new capabilities.<sup>33</sup> This repetitive process ends only when a social form is found "in which the free

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<sup>31</sup> In his description of the opposition of exchange value and use value Marx harks back to Aristotle's distinction between a natural and an unnatural chrematistic in *Politics* I 3, 1256b40–58b8.

<sup>32</sup> I have presented it in Steinvoth 1977 and 2009c.

<sup>33</sup> The simplest and clearest exposition of Marx's ideas is found in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”<sup>34</sup> In such a form it will probably still be necessary to decide on how capabilities are used, but everyone, he expected, will participate in the decisions.

Like Locke, Marx considers the crucial factor that constitutes societies and history to be capabilities or what he calls productive forces. They are not tools and machines but capabilities that include capabilities to invent tools and machines, but also any other capability by which we can change the world or ourselves. Though they are the capabilities of individuals, to use them it is necessary for individuals to cooperate. The most elementary productive power is that of generation; it makes people join in families. But since people have a lot of other capabilities, many of which can appear only after the more elementary ones have been developed, they need more associations than that of the family. This is why capabilities are a force that pushes societies in the direction of increasing opportunities for the use of capabilities.

Let us distinguish from Marxism in a narrower sense the approach so far described as the Marxian approach. It consists in understanding societies as crucially dependent on their capabilities and on the forms of organising them, and in conceiving forms of organisation as embodying a contradiction or basic problem. The problem springs from the fact that a successful organisation form breeds new capabilities or spreads their use to classes who before had no access to them so that a new organisation is required. This contradiction is different from the basic contradiction of commodity production. This consists in the incongruity of exchange value realisation and use value consumption; in contrast, what I have just described is a divergence of interests of the representatives of new and not yet organised capabilities and of the representatives of the existing organisational forms.

The Marxian approach has not been lost in current political theory. To give two prominent examples, Huntington and Fukuyama explain societies and their development by what they call fundamental contradictions or problems in societies (cp. Steinvorth 2008). Though they are not explicit on this point, these problems can be best understood as contradictions between productive forces and their organisational forms. By ascribing to capabilities the crucial role in understanding societies, Marx follows Aristotle’s and Locke’s understanding that the standard by which to evaluate the moral quality and progress of societies is not the increase of happiness but the development of capabilities.

Marx narrowed his approach down through two theses, making it Marxist. *First*, he distinguished a ‘basis’ and a ‘superstructure’ of society. Inspired by his analyses of commodity production, he admitted to the basis only capabilities that contribute to economic production rather than any by which we might change the world or ourselves, and the organisation of such capabilities. The superstructure is determined by the basis and comprehends the other capabilities and their institutions: politics and law, science and art, religion, family and education. Considering the role of politics in earlier societies and that of science in contemporary economy, the Marxist hierarchy lacks plausibility.

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<sup>34</sup> K. Marx, F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, End of Chapter 2.

*Second*, he expected capitalism to increase productive forces to a degree that would allow, once they are better organised, superabundance and, with it, the abolition of justice (the rules of distinguishing between *mine* and *thine*), of the state (the institution of justice enforcement) and of class differences, in particular, of distinctions between directing and executive positions; for he thought that everyone would be able to do every job. Marx seems to be right in predicting that we would get the means for abundance; he may even be right in expecting, with David Hume, that abundance would make justice and the state superfluous;<sup>35</sup> but he was wrong in excluding that in abundance different talents would lead to different classes. People with different talents will choose different lives precisely when there is abundance, and different lives will entail different classes, even if they harmonise better than today.

It was only through narrowing his capability approach down by his theses on the hierarchy of basis and superstructure and the utopia of a classless society that Marx became a Marxist. Horkheimer and Habermas have been right in distinguishing a critical from a non-critical Marxism. I think the Marxian approach is critical and Marxism is not.

## 6. The Content of Critical Theory

Let us now look at the content of critical theory, that is, at what its normative standard and the basic problems might be that are to be solved according to the standard.

My sketch of the development of social thinking from the sophists to Marx may suggest two choices: to prefer a capability criterion to a utilitarian one as the standard needed, and to identify basic social problems with the tension between given forms of organising productive powers and productive powers that have been bred under the forms but lack the opportunity for development. If we follow this suggestion, we'll have a nice relation between criterion and basic problems. Acceptance of a capability criterion will imply a morality that puts the development of their capabilities by individuals at the top of the moral hierarchy. Because of the high value of capability development its obstruction must be considered a basic problem. If we accept the idea of the Marxian approach (and of Aristotle) that we can develop our capabilities only in social interaction, then it is plausible that their development is fostered or fettered by the social forms that organise their use. These suggestions do not produce a fully fledged theory but an approach to conceiving societies, their problems and the standard by

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<sup>35</sup> Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* §145; ed. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon 1975, 183f.: "Let us suppose that nature has bestowed on the human race such profuse *abundance* of all *external* conveniences that, without any uncertainty in the event, without any care or industry on our part, every individual finds himself fully provided with whatever his most voracious appetites can want, or luxurious imagination wish or desire. His natural beauty, we shall suppose, surpasses all acquired ornaments [...]. Music, poetry and contemplation form his sole business: conversation, mirth, and friendship his sole amusement. It seems evident that, in such a happy state, every other social virtue would flourish, and receive tenfold increase; but the cautious, jealous virtue of justice would never once have been dreamed of."

which to judge a change as progressive or regressive or the solution of a problem as good or bad.

No doubt, another historical sketch might suggest other choices. Nonetheless, I follow the approach just described, since I find neither a more plausible historical sketch nor more plausible suggestions. If someone does, she may convince me. Meanwhile, let us check the approach, which is the Marxian one. I summarise it thus:

- (1) Any use of individuals' capabilities needs a social form of organisation to be effective.
- (2) Such forms are progressive or successful if they allow individuals to develop their capabilities known to them when the forms are introduced.
- (3) Successful social forms allow individuals to detect new capabilities.
- (4) Until today, successful organisational forms fettered rather than fostered the development of the capabilities that they allowed individuals to detect.
- (5) Today we can organise capabilities in a form that allows their unhampered development without turning into their fetter.
- (6) Societies ought to organise individuals' capabilities in a form that allows the unhampered development of as many capabilities as possible.

Theses (1) to (5) are empirical propositions that imply what the basic problems of a society are; (6) implies the normative standard that we must use in solving basic problems. It claims that every individual ought to develop their capabilities (and presumes that they are equally entitled to their use); it is for this use that (1) claims we need social forms.

The notion of development of capabilities has first been used by Aristotle, but as might have become clear in our historical retrospect, it is not bound to the idea of a fixed human nature that Aristotle followed. Rather, as Locke and Kant implied, our capabilities must be considered to be inexhaustible, unlimited, unpredictable, and causing, up to now, the basic problems of society: that forms that have fostered their development turn into fetters of newly detected capabilities. The goal the Marxian approach is oriented toward is an unlimited productivity. But its productivity is not to be understood in economic terms.

Thesis (6) implies that what gives value to life is found in individuals using their capacities and not in societies, but (1) implies that for this very reason we must find the adequate forms of socially organising our capabilities. It implies that society is the place to use our capabilities. By this implication critical theory differs once more from medicine. For medicine, the parts of the body function for the whole of the body. For critical theory, society exists for the individuals, even though, because of (1), they are dependent on society.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> This point is not seen by Aristotle, *Politics* I, 1253a20. When Marx calls the individual "the ensemble of the social relations" (*The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. R. C. Tucker, New York (Norton)<sup>2</sup> 1978, 145), like Aristotle he seems to give priority to the community. But (6) is incompatible with such priority.



If we accept theses (1) to (6) as an interpretation of critical theory, how can we prove that they meet the conditions of scientificity? As to the empirical propositions (1) to (5), rather than by prediction they must be checked by the confirmed knowledge of special social theories and historical facts. Though this is a weaker empirical test, it is still a way to falsify a thesis. Among the empirical theses it is probably (5) that might raise most doubts. But I'll just assume that (1) to (5) might pass the empirical test. The hardest problem in accepting the Marxian approach is anyway given by the normative thesis (6).

In fact, thesis (6) raises a double problem. *First*, the Marxian needs to prove that a scientific social theory can and must recognise a normative proposition. What Horkheimer called scientism and positivism can be defined by its exclusion of any normative proposition from science. Whatever may be criticised in Horkheimer's idea of critical theory, he has been perfectly right in claiming that critical theory must reject this exclusion. *Second*, the Marxian needs to prove that it is just (6) and not another normative thesis that we must accept. To consider only the most important competitors to (6): utilitarians argue that societies are to maximise happiness; Nietzscheans claim that societies are to produce an especially talented race of supermen; world-negating religions renounce all hopes of fulfilment through action or the use of our capabilities. How can the Marxian reject them?

To start with the first problem, why should the social theorist recognise a normative proposition for science at all? Why should she not, with the positivist, reject any universally obligatory moral principle for science? Why should we expect the scientist to give recommendations or warnings that can claim universal consent? Why can't we be content with a social science that can describe possible future scenarios and leave the choice to the public?

I do not doubt that very often social scientists should offer the public a set of scenarios from which the public should choose after public deliberation. But it is an illusion to think that the public also can or ought to give directions to social scientists about what they should investigate and prepare for a presentation to the public. Scientists need a science-immanent standard that tells them what the right decision is for choosing a field of research. On such decisions public political decisions depend, since the public relies on knowledge of social facts that only social science can deliver. Remember medicine. Medical scientists need a standard for their decisions on what kind of research to do. Their standard (let's hope) is whether their research will increase public knowledge of how to improve health. This is certainly a vague standard but clear enough to disqualify practice that serves the scientists' income.

For the same reason, social scientists need a criterion that distinguishes good research. The criterion upheld by the Marxian approach is whether research will increase public knowledge of how the use of our capabilities is improved. This standard is vague but clear enough to disqualify practice that raises profits or the GNP. Maybe there is a better one, but the positivistic idea that social science does not need a standard is untenable. Yet if we distinguish good scientific research by the Marxian criterion, we imply that also social developments can be distinguished as good by the corresponding criterion of whether it will improve

not the *knowledge* of how capability use is improved but how this *use* is improved. Knowledge can be the criterion for progress in social science and medicine only if its object is the criterion for progress in society.

In addition to this science-immanent argument there is another one for the necessity, not just for science but for contemporary societies, of a moral standard claiming universal consent. Positivism has based its value-neutrality in science on the thesis that there are no norms or values that can claim universal consent. Such claim can be raised only for descriptions and descriptive theories. This idea put a positivist like Bertrand Russell in trouble. On one hand he was not only convinced of the moral ideas of liberty, equality and pacifism but he also fought for them. On the other hand, he could explain his commitment only as expressing his adherence to a tradition or his sentiments, but could not justify it as something to which every rational being is obligated, as he would have liked it to be. Rational consent can be given only to truth claims, not to moral claims, Russell and the positivists thought.<sup>37</sup>

This view has been nicely expressed by Hume when he argued that “‘Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger” (1978, 416 [bk. 2, pt. 3, sec. 3]). However, this is plausible only if we presume that morality must be based on necessarily true premises that enable us to deduce the norm that we must not destroy the world. But neither a norm nor a fact or description is ever deducible from any such premises. Hume believed that we may deduce scientific descriptions and theories from sense impressions and that sense impressions are infallible. Therefore he, like the 20<sup>th</sup> century positivists, believed that theoretical reason can claim rational consent, while practical reason, lacking comparable premises, cannot. But impressions are not infallible, and descriptions and theories always claim more than is asserted by the assertion of sense impressions. Therefore, the positivist model of both theoretical and practical reason is mistaken.

We have to replace it by Popper’s falsificationist model, according to which we can accept as rational what has passed the sluice of critical efforts, or by Habermas’ communicativist model, according to which we can accept what has passed the sluice of communication and deliberation. In practice, the difference between Popper’s and Habermas’ model is pretty small; for what is communicated and deliberated in the Habermasian sluice are the objects of the critical efforts in the Popperian sluice. In particular, Hume’s thesis that it is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the world to the scratching of my finger is false both according to Popper’s and Habermas’ model of reason. The norm that we must not destroy the world passes both rationality constituting sluices.

Critical theory can even choose a third rationality model by which to understand and defend its capability criterion or thesis (6). It can follow the idea that we accept moral norms after considering our ordinary moral notions and intuitions and reconstructing them in a way that they make sense. This idea

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<sup>37</sup> To illustrate the strength of this view, an anecdote: When I argued against it in my epilogue to Steinworth 1971, I was criticised by a review attacking author and publisher in the weekly *Die Zeit*, Nov 26, 1971. Some weeks later another review appeared in *Die Zeit* while my comments to the review were refused publication.

has become popular among contemporary philosophers since Rawls, following Sidgwick, introduced the concept of a “reflective equilibrium” between moral intuitions (Rawls 1972, 46). It admits that often ordinary moral notions, such as the views on the moral inferiority of women in many contemporary and nearly all past societies, are unacceptable, as they offend our idea of equality. But it insists that the ordinary moral notions are the only source of normativity. Rather than rejecting them for their impurity, we have to adapt them to moral ideas like equality and liberty, which themselves have been developed from ordinary moral notions. True, we can construct different coherent moral systems from the ordinary notions. But the constructors can argue which one to accept. So the process of constructing a moral system out of the ordinary moral notions is again similar to the Popperian critical efforts and the Habermasian communicative processes.

Now, if accepting a normative standard is unavoidable in social science and rational norms can as much claim universal consent as can descriptive theories, then the next question is which universally binding standard for good and bad in social science and society should be chosen. Let us have a peek at some competitors to the capability criterion.

The utilitarian goal of happiness may have been convincing when the possibility of producing happiness by drugs or genetic engineering was not yet threatening. Considering this possibility, depicted in black utopias such as *1984*, the utilitarian Glover deepened what he called the one-dimensional concept of happiness by the dimensions of reality contact, self-activity and self-development (Glover 1984, 154ff.). This transformation of traditional utilitarianism into a ‘complex’ one, convincing though it is, is the recognition that we have to measure the morality of societies by capability development rather than by happiness production, since the point of reality contact, self-activity and self-development is that it requires of us to make a most extensive and intensive use of our capabilities.

Moreover, utilitarianism leaves little space to accept the idea of emancipation. We may try adapting utilitarianism to this idea by saying (as I did in section 1) that it understands emancipation as the state of a person that enables her to judge on what will make her happy. But if she is happier without such ability, the utilitarian has to sacrifice emancipation for happiness. In contrast, accepting the capability criterion implies the highest ranking of the idea of emancipation, since individuals can develop their capabilities only if they are capable of judgment, and emancipation is based on this capability. The criterion of happiness allows that people can stay passive; that of capability development requires them to act themselves.

Living by the Nietzschean idea of society as the place for breeding supermen may be confounded with the criterion of capability development, as the supermen are people with the most developed capabilities. Yet the difference is that the Marxian criterion requires the development of everyone’s capabilities by themselves and the Nietzschean one that of a few only. To follow Nietzsche commits to rejecting the idea of equality. But this idea is on the one hand too deeply rooted in our ordinary notions of justice to be dropped, and on the other

hand our historical experience with societies of inequality like the Fascist but also some capitalist ones cannot recommend dropping equality at all.

Living by the religious idea of renouncing all hope of secular fulfilment is attractive, as by prohibiting any self-interested action it rids us of problems of how far we may use force to prevent violence. It promises to keep our souls pure. But the promise is false. Our soul will not stay pure if we do not actively prevent an aggressor from killing an innocent we can defend. In fact, world-negating religions are rarely consistent in their renunciation of hopes of secular fulfilment, as they allow for defending one's life and that of one's close relatives.

These comments on some competitors to the capability criterion of course cannot prove its rightness; they can only reject objections put forward by their adherents. Yet I think there is no other way to defend the criterion than by considering any possible objection. There is no way of finding a final proof or even a *Letztbegründung* for it. Considering now the Marxian approach and not just competitors to (6), we cannot prove it either but only try rejecting objections.

## 7. Some Objections to the Marxian Approach

*First*, should we not reject or modify (6) because of the dangers of an unhampered use of our capabilities? Has the unregulated growth of productive powers not sufficiently proved, by its effects of environment destruction and the economic and political disasters of the last century, that the idea of capability enactment is mistaken and dangerous? Now this objection follows the very idea of capability development that it wants to reject. We regard the effects mentioned as disasters because we presuppose that destruction is worse than construction, and mean by destruction a reduction not only of happiness but of opportunities for the use of capabilities. So if we recognise that societies are the place where *everyone* is to use their capabilities, we imply that we must not use destructive capabilities, as such use hinders people from realising their possibilities. What is true, though, is that (6) requires us to look for institutions that minimise our destructivity.<sup>38</sup>

*Second*, if we must look for destruction-reducing institutions, should we not look for a more determinate goal of societies and human life rather than identify it as the indeterminate capability development? Does the condition of not being destructive take the dangers of capability development seriously enough? Now, any more determinate description of the goal of capability development would restrict the liberty of individuals to follow their specific talents or qualities and should therefore be rejected. Moreover, the goal points clearly to one of the most obvious failures of contemporary societies, that is, unemployment. Unemployment is the tip of the iceberg of failures of a form of organising capabilities that has been good at breeding formerly undetected capabilities and weak in finding ways to use them.

*Third*, no society or civilisation can realise all of our many if not infinite capabilities at the same time; it can only realise a set of them that is realisable at a time. Any such set may allow for the development of very many though

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<sup>38</sup> I have expounded on this thesis in Steinvorth 2009.

different capabilities, or one set may propose the intensive development of fewer capabilities and another the extensive development of more capabilities. How can we claim that the capability criterion can decide between such sets?

We can since the Marxian approach presumes that at most historical times a society or civilisation has been suffering from a basic contradiction, that between a form of organising the capabilities given at the time when the form was introduced and the capabilities detected after the form succeeded in organising the former capabilities. Societies are challenged by a choice not among theoretically possible sets of capabilities but among forms of organising capabilities that are already detected and demand opportunities for their use and development.

True, the forms that might organise the newly detected capabilities might favour the use of some capabilities at the cost of other capabilities. For instance, the capitalist form of organisation has increased opportunities for the capability of science and technology and decreased opportunities for the capability of meditation and mysticism. But the organisational form that has to be found today would allow for a broader spectrum of capabilities than ever before, because the enormously increased capabilities of economic production allow so many more people to retreat from the sphere of economy and to develop all the many capabilities that are known today (even that for mysticism).

We cannot exclude that at some future time we shall be confronted with a choice among sets of capabilities none of which can be preferred for the reason that it allows more, or more important, capabilities to develop. I do not think that the Marxian approach or any other interpretation of critical theory can solve this problem. But it is not today's problem. Today's problem is not so much that the capabilities bred under capitalism are new in the sense of having been unknown before; rather, a great part of them are new only for a great number of individuals who before had no chance of detecting them as their own capabilities. Therefore, the present challenge is to find an organisational form that allows the masses the use of capabilities that formerly has been the privilege of the happy few, and at the same time not to lose the economic productivity that allows the masses such use. It is a challenge that does not leave a broad margin for realising a lot of possible sets of capabilities none of which could be preferred for the reason that it allows more, or more important, capabilities to develop.

*Fourth*, can the Marxian approach really help understand contemporary problems? Marxists similarly claim to better understand social problems by referring to capabilities and the forms of their organisation. But they do so by using the more specific concept of economic productive powers, while the Marxian concept comprehends any capability by which we may change the world or ourselves. It recognises as a productive force poetic talents and talents for meditation no less than a talent for management or a capability of workaholism. Doesn't the Marxian approach inflate the Marxist conception of productive powers into meaninglessness?

The reason I do not think so is that the capabilities bred by the current capitalist form of organising capabilities but incompatible with it are not only and perhaps even not in the first place the economic productive powers that

Marxism assumes. Rather, they are non-economic capabilities such as enjoying, and adequately responding to, the world and people, artistic capabilities, and talents for meditation and reflection. Such capabilities, as I just said, are not new at all; what is new is that much more individuals detect them than in former societies. It is important, though, that also enormous economically productive powers have been detected in capitalism, powers of using automata, computers, the Web, bio tech and other high technologies. They require new forms of cooperation that often are better compatible with new forms of the commons than with capitalist property (cp. Steinvorth 2009d). But they are also the basis of both abundance and a degree of unemployment that shows how many people might develop their capabilities in fields that have been closed to them before.

So the detection of capabilities formerly inaccessible for the masses is conditioned on the detection of new economically productive powers. Nonetheless, the detection of new capabilities by the masses puts different demands on society than the detection of the high techs. The capitalist system is threatened by the former detection rather than by the latter. The high techs are more easily absorbable by capitalism than the detection of new capabilities by the masses. Their detection leads to the rejection of the system, to a retreat to non-economic spheres such as family and religion, or to militant rebellion. For the Marxist, this is escapism. For the Marxian, it is an effort at developing capabilities unused before, since the opportunities offered for capability use in the capitalist system are rightly felt to be stunting rather than developing. For the Marxist, the flight in destructive actions, including terrorism, is the choice of the *lumpenproletariat*. For the Marxian it is the preference of a life that even though destructive is more suitable to the use of one's capabilities than a life in passivity.

Yet the Marxian could not be a critical theorist if she were not interested in solving the basic problems that the two different movements depend on, the detection of high techs and of new capabilities by the masses. She will agree with the Marxist that the basic problem consists in the misfit of the capitalist form of production with capabilities, because without much theory she can observe the damages produced by today's capitalism. But she does not infer that capitalism must be replaced with communism. Such inference is justifiable only with a wildly speculative theory that she distrusts. So she looks for steps by which the capabilities that people try developing can be better developed than today. Of course she cannot deduce such steps from her approach. However, the Marxian approach can give her some help.

The basic economic condition to give more opportunity for using non-economic capabilities is that everyone has an income that sets them free for developing economically unproductive capabilities but does not undermine the power of economy to produce the abundance that allows the masses to engage in non-economic activities in the first place. The idea of an unconditional basic income meets this condition.<sup>39</sup> It enables everyone to pursue their specific talents, though only in

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<sup>39</sup> Cp. van Parijs 1995 and Pettit 2007. I am here recanting a view I defended in Steinvorth 1999, 161ff. I then feared introducing basic income would reduce politics to a struggle for raising basic income. I now think this danger is small as the interest in non-economic value spheres will prevail over the monetary interests.

frugality, and to stay untroubled by the tyranny of both the labour market and intellectual adaptation constraints that allow intellectual pundits to gain their disproportionate influence. On the one hand, today's enormous productivity of labour that shows in increasing unemployment<sup>40</sup> allows that only a small part of the population is active in economic production; on the other, the higher monetary reward for economically productive labour will allure people with economic talents, workaholism or an inclination to luxuries in a number sufficient for producing abundance.

Experts disagree on how high basic income should be and on the best way to institute it, but many agree that a basic income is possible that ensures everyone a decent life without reducing society's production.<sup>41</sup> We may even expect an increase of economic productivity, as firms will be freed from the ballast of people without interest in economic production and benefit from inventions and detections made in non-economic spheres.

Moreover, basic income can be introduced without reliance on the state. What is necessary for it is that business firms pay a percentage of their profit into a fund from which it is paid. This can be organized more effectively by a non-government institution than by the state. Certainly the firms must be persuaded to pay into the fund; but not the state should persuade them but the population. Therefore, basic income may become the core of an association that makes the state superfluous<sup>42</sup> and organizes justice enforcement in state-independent institutions.<sup>43</sup> The end of the state is desirable for the sake of capability development, since the state reduces and corrupts capabilities by its demand that activities conform to state interests, most important of which is that in its own glory rather than in the development of individual capabilities.

There are certainly a lot of other ways to change society in the direction of creating more opportunities for capability development. What I wanted to show

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<sup>40</sup> As Martin/Schumann 1998, 10, 12f., report, a "global brain trust" of 500 top politicians, economic leaders and scientists, chaired by former and last Soviet Union president Mikhail Gorbachev, predicted in unison that only 20 percent of the population will be needed in jobs; the rest will be appeased by "tittytainment", as former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski formulated. Tittytainment is one of the many contemporary forms of shrinking capabilities.

<sup>41</sup> Cp., among many others, Straubhaar 2006.

<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, van Parijs 1995 does not take account of this point.

<sup>43</sup> Cp. Mathews 1997: "In the Middle Ages, emperors, kings, dukes, knights, popes, archbishops, guilds, and cities exercised overlapping secular power over the same territory in a system that looks much more like a modern, three-dimensional network than the clean-lined, hierarchical state order that replaced it." (61) "NGOs [...] are better than governments at dealing with problems that grow slowly and affect society through their cumulative effect on individuals – the 'soft' threats of environmental degradation, denial of human rights, population growth, poverty, and lack of development that may already be causing more deaths in conflict than are traditional acts of aggression." (63) Hardt, Neri 2000, xii f, find in the "declining sovereignty of nation-states [...] one of the primary symptoms of the coming of Empire" and understand empire as "the realization of the world market". This is an important warning from equating the end of nation-states with the end of political sovereignty. Slaughter 2005, describes an aggregation of global institutions along economic, legal, legislative and information "issues" that "makes a global system of checks and balances possible" (254), as well as a "subsidiarity" that she calls "the European Union's version of Madisonian checks and balances" (255f.).

was that the Marxian approach is fit for application in practice, a practice that may even be called revolutionary.<sup>44</sup>

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