While it is difficult, if not impossible, to account for the unity or coherence of Critical Theory, the attempt to do so for poststructuralism seems even more futile. Neither the name for a school nor that for an intellectual tradition with clear-cut boundaries, this term has come to refer mainly to the work of a small group of rather diverse French thinkers of more or less the same generation: Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Jean-François Lyotard, and often their predecessors Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan (Münker and Roesler 2012). It is also used to refer to work similar to theirs in their own time (as the variant of deconstruction the Belgian-American literary theorist Paul de Man has developed), but also to contemporary theories inspired and marked by the former but developed in new directions (such as the oeuvres of Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe or Slavoj Žižek). Speaking of poststructuralism therefore refers to, on the one hand, an original body of work with more or less defined historical boundaries, namely the period from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s, and, on the other hand, its rather broad and unfinished effects or *Wirkungsgeschichte*, and therefore a set of theoretical gestures and concepts that continue to mark a significant part of current theorizing in the humanities worldwide (Stäheli 2000; Schrift 2010).

This fuzziness and underdetermination of the term “poststructuralism” is clearly mirrored in the many uses of the term “Critical Theory,” which is first used as a reference in intellectual history with a clear demarcation (namely the Frankfurt School in its earlier phases), second, as a name for a group of diverse theories somewhat connected to the first two generations, and third, even broader, as the designation for a whole realm of critical social theory in its widest sense (with many poststructuralist works included). While it would be worthwhile reconstructing the intellectual relations between poststructuralism in the narrower and broader senses to all of the three versions of Critical Theory just outlined, in what follows I will only offer a quite limited and partial perspective. In highlighting the resonance of four major *topoi* from classical poststructuralist thinking with canonical reflections from the Critical Theory tradition, I hope to shed some light on the deep affinity between the two styles of thinking. This is not to downplay or deny the many systematic, methodological and even ideological differences that have been articulated by many authors involved in this exchange and by later commentators on their works. What I want to make visible is one strand in the Critical Theory continent, namely its philosophy of critique, problematization and contestation. Highlighting this strand (and therefore, of course, leaving many others to the side) can reveal a deep affinity with poststructuralism that, having emerged from
different intellectual contexts and aiming at different theoretical opponents, can also be characterized by its polemical and antagonistic character.

On a rather abstract level, both paradigms of thought can be read as offering exercises in non-essentialist and anti-totalitarian thinking which reach from purely theoretical and conceptual questions to practical, political, and even militant stances toward contemporary regimes of truth and forms of action. It might well be that in future textbooks on the intellectual history of the twentieth century, they will appear rather as close cousins than rivals within the broader developments in the humanities. The four fields with regard to which this can be argued in an exemplary fashion are the problem of the bounds of sense and language, the problem of the (im)possibility of history and progress, the problem of the entanglement of power and reason, and the problem of the limits and conditions of the subject and consciousness. I will conclude with some reflections on a version of a current and future Critical Theory that embraces its quasi-poststructuralist elements.

The Bounds of Sense and Language

One of the most foundational moments of poststructuralism as an intellectual movement in retrospect can be found in the early Derrida’s confrontations with classical structuralism and progressive philosophies during the mid- and late 1960s and early 1970s (Ingram 2010). Commenting on the theories of language and signification after Saussure, on Heidegger and phenomenology, and on Bataille, Blanchot, and others, Derrida came to advance an argument in two steps. The first step is Derrida’s skeptical analysis of the metaphysical or ontological systems of traditional philosophy. Breaking up the more or less closed and dogmatic cages of rationalist or idealist philosophies seemed necessary, but difficult. In painstakingly detailed interpretations of Husserl, Lévi-Strauss, Saussure and many others, Derrida was able to show that even attempts to go beyond the traditional form of metaphysical argumentation remain bound up with dogmatic, foundational gestures. He was thus calling into question the supposedly non-metaphysical nature of even formalist structuralism or vitalist anti-metaphysics. The very way in which these attempts are put forward prevents a complete breakout from the grip of metaphysical thinking.

The second step concerns the very form of philosophical argument or its linguistic basis. All philosophical systems are put forward in a form that is in itself hierarchical or foundational, granting superior status to some terms in binary oppositions and relegating others to an inferior place (as in the oppositions nature/culture, sign/signification, appearance/essence, etc.). There emerges the task of analyzing all the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed and on which our discourse lives, not in order to see opposition erase itself but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the différence of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same.

(Derrida 1982: 18)

However, on a closer look and under the eye of a relentless interpreter, these oppositions prove unstable and ultimately unfounded. They are dynamic positing within a certain system and produce their own resistances within a given text, claiming the natural or evident status of its main conceptual structures. The seemingly stable hierarchies rest on the dynamic play of linguistic maneuvers, and any attempt to seal off or fix this dynamic is futile, since there is no “center” or “no natural site” for meaning which is “not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play” (Derrida 2001: 353–354).
Therefore, for Derrida it is the nature of language itself that, on the one hand, gives rise to unavoidable pretensions and illusions of structure, hierarchy, and order, and, on the other, undoes them, revealing the deep contingency and lack of ultimate foundations. Whereas the classical structuralism of Saussure had helpfully revealed the arbitrariness of the sign and the dynamic nature of signification, and shown that the meaning of any given sign or term rests on its relation to others, it stopped there. To say that identity emerges out of difference(s), Derrida claims, is not enough. One has to account for the never-present, always fugitive moment of differentiation itself that makes material differences (as differences between different signs) possible without being itself a visible or empirical fact within a given language. Derrida's term of art, "différence," refers to this ever-operative yet elusive play of language itself that wrecks all pretensions of clear meanings or identities. His proposal then is to read the classical texts of philosophy and literature in a certain way, critically, and with an attention to the inner workings of language and the contingent but powerful claims to hierarchy and foundation. This exercise of immanent criticism or deconstruction (in the technical sense) will not completely undo or neutralize these effects but expose them and create the space for subversive interventions and other readings.

Given this short summary of a line of thought characteristic of early poststructuralism, three similarities to certain motives from Critical Theory, and most notably to the work of Adorno, impose themselves. First, like Derrida, Adorno is highly critical of the classical tradition (especially idealism) and keen on exposing the inner violence and forced order within canonical philosophical systems and texts, as well as the ideological nature of their claims. Classical philosophy's pretensions at ultimate and eternal truth are exposed as having a rather contingent origin and function, and this exposure subverts the appearance of absolute objectivity essential to bourgeois thought.

Second, Adorno's critical stance toward traditional philosophy and metaphysics does not lead him to pretend to fully step out of its horizon. As in the case of Derrida, for Adorno the only critical gesture open to late modern thought is to work through the false claims of traditional and modernist theory, and to reveal their inner contradictions and aporias. But this effort is made on the basis of the assumption that these contradictions are, up to a point, unavoidable, that the history of Western philosophy has left us with the heritage of a certain discourse that cannot be just left behind. In this sense, reading and reinterpreting the history of metaphysics is the only way to redeem its falseness; it is the only way to advance in thinking. For this reason, critical philosophy too remains within a certain line or tradition of thought and "[t]here is solidarity between such thinking and metaphysics at the time of its fall" (Adorno 1973: 408). This enigmatic formula from Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* indicates the proximity to deconstruction, which also confesses its intimate link to the very tradition whose grip on contemporary thinking it tries to unsettle: the very project of anti-metaphysics or *Metaphysikkritik* remains an operation within the horizon of terms, gestures and aspirations that come from the history of metaphysics (Wellmer 1991; Baumann, Müller and Vogt 1999).

Third, as in the case of Derrida, Adorno's methodological basis for many systematic claims lies on the level of a theory of language or concepts. Without ever referencing the achievements of structuralism and leaning on more traditional perspectives (from Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche, among others), Adorno advances the view that general concepts contain a moment of abstraction and falsity that pits them against the ever-singular content they are meant to grasp. This moment of elusiveness and non-congruence leads him to the formulation of the famous doctrine of the "non-identical," mainly elaborated in terms of the philosophy of language (Adorno 1973: 135–207; Seel 2006). It is at this point not difficult to discern a deep affinity between negative-dialectical and deconstructive thought. Both approaches insist on the dynamic and ultimately elusive relation between word and object, signifier and
signified, and both make traditional philosophy responsible for trying to deny the dynamic, ever-shifting play of language in favor of clear-cut identifications and hierarchical thinking. When Adorno attacks the forced identity or “identity’s coercive character” (Adorno 1973: 299; Identitätszwang) in conceptual thinking, he points to something that Derrida might have tried to account for with his insistence on the différence. Deconstruction or early post-structuralism, as well as Adorno’s Critical Theory, thus share a certain anti-essentialist, anti-identitarian view of language and conceptuality. Both call for an identity critique of the false pretentions of metaphysics, but both also acknowledge their rootedness in the nature of language and conceptual thinking as such (Bertram 2011).

The (Im)Possibility of History and Progress

Another seminal moment in the development of poststructuralism as a paradigm can be found in Lyotard’s ground-breaking 1979 essay The Postmodern Condition. In retrospect, his diagnosis of the end of “the grand narratives” (Lyotard 1984: 38) has proven to be one of the most successful intellectual attempts to formulate the Zeitgeist in Western societies in the final decades of the twentieth century. Its core, however, consists in a rather complex philosophical thesis. Lyotard sees a mutual dependence of modern consciousness, modern philosophy of history and the specific sense of legitimacy accorded to modern institutions. Modern knowledge needs a frame of reference to function as the legitimation for modern social arrangements; because we think of institutions in a certain way, we allow them to regulate our lives.

Lyotard sees two main modern narratives or ideologies at work, and both of them are in serious crisis. There is, on the one hand, the idea that the accumulation of knowledge and the advance in scientific mastery of the world will itself generate enlightenment and emancipation. And, on the other, there is the idea that the very process that produces a learned, self-conscious subject (Bildung in the strong Humboldtian-Hegelian sense) is an end in itself. Both stories link rationality to liberation, and both suggest an almost automatic, teleological process of, one might say, modernization, presupposing the progress of knowledge and society at the same time. Modern societies under the emblem of Science and Reason are thought to progress by knowing (about themselves and the world) and founding increasingly efficient, transparent institutions at the service of increasingly rational subjects.

For Lyotard, this modern self-image has, however, come into crisis and is torn by an “internal erosion” (ibid.: 39). New technological developments, forms of storing and processing knowledge, and functions of language and communication have untied the close connection between knowledge and social progress and pluralized the functions of science and Bildung. No coherent, unitary narrative or ideology, he claims, can any longer secure the supremacy of reason based on progressive knowledge, transparent institutions and rational subjects. To accept this “heterogeneity of language games” (ibid.: xxv) means to redescribe the very form of modern society, and to say farewell to the dream of social progress coming about on its own in the course of modernization.

It has been passionately debated whether Lyotard’s plea for a resignation from a “universal metalanguage” (ibid.: xxv) means that one should resign from philosophy as a form of thinking, or whether it can be understood as an attempt to propose a radically pluralist, contextualist and non-metaphysical view of reason (Welsch 1996). And of course, Lyotard’s rather experimental political proposals such as demanding “free access to the memory and data banks” (Lyotard 1984: 67) seem hardly tenable (Honeth 1985). But the basic thrust of his diagnosis might have retained its original striking force: there seems to have been an implicit normative consensus in modern Western societies that has lost its grip and persuasion, and that appears as a specific form of progressivism that seems to have been fueled by a
specific philosophical conception of history as teleological process, powered by progressing scientific and social rationality. But this conviction or hope, Lyotard claims, has not only lost its foundation in historical experience, where the progression of knowledge and the advancement of reason have proven to be disconnected, but has also revealed its ideological, justificatory function. It is this conceptual constellation on which the undisputed power of political authorities and the authorities of knowledge and social norms were founded. But this was only one possible and rather partial, by no means universal, view of history.

At this point a striking similarity of this influential discourse with the forms of critique of progress suggested by several Critical Theory authors is hard to deny. In the works of Adorno, Kracauer, and Marcuse, the rejection of certain bourgeois ideals of universality and justice is a recurring theme, and all of them refer these ideals back to a certain bourgeois conception of historical development that tends to prioritize some forms of culture, habitus and status in the social division of labor over others. But nowhere is this theme more prominent and more energetically developed than in Benjamin's reflections on history and catastrophe from 1940. In his fragments on the concept of history, Benjamin attacks what he calls the “conformism” of Social Democratic and Marxist political theorizing (Benjamin 2003: 393). The idea that the working class might benefit from the gradual advancement of science, as well as technological and social reform has proven fateful: “Nothing has so corrupted the German working class as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological development as the driving force of the stream with which it thought it was moving” (ibid.: 393). Accordingly, a politics accommodated to bourgeois society was determined by a dogmatic concept of “progress of humankind itself (and not just advances in human ability and knowledge),” envisioned as “something boundless (in keeping with an infinite perfectibility of humanity)” and “inevitable – something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course” (ibid.: 394).

Calling for a “criticism of the concept of progress itself” (ibid.: 395), Benjamin was calling attention to the ideological function this notion played by suggesting an inherent connection between certain historical events and the eventual liberation from the social domination the working classes have suffered from. Therefore, “progress” in Benjamin's eyes plays the role of a legitimating narrative in Lyotard's sense: the fusion of diverse and heterogeneous elements into one grand story of unfolding rationality leaves out real history, which is full of contradictions and struggles and in no way a straight path toward the universal, non-partial liberation of all. The very idea of a historically unfolding universality allows one to deny and make invisible the antagonistic and contingent character of modern (i.e. for Benjamin: bourgeois) society, projecting itself as universal, class-less, emancipated.

Despite many disanalogies which mainly stem from a different emphasis on elements from Marxist theory, the two perspectives of Lyotard and Benjamin share an important concern, namely the rejection of an idealist picture of history and the plea to embrace history's highly contingent, irruptive, discontinuous nature. Only such a critical view of history, liberated from the burden of a God's eye point of view, could, for Benjamin at least, make visible the “open air of history” (ibid.: 395) in which true change might eventually happen. Poststructuralism and Critical Theory might not explicitly share a clear vision of how this goal might be achieved, but they share the commitment to de-essentializing and demystifying history as a condition for thinking a different, possible future (Löwy 2001).

The Entanglement of Power and Reason

The most influential contribution to the humanities by Michel Foucault, perhaps the most prominent poststructuralist author in retrospect, has been his problematization of power and his new perspective on power as an object of philosophical inquiry. Famously, Foucault
claimed not to have developed any general “theory of power,” but “an ‘analytics’ of power” (Foucault 1978: 82), and was passionately denying that his approach would amount to anything like “an ‘ontology’ of power” (Foucault 2000: 337). This stance implies two fundamental conceptual decisions. The first leads him to reject any essentialist positing of a substance of power, leading to generalizations like the view that power as such is repressive or negative. Instead, Foucault chooses to practice a form of historiography that proceeds from a multifaceted, multidimensional account of different effects and realizations of power, ranging from violence and physical force to the symbolic and discursive regulation of free individuals. In a second step, Foucault takes this pluralization to the historical terrain, diagnosing and assessing different types or forms of power operative in different societies at different times. His diagnosis that power in modernity is becoming increasingly invisible, dispersed and network-like is a thesis about a historical transformation, but not about the nature of power (Foucault 1994). Accordingly, a critical analytics of power has to map the different coexisting relations of power in a given social setting and will try to account for the shifting relations between them. In Foucault’s view, power is not one and never the same.

It is in Foucault’s material research projects that such a relational, strategic, decentered and anti-intentionalist notion of power is put to work. This is the case most prominently during the period of his work connected with the term “genealogy,” roughly from the early to the late 1970s, and with Nietzsche, whose conception of “will to power” seems to have influenced Foucault’s own understanding quite thoroughly (Saar 2007). But as opposed to Nietzsche, Foucault tries to account for the real historical processes in which modern regimes and forms of power have been invented, established, and institutionalized, but also contested, appropriated, and refused. Starting in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1970 and extending his earlier studies on language and discourse, he tries to account for the mechanisms that produce and regulate what is sayable and unsayable in a given context. In the following years, in his work on the penal system, psychiatry, and sexuality, he traces the conjunction of certain forms of (legal, medical, scientific) knowledge with social and material factors, leading to complexes of “power/knowledge” (Foucault 1980). This neologism indicates that power is operative in producing a certain knowledge at the same time that it is dependent on a certain knowledge to fully function.

However, Foucault is highly critical of the traditional attempt to account for this relation in terms of ideology, because for him this is not a matter of false consciousness, of an original knowledge being distorted or repressed (Foucault 1998). Rather, the relationship between power and knowledge is essentially constitutive; a certain form of social regulation brings about and makes possible certain epistemic possibilities for knowledge or “truths.” “Truth is a thing of this world” (Foucault 1980: 131), he argues, and this means it is a social fact all the way down, entangled with social practices, regimes of behavior, exclusion, and highly concrete institutions, surroundings and technologies. Reason as such does not stand against power, but – in the form of specific, highly contextualized and embodied rationalities – is thoroughly entangled with social forces, hierarchies and exclusions (Allen 2010).

It seems fair to say that many of these concerns bind Foucault directly to projects pursued by the first generation of Critical Theory: a dissatisfaction with the classical concept of ideology, a pessimistic diagnosis of the increase in regulation and subjectivation in the course of modernization, and an attempt to develop a more mundane, non-idealist, contextualized and historicized view of reason (Honneth 1991; McCarthy 1991). His own remark about his missed reception of their work is polite: “Perhaps if I had read those works earlier on, I would have saved useful time, surely” (Foucault 1991: 119). In systematic terms, especially on these topics, the elective affinity is evident. Drawing on similar resources (Nietzsche, Weber, Marx) and opposing similar enemies (triumphant idealism), authors like Horkheimer had already tried to give a critical but non-reductive account of reason. What he had called the “eclipse
of reason” was a process of the hollowing out of social relations under conditions of discipline, exploitation and economization reaching into the last vestige of society. To be sure, for Horkheimer “reason” still stands for the emphatic autonomous human faculty whose transformation into mere technical, profit-oriented rationality should be lamented (Horkheimer 1947). Such an emphasis cannot be found in the Foucaultian lexicon (Demirović 1995). Nevertheless, one could say that Horkheimer already paved the way for a perspective on the fate of reason as a thoroughly historical object, subject to change and transformation precisely through its interaction with its social and political context.

The locus classicus of such a perspective is of course the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where reason itself is regarded in relation to the very society and history in which it expresses itself. The thesis is “that freedom in society is inseparable from Enlightenment thinking,” but that the theory and practice of the Enlightenment “already contains the germ of the regression which is taking place everywhere today” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: xvi). This is a thesis about the mundane, immanent character of reason which is bound up with the specific form and dynamic of social organization in which it exists. On the one hand, Horkheimer and Adorno seem to explain this in universal, transhistorical terms, as if the practical tendency of the “self-destruction of the enlightenment” had existed from the beginning of human civilization or had been part of the “very concept of that thinking” (ibid.: xvi). On the other hand, this is qualified historically or sociologically. Horkheimer and Adorno claim that this dynamic (of reason turning into unreason, of freedom turning into constraint) is characteristic of a society and form of life that is built on the principle of domination. It should be recalled that the exploitation and functionalization of nature, the historical precondition for capitalist accumulation, for them is “[d]omination itself” (ibid.: 156). This is surely not a diagnosis Foucault could easily subscribe to given his weariness concerning oversimplified pictures of the power structure in a society. For him, there is not one principle structuring society as a whole, but a network of interrelated and yet partly contradictory forces. He shares, however, with the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the general impetus to decipher the epistemic and social elements within society simultaneously but non-reductively, i.e. the impetus to assess power in reason and reason in power.

Seen from a distance, then, poststructuralist and Critical Theory perspectives on society agree in the critical or diagnostic act of correlating or bringing into constellation the rational and the social. Despite many differences in methodology and normative orientation, there is a problematic common to both critical projects, namely the fact that a society as differentiated as the modern one has also generated new technologies of social control, normalization and destruction. Both opt for accounting for this not in terms of irrationality or self-deception but in terms of reason itself that evolves in a certain way facilitated by the society of which it is a part. The seemingly noumenal entity called Reason has thus turned into an object of empirical-historical enquiry whose entanglement with profane social powers and forces can be revealed and diagnosed.

**The Conditions of the Subject**

The work of Jacques Lacan is idiosyncratic, constituting almost a school of its own. Yet almost all the poststructuralists have been influenced by it, and one major trope prominent in it plays a central role for the poststructuralists horizon. Lacan has been the most influential theorist to elaborate an idea that can be traced back to Nietzsche and Freud but that was only fully developed into a theoretical conception in the discussions in the humanities since the 1960s, namely the critique and decentering of the subject (Descombes 1980). Breaking with many traditional assumptions about the integrity and status of the subject, a new discourse on self, consciousness and interiority was founded that treats the subject less as a
foundational category than as an effect or element emerging within a given order or set of practices.

In his early work, Lacan gave this idea a developmental interpretation. Commenting on the “mirror stage” in child development, he tried to account for the moment in which the experience of oneself as a separate entity appears. But this, Lacan claims, only happens when the self is seen from the outside, as oneself that is another, as it were. The sense of self emerges as the perception of a unity forged out of the difference between me and the mirror image:

But the important point is that this form situates the agency known as the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, that will only rejoin the coming-into-being (le devenir) of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as I, his discordance with his own reality.

(Lacan 1977: 503)

Dependent and fictional, the truth of the self is outside of itself (Reckwitz 2008: 52–68).

In his later work, Lacan gave various and not always identical explanations of the emergence of the (fictitious unity of the) subject and its inner structure and mechanisms, radicalizing Freud’s conceptions of drives and desire. Here too, the supposed unity and foundational nature of the subject is decomposed into a plurality of processes within the self, on the one hand, and decentered toward its outside, the others, language, and the symbolic order, on the other. The subject only becomes what it is by being marked and traversed by forces beyond itself:

if desire is an effect in the subject of the condition — which is imposed on him by the existence of discourse — that his need pass through the defiles of the signifier; [...] then it must be posited that, as a characteristic of an animal at the mercy of language, man’s desire is the Other’s desire. [...] [This involves] the condition that the subject finds the constitutive structure of his desire in the same gap opened up by the effect of signifiers in those who come to represent the Other for him, insofar as his demand is subjected to them.

(Lacan 2006: 525)

Poststructuralism has come up with a variety of ways to express this thought of the radical dependency of the subject on something that it is not, and not all of them are compatible with Lacan’s own heterodox psychoanalytic account. But the core of this proposal has been retained in many different theoretical contexts, namely the conceptual strategy of redescribing the supposed integrity, transparency and autonomy of the subject in the negative terms of lack, absence or heteronomy. The figure of the subject itself, so dear to the rationalist, idealist and phenomenological traditions in modern philosophy, becomes Janus-faced and ambivalent, on the one hand designating the conscious and coherent instance capable of knowing, action and reflecting, while on the other hand being a product of forces preceding and producing it, making it subjected to a certain grammar of speaking, acting and thinking (Althusser 1971: 162–164). Most theories associated with poststructuralist thought from the mid-1960s until today contain, in one version or another, such a post-Lacanian critique of the subject (Žižek 1999; Williams 2001).

On first sight, it seems implausible to align the mature Critical Theory of Habermas with this author; for sure, differences and disanalogies in theoretical means and meta-theoretical
convictions abound. But there is a structural similarity that makes both authors representatives of a thinking beyond the metaphysics of the subject that was a major heritage of modern philosophy (Menke 2003). For Lacan as for Habermas, the subject (or consciousness) can be conceived of neither monadically nor monologically; the self is neither sealed off from the world surrounding it nor isolated from others. Rather, it is traversed by its outside and its others all the way down.

Habermas pursues this route first with reference to G. H. Mead’s interactionist conception of the individual (or “theory of subjectivity”) for which he chooses the telling formula “individuation through socialization” (Habermas 1992: 149). For Habermas, following the interactionist model and inserting at this point some insights from Hegelian and Piagetian anthropology, subjectivity or selfhood is fundamentally mediated by reference to other subjects, or, differently put, subjective interiority is a product of intersubjective exchange. Only by learning to take the other’s point of view on oneself is a sense of self established and can be maintained and assessed; the other comes to inhabit a certain place in the self from the moment that selfhood is experienced or lived.

This developmental conception (that already bears some resemblances to the early Lacanian view mentioned before) is complemented by Habermas in his work on communication and language by an even more fundamental general argument. Discussing the legacy and the limits of the philosophy of the subject, he argues for a strict renewal of the whole conceptual framework of modern philosophy in light of the insights stemming from the linguistic turn, from systems theory, and from the theory of communication and language. The basic argument of this highly complex part of Habermas’s oeuvre might be summarized as follows: contemporary philosophy and social theory need to reconceptualize the very elements they start with. Under the influence of the paradigm of the philosophy of the subject, the exercise of reason and the mastery of language appear as individual capacities that relate individuals to one another. Adopting an intersubjectivist, communicative account, however, redirects the gaze. It is now the social practice of sharing a language and a lifeworld, of exchanging reasons and making truth-claims to which others respond, that first constitute these faculties, including their normativity and content. The subject of communication, formerly the supposed ground or explanans, becomes the product or explanandum. The philosophy of the subject or of consciousness (Bewusstseinsphilosophie) is superseded by the theory of communicative action; “communicative reason” replaces “subject-centered reason” (Habermas 1990: 294); the traditional conception of the subject is replaced by “the intersubjective model of the socially produced ego” (Habermas 1992: 170).

While these last points signal serious differences of this approach from the psychoanalytic path and the subversive, more skeptical thought of Lacan, both share the gesture of decentering and replacing an older image of the subject by a newer one. They both substitute a unitary-isolated conception for a pluralized-contextual one. In this sense, most of poststructuralism and much of Critical Theory share a common ground and a common opposition to more traditional and metaphysical approaches. To be sure, they differ radically about whether this new vision of the self dependent on language and the others offers a reconstitution of selfhood and authenticity. While Habermas seems to be confident of arriving at an image of the capable, quasi-sovereign subject, Lacan’s revision seems to lead into a much more negative picture centered on absence and lack at the heart of subjectivity.

However, both approaches can be said to offer revisionist, or critical, theories of the decentered subject. In both approaches, the place and the function of the subject do not disappear, and neither of them is proclaiming a “death” of the subject (Bürger 1999: 12–16). Rather, in both redescriptions, the subject appears against a background or web of relations, linguistic and intersubjective, that is not itself subjective.
Philosophies of Resistance

My discussion has highlighted four major *topoi* from poststructuralist theorizing that can also serve as points of entry into the theoretical universe of Critical Theory. This is not meant to deny the many – evident – differences between these two traditions. However, it can show that there is a thematical convergence. De-essentializing meaning, rejecting progress, generalizing the notion of power and decentering the subject are critical gestures that define a style of thinking or a form of critique that concerns the core of modern convictions about language, reason, history and the self. Poststructuralism and Critical Theory can be seen as related but differently executed variants of such a critical form of thinking.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the intellectual history of the last forty years has seen a great variety of encounters and points of contact between these two lines of thought, ranging from fierce polemics to attempts at harmonious reconciliation. Decidedly influencing discussions about language and reason (Bernstein 1992; Wellmer 2004), history (Schmidt 1981; Düttmann 1996; Allen 2016), power (Fraser 1989; Honneth 1991) and the self, these controversies about the compatibility or divergence between both traditions were taken up by authors close to Critical Theory, many of which were heavily influenced by the vibrant debates within feminist theory that were often using insights from both sides (Benjamin 1988; Benhabib 1992; Brown 1995). On the other side, authors more aligned with poststructuralism have consistently tried out their affinities with some of the classical texts from Frankfurt School contexts (Lytard 1974; Derrida 2002; Butler 2005). While Habermas, the most authoritative voice in the early phase of these discussions, has insisted on a deep, paradigmatic disagreement, others have later emphasized convergences and mutual corrections (Hoy and McCarthy 1994; Menke 2006; Saar 2007; Allen 2008). Some more recent developments in Critical Theory such as the turn to liberalism, the re-readings of Kant and Hegel, and the rise to prominence of issues of recognition, justice and justification might seem to differ from the points of convergence discussed here. But at the same time, some other tendencies, like the opening up toward cosmopolitan and postcolonial themes, a reappraisal of Marxism and a rethinking of alterity and transcendence have brought to the fore unexpected proximities, if not in theoretical position then at least in thematic concerns and interest (Sprinker 1999; de Vries and Sullivan 2006).

While methods and normative orientations may vary, both paradigms from their origins share a negative, even destructive side. As the formation of Critical Theory in the Frankfurt School sense was tied to a historicopolitical moment and project of rejecting dominant "traditional" and bourgeois forms of thought in order to better understand a social reality breaking apart, poststructuralism as a loose intellectual movement was challenging dominant Post-War forms of thinking in the humanities and the social sciences in order to establish a more complex view of social reality. This critical and examining stance toward current forms of knowledge might be less *passe* than some current commentators on the "end of critique" seem to imply (Latour 2004). On the contrary, it might be that in the age of hypertecnological capitalism and the ultracommodification of knowledge, the need for an intellectual stance and practice of critical examination and bold subversion is even greater.

The specific contribution of poststructuralism and Critical Theory to the humanities and the social sciences in the present might lie in the insistence that to say no to what is given, to what seems normal and to what authorities say is where thinking as an activity begins (Caygill 2013). Problematizing, questioning, and undermining certainties, norms and normativities are not ends in themselves, but requirements for a thought that is not fully reconciled with the social reality it encounters. In this, thought is inherently resistant to its outside which it knows itself to be a part of. For many members of the two traditions discussed here, this idea amounts to the credo of resistant philosophizing itself: “I think, there is no other
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definition of philosophy than as the spiritual power of resistance,” Adorno (2007: 148) was confessing in the classroom only a few years before the advent of 1968 brought resistance and contestation from the confines of theoretical works into the streets and daily lives of many Western European societies and beyond. The two lines of thinking discussed intersect at this point: the necessity to resist. Their time might not be over yet.

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References


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Further Reading

Butler, J. (1997) The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection, Stanford: Stanford University Press. (The most influential text on the problem of the subject’s relation to power which gave rise to many debates and discussions within Critical Theory.)


