**ALBRECHT WELLMER Critical theory of society\* (1969)**

\* From Critical Theory of Society by Albrecht Wellmer. Continuum, New York, 1971, pp. 127–135.

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I have attempted, in conjunction with the previous criticism of Marx, to indicate

once more the historical background against which Western European intellectuals

have tried since the twenties to bring an ‘unmodified’ Marx into currency again, in

contrast to ossified official Party discussion. Since then, ‘critical Marxism’ has

become a privileged possession of radical intellectuals, at first in the capitalist countries

and, since the end of World War II, to an increasing extent in the socialist

countries too. The isolation of this critical Marxism from political praxis has begun to

give way only in the last few years. One characteristic seems to be common despite all

fundamental differences, from Korsch, the philosophers of the Frankfurt School,

Sartre and Marcuse, to the theoreticians of the Marxism of Warsaw, Prague and

Zagreb: that, as the expression of oppositionist tendencies, it is required implicitly or

explicitly to oppose the objectivistic trends of Marx’s philosophy of history; that it

espouses the claims of individuals to autonomy and happiness as against the historically

effective tendencies to the totalization of technical and bureaucratic rationality;

that (here quite un-Marxist) it espouses ‘morality’ as against the ‘course of the world.’

This post-revolutionary critical Marxism has as yet led to no theory that (in regard to

historical concretion and empirical contents) can be put side by side with that of

Marx. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, it is yet another confirmation of the need for an

ideology-critical examination of Marx’s theory itself, which (with the acumen of the

conservative) Hans Freyer expressed forty years ago. In Marx’s intensification of

‘Hegel’s ethics as naturalism,’ and in his turning of the ‘ “necessity of the cause,” that

is, the necessity of reason, into the causal mechanism of social movement’ Freyer

hears the call-sign of an age which ‘applied all forms of thought, particularly those

inherited from German idealism (having wrested them into a naturalistic shape), to all

areas of reality, even to social facts and the forms of thought proper to the physical

sciences.’ However overstated this criticism may be, the ‘possibility of establishing a

just society’ is in fact a prejudgement that puts Marxist theory (to a greater extent

than its creators would have wished) in line with the other great sociological ‘draft

theories’ of the nineteenth century – but now in a negative sense: ‘As every social

reality is, so it thinks.’

I shall now return to the Frankfurt School’s critique of positivism and make use of

these last insights. At the beginning of this essay, I presented the early Horkheimer’s

theory, corresponding to the contemporary self-conception of Marxist intellectuals,

from the viewpoint of a return to the ‘authentic,’ ‘dialectical’ Marx. It is now evident

that this return was already a wholly critical one. Horkheimer’s criticism of capitalist

society is already fundamentally a ‘critique of instrumental reason’; the instrumentalization

of reason, which Horkheimer observed in bourgeois science, is perceived to be

the interdiction of reason in view of the increasingly universal growth of conditions of

domination, and the exchange principle of bourgeois society is interpreted as the

fullest expression of this instrumentalized reason. Already implicit here is a criticism

of the objectivistic tendencies of Marx’s conception of revolution; it appears in the

distinction between different forms of revolutionary struggle, in the criticism of the

bureaucratic rigidity of the socialist movement, in the demand for the union of spontaneity

and discipline and for the anticipation of future solidarity in the organization

of the revolutionary struggle, and, finally, in the criticism of the objectivistic ‘misunderstanding’

of Marx’s theory itself. What Horkheimer still represents here as a

genuine interpretation of Marx, has already been conditioned by the insight that the

revolution has to break through a closed world of technical rationality and reified

relations, and therefore that it does not only have to carry out the laws of such a world

by means of a mere shifting of the centers of power. Even in the early Horkheimer, the

link is broken that in Marx joined the critique of political economy to the theory of

revolution. However, this is already a first step towards what proved so characteristic

of the later Frankfurt School – the displacement of the critique of political economy

by which the main component of a revolutionary theory becomes the instrument of

an ideology criticism suspicious of political practice.

In The Dialectics of Enlightenment, which Horkheimer and Adorno completed in

1944, while in exile, its authors established the consequences of their critical interpretation

of Marx and of recent historical experiences. The Dialectics of Enlightenment

is a fascinating attempt to produce a profound historico-philosophical critique of

capitalist society – so profound that it grapples both with the liberal capitalism criticized

by Marx and with its state-capitalist and state-interventionist heirs, and

incorporates them in a proficient conceptual framework. Marx saw the cause of the

reification of all social relations in the unleasing of the exchange rationality in bourgeois

society. Inasmuch as he associated this rationality with a specific form of ownership,

he saw the abrogation of this form of property as productive of a consequent

removal of reification; therefore, Horkheimer and Adorno detach the criticism of

exchange rationality from its fundamental exposition in terms of labor value in the

criticism of political economy, and translate it into a criticism of instrumental reason:

the criticism of instrumental reason replaces the criticism of political economy in

terms of trends, and the criticism of political economy becomes a criticism of

technical civilization.

The theoretical significance of this process is immense. The dialectics of alienation

and emancipation that Marx identified is now revealed in all its implications, in

such a way that the theoretical resolution of this dialectics is shown to be obstructed

by a theory of revolution on the Marxian pattern. According to Marx, the social

systems produced by men must turn into an external authority over the reified subjects,

in order to permit development of the material resources which will ultimately

allow men to make their own history with the will and consciousness of freely socialized

individuals. However, since for Marx the dialectical union of social existence and

consciousness ultimately became a unilateral determining relationship, he could

describe the history of self-sacrifice and emancipation only in accordance with that

external destiny which men were themselves preparing by building a class society; by

the same logic of self-preservation that brought men to involve themselves in this

external destiny, they must also eventually liberate themselves from it. Horkheimer

faced Marx with the other side of the picture. The external fate in which men have

had to involve themselves for the sake of emancipation from their natural corruption,

is at the same time their inner destiny; a destiny which reason sustains through its own

efforts. Ultimately, the subjects for whose sake the subjection, reification and demythization

of nature were begun, are themselves so repressed, reified and disenchanted

in self-regard, that even their emancipatory efforts become the contrary: the confirmation

of the context of delusion in which they are imprisoned. The cancellation of an

animistic image of the world already saw the foundation of the dialectics of

enlightenment which, in capitalist industrial society, is taken to the point where ‘man

is anthropomorphized for man.’ ‘The ratio which supplants mimesis is not simply its

opposite. It is itself mimesis: mimesis unto death. The subjective spirit which cancels

the animation of nature, exerts power over a despiritualized nature only by imitating

its rigidity, and despiritualizing itself in turn.’

Horkheimer and Adorno (who know their Freud) emphasize that ‘the power of

control over non-human nature and over other men’ was repeatedly paid for by the

‘denial of nature in man.’ ‘This very denial, the nucleus of all civilizing rationality, is

the cancer-cell of a proliferating mythic irrationality; with the denial of nature in man,

not only the goal of the external conquest of nature, but the goal of man’s own

individual life is distorted and rendered unintelligible. As soon as man discards his

awareness that he himself is nature, all the aims for which he goes on living – social

progress, the enhancement of all material and spiritual powers, even consciousness

itself – are as nothing, and the enthroning of the means as an end (which in late

capitalism develops to a degree tantamount to open insanity) is already perceptible

even in the prehistory of subjectivity. Man’s mastery over himself, which is the basis

of his self, is almost without exception the destruction of the individual as subject,

thus negating the very purpose of that mastery.’ Admittedly, just as the productive

forces arising under the enslaving pressures of a class society are the condition for

social wealth and hence the pre-condition of a state of life without domination, so the

subjection of nature in man is the pre-condition of personal autonomy: it is part of the

mechanism of formation of an ego-consciousness. But the consequence of the worldhistorical

identity of both processes has been that the reification of individuals has

advanced to the same extent as the objectification of external nature; in the end, the

individual subjects are no longer there who alone would be able to ‘appropriate to

themselves’ the promised social wealth.

Therefore, for Horkheimer and Adorno, ‘Enlightenment’ becomes a

world-historical project of the human species, in which the species simultaneous

creates itself and threatens its own destruction; its ultimate aim is social freedom,

happiness and the independence of the individual, but its secret logic aims at the

extinction of the self-liberating subjects and the self-elevation of social bondage and

constraint. From this viewpoint, the various metamorphoses of capitalist society that

with Marx’s approach were equally incomprehensible, can now be shown to be in fact

accomplishments of the law of movement of this capitalist society – the ways in which

the law of increasing objectification is fulfilled. Odysseus and the Marquis de Sade’s

Juliette become key figures in a process of enlightenment at the self-destructive end of

which enlightenment degenerates into mass deception.

Critical theory therefore establishes, in contradistinction to Marx, that the fateful

process of ‘rationalization’ of all processes of social life does not find its preordained

end in an emancipated society, but – in accordance with its inward logic – is compelled

instead to end in the opposite of emancipation: in the subjection of men, too, to

the domination over nature that they themselves have achieved. But then ‘revolution’

is no longer conceivable as the conscious and collective fulfillment of an objectifiable

historical necessity. ‘Revolution’ in the sense of a liberation from the natural history of

man is far more something which results from an enlightenment of enlightened reason

about its own nature – and that something is the breakingthrough of the dialectics

of enlightenment of which revolutions to date were mere blind agents.

This radicalization of Marx’s philosophy of history, by means of which (a long

way from Marx’s ‘technical humanism’ [cf. Klages]) the unleashing of technical

rationality is perceived to be the most decisive of all forms of domination of men by

men, anticipates some of the basic ideas of Marcuse. It reveals somber prospects for

reified men. For their integration into the universal context of delusion is so inclusive

that even the most serious efforts of liberation run the danger of confirming and

stabilizing the existing power structure. The possibility of a ‘praxis that will bring

about a revolutionary transformation’ therefore depends on the self-abandonment of

the enlightenment in its ‘positivistic aspect’ being comprehended appropriately, and

on thought reaching enlightenment about itself when it addresses itself to the domination

in itself that is at the same time ‘nature unreconciled.’ Only this kind of selfconscious

thought, which was from the start the only form in which enlightenment

was opposed to domination, Horkheimer and Adorno believe has the power to break

through that ‘necessity’ which socialism prematurely glorified as the ‘guarantor of

freedom to come.’ Critical theory therefore remains the pioneer and conscience of a

revolutionary, transforming praxis. But the future subjects of that praxis are no longer

to be discerned so simply; the possibility of their existing is dependent solely on the

‘intransigence of theory in regard to the lack of consciousness which allows society to

adopt an inflexible pattern of thought.’ With a resignation born of the experience of

insanity systematized, the authors of The Dialectics of Enlightenment come finally to the

question of the very possibility of enlightenment: ‘If it is possible today to speak to

anyone [in this regard], then we pass on the responsibility not to the so-called masses,

and not to the individual (who is powerless) but to an imaginary witness – lest it

disappear with us entirely.’

The Dialectics of Enlightenment has a key position in regard to the later development

of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. Attention to the basic ideas of

these ‘philosophical fragments’ (the sub-title of the book) should help in further

elucidation of the problem upon which my meta-theoretical discussion up to now has

centered: the question of the mutual relationship of ‘science’ and ‘criticism.’ Adorno

andHorkheimer take seriously the claim of Marx’s theory to the status of ideology

criticism; as against Marx’s scientistic self-misconception they rely on his declared

intention to reveal behind the mere ‘apparent forms’ of capitalist commodity-society

its ‘essential nature’ – which means too, its ‘unnatural essence.’ This insistence on the

distinction between essence and appearance is equally an insistence on the ‘dual

nature’ of society and sociology, which positivism denies. Adorno remarked on this

again in one of his last essays: ‘Sociology enjoys a dual nature: in it the subject of all

knowledge, society, [. . .] is simultaneously the object. Society is subjective because it

refers back to the men who form it, and also because it refers its principles of organization

back to subjective consciousness. [. . .] It is objective, because by reason of its

supporting structure its own subjectivity remains unintelligible to it, because it has no

total subject and through its organization prevents one from being established. However,

a dual nature of this kind modifies the attitude of socio-scientific knowledge to its

object – a fact that positivism does not acknowledge. It treats society, potentially the

self-determining subject, unceremoniously as if it were an object to be determined

from without.’ In this way, the practical core of the theory of science controversy

between ‘traditional’ and ‘critical’ theory, to which the early Horkheimer had already

referred, is revealed anew: Critical social theory lives by the anticipation of a ‘total

social subject’; only on the basis of this anticipation is it able to conceive the apparent

forms of a social disorder or ‘unnatural essence’ of society; the validity of its findings is

bound up with the efficacy of a liberating interest in cognition – in knowing. Whether

sociology ‘as science is to accept society in the particular form in which it functions in

any given case, as it has been traditionally represented as doing from Comte to Talcott

Parsons, or whether – from the basis of social experience – it strives for the transformation

of its fundamental structures, determines scientific theory in all categories and is

therefore scarcely to be decided in terms of scientific theory.’

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