PSYCHOANALYSIS AND CRITICAL THEORY

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Introduction

In the 1930s, the philosophers and social scientists of the Institute for Social Research were the first members of the conservative German academy to not only treat the disreputable avant-garde new discipline of psychoanalysis—whose membership was almost entirely Jewish—seriously, but also to accord Freud the same stature as the titans of the philosophical tradition. The radicalism of psychoanalysis fit with the radicalism of the position they were attempting to develop, and the appropriation of psychoanalysis provided one of the pillars on which Critical Theory was constructed (Jay 1973: 86–112).

In addition to the theoretical affinity between the Frankfurt School and psychoanalysis, the relationship between the two intellectual movements was also practical. The Institute for Social Research and the Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute shared a building, in which they held their classes in the same rooms, and jointly sponsored public lectures by such eminent analysts as Anna Freud, Paul Federn, Hans Sachs, and Siegfried Bernfeld. Indeed, the connection between the two organizations went even further. Max Horkheimer, the director of the Institute for Social Research, sat on the board of the analytic Institute, while Eric Fromm—a trained analyst and member of both groups—helped the Critical Theorists educate themselves about the workings of psychoanalysis.

A major concern that led the Critical Theorists to turn to psychoanalysis was a deficit in Marxian theory: it lacked a so-called subjective dimension and tended to treat subjectivity simply as an epiphenomenon, that is, as a reflection of the material base. With the economic crisis of the 1930s, this concern became especially pressing. Objective conditions obtained that Marxian theory predicted should have produced the radicalization of the working class. But just the opposite was happening: a large portion of the European proletariat was turning to fascism instead. Max Horkheimer, Eric Fromm, and Herbert Marcuse, among others, undertook Studies in Authority and the Family to account for this supposedly anomalous fact (Horkheimer 1936; Jay 1973: 113–142; Wiggershaus 1994: 149–156).

In one sense, the study was groundbreaking for, along with Wilhelm Reich’s work, it represented the first attempt to incorporate psychoanalysis into Marxian theory. But in another sense, its innovations remained limited. Studies on Authority and the Family still remained Marxist—albeit, of highly heterodox sort—insofar as it retained the general framework of political economy. Furthermore, the work drew on the less radical theories in the Freudian corpus, for example, those pertaining to character formation, rather than Freud’s late, more scandalous cultural texts, which Horkheimer and Adorno turned to in conjunction with their reconstitution of Critical Theory in the 1940s.
After immigrating to California, Adorno joined with colleagues outside of the Institute to conduct another psychoanalytically oriented interdisciplinary research project that returned to many of the same themes contained in *Studies on Authority and the Family*. Their findings were published in *The Authoritarian Personality: Studies in Prejudice* (Adorno et al. 1982). Despite its initial influence, the work was later criticized on methodological grounds and fell out of fashion. But, as Peter Gordon has recently suggested, with the election of Donald Trump and the rise of authoritarian leaders around the world, revisiting *The Authoritarian Personality* might be in order (Gordon 2017).

**Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno**

“Beneath the known history of Europe,” Horkheimer and Adorno observe, “there runs a subterranean one [that] consists of the fate of the human instincts and passions repressed and distorted by civilization” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 192). It can be argued that for these two philosophers, the sustained excavation of this subterranean history, as well as a focus on the body in general, constitutes a condition *sine qua non* of their position—as distinguished from what Horkheimer referred to as Traditional Theory (Horkheimer 1972). This orientation, moreover, comprised an essential aspect of the materialist perspective – of the “preponderance of the object,” as Adorno called it – that they sought to maintain (Adorno 1973: 183).

When Horkheimer and Adorno received news that the Nazis had set the final solution into motion and that their colleague Walter Benjamin had committed suicide while trying to escape the Gestapo on the Spanish frontier, they concluded that it was necessary to radicalize their theory in order to do justice to the enormity of the catastrophe that was unfolding in Europe (Rabinbach 1997). That catastrophe, as they saw it, involved more than the failure of the proletariat to fulfill its historical task. It resulted from the self-destruction of the project of enlightenment itself. “Why,” they asked, was “humanity… sinking into a new kind of barbarism” precisely at the point where, according to the (Baconian) Enlightenment, the material conditions had been created that could produce a “truly human state” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: xiv)?

The radicalization of Critical Theory consisted in a move from the critique of political economy to the philosophy of history centering on the domination of nature (Jay 1973: 253–280). In addition to Freud, the two philosophers drew on Nietzsche, Weber, Mauss, as well as others to write a depth-psychological and depth-anthropological Urgeschichte or primal history of civilization. The new position was articulated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which became the defining text of the Frankfurt School during its classical phase. Where the domination of nature in general—as opposed to economic exploitation and class struggle—became the overarching theme of the new philosophy of history, the idea of the domination of inner nature provided the specific link through which Horkheimer and Adorno incorporated Freud into their new theory.

For the mature Freud, the reality principle, understood as *Ananke* or *Atropos* (necessity or the ineluctable), defined the human condition (Whitebook 2017: Chapter 10). It designated the price that nature inevitably exacted from us finite transient beings, in the form of physical suffering and decay, loss, and ultimately death. By reading Marx’s theory of exchange back into prehistory, Horkheimer and Adorno sought to integrate his economic theory with Freudian anthropology. They maintained that the law of equivalence—the principle that everything that happens must pay for having happened—governed mythical thought, and they saw the capitalist principle of exchange as the latest and most complete instantiation of the law of equivalence. The practice of sacrifice, which aims at mitigating the law’s effects, follows from it. For example, the sacrifice that our so-called primitive ancestors performed
to placate the gods after a successful hunting expedition constituted an attempt to control the price they would have to pay for their good fortune by offering an advanced propitiatory payment.

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, enlightenment consists in the attempt to escape mythic fate and sacrifice. Deploying his cunning, which was the precursor of instrumental reason, Odysseus, who is the prototype of the enlightened individual, sought to outsmart the law of equivalence through “the introversion of sacrifice.” Rather than sacrificing a piece of external nature, for example, the hind quarter of an ox, Odysseus sacrificed a piece of his inner nature, which is to say, renounced a piece of his unconscious-instinctual life. By repressing his inner nature in order to form a purposeful, autocratic, virile, and rational (qua calculating) ego, Odysseus believed he could dominate external nature, thereby escaping its dangers, outsmart mythical fate, and evade the law of equivalence. Horkheimer and Adorno argue, however, that the strategy was flawed. Their thesis is that “the denial of nature in human beings,” which constitutes “the core of all civilizing rationality,” contains “the germ cell of proliferating mythic irrationality” out of which the dialectic of enlightenment ineluctably unfolds (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 42).

An erroneous Baconian assumption, which was taken over by Marx, underlies the program of the domination of nature: namely, its demand for renunciation is justified for, in the long run, the domination of nature will create the material conditions that are the prerequisite for what Bacon called “the relief of man’s estate”—or the emancipation of the humanity, to put it in Marxian terms (Bacon 2008: 148). But there is a hitch in this program, and it generates the self-defeating logic of the dialectic of enlightenment. Because it represents “the introversion of sacrifice,” the renunciation of inner nature, which seeks to escape sacrifice, remains a form of sacrifice, albeit a displaced one. And as such, it is still subject to the law of equivalence. The math, Adorno and Horkheimer maintain, does not work: “All who renounce give away more of their life than is given back to them, more than the life they preserve” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 43).

More concretely, the faulty math produces a calamitous result. In order to carry out the domination of nature, the subject must form a purposive calculating self by repressing its unconscious-instinctual life. It thereby reifies itself at the same time and to the same degree that it reifies external nature. It follows that at the point that nature has been thoroughly reified and dominated in order to produce the presumptive material preconditions for emancipation—which Horkheimer and Adorno assume had been approximated by the first half of the twentieth century—the self will have been thoroughly reified as well. In the process of creating the preconditions for its emancipation, the subject has, in short, so deformed itself—has so “annihilated” itself—that it is in no condition to appropriate those preconditions and create a better form of life. Hence, the self-defeating logic of the dialectic of enlightenment: “[W]ith the denial of nature in humans, not only the telos of the external mastery of nature, but also the telos of one’s one life becomes opaque and confused.” Instead of emancipation, barbarism results. It should be noted that, for Horkheimer and Adorno, “nature in the human being” constitutes that which is sacrificed in the process of dominating nature, as well as (in some unspecified fashion) that for the sake of which the entire process is pursued (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 42).

Because of their anti-Hegelian opposition to all modes of final reconciliation and their thesis of a totally administered world, Horkheimer and Adorno opposed all utopian solutions, indeed, positive solutions as such. Nevertheless, logically there is an unthematized utopian implication of their hyperbolic analysis—which they would surely have rejected had it been explicitly presented to them: that only the cessation of renunciation in toto, only the emancipation of inner nature and unfettered fulfillment, could prevent the dialectic of enlightenment from unfolding. Short of this implicit utopian solution, the most that
Horkheimer and Adorno do hint at one other possible way out of the dialectic’s fateful logic, namely, “the remembrance of nature within the subject” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 32). But they do not provide the idea with much content.

After the war, however, there was one place where Adorno might have speculated on non-reified forms of subjectivity. But his prohibition against speculating on positive conceptions of the self prevented him from pursuing this path (Adorno 1968; Jay 1984: Chapter 5; Whitebook 1996: 152–164). Despite his reservations about false reconciliation, in his aesthetic theory, Adorno allows himself to speculate about non-reified forms of synthesis—different relations between part and whole, particular and universal. Borrowing an idea from Kant, he argues that the truly advanced work of avant-garde art exhibits “a non-violent togetherness of the manifold,” that provides a glimpse of what a non-reified world might be like. But Adorno stopped there, refusing to extrapolate from his aesthetic theory in order to envision less violent and more desirable forms of the togetherness of the self, that is, of ego-integration.

Herbert Marcuse

But, in an effort to break out of the Dialectic of Enlightenment, Herbert Marcuse did play the utopian card, first as a theoretical exercise, then as a concrete theoretical program. In the midst of the seemingly closed world of the 1950s, which appeared to confirm Horkheimer and Adorno’s prognosis, Marcuse’s Eros and Civilization attempted to provide a philosophical demonstration that a “nonrepressive civilization”—that is, a civilization in which the sacrifice-repression of inner nature was no longer necessary so that it could be liberated—was possible. But it was just that, philosophical. At the time, Marcuse did not advocate an attempt to realize that society (Marcuse 1955: 5; Whitebook 1996: 26–41, 2004: 82–89).

In Eros and Civilization, Marcuse undertakes an immanent critique of Freud, whose “own theory,” he argues, “provides reasons for rejecting the identification of civilization with repression” (Marcuse 1955: 4). Marcuse’s strategy is to historicize Freud’s basic framework. Where Freud presented the fundamental opposition between the Reality Principle and Pleasure Principle as transcultural and therefore immutable, Marcuse, with the aid of Marx, attempts to “de-ontologize” it by historicizing the Reality Principle. His entire argument rests on this central move.

As mentioned earlier, the mature Freud understood the Reality Principle as Ananke (necessity) or Atropos (the ineluctable). But in what amounts to a Marxifying sleight of hand, Marcuse alters the meaning of that principle and reconceptualizes it in economic terms. Instead of transhistorical necessity, Ananke is recast as historically variable Lebensnot (scarcity) and is defined in terms of “struggle for existence” (Marcuse 1955: 132). The term now refers to the metabolism between humanity and nature that will exist in any conceivable society, and to the amount of toil that, to one degree or another, will be necessary to extract the means of existence from the natural environment at a particular level of economic development. Toil requires unpleasure, that is, frustration, delayed gratification, and the repression of the Pleasure Principle. Thus, insofar as the Reality Principle refers to the quantum of toil that is necessary in a given society, it also refers to the degree of repression of the Pleasure Principle—of inner nature—that is required to carry it out.

The redefinition of Ananke allows Marcuse to introduce another distinction that is obviously modeled on Marx’s distinction between necessary and surplus labor, that is, between basic or necessary repression, on the one hand, and surplus repression on the other. Necessary repression denotes the ineliminable quantum of repression that will be required in any conceivable society in virtue of the fact that we are embodied beings who will, to one degree or another, always have to extract the means of existence from nature. Surplus repression, as
the name suggests, refers to the excess repression beyond the basic repression that could be eliminated in a given society on the basis of the development of its scientific and technological means of production. Marcuse’s thesis is that surplus repression is largely exploitative and is enforced in the interests of the dominant class. Indeed, the difference between necessary and surplus repression can be taken as a measure of the degree of exploitation in a given society.

Marcuse maintains that surplus repression comprises the largest portion of repression in advanced capitalist societies, and he refers to the particular historical instantiation of it that obtains in them as the Performance Principle. His claim is that the Performance Principle—which is maintained in the economic interest of the capitalist ruling class—is perpetuated by the endless creation of false consumerist needs in the population and through capitalism’s perpetual production of (often useless) commodities that can fulfill them.

There is, however, if not an outright contradiction, at least a serious tension lurking in this configuration. The advanced state of the means of production, according to Marcuse, generates the potential and therefore the pressure for a qualitatively different socioeconomic order in which surplus repression could in principle be eliminated. And this potential is at odds with an arrangement where the Performance Principle is artificially enforced. Given a differently constituted system of needs—one not based on the incessant multiplication of false needs—advanced science and technology could be employed to vastly reduce the amount of toil necessary to produce the material requirements not only for existence but also for the satisfaction of true needs that were not artificially inflated. The tension between the existing state of affairs and the potential of advanced science and technology might, Marcuse suggests, contribute to the motivation for a radical transformation of society.

Reinterpreting Marx’s notion of the transition from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom in psychoanalytic terms, Marcuse attempts to envisage a utopian transformation of society. If the highly developed means of production in the advanced world were to be properly appropriated, a social transformation could be affected that would drastically reduce the amount of toil necessary for securing the necessities of life. With the elimination of scarcity, surplus repression could also be eliminated. This, in turn, would make it possible to establish a nonrepressive society—that is, one in which only the minimal amount of basic repression remained—and to emancipate inner nature.

Marcuse draws on the psychoanalytic theory of perverse sexuality to provide content for the vision of a utopian society beyond “the established reality principle” (Marcuse 1955: 129). His rather questionable reasoning is this: because the sexual perversions have somehow eluded, indeed, rebelled against the Oedipally structured historical Reality Principle, they can offer an indication of what form a different arrangement of human sexuality might assume. Marcuse goes so far as to claim that primary narcissism constitutes not only a stage of preoedipal psychosexual development but also that the concept contains “ontological implications” that point “at another mode of being”—one that would be reconciled with external nature (Marcuse 1955: 107 and 109). What Marcuse fails to appreciate is that perverse sexuality, whatever that may mean in today’s context, does not constitute an unalloyed expression of the Pleasure Principle, but is, like all psychical productions, multiply determined. (In a similar romantic vein, the young Foucault made a related mistake when he maintained that madness contained a privileged form of truth that had escaped contamination by normalizing rationality [Whitebook 2002, 2005].)

Freud never denied that the Reality Principle contained an economic component. This is especially true in The Future of an Illusion, his most Marxist book, which progressives regularly cite. But to reduce the concept to economic scarcity is to substantially diminish its philosophical depth. Paul Ricoeur has argued that the mature Freud’s introduction of the term Ananke to denote the Reality Principle indicated a transformation of the concept from
a “principle of ‘mental regulation’” into “a cypher of possible wisdom... beyond illusion and consolation” (Ricoeur 1970: 262 and 325). Freud was staunchly anti-utopian, and his tragic vision consisted in the resignation to Ananke, that is, the disconsolate acceptance of the fact that human reality is constituted by transience and inevitably permeated with loss and death (Whitebook 2017: 329).

But Marxists typically dismiss Freud’s tragic vision as the ideological prejudice of a fin-de-siècle bourgeois patriarch whose world and worldview were crumbling. And it cannot be denied that a number of the questionable anthropological assumptions upon which Freud’s political pessimism is based must be criticized. Nevertheless, even in an emancipated society—however one conceives of it—this tragic dimension should not be eliminated. On the contrary, whereas the tragic register is systematically denied in the infantilism of mass consumerist society and the culture industry, in an emancipated society, it would be actively engaged as it was in most pre-capitalist societies. To accept Ananke is to accept our finitude, and the acceptance of our finitude is not reactionary hogwash, but an essential component of a truly human society. These themes are not entirely lost on Marcuse, and he attempts to confront them (as well as the theme of destructiveness). But his discussion of “the defeat of time,” while interesting, remains unconvincing (Marcuse 1955: 232–237).

Whereas in the 1950s Marcuse treated the idea of a nonrepressive society merely as a philosophical possibility, in the 1960s, it not only became a plausible political program but also a necessary one. He argued that the creation of a post-scarcity society, in which the species’ relationship to its inner and outer nature had been radically transformed, was necessary to prevent the world from slipping into a new form of barbarism and to avoid the destruction of the earth’s ecosystem.

During the heady days of the 1960s, Marcuse published two provocatively entitled articles. One, “The End of Utopia,” maintained that insofar as the concept of utopia literally meant “no place”—a topos that could never be occupied—it had become obsolete (Marcuse 1970b: 62–83). Far from constituting an unrealistic fantasy, the establishment of an emancipated nonrepressive society, based on “the achievements of the existing societies, especially their scientific and technical achievements,” had not only become realistic but historically necessary. The argument of the other paper, “The Obsolescence of the Freudian Concept of Man,” was in line with his thesis in Eros and Civilization (Marcuse 1970a: 44–61). Because Freud’s anthropology was predicated on the false ontologization of the opposition between the Pleasure Principle and the Reality Principle, and because it was now possible to transcend the historical Performance Principle, Freud’s concept of man, Marcuse argued, had also become obsolete (Marcuse 1969: 22).

Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Marcuse subscribed to a version of the totally administered society (Marcuse 1964: xxxvi). As we saw, he argued that through the uninterrupted generation and fulfillment of false (consumerist) needs, the system could integrate all opposition and perpetuate itself indefinitely. A break in this fateful process—which meant a Great Refusal that rejected the false system of needs and the creation of a “new sensibility” embodying an alternative to them—was a necessary condition for the transformation of the established order and the creation of new form of life (Marcuse 1969: 23–48). As opposed to Adorno, Marcuse guilelessly and enthusiastically celebrated the countercultural and radical political movements of the 1960s as an expression of that new sensibility, at least in an incipient form (Adorno and Marcuse, “Correspondence” 1999: New Left Review 1/233, January–February).

But as those movements receded further and further into the past, his position increasingly appeared hopelessly and perhaps even embarrassingly naïve. Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher’s Counter-Revolution successfully quashed the 1960’s vision of the good life and succeeded in reinstating the pursuit of wealth as the summum bonum. The entrepreneur...
in a pinstriped suit replaced the civil rights worker in overalls as the new culture hero. Moreover, with the collapse of communism and the triumphant ascendance of liberal political theory, the discussion of the good as opposed to the right was often condemned as illicit. Indeed, it was sometimes suggested that to countenance the distinction between true and false needs, as Marcuse emphatically did, was to begin down the slippery slope to totalitarianism. The liberal turn in political theory, in short, appeared to exclude the notion of a new sensibility from legitimate discourse and to limit its parameters to a consideration of rights.

But “after the brief interlude of liberalism,” which, one can argue, lasted from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the economic crisis of 2008, the idea of a new sensibility may not seem so daft (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 68). It might be the case that a rights-oriented politics cannot adequately address the rapacious dynamics of the globalized capitalism—the system’s incessant and methodical “colonization of the lifeworld” and the environment—and its lethal effects on the global ecosystem (Habermas 1989: 332–372). Furthermore, where liberal and postmodern critics tend to dismiss Adorno and Horkheimer’s theory of the cultural industry as elitist, the two Critical Theorists were, in fact, diagnosing embryonic tendencies that have now developed beyond their wildest imagination. The capacity of today’s social media and celebrity culture to deflect, disarm, and confuse critical thinking, while simultaneously creating a simulacrum of popular debate, has surpassed their worst fears. As unlikely as the emergence of a new sensibility might seem given our current conditions, it is difficult to imagine how, from a purely logical point of view, a social and political movement that can address the problems that are confronting us can be formed without one. On this point, Marcuse may not have been that naïve after all.

Jürgen Habermas

Because it occurred at the beginning of his career, Habermas’s only sustained Auseinandersetzung with Freud is conflicted and difficult to sort out. At the time, Habermas had one foot planted in the psychoanalytically informed materialism of the first generation of the Frankfurt School. But with the other, he was stepping into the world of linguistified Kantianism that came to define him. Although the early Habermas tried on the mantle of the first generation of Critical Theorists for size, because he possessed substantially different pre-theoretical intuitions, he was never entirely at home in it and therefore moved beyond it relatively quickly (Rabinbach 1997: 168–170).

The first generation’s experience, which was shaped by Weimar, emigration, the War, Nazism, Stalinism, and the Holocaust, resulted in the choice between hyper-radical utopianism and quietist resignation. Habermas’s experience was different. As someone who, as adolescent, had been glued to the radio listening to the broadcasts of the Nuremberg Trials, and who entered adulthood as the Federal Republic was being established, the either/or of quietism versus revolution was unacceptable. Possessing the instincts of a radical reformer, Habermas placed the solidification, cultivation, and defense of German democracy at the top of his political agenda. And he cannot be commended enough for his exemplary career as a public intellectual and for the many courageous political stances he has taken. At the same time, however, it must also be admitted that his resolute defense of democracy has often been coupled with excessive progressivist Whiggishness. This has not only led him to deny the darker antisocial forces in human nature documented by Freud, but it has also prevented him from effectively addressing the irrational forces that are so evident in today’s politics around the globe. For example, while progressive Protestants or reformed Jews might find his position on religion congenial, he sidesteps the really hard problem: how to address fundamentalism. For someone with a fundamentalist mindset would find the position he is advocating well-nigh
unfathomable. How does one enter into a rational dialogue with someone who has not cathexed the idea of rational dialogue?

In the 1960s, Freud was required reading for a budding Critical Theorist, and it is clear from Knowledge and Human Interests that Habermas’s Auseinandersetzung with the psychoanalyst’s work was comprehensive and deep (Habermas 1971). But he did not share the first generation’s elective affinity with the founder of psychoanalysis. As Thomas McCarthy observes, Habermas’s “orientation to Freud’s work” was less substantive and “more methodological than was theirs” (McCarthy 1978: 195). Furthermore, this methodological orientation was one aspect of a larger point of difference separating their younger colleague from the authors of Dialectic of Enlightenment. Horkheimer and Adorno were prepared to resign themselves to the self-referential implication that followed from their analysis: namely, that they could not elucidate that own theoretical standpoint. They therefore abstained in principle from any attempt to clarify the methodological foundations of Critical Theory. At best, they dialectically circled them.

For Habermas, this abstention was unacceptable on theoretical as well as political grounds. Still situating himself within a Marxist vein, he drew on the new working-class theory current at the time and argued that after the Second World War, science and technology had come to occupy a new strategically decisive position in the productive apparatus of the capitalist economy. Therefore, if Critical Theory hoped to influence a progressive transformation of advanced capitalist society, it would have to engage members of scientific and academic communities. To do so, it would be necessary for Critical Theorists to clarify and defend the methodological foundations of their position in a way that was acceptable to those communities of investigators. If the representatives of the first generation of the Frankfurt School sometimes (and somewhat disingenuously) made a fetish of being outsiders, Habermas wanted to challenge the academic community on its own terms, forcing its members to reflect on the dogmatic assumptions underlying their positions.

Where Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse were attracted to psychoanalysis because of its scandalousness, Habermas wanted to use it to make the project academically legitimate and critical at the same time. Strange as it may sound today when the field is in such disrepute, in the 1960s, he believed that psychoanalysis provided a model of a social science that was not simply successful but successful qua reflective and critical. “Psychoanalysis is relevant to us,” he wrote, because it is “the only tangible example of science incorporating methodological self-reflection” (Habermas 1971: 124). He believed that the discipline provided a model case from which general methodological (and normative) principles for a Critical Theory of society could be extrapolated. To accomplish this task—and to rectify what he, like Lacan, mistakenly saw as Freud’s biologism—Habermas sought to apply the findings of the linguistic turn, which was in full force at the middle of the twentieth century, to psychoanalysis. He reinterpreted neurosis and ideology as two structurally homologous forms of false consciousness and conceptualized them as forms of systematically distorted communication.

It is at this point that the serious tensions emerge in Habermas’s position. (A) On the one hand, he continues to not only use the language of the first generation’s materialistically inflected interpretation of Freud but also to gesture towards the substance of that interpretation. (B) On the other hand, however, this strain of his argument is at odds with the linguistifying and transcendentalizing dynamic that he introduces with the notion of systematically distorted communication.

Regarding (A): When, for example, Habermas set out to refute Nietzsche’s Darwinian reductionism, he deployed Freud’s instinct theory (Triebtheorie)—a theory which, if he did not totally repudiate, he radically altered and diluted under the linguistifying pressures of his program. Habermas responds to Nietzsche’s claim that reason is nothing but “an organ of adaptation for men just as claws and teeth are for animals” in the following way. He grants
Nietzsche’s claim that reason is a natural organ of self-preservation, but over the course of evolution, he argues, it also develops into something more than nature. And Habermas uses the concept of libido to explain that something more, that is to say, the “cultural break with nature.” Human drives are excessive—superabundant—in that they overshoot the requirements of self-preservation, of mere life. “Along with the tendency to realize natural drives,” Habermas claims that the cultural formations that have emerged over the course of evolution “have incorporated the tendency toward release from the constraint of nature,” latent in the excessiveness of the drives (Habermas 1973: 312).

At this point, Habermas bursts into a downright Marcusean panegyric to the utopian significance of Eros:

An enticing natural force, present in the individual as libido, has detached itself from the behavioral system of self-preservation and urges toward utopian fulfillment.

(Habermas 1973: 312)

Habermas also enlists Marcuse’s distinction between necessary repression and surplus repression as a means for elucidating the critique of ideology and as a device for measuring the amount of exploitation in a given society (Whitebook 1996: 27–29). He argues, moreover, that the degree of repression obtaining in a given society determines the extent to which it restricts the public expression of libidinally based wishes. According to him, the wishes that are excluded and repressed at a given level of economic development tend to find alternative modes of fulfillment in pathological symptoms, fantasies, illusions, and ideologies, which are structurally homologous formations. And insofar as these phenomena constitute disguised forms of wish fulfillment they “harbor Utopia” (Habermas 1971: 280).

Also in keeping with the vocabulary and sensibility of the first generation of Critical Theorists, Habermas borrows Adorno’s notion of “exact fantasy” to formulate a normative theory in psychoanalytic terms. (It should be noted that, as opposed to his later normative theory, this earlier iteration of it is primarily concerned with the substantive question of the good rather than with the procedural question of justification.) “The ‘good,’” he writes, “is neither a convention nor an essence, but rather the result of fantasy.” It must, however, be “fantasized so exactly that it corresponds to and articulates a fundamental interest… in that measure of emancipation that is objectively historically possible” (Habermas 1971: 228).

 Regarding (B): The linguistic turn, however, took hold of Habermas’s argument and led to a radical alteration of Freudian theory that is most apparent in his account of repression and of the unconscious. Though Freud’s approach contains an important interpretative dimension, it does not comprise a pure hermeneutics. At its core, it is psychodynamic, which means it combines the language of meaning with the language of force (Ricoeur 1970: 65–67). Every psychoanalytically pertinent idea (Vorstellung) has an affective charge attached to it and a pressure (Drang) behind it. To be clinically effective, a psychoanalytic intervention requires more than interpretation—the explication of meaning through meaning. As Ricoeur insisted, it requires technique: that is, the ability to assess the psychodynamic forces at work in a given situation and to successfully intervene in them (Ricoeur 1974). For Freud, moreover, the source of psychical forces is somatic. They emanate from the drives which he describes

- as a “frontier” concept lying “between the mental and the somatic”
- as “the psychical representative [psychischer Repräsentant] of the stimuli originating within the organism” that reaches “the mind”
- “as a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work in consequence of its connection with the body” (Freud 1915: 121–122).
To be sure, Habermas registers the right points in his discussion of Freud’s clinical practice. He acknowledges the necessity of the dynamic point of view and even cites the relevant aperçu from Freud. To simply present patients with accurate information about the content of their unconscious without addressing the psychodynamics of their resistances, Freud wryly observes, would “have as much influence on the symptoms of nervous illness as a distribution of menu-cards in a time of famine has upon hunger” (Freud 1910: 225). Habermas also recognizes that the force of the defenses and resistances encountered in the clinical setting requires that one posit a force-like, which is to say, a nature-like (naturwüchsig), phenomenon at work in the human psyche. As a result, to apprehend these phenomena theoretically, psychoanalysis must, in addition to hermeneutical concepts, employ causal-explanatory ones similar to those used in the natural sciences. Indeed, these considerations lead the anti-positivist Habermas to observe that Freud’s scientific self-understanding is not “entirely unfounded” (Habermas 1971:214).

But the linguistifying imperatives of his program cause Habermas to undo his correct observations concerning Freud’s clinical practice. In his theoretical reflections on those practices—in his metapsychology, as it were—Habermas equates repression with excommunication. Developmentally, he argues, repression arises in situations where children feel it is too dangerous to express certain wishes publicly, that is, in the intersubjective grammar of ordinary language (secondary processes). Because of the weakness of their egos and the superior power of the parental figures populating their environment, children are compelled to repress those wishes. They do this by excommunicating them from the public domain—including the internal public domain of consciousness—and banishing them to the private realm that, for Habermas, comprises the unconscious. The excommunication is accomplished by de-grammaticizing those dangerous wishes. Their representations are thereby expelled from the grammar of ordinary language and relocated in the de-grammaticized realm of the unconscious. (The alogical mentation of the unconscious is the way that Habermas understands primary processes.)

Habermas’s argument for the claim that repression is an entirely intralinguistic affair, consisting in the excommunication of forbidden ideas from the intersubjective realm of ordinary language, borders on a tautology. From the fact that repression can be reversed through the talking cure, he wants to infer that it was a purely linguistic process to begin with. But as we have seen in his discussion of clinical practice, he acknowledges that the undoing of repression is more than an interpretative enterprise. It also involves the force-like phenomena of resistance that must be opposed with the counterforce deployed by clinical technique.

Habermas denies a canonical distinction of Freudian psychoanalysis: “The distinction between word-presentations and symbolic ideas,” he declares ex cathedra, “is problematic,” and “the assumption of a nonlinguistic substratum, in which these ideas severed from language are ‘carried out,’ is unsatisfactory” (Habermas 1971: 241; Whitebook 1996: 179–196). The distinction between word-presentations and thing-presentations, however, is a linchpin for Freud’s entire construction. It is intended to mark the difference between conscious, rational, and what one may call diurnal thought and a radically different form of archaic mental functioning—the language of the night.

And it is also meant to mark the essential division of the self. To deny the existence of a “nonlinguistic” unconscious and to redefine it as merely protolinguistic—which means it can be translated into consciousness without the special effort described required by psychoanalysis—is to deny the radical alterity of the ego’s “internal foreign territory” and to substantially soften the essentially divided and conflicted nature of the self (Freud 1933: 57). It is also to substantially domesticate the Freudian project. Furthermore, this is one symptom of the general difficulty Habermas has accommodating the “nonlinguistic”—the “nonconceptual,” as Adorno calls it—in his theory.
Habermas’s compulsion to think everything in terms of language is so strong that his own position ends up as a variant of linguistic monism that is difficult to distinguish from the Gadamerian hermeneutics he claimed to oppose (Habermas 1980; Lafont: 55–124). The thesis that repression is a purely linguistic affair ipso facto excludes the extralinguistic, that is, the extralinguistic forces that act on language and distort it. And it also leaves out the body, for, as we have seen, the body is the source of the forces that impinge on the psyche and “mutilate” its symbolic texts. Indeed, for Freud, the thing-representations of the unconscious are the mental representations of somatic forces that lie just on the other side of the frontier separating soma and psyche.

A political motive also leads Habermas to reject the distinction between word-representations and thing-representations. It is based on a mistaken presupposition that he shares with many thinkers on the left: namely, that to defend a progressive position one must maintain it is society or language all the way down—that “the self is socially constituted through and through” (Habermas 1992: 183). Given the reactionary uses for which biology has often been employed in discussions of race and gender—epitomized in the slogan “biology is destiny”—one can understand the skepticism towards it among progressives. Nevertheless, as Jean Laplanche has pointed out, sociologism is every bit as much in error as biologism, and both forms of one-sidedness must be avoided (Laplanche 1989: 17ff).

The linguistic strain and the transcendental strain converged in Habermas’s theory and steadily moved him away from the psychoanalytic materialism he had flirted with in Knowledge and Human Interests. The idea of systematically distorted communication that Habermas introduced to elucidate Freud’s theory of neurosis funneled his thinking into the increasingly transcendental channel that he followed for the remainder of his career. The concept of systematically distorted communication can be compared to Descartes’s notion of totalized delusion, resulting from the machinations of a malevolent genius, that the founder of modern philosophy employed in his philosophical construction. And just as Descartes required an Archimedean point outside the totalized delusory cosmos, so Habermas must locate a standpoint outside the structure of systematically distorted communication. On purely logical grounds, systematically distorted communication requires a concept of undistorted communication from which its distortions can be recognized as distortions and corrected. As Habermas observes,

If the interpretation I have suggested is true, the psychoanalyst must have a 'prenotion', or rough (sic) understanding, of the structure of undistorted ordinary-language communication in order to be able at all to trace systematic distortions of language back to a confusion of two developmentally distinct stages of prelinguistic and linguistic organization.

(Habermas 1975: 184)

To elucidate the notion of systematically distorted communication, Habermas, in the wake of Knowledge and Human Interests, posited the notion of an ideal speech situation. It consisted in a counterfactual, distortion-free location from which the systematic distortions of actual communication can be illuminated as distorted.

The postulation of an ideal speech situation represented the first of many attempts in which Habermas sought to delineate a (quasi)-transcendental standpoint to ground his position while avoiding the pitfalls of a full-blown transcendental theory. It is often said that Aristotle is the philosopher of the equivocal, of the “in some sense,” and what one makes of Aristotle often depends on what one makes of his notion of the equivocal. Something similar can be said of Habermas. At different points in the development of his theory, he has employed prefixes like “quasi-,” “soft-,” or “post-” to characterize his brand of modified
transcendental theorizing. How the success of Habermas’s philosophical program as a whole is evaluated depends in no small part on what one makes of his use of these prefixes. Are they question-begging devices, or do they do the conceptual work he claims they do?

Habermas maintains that he has de-transcendentalized his position by formulating it in terms of the philosophy of language rather than of the philosophy of consciousness. But he fails to recognize a fundamental point: his linguistically formulated “quasi”-transcendental position remains every bit as much an instance of what Adorno calls “constitutive subjectivity” as Kant’s paradigmatic rendering of transcendental philosophy that was formulated in terms of the philosophy of consciousness (Adorno 1973: xx). Transcendental intersubjectivity is still transcendental subjectivity. The only difference is that the subject is plural rather than singular. One might say that Habermas’s position is one of “constitutive intersubjectivity,” and as such, it not only retains some of the fundamental difficulties with transcendental philosophy but also hypostatizes the “primacy of language” over the “primacy of the object,” which, as we saw, was Adorno’s way of referring to materialism.

In the same vein, Habermas’s transcendental quest not only led him away from Freud in general but also resulted in one particular consequence: all references to the body virtually disappeared from his thinking. Because Habermas’s “investigation of the basic structures of intersubjectivity is directed exclusively to an analysis of rules of speech,” Axel Honneth observes, “the bodily dimension of social action no longer comes into view.” Consequently, “the human body, whose historical fate Adorno [and Horkheimer] had drawn into the center of their investigation… loses all value within critical social theory” (Honneth 1991: 281).

Axel Honneth and Joel Whitebook

In the third generation of the Frankfurt School, Axel Honneth and I have continued the attempt to integrate psychoanalysis and Critical Theory (Honneth 1996: 92–237, 2012: 101–231; Honneth and Whitebook 2016; Whitebook 1996, 2004, 2017). However, despite the fact that we have both drawn on the preoedipal turn in psychoanalysis, our positions differ in substantial ways. For Honneth, psychoanalysis plays a subsidiary role and is only one element of his larger theory of recognition. Moreover, he has moved in the direction of relational psychoanalysis, which, he believes, avoids the putative biologist and anthropological pessimism of Freudian drive theory and provides support for his intersubjectivist position. For me, on the other hand, psychoanalysis does not only retain a central role in my thinking, but I have also remained closer to the classical Freudian position and the way in which the first generation appropriated it.

Perhaps the major difference in our positions is this. Honneth, like many other progressives who have taken up psychoanalysis, has turned to infant research and the relational school to elucidate the pro-social forces in psychic life and combat Freud’s postulation of “primary mutual hostility [between] human beings” (Freud 1927: 112). I too want to do justice to the pro-social aspects of our psychological inheritance, which, to be sure, were often overlooked in the Freudian tradition. I do not want to accomplish this, however, by minimizing the antisocial forces—most notably, destructiveness and omnipotence—that are also part of that same inheritance. In my opinion, Honneth, no less than Habermas, is guilty of that mistake. The task of accurately elucidating the relation between the pro-social and antisocial forces inherent in the human psyche, as I see it, is located high on the contemporary psychoanalytic agenda.

Hegel, the philosopher of the World Spirit and Donald Winnicott, the theorist of the teddy bear, may strike one as an unlikely twosome. Nevertheless, as Jessica Benjamin had done before him, Honneth brings the two thinkers together in an attempt to develop his version of Critical Theory (Benjamin 1988). He sees their convergence as consisting in the
fact that both thinkers wanted to overcome a monadic starting point and maintained that the self is a product of interaction. Thus, Hegel's way of exiting the philosophy of consciousness was to introduce the struggle for recognition. And Winnicott—who famously stated that "there is no such thing as baby without a mother"—attempted to overcome Freud's one-person psychology, which began with primary narcissism, by introducing the notion of transitional phenomena (Winnicott 1960: 587, n. 1).

In turning to the relational analysts, however, Honneth inherited three difficulties that are characteristic of their position. First, he tends to share their implicit and erroneous assumption that to demonstrate that the self is a product of interaction—a claim that nobody would deny today—is to demonstrate that the self is *ipso facto* sociable (Whitebook 2008: 382). Second, like the Freud Left tradition in general, he tends to assume that antisocial phenomena like destructiveness and omnipotence are not intrinsic features of psychic life but are reactive, that is, the result of environmental failure. The implication is that they could be avoided through better familial arrangements and child-rearing practices. And third, like the relational analysts, he tends to make selective use of Winnicott. It is true that Winnicott is a preeminent two-person psychologist and that with his theory of transitional phenomena, he has made an essential contribution to the field. But it is also true that the British analyst posits a state of omnipotence—of complete "illusionment"—at the beginning of life and argues the mother's task is to disillusion the infant. Indeed, the whole purpose of the transitional object is to make that disillusionment possible. The notion of transitional phenomena would not make sense without the assumption of an original state of omnipotence. By minimizing or denying the role of omnipotence in psychic life, Honneth provides us with an overly socialized account of the human animal, and, despite his differences with Habermas, also, domesticates psychoanalytic theory (Honneth and Whitebook 2016: 176).

In my estimate, in order to advance the integration of psychoanalysis and Critical Theory, three difficulties have to be avoided: Adorno and Horkheimer's impasse and political quietism, Marcuse's utopianism, and Habermas's domestication of psychoanalysis, which excluded the body and denied the radical alterity of the unconscious. My program has been to draw on the work of the psychoanalyst Hans Loewald and the philosopher, psychoanalyst, and social theorist Cornelius Castoriadis, to return to Horkheimer and Adorno's notion of "the remembrance of nature within the subject" in an attempt to provide it with content (Castoriadis 1984: 3–118, 1987: 101–114 and 273–339; Loewald 2000).

Before pursuing that program, however, a preliminary task was in order: Horkheimer and Adorno's (as well as Marcuse's) notion of a totally administered world has to be contested. I agree with Habermas that the claim of totalized untruth is not only theoretically untenable but that it also denies the very real empirical advances in individual freedom, morality, legality, and democracy that have been achieved in modernity.

Once the concept of a totally administered world has become cleared away, it becomes possible to return to another of Adorno's concepts: the nonviolent togetherness of the manifold. As we saw, because of his claim that "the whole is the false," Adorno prohibited himself from advancing any positive formulations concerning the individual or society (Adorno 2006: 50). He maintained that, in an untrue world, any such formulation necessarily constitutes false reconciliation. But as we also saw, there was one place where Adorno allowed himself to relax this prohibition: that is, with regard to truly advanced works of art. In works of Arnold Schoenberg or Samuel Beckett, for example, Adorno maintained that a new form of the non-reified synthesis of the manifold could be observed, and that it constituted an alternative to the forced integration that characterizes instrumental reason.

Where Adorno stopped at this point, Albrecht Wellmer did not. He extended Adorno's analysis, speculating that the form of non-reifying integration observable in the advanced work of art might provide a glimpse into the mode of social integration that would obtain in
an emancipated society (Wellmer 1985: 48, 2001a: 63, 2001b: 14; Whitebook 2004: 57–80). This, however, was the point at which Wellmer brought his investigation to a halt. He did not attempt to extend his analysis to a consideration of the modes of psychological synthesis—of the integration the self—that might obtain in a free society.

And this became my point of departure. (It should be pointed out that the new formations of post-conventional identity and the “neosexualities” that emerged from the movements of the 1960s provided the sociocultural context for his analysis [McDougall 2103: Chapter 11]). I drew on the preoedipal turn in psychoanalysis, the feminist critique of the field, infant research, and attachment theory to contest the official Freudian, patricentric, and Oedipal conception of maturity—which was seen as connected with the classical bourgeois individual and its supposed counterpart the classical neurotic.

To be sure, there are “unofficial” countervailing tendencies in Freud’s thinking. But his “official” Oedipal notion of “maturity,” that is to say, of optimal development, consists in what Castoriadis has called a “power grab,” in which the more “advanced” strata of the psyche dominate the more “primitive”—the ego dominates the id, consciousness dominates the unconscious, realistic thinking dominates fantasy thinking, cognition dominates affect, activity dominates passivity, and the civilized part of the personality dominates unconscious-instinctual life (Castoriadis 1987: 104; Whitebook 2017). Indeed, Freud’s official notion of maturity led to one of his more objectionable formulations where he likened the work of analysis (and the work of civilization) to “the draining of the Zuider Zee.” On this view, maturity consists in a state where all the “primitive” sludge of inner nature had been dredged out of mental life (Freud 1933: 80).

Like Loewald and Castoriadis, I reject Freud’s “official” conception of maturity and attempt to provide an alternative conception of a desirable integration of the psyche, that is, of the felicitous togetherness of the psychic manifold. Maturity must no longer to be understood as the domination of the supposedly more advanced strata of the psyche over the supposedly more archaic. Rather, it must be reconceptualized, as Castoriadis observes, as involving “another relation between” them (Castoriadis 1987: 104). Likewise, Loewald maintains that “the so-called fully developed, mature ego is not one that has become fixated at the presumably highest or latest stages of development, having left the other behind it.” Instead, it is one that “integrates its reality in such a way that the earlier and deeper levels of ego-reality integration remain alive as dynamic sources of higher organization” (Loewald 2000: 20).

What is more, this form of psychic integration is not, Castoriadis argues, “an attained state” but, an ongoing “active situation,” in which the individual is “unceasingly involved in the movement of taking up again” the contents of inner nature and reworking them into richer and more differentiated synthetic configurations. In other words, it does not comprise a state of “awareness’ achieved once and for all,” in which the ego has established its dominance over unconscious-instinctual life. The goal, rather, is to institute another relation between the conscious and the unconscious, between lucidity and the function of the imaginary... another attitude of the subject with respect to himself or herself, in a profound modification of the activity-passivity mix, of the sign under which this takes place, of the respective place of the two elements that compose it.

(Fractoriadis 1987: 104)

Far from constituting the “dictatorship of reason” that Freud unfortunately advocated at one point, what is being suggested is a less violent organization of the psyche, that is, a more propitious integration the psychic manifold (Freud 1933: 215). And this active form of integrating the self can be understood as a living and ongoing remembrance of “nature within the subject.”
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Further Reading


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