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Philosophy and Critical Theory

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From the beginning, the Critical Theory of society was constantly involved in philosophical as well as social issues and controversies. At the time of its origin, in the thirties and forties of the nineteenth century, philosophy was the most advanced form of consciousness, and by comparison real conditions in Germany were backward. Criticism of the established order there began as a critique of that consciousness, because otherwise it would have confronted its object at an earlier and less advanced historical stage than that which had already attained reality in countries outside Germany. Once Critical Theory had recognized the responsibility of economic conditions for the totality of the established world and comprehended the social framework in which reality was organized, philosophy became superfluous as an independent scientific discipline dealing with the structure of reality. Furthermore, problems bearing on the potentialities of man and of reason could now be approached from the standpoint of economics.

Philosophy thus appears within the economic concepts of materialist theory, each of which is more than an economic concept of the sort employed by the academic discipline of economics. It is due more to the theory's claim to explain the totality of man and his world in terms of his social being. Yet it would be false on that account to reduce these concepts to philosophical ones. To the contrary, the philosophical contents relevant to the theory are to be deduced from the economic structure. They refer to conditions that, when forgotten, threaten the theory as a whole.

In the conviction of its founders, the Critical Theory of society is essentially linked with materialism. This does not mean that it thereby sets itself up as a philosophical system in opposition to other philosophical systems. The theory of society is an economic, not a philosophical,

system. There are two basic elements linking materialism to correct social theory: concern with human happiness, and the conviction that it can be attained only through a transformation of the material conditions of existence. The actual course of the transformation and the fundamental measures to be taken in order to arrive at a rational organization of society are prescribed by analysis of economic and political conditions in the given historical situation. The subsequent construction of the new society cannot be the object of theory, for it is to occur as the free creation of the liberated individuals. When Reason has been realized as the rational organization of mankind, philosophy is left without an object. For philosophy, to the extent that it has been, up to the present, more than an occupation or a discipline within the given division of labor, has drawn its life from reason's not yet being reality.

Reason is the fundamental category of philosophical thought, the only one by means of which it has bound itself to human destiny. Philosophy wanted to discover the ultimate and most general grounds of Being. Under the name of reason it conceived the idea of an authentic Being in which all significant antitheses (of subject and object, essence and appearance, thought and being) were reconciled. Connected with this idea was the conviction that what exists is not immediately and already rational but must rather be brought to reason. Reason represents the highest potentiality of man and of existence; the two belong together. For when reason is accorded the status of substance, this means that at its highest level, as authentic reality, the world no longer stands opposed to the rational thought of men as mere material objectivity (*Gegenständlichkeit*). Rather, it is now comprehended by thought and defined as concept (*Begriff*). That is, the external, antithetical character of material objectivity is overcome in a process through which the identity of subject and object is established as the rational, conceptual structure that is common to both. In its structure the world is considered accessible to reason, dependent on it, and dominated by it. In this form philosophy is idealism; it subsumes being under thought. But through this first thesis that made philosophy into rationalism and idealism, it became critical philosophy as well. As the given world was bound up with rational thought and, indeed, ontologically dependent on it, all that contradicted reason or was not rational was posited as something that had to be overcome. Reason was established as a critical tribunal. In the philosophy of the bourgeois era, reason took on the form of rational subjectivity. Man, the individual, was to examine and judge everything given by means of the power of his knowledge. Thus, the concept of reason contains the concept of freedom as well. For such examination and judgment would be meaningless if man were not free to act in accordance with his insight and to bring what confronts him into accordance with reason.

Philosophy teaches us that all properties of mind subsist only through freedom, that all are only means for freedom, and that all seek and produce only freedom. To speculative philosophy belongs the knowledge that freedom is that alone which is true of mind.¹

Hegel was only drawing a conclusion from the entire philosophical tradition when he identified reason and freedom. Freedom is the "formal element" of rationality, the only form in which reason can be.²

With the concept of reason as freedom, philosophy seems to reach its limit. What remains outstanding to the realization of reason is not a philosophical task. Hegel saw the history of philosophy as having reached its definitive conclusion at this point. However, this meant for mankind not a better future but the bad present that this condition perpetuates. Kant had, of course, written essays on universal history with cosmopolitan intent, and on perpetual peace. But his transcendental philosophy aroused the belief that the realization of reason through factual transformation was unnecessary, since individuals could become rational and free within the established order. In its basic concepts this philosophy fell prey to the order of the bourgeois epoch. In a world without reason, reason is only the semblance of rationality; in a state of general unfreedom, freedom is only a semblance of being free. This semblance is generated by the internalization of idealism. Reason and freedom become tasks that the individual is to fulfill within himself, and he can do so regardless of external conditions. Freedom does not contradict necessity, but, to the contrary, necessarily presupposes it. Only he is free who recognizes the necessary as necessary, thereby overcoming its mere necessity and elevating it to the sphere of reason. This is equivalent to asserting that a person born crippled, who cannot be cured at the given state of medical science, overcomes this necessity when he gives reason and freedom scope within his crippled existence, i.e., if from the start he always posits his needs, goals, and actions only as the needs, goals, and actions of a cripple. Idealist rationalism canceled the given antithesis of freedom and necessity so that freedom can never trespass upon necessity. Rather, it modestly sets up house within necessity. Hegel once said that this suspension of necessity "transfigures necessity into freedom."³

Freedom, however, can be the truth of necessity only when necessity is already true "in itself." Idealist rationalism's attachment to the status quo is distinguished by its particular conception of the relation of freedom and necessity. This attachment is the price it had to pay for the truth of its knowledge. It is already given in the orientation of the subject of idealist philosophy. This subject is rational only insofar as it is entirely self-sufficient. All that is "other" is alien and external to this subject and as such primarily suspect. For something to be true, it must be certain.

For it to be certain, it must be posited by the subject as its own achievement. This holds equally for the *fundamentum inconcussum* of Descartes and the synthetic a priori judgments of Kant. Self-sufficiency and independence of all that is other and alien are the sole guarantee of the subject's freedom. What is not dependent on any other person or thing, what possesses itself, is free. Having excludes the other. Relating to the other in such a way that the subject really reaches and is united with it (or him) counts as loss and dependence. When Hegel ascribed to reason, as authentic reality, movement that "remains within itself," he could invoke Aristotle. From the beginning, philosophy was sure that the highest mode of being was being-within-itself (*Beisichselbstsein*).

This identity in the determination of authentic reality points to a deeper identity: property. Something is authentic when it is self-reliant, can preserve itself, and is not dependent on anything else. For idealism, this sort of being is attained when the subject has the world so that it cannot be deprived of it—that is, disposes of it omnipresently—and so that it appropriates it to the extent that in all otherness the subject is only with itself. However, the freedom attained by Descartes' *ego cogito*, Leibniz's monad, Kant's transcendental ego, Fichte's subject of original activity, and Hegel's world-spirit is not the freedom of pleasurable possession with which the Aristotelian God moved in his own happiness. It is rather the freedom of interminable, arduous labor. In the form that it assumed as authentic Being in modern philosophy, reason has to produce itself and its reality continuously in recalcitrant material. It exists only in this process. What reason is to accomplish is neither more nor less than the constitution of the world for the ego. Reason is supposed to create the universality and community in which the rational subject participates with other rational subjects. It is the basis of the possibility that, beyond the encounter of merely self-sufficient monads, a common life develops in a common world. But even this achievement does not lead beyond what already exists. It changes nothing. For the constitution of the world has always been effected prior to the actual action of the individual; thus, he can never take his most authentic achievement into his own hands. The same characteristic agitation, which fears really taking what is and making something else out of it, prevails in all aspects of this rationalism. Development is proclaimed, but true development is "not a transformation, or becoming something else."⁴ For at its conclusion it arrives at nothing that did not already exist "in itself" at the beginning. The absence of concrete development appeared to this philosophy as the greatest benefit. Precisely at its maturest stage, the inner stasis of all its apparently so dynamic concepts become manifest.

Undoubtedly, all these characteristics make idealist rationalism a bourgeois philosophy. And yet, merely on account of the single concept of

reason, it is more than ideology, and in devoting oneself to it one does more than struggle against ideology. The concept of ideology has meaning only when oriented to the interest of theory in the transformation of the social structure. Neither a sociological nor a philosophical but rather a political concept, it considers a doctrine in relation not to the social conditions of its truth or to an absolute truth but rather to the interest of transformation.⁵ Countless philosophical doctrines are mere ideology and, as illusions about socially relevant factors, readily integrate themselves into the general apparatus of domination. Idealist rationalism does not belong to this class, precisely to the extent that it is really idealistic. The conception of the domination of Being by reason is, after all, not only a postulate of idealism. With a sure instinct, the authoritarian state has fought classical idealism. Rationalism saw into important features of bourgeois society: the abstract ego, abstract reason, abstract freedom. To that extent it is correct consciousness. Pure reason was conceived as reason "independent" of all experience. The empirical world appears to make reason dependent; it manifests itself to reason with the character of "foreignness" (*Fremdartigkeit*).⁶ Limiting reason to "pure" theoretical and practical achievement implies an avowal of bad facticity—but also concern with the right of the individual, with that in him which is more than "economic man," with what is left out of universal social exchange. Idealism tries to keep at least thought in a state of purity. It plays that peculiar double role of opposing both the true materialism of critical social theory and the false materialism of bourgeois practice. In idealism the individual protests the world by making both himself and the world free and rational in the realm of thought. This philosophy is in an essential sense individualistic. However, it comprehends the individual's uniqueness in terms of his self-sufficiency and "property"; all attempts to use the subject, construed in this sense, as the basis for constructing an intersubjective world have a dubious character. The alter ego always could be linked to the ego only in the abstract manner: it remained a problem of pure knowledge or pure ethics. Idealism's purity, too, is equivocal. To be sure, the highest truths of theoretical and of practical reason were to be pure and not based on facticity. But this purity could be saved only on the condition that facticity be left in impurity; the individual is surrendered to its untruth. Nevertheless, concern for the individual long kept idealism from giving its blessing to the sacrifice of the individual to the service of false collectives.

Rationalism's protest and critique remain idealistic and do not extend to the material conditions of existence. Hegel termed philosophy's abiding in the world of thought an "essential determination." Although philosophy reconciles antitheses in reason, it provides a "reconciliation not in reality, but in the world of ideas."⁷ The materialist protest and materialist critique

originated in the struggle of oppressed groups for better living conditions and remain permanently associated with the actual process of this struggle. Western philosophy had established reason as authentic reality. In the bourgeois epoch the reality of reason became the task that the free individual was to fulfill. The subject was the locus of reason and the source of the process by which objectivity was to become rational. The material conditions of life, however, allotted freedom to reason only in pure thought and pure will. But a social situation has come about in which the realization of reason no longer needs to be restricted to pure thought and will. If reason means shaping life according to men's free decision on the basis of their knowledge, then the demand for reason henceforth means the creation of a social organization in which individuals can collectively regulate their lives in accordance with their needs. With the realization of reason in such a society, philosophy would disappear. It was the task of social theory to demonstrate this possibility and lay the foundation for a transformation of the economic structure. By so doing, it could provide theoretical leadership for those strata which, by virtue of their historical situation, were to bring about the change. The interest of philosophy, concern with man, had found its new form in the interest of critical social theory. There is no philosophy alongside and outside this theory. For the philosophical construction of reason is replaced by the creation of a rational society. The philosophical ideals of a better world and of true Being are incorporated into the practical aim of struggling mankind, where they take on a human form.

What, however, if the development outlined by the theory does not occur? What if the forces that were to bring about the transformation are suppressed and appear to be defeated? Little as the theory's truth is thereby contradicted, it nevertheless appears then in a new light which illuminates new aspects and elements of its object. The new situation gives a new import to many demands and indices of the theory, whose changed function accords it in a more intensive sense the character of "critical theory."⁸ Its critique is also directed at the avoidance of its full economic and political demands by many who invoke it. This situation compels theory anew to a sharper emphasis on its concern with the potentialities of man and with the individual's freedom, happiness, and rights contained in all of its analyses. For the theory, these are exclusively potentialities of the concrete social situation. They become relevant only as economic and political questions and as such bear on human relations in the productive process, the distribution of the product of social labor, and men's active participation in the economic and political administration of the whole. The more elements of the theory become reality—not only as the old order's evolution confirms the theory's predictions, but as the transition to the new order begins—the more urgent becomes the question of what

the theory intended as its goal. For here, unlike in philosophical systems, human freedom is no phantom or arbitrary inwardness that leaves everything in the external world as it was. Rather, freedom here means a real potentiality, a social relationship on whose realization human destiny depends. At the given stage of development, the constructive character of Critical Theory emerges anew. From the beginning it did more than simply register and systematize facts. Its impulse came from the force with which it spoke against the facts and confronted bad facticity with its better potentialities. Like philosophy, it opposes making reality into a criterion in the manner of complacent positivism. But unlike philosophy, it always derives its goals only from present tendencies of the social process. Therefore, it has no fear of the utopia that the new order is denounced as being. When truth cannot be realized within the established social order, it always appears to the latter as mere utopia. This transcendence speaks not against, but for its truth. The utopian element was long the only progressive element in philosophy, as in the constructions of the best state and the highest pleasure, of perfect happiness and perpetual peace. The obstinacy that comes from adhering to truth against all appearances has given way in contemporary philosophy to whimsy and uninhibited opportunism. Critical Theory preserves obstinacy as a genuine quality of philosophical thought.

The current situation emphasizes this quality. The reverse suffered by the progressive forces took place at a stage where the economic conditions for transformation were present. The new social situation expressed in the authoritarian state could be easily comprehended and predicted by means of the concepts worked out by the theory. It was not the failure of economic concepts that provided the impetus behind the new emphasis of the theory's claim that the transformation of economic conditions involves the transformation of the entirety of human existence. This claim is directed rather against a distorted interpretation and application of economics that is found in both practice and theoretical discussion. The discussion leads back to the question: In what way is the theory more than economics? From the beginning the critique of political economy established the difference by criticizing the entirety of social existence. In a society whose totality was determined by economic relations to the extent that the uncontrolled economy controlled all human relations, even the noneconomic was contained in the economy. It appears that, if and when this control is removed, the rational organization of society toward which Critical Theory is oriented is more than a new form of economic regulation. The difference lies in the decisive factor, precisely the one that makes the society rational—the subordination of the economy to the individuals' needs. The transformation of society eliminates the original relation of substructure and superstructure. In a rational reality, the labor process

should not determine the general existence of men; to the contrary, their needs should determine the labor process. Not that the labor process is regulated in accordance with a plan, but the interest determining the regulation becomes important: it is rational only if this interest is that of the freedom and happiness of the masses. Neglect of this element despoils the theory of one of its essential characteristics. It eradicates from the image of liberated mankind the idea of happiness that was to distinguish it from all previous mankind. Without freedom and happiness in the social relations of men, even the greatest increase of production and the abolition of private property in the means of production remain infected with the old injustice.

Critical Theory has, of course, distinguished among various phases of realization and pointed out the unfreedoms and inequalities with which the new era inevitably will be burdened. Nevertheless, the transformed social existence must be determined by its ultimate goal even at its inception. In its concept of an ultimate goal, Critical Theory did not intend to replace the theological hereafter with a social one—with an ideal that appears in the new order as just another hereafter in virtue of its exclusive opposition to the beginning and its telescoping distance. By defending the endangered and victimized potentialities of man against cowardice and betrayal, Critical Theory is not to be supplemented by a philosophy. It only makes explicit what was always the foundation of its categories: the demand that through the abolition of previously existing material conditions of existence the totality of human relations be liberated. If Critical Theory, amidst today's desperation, indicates that the reality it intends must comprise the freedom and happiness of individuals, it is only following the direction given by its economic concepts. They are constructive concepts, which comprehend not only the given reality but, simultaneously, its abolition and the new reality that is to follow. In the theoretical reconstruction of the social process, the critique of current conditions and the analysis of their tendencies necessarily include future-oriented components. The transformation toward which this process tends and the existence that liberated mankind is to create for itself determine at the outset the establishment and unfolding of the first economic categories. Theory can invoke no facts in confirmation of the theoretical elements that point toward future freedom. From the viewpoint of theory, all that is already attained is given only as something threatened and in the process of disappearing; the given is a positive fact, an element of the coming society, only when it is taken into the theoretical construction as something to be transformed. This construction is neither a supplement to nor an extension of economics. It is economics itself insofar as it deals with contents that transcend the realm of established economic conditions.

Unconditional adherence to its goal, which can be attained only in social

struggle, lets theory continually confront the already attained with the not yet attained and newly threatened. The theory's interest in great philosophy is part of the same context of opposition to the established order. But Critical Theory is not concerned with the realization of ideals brought into social struggles from outside. In these struggles it identifies on one side the cause of freedom, and on the other the cause of suppression and barbarism. If the latter seems to win in reality, it might easily appear as though Critical Theory were holding up a philosophical idea against factual development and its scientific analysis. Traditional science was in fact more subject to the powers-that-be than was great philosophy. It was not in science but in philosophy that the traditional theory developed concepts oriented to the potentialities of man lying beyond his factual status. At the end of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant cites the three questions in which "all the interest" of human reason "coalesces": What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope?⁹ And in the introduction to his lectures on logic, he adds a fourth question encompassing the first three: What is man?¹⁰ The answer to this question is conceived not as the description of human nature as it is actually found to be, but rather as the demonstration of what are found to be human potentialities. In the bourgeois period, philosophy distorted the meaning of both question and answer by equating human potentialities with those that are real within the established order. That is why they could be potentialities only of pure knowledge and pure will.

The transformation of a given status is not, of course, the business of philosophy. The philosopher can only participate in social struggles insofar as he is not a professional philosopher. This "division of labor," too, results from the modern separation of the mental from the material means of production, and philosophy cannot overcome it. The abstract character of philosophical work in the past and present is rooted in the social conditions of existence. Adhering to the abstractness of philosophy is more appropriate to circumstances and closer to truth than is the pseudo-philosophical concreteness that condescends to social struggles. What is true in philosophical concepts was arrived at by abstracting from the concrete status of man and is true only in such abstraction. Reason, mind, morality, knowledge, and happiness are not only categories of bourgeois philosophy, but concerns of mankind. As such they must be preserved, if not derived anew. When Critical Theory examines the philosophical doctrines in which it was still possible to speak of man, it deals first with the camouflage and misinterpretation that characterized the discussion of man in the bourgeois period.

With this intention, several fundamental concepts of philosophy have been discussed in the journal [*Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*]: truth and verification, rationalism and irrationalism, the role of logic, metaphysics

and positivism, and the concept of essence. These were not merely analyzed sociologically, in order to correlate philosophical dogmas with social loci. Nor were specific philosophical contents "resolved" into social facts. To the extent that philosophy is more than ideology, every such attempt must come to naught. When Critical Theory comes to terms with philosophy, it is interested in the truth content of philosophical concepts and problems. It presupposes that they really contain truth. The enterprise of the sociology of knowledge, to the contrary, is occupied only with the untruths, not the truths of previous philosophy. To be sure, even the highest philosophical categories are connected with social facts, even if only with the most general fact that the struggle of man with nature has not been undertaken by mankind as a free subject, but instead has taken place only in class society. This fact comes to expression in many "ontological differences" established by philosophy. Its traces can perhaps be found even in the very forms of conceptual thought: for example, in the determination of logic as essentially the logic of predication, or judgments about given objects of which predicates are variously asserted or denied. It was dialectical logic that first pointed out the shortcomings of this interpretation of judgment: the "contingency" of predication and the "externality" of the process of judgment, which let the subject of judgment appear "outside" as selfsubsistent and the predicate "inside," as though in our heads.¹¹ Moreover, it is certainly true that many philosophical concepts are mere "foggy ideas" arising out of the domination of existence by an uncontrolled economy and, accordingly, are to be explained precisely by the material conditions of life.

But in its historical forms philosophy also contains insights into human and objective conditions whose truth points beyond previous society and thus cannot be completely reduced to it. Here belong not only the contents dealt with under such concepts as reason, mind, freedom, morality, universality, and essence, but also important achievements of epistemology, psychology, and logic. Their truth content, which surmounts their social conditioning, presupposes not an eternal consciousness that transcendently constitutes the individual consciousness of historical subjects, but only those particular historical subjects whose consciousness expresses itself in Critical Theory. It is only with and for this consciousness that the "surpassing" content becomes visible in its real truth. The truth that it recognizes in philosophy is not reducible to existing social conditions. This would be the case only in a form of existence where consciousness is no longer separated from being, enabling the rationality of thought to proceed from the rationality of social existence. Until then truth that is more than the truth of what is can be attained and intended only in opposition to established social relations. To this negative condition, at least, it is subject.

In the past, social relations concealed the meaning of truth. They formed a horizon of untruth that deprived the truth of its meaning. An example is the concept of universal consciousness, which preoccupied German idealism. It contains the problem of the relation of the subject to the totality of society: How can universality as community [*Allgemeinheit*], become the subject without abolishing individuality? The understanding that more than an epistemological or metaphysical problem is at issue here can be gained and evaluated only outside the limits of bourgeois thought. The philosophical solutions with which to resolve the problem are to be found in the history of philosophy. No sociological analysis is necessary in order to understand Kant's theory of transcendental synthesis. It embodies an epistemological truth. The interpretation given to the Kantian position by Critical Theory¹² does not affect the internal philosophical difficulty. By connecting the problem of universality of knowledge with that of society as a universal subject, it does not purport to provide a better philosophical solution. Critical Theory means to show only the specific social conditions at the root of philosophy's inability to pose the problem in a more comprehensive way, and to indicate that any other solution lay beyond that philosophy's boundaries. The untruth inherent in all transcendental treatment of the problem thus comes into philosophy "from outside"; hence, it can be overcome only outside philosophy. "Outside" does not mean that social factors affect consciousness from without as though the latter existed independently. It refers rather to a division within the social whole. Consciousness is "externally" conditioned by social existence to the very extent that in bourgeois society the social conditions of the individual are external to him and, as it were, overwhelm him from without. This externality made possible the abstract freedom of the thinking subject. Consequently, only its abolition would enable abstract freedom to disappear as part of the general transformation of the relationship between social being and consciousness.

If the theory's fundamental conception of the relation of social existence to consciousness is to be followed, this "outside" must be taken into consideration. In previous history there has been no pre-established harmony between correct thought and social being. In the bourgeois period, economic conditions determine philosophical thought insofar as it is the emancipated, self-reliant individual who thinks. In reality, he counts not in the concretion of his potentialities and needs but only in abstraction from his individuality, as the bearer of labor power, i.e., of useful functions in the process of the realization of capital. Correspondingly, he appears in philosophy only as an abstract subject, abstracted from his full humanity. If he pursues the idea of man, he must think in opposition to facticity. Wishing to conceive this idea in its philosophical purity and universality, he must abstract from the present state of affairs. This abstractness, this

radical withdrawal from the given, at least clears a path along which the individual in bourgeois society can seek the truth and adhere to what is known. Besides concreteness and facticity, the thinking subject also leaves its misery "outside." But it cannot escape from itself, for it has incorporated the monadic isolation of the bourgeois individual into its premises. The subject thinks within a horizon of untruth that bars the door to real emancipation.

This horizon explains some of the characteristic features of bourgeois philosophy. One of them affects the idea of truth itself and would seem to relativize "sociologically" all its truths from the start: the coupling of truth and certainty. As such, this connection goes all the way back to ancient philosophy. But only in the modern period has it taken on the typical form that truth must prove itself as the guaranteed property of the individual, and that this proof is considered established only if the individual can continually reproduce the truth as his own achievement. The process of knowledge is never terminated, because in every act of cognition the individual must once again re-enact the "production of the world" and the categorical organization of experience. However, the process never gets any further because the restriction of "productive" cognition to the transcendental sphere makes any new form of the world impossible. The construction of the world occurs behind the backs of the individuals; yet it is their work.

The corresponding social factors are clear. The progressive aspects of this construction of the world—namely, the foundation of knowledge on the autonomy of the individual and the idea of cognition as an act and task to be continually re-enacted—are made ineffective by the life-process of bourgeois society. But does this sociological limitation affect the true content of the construction, the essential connection of knowledge, freedom, and practice? Bourgeois society's domination reveals itself not only in the dependence of thought but also in the (abstract) independence of its contents. For this society determines consciousness such that the latter's activity and contents survive in the dimension of abstract reason; abstractness saves its truth. What is true is so only to the extent that it is not the truth about social reality. And just because it is not the latter, because it transcends this reality, it can become a matter for Critical Theory. Sociology that is interested only in the dependent and limited nature of consciousness has nothing to do with truth. Its research, useful in many ways, falsifies the interest and the goal of Critical Theory. In any case, what was linked, in past knowledge, to specific social structures disappears with them. In contrast, Critical Theory concerns itself with preventing the loss of the truths which past knowledge labored to attain.

This is not to assert the existence of eternal truths unfolding in changing historical forms of which they need only to be divested in order for

their kernel of truth to be revealed. If reason, freedom, knowledge, and happiness really are transformed from abstract concepts into reality, then they will have as much and as little in common with their previous forms as the association of free men with competitive, commodity-producing society. Of course, to the identity of the basic social structure in previous history certainly corresponds an identity of certain universal truths, whose universal character is an essential component of their truth content. The struggle of authoritarian ideology against abstract universals has clearly exhibited this. That man is a rational being, that this being requires freedom, and that happiness is his highest good are all universal propositions whose progressive impetus derives precisely from their universality. Universality gives them an almost revolutionary character, for they claim that all, and not merely this or that particular person, should be rational, free, and happy. In a society whose reality gives the lie to all these universals, philosophy cannot make them concrete. Under such conditions, adherence to universality is more important than its philosophical destruction.

Critical Theory's interest in the liberation of mankind binds it to certain ancient truths. It is at one with philosophy in maintaining that man can be more than a manipulable subject in the production process of class society. To the extent that philosophy has nevertheless made its peace with man's determination by economic conditions, it has allied itself with repression. That is the bad materialism that underlies the edifice of idealism: the consolation that in the material world everything is in order as it is. (Even when it has not been the personal conviction of the philosopher, this consolation has arisen almost automatically as part of the mode of thought of bourgeois idealism and constitutes its ultimate affinity with its time.) The other premise of this materialism is that the mind is not to make its demands in this world, but is to orient itself toward another realm that does not conflict with the material world. The materialism of bourgeois practice can quite easily come to terms with this attitude. The bad materialism of philosophy is overcome in the materialist theory of society. The latter opposes not only the production relations that gave rise to bad materialism, but every form of production that dominates man instead of being dominated by him: this idealism underlies its materialism. Its constructive concepts, too, have a residue of abstractness as long as the reality toward which they are directed is not yet given. Here, however, abstractness results not from avoiding the status quo, but from orientation toward the future status of man. It cannot be supplanted by another, correct theory of the established order (as idealist abstractness was replaced by the critique of political economy). It cannot be succeeded by a new theory, but only by rational reality itself. The abyss between rational and present reality cannot be bridged by conceptual thought. In order to retain what

is not yet present as a goal in the present, fantasy is required. The essential connection of fantasy with philosophy is evident from the function attributed to it by philosophers, especially Aristotle and Kant, under the title of "imagination." Owing to its unique capacity to "intuit" an object, though the latter be not present, and to create something new out of given material of cognition, imagination denotes a considerable degree of independence from the given, of freedom amid a world of unfreedom. In surpassing what is present, it can anticipate the future. It is true that when Kant characterizes this "fundamental faculty of the human soul" as the a priori basis of all knowledge,¹³ this restriction to the a priori diverts once again from the future to what is always past. Imagination succumbs to the general degradation of fantasy. To free it for the construction of a more beautiful and happier world remains the prerogative of children and fools. True, in fantasy one can imagine anything. But Critical Theory does not envision an endless horizon of possibilities.

The freedom of imagination disappears to the extent that real freedom becomes a real possibility. The limits of fantasy are thus no longer universal laws of essence (as the last bourgeois theory of knowledge that took seriously the meaning of fantasy so defined them¹⁴), but technical limits in the strictest sense. They are prescribed by the level of technological development. What Critical Theory is engaged in is not the depiction of a future world, although the response of fantasy to such a challenge would not perhaps be quite as absurd as we are led to believe. If fantasy were set free to answer, with precise reference to already existing technical material, the fundamental philosophical questions asked by Kant, all of sociology would be terrified at the utopian character of its answers. And yet the answers that fantasy could provide would be very close to the truth, certainly closer than those yielded by the rigorous conceptual analyses of philosophical anthropology. For it would determine what man is on the basis of what he really can be tomorrow. In replying to the question What may I hope? it would point less to eternal bliss and inner freedom than to the already possible unfolding and fulfillment of needs and wants. In a situation where such a future is a real possibility, fantasy is an important instrument in the task of continually holding the goal up to view. Fantasy does not relate to the other cognitive faculties as illusion to truth (which in fact, when it plumes itself on being the only truth, can perceive the truth of the future only as illusion). Without fantasy, all philosophical knowledge remains in the grip of the present or the past and severed from the future, which is the only link between philosophy and the real history of mankind.

Strong emphasis on the role of fantasy seems to contradict the rigorously scientific character that Critical Theory has always made a criterion of its concepts. This demand for scientific objectivity has brought materialist

theory into unusual accord with idealist rationalism. While the latter could pursue its concern with man only in abstraction from given facts, it attempted to undo this abstractness by associating itself with science. Science never seriously called use-value into question. In their anxiety about scientific objectivity, the Neo-Kantians are at one with Kant, as is Husserl with Descartes. How science was applied, whether its utility and productivity guaranteed its higher truth or were instead signs of general inhumanity—philosophy did not ask itself these questions. It was chiefly interested in the methodology of the sciences. The Critical Theory of society maintained primarily that the only task left for philosophy was elaborating the most general results of the sciences. It, too, took as its basis the viewpoint that science had sufficiently demonstrated its ability to serve the development of the productive forces and to open up new potentialities of a richer existence. But while the alliance between idealist philosophy and science was burdened from the beginning with sins engendered by the dependence of the sciences on established relations of domination, the Critical Theory of society presupposes the disengagement of science from this order. Thus, the fateful fetishism of science is avoided here in principle. But this does not exempt the theory from a constant critique of scientific aims and methods which takes into account every new social situation. Scientific objectivity as such is never a sufficient guarantee of truth, especially in a situation where the truth speaks as strongly against the facts and is as well hidden behind them as today. Scientific predictability does not coincide with the futuristic mode in which the truth exists. Even the development of the productive forces and the evolution of technology know no uninterrupted progression from the old to the new society. For here, too, man himself is to determine progress: not “socialist” man, whose spiritual and moral regeneration is supposed to constitute the basis for planning the planners (a view that overlooks that “socialist” planning presupposes the disappearance of the abstract separation both of the subject from his activity and of the subject as universal from each individual subject), but the association of those men who bring about the transformation. Since what is to become of science and technology depends on them, science and technology cannot serve *a priori* as a conceptual model for Critical Theory.

Critical Theory is, last but not least, critical of itself and of the social forces that make up its own basis. The philosophical element in the theory is a form of protest against the new “economism,” which would isolate the economic struggle and separate the economic from the political sphere. At an early stage, this view was countered with the criticism that the determining factors are the given situation of the entire society, the interrelationships of the various social strata, and relations of political power. The transformation of the economic structure must so reshape the organiza-

tion of the entire society that, with the abolition of economic antagonisms between groups and individuals, the political sphere becomes to a great extent independent and determines the development of society. With the disappearance of the state, political relations would then become, in a hitherto unknown sense, general human relations: the organization of the administration of social wealth in the interest of liberated mankind.

The materialist theory of society is originally a nineteenth-century theory. Representing its relation to rationalism as one of "inheritance," it conceived this inheritance as it manifested itself in the nineteenth century. Much has changed since then. At that time the theory had comprehended, on the deepest level, the possibility of a coming barbarity, but the latter did not appear to be as imminent as the "conservative" abolition of what the nineteenth century represented: conservative of what the culture of bourgeois society, for all its poverty and injustice, had accomplished nonetheless for the development and happiness of the individual. What had already been achieved and what still remained to be done were clear enough. The entire impetus of the theory came from this interest in the individual, and it was not necessary to discuss it philosophically. The situation of inheritance has changed in the meantime. It is not a part of the nineteenth century but authoritarian barbarity that now separates the previous reality of reason from the form intended by the theory. More and more, the culture that was to have been abolished recedes into the past. Overlaid by an actuality in which the complete sacrifice of the individual has become a pervasive and almost unquestioned fact of life, that culture has vanished to the point where studying and comprehending it is no longer a matter of spiteful pride, but of sorrow. Critical Theory must concern itself to a hitherto unknown extent with the past—precisely insofar as it is concerned with the future.

In a different form, the situation confronting the theory of society in the nineteenth century is being repeated today. Once again, real conditions fall beneath the general level of history. Fettering the productive forces and keeping down the standard of life is characteristic of even the economically most developed countries. The reflection cast by the truth of the future in the philosophy of the past provides indications of factors that point beyond today's anachronistic conditions. Thus, Critical Theory is still linked to these truths. They appear in it as part of a process: that of bringing to consciousness potentialities that have emerged within the maturing historical situation. They are preserved in the economic and political concepts of Critical Theory.

Notes

1. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, in *Werke*, 2d ed. (Berlin, 1840–47), IX, p. 22.

2. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, in *Werke*, XIII, p. 34.
3. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, par. 158, op. cit., VI, p. 310.
4. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, op. cit., p. 41.
5. See Max Horkheimer, "Ein neuer Ideologiebegriff?", *Grünbergs Archiv*, XV (1930), pp. 38–39.
6. Kant, *Nachlass Nr. 4728*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin, 1900–55), XVIII.
7. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, op. cit., p. 67.
8. See Max Horkheimer. "Traditionelle und kritische Theorie," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, VI (1937), p. 245.
9. Kant, *Werke*, ed. Ernst Cassirer (Berlin, 1911–), III, p. 540.
10. Ibid., VIII, p. 344.
11. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie*, par. 166, op. cit., p. 328.
12. See *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, VI (1937), pp. 257ff.
13. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, op. cit., p. 625.
14. Edmund Husserl, *Formale und transzendente Logik*, in *Jahrbuch für Philosophie*, X (Halle, 1929), p. 219.