Critical theory in the Frankfurt School tradition can be, very roughly, characterized by four features that are meant to distinguish it from other types of philosophical and social theorizing. (1) It is self-reflexive, in that it questions its own presuppositions and systematically takes into account the social and historical conditions of theory formation, including its own; (2) it is interdisciplinary, in that it opposes any desire for philosophical purity and integrates philosophical analysis with social theory and empirical social research; (3) it is materialist, in the sense that it is anchored in social and political struggles and the oppositional experiences and forms of consciousness they express, from which it takes its cue, but which it does not uncritically follow; and (4) it is emancipatory, i.e. guided by the goal of social emancipation, whose obstacles it seeks to analyze based on social research and whose possibilities it seeks to expand in connection with political and social movements. It is especially critical theory’s claim to be materialist and emancipatory that situates it in the Marxist tradition, taking up that tradition’s commitment to overcoming the division between theory and practice.

As part of its Marxist heritage, critical theory turns the value systems, conceptions of human nature, and allegedly scientific discourses that traditional theories treat as sources of – or as providing a firm standpoint for – critique into objects of critique. Since, e.g., normative principles are not accessible in abstraction from historically concrete social contexts and often fulfill an ideological function – being “so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests” (Marx/Engels 1978 [1848]: 482) – critique cannot proceed by confronting an allegedly deficient reality with an abstractly derived ideal or norm. The same holds for assumptions about human nature or presumably scientific insights. Instead of focusing on “simplistic questions of conscience and clichés about justice,” taking “refuge from history in morality” and relying on the “armoury of its moral indignation” (Marx 1976 [1847]: 322, 325), critique has to be based in an analysis of social reality and its contradictions, and can only find its criteria in the social practices, struggles, experiences, and self-understandings to which it is connected (see also Celikates 2012).

Those who engage in social critique within the Marxist and Frankfurt School tradition have long been challenged to make explicit and justify the normative basis of their approach. In what follows, however, I will not trace the well-documented and controversial...
debates about the normative foundations of critique (see, e.g., Finlayson 2007); rather, I will reconstruct the different ways in which the theorists of the Frankfurt School conceptualized the relation of theory to practice and their own role as critical theorists. After the loss of confidence in an identifiable direction of history and a privileged collective subject whose struggle leads the way, critical theorists were confronted with the problem that, on the one hand, they had to uphold the link to pre-theoretical experiences, oppositional forms of consciousness, and actually existing practices of critique and resistance, while, on the other hand, it became increasingly unclear how they were supposed to identify the social struggles and movements that their theory was meant to connect to and whether the conditions for them to emerge were given in the first place. This challenge takes on an existential dimension insofar as it is true that, as Axel Honneth (2007 [1994]: 66) argues, without some form of proof that its critical perspective is reinforced by a need or a movement within social reality, Critical Theory cannot be further pursued in any way today, for it would no longer be capable of distinguishing itself from other models of social critique in its claim to a superior sociological explanatory substance or in its philosophical procedures of justification.

To many, including later generations of critical theorists, relying on the link between theory and practice while claiming that the latter is increasingly blocked necessarily leads into a theoretical and political dead end. To avoid, or at least reduce, the risks of oversimplification such judgments run into, it helps to take seriously an implication of the claim to link theory and practice, namely that critical theory can itself only be properly understood in relation to the intellectual and political practice of its representatives (see Demirović 1999, e.g. 14).

As the following brief – and necessarily selective – survey of attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice throughout the different generations of the Frankfurt School underlines, instead of being easily overcome, the division between theory and practice has proven obstinate, resulting in a number of complex mediations and tensions that characterize critical theory – in its different strands and voices – until today.

The Original Project and the Closure of Political Space

In his influential programmatic articles published in the Frankfurt Institute’s Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung in the 1930s, Max Horkheimer famously sketches the contours of critical theory’s project to transcend the limitations of traditional theory. When in his 1931 inaugural address as the new director of the Institute Horkheimer focuses on the link between theory and empirical research – and thus on the essentially interdisciplinary character of what he here calls “social philosophy” – the link between theory and practice appears in methodological guise as “the idea of a continuous, dialectical penetration and development of philosophical theory and specialized scientific praxis” (Horkheimer 1993 [1931]: 9). This commitment to interdisciplinarity acquires its transformative and emancipatory twist in his 1937 article “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in which Horkheimer (1972 [1937]: 206) identifies a “‘critical’ activity […] which has society itself for its object” as the pre-theoretical anchoring point for critical theory. “Although it itself emerges from the social structure,” this activity does not have as its purpose “the better functioning of any element in the structure” (ibid.: 207), but it is transformative and emancipatory. Critical theory, then, is not related to practice in an external manner, as this “would yield only an application of traditional theory to a specific problem, and not the intellectual side of the historical process of proletarian emancipation” (ibid.: 215) – nor can it subscribe to a simplistic understanding of “a division of labor […] between men [Menschen] who in social conflicts affect the course of history
and the social theoreticians who assign them their standpoint" (ibid.: 222). Rather, theory has to enter into a “dynamic unity” with practice, so that it is “not merely an expression of the concrete historical situation but also a force within it to stimulate change” (ibid.: 215). As Herbert Marcuse notes in an early comment on Horkheimer’s article, critical theory, in contrast to an “idealistic” understanding of protest and critique, is thereby linked to a “materialist protest and materialist critique [which] originated in the struggle of oppressed groups for better living conditions and remain permanently associated with the actual process of this struggle” (Marcuse 2009 [1937]: 104).

In the course of the following years, however, the political and social context afforded less and less opportunities for critical theologers to identify “struggles of oppressed groups” which could serve as their point of reference in practice. The closure – or destruction – of political space, first in fascism, then in what Adorno would famously come to call the “totally administered world,” seemed to throw critical theory back upon itself, raising new questions about the relation between theory and practice and the role of the critical theorist under conditions in which social struggles, if they have not turned regressive, seemed to have been neutralized by being preempted, integrated, or co-opted. As is well known, in response to the paradoxes, or dead-ends, presumably resulting from these incompatible methodological and diagnostic commitments – to link theory to practice in a situation in which practice is foreclosed – later generations of the Frankfurt School, especially Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, turned to developing more openly normative programs of justification with the aim of safeguarding the critical and orienting function of critical theory (see Finlayson 2007).

There are, however, at least two complicating factors which make it difficult to reduce the first generation’s post-1940s conceptualization of the link between theory and practice to one of hyper-pessimistic withdrawal, let alone to Georg Lukács’s sardonic diagnosis that Adorno et al. had installed themselves in the “Grand Hotel Abgrund.” The first of these factors is socio-theoretical and well expressed in Adorno’s claim that although society has to be understood as totality, it would be a mistake to conceptualize existing society as a perfectly closed and functionally integrated self-reproducing totality without any contradictions, experiences, or forms of resistance that critical theory could build on. Rather, insofar as society is a totality, it has to be understood not in terms of homogeneity but in terms of structural antagonisms (Adorno 1976 [1957]: 77), not in terms of frozen stability but in terms of conflict and process (Adorno 1969 [1965]), i.e. as riddled with contradictions. As Adorno underlines, in a seemingly paradoxical formulation, it is “only through these contradictions that it is possible for us to break open the universal system of delusion [totaler Verblendungszusammenhang], within which we are positioned” (Adorno 2012 [1960]: 155; my translation). Instead of a complete displacement of politics, this possibility of “breaking open” the system enables a “dialectical” interpretation according to which “politics is, on the one hand, a façade, ideology, and society the primary reality, but on the other hand transformative social practice has the form of politics: politics with the aim of abolishing politics” (Adorno 1996 [1957]: 399; my translation). In one of his last texts written shortly before his death, Adorno therefore concludes that “critical theory is not aiming at totalit-

This could seem like a merely abstract theoretical commitment without much practical relevance, were it not for the second complicating factor which concerns the actual historically situated intellectual practice of first-generation critical theologers. Herbert Marcuse
is usually cast as the exception, the engaged radical public intellectual who inspired, and responded to the call of, the student movement both in practice and in theory with a revolutionary optimism that will now seem somewhat quaint, and that did indeed provoke some skepticism among the colleagues in Frankfurt (see, e.g., Marcuse 1969; Adorno/Marcuse 1999 [1969]). It is true that Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as later Habermas, had a much more complicated relationship with the student movement (for extensive documentation see Kraushaar 1998) – symbolically culminating in Adorno’s decision to call the police to clear the Institute of protesting students and the break with student leader and former protégé Hans-Jürgen Kahl, who accused Adorno of “complicity with the ruling powers,” “inability […] to deal with the question of organization,” and blindness to “the historical possibilities of liberating praxis” (Kahl 1975 [1969]: 832–833). Nevertheless, it would be wrong to conclude that Adorno and Horkheimer had withdrawn from political practice and public engagement altogether. If one takes Adorno’s work as a whole into account and includes his many university and public lectures, radio addresses, interviews, and public interventions, the picture becomes more complicated (see Müller-Doom 2005 [2003]: Part IV; Hammer 2005: ch. 1). After Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s return, they both had quite a significant influence on the emergence of a democratic public sphere in Germany, an influence that was not only due to their writings but also, maybe even more, due to their institutional engagement (Horkheimer became rector of the Goethe University in Frankfurt, Adorno served as president of the German Sociological Association), their teaching, and their interventions in public debates through talks, journal articles, interviews, and radio lectures. These activities have been said to amount to an “intellectual foundation of the Federal Republic” (see Albrecht et al. 1999), although they are probably better described as attempts to institutionalize the practice of the “nonconformist critical intellectual” (Demirvö 1999) – a project very much at odds with the dominant intellectual climate of postwar Germany.

Of course, the precise status of Adorno’s intellectual practice of critique remains troubled as he can neither simply presuppose an immediate addressee with a practical interest in overcoming the status quo nor do without any anchoring point in the experience or consciousness of those whose suffering his theory tries to give voice to. Adorno himself attempted to articulate and defend the resulting complex and deferred relation between theory and practice against what he saw as the “actionist” ideology of “pseudo-activity” by arguing that

praxis without theory, lagging behind the most advanced state of cognition, cannot but fail, and praxis, in keeping with its own concept, would like to succeed. False praxis is no praxis. […] The hostility to theory in the spirit of the times, the by no means coincidental withering away of theory, its banishment by an impatience that wants to change the world without having to interpret it while so far it has been chapter and verse that philosophers have merely interpreted—such hostility becomes praxis’s weakness.

(Adorno 1998 [1969]: 265, 2001 [1963]: lecture one; see also Hammer 2005: 3; Freyenhagen 2014)

As a result, by the turbulent end of the 1960s, critical theory seemed to have undergone its own process of radicalization, moving toward a more and more negativistic diagnosis that left only marginal, if any, possibilities for a critical form of consciousness to emerge, let alone coalesce into social struggles that would be able to fundamentally question the current system and its attempts to coopt and neutralize any form of divergence, critique, and opposition. Instead, social integration, the pacification of class conflict, and the closure of the political space seemed to have robbed critical theory of its pre-theoretical anchoring point
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despite its attempts to save the relation between theory and practice – even at the cost of seeing it as one of contradiction instead of unity (Adorno 1998 [1969]: 277).

A Normativist Way Out?

Against this background, Habermas's break with the first generation concerns not only their "pessimism," i.e. his rather different diagnosis of the historical moment, but also the basic methodological and substantial premises of critical theory. However, even this break can only be understood as resulting from a series of attempted mediations between theory and practice over time that Habermas ultimately judged to have failed.

In his early attempts to determine the methodological status of critical theory between traditional philosophy and positivist social science – in Theory and Practice (1963), On the Logic of the Social Sciences (1967), and Knowledge and Human Interests (1968) – Habermas emphatically rearticulates Horkheimer's claim that critical theory's differentia specifica resides in a dual reflexivity: it reflects both on the context of its own emergence, i.e. the social conditions of possibility of critique, and its context of application, i.e. the possibilities of social transformation and emancipation in the present. In this context, he differentiates between three different tasks that are essential aspects of any attempt to mediate between theory and practice but that should be kept separate, namely

the formation and extension of critical theorems, which can stand up to scientific discourse; the organization of processes of enlightenment, in which such theorems are applied and can be tested in a unique manner by the initiation of processes of reflection carried on within certain groups toward which these processes have been directed; and the selection of appropriate strategies, the solution of tactical questions, and the conduct of the political struggle.

(Habermas 1973 [1963]: 32)

As Habermas goes on to argue, against traditional Marxist attempts at a unified approach which suffer from the false certainties of a philosophy of history no longer available to us, addressing these tasks presupposes recognizing that they follow different principles:

a theory can only be formulated under the precondition that those engaged in scientific work have the freedom to conduct theoretical discourse; processes of enlightenment (if they are to avoid exploitation and deception) can only be organized under the precondition that those who carry out the active work of enlightenment commit themselves wholly to the proper precautions and assure scope for communications on the model of therapeutic 'discourses'; finally, a political struggle can only be legitimately conducted under the precondition that all decisions of consequence will depend on the practical discourse of the participants – here too, and especially here, there is no privileged access to truth.

(ibid.: 34)

In order to avoid the authoritarian and paternalist risks associated with reductivist attempts to unify theory and practice, Habermas argues that instead of being on principle superior to the agents, the theorist has to be seen as being located at the same epistemic level, even if he or she does – at least temporarily – have a better view of the terrain. This potential temporary superiority is owed to a methodical view of the “object,” which “distinguishes a reflective understanding from everyday communicative experience” (Habermas 1990 [1967]: 167). But if theory is to avoid “the misunderstanding of itself as a science” (Habermas 1973
[1963]: 238), it needs to assume that agents will at least be able to appropriate this methodological view. After all, facilitating this appropriation is exactly the aim of the theoretical intervention. The result is the seemingly paradoxical position of critical social theory:

The vindicating superiority of those who do the enlightening over those who are to be enlightened is theoretically unavoidable, but at the same time it is fictive and requires self-correction: in a process of enlightenment there can only be participants. (Habermas 1973 [1963]: 40)

Following up on these claims, in Knowledge and Human Interests Habermas presents a meta-theoretical analysis of the intertwinement of theoretical reflection, self-understanding, and critique specific for critical theory. He argues that the latter can find a paradigmatic role model for strengthening its still underdeveloped methodology of reconstructive critique in psychoanalysis. For Habermas, the conception of self-reflection plays a decisive role in the characterization of both the process of reconstructive critique and its aim, that is, the situation that is to be brought about by this procedure. In dialogue with the analyst or critical theorist, the addressee experiences the “emancipatory power of reflection” (Habermas 1971 [1968]: 197), triggered by the analyst’s or theorist’s attempts at reconstruction. For the goal of these attempts is “setting in motion a process of enlightenment and bringing the patient to self-reflection” (ibid.: 244) – a process in which the self-reflective effort has to be made by the subjects themselves. On this picture, critique and self-reflection can be turned neither into a science nor into a technique nor can they be delegated in any other way. The addressees must therefore be engaged in the process in such a way that they can describe it from their own perspective as a process of self-reflection in which they are agents, not mere objects.

Habermas himself, however, did not remain convinced by his own methodological approach for very long. As early as 1973, in a postscript to the second edition of Knowledge and Human Interests, he introduced a crucial distinction that was to clear up a supposed confusion – the distinction between “reconstruction” (for which he now uses the German term “Nachkonstruktion”) and “self-reflexion” in a critical sense (which is an essential aspect of what “reconstruction” [“Rekonstruktion”] means in Knowledge and Human Interests). “On the one hand,” Habermas writes, the term “reflexion”

denotes the reflexion upon the conditions of potential abilities of a knowing, speaking and acting subject as such; on the other hand, it denotes the reflexion upon unconsciously produced constraints to which a determinate subject […] succumbs in its process of self-formation.

(Habermas 1973: 182)

As is well known, Habermas subsequently devoted himself to the project of rational reconstruction (“Nachkonstruktion”) in the form of a “quasi-transcendental” universal or formal pragmatics, in which the aim is to reconstruct the normative structures of all action and speech in order to provide critical theory with a solid normative foundation.

The final step in this attempt to move beyond the perceived limitations of the first generation – whose members were, in Habermas’s view, wedded to an untenable philosophy of history and still constrained by the metaphysical commitments of traditional philosophy of consciousness – took the form of a communicative turn in which the critique of ideology was transformed into a critique of the conditions of communication. As Habermas points out in the context of his analysis of the colonization of the lifeworld, the intrusion of system-specific mechanisms of action coordination (power and money) into the lifeworld (in the guise of its bureaucratization and monetarization) can result in “reification – that is, in a
pathological de-formation of the communicative infrastructure of the lifeworld” (Habermas 1987 [1981]: 375). If this occurs, the dominance of one-sidedly cognitive-instrumental forms of rationality prestructures how subjects relate to the world and to themselves in ways that incentivize strategic interactions. In this context, Habermas identifies “a structural violence that, without becoming manifest as such, takes hold of the forms of intersubjectivity of possible understanding. Structural violence is exercised by way of systemic restrictions on communication” (ibid.: 187). Systematically distorted communication is thus “systematic” in the dual sense of being systemic or structural rather than contingent, and rooted in the system as opposed to the lifeworld.

In order to take this kind of distortion into account, the internal perspective of the participants has to be complemented with the external perspective of an observer who has the theoretical means to suspend the counterfactual pragmatic presuppositions speakers necessarily have to make, and to diagnose how systems overreach and undermine the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld through communicative action. Against this background, it can be seen as one of the main tasks of critical theory to analyze and bring to the agents’ attention the distortions that block them from addressing and overcoming obstacles to emancipation.

Habermas’s critique of the first generation was that they had navigated themselves into a dead end, in which their totalizing diagnosis of an all-encompassing state of delusion dominated by instrumental rationality and the exchange principle robbed them of any standard of critique. The result is one massive performative contradiction: if reason is totalitarian and enlightenment equals domination, the very conditions of possibility of critique are undermined. In order to provide firm normative foundations and avoid the risk of having to invoke pseudo- or cryptonormative vocabulary, Habermas positions his own theory of communicative action as being able to “ascertain for itself the rational content of anthropologically deep-seated structures by means of an analysis that, to begin with, proceeds reconstructively that is, unhistorically” (ibid.: 383). Reconstruction in this sense still involves reference to a pretheoretical anchoring point; only now it is not struggles and oppositional forms of consciousness or experience that Habermas has in mind but “the pretheoretical knowledge of competently judging, acting, and speaking subjects” (ibid.: 399).

Struggles, however, are not altogether absent from the picture Habermas develops. On a diagnostic level, continuing affluence and welfare-state policies of redistribution seemed to contribute to the further integration of the (former) working class and the marginalization of economic struggles, leading to a displacement of conflicts onto the terrain of culture and forms of life. In this context, social struggles still play a certain role but are reprogrammed, as in Habermas’s view a new type of conflict arises “along the seams between system and lifeworld” (395). These so-called new social movements were situated precisely at the increasingly porous and contested borders between system and lifeworld, opposing the “colonization of the lifeworld” and responding to the impression that the claims to redistribution articulated by the remnants of the workers’ movement – labor unions and parts of the Social Democratic Party – had been successfully coopted into the system. As Habermas notes,

these new conflicts arise in domains of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization; they are carried out in subinstitutional – or at least extraparliamentary – forms of protest; and the underlying deficits reflect a reification of communicatively structured domains of action that will not respond to the media of money and power.

(iibid.: 392)

Rather than having a theoretical or practical significance in their own right, however, these conflicts seem to primarily serve an epistemic function in signaling the shortcomings of a
process of social rationalization and modernization that is selective in a problematically one-sided way.

For Habermas, the liberal-democratic capitalist welfare state provides a contradictory but ultimately unsurpassable institutional context in which the “anarchic” potential of communicative action can unfold itself in the public sphere even though it is confronted with powerful forces and obstacles. The latter appear in the form of the colonization of the lifeworld, the distortion of communicative interaction through power relations, the lure of a technocratic displacement of politics – including, increasingly, at the supranational level as in the case of the European Union – and the fragmentation and narrowing of public discourse – a tendency much exacerbated by the rise of the Internet. In this context, it is no surprise that Habermas thinks of his own very prolific intellectual engagement – from the student movement, via the so-called Historians’ Debate (“Historikerstreit”) in the 1980s and German unification to the future of the European Union – in terms that are significantly different from Adorno’s (see Müller-Dönhm 2005, 2016 [2014]: esp. chs. 5, 9, 10, 12). His increasingly Kantian orientation, his theoretical elaboration of the model of deliberative democracy, and his interest in the latter’s institutionalization not only on the national but also on the transnational level and especially within the European Union have led to an increasing disconnect from struggles and “practice” in the institution-transcending sense of early-to-mid critical theory.

Starting in the 1970s and 1980s, however, an alternative strand within critical theory started to develop which aimed at recovering the link between theory and practice in a more substantial way by connecting the development of theory itself to social conflicts and social movements. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge’s Public Sphere and Experience (2016 [1972]) is an early example of a critique of the bourgeois (i.e. hegemonic) public sphere that invokes proletarian or plebeian non-state forms of the public and the divergent critical experiences they articulate – as well as the blockades, e.g. in the form of the “consciousness industry” or the pacification of social conflicts through “pseudo-publics,” they have to face – as alternative sources of normativity. In a more explicit vein, Nancy Fraser introduces her own contribution to the feminist turn in critical theory – for which the work of Seyla Benhabib, Jean Cohen, and Amy Allen has also been decisive – by building on Marx’s famous “definition of critical theory” as “the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age.” In her view, critical theory therefore “frames its research program and its conceptual framework with an eye to the aims and activities of those oppositional social movements with which it has a partisan, though not uncritical, identification” (Fraser 1985: 97). As Fraser notes, against this background, critical theory in general and the Habermasian approach in particular have failed to theorize one of the most significant struggles against domination, namely the feminist movement. It is, however, in the work of Axel Honneth – according to whom both Adorno and Habermas ultimately fail to live up to the task of “identifying empirically experiences and attitudes that give a pre-theoretical indication that [critical theory’s] normative standpoints have some basis in social reality” (Honneth 2007 [1994]: 69) – that the link between struggles and theory development has gained the most prominent role in what is often referred to as the third generation of the Frankfurt School.

The Return to Struggles and Movements

Honneth’s attempt to renew the tradition of critical theory involves moving beyond Habermas in a variety of ways that are meant to open access to more deeply seated and not communicatively mediated expectations, experiences, and pathologies of recognition. At the same time, experiences of misrecognition are taken to lead to social struggles for recognition that in turn serve as a pretheoretical reference point for Honneth’s left-Hegelian renewal of critical theory. Already early on, Honneth underlined that it is the reference to “the
pretheoretical resource (\textit{vorwissenschaftliche Instanz}) in which its own critical viewpoint is anchored extratheoretically as an empirical interest or moral experience” that distinguishes critical theory from other normative enterprises (Honneth 2007 [1994]: 63–64). Beyond the relatively narrow cognitivist focus on communication, the theory of recognition zooms in on more fundamental and often prelinguistic experiences and intersubjective relations – which are supposed to furnish precisely that pre-theoretical anchoring point and those resources that Honneth identified as desiderata in earlier versions of critical theory. At the same time, his approach further broadens the theoretical focus by incorporating and reformulating two Marxist topoi: the importance of the sphere of work and labor, now understood as a space in which recognition is both enabled and denied, and of class struggle, which reappears in the guise of struggles for recognition that social groups engage in in reaction to their experiences of social suffering produced by misrecognition.

As the struggle for recognition feeds on negative personal and collective experiences of systematic misrecognition, it can take more or less radical, i.e. more reformist or more revolutionary, forms:

All struggles for recognition […] progress through a playing out of the moral dialectic of the universal and the particular […] each principle of recognition has a specific surplus of validity whose normative significance is expressed by the constant struggle over its appropriate application and interpretation. Within each sphere, it is always possible to set a moral dialectic of the general and the particular in motion: claims are made for a particular perspective (need, life-situation, contribution) that has not yet found appropriate consideration by appeal to a general recognition principle (love, law, achievement).

(Honneth/Fraser 2003: 152, 186)

At least on an optimistic view, experiences of misrecognition are articulated in social struggles for recognition that, in appealing to partially institutionalized principles of recognition, set in motion a progressive dynamic that leads to ever more inclusive and differentiated relations of recognition.

More recently, however, and especially in \textit{Freedom’s Right} (2014 [2011]), Honneth turns to the ways in which modern society attempts to institutionalize freedom in different social spheres, notably in its legal, moral, political as well as social and economic practices and institutions. Against both revolutionary and conservative approaches, he aims to show that the structure of this institutionalization allows for a progressive, ever more adequate realization of the value of freedom as social actors appeal to the constitutive idea of freedom to challenge the concrete forms of unfreedom that remain characteristic of our social reality. Democratic ethical life – \textit{demokratische Sittlichkeit} – is that set of dynamic practices and institutions which both already realizes freedom and enables its own transformation from a partial toward a more comprehensive realization of freedom. In this process, a one-sided, e.g. overly individualist and negative understanding of freedom is overcome in the direction of a social order that can be regarded as just to the extent that it adequately institutionalizes freedom in its comprehensive sense. Despite Honneth’s emphasis on the dynamical development of society, however, \textit{Freedom’s Right} does not contain a detailed theoretical explanation of how historical change occurs, of how social learning processes unfold on the basis of certain experiences, and of their interpretation and translation into collective action and struggle.

From Honneth’s more institution-centered vantage point, power and struggle now appear as external and temporary phenomena rather than as constitutive aspects of relations of recognition. To put it differently, by treating struggles and conflicts as mere occasions for the development of particular attempts to institutionalize freedom and recognition, as reactions
to perceived deficits in the social realization of the ideal of recognition, neither the intertwining of relations of recognition and individual and collective capacities for conflict, nor the constitution and tenuous maintenance of relations of recognition precisely in conflicts are adequately taken into account. As a result, conflict and struggle now seem secondary with regard to the unfolding of institutionalized achievements and incremental learning processes, and the latter take on the role of a pretheoretical anchoring point for the now largely backward-looking reconstructive work of the critical theorist (see Bertram/Celikates 2015; for an alternative account of social learning processes, see Jaeggi 2018 [2013]).

In response to objections that painted his approach as overly reformist or even conservative, Honneth’s next book, The Idea of Socialism (2017 [2015]), asks how, in the case of socialism, we should rethink the relationship between theory and practice. In this context, he makes the following, maybe somewhat surprising, claim that is nevertheless in line with his previous approach: “not rebelling subjectivities but objective improvements, not collective movements, but institutional achievements should be regarded as the social bearer of those normative claims [to freedom] which socialism articulates in modern societies” (Honneth 2017 [2015]: 73–74 [translation modified as the sentence from p. 117 of the German original has no equivalent in the English version]). With this claim Honneth attempts to go beyond one of the three “birth defects” he ascribes to the socialist project, namely its self-referential assumption that there already exists within society an oppositional force which emancipatory theory can claim to express and in turn inform.

While Honneth points out that the reference to oppositional forces and movements is part and parcel of the reflexive structure of any emancipatory theory that is not freestanding, in his view socialists tended to apodictically presuppose the existence of such a movement, simply engaging in the sociological ascription of interests in a way that is theoretically arbitrary (Honneth 2017 [2015]: 38–39). In this way, they elevated the existence of the kind of social movement required by the theory in order to become practical into a “transcendental precondition” (ibid.: 40).

If the link to actually existing social struggles or movements is dropped, however, the question arises what remains of the claim that socialism – and by analogy: critical theory – is not just another political theory indistinguishable from mainstream liberalism. If socialism wants to avoid becoming simply another normative theory, it has to replace the lost link with the proletariat with something more convincing. Accordingly, Honneth makes it clear that if this tradition is to retain its distinctiveness vis-à-vis liberal political philosophy, i.e. in order to avoid collapsing into just another normative approach that confronts reality with a mere ought, it has to find an alternative form of historical anchoring. This anchoring, however, is supposed to be located on a “higher level of abstraction” (ibid.: 64, 71) which Honneth identifies with the institutional achievements of modern liberal democracies. Honneth sees no alternative to this shift from struggles to institutions, as otherwise he thinks one would unjustifiably privilege certain group-specific experiences of heteronomy and exclusion over others. In addition, as social movements “come and go” according to the contingencies of historical developments and fluctuating media attention, they can no longer be regarded as reliable indicators of heteronomy and exclusion (ibid.: 72). For these reasons, Honneth concludes, socialism today should locate the horizon of future emancipation where “the expansion of social freedoms can already be found in existing institutions, in altered legal structures and shifts in mentality that can no longer be rolled back” (ibid.: 73).

This reconceptualization of the link between emancipatory theory and practice, however, raises several questions. To start with, there is the increasingly pressing question of how strong the notion of quasi-irreversibility behind the claim that certain achievements “can no longer be rolled back” is intended to be and how it could be defended socio-theoretically and empirically. More importantly, one could argue that the relation between institutional
achievements and collective movements is more complex than Honneth’s dichotomy suggests. Struggles and institutional achievements seem to be internally connected in at least three ways – (i) in terms of their genesis: how institutional achievements come about (usually not by institutional self-learning or self-correction alone); (ii) in terms of their functioning: how institutional achievements are integrated into the everyday functioning of institutions (usually not exclusively thanks to the institution’s internal structure but also to external pressure); and (iii) in terms of stabilization: how institutional achievements are secured (usually not just through practices and habits, but also through struggles and movements in which those affected defend the outcomes of their struggles).

The methodological abstraction from collective movements and rebellious subjectivities and the relocation of the emancipatory potential in the normative achievements of the existing institutional order risks underestimating how, in the three dimensions of the genesis, functioning and stabilization of the institutional order, institutional dynamics and social struggles are inextricably intertwined. Finally, there are also methodological and epistemological problems concerning the status of critical theory and the standpoint from which it reconstructs the supposed achievements of the institutional order (while running the risk of downplaying the functional reliance of these achievements on forms of domination, exploitation, and exclusion) that the uncoupling of the latter from emancipatory movements gives rise to.

A more promising route, in this respect, is taken by Honneth in his recent Mark Sacks lecture in which he advances the claim that

> critical theory is nothing but the continuation, by means of a controlled scientific methodology, of the cognitive labor that oppressed groups have to perform in their everyday struggles when they work to de-naturalize hegemonic patterns of interpretation and to expose the interests by which these are motivated.

(Honneth 2017: 919)

In this way, he reaffirms the link between theory and struggles, animated by an emancipatory interest, so central for Horkheimer’s original project.

**Challenges and Perspectives**

The difficulties with which Honneth grapples in his most recent work exemplify that the link between critical theory and social struggles has become problematic for a variety of reasons. At the same time, critical theory is not able to easily rid itself of these problems as it would then risk losing its methodological specificity. In this context, three challenges can be distinguished.

**First**, and most obviously, for Horkheimer (but, arguably, also already for Marx) there is no automatic translation of social position into epistemic privilege, and of epistemic privilege into political progressiveness. Although the oppressed are in a unique social and epistemic position, their actual practices and worldviews can be distorted, and it is one of the tasks of critical theory to contribute to overcoming these distortions. However, this is not a huge problem for critical theory, since the clearing away of distortions can still be seen as a process of self-clarification and self-emancipation, in which, to return to Habermas’s memorable phrase, “there can only be participants.”

**Second**, there is the more fundamental challenge that in certain situations there are no struggles to latch onto for critical theory. How could critical theory respond to a situation in which domination is more or less total and has managed to suppress any critical consciousness and practice? To this scenario, to which some of Marcuse’s descriptions of contemporary
society might come closest, one can respond, following Raymond Geuss (1981: 83–84), that “a society of happy slaves, genuinely content with their chains,” a society in which domination is not even experienced as domination but as freedom, might be the critical theorists’ nightmare, but it “is a nightmare, not a realistic view of a state of society which is at present possible.” Nevertheless, the challenge should also not be dismissed too easily since it points to a problem or a dilemma critical theory faces. On the one hand, critical theory requires a starting point in the forms of consciousness, experience, and practice of its addressees, but, on the other hand, critical theory is supposed to respond to and address distortions and blockades of precisely these forms of consciousness, experience, and practice. As Honneth (2009 [2004]: 29–30) argues, the explanatory task of critical theory – and this is another reason why it cannot be reduced to a purely normative enterprise – focuses on the workings of ideology and false consciousness, explaining why there is little or no critical counter-conduct, although the suffering and restrictions on agents’ rational capacities are presumably such that agents cannot remain indifferent to them. Again, one could argue, however, that the possibility of more or less total delusion does not pose such a pressing problem, because these distortions and blockades will in most cases turn out to be partial rather than total and thus allow for some form of problematization to emerge (Celicakes 2018 [2009]: Part III). At the same time, it is important to avoid what Honneth calls the “abstractive fallacy” involved in tying critical theory to already existing social movements and thus to “goals that have already been publicly articulated insofar as [this] neglects the everyday, still unthematized, but no less pressing embryonic form of social misery and moral injustice” (Honneth 2003: 113–114). As Honneth (2007 [1981]: 82) pointed out early on, critical theory must always also refer to “forms of existing social critique not recognized by the political-hegemonical public sphere” as strategies to preserve the hegemonic order by, e.g., desymbolization (or what has come to be called “epistemic injustice”) and individualization that can effectively block, or distort, the expression of experiences of injustice and their translation into collective forms of mobilization and struggle (see also Renault 2004; Fischbach 2009).

The third challenge critical theory has to face in this regard might turn out to be even more pressing. After the demise of the kind of philosophy of history that identified the proletariat as the revolutionary subject and the workers’ movement as the emancipatory oppositional force to which critical theory could and should attach itself, it has become unclear how critical theorists can determine with which of the different emancipatory movements to enter into the kind of alliance envisaged by Marx and Horkheimer and which “forms of existing social critique” or “experiences of injustice” to pick up on. This difficulty is not only due to the plurality – or intersectionality – of movements, practices of critique, and experiences of injustice, but also due to the fact that these are often far from perfectly aligned and can operate at cross-purposes, in the case of movements with regard to both their aims and their methods or means. Analogous to the problem of “theory choice” discussed in the philosophy of science, critical theory seems to be confronted with what we could call the problem of “movement choice.” In answering this challenge, which at least those critical theorists have to face who are not “organic intellectuals” of existing movements, two extreme options seem unattractive: neither can the correct “choice” be derived from some overarching laws of historical development (the pole of determinism), nor does it seem satisfactory to simply claim that the theorist has to decide which struggle or movement to link her theory to (the pole of voluntarism).

As these challenges and the foundational problems they stem from – that of the methodological status of critical theory, its relation to practice, and the corresponding role of the critical theorist – are still with us today, one hopes they will no longer be pushed into the background by the dominance of the debate on the normative standards of critique but be discussed in their own right. The question concerning normative foundations is clearly of
central importance, but it cannot replace the at least equally central question – one even more important for the self-understanding of early critical theory – of how the relation between theory and practice or between theorists and their addressees should be understood, if it is not to be construed in line with the epistemological dogma that the self-understanding of agents is irrelevant for the empirical verification of the theory and only complicates the data. This suggests that the emancipatory orientation of critical theory is internally linked to its double reflexivity: only reflection on the context in which a theory emerged and in which it is used – a twofold dependency of theory on practice – enables an adequate understanding of the practical character of theory itself, and thus a break with the dogma of scientism and objectivism. Next to its practical interest in emancipation, reflection on its own methodological status and its self-understanding as part of social practice are supposed to distinguish critical theory from “traditional theories.” For “in contrast to what is the case for empirical-analytical theories, the metatheory of method is part of critical theory itself” (Wellmer 1977 [1969]: 13; my translation), and as Wellmer adds, “The unity of theory and metatheory is nothing but a different expression of the unity of theory and practice.”

While the dependence on practices and on the real-life “critical activity” of social actors “which has society itself for its object” (Horkheimer 1972 [1937]: 206) has always been part of the way in which critical theory positions itself methodologically (see also Nobre 2015), it cannot be denied that there is a parallel tendency to neglect actually existing social practices of critique and struggle. This tendency can be found both in traditional and in current forms of critical theory and is partly due to the assumption of an asymmetry between the theoretically informed (and critical or objective) perspective of the observer and the naive (and excessively subjective) participant perspective, along with the corresponding assumption of the necessity of a break with the self-understanding of agents. If, in contrast, we understand critical social theory itself as a social practice, placing it – regarding the contexts of its emergence and use, as well as its subject matter – in a constitutive relation to the social practices of critique and the reflexive capacities of agents that are expressed in these practices, then the dogma of asymmetry and of the break loses its appeal and can be recognized as a relic of a traditional understanding of theory. First and foremost, however, critical theory will have to recognize its addressees as equal partners in a dialogical struggle for appropriate interpretations and the realization of transformative potentials – partners that are capable of assuming the perspective taken by critical theory (see Bohman 2003; Cooke 2005; Celikates 2018 [2009]). Arguably, the tensions that these often conflicting commitments give rise to are part and parcel of the “dynamic unity” in which Horkheimer thought critical theory stands in relation to practice and actually existing struggles, without denying “the ever present possibility of tension between the theoretician and the class [struggle, movement, experience] which his thinking is to serve” (Horkheimer 1972 [1937]: 214–215). Giving up this aspiration to a “dynamic unity” between theory and practice would face critical theory with the unacceptable choice between a “theory that bears no relation to any conceivable practice [and becomes] a piece of dead scholarship, a matter of complete indifference to us as living minds and active, living human beings” and “a practice that simply frees itself from the shackles of theory and […] sinks to the level of activity for its own sake […] stuck fast within the given reality” (Adorno 2001 [1963]: 6).

References


CRITICAL THEORY & PRACTICE

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Further Reading


Feenberg, A. (2014) The Philosophy of Praxis: Marx, Lukács and the Frankfurt School, London: Verso. (A historical reconstruction of how Marx’s notion of praxis was transformed by the Frankfurt School.)
