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ARGUING FOR CLASSICAL CRITICAL THEORY

ABSTRACT

In my view, making the case for a specific interpretation of Critical Theory is problematic.¹ Although the term has a prestigious origin stemming from Horkheimer's 1937 paper, *Traditional and Critical Theory*,² given during his term as Director of the Institute for Social Research at Frankfurt University and generating the enthusiasm of its members, the term and the movement associated would be defined and radically redefined not only by subsequent generations but by its very author. One of the merits of the book under discussion is that even before the first chapter an 'Interlude' is presented entitled *Arguing for Classical Critical Theory* signifying to the reader that Horkheimer got it right when he defined the subject and that it is possible to return to that particular definition after 83 years. This paper challenges Professor Sørensen's claims for the restoration of classical Critical Theory on three levels: the scientific, the historical and the political level.

KEYWORDS

critical theory,
Horkheimer, science,
history, democracy

A. The Case for Critical Theory as Science³

When Horkheimer defined Critical Theory in the 1937 article his intention was to avoid the pitfalls of a Marxian orthodoxy that had defined the Marxian heritage both within the newly founded Institute for Social Research and in other parts of the world. The idea was to argue for Critical Theory as a science. Of course, Marxism had been associated with science before this academic institute was founded but Horkheimer defined it from an epistemological point of view, allying it with the tradition of the theory of knowledge as it was carried down from the German enlightenment. As the article illustrates he attempts to dissociate his definition from empirical science by differentiating his understanding of science from the tradition inherited from Descartes. However, in attempting to free the Marxist heritage from a rank empiricism he included basic Marxian categories as the foundation of scientific understanding. This was problematic

1 See my essay in Rasmussen: 1996: 11–38.

2 Horkheimer 1972: 188–243.

3 See the section entitled, "Interlude: Arguing for Classical Critical Theory: Horkheimer, Marcuse et al." in Sørensen 2019: 24–83. My comments will be limited to this section of the book.

from two points of view. On the one hand it was not absolutely certain that Marx's thesis regarding the forces and relations of production could be justified as the foundational insight given to any definition of science. Beyond that, the self-evident character of basic Marxian categories had begun to dissolve in the course of contemporary events. As a consequence, Horkheimer's definition of Critical Theory was problematic from the very beginning. To be sure, anyone who has been inspired by the tradition of Critical Theory has been impressed by Horkheimer's attempt because it tried to put Critical Theory and the Marxian heritage that it represented on a firm foundation. Actually one could argue that it was this very attempt that gave life to Critical Theory as it manifested itself in its various stages of development, as is clear from those representatives of the second and third generations of Critical Theory who become part of the book's argument. This dynamic explains Horkheimer's departure from an emphasis on science in his turn towards instrumental reason under the influence of Max Weber and the writing of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* with his colleague Adorno under the influence of Nietzsche. Although I cannot go into a detailed analysis of this process at this point, clearly, they gave up on trying to ground Critical Theory in science. There are at least two reasons for this: first, the so-called scientific principles underlying a view of science informed by Marx were no longer self-evident and the very assurance that history would move us to a stage beyond Capitalism was less secure. However, that did not mean that Horkheimer, Adorno, and others within the Institute would give up on trying to find a foundation for Critical Theory.

Now, although I don't want to be unfair in my criticism of Professor Sørensen, it seems that his affirmation of Horkheimer's definition of Critical Theory as science, i.e., Marxist science is problematic when he states the following: "Horkheimer follows Marx in considering science as primarily societal "forces of production". As it is well known, such forces of production are always found within the totality of societal organization of production, i.e., what Marx calls the "relations of production" and the dynamics of history is due to the contradictions between these two elements" (Sørensen 2019: 30–31). I am aware that the original intention of this statement is that this definition of science should include society. However, to argue that Critical Theory should be based on what we now label as a form of economic determinism seems difficult to sustain. However, Sørensen's argument goes on to claim "Critical Theory in its most classical form basically poses as a theory of science, i.e. a normative program for multi- or cross-disciplinary social science about the modern society" (Sørensen 2019: 37). A claim that on the face of it seems quite benign until one reads further to discover the underlying dogmatic interpretation that is given to this claim. "Critical Theory is not a collection of particular critical theories, it is to be understood as *the* Critical Theory of society *per se*." (Sørensen 2019: 37) At this point I am not arguing that Horkheimer and by implication Sørensen is a rank positivist. Rather, given his Kantian background, he wrote his doctoral dissertation as well as his *Habilitationschrift* on Kant's teleological judgment, he was trying to ground Critical Theory on a firm, rational, almost

Kantian foundation. Certainly, Sørensen's argument is following in this venerable tradition. Also, I am not simply dismissing Marx's insights as positivist insights. However, from the perspective of the 21st century to make the claim that Critical Theory as science is *the* one singular theory of society, seems both naïve and difficult to sustain. Further, it became apparent shortly after the 1937 definition of Critical Theory that Marx's insights regarding both the forces and relations of production and their contradiction as force for historical change could not explain what was actually happening in society. Apparently, the conclusion they drew from this course of events was not to give up on Critical Theory but rather to give up on this definition of Critical Theory.⁴

B. The Historical Dimension

I

Given the fact that the argument for the grounding of Critical Theory on science in the strict sense in which it was presented in the 1937 paper was abandoned so quickly, I was surprised and also disappointed to discover that Professor Sørensen would more or less discard the historical development of Critical Theory in order to return to its original definition as science. I realize there are some exceptions to this because he does affirm a part of Habermas's program and he does affirm the development of Critical Theory by Herbert Marcuse. However, on the basis of an argument for not getting committed to "idealist schemes of historical progression" and at the same time "open to the possibility of the realization of a just society" (Sørensen 2019: 49). Sørensen does "not think it unrealistic to leave Critical Theory where Horkheimer left it in 1937, i.e. before the outbreak of WWII and the discovery of Auschwitz et al. and only skipping the belief stemming from Marxist orthodoxy that justice can somehow be predicted or expected to be realized in some nearby future" (Sørensen 2019: 49). My first problem with this view is that it is based on an illusion in the sense that going back to the 1937 position on Critical Theory will not free one from a strong theory of historical progress. When Horkheimer affirmed Critical Theory as a scientific theory based on insights developed by Marx, those insights were in substance a theory of historical development and they were duly quoted and affirmed by Sørensen himself. History, that is the development of society, "real history" as Marx labeled it, is to be explained by the contradiction between the forces and relations of production.⁵ I agree with the proposition that there are problems with a theory of progress, but the solution does not reside in going back to the 1937 paper. My solution is that, rather than going backwards, one should go forward to the democratization of Critical Theory, which I will discuss when I turn to the political dimension of Critical Theory.

4 To the extent that Critical Theory is regarded as political theory, to define it as *the* theory of society avoids pluralism.

5 This notion of "real history" is developed in Marx's *The German Ideology* taken from the introduction to the section labeled "I. History" (Marx 1978: 155).

My second problem has to do with the historical explanation of the development of Critical Theory. By abandoning the history of Critical Theory on the assumption that it is possible to simply go back to the beginning one fails to understand why, for example, Horkheimer and Adorno abandoned the original project for what can be categorized as internal reasons (Williams). I have already made reference to some of those reasons associated with the historical failure of the Marxian project and the rise of fascism. However, what is really interesting is the course that took from endorsing Critical Theory on the basis of rigorous science to looking at science through the lens of instrumental reason, from enthusiastically endorsing Critical Theory as an emancipatory project to looking at history from the perspective of the eternal return of the same, and, in Adorno's case, to redirecting that very project of emancipation to the aesthetic realm. Somehow the Critical Theory project managed to stay alive even beyond its founders, which suggests that there was something more to the movement than its first epistemological move.

II

Before turning to the political dimension of my argument, allow me to consider the major figures of the second and third generations of Critical Theory, Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth. I agree with Sørensen's analysis of Habermas's first two phases, the critique of positivist science and knowledge and human interest, characterized as faithful to the epistemological foundation of Critical Theory laid down by Horkheimer.⁶ However, I disagree regarding the dismissal of Habermas's endorsement of the communicative paradigm. Sørensen rejects the paradigm shift on the grounds that the result is that he and Habermas now face each other from "incommensurable positions, which by definition cannot be bridged by any argument" (Sørensen 2019: 65). He goes on to characterize Habermas as retaining certain "positivist premises that should have been left in the past" (Sørensen 2019: 65). By implication, this argument implies that Habermas, in turning to the communicative paradigm, simply abandoned the epistemological orientation of the earlier phases of his work. I believe this is essentially wrong because it can be shown through Habermas's own self-interpretation that his work in collaboration with Karl-Otto Apel focusing on the issue of foundations grounds a certain emancipatory orientation implicit in the early foundations of Critical Theory in language. From an historical perspective the great service Habermas rendered to Critical Theory was to update it, making it palpable for the twentieth and now 21st centuries. Hence to find the emancipatory, the transformational thrust of Marx's early analysis in a certain orientation to language has been a part, but only a part of Habermas's great contribution.

6 I agree to the extent that Habermas was concerned with epistemology among other things and that he makes an epistemological argument in *Knowledge and Human Interest* when he distinguishes the three types of discourse in the appendix. I don't agree that epistemology provides the fundamental norm for the characterization of a valid Critical Theory.

C. The Political Dimension: The Question of Democracy

I know that the book as a whole has a great deal to say about politics, however, very little is said about democracy in the argument for classical Critical Theory. Yet, if we are ever going to have a just society it will only be through democratic means. Unfortunately, this failure can be traced beyond the Frankfurt School to Marx himself. Habermas was aware of this lacuna in the Marxist tradition, a tradition that included Critical Theory when he published *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, a revision of his *Habilitationschrift*. The point of the book was that the transition was made from reliance on traditional forms of governance that were based on the authority of inherited traditions to the emergence of a new form of authority based on public opinion. If there was ever a transformational moment in the history of modern politics it was simultaneous with the emergence of a public sphere. Here, the problem with the argument is not what is said but what is unsaid. In other words, by making the argument that the force and significance of Critical Theory is to be associated with the 1937 position is to omit any consideration of democracy.

There is a second problem with the confining of Habermas to the two stages of development, namely, the critique of positivism and knowledge and human interest that is to overlook what may be regarded as the most important contribution to Critical Theory, *Between Facts and Norms*. To be sure, Sørensen does mention *Between Facts and Norms* in a somewhat positive light suggesting that it corrects an earlier problem with regard to “lumping together capitalist economy and the state under the heading ‘the system’ [...]” (Sørensen 2019: 67), an argument which in the context of the numerous critiques of Habermas’s distinction between system and lifeworld has merit. However, what is overlooked is the contribution regarding the development of law and democracy that the book makes to Critical Theory in general. Specifically, the thesis regarding the co-originality of private and public autonomy speaks to the critique of traditional theory implicit in Horkheimer’s 1937 essay by showing that private autonomy is only possible on the basis of public autonomy, or to put it in Horkheimer’s terms, traditional theory is only possible on the basis of critical theory.

Under Sørensen’s normative scrutiny Axel Honneth, compared to Habermas, fails completely because he committed the original sin of taking the first step in a program that involves the affirmation of the communicative paradigm. Further, when Honneth affirms a program of social philosophy he abandons the scientific standards established by Horkheimer in that early definition of Critical Theory. Frankly, I think the contribution of Honneth’s work to Critical Theory has been to re-introduce the Hegelian concepts of recognition and alienation. One wonders why they are not discussed in the book under consideration.

Conclusion

Finally, we who have labored in the fields of Critical Theory have come to many different conclusions. Whereas Professor Sørensen has stated his desire to reconstruct the very beginnings of Critical Theory I have wanted to follow that tradition to its more current manifestations. To me that means that Critical Theory, a certain formation of which began in Frankfurt, continues to this day as a living tradition that can be affirmed through its various manifestations. One of the conclusions to be drawn from this statement is that although I have been critical of Professor Sørensen's presentation, I do regard it as legitimate. My own analysis has been limited by its confinement to only one argument in a book devoted to political economy, dialectics with a final chapter that celebrates the work of Herbert Marcuse. With Marcuse the argument is less about an emphasis on epistemology and more on the achievement of a reasonable society. In the end I share the hope for the latter.

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Argumentovanje u prilog klasičnoj kritičkoj teoriji

Apstrakt:

Prema mom shvatanju, zastupanje jedne specifične interpretacije kritičke teorije je problematično. Iako ime kritička teorija ima prestižno poreklo vezano za Horkhajmerov rad iz 1937 *Tradicionalna i kritička teorija*, ime koje je dato tokom njegovog mandata kao direktora Instituta za društvena istraživanja Univerziteta u Frankfurtu, i koje je bilo entuzijastično prihvaćeno od strane članova Instituta, samo ime i pokret vezan za njega će biti radikalno redefinisani, ne samo od strane narednih generacija već i samog autora. Jedna od prednosti knjige o kojoj se ovde diskutuje je da čak i pre prvog poglavlja postoji 'interludijum' sa naslovom *Argumentovanje u prilog klasičnoj kritičkoj teoriji* koje čitaocu sugerise da je Horkhajmer na ispravan način definisao kritičku teoriju i da je moguće vratiti se toj definiciji posle 83 godine. U ovom tekstu preispitujem Serensenove pokušaje restauracije klasične kritičke teorije an tri nivoa: nivou nauke, istorije i politike.

Ključne reči: kritička teorija, Horkhajmer, nauka, historija, demokratija