

STOCKHOLM STUDIES IN POLITICS 158

Reason and Utopia

Reconsidering the Concept of Emancipation in Critical Theory

Andreas Gottardis



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“To the hope of those
without hope”

Herbert Marcuse

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Preface

After years of painstaking work, one conclusion can be drawn with some certainty: the task of writing a doctoral thesis on the subject of emancipation is a paradoxical one, not least because the accomplishment of such a task can itself be conceived of in terms of a process of emancipation. Indeed, the very essence of the research process appears to become clear only when it comes to a grinding halt – when the project that once seemed viable and exciting is turned into a source of oppression and when the very act of writing is gradually transformed into a tool of liberation.

As I argue in this book, emancipation can be viewed as an escape from the confining boundaries of a picture or perspective. As suggested by Lucio Fontana's slashes, one of which is reproduced on the cover of this work, liberation can thus be associated with the ability to expose the homogenizing tendencies in society in order to open up the possibility for alternative forms of life. However, this is not the whole story. Following Jürgen Habermas, I believe that the idea of emancipation also has to be understood as a potential inherent in everyday communicative practice. To the degree that the process of writing this book can be conceived of as a process of emancipation, I believe that it has to be understood in such way. On this account, liberation cannot be achieved alone. In other words, the completion of this work would not have been possible without the help and encouragement of a number of people.

First of all, I owe a great debt to Ulf Mörkenstam and Sofia Näsström, who have read and commented my work for many years. It is no exaggeration to say that without their critical suggestions and unflinching support I would not have been able to finish this book. It would also not have been possible without the encouragement of Bo Lindensjö, who, sadly, passed away during the course of this project. His open-mindedness and enthusiasm for different types of political theory was a great source of inspiration and contributed greatly to the intellectual and social milieu in which this book was written.

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1.

Introduction: What Does Emancipation Mean Today?

In political and social theory the idea of emancipation has typically been understood in terms of a process of rationalization involving the promotion of human rights or the historical overcoming of capitalism. One of the clearest examples of such a concept of emancipation is the freedom of slaves that followed upon the so-called Emancipation Proclamation during the American Civil War. As such, the idea of emancipation can be understood on the basis of what Immanuel Kant once described as an Enlightenment project. As ever greater sections of the population acquire civil and political rights, formerly excluded groups gain the opportunity “to make *public use* of [their own] reason in all matters” and thus to liberate themselves from their “*self-incurred immaturity*.”¹

Although the potential for emancipation may still be explained in terms of the allocation of equal political and civil rights, in contemporary political theory it is often observed that the extension of equal citizenship rights does not automatically lead to freedom and equality.² As was noted by Karl Marx, while the abolition of aristocratic privileges and the evolution of liberal rights can certainly be seen as “a big step forward,”³ it did not eliminate the exploitation of the working class. Indeed, rather the opposite was the case. Moreover, as early feminists were keen to point out, most of the fundamental civil and political rights derived from citizenship in the liberal state – the so-called rights of man – did not apply to women.⁴

In Marx’s alternative to the liberal view, he focused on the struggle for the liberation of the proletariat. This is another obvious example that comes to mind when considering the ways in which the concept of emancipation has traditionally been understood. In this version, the idea of emancipation refers

¹ Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’”, in *Political Writings*, 2nd edn, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 54-55.

² See, for example, Iris M. Young, “Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship”, in Robert E. Goodin & Philip Pettit (eds.), *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology*, Blackwell, Cambridge, Mass., 1997, pp. 256-272.

³ Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, in *Early Writings*, Penguin books, London, 1992, p. 221.

⁴ See, for example, Marion Reid, *A Plea for Women*, Farmer and Dagers, New York, 1845, Ch. 5; and Barbara Leigh Smith, *A Brief Summary in Plain Language of Some of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women: Together with a Few Observations Thereon*, Trübner & Co, London, 1969.

to a kind of freedom that goes beyond the possession of human rights. As famously argued by Marx, since the extension of equal citizenship rights inevitably results in a separation of civil society from political life, it excludes the possibility of real freedom. For this reason, political emancipation has to be distinguished from genuine human emancipation: “only when man has recognized and organized his [own forces] as *social forces* so that social force is no longer separated from him in the form of *political* force, only then will human emancipation be completed.”⁵

To be sure, even if still compelling in its devastating critique of liberalism, when presented as an alternative in its own right the Marxian view of emancipation is no less problematic.⁶ Indeed, as pointed out so well by Friedrich Nietzsche, Enlightenment ideals of emancipation like that of Marx are accompanied by a totalizing vision of reason that presupposes the abolition of power. As he put it in a characteristic passage: “everywhere people are now raving, even under scientific disguises, about coming conditions of society in which ‘the exploitative aspect’ will be removed – which sounds to me as if they promised to invent a way of life that would dispense with all organic functions.”⁷ According to Nietzsche, it is the homogenizing outcome of such a use of reason, rather than the sufferings it strives to overcome, that should be considered as oppressive, while it perverts the basic principle of life itself, namely the will to power. In this sense, Nietzsche anticipated the critique of the modern state and its normalizing features, decrying the formation of a mass society and the levelling tendencies of contemporary morality.

To the same extent as the liberal view that it seeks to replace, the Marxist idea of emancipation seems to be based on the philosophical assumption of the Enlightenment of an intimate connection between reason and freedom. From this point of view, Marx’s attempt to come up with an alternative to the liberal approach appears to be misleading and even damaging.

The liberal and Marxist standpoints dominated the discourse on emancipation for many years. Yet, it has been clear for a long time now that both conceptions of emancipation suffered from a number of limitations. Most importantly, Enlightenment notions of emancipation rested on a belief in progress that can no longer be maintained without significant qualification. The traditional view, according to which emancipation was conceived as a natural process or an evolutionary development toward a final goal, has definitely come to an end.

This point has important consequences for our conception of emancipation. The idea of emancipation used to be closely associated with the

⁵ Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, in *Early Writings*, p. 235.

⁶ As for the question of its historical realization, Marx’s conception of the liberated communist society as prefigured in the developmental tendencies of capitalist states has proved to be no less utopian than Marx’s notion of the Kingdom of God. Moreover, the normative ideal in itself has been criticized for its outmoded conception of power and for its inability to deal with questions of social and political pluralism.

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil,” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, New ed., Random House, New York, 2000, section 259, p. 393.

history of the struggle of black Americans for freedom, proletarian revolutionary action or feminist liberation movements. But what does emancipation mean today?

One possible answer to this question is provided by Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred, who, in his work *Wasáse: indigenous resurgences*,⁸ presents his recipe for the emancipation of indigenous peoples. Against the background of a 500-year history of pain, loss and oppression and in the light of the need to turn away from this legacy of colonialism, Alfred calls for a “regenerative struggle” in order to break with the Enlightenment values imposed on the *Onkwehonwe*⁹ and in the hope of recreating “the conditions of coexistence”¹⁰ between the indigenous and non-indigenous populations.

While making reference to the concept of emancipation, the above example clearly differs from traditional emancipatory theories. In contemporary social criticism, the conflict between Enlightenment thinking and Enlightenment critique has largely replaced the earlier antagonism between liberalism and Marxism. As implied in Alfred’s theory, we have to draw on elements of both traditions in order to make sense of contemporary struggles for liberation. More specifically, the urge to stop “modernity’s attempt to conquer our souls”¹¹ and thus to achieve a radical break with the established norms of present reality, is based on the assumptions of Enlightenment critique, while the vision of a peaceful coexistence can be seen as part of the Enlightenment-philosophical approach.

The difference between the two major and rival ‘schools’ of contemporary critical theory can be expressed by referring to a famous etching by Francisco Goya. The striking image, drawn from a series titled *Los Caprichos*, and dating back to 1799, shows a man sleeping at his desk, surrounded by a flock of strange bat-like creatures. The title of the etching is written on the desk: “El sueño de la razón produce monstruos.”¹² Goya’s work is interesting because of its disturbing ambiguity. For, what should we take him to be saying with this expression? Is it the “sleep of reason” or is it the “dream of reason” that produces monsters?

The first and primary reading says that when reason goes to sleep monsters are produced. This slogan of modern enlightenment is flatly contradicted by the second, counterenlightenment reading, which says that the monsters are themselves reason’s dreams. On this latter reading, reason is not simply a light opposed to the darkness of fantasy but has its own dark side.¹³

⁸ Taiaiake Alfred, “Wasáse: Indigenous Resurgences”, in Jacob T. Levy & Iris M. Young (eds.), *Colonialism and Its Legacies*, Lexington books, Lanham, 2011, pp. 79-96.

⁹ Mohawk term for “the original people”.

¹⁰ Taiaiake Alfred, “Wasáse: Indigenous Resurgences”, in Jacob T. Levy & Iris M. Young, *Colonialism and Its Legacies*, pp. 80-81.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

¹² “The sleep [or dream] of reason produces monsters.”

¹³ David C. Hoy & Thomas A. McCarthy, *Critical Theory*, Blackwell Publishers, Cambridge, Mass., USA, 1994, p. 1.

The ambivalence implied in the title of Goya's work is indicative of an ambiguity regarding the tasks of contemporary critical theory. According to one view, a critical theory should be guided by the aim to realize the normative ideals of the European Enlightenment; according to the other view, the totalizing tendencies of this project is reason enough for critique to distance itself from the Enlightenment tradition as a whole.

One of the major differences between the two modes of critique concerns the question of emancipation. Unlike the first approach, according to which the idea of emancipation is based on a concept of reason that is committed to the reconciliation of private and public autonomy, the alternative view of liberation is tied to a radical critique of reason that arguably precludes any such attempt.¹⁴ In contrast to the Enlightenment-philosophical approach, the Enlightenment-skeptical view of emancipation has to do with what Richard Rorty once referred to as "the recognition of contingency".¹⁵ Within the context of this alternative approach, the classical notion of emancipation is redefined either in terms of the development of a capacity for self-creation or in terms of abstract transcendence. According to the first of these alternatives, liberation is associated with the ability to reveal the homogenizing tendencies in society in order to open up the possibility for alternative forms of life. According to the second alternative, it is connected with the abstract possibility of a future state of society, the discovery of which is dependent upon revelation.

The idea of emancipation is central to critical social theory. This is obviously true for the type of critique that is firmly committed to the normative ideals of the Enlightenment. However, it is often forgotten that Enlightenment-skeptical criticism is guided by a similar idea. To be sure, contemporary critical theorists working within the two traditions focus on different aspects of emancipation.¹⁶ However, while there has been some recognition of "allied motives and shared intentions,"¹⁷ few have explored the possibility of a critical exchange between the two main currents of critical theory.¹⁸ In recent years, the idea of irreconcilable differences has been called into question, although no one has, to my knowledge, seriously considered the possibility of combining the two concepts of emancipation.

The tension between the Enlightenment-philosophical and the Enlightenment-skeptical points of view can be taken as emblematic of the two main tendencies within contemporary critical thought. However, a similar

¹⁴ The words "emancipation" and "liberation" are taken to be synonymous.

¹⁵ Richard Rorty, "Habermas, Derrida and the Functions of Philosophy," in Lasse Thomassen (ed.), *The Derrida-Habermas Reader*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2006, p. 61.

¹⁶ See David Owen, "Criticism and Captivity: On Genealogy and Critical Theory", in *European Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2002, pp 216-230.

¹⁷ Jürgen Habermas, "How to Answer the Ethical Question," in Bettina Bergo et al (eds.), *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2007.

¹⁸ For a recent and, in my view, inconclusive attempt to examine this issue, see Ruth Sonderegger & Karin de Boer (eds.), *Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK, 2012; and Robert Sinnerbrink et al (eds.), *Critique Today : Social and Critical Theory*, Brill, Leiden, 2006.

ambivalence can be found in the classical critical theory of the so-called Frankfurt School, as it was developed by Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and the other members of the Institute for Social Research shortly before and after the Second World War. While the first phase of the Frankfurt School continued to endorse the basic principles of the Enlightenment approach, as conceived by Marx and Hegel, the next phase was characterized by the abandonment of this position and the introduction of a concept of emancipation more in line with the assumptions of the Enlightenment-skeptical approach.

At first sight these two different kinds of critical thought may indeed seem diametrically opposed. Is there any way to resolve this apparent contradiction? In trying to answer this question, I will argue throughout this book that the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas can be understood in such a way, i.e. as an attempt to overcome the opposition between the two versions of the Frankfurt School. Reconceptualizing the Enlightenment-philosophical approach of the early Frankfurt School in terms of the concept of communicative action and the Enlightenment-skeptical approach of the late Frankfurt School in terms of the concept of the colonization of the lifeworld, Habermas seeks to integrate both points of view in a comprehensive theory.

Needless to say, if Habermas's critical social theory can be seen as an attempt to reconstruct the positions of the early and the late Frankfurt School so as to reconcile the two types of critical theoretical thought,¹⁹ there is no general agreement regarding the implications of this attempt. Among contemporary defenders of Enlightenment-skeptical critique, Habermas's approach is frequently seen as part of the problem rather than as part of the solution. Notably, Ernesto Laclau tends to describe Habermas as a naïve universalist who sees the dialogical process as "a way of reaching a consensus transcending all particularism".²⁰

What does emancipation mean today? It may be tempting to conclude that the critical debate surrounding the early conceptions of this idea has resulted in a mishmash of conflicting views. However, I believe that the complex

¹⁹ For a somewhat similar view, see Albrecht Wellmer, "Reason, Utopia, and the Dialectic of Enlightenment", in *Praxis International*, Vol. 3, No 2, 1983, pp. 83-107; and Helmut Dubiel, "Domination or Emancipation? The Debate over the Heritage of Critical Theory", in Axel Honneth et al (eds.), *Cultural-Political Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1992, pp. 3-16.

²⁰ Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, Verso, New York, N.Y., 1996, p. viii. Although I am somewhat sympathetic to Laclau's critique of the classical notion of emancipation and his insistence that emancipatory discourses are based on two lines of thought that "are logically incompatible and yet require each other," (ibid., p. 6) I cannot agree with the conclusions that he draws from these observations. In my view, if the idea of totality is reformulated in terms of a "constitutive lack," as "present in the particular as that which is absent" (ibid., p. 15) et cetera, the universalist claim of the notion of emancipation has to be read as a modern version of the myth of Sisyphus. In this sense, the concluding assertion that we are "at the beginning of freedom" (ibid., p. 18) would have to be endlessly repeated. In contrast to this view, I argue that the contradictory requirements acknowledged by Laclau and thus the opposition between two different views of emancipation should lead us to conceive of emancipatory struggles as a sequential process involving three disparate yet interconnected stages.

configuration of present-day critical theory provides favorable conditions for a renewed understanding of this important concept in modern political thought. Yet, in order to make sense of contemporary struggles for liberation, we should consider the possibility of setting up a dialogue between the conflicting theories of Enlightenment philosophical and Enlightenment-skeptical thought.

1.1 Aim of the Study

The overall aim of this study is to examine the meaning of emancipation in contemporary critical thought. More specifically, the first and principal aim is to demonstrate that Jürgen Habermas's critical theory can be understood as an attempt to overcome the opposition between the early and the late Frankfurt School in order subsequently to evaluate this attempt and thereby judge whether Habermas's approach can serve as a key for combining the concepts of emancipation corresponding to these two types of critique. A second, more modest aim is to re-examine the compatibility of Enlightenment-philosophical and Enlightenment-skeptical models of critical theory with the objective of contributing to the development of a theoretical framework that can accommodate a more profound interpretation of the concept of emancipation.

One of the central claims of this book is that, in order to answer the question of emancipation, we have to draw on elements of both traditions. That is, in developing an alternative to the classical account of emancipation, emancipation can be reconceptualized in terms of an open-ended process consisting of three interrelated steps: an initial break in the continuity of history; a collective political struggle in order to realize the utopian vision thereby opened up; and a possible understanding among the participants in a discourse. By making use of the Enlightenment-skeptical approach, the classical notion of emancipation is turned on its head. The utopian aspect of emancipation is thus understood as a possible break in the actual course of historical events, as the beginning of the emancipatory process rather than as its final goal.²¹ As I will show, the nucleus of such a concept of emancipation can be found in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School.

My critical evaluation of Habermas should be understood against this background. From my examination of Habermas's work, I conclude that while it can be understood as a way of dealing with the gap between the two versions of the Frankfurt School, it fails to take sufficient account of the Enlightenment-skeptical idea of emancipation. It thereby remains closed to the alternative conception of emancipation that I seek to establish. In addition, it

²¹ As argued by Walter Benjamin: "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]." In this sense Benjamin establishes "a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time." See Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, New York, 1964, pp. 261 and 263.

fails to deal adequately with the early Frankfurt School's attempt to identify the motivational causes of social struggle. My main objection to Habermas's reformulation of critical social theory, then, is that it is characterized by a lack of emancipatory potential and a lack of critical force.

The limited potential for emancipation and critique should not be taken to imply that Habermas's critical theory is incapable of explaining the nature of freedom and the conditions for emancipatory social change. Rather, in my view, it indicates that his theory needs to be supplemented by a further analysis of emancipation and domination. As I argue in the final part of this thesis, in order to address the shortcomings of Habermas's work, we need to develop a theoretical framework that draws on each of the two traditions of critical theory: the Enlightenment-philosophical approach as well as the Enlightenment-skeptical approach.

As I will show in this study, the differences between the two main strands of critical theory are reflected in the distinction between Enlightenment philosophy and Enlightenment skepticism. The ambivalent attitude toward the Enlightenment is held to be embedded in the opposition between their respective concepts of emancipation. A distinction is thus made between two different and apparently incompatible models of critique.

By Enlightenment-philosophical critique, on the one hand, I understand a model of critical theory committed to an idea of emancipation requiring that the division between private and public autonomy can be overcome. Moreover, such a critical approach ultimately depends on the possibility of progressive social action and thus on the emergence of a collective actor that can achieve this normative ideal in reality.

By Enlightenment-skeptical critique, on the other hand, I mean a model of critical theory directed against the effort to realize the Enlightenment concept of reason and thus committed to an alternative interpretation of the idea of emancipation. This sort of criticism refers to a conception of emancipation as self-creation or abstract transcendence. While it does not rule out the existence of social communities or collective activity, the possibility of its underlying idea of freedom is independent of such considerations.

1.2 Previous Research

Traditionally, a distinction has been made between three generations of critical theory.²² The *first* generation is above all associated with Max Horkheimer,

²² See, for example, Douglas Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1989; Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950*, Heinemann Educational Books, London, 1973; and David M. Rasmussen (Ed.), *Handbook of Critical Theory*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford, 1996. For recent discussions referring to this distinction between three generations of critical theory, see Danielle Petherbridge, *The Critical Theory of Axel Honneth*, Lexington Books, Plymouth, 2013; and Joel Anderson, "Situating Axel Honneth in the Frankfurt School

Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, the main exponents of the so-called Frankfurt School. The *second* generation is represented primarily by Jürgen Habermas, while scholars such as Axel Honneth, Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser are often referred to as the *third* generation of critical theory. In the following overview I will focus on the first two versions of critical theory.

1.2.1 The Frankfurt School

As Rolf Wiggershaus has pointed out, the terms “critical theory” and “Frankfurt School” have never corresponded to any homogeneous phenomenon. There has never been a consistent critical theory, and what is called “The Frankfurt School” is so diverse that “one aspect of it or another is always currently relevant, and one aspect or another is always turning out to have been unfinished business crying out to be carried forward.”²³ Following Helmut Dubiel, one may thus ask where one is to locate “a reference point that will define the theory’s identity and continuity over the course of its development”.²⁴

Despite its evasive nature, it can still be argued that critical theory has “a recognizable face”. In the concluding section of his impressive work, Wiggershaus emphasizes one aspect that arguably constitutes a common ground for the critical theorists. The concept of critical theory should be taken to refer to “a form of thought that is committed to the abolition of domination and that stands in a Marxist tradition open to a wide variety of associations.”²⁵

This commitment to the normative ideal of an emancipatory transformation of society has been noted by a host of scholars. To begin with, the emancipatory intent was made explicit by some of the original members of the Frankfurt School themselves. In Horkheimer’s important essay *Traditional and Critical Theory* from 1937, in which he attempts to define the theoretical and political position of critical theory, he argues that the latter “is not just a research hypothesis which shows its value in the ongoing business of men; it is an essential element in the historical effort to create a world which satisfies the needs and powers of men. [...] Its goal is man’s emancipation from slavery.”²⁶

Contemporary commentators sum up the rationale behind critical theory in a similar way. Thus, according to Bronner: “Critical theory began with an emancipatory promise. It offered an interdisciplinary perspective seeking to inform the struggle against oppression in all its guises [...]”²⁷ Seyla Benhabib has argued that: “The task of critical social theory is [...] to show the potential

Tradition,” in Danielle Petherbridge (ed.), *Axel Honneth: Critical Essays*, Brill, Leiden, 2011, pp. 31-57.

²³ Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 4. See also Joel Anderson, “Situating Axel Honneth in the Frankfurt School Tradition”, in Danielle Petherbridge (ed.), *Axel Honneth: Critical Essays*, pp. 31-57.

²⁴ Helmut Dubiel, *Theory and Politics: Studies in the Development of Critical Theory*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1985, p. 3.

²⁵ Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, pp. 658-659.

²⁶ Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. Continuum, New York, 1972, pp. 245-246.

²⁷ Stephen E. Bronner, *Of Critical Theory and its Theorists*, Blackwell, Cambridge, 1994, p. 321.

for rationality and emancipation implicit in the present.”²⁸ Similarly, according to James Bohman: “From Horkheimer and Adorno to Marcuse and Habermas, [critical theory] has sought to articulate and enlarge the possibilities of human life that is shaped by reason and free of domination.”²⁹

Despite the diversity that characterizes critical theory as a whole, the attempt to view the present from the standpoint of a potential emancipatory transformation of society seems to unite many of its adherents. But what does emancipation mean here? What does the commitment to the abolition of domination actually imply?

On the one hand, the Frankfurt scholars remained loyal to the Enlightenment-philosophical view that the possibility of emancipation is tied to the practical use of human reason.³⁰ The realization of this rational potential depended on the assumption that the working class could be counted on as an agent of social change. On the other hand, though, classical critical theory is also associated with the opposite, Enlightenment-skeptical view that reason constitutes a source of domination rather than a prerequisite for liberation.³¹ According to this point of view, the prospect for liberation is rather linked to the exercise of a radical *critique* of reason made possible by a deconstructive kind of philosophy.

Reflecting over the work of the Frankfurt School as a whole, one is struck not so much by the great importance attached to the ideas of reason and freedom as by the ambivalent approach to these concepts. While in their early works the members of the Institute based the potential for liberation on the possibility of realizing reason and thus on the expectation of radical social change, later on – as the confidence of such a development grew weaker – a purely utopian concept of emancipation, relying upon the mere critique of existing forms of reason, superseded the former one.

As mentioned, the original members of the Frankfurt Institute made up what is known as the *first generation* of critical social theory. When I return to this subject in Chapters 2 and 3, I use the term “Frankfurt School” in a synonymous way to indicate this initial period of critical theory. In addition, corresponding to the opposition between Enlightenment thinking and Enlightenment skepticism in classical critical theory, I make a distinction within this first period between “the early” (pre-war) Frankfurt School and

²⁸ Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1986, p. 225.

²⁹ James Bohman, “Critical Theory and Democracy”, in David M. Rasmussen (Ed.) *Handbook of Critical Theory*, p. 211.

³⁰ In fact, according to Benhabib: “No idea has been as central to the tradition of critical social theory as the belief that the exercise of human reason is essential to the attainment of moral autonomy and fulfillment, public justice and progress.” See Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, pp. 343-344.

³¹ Thus, as summarized by David Rasmussen: “the kind of analysis which began with the great optimism inaugurated by the German enlightenment [...] would end with the pessimistic realization that reason functions for social control, not in the name of enlightenment or emancipation.” See David M. Rasmussen, “Critical Theory and Philosophy”, in David M. Rasmussen (Ed.) *Handbook of Critical Theory*, p. 23.

“the late” (post-war) Frankfurt School. In the present work, “the late Frankfurt School” should not be confused with the so-called *second generation* of critical theory, which is closely associated with Jürgen Habermas, or *third generation* critical theorists such as Axel Honneth and Seyla Benhabib.

1.2.2 Jürgen Habermas

In this study, the contemporary meaning of emancipation is examined in close connection with the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas. How does this approach relate to previous research on Habermas’s work?

Habermas is generally considered to be the leading exponent of the second generation of critical theorists, and his theory of communicative action can best be understood as a contribution to the development of the Frankfurt School project.³² However, while there is no doubt that his work can be viewed as “the fruit of an ongoing response”³³ to classical critical theory, there is a need to investigate the nature of this relationship.

In most of the literature on Habermas, there is an implicit assumption that his work is situated firmly within the Enlightenment-philosophical model of critical theory. This has most obviously been the case with the post-structuralist critique of Habermas, in which scholars such as Fredric Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard attributed to Habermas a “vision of a ‘noise-free,’ transparent, fully communicational society.”³⁴ Moreover, as insinuated by Lyotard, the aim of the project of modernity, as conceptualized by Habermas, is “the constitution of sociocultural unity within which all the elements of daily life and of thought would take their places as in an organic whole.”³⁵

To be sure, the somewhat tendentious characterization of Habermas as a thinker who “unilaterally privileges universalism”³⁶ was more common toward the end of the last century than it is today. However, in the meantime, while Habermas was busy responding to the challenge of post-modern skepticism, an important part of contemporary critical theory “has also succumbed to the sceptical mood of the times.”³⁷ Indeed, while agreeing with the general goal of his theoretical project, some sympathetic critics of Habermas have been

³² See, for example, Raymond Geuss, “Introduction”, in *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School*, Cambridge U. P., Cambridge, 1981, pp. 1-3; Martin Jay, “Preface to the 1996 Edition”, in *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996, pp. xi-xxi; and Lasse Thomassen, *Habermas: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Continuum, London, 2010, p. 16.

³³ Gordon J. Finlayson, *Habermas: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, p. 1.

³⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Foreword*, in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report of Knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p. vii.

³⁵ Lyotard, Jean-François, “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?”, in *ibid.*, p. 72. See also above, note 20.

³⁶ Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, p. viii.

³⁷ Nikolas Kompridis, “From Reason to Self-Realisation? Axel Honneth and the ‘Ethical turn’ in Critical theory”, in *Critical horizons*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2004, p. 324.

forming what can be described as a “loyal opposition”, drawing attention to “a tacit authoritarianism in Habermas’s account of communicative rationality.”³⁸

The present focus on the normative aspects of Habermas’s work is another, more indirect example of this tendency to reduce Habermas’s critical social theory to a product of Enlightenment thought. In the current debate on Habermas’s critical theory, the possibility of a rational consensus concerning normative claims is the question that has received the most attention. This comes to the fore most clearly in the discussion of Habermas’s discourse ethics and the theory of deliberative democracy. The debate surrounding the so-called “family quarrel”³⁹ between Habermas and Rawls is a case in point.⁴⁰ However, against the background of this focus on questions of justification, it is important to point out that Habermas’s intention to formulate a well-grounded critical theory does not rely on normative arguments alone. In addition, it draws on an empirically testable account of societal rationalization.

Above all, what is missing from the current debate is an appreciation of the fact that Habermas’s critical project is based on a critique of the process of modernization as well as an account of the potential for communicative rationality. In an attempt to fill this gap, one of the central claims of this book is that Habermas’s approach can be understood as a way to mediate between two types of critical theoretical thought.

In previous research, Habermas’s version of critical theory has come under fire from two directions: accused of being based on a concept of reason that is either too weak or too strong. According to some scholars, Habermas’s concept of reason is too weak to be able to provide a credible explanation of the “pre-theoretical resource for emancipation.”⁴¹ According to others, Habermas’s concept of reason is too strong, since it requires him to formulate a critical project that is committed to the goal of a comprehensive social theory. As argued by the proponents of this latter approach, Habermas’s version of critical theory is not sensitive enough to the differentiated character of modern society.⁴²

³⁸ Maeve Cooke, “Habermas’s Social Theory: The Critical Power of Communicative Rationality”, in Ruth Sonderegger & Karin de Boer (eds.), *Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy*, p. 204.

³⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1998, p. 50.

⁴⁰ For a recent example, see Gordon J. Finlayson, Fabian Freyenhagen & James Gledhill (eds.), *Habermas and Rawls: Disputing the Political*, Routledge, London, 2011. For a Hegel-inspired critique of the prevailing focus on normative issues in contemporary critical theory, see Axel Honneth, *Freedom’s Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, Polity, Cambridge, 2013. According to Honneth: “One of the major weaknesses of contemporary political philosophy is that it has been decoupled from an analysis of society, instead becoming fixated on purely normative principles.” See *ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴¹ Axel Honneth, “The Social Dynamics of Disrespect”, in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, Polity, Cambridge, 2007, p. 65.

⁴² See, for example, Maeve Cooke, “Avoiding Authoritarianism: On the Problem of Justification in Contemporary Critical Social Theory”, in *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2005, pp. 379-404; and James Bohman, “Habermas, Marxism and Social Theory: The Case for

In my view, while providing some valuable insights, these critics tend to ignore an important dimension of Habermas's approach, namely its aim to reconcile the two types of critical theoretical thought. As I will argue in Chapter 4, while Habermas's concept of emancipation belongs to the tradition of Enlightenment philosophy, part of his account of the contemporary structures of domination grows out of a tradition of Enlightenment skepticism. Indeed, while the theory of communicative reason can be seen as an attempt to rehabilitate the conception of critical theory that was developed during the 1930s, Habermas's thesis of colonization can be seen as an attempt to reconstruct the late Frankfurt School's skepticism regarding the possibility of realizing the normative goal of human emancipation.⁴³

To be sure, there is a considerable body of literature on the relationship between critical theorists working within the tradition of Enlightenment philosophy and the tradition of Enlightenment skepticism⁴⁴ and a growing number of publications dealing with the possibility of overcoming the opposition between these main tendencies within contemporary critical thought.⁴⁵ As far as I know, however, no one has yet proposed that Habermas's critical theory can be understood in terms of such an attempt.⁴⁶

Pluralism in Critical Social Science", in Peter Dews (ed.), *Habermas: A Critical Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1999. For a further analysis of these critical points, see Chapter 5.3 below.

⁴³ For a recent emphasis on the importance of the colonization thesis, see Timo Jütten, "The Colonization Thesis: Habermas on Reification", in *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 5, 2011, pp. 701-727. See also Thomas Hove, "Understanding and Efficiency: Habermas's Concept of Communicative Relief", in *Communication Theory*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2008, pp. 240-254.

⁴⁴ See especially David C. Hoy & Thomas A. McCarthy, *Critical Theory*; Samantha Ashenden & David Owen (eds.), *Foucault Contra Habermas: Recasting the Dialogue Between Genealogy and Critical Theory*, SAGE, Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1999; David Owen, "Criticism and Captivity: On Genealogy and Critical Theory"; Deborah Cook, *Adorno, Habermas, and the Search for a Rational Society*, Routledge, London, 2004; and Babette E. Babich (ed.), *Habermas, Nietzsche, and Critical Theory*, Humanity Books, Amherst, N.Y., 2004.

⁴⁵ See in particular Axel Honneth, *The critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1991; Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1991; Beatrice Hanssen, "Critical Theory and Poststructuralism: Habermas and Foucault", in Fred Rush (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, pp. 280-309; Lasse Thomassen, "Within the Limits of Deliberative Reason Alone: Habermas, Civil Disobedience and Constitutional Democracy", in *European Journal of Political Theory*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2007, pp. 200-218; Amy Allen, *The Politics of Ourselves: Power, Autonomy and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2008; and Stefan Rummens, "Deliberation Interrupted: Confronting Jürgen Habermas with Claude Lefort", in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2008, pp. 383-408.

⁴⁶ As indicated above, however, the possibility of such an approach is hinted at in Albrecht Wellmer, "Reason, Utopia, and the Dialectic of Enlightenment", pp. 83-107; and Helmut Dubiel, "Domination or Emancipation? The Debate Over the Heritage of Critical Theory", in Axel Honneth et al (eds.), *Cultural-Political Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*, pp. 3-16. See also Beatrice Hanssen, "Critical Theory and Poststructuralism: Habermas and Foucault", in Fred Rush (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, pp. 280-309.

1.3 Methodological Framework

While revolving around the relationship between two types of critical theory, this thesis also constitutes a critique in its own right. As I argue throughout the second part of this book, Habermas's endeavor to integrate elements from the program of the early Frankfurt School as well as late Frankfurt School thought can be seen as a way to reconcile the opposition between the two versions of critical theory. My own attempt to deal with this relationship is certainly influenced by Habermas's approach, but it is also guided by the conviction that ultimately he is unable to combine the two types of (contemporary) critical thought in a balanced way.

My analysis of the meaning of emancipation in contemporary critical theory is thus directed toward a critical evaluation of Habermas's approach to the Frankfurt School. This analysis is based on a genealogical method of critique.⁴⁷ As conceived by Foucault, the task of genealogy is to write "the history of the present,"⁴⁸ i.e. to trace the development of an idea or a practice in order to uncover and undermine the taken-for-granted aspects of present social life. In other words:

Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people. [...] The search for descent is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself.⁴⁹

As Foucault emphasized a few years later during his lectures at the *Collège de France*, the practice of unmasking predominant truths and values is linked to the "insurrection of subjugated knowledges."⁵⁰ Consequently, genealogy can also be described as "a sort of attempt to desubjugate historical knowledges, to set them free, or in other words to enable them to oppose and struggle against the coercion of a unitary, formal and scientific theoretical discourse."⁵¹

To put it briefly, I first trace the genealogy of the concept of emancipation in classical critical theory in order to expose the contradictory character of this concept. As it is used in the theory of the early and the late Frankfurt School, the concept of emancipation is shown to be part of an Enlightenment-philosophical discourse, on the one hand, and an Enlightenment-skeptical

⁴⁷ The genealogical method used in this study should not be confused with the Enlightenment-skeptical form of criticism, the so-called genealogical model of critique, which is discussed in Ch. 3.

⁴⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Vintage books, New York, 1979, p. 31.

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1984, pp. 81-82.

⁵⁰ Michel Foucault, "*Society Must be Defended*": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, Picador, New York, 2003, p. 7.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

discourse, on the other. Second, I argue that Habermas's critical theory can be understood as an attempt to bridge the gap between the early and the late Frankfurt School. Third, I rely on my genealogical analysis in order to unmask the proposed reconciliation and thus to expose the neutralizing effect of Habermas's position.

Sure enough, the methodological strategy that will be employed in this book is only loosely based on Foucault's genealogical method of critique. For instance, I do not agree with the idea that we have to "fight the power-effects characteristic of any discourse that is regarded as scientific."⁵² For while my analysis serves to expose the ambivalent character of the concept of emancipation, revealing in classical critical theory the existence of an alternative to the Enlightenment-philosophical approach, I take this as a starting point for an attempt to combine the insights of the two rival traditions of modern critical theory and for the development of a more comprehensive theoretical framework that can accommodate a more complex understanding of the emancipatory process.

It is important to point out, however, that the two traditions are compared primarily with regard to their respective understandings of emancipation, as defined in relation to the Enlightenment ideals of reason, freedom and progressive social change. Moreover, unlike Habermas's effort to bridge the gap between the early and the late Frankfurt School, which, as we shall see, appears to require a *complete reconciliation* of these two views, the compatibility of Enlightenment-philosophical critical theory and Enlightenment-skeptical critical theory should rather be understood in terms of the possibility of *combining* two different (but not necessarily conflicting) concepts of emancipation. While the first strategy involves the reconstruction of the conflicting positions in order to integrate both points of view in a comprehensive theory, the second, less demanding strategy is to show that the two positions are not incompatible.

To what extent can Habermas's theoretical approach be understood as a way to deal with the gap between the two versions of the Frankfurt School, and to what extent can it serve as a basis for bringing the two concepts of emancipation together?

In order to answer these questions, I must first examine how the form of critical theory developed by the members of the Frankfurt School in the beginning of the 1930s differs from the subsequent reformulation of this theoretical approach. This involves tracing the intellectual roots of the two positions, demonstrating that the first type of critique is part of an Enlightenment-philosophical orientation that includes thinkers such as Rousseau, Kant, Hegel and Marx, while the second form of critique is part of an Enlightenment-skeptical orientation that arose out of the thought of Nietzsche.

Once this task is accomplished, I will then be able to clarify how the position of the early Frankfurt School is reinterpreted by Habermas as the

⁵² Ibid., p. 9.

conceptual cornerstone of a theory of emancipation that draws on the potential of communicative rationality and how the position of the late Frankfurt School is reformulated in terms of a theory of domination that focuses on the colonization of the lifeworld. In other words, this background will serve as a basis for reconstructing Habermas's theoretical approach, showing that it can be understood as an attempt to overcome the opposition between the two types of critical theoretical thought.

The initial genealogical analysis also serves as a background for my critique of the proposed reconciliation as formulated in the theory of communicative reason. Based on my understanding of how the two strands of classical critical theory can be taken to represent an Enlightenment-philosophical and an Enlightenment-skeptical view of emancipation, I set out to expose the neutralizing consequences of Habermas's position, demonstrating that it tends to conceal the utopian aspect of emancipation (as defined in late Frankfurt School theory) and the affective aspect of oppression (as formulated in early Frankfurt School theory).

Finally, based on the conclusions of this critique, I seek to provide an alternative to Habermas's account. In trying to pave the way for a fruitful discussion, my strategy for accommodating the tensions between the two models of critical theory is to show that emancipation can be viewed as a process involving three disparate yet interconnected stages. Rather than reducing the tension among the defenders of the Enlightenment-philosophical approach, on the one hand, and the advocates of the Enlightenment-skeptical approach, on the other, to an implacable opposition between Critical Theory and post-structuralism,⁵³ I believe that we should consider the possibility of a productive dialogue between these two traditions.

1.4 The Structure of the Thesis

The analysis of the meaning of emancipation is conducted in four analytical chapters. In the next two chapters, I examine how the critical approach developed by the members of the Frankfurt School in the beginning of the 1930s differs from the subsequent reformulation of this view. In order to determine the character of this division, I seek to clarify the theoretical background of the two positions. Further, in the following two chapters, I analyze Habermas's relation to the complex mosaic of classical critical theory. First, I show that Habermas's theoretical approach can be understood as an attempt to overcome the opposition between the early and the late Frankfurt

⁵³ For examples of this all too common approach, see Stephen E. Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Towards a Politics of Radical Engagement*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2004; Richard Wolin, *The Frankfurt School Revisited: And Other Essays on Politics and Society*, Routledge, New York, 2006; Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1990.

School. Second, I argue that there are two main problems with this approach, i.e. the lack of emancipatory potential and the lack of critical force. In the final chapter I summarize the main conclusions of the study and present the reasons for considering an alternative critical theoretical framework that can accommodate a more profound interpretation of the concept of emancipation.

In Chapter 2, *Rational Ideals and Unfulfilled Expectations*, I distinguish between two types of social criticism within the tradition of Enlightenment thought. The individualist and the communalist approach (as exemplified by the political philosophy of Kant and Rousseau) can be seen as part of the constructive model of critique. The dialectical approach (as represented by the political philosophy of Hegel and Marx) can be characterized as adhering to the reconstructive model of critique. I draw on the distinction between the constructive and the reconstructive models of critique in order to clarify the differences and similarities between the three Enlightenment-philosophical approaches to the question of emancipation. Guided by this analytical framework, I then attempt to determine the specific character of the early Frankfurt School's theoretical perspective. As I argue, while it can be seen as rooted in Marx's theoretical approach and thus as a version of the reconstructive model of critique, it is not a matter of a simple continuation of this approach.

In Chapter 3, *The Hope of Freedom and the Reality of Oppression*, I distinguish between two different lines of thought within the tradition of Enlightenment skepticism. As I argue, both versions of radical criticism – the genealogical approach and the disclosive approach – can be traced back to Nietzsche. To begin with, I use this conceptual framework to examine the contradictory character of Nietzsche's thinking. The purpose of this analysis is to reconsider the critical potential of Nietzsche's philosophy in order to determine whether it can contribute to our understanding of the late Frankfurt School's view of reason, emancipation and collective action. As I conclude, while, on the one hand, the Frankfurt scholars remain loyal to the idea of reason as a reconciliation between private and public autonomy, on the other hand, as a consequence of their rejection of the possibility of realizing this idea of reason, emancipation is redefined in terms of the development of a capacity for self-creation or in terms of abstract transcendence.

In Chapter 4, *Jürgen Habermas – Bridging the Gap Between the Early and the Late Frankfurt School*, I claim that Habermas's theory of communicative action can be understood as an effort to bridge the gap between the two versions of classical critical theory. Furthermore, I argue that this can be described as an attempt to answer two questions: Can reason be understood in terms of a unified concept? To what extent can this idea of reason be realized in the form of a rational, emancipated society? According to Habermas, despite the loss of meaning that follows from the inevitable process of cultural differentiation, reason can still be understood in terms of a unified concept; and, despite the loss of freedom that accompanies the process of social differentiation, the potential for rationality implicit in present social life is not exhausted. I can thus show that Habermas's concept of emancipation is based on the potential

to reach understanding and that it refers to the ability to rely on this rational potential as a mechanism for action coordination. Furthermore, I argue that Habermas makes use of the concept of communicative reason in order to develop a two-tiered approach to the processes of societal rationalization, something that enables him to criticize the predominant characteristics of the process of modernization while maintaining a well-grounded confidence in the possibility of an alternative development. In this sense, the effort to bridge the gap between the early and the late Frankfurt School can be seen as an attempt to combine a positive notion of emancipation with a negative dialectic of reification.

In Chapter 5, *Too Weak or Too Strong? The Limitations of Habermas's Reformulation of Critical Theory*, I argue that Habermas's approach suffers from a lack of emancipatory potential and a lack of critical force, something that I take to be a consequence of his interpretation of classical critical theory. Firstly, by reinterpreting emancipation in terms of a theory of communicative action, the transfigurative potential of this concept is essentially lost. Secondly, given that domination is understood mainly as the subordination of the lifeworld to systemic constraints, it becomes difficult to explain what could motivate the emergence of political struggle and thus to clarify the inherent potential for social change. To conclude, I take this to indicate that Habermas's critical theory needs to be supplemented by an alternative analysis of emancipation and domination.

In Chapter 6, *Retrieving the Legacies of Classical Critical Theory: Toward a More Profound Understanding of Emancipation*, I summarize the main arguments of the thesis. Further, I argue that we should reconsider Habermas's interpretation of the early and the late Frankfurt School in order to explore the possibilities of an alternative analysis. In the final part of the chapter, I use this alternative analysis as a starting point for the development of a theoretical framework that can accommodate a more profound understanding of the concept of emancipation and possibly lay the ground for a productive dialogue between the two main strands in contemporary critical thought.

2.

Rational Ideals and Unfulfilled Expectations

The transformation of critical theory can be characterized in terms of a distinction between two forms of social criticism. Among the members of the early Frankfurt School, on the one hand, “it was considered self-evident that a theory of society could engage in critique only insofar as it was able to rediscover an element of its own critical viewpoint within social reality,”⁵⁴ i.e. in so far as it could make reference to moral norms which were already embodied in the basic structures of a given society. According to the radical approach of the late Frankfurt School, on the other hand, the critical theory was directed against most of these normative ideals as well.⁵⁵

The opposition between these two points of view provides evidence of the ambivalence that characterized critical theory from the start. However, it also gives rise to questions about the further implications of this difference and the very feasibility of the second form of criticism. Is it even possible to make sense of such a radical view? As Habermas puts it: “Inasmuch as it turns against reason as the foundation of its own validity, critique becomes total. How is this totalization and independence of critique to be understood?”⁵⁶

The analysis of classical critical theory in the present chapter and in Chapter 3 is related to a distinction between Enlightenment philosophy and Enlightenment skepticism. As I will attempt to show below, while the early Frankfurt School can be characterized as an heir to the Enlightenment, the late Frankfurt School ought to be examined from the point of view of Enlightenment skepticism.

Furthermore, in order to provide a representative view of classical critical theory and its antecedents, I distinguish between two models of critique within

⁵⁴ Axel Honneth, “The Social Dynamics of Disrespect”, in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 64.

⁵⁵ Consider the following observation by Horkheimer: “Justice, equality, happiness, tolerance, all the concepts that, as mentioned, were in preceding centuries supposed to be inherent in or sanctioned by reason, have lost their intellectual roots. [...] The statement that justice and freedom are better in themselves than injustice and oppression is scientifically unverifiable and useless. Is has come to sound as meaningless in itself as would the statement that red is more beautiful than blue, or that an egg is better than milk.” See Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, New ed., Continuum, London, 2004, pp. 16-17.

⁵⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, pp. 118-119.

each of these traditions. In the following analysis of the two versions of the Frankfurt School, I apply a framework based on four models: “construction,” “reconstruction,” “genealogy” and “disclosure”.⁵⁷ The first two of the four models will be applied below, while the latter two models will be dealt with in the next chapter.

The purpose of the present chapter is to trace the intellectual roots of the early Frankfurt School so as to clarify the specific character of its theoretical approach. In considering this issue, I rely on a distinction between two types of social criticism within the tradition of Enlightenment thought.

Taken as a whole, the Enlightenment-philosophical critique of society refers to an idea of emancipation that requires that the division between private and public autonomy can be overcome. Moreover, such a critical approach ultimately depends on the possibility of collective action – “the exercise of the general will,”⁵⁸ “the public use of man’s reason”⁵⁹ or the “conquest of political power by the proletariat”⁶⁰ – and thus on the emergence of a collective actor – a sovereign people or a proletarian mass movement – that can bring this normative ideal into reality.

Beyond these general characteristics, however, we have to be aware of the differences between various Enlightenment-philosophical approaches to the question of emancipation. In the following, I will draw on a distinction between a constructive and a reconstructive model of critique in order to make this clear. Having done that, I will relate the theory of the early Frankfurt School to this analysis.

The *constructive model* is probably the most widely used form of social criticism. The central assumption behind this approach is that the problem of finding a normative standpoint from which to critically examine the existing social order requires us to design a universalistic strategy of justification. In other words, it relies on the conception of a valid justificatory process in order to come up with an external standard to which it can appeal for support. A prominent contemporary example of such an approach is John Rawls’s theory of justice, in which “a bundle of principles capable of general agreement are justified under the fictive conditions of an ideal original situation that can then be used to criticize the institutional order of a society.”⁶¹ However, in

⁵⁷ This theoretical framework is inspired by Axel Honneth’s comparison of different types of social criticism. See in particular Axel Honneth, “Reconstructive Social Criticism with a Genealogical Proviso: On the Idea of ‘Critique’ in the Frankfurt School”, in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2009, pp. 43-53; and Axel Honneth, “The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in Light of Current Debates in Social Criticism,” in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, pp. 49-62.

⁵⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Of the Social Contract, or, Principles of Political Right,” in *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 57.

⁵⁹ Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’,” in *Political Writings*, p. 55.

⁶⁰ Karl Marx, & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, Pluto Press, London, 2008, p. 53.

⁶¹ Axel Honneth, “Reconstructive Social Criticism with a Genealogical Proviso: On the Idea of ‘Critique’ in the Frankfurt School”, in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, p. 47.

examining the theoretical background of the early Frankfurt School, I will argue that the constructive model of social criticism offers a useful framework for understanding the differing political philosophies of Kant and Rousseau.

The *reconstructive model* starts from the assumption that we do not have to make reference to an external standpoint in order to formulate a critique of the established social order. According to this view, social criticism is necessarily situated in the sense that the norms relied upon have to be firmly anchored in the local culture of the society in question. Michael Walzer's version of hermeneutics may serve as a contemporary case in point. According to this approach: "The critique of existence begins or can begin from principles internal to existence itself."⁶² In other words, such a critique is based on a reconstruction of normative standards that are already present in a given society. As will be demonstrated later in this chapter, the political philosophy of Hegel and Marx can be seen as two different versions of such a critical approach.

In the following section, I will draw on this distinction between the constructive and the reconstructive models of critique in order to clarify the relationship between three Enlightenment-philosophical approaches to the question of emancipation. Guided by this analytical framework, I will then attempt to determine the specific character of classical critical theory as first generated in the 1930s. As we shall see, while the analysis presented below supports the general view of early Frankfurt School theory as rooted in the Marxian critique of political economy and thus as belonging to the reconstructive model of critique, there is reason to question the standard version of this account.

2.1 The Emancipatory Potential of the Enlightenment Project

The philosophers that belong to the Enlightenment tradition share a common assumption regarding the relation between reason and emancipation: "What these philosophers have in common is a universalistic conception of freedom linked to a strong notion of human dignity and/or human rights."⁶³ While agreeing on the importance of this theme, when it comes to the question of how freedom can be realized and thus to the reconciliation of private and public autonomy, Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant, Rousseau Hegel and Marx are indeed deeply divided.

In the following, I will distinguish between three Enlightenment-philosophical approaches to the issue of emancipation in order to shed some

⁶² Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1987, p. 20.

⁶³ Albrecht Wellmer, *Endgames: The Irreconcilable Nature of Modernity : Essays and Lectures*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1998, p. 3.

light on the theoretical background of the early Frankfurt School. As I will argue, while the individualist and the communalist approach (as exemplified by the political philosophy of Kant and Rousseau) can be seen as part of the constructive model of critique, the dialectical approach (as represented by the political philosophy of Hegel and Marx) can be characterized as adhering to the reconstructive model of critique.

2.1.1 The Self-Defeating Logic of Individualist and Communalist Concepts of Emancipation

The main tension between different versions of the constructive model of critique can be understood in terms of a division between individualist and communalist conceptions of freedom. According to Albrecht Wellmer: “Individualist theories of freedom are centered around a notion of basic rights [...] Communalist theories of freedom, on the other hand, locate freedom in an intersubjective form of life [...]”⁶⁴

Arguably, this does not have to be seen as an ideal-typical distinction between mutually opposed views. Indeed, “ever since Rousseau,” the conflict between these conceptions of freedom, and thus between the ideas of private and public autonomy, between man as a private individual and man as a citizen of the state, “has been a fundamental problem of all modern theories of the state and society.”⁶⁵ As Rousseau famously put it:

To find a form of association that will defend and protect the person and goods of each associate with the full common force, and by means of which, uniting with all, nevertheless obey only himself and remain as free as before. This is the fundamental problem to which the social contract provides the solution.⁶⁶

Given their mutual interest in finding an internal connection between the ideas of private and public autonomy, neither Kant nor Rousseau can be assumed to represent something like an authentic version of the individualist or communalist view. On the other hand, since, as we shall see, none of them has succeeded in reconciling the two ideas in a convincing manner and since their respective approaches to the question of emancipation are in fact more liberal, in the case of Kant, and closer to the model of republicanism, in the case of Rousseau, it still makes sense to use this distinction.

The tension between Kant’s individualist approach and Rousseau’s communalist approach to emancipation is closely related to their respective conceptions of reason.

Kant understands reason as a subjective faculty of mind. It represents “the capacity to transcend the sensible realm of nature.”⁶⁷ As is well known, in his

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 3.

⁶⁵ Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991, p. 235.

⁶⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Of the Social Contract or Principles of Political Right”, in *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, pp. 49-50.

⁶⁷ Otfried Höffe, *Immanuel Kant*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1994, p. 139.

moral philosophy, practical reason and freedom are brought together in the idea of self-legislation: “Reason must regard itself as the author of its principles, independently of foreign influences; consequently, as practical reason or as the will of a rational being, it must regard itself as free.”⁶⁸ This ability for a person to determine oneself on the basis of one’s own principles is what makes moral action possible. In other words: “the moral law expresses nothing else than the *autonomy* of the pure practical reason; i.e. freedom [...]”⁶⁹

Now, this idea of moral, or inner, freedom, i.e. man’s ability to choose his action autonomously, independent of impulses and inclinations, has to be distinguished from the concept of legal, or external, freedom, i.e. a person’s “independence from the constraint of another person’s will”⁷⁰ or, in the positive sense, the “warrant to obey no external laws except those to which I have been able to give my own consent.”⁷¹ With the latter concept, the idea of self-legislation is related to the question of the possibility of social integration and thus to the justification of law and government. Since in a society the presumption of unlimited freedom would lead to contradictory consequences, the external freedom of each has to be reconciled with “the *right* of men [to live] *under public coercive laws* by which each can be given what is due to him and secured against attack from any others.”⁷²

Since Kant understands reason primarily in terms of the subjective capacity for self-determination, the necessity to restrict the scope for external freedom by means of the establishment of a sovereign lawgiver has to be conceived in a manner that does not come into conflict with this notion. Therefore, Kant’s conception of popular sovereignty is morally grounded. To be more precise, Kant argues that the external freedom of every man should be dealt with in line with a universal principle of law, i.e. limited “so that it harmonizes with the freedom of everyone else (in so far as this is possible within the terms of a general law).”⁷³

Since the principle of law is derived from the categorical imperative, i.e. given that it “obligates the community of outwardly free subjects to obey universal legal regulations in the same way that the categorical imperative obligates the personal will with the maxims which it has laid down,”⁷⁴ one may reasonably argue that the ideal of private autonomy is given priority at the expense of the ideal of public autonomy and, consequently, that man as a citizen of the state is subordinated to man as a private individual. As Hegel famously put it:

⁶⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1969, p. 76.

⁶⁹ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, Dover Publications, New York, 2004, p. 34.

⁷⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysical Elements of Justice*, Indianapolis, 1999, p. 38.

⁷¹ Immanuel Kant, “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch,” in *Political Writings*, p. 99.

⁷² Immanuel Kant, “On the Common Saying: ‘This May be True in Theory, but it Does not Apply in Practice’”, in *Political Writings*, p. 73.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Otfried Höffe, *Immanuel Kant*, p. 173.

between the Shaman of the Tungus, the European prelate who rules church and state, the Voguls, and the Puritans, on the one hand, and the man who listens to his own command of duty, on the other, the difference is not that the former make themselves slaves, while the latter is free, but that the former have their lord outside themselves, while the latter carries his lord in himself, yet at the same time is his own slave.⁷⁵

While Kant considers man to be a “rational being” whose reason consists in his ability to “act under the idea of freedom”,⁷⁶ Rousseau argues that the capacity to employ one’s natural liberty in a rational way does not arise until the passage to the civil state:

Only then, when the voice of duty succeeds physical impulsion and right succeeds appetite, does man, who until then had looked only to himself, see himself forced to act on other principles, and to consult his reason before listening to his inclinations.⁷⁷

Indeed, as Rousseau sees it, the idea of freedom as self-legislation, i.e. the freedom to obey laws that “one has prescribed to oneself”,⁷⁸ relies on the prior renouncement of each man’s natural liberty, or, as he puts it, “the total alienation of each associate with all his rights to the whole community [...]”⁷⁹

Despite this dubious claim, the fundamental question that Rousseau (along with Kant) attempts to answer is how private and public autonomy can be reconciled. For such a reconciliation to be possible, the will of individual persons has to be mediated with the general will (*volonté generale*). As he argues:

while the opposition of particular interests made the establishment of societies necessary, it is the agreement of these same interests which made it possible. What these different interests have in common is what forms the social bond [...] Now it is solely in terms of this common interest that society ought to be governed.⁸⁰

On the one hand, Rousseau assumes that an identity between the general will and the individual wills can be achieved by means of popularly supported, abstract and general laws. For, as he puts it: “there is no one who does not appropriate the word *each* to himself, and think of himself as he votes for all”⁸¹ and, consequently, “the law combines the universality of the will and that of the object”.⁸² On the other hand, he is well aware that the legislative procedure

⁷⁵ Georg W. F. Hegel, “The spirit of Christianity and its Fate”, in *Early Theological Writings*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1996, p. 211.

⁷⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 75.

⁷⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Of the Social Contract or Principles of Political Right”, in *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, p. 53.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 67.

cannot by itself guarantee the maintenance of such a connection. Since individuals “see the good they reject” and “the public wills the good it does not see”, the “first must be obliged to conform their wills to their reason [and] the other must be taught to know what it wills.”⁸³

How this is supposed to be carried out is not entirely clear. Ultimately the possibility of an internal connection between the general will and the will of single human beings appears to depend on the homogeneity of the already existing community:

For a nascent people to be capable of appreciating sound maxims of politics and of following the fundamental rules of reason of State, the effect would have to become the cause, the social spirit which is to be the work of the institution would have to preside over the institution itself, and men would have to be prior to laws what they ought to become by means of them.⁸⁴

Quite clearly, Rousseau’s view of practical reason as synonymous with the general will corresponds to a view of freedom that emphasizes public autonomy at the expense of private autonomy. Contrary to the outcome of Kant’s approach, man as a private individual is subordinated to man as a citizen of the state.

2.1.2 The Totalizing Claims of Dialectical Concepts of Emancipation

As I have argued so far, neither Kant nor Rousseau managed to reconcile the idea of private and public autonomy in a convincing way, an inability which left them with a profoundly ambivalent concept of freedom. Either emancipation is conceptualized in terms of the moral freedom of a self-determining subject, leaving the will of the people without enough attention, or it is understood as the ethical freedom of a self-legislating community, whereby individual will is neglected.

It was partly with the intention of solving this problem, or more generally in trying to overcome the divisions that marked contemporary philosophical thought no less than the social conditions of his day, that Hegel set out to develop an alternative approach: “Dichotomy is the source of *the need of philosophy*; and as the culture of the era, it is the unfree and given aspect of the whole configuration.”⁸⁵ In this sense, it was the conflictual relation between individualist and communalist conceptions of freedom that enabled the introduction of Hegel’s alternative approach: “Hegel’s answer to the question of how freedom can be realized in the modern world is, consequently, an attempt to transcend the political divide between individualism and communalism”.⁸⁶

⁸³ Ibid., p. 68.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 71.

⁸⁵ Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, State University of New York P., Albany, 1977, p. 89.

⁸⁶ Albrecht Wellmer, *Endgames: The Irreconcilable Nature of Modernity: Essays and Lectures*, p. 8.

Now, this answer should not be understood as a blatant attempt to combine individualism and communalism. Nor does it oblige Hegel to place himself in direct opposition to any of these views. Rather, Hegel's approach involves affirmation as well as criticism of both positions and may, as we shall see, be characterized as a dialectical conceptualization of the issue of emancipation.

In the first place, Hegel focuses on the antithetical nature of these points of view. That is, by disclosing the internal inconsistency of individualist and communalist political thought, he sets out to analyze the reason behind the ambivalent structure of these positions and thus to explain why the attempt to realize freedom as conceptualized by Kant or Rousseau will lead to the opposite of the intended results. In the second place, he makes an effort to understand what is lacking in order for the original intention of these views to be realized.

Let us say something more about how Hegel's dialectical approach to the question of emancipation is related to Kant and Rousseau, beginning with his attempt to expose the internal contradictoriness of their thought.

In the context of political philosophy, Hegel's critique of Kantian individualism consists in the claim that even though Kant is well aware that the realization of freedom is dependent on the existence of a sovereign state that protects all men "against attack from any others"⁸⁷ through the enforcement of rights, his basic idea of freedom necessarily comes into conflict with this awareness. For, as long as freedom is understood primarily as an inner value, i.e. if the rational will is supposed to take shape at the level of the individual subject, then the polity has to be conceptualized in terms of something that sets limits to man's freedom and thus as reason's other, so to speak, as the opposite of freedom. Consequently, as he argues in a similar critique against Fichte: "In a community with others [...] freedom must be *surrendered* in order to make possible the freedom of all rational beings living in community."⁸⁸

Given the critique of individualist theories, one might be inclined to think that Hegel preferred the communalist conception of freedom described above. However, as we shall see, this is not the case. For even though Hegel gives Rousseau credit for having "put forward the *will* as the principle of the state," in the next moment he claims that the latter:

considered the will only in the determinate form of the *individual* [*einzelnen*] will [...] and regarded the universal will not as the will's rationality in and for itself, but only as the *common element* arising out of this individual [*einzelnen*] will as a *conscious will*.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Immanuel Kant, "On the Common Saying: 'This May be True in Theory, but it Does not Apply in Practice'", in *Political Writings*, p. 73.

⁸⁸ Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, p. 144.

⁸⁹ Georg W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 277.

At first sight, this analysis of Rousseau's concept of the general will appears to be completely unfounded. After all, if we were to choose one fundamental principle above all others to convey the intent of Rousseau's political thought, his distinction between the will of all (*volonté de tous*) and the general will (*volonté générale*) would certainly be a strong candidate. And, if it were not for his claim that "the latter looks only to the common interest [while] the former looks to private interest, and is nothing but a sum of particular wills,"⁹⁰ we would not have characterized him as a communalist from the start.

Despite Rousseau's view of freedom as a communal value, his insistence that the rational will can develop only at the level of collective life and, consequently, that such a general will cannot be reduced to a sum of individual wills, in Hegel's analysis he is "lumped together with Kant as the target of the same criticism".⁹¹

One reason for this has to do with the foundation of the general will. As is well known, in conformity with liberal thinkers such as Kant, Rousseau's view of the legitimacy of the state is dependent on the model of a social contract. While for Kant, the assumption of such a contract among singular individuals is necessary to justify the restriction of external freedom, Rousseau introduces this notion rather in order to explain the "remarkable change in man" that is associated with the transition to the civil state and owing to which he becomes "an intelligent being", i.e. a virtuous citizen committed to the common good of society.⁹² For, as we have already seen, Rousseau assumed that the emergence of such a rational being relied upon an act of association, by which man agreed to renounce his natural liberty to the community as a whole.

From this point of view, "the individuals appear to be the 'absolute' basis of the universal or the general will, even though Rousseau insists always that the latter is not a mere aggregate or *volonté de tous*."⁹³ As a consequence, the same kind of paradox that is associated with Kant's effort to integrate the concept of internal and external freedom in a balanced way is also attached to Rousseau's attempt to derive the possibility of civil freedom from the (voluntary) alienation of natural freedom: "[T]he community is a condition of freedom. So freedom must suspend itself in order to be freedom."⁹⁴

As we have seen, one aim of Hegel's dialectical view is to overcome political theoretical divisions such as that between individualism and communalism. While the first aspect of this approach regarded the need to analyze the antithetical structure of the latter, the second aspect involves an effort to clarify how these views have to be extended in order to get beyond

⁹⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Of the Social Contract or Principles of Political Right", in *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, p. 60.

⁹¹ Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge, 1975, p. 372.

⁹² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Of the Social Contract or Principles of Political Right", in *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, p. 53.

⁹³ Lewis P. Hinchman, *Hegel's Critique of the Enlightenment*, University Presses of Florida, Gainesville, 1984, p. 151.

⁹⁴ Georg W. F., *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, p. 144.

the internal inconsistencies and to enable the coexistence of private and public autonomy.

Put somewhat differently, the first step in this attempt at a transcendence allows Hegel to cast doubt upon the validity of the presumed distinction. Indeed, as follows from the analysis above, in addition to the fact that Kant's and Rousseau's political philosophies are characterized by an ambivalent structure, the very distinction between these versions of individualism and communalism appears to be illusory. That is, as Hegel sees it, as long as the existence of a legitimate political entity is held to be based on the will of isolated individuals, it does not matter whether the sought-for connection between private and public freedom is understood primarily from "the prepolitical viewpoint of the morally judging individual" or from the perspective of a "procedurally correct exercise of popular sovereignty".⁹⁵ In the case of Kant, as well as in the case of Rousseau, what started out as an attempt to lay the ground for the emancipation of man ends up as an apology for his actual enslavement.⁹⁶

Having thus redefined the relation between these positions in terms of a difference in appearance but a similarity in essence, Hegel may go on to point out the missing link common to both views. This second step of the attempt at a transcendence involves an effort to come up with an alternative to the impotent prescriptivism of most contractualist theories. For, as Hegel sees it, the foundational act in question – the emergence of the so-called social contract – cannot be convincingly explained from this kind of normative point of view:

Law [*Recht*] is the *relation* of persons, in their conduct, to others, the universal element of their free being or the determination, the limitation of their empty freedom. It is not up to me to think up or bring about this relation or limitation for myself; rather, the subject-matter [*Gegenstand*] is itself this creation of law in general[, i.e. the *recognizing* relation].⁹⁷

Consequently, before one can say anything about the restriction of "empty freedom" (and thus about the relation between private and public autonomy), one must be able to understand the very possibility of law, and this cannot be achieved from a contractualist point of view:

⁹⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, Polity, London, 1996, pp. 94 and 101.

⁹⁶ According to Kant, for instance: "all resistance against the supreme legislative power, all incitement of the subjects to violent expressions of discontent, all defiance which breaks out into rebellion, is the greatest and most punishable crime in a commonwealth, for it destroys its very foundations. This prohibition is *absolute*. And even if the power of the state or its agent, the head of state, has violated the original contract by authorising the government to act tyrannically, and has thereby, in the eyes of the subject, forfeited the right to legislate, the subjects is still not entitled to offer counter-resistance." See Immanuel Kant, "On the Common Saying: 'This May be True in Theory, but it Does Not Apply in Practice'", in *Political Writings*, p. 81.

⁹⁷ Georg W. F. Hegel, "Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit", quoted in Axel Honneth, *Struggle For Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 42.

Hegel merely wants to say that every philosophical theory of society must proceed not from the acts of isolated subjects but rather from the framework of ethical bonds, within which subjects always already move. Thus, contrary to atomistic theories of society, one is to assume, as a kind of natural basis for human socialization, a situation in which elementary forms of intersubjective coexistence is always present.⁹⁸

Thus, as Hegel sees it, the contradictory outcome of previous attempts to demonstrate the congruity between individual and universal freedom can be dealt with only against the background of an already existing intersubjectivity. Kant's doctrine of moral freedom would lose its character of a "mere ought" only if it is anchored in ethical life. Similarly, the totalitarian implications of Rousseau's concept of general will would disappear, provided that it could be related to the plurality of private wills in a less arbitrary way.

Hegel's early attempt to deal with this question is no less ambivalent than the social contract theories toward which his critique is oriented. For, while classical contractualism supposedly defended a social ideal that merely reflected the dichotomous nature of existent culture and society, Hegel's alternative was derived from an idealized view of the ancient city-states: "What he admires about them is the romantically transfigured circumstance that, in publicly practised customs, members of the community could also witness the intersubjective expression of their own particularity."⁹⁹ Indeed, if the "union of universal and individual freedom"¹⁰⁰ cannot be anchored in present social life but has to be guided by the powerful though obsolete image of the Greek polis, the search for such a reconciliation of the spheres of legality and morality is bound to remain a "retrospective utopia".¹⁰¹

Despite Hegel's weakness for the ancient ideal of the polis, he was nonetheless aware of its shortcomings. As Habermas has pointed out, Hegel is "the first to bring to expression a conceptual framework that is even terminologically adequate to modern society, in that he separates the political sphere of the state from 'civil society'."¹⁰² But what implications does this have for the possibility of realizing freedom as understood by Hegel? Given that his analysis of contemporary society is incompatible with the "unitary thinking of metaphysics,"¹⁰³ the aimed-at transcendence of individualism and communalism has to be conceived of in other terms.

In an alternative approach, Hegel draws on Fichte's theory of recognition in order to redefine the ancient ideal of ethical life in a more convincing way and

⁹⁸ Axel Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, p. 14.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁰ Georg W. F. Hegel, *Natural law: The Scientific Ways of Treating Law, Its Place in Moral Philosophy, and Its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Law*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1975, p. 85.

¹⁰¹ Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 42.

¹⁰² Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 37.

¹⁰³ Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992, p. 117.

thus to make clear how such a pre-contractual intersubjectivity can explain the subsequent emergence of legal relations:

Man is necessarily recognized and necessarily gives recognition. This necessity is his own, not that of our thinking in contrast to the content. As recognizing, man is himself this movement, and this movement itself is what supersedes his natural state: he is recognition.¹⁰⁴

Instead of having to rely on Aristotelian ontology, and in opposition to the contractualist conception of the foundational act in terms of something that takes place “within me”, as “the movement of my thought”¹⁰⁵, etc., Hegel introduces the idea of mutual recognition in order to show “that subjects can, on their own, reach a conflict resolution based on law”.¹⁰⁶

As much as this can be understood as an attempt on Hegel’s part to dissociate himself from social contract theory and the ancient idea of the state, it is also an effort to reclaim and reconcile the two aspects of freedom inherent in these traditions. To reiterate, in order to enable the coexistence of private and public autonomy and thus make it possible to realize the individualist as well as the communalist conceptions of freedom, it is necessary to demonstrate how the wills of the plurality of individuals can be joined with the universal will of the political community.

It is in this context that the theory of recognition proves to be useful. For, given that

all human coexistence presupposes a kind of basic mutual affirmation between subjects [...] the transition to the social contract is to be understood as something that subjects accomplish in practice, at the moment in which they become conscious of their prior relationship of recognition and elevate it explicitly to an intersubjectively shared legal relation.¹⁰⁷

However, as he develops the dialectical approach to the question of emancipation in this way, Hegel cannot help having recourse to the philosophy of consciousness: “Hegel conceives of the one as absolute subject, thereby annexing the metaphysical figures of thought to that concept of autonomously acting subjectivity from which modernity draws its consciousness of freedom”¹⁰⁸ The political outcome of this choice is “the modern European state, whose task it is to reconcile the principle of the *polis* – the substantial generality – with the principle of the Christian religion – subjective individuality.”¹⁰⁹ As Hegel sees it, with the rise of the modern Prussian state, “the contrast between private and political life, as well as that between the

¹⁰⁴ Georg W. F. Hegel, “Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit”, quoted in Axel Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, p. 42.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁰⁶ Axel Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, p. 42.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁰⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, p. 129.

¹⁰⁹ Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought*, p. 243.

bourgeois and the *citoyen* [is] reduced to a difference completely encompassed by the totality, and to be suspended.”¹¹⁰

On the other hand, if the ethical whole is derived in this way from a radicalized version of the concept of self-consciousness and if the state is thus conceived on the model of a subject that includes its other, the I as individual is transformed into an internal moment of the I as universal: “the outcome of this logic is the primacy of the *higher-level subjectivity of the state* over the subjective freedom of the individual.”¹¹¹

This is the main reason for the ambivalent attitude that the members of the Frankfurt School and later exponents of critical theory have had to Hegel. As much as Herbert Marcuse’s well-known work *Reason and Revolution* “was written in the hope that it would make a small contribution to the revival [of Hegel’s] negative thinking,”¹¹² for instance, he was well aware that Hegel’s effort to reconcile private and public autonomy ended up in a new, more deterministic “interpretation of freedom”¹¹³ and that the “quest for the true community thus terminates in a society governed by utmost discipline and military preparation.”¹¹⁴ Likewise, even though Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition is based on an interpretation of Hegel’s early philosophy, he does not hesitate to denounce the conservative political view that eventually came out of it. As he points out: “Hegel paid for the theoretical gains of his turn to the philosophy of consciousness by sacrificing his strong intersubjectivism.”¹¹⁵

As much of the critique mentioned above was originally developed by Marx, no attempt to explain the background of the Frankfurt School’s early view on emancipation would be complete without at least saying something about his position on this question. In order to do that we have to clarify Marx’s relation to Hegel.

Although there are different opinions about the relationship between the two thinkers, i.e. whether Marx is “basically a Hegelian”¹¹⁶ or whether his theory should be seen as “a trenchant critique of the philosophy of Hegel”¹¹⁷, few would seriously argue that his work can be understood in isolation from Hegel. We should beware of lending our support to any such one-sided interpretation of Marx’s debt to Hegel. For, while the early work of Marx essentially confirms the young Hegel’s “*immanent critique* of bourgeois civil society”¹¹⁸, he vigorously opposed the political philosophy that came out of this critical analysis. Indeed: “Marx does not quarrel with Hegel’s principle, but only with the concrete working out of what he, too, asserted: the unity

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 244.

¹¹¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 40.

¹¹² Herbert Marcuse, “Preface: A Note on Dialectic”, in *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1960, p. vii.

¹¹³ Marcuse, Herbert, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, p. 55.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 59. See also pp. 174 and 218.

¹¹⁵ Axel Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, p. 61.

¹¹⁶ Tom Rockmore, *Marx after Marxism: The Philosophy of Karl Marx*, Blackwell Publishers, Malden, MA, 2002, p. 30.

¹¹⁷ Lucio Colletti, “Introduction”, in Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, p. 16.

¹¹⁸ Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 21.

between reason and reality, and between universal essence and individual existence.”¹¹⁹

While Marx agrees with Hegel’s portrayal of the present social order as separated into a private and a public sphere and with his aim to overcome this division, he does not agree with Hegel’s understanding of this relationship and rejects the proposed reconciliation as “uncritical mysticism”¹²⁰. As we shall see, Marx is convinced that the emancipation of Man requires us to bring about Hegel’s philosophical reconciliation in practice: “Philosophy cannot realize itself without the transcendence of the proletariat, and the proletariat cannot transcend itself without the realization of philosophy.”¹²¹

In the *Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State*, Marx takes great pains to demonstrate that Hegel’s conception of the state as an absolute subject leads to an illogical reversal of the relation between subject and predicate, that is to say, that the relationship between civil society and political society is inverted:

The family and civil society are the preconditions of the state; they are the true agents; but in speculative philosophy it is the reverse. When the Idea is subjectivized the real subjects – civil society, the family, ‘circumstances, caprice etc.’ – are all transformed into *unreal*, objective moments of the Idea referring to different things.¹²²

Only against the background of such an inversion does it become possible for Hegel to understand the modern state as an ethical whole, to justify the existing constitutional monarchy of Prussia as a manifestation of reason.¹²³

As we have seen, the reason why Hegel tried to base his political philosophy on an alternative version of the philosophical theory of consciousness is that, since the ancient ideal of ethical life cannot be derived ontologically from the assumption of an objective order of reality, he could find no other way to mediate this ideal with the realities of the modern world: “Hegel’s thesis was, that under conditions of modernity [...] the substantive ethical life of the Greek polis could only be recovered as the reconciliation of opposites on a higher level.”¹²⁴

As Marx sees it, it is a mistake to deal with the present social situation in such a way. Radical political ideals do not necessarily have to be adapted to the differentiation of modern civil society. On the contrary, as long as nothing is done in order to change this existing social structure itself, as long as man does

¹¹⁹ Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought*, p. 145.

¹²⁰ Karl Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State”, in *Early Writings*, p. 149.

¹²¹ Karl Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right”, in *Early Writings*, p. 257.

¹²² Karl Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State”, in *Early Writings*, p. 62.

¹²³ In other words: “the fact is that the state evolves from the mass existing as members of families and of civil society; [but Hegel] explains this fact as the act of the Idea, not as the Idea of the mass, but as the act of a subjective Idea distinct from the fact itself [...] Thus empirical reality is accepted as it is; it is even declared to be rational. However, it is not rational by virtue of its own reason, but because the empirical fact in its empirical existence has a meaning other than itself.” See *ibid.*, p. 63.

¹²⁴ Albrecht Wellmer, “Reason, Utopia, and the Dialectic of Enlightenment”, p. 86.

not prove “the reality and power [...] of his thinking in practice,”¹²⁵ no attempt to overcome the contradictions of modern society will succeed: “The moment of unity or community has to be *abstract* (the state) because in the real, fragmented society a common or general interest can only arise by dissociation from all the contending private interests.”¹²⁶

According to Marx, then, since the question of how freedom is to be realized under the conditions of modern, depoliticized society cannot be answered by reference to the idea of a demiurge-like subject, that is, in terms of “infinite subjectivity that is eternally giving birth to objectivity in order to raise itself out of its ashes into the glory of absolute knowledge”¹²⁷, the fragments of modern society have to be recomposed in another way. In order to overcome the contradictions and reunite what has been divided, the separation of civil society from political life has to be abolished:

Only when real, individual man resumes the abstract citizen into himself and as an individual man has become a *species-being* in his empirical life, his individual work and his individual relationships, only when man has recognized and organized his *forces propres* as *social forces* so that social force is no longer separated from him in the form of *political force*, only then will human emancipation be completed.¹²⁸

The subsequent theory of capitalist society can be seen as an attempt to provide scientific support for this radical claim. Indeed, if Marx’s view of a liberated society was to be given more serious consideration than previous utopian beliefs, he had to make sure that this ideal could be firmly anchored in present reality, i.e. he “had to show how the emancipated society was already prefigured in the dynamics, the crises and the logic of development of capitalist societies. Marx, in other words, had to transform socialism from a utopia into a science [...]”¹²⁹

As is well known, Marx’s basic idea was to rely on an interpretation of how domination finds expression in modern societies in order to work out a crisis theory by means of which the inherent potential for social change can be clarified. As he argued, with the growth of capitalism and the institutionalization of the wage-labor contract, the conflict-ridden relations between oppressor and oppressed took on an economic character. According to this view, in order to realize the rational idea of freedom it was necessary to abolish the prevailing mode of labor. Furthermore, reason was supposed to be located in the social class – the proletariat – that, given favorable conditions, could bring this about:

¹²⁵ Karl Marx, “Concerning Feuerbach”, in *Early Writings*, p. 422.

¹²⁶ Lucio Colletti, “Introduction”, in Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, p. 35.

¹²⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 40.

¹²⁸ Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, in *Early Writings*, p. 235.

¹²⁹ Albrecht Wellmer, “Reason, Utopia, and the Dialectic of Enlightenment”, p. 83.

with the abolition of the basis of private property, with the communistic regulation of production (and, implicit in this, the destruction of the alien relation between men and what they themselves produce), the power of the relation of supply and demand is dissolved into nothing, and man get exchange, production, the mode of their mutual relation, under their own control again [...]¹³⁰

Since Marx did not manage to secure a convincing foothold for this radical view, the forward-looking vision of a possible liberation of mankind turned out to be no less abstract than the backward-looking ideal of the young Hegel.¹³¹ And, as one should add, given that he could not clarify how the introduction of a centrally planned economy could lead to a communist society in which the coercive aspects of societal reproduction is overcome, Marx's version of the dialectical approach is also no less authoritarian than that of the old Hegel.¹³²

2.2 Failed Promises and Remaining Tasks: The Critical Theory of the Early Frankfurt School

I have distinguished between two broad types of social criticism within the tradition of Enlightenment thought. To reiterate, while Enlightenment-philosophical critique in general refers to an idea of emancipation that requires that the division between private and public autonomy can be overcome, it lends itself to different interpretations, ranging from Kant's individualist and Rousseau's communalist approaches to the dialectical positions of Hegel and Marx. We started out by analyzing the difference between the two versions of the constructive model of critique. These theories were then compared to the two variants of the reconstructive model of critique.

Guided by this analytical framework, I will now attempt to determine the specific character of the early Frankfurt School's theoretical perspective. As we shall see, while it can be understood as rooted in Marx's theoretical approach and thus as a version of the reconstructive model of critique, it is not a matter of a simple continuation of this approach.

¹³⁰ Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1970, p. 55.

¹³¹ See Albrecht Wellmer, "Reason, Utopia, and the Dialectic of Enlightenment", p. 84.

¹³² Indeed, as pointed out by Habermas: "If, then, the ruptured ethical totality is thought of as alienated labor, and if the latter is supposed to overcome its alienation *from itself*, then emancipatory praxis can proceed from labor itself. Here Marx is entangled in basic conceptual difficulties similar to Hegel's. [...] The necessity for self-objectification is immanent in the structure of self-externalization, just as it was in the structure of the relation-to-self." See, Jürgen Habermas, *The philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, pp. 63 and 67.

2.2.1 Situating the Program of Classical Critical Theory Within the Enlightenment Tradition

As in the case of Wiggershaus's classical study, most thinkers who decide to write about the Frankfurt School end up having to consider whether it is appropriate to even "speak of a 'school' in the strict sense."¹³³ On the other hand, while this conclusion generally applies to their major works taken as a whole, the thought of the early Frankfurt Institute is most often characterized in a less hesitant manner.¹³⁴

When related to the multifaceted nature of the Enlightenment tradition, the approach of the early Frankfurt School is generally regarded as a version of the dialectical view, or, to be more precise, as a body of thought emerging from Marxism. Furthermore, this picture is largely supported by the members' own account of their theoretical position during that period. As can be seen from the following analysis of the Frankfurt School, in accordance with Marx's conception of the dialectical view and thus with his reinterpretation of Hegel's critique of Kant, the critical theorists relied on the assumption of an intramundane potential for liberation. Indeed, it is a well-established view that, during the 1930s, the members of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* were still convinced that "embodied in the forms and institutions of bourgeois culture [...] there were basic structures to which critical theory could make immanent reference."¹³⁵

This confidence in the rational potential of modern culture is the first and arguably most essential aspect of the rather positive outlook that characterizes the early works of the Institute. Horkheimer's conception of social philosophy as an interdisciplinary social science can serve as a case in point.

In his inaugural address on taking up the directorship of the Institute, Horkheimer declared his intention to combine the insights of different scientific disciplines in order to clarify the conditions for the realization of reason. As he argued:

The project of investigating the relations between [the economic life of society, the psychical development of individuals, and the changes in the realm of culture in the narrower sense] is nothing but a reformulation [...] of the old question concerning the connection of particular existence and universal Reason, of reality and Idea, of life and Spirit.¹³⁶

¹³³ Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, p. 1.

¹³⁴ Thus: "Some of the characteristic attributes of a 'school' were certainly present, either constantly, temporarily, or from time to time. [...] Most of these characteristics, however, only applied to the first decade of the Institute's Horkheimer period, the 1930s, and to its New York period in particular." See *ibid.*, p. 2.

¹³⁵ Helmut Dubiel, "Domination or Emancipation", in Axel Honneth et al (eds.), *Cultural-Political Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*, p. 5.

¹³⁶ Max Horkheimer, "The Present Situation of Social Philosophy", in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1993, pp. 11-12. See also Horkheimer, Max, "The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy", in *ibid.*, p. 259.

Horkheimer and his colleagues subscribed to a concept of reason that emerged out of the philosophy of Hegel and that reconfirmed Marx's critique of Feuerbach almost a century before.¹³⁷ According to this view, reason is neither "a subjective faculty of the mind" nor "a principle inherent in reality"¹³⁸ but is associated rather with the transgression of this opposition, with the dialectical relation between subject and object. Philosophy was still understood as the keeper of this rational potential but, as Marcuse argued, with Hegel's concept of reason as freedom this approach appeared to have reached its limit: "What remains outstanding to the realization of reason is not a philosophical task."¹³⁹ In other words, while the members of the Frankfurt School continued to pledge their commitment to the ideas of the Enlightenment, they considered it the task of the critical theory to clarify how the truth content of such philosophical concepts disagree with the established social order and how this truth can be realized:

Today it is claimed that the bourgeois ideals of Freedom, Equality, and Justice have proven themselves to be poor ones; however, it is not the ideals of the bourgeoisie, but conditions which do not correspond to them, which have shown their untenability. The battle cries of the Enlightenment and of the French Revolution are more valid now than ever. The dialectical critique of the world, which is borne along by them, consists precisely in the demonstration that they have retained their actuality rather than lost it on the basis of reality.¹⁴⁰

In addition to this attempt to deal with "the camouflage and misinterpretation that characterized the discussion of man in the bourgeois period,"¹⁴¹ the critical theorists also took on the task of showing how the rational content of the philosophical ideals can be put into practice.¹⁴² In line with the dialectical conception of this idea, the critical theorists allegedly believed that the realization of this untapped potential was dependent on the contradictory character of capitalist social reproduction and the capability of the working class movement to take advantage of this situation.

¹³⁷ In *Concerning Feuerbach*, Marx famously argues that: "The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively." Moreover: "The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that the circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself." Concluding his critique, Marx argues that: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it." See Karl Marx, "Concerning Feuerbach", in *Early Writings*, pp. 421-423.

¹³⁸ Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p. 4.

¹³⁹ Herbert Marcuse, "Philosophy and Critical Theory", in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, Allen Lane, London, 1969, p. 137.

¹⁴⁰ Max Horkheimer, "Materialism and morality", in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, p. 37.

¹⁴¹ Marcuse, Herbert, "Philosophy and Critical theory", in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, p. 147.

¹⁴² Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory: Postscript", in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p. 246.

Concerning the first of these requirements, the general understanding of the approach that began to take shape with Horkheimer's accession to the directorship of the Institute in 1930¹⁴³ is that it belonged to the tradition of socialist theory. According to Habermas, for instance: "At that time critical theory was still based on the Marxist philosophy of history, i.e. on the conviction that the forces of production were developing an objectively explosive power."¹⁴⁴ Similarly, Honneth has argued that "critical theory [...] was conceived from the outset as a continuation of Marx's intentions under altered historical circumstances" and that "the productive forces [were] seen as an emancipatory potential whose unplanned organization in capitalism [was] regarded only as the expression of human self-deception."¹⁴⁵

Apparently, for Horkheimer and his colleagues, as for other advocates of the left Hegelian legacy, the

idea of a 'free, self-determining society' is not a mere 'ought,' a postulate of practical reason, but a possibility – albeit a historical, not a natural one. This ideal is an immanent, historical potential embedded in the development of the forces of production and the human mastery of nature.¹⁴⁶

If we turn back to the original members own account, this analysis seems to be broadly confirmed. In other words, there is much to indicate that, in the beginning of the 1930s, their view on how "the isolated traits of the rational society"¹⁴⁷ can be realized was close to the tradition of Left Hegelianism. According to Marcuse, for example, since the antagonism between different social groups had assumed an economical character, "problems bearing on the potentialities of man and of reason could now be approached from the standpoint of economics."¹⁴⁸

In this sense, the aim of the emancipatory struggle was conceptualized mainly in terms of a planned economy. The realization of "the desired unifying totality" would thus primarily be "an *economic* task: elimination of the economic order that is the source of classes and class struggles."¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, the

¹⁴³ According to Martin Jay, this happened in July, 1930, although the official installation took place a few months later: "In January of 1931, Horkheimer was officially installed in his new post." See Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A history of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950*, p. 25.

¹⁴⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2, Lifeworld and System : A critique of functionalist reason*, Polity, Cambridge, 1987, p. 382.

¹⁴⁵ Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, pp. 3 and 9.

¹⁴⁶ Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 7.

¹⁴⁷ Max Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality" , in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, p. 37.

¹⁴⁸ Herbert Marcuse, "Philosophy and Critical theory", in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, p. 134. In this passage, "critical theory" obviously alludes to Marxism. See also Max Horkheimer, "The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy", in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, p. 251.

¹⁴⁹ Herbert Marcuse, "Struggle Against Liberalism in 'Totalitarianism'", in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, pp. 21-22. See also Max Horkheimer, "Egoism

fulfilment of this aim, the transgression of the oppositions characterizing the modern world, was closely related to the observation that commodity economy leads “to a heightening of those social tensions which in the present historical era lead in turn to wars and revolutions.”¹⁵⁰

The second condition for the realization of reason, namely the requirement that emancipatory change has to be carried out by the labor movement, is not as well-established as the first one. However, Dubiel has asserted that, during the 1930s, the proletariat remained the addressee of the critical theory:

Characteristically, the socialist intelligentsia understood itself, not as the subject of its own theory, but as the instrument to articulate orientations already present in proletarian class consciousness. Hence the proletariat appeared as both subject and addressee of a theory tailored to its own social situation.¹⁵¹

In this period of their development, the critical theorists were apparently convinced that dialectical reason would play a key role in liberating humankind from the present state of oppression. To reiterate, this should not be seen entirely as the consequence of the pathological development of the economic system. At least from the outset, the proletarian social movement was counted on as the agent that would bring this rational ideal into practice. As emphasized by Marcuse: “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.”¹⁵² Similarly, according to Horkheimer: “This part of humanity, which necessarily counts on this change due to its situation, already contains (and attracts even more) forces to whom the realization of a better society is a matter of great importance.”¹⁵³

To conclude, there is clear evidence in support of the general idea that, during this early period of the Frankfurt School, the conception of reason and emancipation was very much in line with Marx’s version of the dialectical view. However, having said that, it is an irritating fact that the more one focuses on this traditional interpretation, the more remarkable the subsequent change of view appears. For this reason, it is important to assess whether there is any indication in the early works of the Frankfurt School of the subsequent reorientation.

To be sure, neither the Frankfurt scholars themselves nor their contemporary interpreters have claimed critical theory to be a simple continuation of Marx’s theoretical approach. However, as we shall see, while in

and Freedom Movements”, in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, p. 95.

¹⁵⁰ Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical theory”, in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p. 226.

¹⁵¹ Helmut Dubiel, *Theory and Politics: Studies in the Development of Critical Theory*, p. 8.

¹⁵² Herbert Marcuse, “Philosophy and Critical Theory”, in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, p. 141.

¹⁵³ Max Horkheimer, “Materialism and Morality”, in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, p. 43.

most studies of the Frankfurt Institute deviations from Marxism are explicitly accounted for, there is reason to question the standard version of this account.

2.2.2 Reconsidering the Conditions for Emancipatory Social Change

According to the conventional understanding of the early Frankfurt School, the members' ambivalence regarding some aspects of the dialectical view developed through a gradual process corresponding to particular historical circumstances. Thus, according to Kellner: "Critical Theory began as a primarily Marxian critique of capitalist modernity, and then progressively moved away from orthodox Marxian positions in response to the vicissitudes of twentieth-century history."¹⁵⁴

To be more precise, three historical experiences are commonly referred to in order to explain this process. As Rasmussen sees it, for instance:

The rise of fascism and the splintering of the workers' movement as well as the Stalinization of Russia would force the Institute to stray from the conventional Marxist wisdom about both theory and science as well as shake their confidence in the workers' movement.¹⁵⁵

Similarly, Honneth argues that:

as a result of the experiences of the National Socialists' seizure of power and of Stalinism, the doubt has increased about whether, under the conditions of postliberal capitalism, the proletariat still bears the potential for transformation resulting from its experience of oppression and crisis, as the Marxist concept of revolution assumes.¹⁵⁶

Few would deny the importance of these events for the subsequent development of critical theory. Some would even argue that this assumption can be justified by reference to the materialistic view initially espoused by the Institute. As maintained by Kellner, for example, one of the distinguishing characteristics of early critical theory is "its appropriation of the Hegelian-Marxian dialectical heritage which sees socially critical categories and analysis to be fundamentally historical and in need of development and revision as historical conditions change."¹⁵⁷

On the other hand, the basic assumption underlying this approach, i.e. that the reason behind the transformation of Frankfurt School thought was external to the critical theory itself, is not as obvious as it might first appear. While Horkheimer and his colleagues were certainly convinced that "the

¹⁵⁴ Douglas Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity*, pp. 1-2.

¹⁵⁵ David M. Rasmussen, "Critical Theory and Philosophy", in David M. Rasmussen (ed.) *Handbook of Critical Theory*, p. 17.

¹⁵⁶ Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, p. 18. See also Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, pp. 366-367; and Stephen E. Bronner, *Of Critical Theory and Its Theorists*, p. 79.

¹⁵⁷ Douglas Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity*, p. 6.

theoretical activity of men [...] is not the independent knowledge of a fixed object, but a product of ever-changing reality,”¹⁵⁸ it is necessary to point out that the gloomy approach of the late Frankfurt School was already anticipated in its earliest works. Indeed, some aspects of this more resigned and far from Marxian view were present before Hitler’s *Machtergreifung*, ahead of the Institute’s exile from fascism and prior to the horrors of the Great Purge.¹⁵⁹ Let us take a closer look at the early signs of this reorientation.

In my view, the most significant example of the initial divergence from Marxism has to do with the Institute’s ambivalent relation to the proletariat. This ambivalence is clearly manifested in the book entitled *Dämmerung*, a collection of aphorisms that was written between 1926 and 1931 and that, according to the preface composed a few years later, belongs “to the period before the final victory of Nazism [and thus refers] to a world which is today already out of date.”¹⁶⁰ As may be concluded from this work, while Horkheimer seems clearly committed to the idea of the working class as the collective agent of emancipation, he harbored serious doubts about the viability of this approach.

On the one hand, then, while rejecting the social skepticism of “all the well-meaning bourgeois friends of socialism” as well as the certainty of those who cling to the illusion that “the advent of the socialist order is of the same order of necessity as natural events”, Horkheimer emphasizes the commitment to “proletarian practice”, arguing that socialism “will not be realized by a logic that is immanent in history but by men trained in theory and determined to make things better.”¹⁶¹

On the other hand, Horkheimer is painfully aware that these men cannot plausibly be considered as a homogeneous group anymore: “Today, the term proletariat for a class which experiences the negative side of the present order, the wretchedness, in its own existence, applies to its components so unevenly that revolution may easily seem an individual concern.”¹⁶² At least this seems to be the case for the German working class, the impotence of which is due to the fact that the regularly employed workers “do not have the same interests as those who even today have nothing to lose but their chains.”¹⁶³

To be sure, in this segment of the book, Horkheimer attempts to explain this transformation of the working class (as well as the split of the labor

¹⁵⁸ Max Horkheimer, “Materialism and Metaphysics”, in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p. 28. See also Max Horkheimer, “Materialism and Morality”, in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, p. 44.

¹⁵⁹ Admittedly, it is not obvious whether such tendencies should be seen as a foretaste of the later Frankfurt School or merely as an attempt to “explain mistaken Marxist prognoses, but without breaking with Marxist intentions.” See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 116.

¹⁶⁰ Max Horkheimer, quoted in Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, p. 127.

¹⁶¹ Max Horkheimer, *Dawn & Decline. Notes 1926-1931 and 1950-1969*, The Seabury Press, New York, 1978, pp. 36-37.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

movement into two separate political parties) as a consequence of changes in the productive relations. As he argues: “The capitalist process of production has [...] driven a wedge between the interest in socialism and the human qualities necessary to its implementation.”¹⁶⁴ However, in other works from the beginning of the 1930s, the Frankfurt scholars questioned this one-sided focus of orthodox Marxist theory and argued for a more nuanced view of the relationship between base and superstructure. Indeed, the very idea of an interdisciplinary social science, as it was presented in Horkheimer’s inaugural lecture, is an example of the Institute’s early rejection of that kind of dogmatic economic account.¹⁶⁵

As maintained by Horkheimer in an article published 1932 in the first issue of *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (the official journal of the institute):

It remains unknown precisely how structural economic changes that affect the psychic constitution prevailing among the members of different social groups in a given period transform their overall life expressions [*Lebensäußerungen*]. Thus the claim that the latter depends upon the former contains dogmatic elements that seriously undermine its hypothetical value for explaining the present.”¹⁶⁶

As a consequence of this understanding, it becomes “necessary to investigate the genesis of psychic mechanisms that make it possible to keep latent the tensions between social classes that lead to conflicts on the basis of the economic situation.”¹⁶⁷

The attempt to combine historical materialism with psychoanalytic theories of explanation is closely related to this analysis. In the same issue of the *Journal of Social Research* as referred to above, Erich Fromm writes:

Suppose we ask which forces maintain the stability of a given society and which undermine it. We can see that economic prosperity and social conflicts determine stability or decomposition, respectively. But we can also see that the factor which, on the basis of these conditions, serves as a most important element in the social structure are the libidinal tendencies actually operative in men.¹⁶⁸

By the beginning of the 1930s, the scholars that made up part of the inner circle of the Institute had grave doubts regarding the revolutionary potential of the working class and thus about the possibility of bringing about the idea of emancipation to which they remained loyal.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁶⁵ See Max Horkheimer, “The Present Situation of Social Philosophy”, in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, p. 12.

¹⁶⁶ Max Horkheimer, “History and Psychology”, in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, p. 120.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 121. See also Helmut Dubiel, *Theory and Politics: Studies in the Development of Critical Theory*, p. 35.

¹⁶⁸ Erich Fromm, “The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology”, in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, Greenwich, Conn., 1971, p. 158.

As demonstrated above, there is plenty of evidence to support the conventional view of early Frankfurt School theory as a body of thought emerging from Marxism. However, as we have also seen, this definition is not as clear-cut as it might appear at first sight. The attempt to make use of psychoanalytic theory in order to explain the absence of a proletarian revolution constitutes one example of the rejection of Marxian orthodoxy. However, not as frequently noted is that the Freudian approach was used in a more general sense as well, i.e. to identify the motivational causes of social struggle, and thus to clarify the subjective conditions for emancipatory social change. Indeed, according to Honneth: “It is from his psychoanalytic theory that critical theory takes the thought that social pathologies must always express themselves in a type of suffering that keeps alive the interest in the emancipatory power of reason.”¹⁶⁹

A similar point has recently been made by Joseph Berendzen. As he observes, in Horkheimer’s early works the experience of suffering is seen to have normative force.¹⁷⁰ As argued by Horkheimer, for example: “The simple establishment of commonality in suffering and the description of oppressive relations, which tend to be hidden from the light of consciousness by the ideological apparatus, can be liberating.”¹⁷¹ Oddly enough, while the proletariat is often presented as the collective agent that would bring the transcending ideal into practice, at times it is replaced by the category of “suffering”. In place of the working class, “a submerged rational capacity must resurface for which all subjects in principle have the same motivational aptitude.”¹⁷²

In this chapter I have argued that there is a tradition in modern political philosophy and social theory that relies on the idea of a necessary relation between reason and emancipation. This fundamental principle brings together seemingly disparate thinkers such as Kant, Hegel and Marx with the members of the early Frankfurt School. However, as I have also shown, while it can be seen as rooted in the Marxian critique of political economy, we should resist the temptation to interpret the early Frankfurt School program as a simple continuation of this approach. Considering the adoption of psychoanalytic theory in order to uncover the conditions for social change, classical critical theory can perhaps be seen as a further development of the dialectical approach and thus as yet another version of the reconstructive model of critique.

As I will argue in the pages ahead, in order to clarify the basic assumptions of the late Frankfurt School, we have to go on to examine what arguably

¹⁶⁹ Axel Honneth, “A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory”, in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, p. 36.

¹⁷⁰ See J. C. Berendzen, “Suffering and Theory: Max Horkheimer’s Early Essays and Contemporary Moral Philosophy”, in *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, Vol. 36, No 9, 2010, pp. 1019-1037.

¹⁷¹ Max Horkheimer, “The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy”, in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, p. 261.

¹⁷² Axel Honneth, “A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory”, in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, p. 38.

constitutes another line of thought in modern political philosophy. What is characteristic of this view is that it rejects the fundamental premise of the Enlightenment tradition. In explicit opposition to this approach, proponents of the Enlightenment-skeptical view tend to link the prospect of liberation to a radical *critique* of reason.

3.

The Hope of Freedom and the Reality of Oppression

While in its first phase, the Frankfurt School remained relatively faithful to Marx's version of the dialectical approach and thus to a notion of emancipation that was positively related to a materialistic conception of reason and to a view of the realization of this rational potential that relied on the assumption of the working class as the agent of social change, the next phase was characterized by the abandonment of this position.

Even though, as I have argued, some aspects of this shift can be traced back to the initial stage of critical theory, this was only a foretaste of what was to come. For instance, during the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the following decade, the Institute's attitude toward the working class became more and more skeptical. According to Dubiel:

When Horkheimer, Pollock and Adorno examine from the perspective of the 1940s the demise of the German labor movement, all of their relevant considerations are founded on the then-current judgement that the proletariat had disintegrated as a class-conscious, and therefore politically effective, subject of history.¹⁷³

Similarly, while we have seen that the "historical-materialist assumptions regarding the dialectical relation between productive forces and productive relations"¹⁷⁴ were challenged already in the early works of Horkheimer and his colleagues – something which provided a strong motive for the attempt to supplement this Marxist approach with a social psychology – in the years to come this critique was substantially radicalized. As Honneth sees it:

Whereas in the 1930s Horkheimer entrusted to the technologically guided cultivation of nature the uninterrupted potential for civilizing liberation, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, less than a decade later, attributes the original impetus for the decay of civilization to the same process of a technologically progressing domination of nature.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Helmut Dubiel, *Theory and Politics: Studies in the Development of Critical Theory*, p. 69.

¹⁷⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, p. 382.

¹⁷⁵ Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, p. 56.

Now, the transformation of critical theory is not restricted to the rejection of these aspects of the dialectical view. Along with the abandonment of Marxist theory, the key members of the Institute distanced themselves from the Enlightenment tradition as a whole. Indeed, according to a common interpretation of this shift: “The assumption of an essential connection between reason and freedom, which the critical theorists had carried forward from Hegel and Marx, had proved to be problematic in actual historical practice.”¹⁷⁶ In other words, during this new phase of their thought, the main exponents of critical theory took up an Enlightenment-skeptical approach and thus “gave up not only on being thinkers in solidarity with the proletariat, but also on the redemptive powers of rationality itself.”¹⁷⁷

So how does the critical theory of the late Frankfurt School differ from the previous version? Before we can answer this question, we need to say something about the concept of Enlightenment critique.

3.1 The Critique of Enlightenment Thought

The debate around the question of Enlightenment critique can be framed in terms of a conflict between two different conceptions. Such criticism is understood either as a radical form of Enlightenment thought or as a rejection of the idea of Enlightenment in general.

In accordance with the first interpretation, such criticism is levelled against one particular historical expression of the general notion of Enlightenment – “the Enlightenment of the eighteenth Century” – rather than against the concept of Enlightenment per se. As suggested by Graeme Garrard, “any attempt to explain the ways in which the Enlightenment was wrong, harmful, dangerous or deluded is itself an attempt to enlighten,”¹⁷⁸ and he takes pains to show that even the late Frankfurt School can be analyzed in line with this approach. As he maintains, while some interpreted the troubled history of the past century as a

betrayal of the values and beliefs of the *philosophes*, they saw it as their outcome. For them it was not the absence of reason that best explained the political tragedies of twentieth-century Europe, but its perversion by the Enlightenment.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ Joan Alway, *Critical theory and Political Possibilities: Conceptions of Emancipatory Politics in the Works of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Habermas*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn., 1995, p. 32.

¹⁷⁷ David M. Rasmussen, “Critical Theory and Philosophy”, in David M. Rasmussen (ed.) *Handbook of Critical Theory*, p. 22.

¹⁷⁸ Graeme Garrard, *Counter-Enlightenments: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, Routledge, London, 2006, p. 8.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

While Garrard concerns himself solely with the first conception of Enlightenment critique, many interpreters of critical theory tend to adopt the second and more radical approach in their analysis of the late Frankfurt School. To mention a few examples, Bronner has argued that, with *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno “offered not simply the critique of some prior historical moment in time, but of all human development,” something which led them to identify Enlightenment “with barbarism” rather than “with progress”.¹⁸⁰ On McCarthy’s account, moreover, “the wholesale rejection of Western rationalism was given a sociopolitical articulation by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno”.¹⁸¹ Similarly, Wolin has pointed out that “by accepting a Nietzschean view of reason, Horkheimer and Adorno bid adieu prematurely to the project of human self-determination.”¹⁸²

In my view, neither of these two conceptions provides a convincing starting point for an analysis of the late Frankfurt School. For, if Enlightenment-skepticism is interpreted as a complete rejection of the tradition of Enlightenment, then it becomes difficult to account for the continued (although implicit) importance of normative ideals such as freedom and justice. However, if it is understood in the second sense, as a strain of Enlightenment thought that opposes itself to the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, then it seems hard to explain one of the basic ideas behind the theory of the late Frankfurt School, i.e. that the dialectic of Enlightenment can be traced all the way back to the beginning of human civilization.

To return to the question of the relationship between the early and the late Frankfurt School, I have already argued that the transformation of critical theory can be characterized in terms of a distinction between Enlightenment philosophy and Enlightenment skepticism.¹⁸³ Furthermore, I distinguished between two models of critique within each of these traditions and proposed a theoretical framework based on four models: “construction,” “reconstruction,” “genealogy” and “disclosure”. The first two models of critique have already been applied in my analysis of the early Frankfurt School. In the following, I will focus on the latter two of the four models.

In accordance with the guiding principle of Nietzsche’s well-known critique of morality, the *genealogical approach* refers to a form of social criticism that is premised on the possibility of showing that the purposes currently served by a normative ideal or a social practice may be quite different from the purposes that governed its emergence. Within the framework of this first model of Enlightenment-skeptical critique, the aim is to: “criticize a social order by demonstrating historically the extent to which its defining ideas and norms

¹⁸⁰ Stephen E. Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Towards a Politics of Radical Engagement*, p. 3.

¹⁸¹ Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory*, p. 103.

¹⁸² Richard Wolin, *The Frankfurt School Revisited: and other Essays on Politics and Society*, p. 6.

¹⁸³ See the beginning of Chapter 2.

already serve to legitimate a disciplinary or repressive practice.”¹⁸⁴ Furthermore, as Foucault once argued, such a critique:

will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing or thinking what we are, do or think. [...] it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and as wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom.¹⁸⁵

The genealogical approach is a good example of how to tackle the issue of Enlightenment skepticism. However, if it is our intention to clarify the theoretical underpinnings of the late Frankfurt School, it seems to me that we should take yet another approach into consideration.

According to Walzer, the history of religion offers a good example of a critical approach that relies on the knowledge of a moral law that has been acquired through revelation: “Here, to be sure, discovery waits upon revelation; but someone must first climb the mountain, go into the desert, seek out the God-who-reveals, and bring back his word.”¹⁸⁶ A moral law that has been discovered in a similar way can challenge the social order because of its divine origin. Such a moral doctrine is thus opposed to the current norms and practices:

What is revealed to us is a set of decrees: do this! don’t do that! And these decrees are critical in character, critical from the beginning, for it would hardly be a revelation if God commanded us to and not do what we are already doing and not doing.¹⁸⁷

In his recent reformulation of Walzer’s theory, Honneth refers to a profane version of the *disclosive approach* that sets out to “achieve a critique of social reality by opening up a radically new view of reality, a yet-unexhausted value horizon.”¹⁸⁸ This approach is further examined in *The possibility of a disclosing critique of society*, where Honneth comes to the conclusion that the presence of pathological living conditions justifies transcending the prevailing value horizons by means of a disclosing form of social criticism. According to Honneth, moreover, since such a critique

eschews metaphysical presuppositions, it does not seek to justify its normative judgement rationally but to invoke it intentionally in the reader, so to speak. It accomplishes this by presenting such a radically new description of social living

¹⁸⁴ Axel Honneth, “Reconstructive Social Criticism with a Genealogical Proviso: On the Idea of ‘Critique’ in the Frankfurt School”, in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, p. 48.

¹⁸⁵ Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment,” in *The Foucault Reader*, p. 46.

¹⁸⁶ Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁸⁸ Axel Honneth, “Reconstructive Social Criticism with a Genealogical Proviso: On the Idea of ‘Critique’ in the Frankfurt School”, in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, pp. 47-48.

conditions that the latter suddenly acquire the new meaning of a pathological living condition.¹⁸⁹

In my view, the theoretical framework that emerges from the above analysis can be connected to the distinction, relied on in this thesis, between two fundamentally different traditions of thought. As I showed in the previous chapter, the first two models (i.e. the constructive and the reconstructive approaches) provide a basis for the kind of social criticism that find expression within the frame of the Enlightenment tradition. As I pointed out, the Enlightenment-philosophical critique of society refers to an idea of emancipation that requires that the division between private and public autonomy can be overcome.

Likewise, the latter two models (the genealogical and the disclosive forms of critique) offer a useful framework for understanding the radical form of social criticism that draws on the tradition of Enlightenment-skeptical thought. As I will further argue, this sort of criticism refers to a conception of emancipation as a capacity for self-creation or abstract transcendence. While none of these approaches rule out the existence of social communities or collective activity, the possibility of its underlying idea of freedom is independent of such considerations.

Let us return to the debate around the question of Enlightenment critique for a moment in order to examine the main characteristics of the Enlightenment-skeptical view on emancipation and to further clarify the distinction between the genealogical and the disclosive forms of critique.

3.1.1 Two Forms of Enlightenment Skepticism

The either/or logic that follows from the most common approaches to the question of Enlightenment critique is quite reminiscent of what Michel Foucault once called “the ‘blackmail’ of the Enlightenment,” namely that any attempt at a critical analysis of the established social order is confronted with a “simplistic and authoritative alternative: you either accept the Enlightenment and remain within the tradition of its rationalism [...]; or else you criticize the Enlightenment and then try to escape from its principles of rationality”.¹⁹⁰

Therefore, we better avoid thinking of Enlightenment skepticism as a particular version of the Enlightenment-philosophical approach or as a total rejection of this view. In other words, although one might come up with several examples of such thought that actually seek to escape from the Enlightenment principles of rationality, one should be careful not to define Enlightenment criticism in general as “reason’s absolute other,” or as a critique of modernity that has given up on the possibility of retaining “an emancipatory content,” as Habermas tends to see it.¹⁹¹ On the other hand, even though, as

¹⁸⁹ Axel Honneth, “The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The Dialectic of Enlightenment in Light of Current Debates in Social Criticism”, in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 57.

¹⁹⁰ Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment,” in *The Foucault Reader*, pp. 42-43.

¹⁹¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 94.

we shall see, the radical critique of Enlightenment may be endowed with a liberating potential of its own, this does not imply that such a view ought to be regarded as just another form of Enlightenment thought.

In the previous chapter, I referred to Karl Löwith's contention that "ever since Rousseau" the incongruity between private and public autonomy "has been a fundamental problem of all modern theories of the state and society."¹⁹² Now, as I shall argue, the most significant difference between the two traditions has to do with their distinctive approaches to this issue and thus with their respective conceptions of emancipation. While the Enlightenment-philosophical expression of the idea of emancipation has been seen as an effort to overcome the division between private and public autonomy in a balanced and rational way, the Enlightenment-skeptical view is typically defined in contrast to this aim. A similar explanation has been suggested by Richard Rorty.

According to Rorty, there is no doubt that "skeptics like Nietzsche [...] turn their backs on the idea of a community larger than a tiny circle of initiates."¹⁹³ However, this rejection of the attempt to "fuse the public and the private" does not rule out the possibility of an alternative interpretation of emancipation. As he argues, the implications of the Enlightenment-skeptical approach should rather be understood in terms of a reconceptualization of the idea of autonomy: "As ironist theorizing shoved a concern for human solidarity aside, concern for the emancipation of the individual philosopher from his predecessors replaced concern for the emancipation of the oppressed."¹⁹⁴

Unlike the attempt to reconcile the concept of man as a private individual with the concept of man as a citizen of the state, the exclusive "desire for self-creation" is antisocial. On Rorty's account, the kind of freedom that the proponents of the Enlightenment-critical view try to achieve cannot be reflected in social institutions:

Autonomy is not something which all human beings have within them and which society can release by ceasing to repress them. It is something which certain particular human beings hope to attain by self-creation, and which a few actually do.¹⁹⁵

On the other hand, this position does not necessarily require a wholesale abandonment of all of the basic aspects of Enlightenment thought. Indeed, the skeptical scholars that Rorty has in mind do not reject the belief in man's

¹⁹² Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought*, p. 235.

¹⁹³ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. xiii.

¹⁹⁴ Richard Rorty, "Habermas, Derrida and the Functions of Philosophy," in Thomassen, Lasse (red.), *The Derrida-Habermas reader*, p. 48.

¹⁹⁵ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 65.

potential “*emergence from his self-incurred immaturity.*”¹⁹⁶ It is rather the ambivalent consequences of the Enlightenment project’s attempt to realize this idea that they oppose.

In this way one can argue that the Enlightenment-skeptical view of emancipation has to do with what Rorty refers to as “the recognition of contingency,”¹⁹⁷ i.e. to become aware of the essentially constructed and homogenizing character of the ideas and norms on which the social order is based. According to this view, emancipation is closely related to the attainment of private autonomy, i.e. “the sublimity one attains by breaking out of some particular inheritance (a vocabulary, a tradition, a style) which one had feared might bound one’s entire life.”¹⁹⁸

Rorty’s attempt to assimilate this alternative view of freedom to the political philosophy of liberalism is not very convincing. To be sure, the thought of skeptics like Nietzsche, who, as we shall see, can be regarded as the most important originator of the Enlightenment-skeptical approach, is hardly compatible with such a liberal political vision:

In fact, Rorty’s privatisation of the self falls back on the illusion of classical liberalism, which posited a pre-political self in full possession of human faculties, such as free will and conscience, independent of cultural processes of socialisation.¹⁹⁹

To the contrary, Ansell-Pearson believes that Nietzsche would consider Rorty’s notion of private self-creation as a “retreat from the social world” and as “symptomatic of the degeneration of creative action which characterises the modern world.”²⁰⁰

However, while I share these concerns regarding Rorty’s liberal interpretation of Enlightenment-skeptical thought, the mere assumption that the idea of self-creation can have an “impact upon society” does not refute the essentially individualistic character of this alternative concept of freedom. Though it is scarcely justifiable to characterize the tradition of Enlightenment skepticism as apolitical, the unwillingness to come to grips with the traditional issues of political philosophy inevitably dilutes its political potency. For, unlike the leading figures of Enlightenment thought whose idea of emancipation is based on a concept of reason that is committed to the reconciliation of the public and the private, the Enlightenment-skeptical view of liberation is tied to a critique of the concept of reason that arguably precludes any such attempt.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁶ Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’” in *Political Writings*, p. 54.

¹⁹⁷ Richard Rorty, “Habermas, Derrida and the Functions of Philosophy,” in Thomassen, Lasse (red.), *The Derrida-Habermas Reader*, p. 61.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁹⁹ Keith Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker: The Perfect Nihilist*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 171.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ As Peter Sedgwick has argued regarding Nietzsche’s relevance to political thought: “it seems that Nietzsche might be best read as a thinker who unsettles our unquestioned political habits

Having said that, while the Enlightenment-skeptical approach to the question of freedom is typically expressed in opposition to this project, the accompanying view of emancipation does not necessarily coincide with the concept of autonomy understood as a capacity for self-creation. Indeed, such criticism can also be associated with a fierce “rejection of human fragmentation into separate and alienated individuals”²⁰² and thus with a view of emancipation that can be considered as a pre-Socratic counterpart to the Enlightenment-philosophical attempt at a reconciliation, i.e. with the effort to re-create the primordial unity between man and man and between man and nature.

In the following section, I will thus distinguish between two different lines of thought within the tradition of Enlightenment skepticism. As I shall argue, the *world-disclosing critique of society* maintains the idea of an original unity, excluded from the rational structure of the modern world. According to this view, the search for emancipation will require re-establishing one’s relation to this extra-rational realm of reality. From the perspective of disclosing critique, liberation is associated with abstract transcendence. When critique is understood in such a way, the underlying notion of Enlightenment skepticism comes close to the ideal-typical conception of it as the rejection of Enlightenment in general.²⁰³ However, later on in the present chapter we will have occasion to consider a slightly different version of this approach.

The *genealogical critique of society*, on the other hand, dismisses the idea of a primordial unity as pure idealism and consequently rejects the correlative conception of reason’s other as an absolute exteriority. The liberating potential of genealogy does not consist in the ability to disclose external notions of value but rather in the capacity to reveal the homogenizing outcome of Enlightenment reason. From the perspective of genealogical critique, emancipation is associated with the capacity for critical reflection and self-creation. The aim of this approach is not to open up a privileged access to truth in its original sense but, more modestly, to unmask a hidden will to power and thereby to enable us to free ourselves “from captivity to a picture or perspective”.²⁰⁴

As I will seek to demonstrate in the following section, both versions of radical criticism – the genealogical approach and the disclosive form of critique – can be traced back to Nietzsche. To begin with, I will use this conceptual

rather than as someone who offers us easy solutions to political troubles.” See Peter Sedgwick, *Nietzsche: The Key Concepts*, Routledge, New York, 2009, p. 124.

²⁰² Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1990*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1992, p. 60.

²⁰³ See Graeme Garrard, *Counter-Enlightenments: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, p. 8.

²⁰⁴ David Owen, “Criticism and Captivity: On Genealogy and Critical Theory”, p. 216. For a similar analysis of the concept of autonomy that is inherent in Foucault’s critical philosophy, see Amy Allen, *The Politics of Ourselves: Power, Autonomy and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory*, Ch. 3; David Owen, “Orientation and Enlightenment: An Essay on Critique and Genealogy,” in Samantha Ashenden, & David Owen, (eds.), *Foucault Contra Habermas: Recasting the Dialogue Between Genealogy and Critical Theory*, Ch. 1; and Paul Patton, “Foucault’s Subject of Power,” in *Political Theory Newsletter*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1994, pp. 60-71.

framework to examine the contradictory character of Nietzsche's thinking. The purpose of this analysis is to reconsider the critical potential of Nietzsche's philosophy in order to determine whether it can contribute to our understanding of the late Frankfurt School's view of reason, emancipation and collective action. In response to the tendency to frame the theory of the late Frankfurt School in terms of a radical form of Enlightenment thought or as a rejection of the idea of Enlightenment in general, I will attempt to provide the outlines of an alternative approach.

3.2 Nietzsche as a Progenitor of Enlightenment Skepticism

In conformity with what was said in the beginning of the previous chapter regarding the heterogeneity of the Frankfurt School, it has been argued about Nietzsche that his work can neither "be reduced to an essence nor [...] be said to possess a single and clear authoritative meaning."²⁰⁵ Indeed, as Mazzino Montinari points out, "there is no reading of an author like Nietzsche [...] worse than one presenting his violent and unsettling stream of thought as a rigid dogma."²⁰⁶ For this reason it is seriously misleading to reduce the whole of Nietzsche's writings to a mere expression of counter-Enlightenment thought – "anti-liberal, anti-socialist, anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian, anti-rationalist and anti-historical"²⁰⁷ – as many contemporary critical theorists tend to do.

Having said that, the characterization of Nietzsche as a fierce proponent of irrationalism seems more appropriate when applied to his first book, which even Kaufmann has described as "murky," "occasionally hyperromantic" and "less worthy of Nietzsche than anything else of comparable length he ever published."²⁰⁸ As I will seek to show, the basic assumptions that underlie *The Birth of Tragedy* correspond with the first of the two forms of Enlightenment-skeptical critique presented above: the disclosive approach.

3.2.1 The Metaphysical Comfort of Art: Nietzsche's Early Thought

As Raymond Geuss points out in his introduction to *The Birth of Tragedy*, this early work can be understood as an intervention into the debate over the pathologies of modern society and modern culture:

The diagnosis was that life in the modern world lacks a kind of unity, coherence, and meaningfulness that life in the previous societies possessed.

²⁰⁵ Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1990*, p. 3.

²⁰⁶ Mazzino Montinari, *Reading Nietzsche*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 2003, p. 7.

²⁰⁷ Stephen E. Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Towards a Politics of Radical Engagement*, p. 112.

²⁰⁸ Walter Kaufmann, "Translator's Introduction", in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, pp. 3, 4 and 13.

Modern individuals have developed their talents and powers in an overspecialized, one-sided way; their life and personalities are fragmented, not integrated, and they lack the ability to identify with their society in a natural way and play the role assigned to them in the world wholeheartedly.²⁰⁹

But while some scholars (such as Marx) stressed the need for a political response to this issue, the early Nietzsche was convinced that the ills of modern society could only be cured through the rebirth of tragic art. While the former thought that the problem should be dealt with through a critique of political economy and a revolutionary transition to socialism, the latter put faith in the “metaphysical comfort – with which [...] every true tragedy leaves us – that life is at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable”.²¹⁰

Unlike “the cheerful optimism”²¹¹ of theoretical men like Marx, who believed that it was possible to transform society in accordance with rational principles, Nietzsche was convinced that suffering and cruelty are necessary conditions of human life and that “true knowledge, an insight into the horrible truth, outweighs any motive for action”.²¹² According to Nietzsche, it is because of this fundamental condition of man that “we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art – for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*”.²¹³

As has been argued by Keith Ansell-Pearson, Nietzsche’s early idea of emancipation is based on an exploration of the “Greek experience of art”.²¹⁴ To be more precise, Nietzsche’s view on the possibility of escaping pessimism is founded on his interpretation of the principles (or drives) of the Apollinian and Dionysian. According to Nietzsche, these two principles can be understood either as “artistic energies which burst forth from nature herself” or as two forms of human aesthetic activity:

With reference to these immediate art-states of nature, every artist is an ‘imitator,’ that is to say, either an Apollinian artist in dreams, or a Dionysian artist in ecstasies, or finally – as for example in Greek tragedy – at once artist in both dreams and ecstasies ...²¹⁵

However, in addition to the mimetic potential of art, its function was also to help us overcome the apparent meaninglessness of life. Indeed, as Nietzsche observes, in order to endure the terror and horror of existence, the Greek “had

²⁰⁹ Raymond Geuss, “Introduction,” in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. xii.

²¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy,” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, p. 59.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

²¹² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

²¹⁴ Keith Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker: The Perfect Nihilist*, p. 66.

²¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy,” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, p. 38.

to interpose between himself and the life the radiant dream-birth of the Olympians.”²¹⁶

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche elaborates his romantic theory of the essential meaninglessness of life and the correlative existence of a “mysterious primordial unity”.²¹⁷ According to Nietzsche, man becomes aware of the true essence of things under the charm of the Dionysian, and, as he argues, “the blissful ecstasy that wells from the innermost depths of man” with this insight can be explained by the analogy of intoxication:

Either under the influence of narcotic draught, of which the songs of all primitive men and peoples speak, or with the potent coming of spring that penetrates all nature with joy, these Dionysian emotions awake, and as they grow in intensity everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness.²¹⁸

In line with what we have said about the disclosive form of critique, this theory refers to a conception of emancipation as abstract transcendence.

When – as in the Attic tragedy – the Dionysian principle is coupled with the Apollinian one, the metaphysical truth about the world can be revealed to man without having to let him fall into such a state of self-forgetfulness. As he argues:

When after a forceful attempt to gaze on the sun we turn away blinded, we see dark-colored spots before our eyes, as a cure, as it were. Conversely, the bright image projections of the Sophoclean hero – in short, the Apollinian aspect of the mask – are necessary effects of a glance into the inside and terrors of nature; as it were, luminous spots to cure eyes damaged by gruesome night.²¹⁹

In this way, man becomes aware of the gloomy necessity of the world, but he is also liberated from the dreadfulness of this knowledge: “this is the most immediate effect of the Dionysian tragedy, that the state and society and, quite generally, the gulfs between man and man give way to an overwhelming feeling of unity leading back to the very heart of nature.”²²⁰

The rise of Socratism marked the beginning of the end for Greek tragedy. According to Nietzsche, the Dionysian world view was thus superseded by an approach based on the “dialectical desire for knowledge and the optimism of science”.²²¹ In other words, the possibility of gaining insight into the fundamental human condition was concealed from modern man on account of the “theoretical” assumption that the use of reason will lead to happiness. As Geuss writes:

²¹⁶ Ibid., p. 42.

²¹⁷ Ibid., p. 37.

²¹⁸ Ibid., p. 36.

²¹⁹ Ibid., p. 67.

²²⁰ Ibid., p. 59.

²²¹ Ibid., p. 106.

Socratic rationalism upsets the delicate balance on which tragedy depends, by encouraging people not to strive for wisdom in the face of the necessary unsatisfactoriness of human life, but to attempt to use knowledge to get control of their fate.²²²

In this sense, the illusion of being able to “heal the eternal wound of existence” by means of the “Socratic love of knowledge”²²³ is essentially oppressive, since it keeps us from realizing and dealing properly with the basic horror of things.²²⁴

Now, just as Nietzsche believes that the pursuit of theoretical knowledge brought about the death of Greek tragedy and that, as a result, our modern world is “entangled in the net of Alexandrian culture,”²²⁵ so he believes that the answer to this problem lies in a rebirth of the tragic world view: “what hopes must revive in us when the most certain auspices guarantee *the reverse process, the gradual awakening of the Dionysian spirit* in our modern world!”²²⁶

As I have argued, the concept of liberation that is connected with the disclosive form of Enlightenment criticism refers to the continued existence of an extra-rational realm of reality as a promise of a possible escape from the world of reason. Nietzsche’s attempt to deal critically with the consequences of Socratic rationalism and to remind us of the possibility of becoming aware of the reality beyond all appearances, the “mysterious primordial unity,” can thus be understood in terms of such an Enlightenment-skeptical view. Furthermore, as I shall argue below, the theory of the late Frankfurt School can be seen as a more demanding version of this approach.

The political implications of this approach are quite unclear. Is the author of *The Birth of Tragedy* a political thinker, or is he essentially an apolitical philosopher of culture? What exactly does the realization of freedom mean in the context of Nietzsche’s early thought? Is his idea of emancipation based on the expectation of social change, or should it be understood as a form of radical individualism, devoid of any collective vision?

According to Walter Kaufmann’s influential interpretation, Nietzsche was merely interested in the fate of the solitary, isolated individual. For, as he claims, Nietzsche “was not primarily a social or political philosopher,” “he was basically ‘*antipolitical*’.”²²⁷ Similarly, George Mosse has argued that Nietzsche’s thought should be interpreted in light of the decadence of the bourgeois culture taking place in Germany during the second half of the nineteenth

²²² Raymond Geuss, “Introduction,” in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, p. xii.

²²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy,” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, p. 109.

²²⁴ “[L]et us think of a culture that has no fixed or sacred primordial site but is doomed to exhaust all possibilities and to nourish itself wretchedly on all other cultures – there we have the present age, the result of that Socratism which is bent on the destruction of myth.” See *ibid.*, p. 135.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

²²⁷ Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4. ed., Princeton, N.J., 1974, pp. 123 and 412.

century. According to this view, thinkers such as Nietzsche (the *early* Nietzsche at least) blamed the bourgeois age for their “alienation” and did not consider Marxism, for instance, to be a valid alternative to the prevailing state of order. As Mosse sees it, this protest had an existentialist character; Nietzsche and his like-minded contemporaries had little or no ambition whatsoever to actually change society: “Their protest was strictly individual [...] Rejecting traditional modes of thought and society, they found, in art and literature, a way out of the hostile present.”²²⁸

This interpretation is partly supported by Nietzsche’s view that the desire for “metaphysical comfort” exists only for “the more nobly formed creatures, who actually feel profoundly the weight and burden of existence, and must be deluded by exquisite stimulants into forgetfulness of their displeasure.”²²⁹ Furthermore, Nietzsche argues that every man that is capable of such pain and suffering is similar to the figure of Hamlet:

both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have *gained knowledge*, and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things; they feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that they should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint.²³⁰

Even though the Nietzsche of this early work had no declared wish to incite people to change the political institutions in line with the “mystic feeling of oneness”²³¹ that the Dionysian discloses as the true essence of things, and even though one may broadly agree with Thomas Brobjer that Nietzsche’s perspective was rarely “political in any ordinary sense of that word,”²³² in my opinion the characterization of his work as “a-political, anti-political [...] or even supra-political”²³³ is misleading, to say the least. For, as Peter Sedgwick has pointed out, it is unconvincing to suggest that “just because someone does not have an explicitly articulated *theory* of politics this necessarily means they do not have a politics and what they say or write has no political import.”²³⁴

The opposite position is taken by Ansell-Pearson. While he agrees with the former that “the experience of emancipation from oppression (from nature, and from other human beings) is only possible through the medium of art,”²³⁵ he emphasizes the importance to recognize that:

²²⁸ George L. Mosse, *Germans and Jews: The Right, the Left and the Search for a "Third Force" in Pre-Nazi Germany*, London, 1971, p. 5.

²²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy,” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, p. 110.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²³² Thomas H. Brobjer, “Critical Aspects of Nietzsche’s Relation to Politics and Democracy,” in Herman W. Siemens & Vasti Roodt (eds.), *Nietzsche, Power and Politics: Rethinking Nietzsche’s Legacy for Political Thought*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 2008, pp. 206-207. [My emphasis]

²³³ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

²³⁴ Peter Sedgwick, *Nietzsche: The Key Concepts*, p. 123.

²³⁵ Keith Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker: The Perfect Nihilist*, p. 64.

the ‘art’ Nietzsche speaks of and esteems is *public* art, i.e. art such as Greek tragic drama, which gathers together a people or community and discloses to them the ‘truth’ of their existence. One could say, therefore, that in this sense the experience afforded by art *is* political.²³⁶

Even if it seems likely that his contempt for contemporary political ideals involves a commitment to an alternative social order, the political implications of the kind of liberation that Nietzsche has in mind remain quite unclear. While he explicitly rejects the Enlightenment-philosophical effort to “correct the world by knowledge, guide life by science and actually confine the individual within a limited sphere of solvable problems,”²³⁷ *The Birth of Tragedy* contains no clearly defined alternative political vision.

As one might still argue, Nietzsche’s political views are substantially expressed in the text *The Greek State*, which made up part of an early draft of *The Birth of Tragedy* but which he never published.²³⁸ To be sure, in this essay Nietzsche does reveal his initial preference for a strong state, an aristocratic culture and a hierarchical social structure, arguing that “*slavery belongs to the essence of a culture*” and that man can “excuse his existence [...] only as a completely determined being, serving unconscious purposes”.²³⁹ However, to the extent that Nietzsche betrays a profound nostalgia for some aspects of Greek political life, he does not explain how this retrospective vision is linked to his understanding of emancipation.

To conclude, although Nietzsche’s early view of emancipation differs from the radical form of individualism with which it has been associated, and although his conception of “the individual as part of an organic whole”²⁴⁰ can be interpreted as an Enlightenment-skeptical counterpart to the striving for a reconciliation of the public and the private, this approach provides a disclosure of the possibility of escaping the world of reason rather than a recipe for how to deal effectively with the major problems of modern society:

Dionysian art, too, wishes to convince us of the eternal joy of existence: only we are to seek this joy not in phenomena, but behind them. [...] In spite of fear and pity, we are the happy living beings, not as individuals, but as the *one* living being, with whose creative joy we are united.²⁴¹

As we shall see below, this conclusion applies to the philosophers of the Frankfurt School as well. Their inability to clarify the practical consequences of

²³⁶ Ibid., p. 5.

²³⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy,” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, p. 109.

²³⁸ See Raymond Geuss, “Introduction,” in Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, p. xvi; and Keith Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker: The Perfect Nihilist*, pp. 71-76.

²³⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Greek State,” in *On Genealogy of Morality*, Cambridge university press, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 166 and 173.

²⁴⁰ Keith Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker: The Perfect Nihilist*, pp. 71-72.

²⁴¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy,” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, p. 104-105.

their approach can be seen as a typical manifestation of the disclosive form of social criticism.

3.2.2 The Birth of the Sovereign Individual: Nietzsche's Mature Thought

In the "Attempt at a Self-Criticism", written several years after *The Birth of Tragedy* was first published and placed at the beginning of the new edition, Nietzsche describes the book as "badly written, ponderous, embarrassing, image-mad and image-confused, sentimental, in places saccharine to the point of effeminacy,"²⁴² and so on. More importantly, he apparently dissociates himself from his earlier belief in a mysterious primordial unity and his faith in the liberating power of tragic myth. Referring to a well-known passage in his own book, he denies that it would be necessary "to desire a new art, the *art of metaphysical comfort*" and argues instead that "you need to learn the art of *this-worldly* comfort first; you ought to learn to laugh".²⁴³ For, as he wrote a few years earlier in *Human, all Too Human*: "Mankind likes to put questions of origins and beginnings out of its mind: must one not be almost inhuman to detect in oneself a contrary inclination?"²⁴⁴ Besides, there simply is no such thing as an ideal past of humankind, since "before its gate stands the ape"²⁴⁵.

One of the most important implications of this turn in the thought of Nietzsche is that the previous assumption about an *absolute* other and the correlative belief in the possibility of *breaking out* of the rational structure of the modern world has to be rejected.²⁴⁶ There is no primordial realm definitely separated from reason.

Despite the deliberate versatility of his philosophy – "Nur wer sich wandelt, bleibt mit mir verwandt"²⁴⁷ – some questions remain in the focus of Nietzsche's attention during the course of his career. One of these subjects, to which Nietzsche frequently returns, is the critique of Enlightenment reason. More specifically, I am referring here to his criticism of the idea of emancipation underlying most expressions of Enlightenment thought, i.e. the idea that reason can be used to overcome ultimately the "bad things" in life, such as the power-laden relations between men and men's sufferings more generally. As he observes in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

everywhere people are now raving, even under scientific disguises, about coming conditions of society in which 'the exploitative aspect' will be removed

²⁴² Ibid., p. 19.

²⁴³ Ibid., p. 26.

²⁴⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, all Too Human*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, section 1.

²⁴⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Dawn: Thoughts on the Presumptions of Morality*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2011, section 49.

²⁴⁶ Off course, whether it should be considered a turn or not is open to discussion. In fact, the ideas that I have analyzed in terms of a world-disclosing view are quite easy to find even in Nietzsche's later works, such as *Beyond Good and Evil* and *On the Genealogy of Morality*.

²⁴⁷ "One has to change to stay akin to me." See Friedrich Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil," in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, p. 433.

– which sounds to me as if they promised to invent a way of life that would dispense with all organic functions.²⁴⁸

According to Nietzsche, it is the homogenizing outcome of such a use of reason, rather than the sufferings it strives to overcome, that should be considered as oppressive, since it perverts the basic principle of life itself, namely the will to power. As I shall argue, in accordance with what we have said about the genealogical form of critique, this view refers to a conception of emancipation as a capacity for critical reflection and self-creation.

Given that the previous idea of an extra-rational realm of reality is rejected, Nietzsche cannot formulate his critique of reason from the position of an absolute other. Rather, as David Owen has pointed out, Nietzsche's critical evaluation must "acknowledge its own specificity as a moment within the history of reason".²⁴⁹ Since he understands the development of human knowledge as the result of a will to power, he has to rely on this idea as a principle of critique: "Nietzsche's notion of genealogy can act as a form of critique insofar as will to power as an ontological account of human beings functions as a principle of intelligibility and explanation."²⁵⁰

It is well known that Nietzsche came to see the will to power as the fundamental principle of life: "life itself is *essentially* appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest, exploitation [...]".²⁵¹ Therefore, one should not be surprised by or take offence to the fact that the strong man rules over the weak, because, after all, this order of things complies with the fundamental nature of the world. The strong man cannot choose to be weak, and the bird of prey is not free to be a lamb.²⁵² This principle applies to the legal sphere as well. It is simply to be expected that the stronger power makes use of the force of law to achieve a more efficient rule over the weaker powers subordinated to it:

Everywhere that justice is practiced and maintained, the stronger power can be seen looking for means of putting an end to the senseless ravages of *ressentiment* amongst those inferior to it [...] The most decisive thing, however, that the higher authorities can invent and enforce against the even stronger power of hostile and spiteful feelings – and they do it as soon as they are strong enough – is the setting up of a *legal system*, the imperative declaration of what counts as permissible in their eyes, as just, and what counts as forbidden, unjust [...].²⁵³

²⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 393.

²⁴⁹ David Owen, *Maturity and Modernity: Nietzsche, Weber, Foucault and the Ambivalence of Reason*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 31.

²⁵⁰ David Owen, *Nietzsche, Politics and Modernity: A Critique of Liberal Reason*, Sage, London, 1995, p. 47.

²⁵¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil," in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, aphorism 259, p. 393.

²⁵² Friedrich, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, pp. 25-26.

²⁵³ Ibid., pp. 49-50.

However, while the attempt to make use of the force of law in order to defend or increase one's power in relation to other men corresponds with the fundamental nature of life, it is *not* in accordance with the will to power to use for instance legal means in a totalizing way, with the intention of bringing such power-ridden activities to an end:

A system of law conceived as sovereign and general, not as a means for use in the fight between units of power but as a means *against* fighting in general [...] this would be a principle *hostile to life*, an attempt to assassinate the future of man, a sign of fatigue and a secret path to nothingness.²⁵⁴

According to Nietzsche, this is precisely what those who rely on the liberal idea of universal human rights try to achieve in order to overcome the present state of oppression.²⁵⁵ For, on his account: "liberal institutions stop being liberal as soon as they have been attained: after that, nothing damages freedom more terribly and more thoroughly than liberal institutions."²⁵⁶ Indeed, as Nietzsche sees it, the homogenizing tendencies of modern culture is closely related to this effort to promote freedom through the legal guarantee of individual liberties.

Arguably, this does not automatically imply that Nietzsche has to be interpreted as a straightforward reactionary thinker or even as simply conservative. To appreciate Nietzsche's radical critique of the Enlightenment-philosophical view on the possibility of using reason in a liberating way, one should also bear in mind his understanding of human cognition as inescapably situated:

[L]et us be wary of the tentacles of such contradictory concepts as 'pure reason', 'absolute spirituality', 'knowledge as such': - here we are asked to think an eye which cannot be thought at all, an eye turned in no direction at all, an eye where the active and interpretative powers are to be suppressed, absent, but through which seeing still becomes a seeing-something, so it is an absurdity and non-concept of eye that is demanded. There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival 'knowing' [...]²⁵⁷

Indeed, from the point of view of Nietzsche's perspectivism, the belief in objective truth stands out as one of the greatest lies in the history of humankind.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 50.

²⁵⁵ See Keith Ansell-Pearson, "Nietzsche on Autonomy and Morality: The Challenge to Political Theory," in *Political Studies* 39, 1991, p. 275.

²⁵⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols, or How to Philosophize With a Hammer," in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, Section 38, p. 213.

²⁵⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, p. 87.

²⁵⁸ According to Nietzsche: "These 'no'-sayers and outsiders of today, those who are absolute in one thing, their demand for intellectual rigour, [...] all these pale atheists, Antichrists, immoralists, nihilists, these sceptics, ephectics, *hectics* of the mind [...] These are very far from being *free* spirits: *because they still believe in truth*." See *ibid.*, p. 111.

Apart from being hostile to the very essence of life, the prevailing Enlightenment-philosophical conception of reason seems to contradict the perspectival character of existence as well. This idea entails a *perversion of the will to power*, since the attempt to abolish oppression turns the fundamental instincts backward against man himself, and it brings about a *castration of the intellect*, since the preaching of *one* truth conceals its inherent perspectivity.

In other words, just as the moral claims of Enlightenment reason “posit the univocity of right,” so too the epistemological claims of such a conception of reason “posit the univocity of truth”.²⁵⁹ The combination of these two features of Enlightenment thought characterizes a kind of reasoning that Nietzsche calls slave morality. In order to understand Nietzsche’s concept of freedom, we have to make reference to his genealogical critique of this type of moral reasoning. Moreover, as we shall see below, the critical theory of the late Frankfurt School is strongly influenced by this critical approach.

According to Nietzsche, slave morality has turned man into a tame and pitiful creature, into a herd animal that “knows’ what is good and evil”.²⁶⁰ It preaches that: “Only those who suffer are good, only the poor, the powerless, the lowly are good; the suffering, the deprived, the sick, the ugly are the only pious people, the only ones saved, salvation is for them alone [...]”²⁶¹ Furthermore, it does not content itself with the propagation of such a negative attitude toward life. According to Nietzsche, slave morality is founded upon the negation of that which is different from itself: “Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant saying ‘yes’ to itself, slave morality says ‘no’ on principle to everything that is ‘outside’, ‘other’, ‘non-self’: and *this* ‘no’ is its creative deed.”²⁶²

Slave morality is thus founded on the marginalization of “the Other,” and since the prevailing manifestations of Enlightenment thought – the democratic movement, the “ideologists of revolution” and the “doltish philosophers and brotherhood enthusiasts who call themselves socialists and want a ‘free society’”²⁶³ – are seen by Nietzsche as the *heirs* of this view, they must be based on the same logic.²⁶⁴

One of the main aims of Nietzsche’s analysis of slave morality is to undermine the foundational presuppositions on which the Enlightenment-

²⁵⁹ David Owen, *Nietzsche, Politics and Modernity: A Critique of Liberal Reason*, p. 71.

²⁶⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil,” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, Section 202, p. 305.

²⁶¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, p. 17.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁶³ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil,” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, Section 202, pp. 305-306.

²⁶⁴ “Today it seems *to do everyone good* when they hear that society is on the way to *adapting* the individual to general requirements, and that *the happiness and at the same time the sacrifice of the individual* lies in feeling himself to be a useful member and instrument of the whole [...] What is wanted – whether this is admitted or not – is nothing less than a fundamental remoulding, indeed weakening and abolition of the *individual* [...]” See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, Part II, Section 132, p. 83. See also? Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, all Too human*, Part II, Section 218, p. 366.

philosophical project of emancipation is built, i.e. to demonstrate that “even the most cherished notions of modern political culture are the product of a specific historical labour of discipline and culture”.²⁶⁵ This approach should arguably not be lumped together with Nietzsche’s earlier effort to escape the world of reason. Rather, as we have seen, it should be understood as an attempt to reconstruct the idea of Enlightenment in terms of the philosophy of the will to power and the closely related theory of perspectivism in order to “unsettle and undermine the philosophical premises on which humanity erects its political hopes and aspirations.”²⁶⁶

If the critical thrust of the genealogical approach lies in its ability to demonstrate that the ideas and norms on which the modern social order depends contain a hidden will to power, the liberating potential resides in its capacity to make use of this information in order to free us from subjection to such ideas and norms: “What is necessary [...] is to recognise the signs and symptoms of one’s time, resist modernity, and, in this way, achieve a degree of freedom.”²⁶⁷

As we have seen, Nietzsche has to rely on the principle of the will to power as a source of this liberating critique. According to Peter Sedgwick’s understanding of this premise, the origins of critical thought are inextricably connected with the normative conventions that govern society: “The social realm can itself become the precondition for the constitution of autonomous individuals who are able to make their own promises as free beings.”²⁶⁸ In other words, our potential ability to reveal the homogenizing outcome of Enlightenment reason and to free ourselves from the grip of its ideas is dependent on the prior existence of such normative compulsion: “It is this power structure that endows humanity with a will and forms the basis of Nietzsche’s ultimate contention that personhood and will to power go hand in hand.”²⁶⁹

As Nietzsche famously argues in his most important work, *On the genealogy of morality*, the emancipated individual is characterized by his ability to reject the moral authority of tradition and thus to go beyond the rules that constitute social life. For, as Nietzsche writes:

at the end of this immense process where the tree actually bears fruit, where society and its morality of custom finally reveal what they were simply *the means* to [we] find the *sovereign individual* as the ripest fruit on its tree, like only to itself,

²⁶⁵ Keith Ansell-Pearson, “The Significance of Michel Foucault’s Reading of Nietzsche: Power, the Subject, and Political Theory,” in Peter R. Sedgwick, Peter R. (ed.), *Nietzsche: A Critical Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1995, p. 20.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁶⁷ Keith Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political thinker: The perfect Nihilist*, p. 81. See also David Owen, “Criticism and Captivity: On Genealogy and Critical Theory”.

²⁶⁸ Peter R. Sedgwick, *Descartes to Derrida: An Introduction to European Philosophy*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2001, p. 262.

²⁶⁹ Peter R. Sedgwick, “Nietzsche, Normativity and Will to Power,” in *Nietzsche-Studien*, 36, 2007, pp. 216-217.

having freed itself from the morality of custom, an autonomous, supra-ethical individual [...]”²⁷⁰

However, for Nietzsche genuine autonomy is not only connected with the power to transcend the moral standards of ordinary men and to create one’s “own *standard of value*”.²⁷¹ It is also associated with the ability to prepare “the intellect for its future ‘objectivity,’” i.e. “perspectival ‘knowing’”. As we have seen, the latter must not be understood “as ‘contemplation without interest,’” but rather “as *having in our power* the ability to engage and disengage our ‘pros’ and ‘cons,’” for, as he asserts, “we can use the *difference* in perspectives and affective interpretations for knowledge.”²⁷²

To conclude, Nietzsche’s idea of perspectival knowing and his idea of the possibility of transcending the opposition of good and evil are based on the rejection of slave morality. For, as we have seen, the qualities that define the sovereign individual – “this master of *free will*”²⁷³ – are necessarily opposed to the idea of the “univocity of right” as well as the idea of the “univocity of truth.”

Earlier on in this chapter, I distinguished between two forms of critique within the tradition of Enlightenment skepticism. The first of these – the disclosive form of criticism – was found to correspond with the basic assumptions that underlie the idea of emancipation in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Furthermore, in contrast to the outlook of his earlier work, Nietzsche’s mature conception of emancipation can be regarded as a manifestation of the second mode of critique, i.e. the genealogical form of criticism. Moreover, as I shall argue below, in order to come up with a reasonable interpretation of the late Frankfurt School, we have to make reference to both these forms of critique.

As I have argued with reference to both genealogy and world-disclosure, while neither of these types of Enlightenment criticism rule out the idea of collective action, the possibility of its underlying idea of freedom is independent of such considerations. What can be said about Nietzsche’s position with regard to this point? How should we understand the political significance of Nietzsche’s concept of sovereign individuality and the closely related idea of emancipation? As in the case of Nietzsche’s early work, the political implications of his mature thinking are not clear and need to be investigated.

According to Sedgwick, “there is little consensus concerning the manner in which we are to assess or even approach the relationship between Nietzsche and politics.”²⁷⁴ While some scholars agree with Brian Leiter that Nietzsche “has no political philosophy, in the conventional sense of a theory of the state

²⁷⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, pp. 36-37.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 87.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁷⁴ Peter Sedgwick, *Nietzsche: The Key Concepts*, p. 124.

and its legitimacy,”²⁷⁵ others, such as Ansell-Pearson, maintain that “Nietzsche is a ‘political’ thinker first and foremost.”²⁷⁶ On the other hand, the difference between these positions is not as profound as it might appear. After all, the proponents of the first view are aware that, even if Nietzsche did not regard himself as a political thinker, this does not mean “that there are no political consequences of his thinking.”²⁷⁷ Similarly, many of the advocates of the second point of view most likely agree with the opinion that the source of the problem in determining the nature of Nietzsche’s political thought “lies in the fact that nowhere in his writings does Nietzsche ever identify his conception of sovereign individuality with a modern political form.”²⁷⁸

My own position on this subject is rather pragmatic. In my view, the political import of Nietzsche’s mature philosophy is related to his conception of autonomy. To be more precise, I believe that Nietzsche’s idea of emancipation is political in the sense that it seeks to clarify the meaning of autonomy in contrast to the dominant traditions of political thought, such as liberalism and socialism. On the other hand, Nietzsche’s conception of emancipation is apolitical, since the manner in which he defines autonomy precludes the possibility of evaluating the political consequences of free human action. Let me explain this position in more detail.

According to Ken Gemes, Nietzsche’s notion of autonomy must be distinguished from a metaphysical account of freedom of the sort that Kant developed. For, as he argues:

Where one approach begins with the questions ‘For what acts is one morally responsible? For what acts can one be punished or rewarded?’, the other begins with the arguably profounder question ‘What is it to act in the first place, what is it to be capable of acting?’. Those who take the questions of moral responsibility and desert as paramount to the free will question, tend to write as if we already have a notion of self and action more or less firmly in place and are only raising the question of whether such selves are ever to be held morally responsible for their actions. The other approach seeks to problematize the very notions of self and action.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁵ Brian Leiter, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Morality*, Routledge, London, 2002, p. 296. See also Thomas H. Brobjer, “Critical Aspects of Nietzsche’s Relation to Politics and Democracy,” in Herman W. Siemens, & Vasti Roodt (eds.), *Nietzsche, Power and Politics: Rethinking Nietzsche’s Legacy for Political Thought*.

²⁷⁶ Keith Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker: The Perfect Nihilist*, p. 2. See also Peter R. Sedgwick, “Nietzsche, Normativity and Will to power”, pp. 201-209; David Owen, *Nietzsche, Politics and Modernity: A Critique of Liberal Reason*; and Herman Siemens, “Nietzsche Contra Liberalism on Freedom,” in Keith Ansell-Pearson (ed.), *A Companion to Nietzsche*, Blackwell, Malden, MA, 2006.

²⁷⁷ Thomas H. Brobjer, “Nietzsche as Political Thinker: A Response to Don Dombowsky,” in *Nietzsche-Studien*, 30, 2001, p. 394.

²⁷⁸ Keith Ansell-Pearson, “Nietzsche on Autonomy and Morality: The Challenge to Political Theory”, p. 280.

²⁷⁹ Ken Gemes, “Nietzsche on Free Will, Autonomy, and the Sovereign Individual,” in Ken Gemes & Simon May (eds.), *Nietzsche on Freedom and Autonomy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, p. 39.

As we have already seen, in contrast to the Kantian notions of autonomy and free will, Nietzsche is convinced that the emancipated individual is a product of historical conditions. In this sense, Nietzsche does provide us with the means for dealing critically with some of the prevailing traditions of political thought. However, if the idea of emancipation is understood only as the historically procured capacity for self-creation and transcendence of norms and if “the possibility of becoming a sovereign individual is [not] open to humanity as a whole,”²⁸⁰ then it becomes difficult to account for the political counterpart of this idea (perhaps with the exception of some kind of aristocratic polity). No wonder, then, that “Nietzsche is more preoccupied with questions of social and historical change than he is with constructing a model of the ideal society.”²⁸¹ Furthermore, if “individuals that measure up to this supra-normative model define themselves by way of their ability to create their own values,”²⁸² then we cannot say anything about whether the political consequences of such autonomous action can be justified. For, as Ansell-Pearson rightly points out: “Nietzsche succeeds in showing the autonomous self to be the result of an historical process but fails to give recognition in his moral and political thought to the needs of the self as a communal being.”²⁸³

Along with the genealogical approach, Nietzsche’s mature critique of morality and contemporary political culture refers to a concept of emancipation that has political potency but whose main objective is to enable self-creation. According to this approach, once we realize that the predominant way of “conceptualizing the real” is just one among many possible perspectives on the world, then it becomes possible to evaluate this conceptualization and to compare it with other points of view. As Owen argues, the motivation behind such a genealogical approach to the question of emancipation is to enable us to free ourselves “from captivity to a picture or perspective.”²⁸⁴ In *Daybreak* Nietzsche provides a powerful explanation of this view of freedom that deserves to be quoted at length:

At the present time it seems that [...] those who do not regard themselves as being bound by existing laws and customs are making the first attempts to organise themselves and therewith to create for themselves a *right*; while hitherto they had lived, corrupt and corrupting, denounced as criminals, free-thinkers, immoral persons, and villains, and under the ban of outlawry and bad

²⁸⁰ Peter R. Sedgwick, *Descartes to Derrida: An Introduction to European Philosophy*, p. 263. “In fact, the contrary is the case: sovereign individuals are by their very nature exceptions to the rule. They must be exceptions to the rule, for they transcend the conditions that make them possible, and these conditions must continue to exist if such individuals are to be possible.” See *ibid.*, p. 262.

²⁸¹ Keith Ansell-Pearson, “Nietzsche on Autonomy and Morality: The Challenge to Political Theory”, pp. 280-281.

²⁸² Peter R. Sedgwick, *Descartes to Derrida: An Introduction to European Philosophy*, p. 265.

²⁸³ Keith Ansell-Pearson, “Nietzsche on Autonomy and Morality: The Challenge to Political Theory”, p. 285.

²⁸⁴ David Owen, “Criticism and Captivity: On Genealogy and Critical Theory”, p. 216.

conscience. One ought to find this on the whole *fair and right*, even though it may make the coming century a dangerous one and put everybody under the necessity of carrying a gun: by this fact alone it constitutes a counter-force which is a constant reminder that there is no such thing as a morality with an exclusive monopoly of the moral, and that every morality that affirms itself alone destroys too much valuable strength and is bought too dear. Men who deviate from the usual path and are so often the inventive and productive men shall no longer be sacrificed, [...] numerous novel experiments shall be made in ways of life and modes of society [...]²⁸⁵

I have demonstrated how the concept of genealogy and world-disclosure can be derived from Nietzsche's work. As I shall argue in the following section, the critical theory of the late Frankfurt School can be regarded as a kind of synthesis of these two forms of Enlightenment critique.

3.3 In the Absence of a Rational Ground for Emancipation: The Theory of the Late Frankfurt School

The work of the late Frankfurt School has often been described as a more radical version of Georg Lukács' critique of reification. The basic assumptions of this approach have been formulated by Habermas in his analysis of the concept of instrumental reason that was characteristic of this phase of their thought. In attempting to reveal the contradictions inherent in a critical project that starts from the hypothesis of an entwinement of reason and power, Habermas argues that members of the Frankfurt School face the following problem:

On the one hand, they do not agree with Lukács' view that the seemingly complete rationalization of the world has its limit in the formal character of its own rationality [...] On the other hand, Horkheimer and Adorno radicalize Lukács' critique of reification. They do not consider the rationalization of the world to be only 'seemingly complete;' and thus they need a conceptual apparatus that will allow them nothing less than to denounce the whole as the untrue.²⁸⁶

If the goal of critical theory is understood in terms of the possibility of realizing the Enlightenment-philosophical notion of reason, it is hard to deny the existence of such a contradiction. The radical critique of reification, as formulated by the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, cannot be reconciled with an idea of emancipation that requires that the division between private and public autonomy can be overcome. However, as already pointed out

²⁸⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, Part III, Section 164, pp. 100-101.

²⁸⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, pp. 377-378.

above, the attempt to interpret the theory of the late Frankfurt School in light of the Enlightenment-philosophical tradition of thought is misleading. However, as I will argue in the pages ahead, if examined from the point of view of Enlightenment skepticism, the emancipatory potential inherent in late Frankfurt School thought can be explained in a more plausible way.

3.3.1 The Reality of Oppression

It is hardly original to emphasize Nietzsche's influence on the critical theoretical approach that was developed in the beginning of the 1940s. According to Wiggershaus, for instance, Horkheimer and Adorno found "in him, as in no other philosopher, their own desires confirmed and accentuated."²⁸⁷ Likewise, Kellner has noted the similarities between the Frankfurt scholars' "analysis of the relation between the categories of Enlightenment rationality and social domination" and "Nietzsche's derivation of moral categories in *The Genealogy of Morals*."²⁸⁸ Finally, as Wolin points out: "The authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* unreservedly embrace Nietzsche's 'critique of reason'."²⁸⁹

In the prevailing account of the relationship between Nietzsche and the late Frankfurt School, however, this critical approach tends to be understood either as a radical form of Enlightenment thought or as a rejection of the idea of Enlightenment in general. As pointed out above, neither of these two conceptions provides a convincing starting point for an analysis of the late Frankfurt School. In attempting to provide an alternative approach, I will thus draw on the above distinction between the genealogical and the disclosive models of critique.

When reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – the most important work from this period – it is hard not to notice the influence of Nietzsche's philosophy. Obviously, as suggested by contemporary proponents of critical theory, Horkheimer and Adorno turn to thinkers such as Nietzsche and Marquis de Sade mainly in order to expose the "regressive moment"²⁹⁰ of Enlightenment. As they argue: "Like few others since Hegel, Nietzsche recognized the dialectic of Enlightenment. He formulated the ambivalent relationship of Enlightenment to power."²⁹¹ In contrast to "the light-bringing writers" of the

²⁸⁷ Rolf Wiggershaus, "The Frankfurt School's 'Nietzschean Moment'", in *Constellations*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2001, p. 145.

²⁸⁸ Douglas Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity*, p. 95.

²⁸⁹ Richard Wolin, *The Frankfurt School Revisited*, p. 6. See also Peter Pütz, "Nietzsche and Critical Theory", in J. M. Bernstein, (ed.), *The Frankfurt School: Critical Assessments. 1*, Routledge, London, 1994; William Outhwaite, "Nietzsche and Critical Theory", in Peter R. Sedgwick, (ed.), *Nietzsche: A Critical Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1995; Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1990*, Ch. 6 and 9; and Karin Bauer, "Nietzsche, Enlightenment, and the Incomplete Project of Modernity", in Babette E. Babich (ed.), *Habermas, Nietzsche, and Critical Theory*.

²⁹⁰ Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, p. xvi.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

bourgeoisie then, thinkers such as Nietzsche “did not seek to avert the consequences of Enlightenment with harmonistic doctrines.”²⁹²

The radical critique of Enlightenment was a central theme in other works from this period as well. As Horkheimer writes in *Eclipse of Reason*, the ambivalent character of progress is indicated by the fact that “enlightenment is accompanied by a process of dehumanization.” In other words,

it seems that even as technical knowledge expands the horizon of man’s thought and activity, his autonomy as an individual, his ability to resist the growing apparatus of mass manipulation, his power of imagination, his independent judgement appear to be reduced.²⁹³

Similarly, Adorno conceives of a “regressive progress”²⁹⁴ and argues that the dialectic of Enlightenment

gave rise to a situation where peoples were more and more inducted into the control of nature and social organization, but grew at the same time, owing to the compulsion under which culture placed them, incapable of understanding in what way culture went beyond such integration.²⁹⁵

The Frankfurt School’s conception of Enlightenment reason is somewhat reminiscent of Nietzsche’s notion of Socratism. In conformity with the thought of the early Nietzsche, who derives the modern ideal of scientific knowledge from Socrates – “the prototype of the theoretical optimist”²⁹⁶ – Horkheimer describes the “disease” affecting Enlightenment thought “not as having stricken reason at some historical moment, but as being inseparable from the nature of reason in civilization as we have known it so far.”²⁹⁷ Indeed, by focusing on “the cause of enlightenment’s relapse into mythology,”²⁹⁸ the Frankfurt scholars pressed the search for the origin of theoretical knowledge even further back in time. As claimed in the 1944 preface to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology.”²⁹⁹

Admittedly, the Frankfurt scholars’ praise for Nietzsche’s critique of reason is not without reservations. According to Adorno, even if his analysis of slave morality can be relied upon in order to undermine the project of

²⁹² Ibid., p. 92.

²⁹³ Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p. v.

²⁹⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged life*, Verso, London, 2005, p. 151.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 156.

²⁹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy,” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, p. 97.

²⁹⁷ Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p. 119.

²⁹⁸ Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, p. xvi.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., p. xviii. A similar view can be found in Adorno’s work *Minima Moralia*: “Panic breaks once again, after millennia of enlightenment, over a humanity whose control of nature as control of men far exceeds in horror anything men ever had to fear from nature.” See Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, p. 254.

Enlightenment, Nietzsche's alternative to this state of affairs is no less an expression of a general principle of injustice: "The slave morality is indeed bad: it is still the master morality."³⁰⁰ Besides, although the ideal of master morality carries a potential for social criticism, the realization of the doctrine will ensure that this potential is lost:

As a protest against civilization the master morality perversely upheld the oppressed, [but] in the guise of a great power and a state religion, the master morality places itself entirely in the service of the civilizing powers that be, of the solid majority, of resentment and everything that it once opposed.³⁰¹

So, how should we understand the late Frankfurt School's relation to Nietzsche? Should we focus on the apparent similarities between these thinkers, or should we emphasize the divergent orientations with which they approach the task of social criticism? As we have already seen, Nietzsche's view of emancipation is closely related to the conceptions of Enlightenment criticism that were presented in the beginning of this chapter. We now have to examine whether any of these two conceptions provides a convincing starting point for an analysis of the late Frankfurt School.

3.3.2 The Possibility of Emancipation

Thus far we have focused on the Institute's critique of Enlightenment reason. More interestingly, though, in addition to this attempt to investigate "the self-destruction of enlightenment"³⁰² and contrary to what is generally supposed, the Frankfurt scholars also rely on this analysis in order to "prepare a positive concept of enlightenment which liberates it from its entanglement in blind domination."³⁰³ While admitting that all Enlightenment thinking *aims* at promoting social freedom, they are convinced that "the very concept of that thinking, no less than the concrete historical forms, the institutions of society with which it is intertwined, already contains the germ of regression which is taking place everywhere today."³⁰⁴

In order to fulfil the ideals contained in Enlightenment philosophy, it is necessary for Enlightenment thought to "demonstrate its own equivocal nature."³⁰⁵ In other words, the possibility of emancipation is grounded in a process of radical self-examination: "By modestly confessing itself to be power and thus being taken back into nature, mind rids itself of the very claim to mastery which had enslaved it to nature."³⁰⁶ Nietzsche's achievement lies precisely in his insistence on this shocking truth, in having disclosed the

³⁰⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, p. 199.

³⁰¹ Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, p. 79.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

triumph of instrumental reason. For, on Horkheimer and Adorno's account, the potential freedom of man depends on this kind of radical critique of the existing: "In proclaiming the identity of power and reason [Sade and Nietzsche laid bare] the utopia of a humanity which, itself no longer distorted, no longer needs distortion."³⁰⁷

How are we to make sense of this seemingly paradoxical view, which might be understood as a form of Enlightenment thought but which could also be seen as a manifestation of what Habermas refers to as "totalizing critique"?³⁰⁸

Instead of getting caught up in the controversy between those who seek to prevent the Frankfurt School from being associated with "a critique of reason that has become total"³⁰⁹ and those who deny the existence of differences altogether,³¹⁰ I think that we should consider whether any of the models discussed earlier can provide a more convincing explanation of the relation between Nietzsche and the founders of critical theory. As I shall argue, we have to make reference to both of these models of Enlightenment critique in order to come up with a reasonable interpretation of the late Frankfurt School.

The alternative definition of Enlightenment critique that was presented in the beginning of this chapter allows us to move beyond the either/or logic that has characterized much contemporary theoretical discourse. Rather than treating such criticism as necessarily being a part of Enlightenment thought or as a total rejection of such thought, I suggested that it should be interpreted primarily in terms of a reconceptualization of the idea of emancipation. According to this approach, the Enlightenment-skeptical view of emancipation is directed against the notion of a reconciliation between the private and the public and can be considered as aiming for self-creation, in the case of the genealogical form of critique, or abstract transcendence, in the case of the disclosive form of critique. Let us get back to the late Frankfurt School and see what conclusions we can reach.

There are strong suggestions in Horkheimer and Adorno's mature work that emancipation should be understood in line with the genealogical view. To reiterate, the first aspect of this approach is to reveal the homogenizing character of Enlightenment reason. In accordance with this aim, the two thinkers insist that the "tireless self-destruction of enlightenment [...] compels thought to forbid itself its last remaining innocence regarding the habits and tendencies of the *Zeitgeist*"³¹¹ According to Horkheimer, the "task of the masses today consists not in clinging to traditional party patterns, but rather in recognizing and resisting the monopolistic patterns that is infiltrating their own organizations and infesting their minds individually."³¹² For, as Adorno points

³⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 93.

³⁰⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 102.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 96.

³¹⁰ See, for instance, Karin Bauer, "Nietzsche, Enlightenment, and the Incomplete Project of Modernity", in Babette E. Babich (ed.), *Habermas, Nietzsche, and Critical Theory*.

³¹¹ Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, p. 18.

³¹² Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p. 99.

out: “Dialectical reason is, when set against the dominant mode of reason, unreason: only in encompassing and cancelling this mode does it become itself reasonable.”³¹³

In the genealogical view, emancipation is associated with the purpose of uncovering the essentially constructed and repressive character of the ideas and norms on which the social order is based in order to open up the possibility for alternative ways of life. As Adorno argues, once critical theory “has recognized the ruling universal order and its proportions as sick [...] then it can see as healing cells only what appears, by the standards of that order, as itself sick”. Therefore, the task of critical theory is “to help this fool’s truth to attain its own reasons, without which it will certainly succumb to the abyss of the sickness implacably dictated by the healthy common sense of the rest.”³¹⁴ Furthermore, as Horkheimer concludes in *Eclipse of reason*:

If by enlightenment and intellectual progress we mean the freeing of man from superstitious belief in evil forces, in demons and fairies, in blind fate – in short, the emancipation from fear – then denunciation of what is currently called reason is the greatest service reason can render.³¹⁵

Despite the parallels noted, we should also bear in mind the differences. Although the theory of the late Frankfurt School has much in common with the genealogical mode of critique, it cannot be reduced to such an approach. Most importantly, the members of the Institute never became fully reconciled to the idea of will to power and did not content themselves with stating the goal of self-creation. For, even if they sometimes came to the conclusion that “part of the social force of liberation may have temporarily withdrawn to the individual sphere,”³¹⁶ even if they exposed the “antagonism epitomizing the history of our civilization” and acknowledged philosophy’s inability to recognize “the very existence of the antagonism,” they were confident that “philosophical awareness of these processes may help to reverse them”³¹⁷ and continued to nurture the “hope that all may yet be well.”³¹⁸

Does the conception of hope as “wrested from reality by negating it,”³¹⁹ the idea that the experience of society as oppressive may give rise to a hope for change, have more in common with the second version of Enlightenment skepticism, i.e. the disclosive form of critique? As we have seen, for the early Nietzsche, the possibility of overcoming the fragmentation of modern society

³¹³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections From Damaged Life*, p. 78.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

³¹⁵ Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of reason*, p. 126.

³¹⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections From Damaged Life*, p. 18. Similarly, according to Horkheimer: “It is evidence against social pessimism that despite the continuous assault of collective patterns, the spirit of humanity is still alive, if not in the individual as a member of social groups, at least in the individual as far as he is let alone.” See Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p. 95

³¹⁷ Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p. 110.

³¹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections From Damaged Life*, p. 119.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

lies in our ability to reveal the tragic character of human existence. This view is based on a conception of emancipation as a possible escape from the world of reason. A similar idea seems to be implied by Adorno when he argues that “consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite.” In other words, the idea of a liberated society can only be conceived as an abstraction, i.e. in terms of a utopian negation of present society:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. [...] Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light.³²⁰

The plausibility of such an interpretation is supported by the fact that the theorists of the Frankfurt School gave no clear indications as to the practical implications of their work. On the contrary, one of the main characteristics of their late theory of emancipation is a fundamental skepticism regarding the possibility of realizing this theory. In contrast to their earlier emphasis on the rational potential of modern culture, they were now forced to admit that:

The hope for better conditions, insofar as it is not merely an illusion, is founded less on the assurance that those conditions are guaranteed, sustainable, and final than on a lack of respect for what is so firmly ensconced amid the general suffering.³²¹

This abstract and utopian conception of emancipation is the logical result of the uncertainty concerning the liberating potential of individuals and groups. Whereas they had previously relied on the working class as the agent of social change, now the probability of a development in line with the socialist credo seemed very remote:

The rise of the workers from a passive to an active role in the capitalistic process has been achieved at the price of integration in the general system. [...] Their minds are closed to dreams of a basically different world and to concepts that, instead of being mere classification of fact, are oriented toward real fulfilment of those dreams.³²²

Although this theory has clear similarities to the disclosive form of Enlightenment critique, these similarities should not obscure the differences

³²⁰ Ibid, p. 263. Similarly, Horkheimer argues that: “Mutilated as men are, in the duration of a brief moment they can become aware that in the world which has been thoroughly rationalized they can dispense with the interests of self-preservation which still set them one against the other.” See Max Horkheimer, “The End of Reason,” in Andrew Arato & Eike Gebhardt (eds.), *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, Continuum, New York, 1982, p. 48

³²¹ Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, “On the Critique of the Philosophy of History,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, p. 186.

³²² Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p. 100-101.

between them. Above all, while Nietzsche's early conception of emancipation also involves a willingness to let the "saving sorceress" of art turn the "nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live"³²³ and thus to provide us with the metaphysical comfort of dissolution into a "primordial unity", the Frankfurt scholars still cling to an Enlightenment-philosophical understanding of such a union – the unification of private and public autonomy: "An emancipated society [would be] the realization of universality in the reconciliation of differences."³²⁴

To reiterate though, in the thought of the late Frankfurt School this idea serves only a utopian function. In a situation in which there was no social force that could realize reason as interpreted by Horkheimer and his colleagues and in which – in their view – a distorted concept of reason gained ground, they saw no other alternative than to place themselves in radical opposition. Indeed, as Horkheimer assures the reader: "the modern propensity to translate every idea into action [...] is one of the symptoms of the present cultural crisis: action for action's sake is in no way superior to thought for thought's sake, and is perhaps even inferior to it."³²⁵

To sum up, while there are good reasons to agree with those who maintain that Adorno and Horkheimer never entirely stepped out of the tradition of Enlightenment, this fact alone does not tell the whole story. To provide a more convincing understanding of the late Frankfurt School's conception of reason, emancipation and collective action, we can draw from our analysis of Enlightenment skepticism.

On the one hand, insofar as Frankfurt School theory aspires to uncover the contingent processes through which our mode of life has developed, it can be regarded as a genealogical form of critique. In the genealogical view, emancipation is associated with the ability to become aware of the homogenizing character of Enlightenment rationality in order to open up the possibility for self-creation.

On the other hand, inasmuch as the theory of the late Frankfurt School should also be understood as an attempt to overcome the divisions of modern society, it can be seen as a disclosing form of critique. What is intended is not only the disclosure "of our world as a social context of life whose institutions and practices can be taken 'pathological'"³²⁶ but, negatively, the revelation of a liberated society that can only be understood as the utopian counter-image of our world. It is important to point out that, for a thinker such as Nietzsche, the emancipatory potential of world-disclosing critique does not require a political

³²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy," in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, p. 60.

³²⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections From Damaged Life*, p. 110. Indeed, as maintained by Horkheimer: "The task of philosophy is not stubbornly to play the one against the other, but to foster a mutual critique and thus, if possible, to prepare in the intellectual realm the reconciliation of the two in practice." See Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p. 118

³²⁵ Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p. vi.

³²⁶ Axel Honneth, "The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in Light of Current Debates in Social Criticism," in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 60.

strategy in order to be redeemed. For the philosophers of the Frankfurt School, on the other hand, whose “external’ notions of value”³²⁷ cannot be fulfilled in that way, the shattering consequences of their inability to come up with such a program of action are painfully clear:

The infinite patience, the tender, never-extinguished impulse of creaturely life toward expression and light, which seems to soften and pacify within itself the violence of creative evolution, does not, like the rational philosophies of history, prescribe a certain praxis as beneficial, not even that of nonresistance. The light of reason, which dawned in that impulse and is reflected in the recollecting thought of human beings, falls, even on the happiest day, on its irresolvable contradiction: the calamity which reason alone cannot avert.³²⁸

In the following chapters, I will focus on Jürgen Habermas’s critical theoretical approach and its relation to the two versions of Frankfurt School theory. As I will argue in the next chapter, while Habermas’s theory of communicative reason has been examined from a number of perspectives, few have noticed that this approach can be understood as an effort to overcome the opposition between the early and the late Frankfurt School. In my view, to the extent that the concept of communicative reason enables Habermas to combine a positive notion of emancipation with a negative dialectic of reification, it can be seen as a way to bridge the gap between the two types of critical theoretical thought.

³²⁷ Ibid., p. 50.

³²⁸ Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, “On the Critique of the Philosophy of History,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, p. 186-187.

4.

Jürgen Habermas: Bridging the Gap Between the Early and the Late Frankfurt School

In order to make sense of the complex mosaic that classical critical theory became as it evolved during the 1930s and the post-war period, I have argued that we should distinguish between two types of critical theoretical thought. The early Frankfurt School can basically be understood as an heir of the Enlightenment, while the late Frankfurt School should be examined from the point of view of Enlightenment skepticism.

Jürgen Habermas is generally considered to be the leading exponent of the second generation of critical theorists, and his theory of communicative action can thus be understood as a contribution to the development of the Frankfurt School project. However, while few would dispute that Habermas's work can be seen as falling "within the tradition of the Frankfurt School,"³²⁹ it is less clear to which version of classical critical theory it responds.

It was not until the 1980s that Habermas attempted to define his theory in relation to that of the original Frankfurt School in a systematic way, and the position in which he ends up is far from clear-cut.³³⁰ To the degree that he recognizes "the irresistible irony of the world-historical process of enlightenment"³³¹ and puts forward "a new formulation of the paradox of rationalization,"³³² Habermas appears to refer back to the gloomy outlook of the late Frankfurt School. However, as far as he declares his intent to "recall the complex of themes that originally occupied"³³³ the Institute for Social Research and thus to "take up once again the since-neglected tasks of a critical

³²⁹ David Owen, *Between Reason and History: Habermas and the Idea of Progress*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2002, p. 71.

³³⁰ Having said that, I do not intend to give the impression that Habermas remained unaware of classical critical theory until then. Given that his work is rooted in the critical theory developed by the members of the Institute for social research, Frankfurt School theory has, of course, always served as an important background for Habermas.

³³¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, p. 155.

³³² *Ibid.*, p. 118.

³³³ *Ibid.*, p. 378.

theory of society,”³³⁴ his theoretical approach seems to have more in common with that of the early Frankfurt School.

Today most commentators understand Habermas’s critical theory in the latter way, i.e. as a continuation of the research program that was developed in the 1930s or, similarly, as a break with the radical approach that took form in the 1940s. As an example of the first type of view, Peter Dews has described Habermas as “the inheritor” of “the form of interdisciplinary Marxist social analysis initiated by members of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research.”³³⁵ Similarly, according to Seyla Benhabib: “Habermas has succeeded in restoring that unique relationship between philosophy and the social sciences that had been characteristic of early critical theory.”³³⁶

It is also common to describe Habermas’s work as a reaction to the critical approach that was developed by the late Frankfurt School. According to some commentators, we should be aware of the fundamental difference between Habermas’s theory and the critique of reason that was articulated in the most important works from this period:

Rebuffing the lessons of his teachers, who drew in *Dialectic [of Enlightenment]* the important connection between instrumental reason and totalitarianism, Habermas rejects the antifoundational impetus of Adorno and Horkheimer’s critical theory.³³⁷

According to this view, Habermas saw Horkheimer and Adorno’s failure to provide a normative foundation for critical theory as an opportunity to overcome this weakness in their legacy:

Where Adorno viewed radical critique as the necessary condition for an emancipated society that would accommodate individuals *qua* particulars, Habermas believes that reconciliation already glimmers in communicative practices in the rationalized lifeworld.³³⁸

While attracting less attention, the relation between Habermas and the older members of the Frankfurt School can also be described in the opposite way. Some commentators hesitate to describe Habermas’s work in terms of a renewed attempt to link up with Horkheimer’s original program. As has been argued by Göran Therborn, for example: “Habermas has not seen or

³³⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, p. 386.

³³⁵ Peter Dews, “Editor’s Introduction”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jürgen Habermas*, Verso, London, 1992, p. 1.

³³⁶ Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 278. See also Douglas Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism and Modernity*, p. 196; and Joan Alway, *Critical Theory and Political Possibilities: Conceptions of Emancipatory Politics in the Works of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas*, Ch. 6.

³³⁷ Karin Bauer, “Nietzsche, Enlightenment, and the Incomplete Project of Modernity”, in Babette E. Babich (ed.), *Habermas, Nietzsche, and Critical Theory*, p. 119.

³³⁸ Deborah Cook, *Adorno, Habermas, and the Search for a Rational Society*, p. 160. See also James Bohman, “Critical Theory and Democracy”, in David M. Rasmussen (ed.), *Handbook of Critical Theory*; and Lasse Thomassen, *Habermas: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Ch. 1.

presented himself, or even without objection allowed others to present him, as the heir of critical theory, or as continuing the work of the Frankfurt School.”³³⁹

Others have tended to emphasize the similarities between Habermas’s approach and the type of critical theory that took form in the 1940s. For instance, Thomas McCarthy has drawn attention to Habermas’s interest in the idea of reification” that haunted Western Marxism’s original perception of Max Weber.” As he sees it: “It is, in fact, one of the principal aims of *The Theory of Communicative Action* to develop a more adequate version of the theory of reification.”³⁴⁰ Furthermore, Axel Honneth has described Habermas’s work as: “an attempt to give a communication-theoretic turn to the diagnosis that in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* took the form of a philosophy of history.”³⁴¹

How are we to understand Habermas’s critical theory then? As the debate surrounding Habermas’s work suggests, his position within the tradition of critical theory can be explained in a number of different and apparently contradictory ways. However, while in previous research Habermas’s approach has been explained as a new version of the project of the early Frankfurt School as well as a contribution to the development of late Frankfurt School theory, to my knowledge no one has systematically considered the possibility of combining both of these explanations.³⁴² One of the central claims of this book is that Habermas’s critical theory can be interpreted in such a way.

Throughout this chapter, I will attempt to show that Habermas’s critical theory can be understood as a way to mediate between the two versions of critical theoretical thought. If we assume, as I believe we should, that it is Habermas’s aim to reconcile the opposition between the two types of critical theory, what appear to be mutually exclusive positions may not actually be so. Indeed, to the extent that Habermas’s theory “establishes an intelligible link between the *negative* dynamic of progress in present-day capitalism and an emancipatory historical *project* in the Marxian sense”³⁴³, it can be seen as a way to bridge the gap between the early and the late Frankfurt School.

As pointed out in the introductory chapter, the possibility of negotiating the tension between the two versions of critical theory can be understood in at least two ways. The first option is to reconstruct the opposing positions in

³³⁹ Göran Therborn, *From Marxism to Post-Marxism?*, Verso, London, 2008, pp. 79-80. See also Thomas B. Bottomore, *The Frankfurt School and Its Critics*, Routledge, London, 2002, Ch. 3 and 4.

³⁴⁰ Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory*, p. 152.

³⁴¹ Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, p. 285. See also Timo Jütten, “The Colonization Thesis: Habermas on Reification”.

³⁴² The possibility of such an approach is hinted at in Albrecht Wellmer, “Reason, Utopia, and the Dialectic of Enlightenment”; and Helmut Dubiel, “Domination or Emancipation? The Debate over the Heritage of Critical Theory”, in Axel Honneth et al (eds.), *Cultural-Political Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*. See also Beatrice Hanssens interesting discussion of Habermas’s interpretation of Walter Benjamin in Beatrice Hanssen, “Critical Theory and Poststructuralism: Habermas and Foucault”, in Fred Rush (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, pp. 280-309.

³⁴³ Albrecht Wellmer, “Reason, Utopia, and the Dialectic of Enlightenment”, p. 101.

order to integrate both points of view in a comprehensive theory. As I seek to show in the following sections, this is the approach chosen by Habermas in his attempt to develop an alternative to classical critical theory. In order to make this point clear, we have to explain how his efforts to reconcile the two positions are related to the development of an alternative concept of reason and a two-tiered theory of rationalization. In the remainder of this chapter, I will focus on this issue. The second option is to argue that the two positions are, after all, not in conflict. This less demanding approach is the one that will be adopted when I return to this subject in the final chapter.

To be sure, in Habermas's attempt to deal with the dual legacy of Frankfurt School thought, neither of the classical versions of critical theory is accepted uncritically. However, before we proceed to examine this attempt, we should look more closely at the reasons for reconstruction.

4.1 The Ambivalent Legacy of the Frankfurt School and the Need for an Alternative Concept of Reason

Like his predecessors in the Frankfurt School, Jürgen Habermas has attached great importance to the concept of reason. However, while he remains committed to their goal of reconciling “a modernity which has fallen apart,”³⁴⁴ the inability to understand rationality in a truly intersubjective way is seen by Habermas as a motive for reconsidering classical critical theory. As he argues, the somewhat naïve optimism of the early Frankfurt School as well as the exaggerated pessimism of the late Frankfurt School can be explained as a consequence of too narrow a conception of reason.

Firstly, one of the main aims of the early Frankfurt School was to demonstrate that the potential for reason and emancipation was already implicit in contemporary social life. According to Habermas, the failure to meet this requirement has to do with the fact that the key members of the Institute initially remained loyal to Marx in ascribing a liberating potential to the historical expansion of the productive forces. In other words, the early Frankfurt School continued to endorse a concept of reason, the realization of which was dependent on “the purposive application of the immeasurable wealth of human and material powers of production”.³⁴⁵ As Habermas argues, the main objective of the early Frankfurt School foundered on a too narrowly defined concept of reason.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁴ Jürgen Habermas, “The Dialectics of Rationalization”, in *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jürgen Habermas*, p. 125.

³⁴⁵ Max Horkheimer, “Materialism and Morality”, in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p. 29.

³⁴⁶ See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, p. 382; Jürgen Habermas, “Max Horkheimer: La scuola di Francoforte a New York”, in *Profili politico-filosofici*, Guerini e associati, Milano, 2000, p. 276; and Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 129.

More precisely, Habermas argues that the Marxist approach to reason that characterized the *Institut für Sozialforschung* during the 1930s can be understood as a version of the modern philosophy of the subject. Within this model, two subject-object relationships are singled out as equally primordial:

Under 'object' the philosophy of the subject understands everything that can be represented as existing; under 'subject' it understands first of all the capacities to relate oneself to such entities in the world in an objectivating attitude and to gain control of objects, be it theoretically or practically. The two attitudes of mind are representation and action. The subject relates to objects either to represent them as they are or to produce them as they should be.³⁴⁷

As Habermas clarifies a few years later, when the relationship between the human being and the world is understood in terms of the philosophy of the subject, reason is cognitively and instrumentally reduced.³⁴⁸ More importantly, though, as soon as one makes such a reduced concept of reason the basis of a project of emancipation, "one immediately runs up against an ironic inversion of what is actually intended."³⁴⁹ In the absence of a clearly defined alternative to purposive rationality and without a concept of reason that is wide enough to include other kinds of rational behavior as well, the project of emancipation will necessarily turn into its opposite.

Secondly, Habermas shares the tendency of the late Frankfurt School to regard "the fact that instrumental reason has attained predominance over other forms of action and knowledge as constituting the decisive 'disorder' of modern societies."³⁵⁰ However, Habermas has challenged the original version of this approach, arguing that it is contradictory to describe reason exclusively as an instrument of domination while still holding on to a by now vague idea of non-instrumental reason in its attempt to expose the true nature of the former: "To be sure, this description of the self-destruction of the critical capacity is paradoxical, because in the moment of description it still has to make use of the critique that has been declared dead."³⁵¹

Insofar as the conceptual framework of instrumental reason "expresses the relations between subject and object from the vantage point of the knowing and acting subject and not from that of the perceived and manipulated subject,"³⁵² the late Frankfurt School remains caught in the nets of the philosophy of the subject. Once the concept of reason is reduced to instrumental reason, the explicative tools needed to understand the structures of domination from the perspective of the dominated groups themselves is lost. This kind of critique "denounces as a defect something that it cannot

³⁴⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, p. 387.

³⁴⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 311.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 292

³⁵⁰ Axel Honneth, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect", in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 73.

³⁵¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 119.

³⁵² Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, p. 389.

explain in its defectiveness because it lacks a conceptual framework sufficiently flexible to capture the integrity of what is destroyed through instrumental reason.”³⁵³ As long as reason is comprehended in such a foreshortened way, critical theory cannot credibly live up to the demand to demonstrate that the potential for emancipation is already implicit in contemporary social life: “freedom, as the principle of modernity, cannot be really grasped by means of the basic concepts of the philosophy of the subject.”³⁵⁴

While the inability to understand rationality in a truly intersubjective way is seen by Habermas as a motive for reconsidering classical critical theory, his efforts to bridge the gap between the early and the late Frankfurt School are closely related to the development of an alternative concept of reason. In this attempt to reformulate the normative foundations of critical theory, two questions stand out. The first question is whether reason can be understood in terms of a unified concept. The second question regards the potential for the creation of a more liberated society and thus whether and how reason can be practical. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, Habermas’s attempt to overcome the gap between the early and the late Frankfurt School is closely related to his answer to these two questions.

In *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas sets out to explore the two questions by looking at two aspects of Max Weber’s theory of rationalization. Referring to Weber’s well-known diagnosis of the times in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and the late essay *Science as a Vocation*, Habermas focuses on the theses of a loss of meaning and a loss of freedom, which, according to his interpretation, characterizes Weber’s view of the disenchanting world.³⁵⁵ Weber’s two theses are closely related to the questions above. While the former thesis deals with cultural rationalization (the disintegration of objective reason), the latter one relates to the issue of social rationalization (the institutionalization of cultural rationality complexes).

According to Weber’s first thesis, as a consequence of the development of modern structures of consciousness, reason has split into a plurality of cultural value spheres. Habermas makes a distinction between three such spheres:

With science and technology, with autonomous art and the values of expressive self-presentation, with universal legal and moral representations, there emerges a differentiation of *three value spheres, each of which follows its own logic.*³⁵⁶

Along with this process of differentiation, in which “the ‘inner logics’ of the cognitive, expressive and moral elements of culture come into consciousness,”³⁵⁷ the relation between the three spheres supposedly develops into a conflict, something which Weber has described in terms of a “new polytheism”:

³⁵³ Ibid., p. 389.

³⁵⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 292.

³⁵⁵ See above all Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, Ch. II.4.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 163-164.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 164.

Here, what we see is the perpetual conflict of different gods with each other. [...] Just as it was when the Hellene sacrificed to Aphrodite, and then to Apollo, and, above all, when everyone sacrificed to the gods of his particular city, so it remains today, although the magical and mythical, though inwardly true, plasticity of those acts has been stripped away. It is fate that reigns over these gods and controls their struggle, certainly not 'science'.³⁵⁸

As different and competing complexes of rationality are developed, as the substantial unity of reason is lost, so too is the sense of meaning that traditional religious worldviews once provided for: "To the degree that objective reason shrunk down to subjective reason, culture was losing the power to reconcile particular interests through convictions."³⁵⁹

Furthermore, in addition to the process of cultural rationalization, which has led to the disintegration of traditional worldviews, Weber takes an interest in the *institutionalization* of the modern structures of consciousness, i.e. in the process of societal rationalization. As Habermas points out, though, according to Weber's understanding of this development, only one of the three spheres of value that was differentiated along with the process of cultural rationalization has actually been institutionalized in modern societies. Only the purposive kind of rationality characteristic of the cognitive element of culture gets transposed into societal rationalization. As Weber sees it, the institutional embodiment of reason is represented by the formation of the capitalist economy and the modern state:

Societal rationalization consists in the establishment of subsystems of purposive-rational action and, indeed, in the forms of the capitalist enterprise and the modern governmental institution. [...] According to Weber, the rationality of these forms of enterprise [*Betrieb*] and institution (or compulsory association, *Anstalt*) consists in the fact that at first entrepreneurs and officials, and then also workers and employees, are obliged to act purposive-rationally.³⁶⁰

As stated in Weber's second thesis, this process entails man's subjection to the economy and the state and hence brings with it a form of domination that can be described in terms of a loss of freedom. As he put it in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*:

The Puritans *wanted* to be men of the calling – we, on the other hand – *must be*. For when asceticism moved out of the monastic cells and into working life, and began to dominate innerworldly morality, it helped to build that mighty cosmos of the modern economic order (which is bound to the technical and economic conditions of mechanical and machine production). Today this mighty cosmos determines, with overwhelming coercion, the style of life *not only* of those

³⁵⁸ Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation", in *Max Weber's Complete Writings on Academic and Political Vocations*, Algora Publishing, 2008, p. 44.

³⁵⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, p. 302.

³⁶⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, pp. 217 and 219.

directly involved in business but of every individual who is born into this mechanism [...] ³⁶¹

As we shall see, while Habermas basically agrees with Weber's hypothesis of the cultural rationalization, he is not convinced that the existence of a plurality of value spheres implies an irreparable loss of meaning; and, while he defends the view that the spread of purposive-rational action, following in the wake of the formation of the capitalist economy and the bureaucratic state, largely characterizes the development of modern societies, he does not agree that it is the only possible outcome. In other words, the rationalization of society does not inevitably lead to a loss of freedom.

Can reason be understood in terms of a unified concept, and can this idea of reason be realized in the form of a rational, emancipated society? In order to address the first and principal aim of this book and thus to substantiate the claim that Habermas's critical theory can be understood as an attempt to mediate the gap between the two types of classical critical theory, I will in the remainder of this chapter seek to show how the sought-after reconciliation is related to his answer to the above questions. In other words, I will demonstrate how his efforts to overcome the opposition between the early and the late Frankfurt School is related to the development of an alternative concept of reason.

As will become clear, in spite of Habermas's critique of his predecessors in the Frankfurt School, he subscribes to a version of the Enlightenment-skeptical view according to which the modernization of society is characterized by an increasing degree of domination. At the same time, he is trying to revive the more optimistic view of the early Frankfurt School, arguing that society can after all be transformed in a liberating way.

4.2 The Unity of Rationality in the Multiplicity of Value Spheres

As pointed out above, Habermas's attempt to overcome the tension between the two versions of the Frankfurt School is based on the development of an alternative concept of reason. To clarify this point, I will first try to show how Habermas relies on the theory of communicative rationality in order to reconcile the ideal of a unified concept of reason with the practice of differentiation. Furthermore, as I will discuss in the next section, Habermas makes use of the concept of communicative reason in order to develop a two-levelled approach to the processes of societal rationalization. As I see it, this position enables Habermas to criticize the predominant characteristics of the process of modernization while maintaining a well-grounded confidence in the

³⁶¹ Max Weber, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism", in Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism and Other Writings*, Penguin Books, 2002, pp. 120-121.

possibility of an alternative emancipatory form of social change and thus of closing the gap between the two types of critical theoretical thought.

How does this relate to the development of “a social theory concerned to validate its own critical standards”?³⁶² As I will discuss later in this chapter, Habermas’s intention to formulate a well-grounded critical theory does not rely on philosophy alone. Thus, as pointed out by Peter Dews, Habermas “continues the materialist argument of the original Frankfurt School in suggesting [...] a practically-oriented collaboration between philosophy and empirical social science.”³⁶³

The main intention behind Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality is to regain “the lost unity of reason”³⁶⁴ in order to lay down the normative grounds of social criticism and to promote once again, within the frame of such a theory, the project of an emancipated society. As we have already seen, the definition of such a concept of rationality has to correspond with a disenchanting worldview and thus with the differentiated character of modern culture. In other words, the attempt to justify “a weak but not defeatistic concept of linguistically embodied reason”³⁶⁵ has to steer between the Scylla of a nostalgic return to the unitary thinking of metaphysics and the Charybdis of a complete rejection of this ideal.

Modern philosophical thought differs from traditional philosophy primarily with respect to how the issue of reason is addressed. In Habermas’s view, contemporary philosophy cannot lay claim to an all-encompassing knowledge of the world as a whole. In other words, “the philosophical tradition, insofar as it suggests the possibility of a philosophical worldview, has become questionable.”³⁶⁶ What implications does this have for the possibility of recovering a comprehensive concept of reason?

Following the disintegration of metaphysical thought, the idea of a possible “reconciliation of a modernity which has fallen apart”³⁶⁷ has to be understood in a post-metaphysical way. Such a reconstruction of the concept of reason is possible only insofar as philosophy “still maintains a certain relation to pretheoretical knowledge and to the nonobjective totality of the lifeworld.”³⁶⁸ Instead of remaining faithful to its metaphysical origins, philosophy “might do

³⁶² Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, p. xli.

³⁶³ Peter Dews, “Editor’s Introduction”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jürgen Habermas*, p. 26.

³⁶⁴ Jürgen Habermas, “Philosophy as Stand-In and Interpreter”, in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1990, p. 18.

³⁶⁵ Jürgen Habermas, “The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of Its Voices”, in *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, p. 142.

³⁶⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, p. 1.

³⁶⁷ Jürgen Habermas, “The Dialectics of Rationalization”, in *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jürgen Habermas*, p. 125.

³⁶⁸ Jürgen Habermas, “A Return to Metaphysics?”, in *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, p. 48.

well to refurbish its link with the totality by taking on the role of interpreter on behalf of the lifeworld.”³⁶⁹

In its post-metaphysical form, philosophy must renounce “its privileged access to truth” and has to “implicate itself in the fallibilistic self-understanding and procedural rationality of empirical sciences [...]”³⁷⁰ However, while the growth of modern science, the disintegration of traditional worldviews and other changes have led to the development of philosophy as merely one academic discipline among others, it does not necessarily follow that philosophy must “completely surrender the relationship to the whole that had distinguished metaphysics.”³⁷¹ For, unlike the other scientific disciplines, philosophy can rely on its intimate relation to the lifeworld in order to discover “a reason that is already operating in everyday communicative practice.”³⁷² Rather than trying to rehabilitate the exaggerated concept of reason that was developed within the tradition of metaphysical idealism, our interest should be directed toward the “goal of formally analysing the conditions of rationality”.³⁷³

Now, what does it mean to say that a person behaves in a rational way? And, what does it mean to say of a linguistic expression that it can count as rational? As Habermas has pointed out: “When we use the expression ‘rational’ we suppose that there is a close relation between rationality and knowledge.”³⁷⁴ In his attempt to come up with a preliminary specification of the concept of rationality, Habermas compares a phenomenological approach with what he calls a “realistic” approach and makes it clear that his position is close to the former.

While the realistic approach “starts from the ontological presupposition of the world as the sum total of what is the case and clarifies the conditions of rational behavior on this basis,”³⁷⁵ the phenomenological perspective makes the objective world a problem by examining how the unity of the world is constituted for the members of a given community:

The world gains objectivity only through *counting* as one and the same world *for* a community of speaking and acting subjects. [...] To elucidate the concept of rationality the phenomenologist must then examine the conditions for communicatively achieved consensus.³⁷⁶

At its most fundamental level, Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality implies that human speech is associated with such a consensus generating

³⁶⁹ Habermas, Jürgen, “Philosophy as Stand-In and Interpreter”, in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, pp. 18-19.

³⁷⁰ Jürgen Habermas, “A Return to Metaphysics?”, in *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, p. 38.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*

³⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

³⁷³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, p. 2.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

potential. It is basically because our knowledge of the world is founded on this possibility (because it is communicatively mediated) that reason ought to be understood as communicative reason.

In opposition to the subject-object model of consciousness that has characterized the philosophical tradition to such a large degree, Habermas's view rests on a fundamental assumption of the philosophy of language, namely:

the conviction that language forms the medium for the historical and cultural embodiments of the human mind and that a methodologically reliable analysis of mental activity must therefore begin with the linguistic expressions of intentional phenomena, instead of immediately with the latter.³⁷⁷

In order to clarify why Habermas considers the sphere of everyday life to be a "promising medium for regaining the lost unity of reason"³⁷⁸ and whether such a concept of rationality can be assumed to correspond with the differentiated character of modern culture, I will pursue some of the consequences of this so-called "linguistic turn".

Firstly, Habermas emphasizes the internal connection between meaning and validity. As he sees it, we understand the meaning of an utterance when we know what makes it valid, i.e. when we are aware of the grounds that make it acceptable. In other words: "We understand a speech act when we are acquainted with the kind of reasons that a speaker could cite in order to convince a hearer that he (the speaker) is entitled under the given circumstances to claim validity for his utterance."³⁷⁹

Now, as long as knowledge is understood exclusively in descriptive terms, as the knowledge of something that takes place in the objective world, the concept of rationality is reduced to only one of its dimensions. As long as we hold on to such a cognitivist approach, "only the representative function [of language] is supposed to be constitutive of reason."³⁸⁰ The internal connection between meaning and validity would then be limited to the "dimension of the linguistic representation of states of affairs," so that speakers and hearers would "understand the meaning of a sentence when they know under what conditions it is *true*."³⁸¹ Similarly, we understand an intention to bring about a certain end when we are acquainted with the means for attaining it. Given this assumption, the rationality of a person would have to be established in terms of her ability to put forward well-grounded truth claims and to her successfulness in carrying through goal-directed actions. However, as

³⁷⁷ Jürgen Habermas, "The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of Its Voices", in *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, p. 134.

³⁷⁸ Jürgen Habermas, "Philosophy as Stand-In and Interpreter", in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, p. 18.

³⁷⁹ Jürgen Habermas, "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning", in *Postmetaphysical Thinking. Philosophical Essays*, p. 78.

³⁸⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 311.

³⁸¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, pp. 276-277. [My emphasis]

Habermas points out, the potential of reason should not be restricted to this sole dimension:

In contexts of communicative action, we call someone rational not only if he is able to put forward an assertion and, when criticized, to provide grounds for it by pointing to appropriate evidence, but also if he is following an established norm and is able, when criticized, to justify his action by explicating the given situation in the light of legitimate expectations. We even call someone rational if he makes known a desire or an intention, expresses a feeling or a mood, shares a secret, confesses a deed, etc., and is then able to reassure critics in regard to the revealed experience by drawing practical consequences from it and behaving consistently thereafter.³⁸²

Consequently, the internal relationship between meaning and validity does not only concern claims to truth and effectiveness. According to Habermas's pragmatically expanded theory of meaning, we understand the meaning of any given speech act when we know "the conditions under which it can be accepted as *valid*."³⁸³

Closely related to all this, a further consequence of Habermas's language philosophical approach is that the ontological framework of the participants in interaction has to be expanded. The three-world theory, which emerges out of the extended theory of meaning and the broadening of the concept of validity, constitutes an important aspect of Habermas's thought. To put it briefly, the theory of communication is bound up with a modern worldview according to which a subject may adopt "*different basic attitudes toward elements of the same world*".³⁸⁴ The predominant aspect of validity and the concept of the world to which the validity claim corresponds vary with the type of communicative action in which an actor is involved:

[I]f normative rightness and subjective truthfulness are introduced as validity claims analogous to truth, 'worlds' analogous to the world of facts have to be postulated for legitimately regulated interpersonal relationships and for attributable subjective experiences – a 'world' not only for what is 'objective,' which appears to us in the attitude of the third person, but also one for what is normative, to which we feel obliged in the attitude of addressees, as well as one for what is subjective, which we either disclose or conceal to a public in the attitude of the first person.³⁸⁵

The world-historical development reflected by the ontological premises of the theory of communication, i.e. the disintegration of objective reason, brings the theme of reconciliation to the fore. As long as "the three aspects under which the world can become accessible to rational treatment" were still held together within the conceptual framework of metaphysical and religious worldviews,

³⁸² Ibid., p. 15.

³⁸³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 313. [My emphasis]

³⁸⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, p. 236.

³⁸⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 313.

they “were able to impart a unitary sense to the life-conduct of those who oriented themselves according to these worldviews in their thought and action.”³⁸⁶ However, along with the process of modernization, this illusion is broken. As the substantial unity of reason is dissolved, as the aspects truth, normative rightness and authenticity or beauty are separated from each other, the world appears to become void of meaning.

This brings us back to the question with which this section began, i.e. whether it is possible to regenerate the sense of unity once anchored in a divine world order by other means. According to skeptics such as Weber, the only feasible way to reestablish some kind of unity is through a subjective act of will. The burden to “create meaning in a fragmented universe”³⁸⁷ is thus placed on the modern individual herself. However, the value struggle would only be pacified at the level of the individual. The rationalized world as a whole would still be characterized by the antagonism between the competing value spheres and thus by a deep sense of meaninglessness.

As Habermas sees it, while reason has indeed “split itself up into a plurality of value spheres,”³⁸⁸ the different aspects of reason are interrelated through processes of speech oriented toward understanding. In order to grasp this view, we have to move on to the third consequence of Habermas’s paradigm of linguistic philosophy, namely, the implications for the very concept of rationality.

Habermas’s three-world theory can be seen as an alternative approach to the question of reconciliation, i.e. to the question of how the unity of reason may be preserved. The motive is well known. This was the point of departure for the philosophy of the young Hegel, and, as we have seen, Marx as well as the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School were driven by similar intentions.

Now, as indicated in the beginning of this section, while Habermas shares the concern for the “reconciliation of a modernity which has fallen apart”³⁸⁹ he does not believe that anything can give back the absolute sense of meaning that traditional religious worldviews once provided, and he repudiates the romantic ideal of a unified ethical life. Furthermore, in line with Weber, he sees the separation of reason into a number of cultural value spheres as an inevitable part of the process of differentiation. On the other hand, though, he does not believe that this development leads to a “new polytheism”,³⁹⁰ to an insoluble value struggle between the three spheres. In other words, reconciliation can supposedly be attained “without surrendering the differentiation that modernity has made possible [...]”.³⁹¹

³⁸⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, p. 246.

³⁸⁷ Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 262.

³⁸⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, p. 247.

³⁸⁹ Jürgen Habermas, “The Dialectics of Rationalization”, in *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jürgen Habermas*, p. 125.

³⁹⁰ Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation”, in *Max Weber’s Complete Writings on Academic and Political Vocations*, p. 44.

³⁹¹ Jürgen Habermas, “The Dialectics of Rationalization”, in *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jürgen Habermas*, p. 125.

How can these apparently opposing conceptions be combined? How can the guiding thought of a possible reconciliation of modernity and the intuition of undisturbed intersubjectivity – an idea which “recalls older ideas of logos”³⁹² such as the unitary thinking of Plato – be brought together with the sundering process of differentiation?

As we have seen, corresponding to the process of differentiation, Habermas makes a distinction between the different aspects under which an interacting subject can lay claim to the validity of an utterance and between the world dimensions to which such claims are related. This analysis leads to the conclusion that linguistic understanding contains principally three forms of rationality and, accordingly, to the formulation of a concept of reason that is internally differentiated.³⁹³

As follows from this view, the unity of the moments of reason can only be preserved discursively, through communicative processes that make it possible for the participants to assume the obligation to provide, if necessary, convincing grounds for the validity claims raised: “The unity of rationality in the multiplicity of value spheres rationalized according to their inner logics is secured precisely at the formal level of the argumentative redemption of validity claims.”³⁹⁴

Habermas makes use of speech act theory in order to clarify how the three aspects of reason are interrelated. Focusing on the communicative employment of sentences, three universal linguistic functions that are held to be equally constitutive of men’s relationship to the world and, thus, of the “genuinely social reproduction of life” come into view. As he argues:

Elementary speech acts display a structure in which three components are mutually combined: the propositional component for representing (or mentioning) states of affairs; the illocutionary component for taking up interpersonal relationships; and finally, the linguistic components that bring the intention of the speaker to expression.³⁹⁵

According to this view, while the speaker determines under which aspect of validity his utterance is primarily to be understood, in processes of reaching understanding the three components of the speech act are always interrelated. In other words,

in coming to an understanding about something with one another and thus making themselves understandable, actors cannot avoid embedding their speech acts in precisely three world-relations and claiming validity for them under these aspects.³⁹⁶

³⁹² Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 315.

³⁹³ See Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, p. 286.

³⁹⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, p. 249.

³⁹⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 312.

³⁹⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, p. 308.

Let us gather up the threads in order to get back to the issue of Habermas's relation to the early and the late Frankfurt School. In the beginning of this chapter, I argued that Habermas's reconstruction of the normative foundations of critical theory can be described as an attempt to answer two questions. The first question was whether reason could be understood in terms of a unified concept. The second question concerned the potential for the creation of a more liberated society and thus whether and how reason could be realized.

As for the first question, I have shown how Habermas relies on the theory of communicative rationality in order to reclaim the ideal of a unified concept of reason without abandoning the differentiation that modernity has made possible. As we have seen, the communicative concept of reason is claimed to be able to hold together the three dimensions of rationality that has been separated out in the process of differentiation. In Habermas's own words: "these three [aspects] continue to form a concept of reason which is internally differentiated."³⁹⁷

Given that the normative ground of critical theory is redefined in such a manner, the liberating potential has to be qualified in a similar way. This leads to the second question, i.e. to what extent Habermas's critical theory can contribute to the realization of reason and thus to the construction of a liberated society. This also brings us back to the issue of Habermas's relation to classical critical theory.

As indicated above, Habermas's position within the tradition of critical theory can be described as conforming to the model of the early Frankfurt School as well as the late Frankfurt School approach. However, as I will continue to argue, Habermas's intersubjective reorientation of classical critical theory should rather be understood as an attempt to overcome the opposition between these two types of critical thought.

4.3 Two Models of Social Rationalization

How is the attempt to recover a comprehensive concept of reason related to the development of a well-grounded critical theory? As we have seen, Habermas follows pragmatism and hermeneutic phenomenology in attributing "epistemic authority to the community of those who cooperate and speak with one another."³⁹⁸ The implications of this insight into the fundamental precedence of practice over theory lie not only in enabling post-metaphysical philosophy to "undertake a self-reflection of the sciences that [...] exposes the meaning foundation of scientific theory-formation in prescientific practice"³⁹⁹

³⁹⁷ Habermas, Jürgen, *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jürgen Habermas*, p. 93.

³⁹⁸ Habermas, Jürgen, "Philosophy as Stand-In and Interpreter", in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, p. 19.

³⁹⁹ Habermas, Jürgen, "A Return to Metaphysics?", in *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, p. 49.

but also in enabling a reconstruction of its traditional role as “the guardian of rationality.”⁴⁰⁰ If philosophy steps out of the system of the sciences and turns back toward the horizon of the lifeworld, it “discovers a reason that is already operating in everyday communicative practice.”⁴⁰¹ By making use of that knowledge, philosophy can assume the role of helping us to become aware of the social pathologies of modernity. In other words,

communicative rationality provides a standard for evaluating systematically distorted forms of communication and of life that result when the potential for reason that became available with the transition to modernity is selectively utilized.⁴⁰²

This reformulation of critical social theory cannot rest on philosophy alone. As he points out: “We have to bear in mind that philosophical thought, which has surrendered the relation to totality, also loses its self-sufficiency.”⁴⁰³ In order to avoid the apriorism of traditional views of reason, the internalist perspective of the philosophical reconstruction of reason has to cooperate with the externalist perspective of empirical science. In this sense, the reconstruction of the normative foundations of critical social theory must be based on an empirically testable account of societal rationalization as well as on the potential for communicative rationality.

Habermas’s attempt to bridge the gap between the early and the late Frankfurt School is carried out within the framework of a two-tiered theory of rationalization that enables him to account for the contemporary structures of domination as well as the social potential for a transformation of these structures. In the following section I will focus on the issue of transformation. In other words, I will attempt to describe how the position of the early Frankfurt School is reinterpreted by Habermas as the conceptual cornerstone of a theory of emancipation that draws on the potential of communicative rationality.

As I will argue, if social change is conceived as a product of communicative action, the conditions for the realization of an emancipated society appear to be satisfied. However, the reproduction of society does not take place merely according to the premises of communicative reason. Indeed, as will be demonstrated later in this chapter, the actions of those involved in this process (i.e. the members of a particular society): “are coordinated not only through processes of reaching understanding, but also through functional interconnections that are not intended by them and are usually not even perceived within the horizon of everyday practice.”⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰⁰ Habermas, Jürgen, “Philosophy as Stand-In and Interpreter”, in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, p. 20.

⁴⁰¹ Habermas, Jürgen, “A Return to Metaphysics?”, in *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, p. 50.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴⁰³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, p. 2.

⁴⁰⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, p. 150.

As I will try to make clear in the second part of this section, if the existing social order is understood as the unintended consequence of human action, the coercive aspects of societal reproduction come to the fore. In this sense, Habermas's critical theory may also lay the ground for an analysis of contemporary structures of domination. We shall thus see how the position of the late Frankfurt School is reformulated in terms of a theory of domination that focuses on the colonization of the lifeworld.⁴⁰⁸

4.3.1 The Unredeemed Potential for Communicative Rationalization

In general terms, Habermas's notion of emancipation is tied to the idea of a potential integration of private and public autonomy. In line with the tradition of Enlightenment thought, liberation alludes to the possibility of a society where our dependence on others does not limit our freedom as autonomous and individuated beings, i.e. a society where we are able to take part freely in the process whereby the social norms are reproduced. In other words, the concept of emancipation refers to the possibility of self-determination and self-realization that would arise from the establishment of such a community.

More specifically, though, Habermas's belief in the possibility of human emancipation is based on the idea of unrestricted communication. In the 1970s Habermas introduced the concept of the "ideal speech situation" in order to account for the counterfactual conditions conceived of as necessary for the development of "an emancipated form of life".⁴⁰⁹ As he argued: "we call a speech situation ideal if communication is impeded neither by external contingent forces nor, more importantly, by constraints arising from the structure of communication itself."⁴¹⁰

Initially, Habermas apparently assumed that the ideal speech situation could be understood as the appearance of an ideal form of life that may actually be realized.⁴¹¹ In later works, however, Habermas has taken pains to deny the utopian nature of this approach. Indeed, according to this later view, the ideal speech situation should *not* be seen as "as a utopian model for an emancipated society".⁴¹² So, what does the concept of emancipation essentially mean, and what does the abstract state of an emancipated society actually refer to?

⁴⁰⁸ Indeed, according to Honneth: "With regard to this image of a colonization of the life-world, Habermas's theory of society ultimately seems to agree with the pessimistic social critique we find in the negativist current of contemporary Critical Theory." See Axel Honneth, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect", in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 68.

⁴⁰⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction: Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2001, p. 99. See also Jürgen Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics*, Heinemann, London, 1971 pp. 118-120; and Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, pp. 25-26.

⁴¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction: Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action*, p. 97.

⁴¹¹ See for example the quote from "Wahrheitstheorien" in Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1978, p. 310.

⁴¹² Jürgen Habermas, *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jürgen Habermas*, p. 93. In *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas refers to Hauke Brukhorst in order to sustain this view. As he argues: "In contrast to the projection of ideals, in the light of which we can identify *deviations*, 'the idealizing presuppositions we always already have to adopt whenever we want to reach mutual

According to Habermas: “Even the decentered society cannot do without the reference point provided by the projected unity of an intersubjectively formed common will.”⁴¹³ On the other hand, today “there is no equivalent for the philosophy of the subject’s model of self-influence in general and for the Hegelian-Marxist understanding of revolutionary action in particular.”⁴¹⁴ As far as Habermas is concerned, the idea of liberation does not refer to the self-legislation of a transcendental subject, as in Kant; nor does it refer to the domain of social labor and the potential self-organization of society, as in Marx and early critical theory. Rather, the notion of emancipation has to be redefined in communicative terms: “The ideas of reconciliation and freedom [...] can in fact be developed by means of the concept of communicative rationality [...]”⁴¹⁵

The communicative conception of emancipation is likely to remain an impotent ideal, unless it can be backed up with empirical support. In order to accommodate the project of liberation, communicative rationality has to be understood both in a regulative sense, as an ideal indicating how the unity of reason can be vindicated discursively, and in a constitutive sense, as “actually progressively embodied in the activities and institutions of society.”⁴²² As I will try to make clear, Habermas’s concept of emancipation is closely connected to the development of grammatical speech.

We have already seen how Habermas makes use of speech act theory in his attempt at “rationally reconstructing universal rules and necessary presuppositions of speech actions oriented to reaching understanding.”⁴²³ This formal pragmatic reconstruction of the idea of reason has to be confirmed through a rational reconstruction in the broad sense, which is able to account for the ontogenetic and phylogenetic *development* of such deep structures of cognition and action.

In his *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas draws on George H. Mead’s understanding of language in order to explain the development of the ability to act communicatively and thus to back up the theory of communicative reason with convincing empirical support. Strictly speaking, Habermas’s idea is not so much to prove his theoretical assumptions empirically as to render them open to falsification. By translating the philosophical theory into sociological and social psychological terms, he sets out to demonstrate that communicative reason is implicit in contemporary social life, while keeping this assumption within the reach of empirical scrutiny.

understanding do not involve any kind of correspondence or comparison between idea and reality.” See Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, p. 323.

⁴¹³ Jürgen Habermas, “The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of Its Voices”, in *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, p. 141.

⁴¹⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 361.

⁴¹⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, pp. 1-2.

⁴²² Peter Dews, “Introduction: Habermas and the Desublimation of Reason”, in Peter Dews (ed.), *Habermas: A Critical Reader*, p. 19.

⁴²³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, p. 138.

Firstly, in opposition to the basic assumptions of the philosophy of the subject, Mead argues that a person's constitution as a *subject* coincides with "the emergence of a new medium of communication,"⁴²⁴ i.e. with the establishment of symbolically mediated interaction. As described by Habermas: "self-consciousness forms itself on the path from without to within, through the symbolically mediated relationship to a partner in interaction."⁴²⁵

According to this view, consciousness is not understood as something "immediate or purely inward"; neither does it presuppose that a person objectify herself from the perspective of a third person. Rather, an actor originally becomes conscious of himself by taking the perspective of a *second* person: "With this self-relation, the actor doubles himself in the instance of a 'me,' which follows the performative 'I' as a shadow – a shadow, because 'I,' as the author of a spontaneous gesture, am given to 'me' only in memory".⁴²⁶ In other words, a person's consciousness of himself ought to be understood as a phenomenon that is "communicatively generated" and that, therefore, possesses "an intersubjective core".⁴²⁷

Secondly, as Habermas points out, Mead does not only see language as that which explains the possibility of self-consciousness. More importantly, it is also supposed to serve as "a medium for action coordination and for socialization."⁴²⁸ Apart from the *cognitive* self-relation through which the subject becomes conscious of itself, a person may also take up a linguistically mediated *practical* relation to herself. Once again, Mead explains this through the mechanism of taking the attitude of the other:

Now, however, taking the other's perspective is extended into *role-taking*: Ego takes over alter's *normative*, not his *cognitive* expectations. [...] Through the fact that I perceive myself as the social object of an other, a new reflexive agency is formed through which ego makes the behavioral expectations of others into his own.⁴²⁹

In order to explain the emergence of this process, one has to take the structures of grammatical language and normatively guided action into further consideration. Habermas's main critique of Mead is tied to this assumption. As he points out, having explained how the prelinguistic, instinct-steered interaction was reorganized through the emergence of a new medium of communication, i.e. "symbolically mediated interaction" or "symbol language",

⁴²⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, p. 43.

⁴²⁵ Jürgen Habermas, "Individuation through Socialization: On Mead's Theory of Subjectivity", in *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, p. 177.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 177-178.

⁴²⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, p. 27.

⁴²⁹ Habermas, "Individuation through Socialization: On Mead's Theory of Subjectivity", in *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, p. 179.

Mead did not manage to describe the subsequent development of a differentiated system of language, what he calls grammatical speech.⁴³⁰

In Habermas's view, as action became normatively regulated,⁴³¹ language took on the function of coordinating action and socializing actors, in addition to the function of reaching understanding.⁴³² Together with this development, the original function of language, the very means for reaching understanding, was transformed, resulting thereby in the constitution of a propositionally differentiated form of communication.⁴³³ At this stage, language is supposedly comprised of three independent, yet interconnected, components, or modes: the propositional, the illocutionary and the expressive.

Habermas is convinced that it is with the "differentiation of the different modes" just mentioned that "the linguistic medium of reaching understanding gains the power to *bind* the will of responsible actors."⁴³⁴ Indeed, at this level, linguistic communication makes it possible to achieve action coordination and socialization in a non-coercive way, since it presupposes understanding and an orientation to validity claims:

The binding effect of illocutionary forces comes about, ironically, through the fact that participants can say 'no' to speech-act offers. The critical character of saying 'no' distinguishes taking a position in this way from a reaction based

⁴³⁰ Habermas, Jürgen, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, Chapter V, for instance p. 23. As regards the development of mutually obligating norms, Mead examines its part in the process of socialization *ontogenetically* – from the point of view of the growing child – but he does not explain how this structure of normed expectations could develop *phylogenetically*. The moral authority of the generalized other "is supposed to have arisen by way of the internalization of group sanctions. However, this explanation can hold only for ontogenesis, for groups must have first been constituted as units capable of acting before sanctions could be imposed in their name." See *ibid.*, p. 45. These shortcomings have to be remedied in order for Mead's assumption about the "genetic primacy of society in relation to socialized individuals" to be conceivable. See *ibid.*, p. 43.

⁴³¹ Habermas draws on Émile Durkheim's sociology of religion in order to clarify the origins of the structure of norm-guided action and thus to "close the phylogenetic gaps in Mead's construction." See *ibid.*, p. 53. He argues that the collective identity that Mead's comprehension of socialization *presupposes* develops out of a religious community: "The core of collective consciousness is a normative consensus established and regenerated in the ritual practices of a community of believers." See *ibid.*, p. 60.

⁴³² Durkheim does not pay much attention to the role of language, whereas Habermas agrees with Mead that once on the level of normatively regulated action, linguistic communication takes on the function as a medium for socialization and action coordination: "Previously, only the instruments for reaching understanding were transformed into signals, into signs with conventionally fixed meanings; at the stage of normatively guided action, however, the symbolism penetrates even into motivation and the behavioral repertoire. It creates both subjective orientations and suprasubjective orientation systems, socialized individuals, and social institutions." See *ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴³³ According to Habermas, Mead does not take notice of the fact that, as norm-guided action becomes linguistically mediated, the very structure of reaching understanding is changed. In this manner, language itself develops into grammatical speech. As he sees it, "grammatical speech is distinguished from signal language by the differentiation and reintegration at a higher level of the assertoric, appellative, and expressive components that at first form a diffuse unity." See *ibid.*, p. 61.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

solely on caprice. A hearer can be 'bound' by speech-act offers because he is not permitted arbitrarily to refuse them but only to say 'no' to them, i.e. to reject them for reasons.⁴³⁵

From the above discussion on the development of the ability to act communicatively we may conclude that, according to Habermas, communicative rationality is actually embodied in the structure of intersubjective social relations. Since at the level of grammatical speech the medium of understanding is structured in such a way that participants in communication have to orient themselves in relation to criticizable validity claims, the potential for emancipation is "not merely a normative or regulative *ideal* of argumentative discourse but one of its constitutive *presuppositions*."⁴³⁶

What can be said about the conditions for the emergence of an emancipated society? In order to answer this question, Habermas's reconstruction of the concept of reason has to be connected to his theory of societal rationalization. As he argues,

despite its purely procedural character as disburdened of all religious and metaphysical mortgages, communicative reason is directly implicated in social-life processes insofar as acts of mutual understanding take on the role of a mechanism for coordinating action.⁴³⁷

As maintained by Habermas, social actions can be distinguished by whether the participants are oriented toward reaching an agreement with each other or whether each actor is oriented to his own success.⁴³⁸ By relating the two action orientations to the mechanisms through which individual actions are coordinated, i.e. if a social relation for instance "is based on *interest positions* alone or on *normative agreement* as well,"⁴³⁹ he is able to make a distinction between two models of social rationalization:

The model of purposive-rational action takes as its point of departure the view that the actor is primarily oriented to attaining an end (which has been rendered sufficiently precise in terms of purposes), that he selects means that seem to him appropriate in the given situation, and that he calculates other foreseeable consequences of action as secondary conditions of success. Success is defined as the appearance in the world of a desired state, which can, in a given situation, be casually produced through goal-oriented action or omission. [...] By contrast, I shall speak of *communicative* action whenever the actions of the agents are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding. In communicative action participants are not primarily oriented to their own individual successes; they pursue their individual

⁴³⁵ Ibid., pp. 73-74

⁴³⁶ Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory*, p. 195.

⁴³⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 316.

⁴³⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, p. 286.

⁴³⁹ Ibid., p. 282.

goals under the condition that they can harmonize their plans of action on the basis of common situation definitions.⁴⁴⁰

Obviously, only the second of these models is genuinely social and consistent with the conditions for emancipation. Unlike purposive-rational action, communicative action does not depend on plain power or a potential for sanction in order to achieve coordination. Now, as we have seen: “it is only on the level of grammatical speech that an agreement *can* take on the form of communicatively achieved consensus.”⁴⁴¹ Hence, as Habermas sees it, the potential emergence of a liberated society relies upon the development of a propositionally differentiated form of communication.

4.3.2 The Paradoxes of Societal Modernization

In Habermas’s attempt to justify the normative foundations of critical theory, the reproduction of society is understood in terms of communicative rationality. From this internal point of view,

society is represented as a network of communicatively mediated cooperation, with strategic relations and ruptures inserted into it. [...] It lends to everything that happens in society the transparency of something about which one can speak – even if one does not (yet) understand it.⁴⁴²

As Habermas points out though, the maintenance of society as a whole cannot be convincingly explained in this way: “The material reproduction of society – securing its physical maintenance both externally and internally – is blended out of the picture of society understood as a communicatively structured lifeworld.”⁴⁴³ This is important since, according to Habermas, disturbances in the social development and the corresponding crisis manifestations of modern society – “loss of meaning, anomie, and alienation” – derive from such processes of material reproduction and cannot be properly perceived from the internal perspective referred to above.⁴⁴⁴

According to Habermas, in order to understand the contemporary structures of domination, one has to adopt an approach that makes it possible to analyze societal reproduction from an external point of view as well. Indeed, “it is precisely the phenomena of contradictory rationalization” that makes it necessary to differentiate between two approaches to the study of society.⁴⁴⁵

Habermas’s introduction of a two-level concept of society can be traced back to Marx’s critique of the efforts to explain the existing social order as an outcome of the interaction between free and equal persons. As famously asserted in the opening words of *The Communist Manifesto*: “The history of all

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 285-86.

⁴⁴¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, p. 73.

⁴⁴² Ibid., pp. 148-149.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., p. 110.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 148.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 301.

hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.”⁴⁴⁶ Significantly, Marx considered the various attempts to delineate the legitimate exercise of political power as different ways to conceal its real nature.

As stressed by Marx, with the growth of capitalism and the institutionalization of the wage-labor contract, the antagonistic nature of social existence was hidden behind the “mysterious character of the commodity-form”.⁴⁴⁷ Thereby, the class antagonism between “oppressor and oppressed” took on an economic character. In contrast to the conflict-ridden relations between “freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf”⁴⁴⁸, the interaction between bourgeoisie and proletariat was not easily recognized in terms of class domination:

It is [...] precisely this finished form of the world of commodities – the money form – which conceals the social character of private labor and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly.⁴⁴⁹

If the reproduction of society somehow takes place in secret, if it has to be seen as the outcome of an automatically determined process rather than a result of what its members desire, how should it be approached from the point of view of critical theory? One of the main achievements of Marx was the development of a theoretical approach that enabled him to analyze the social world from the point of view of both transsubjectivity and intersubjectivity:

In this theory for the first time a sphere of activity is institutionalized which operates according to laws unintended by and unknown to social agents themselves, and which can only be analyzed from the transsubjective standpoint of the observer. The main purpose of critical social theory is to demystify the power of this domain upon individuals’ lives, and to return the control over their actions and interactions to individuals themselves.⁴⁵⁰

Habermas basically agrees with Marx’s view that contemporary forms of coercion has to be analyzed from the point of view of a third person *as well as* the historical perspective of those subjected to it.⁴⁵¹ In order to be able to explain the development of society as, to some extent, independent of the will of social actors without excluding the possibility of regaining a sense of control over this process, we should “distinguish between *social integration* and *system integration*: the former attaches to action orientations, while the latter reaches right through them.”⁴⁵²

⁴⁴⁶ Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 33.

⁴⁴⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, Penguin Classics, 1990, p. 164.

⁴⁴⁸ Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 33.

⁴⁴⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, pp. 168-169.

⁴⁵⁰ Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 68.

⁴⁵¹ See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, pp. 334-338.

⁴⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 150.

Basically, the concept of social integration refers to the symbolic reproduction of society, whereby action orientations ideal typically are harmonized through intersubjective understanding, whereas the concept of system integration refers to the processes of material reproduction, which do not necessarily rely on norms in this sense. System integration gains importance only in connection with the development of the capitalist economy and modern administration:

Actors have always been able to sheer of from an orientation to mutual understanding, adopt a strategic attitude, and objectify normative contexts into something in the objective world, but in modern societies, economic and bureaucratic spheres emerges in which social relations are regulated only via money and power.⁴⁵³

In these areas, action coordination is fundamentally brought about by means of “delinguistified” media, such as money and power, rather than through ordinary language.⁴⁵⁴

While Habermas follows Marx in founding the point of departure for his critique of society on the twofold conception of social life, he shares the skepticism of the late Frankfurt scholars concerning the possibility of overcoming, once and for all, the coercive aspects of societal reproduction. Furthermore, he criticizes Marx’s conception of domination for its exclusive focus on the economic sphere.

Firstly, while for Marx the fact that the crisis-ridden coordination of the economic sphere presently takes place behind the backs of the great mass of people who are subjected to it does not preclude a development through which the control over this process would be placed in the hands of this class, Habermas remains skeptical as to very possibility of such a project. As he argues, Marx “underestimated the independent logic of systemically integrated spheres of action”⁴⁵⁵

Indeed, Marx’s conviction regarding the possibility of a revolutionary transformation whereby the autonomous economic process would be brought back “into the horizon of the lifeworld again”⁴⁵⁶ relies on the assumption that “the capitalist system is *nothing more* than the ghostly form of class relations that have become perversely anonymous and fetishized.”⁴⁵⁷ As Habermas sees it, the differentiation of systemically coordinated action spheres belongs to the course of social evolution itself and cannot be reversed without further ado. Contrary to Marx’s revolutionary expectations, Weber’s prediction turned out

⁴⁵³ Ibid., p. 154.

⁴⁵⁴ As explained by Habermas: “Media such as money and power attach to empirical ties; they encode a purposive-rational attitude toward calculable amounts of value and makes it possible to exert generalized, strategic influence on the decisions of other participants while *bypassing* processes of consensus-oriented communication.” See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, p. 183.

⁴⁵⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 352.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, p. 339.

to be correct: “the abolition of private capitalism would not at all mean the destruction of the iron cage of modern industrial labor.”⁴⁵⁸ In other words, Marx failed to see that “*every* modern society, whatever its class structure, has to exhibit a high degree of structural differentiation,”⁴⁵⁹

Secondly, in contrast to Marx’s diagnosis of capitalistic ills, Habermas does not focus merely on the economic aspect of the systemic coordination of action. For, as he argues: “Even if system problems arise in the first place from the crisis-ridden course of economic growth, economic disequilibria can be balanced through the state jumping into the functional gaps of the market.”⁴⁶⁰

While the modern state is dependent on the economic system in the sense that it has to rely on taxation, it certainly plays an independent role in the process through which the scope for communicative action is circumscribed. In other words, the mere disclosure of the economic aspect of the opposition between the differently coordinated social domains is not sufficient to comprehend the complexity of this kind of domination:

As opposed to the monism of the theory of value, we have to allow for two steering media and four channels through which the two complementary subsystems subject the lifeworld to their imperatives. Reification effects can result in like manner from the bureaucratization and monetarization of public and private areas of life.⁴⁶¹

As we have seen, Habermas relies on the theory of communicative rationality in order to reclaim the ideal of a unified concept of reason. Furthermore, the notion of emancipation refers to the possibility of making use of this potential for rationality as a mechanism for coordinating action. However, as follows from his diagnosis of contemporary social pathologies, the communicative reproduction of society appears to be “colonized” by money and power. Indeed, similar to the analysis of Weber and the late Frankfurt School, Habermas argues that the conditions for emancipation are distorted by the logic of system rationalization:

To the degree that the economic system subjects the life-forms of private households and the life conduct of consumers and employees to its imperatives, consumerism and possessive individualism, motives of performance, and competition gain the force to shape behavior. The communicative practice of everyday life is one-sidedly rationalized into a utilitarian life-style [...] As the private sphere is undermined and eroded by the economic system, so to is the public sphere by the administrative system. The bureaucratic disempowering and desiccation of spontaneous processes of opinion- and will-formation expands the scope for engineering mass loyalty and makes it easier to uncouple political decision-making from concrete identity-forming contexts of life.⁴⁶²

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 340.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 343.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

⁴⁶² Ibid, p. 325.

Habermas's thesis of colonization can thus be understood as an attempt to reconstruct the late Frankfurt School's skepticism regarding the possibility of realizing the normative goal of human emancipation. In this sense, the diagnosis of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is reformulated in terms of a theory of reification that focuses on the colonization of the lifeworld.⁴⁶³

4.4 Conclusion

Like his predecessors in the Frankfurt School, Habermas has attached great importance to the concept of reason. In his view, reason has always been and remains the basic theme of philosophy: "One could even say that philosophical thought originates in reflection on the reason embodied in cognition, speech, and action; and reason remains its basic theme."⁴⁶⁴

However, as we have seen in this chapter, the inability to understand rationality in a truly intersubjective way is seen by Habermas as a motive for reconsidering classical critical theory. As he argues, the somewhat naïve optimism of the early Frankfurt School as well as the exaggerated pessimism of the late Frankfurt School can be explained as a consequence of too narrow a conception of reason. Furthermore, to the extent that the theory of communicative action enables Habermas to combine a positive notion of emancipation with a negative dialectic of reification, it can serve as a tool for bridging the gap between the early and the late Frankfurt School.

On the one hand, the position of the early Frankfurt School is reinterpreted in terms of a theory of emancipation that draws on the potential of communicative rationality. For, as Habermas sees it, while the normative assumptions on which the Frankfurt scholars initially relied were "not able to support an empirical research program,"⁴⁶⁵ some of these intentions "can be taken up without the philosophy of history to which they were tied."⁴⁶⁶ In this sense, Habermas has argued that "the emancipatory perspective proceeds precisely not from the production paradigm, but from the paradigm of action oriented toward mutual understanding."⁴⁶⁷ Such a change of paradigm would make it possible to rehabilitate the conception of critical theory that was developed during the 1930s and thus "to return to the undertaking that was *interrupted* with the critique of instrumental reason".⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶³ For a similar approach, see Timo Jütten, "The Colonization Thesis: Habermas on Reification", pp. 701-727; and Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, p. 285.

⁴⁶⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, p. 1.

⁴⁶⁵ Habermas, Jürgen, *The Theory of Communicative action*, Vol. 2, p. 382.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 378.

⁴⁶⁷ Habermas, Jürgen, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 82.

⁴⁶⁸ Habermas, Jürgen, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, p. 386.

On the other hand, the position of the late Frankfurt School is reformulated in terms of a theory of domination that focuses on the colonization of the lifeworld. According to Habermas, the critique of reason that was presented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* “has the advantage of directing our attention to the symptoms of the systemically induced deformation of communicatively structured life-contexts”.⁴⁶⁹ However, while Habermas sympathizes with the intentions of such a critique and agrees with Adorno and Horkheimer’s “ironic use of the word ‘reason’”,⁴⁷⁰ he is convinced that the Frankfurt scholars missed the deeper irony of the social process, i.e.

that the communicative potential of reason first had to be released in the patterns of modern lifeworlds before the unfettered imperatives of the economic and administrative subsystems could react back on the vulnerable practice of everyday life.⁴⁷¹

Seeking to mediate between these two theoretical perspectives, Habermas is able to combine an affirmative attitude toward the liberating aspects of societal rationalization with a contemporaneous critique of the historical tendency toward reification and to conclude that: “The communicative potential of reason has been simultaneously developed and distorted in the course of capitalist modernization.”⁴⁷²

Taking the above into account, one can indeed argue that Habermas’s theory of communicative action ought to be understood as a way to deal with the gap between the two versions of the Frankfurt School. On the other hand, as I shall further argue in the following chapter, some of the main shortcomings of Habermas’s theoretical approach derive from his conceptualization of this attempt. For, as we shall see, in order to overcome the opposition between the two sides of classical critical theory, Habermas has to formulate the theory of emancipation in a way that allows for the “paradoxical contemporaneity”⁴⁷³ of the process of reification. Conversely, the theory of domination must be limited with respect to his assumptions regarding the gradual development of a more rational society.

⁴⁶⁹ Habermas, Jürgen, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, p. 333.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 391.

⁴⁷¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 315.

⁴⁷² Ibid., p. 315.

⁴⁷³ Ibid.

5.

Too Weak or Too Strong? The Limitations of Habermas's Reformulation of Critical Theory

In an interview with Habermas in 1981, just before the publication of what arguably should be considered his most important work thus far (*The Theory of Communicative Action*), he emphasized a “conceptual motive” as central to his thought and a “fundamental intuition” regarding the possibility of realizing this motive:

The motivating thought concerns the reconciliation of a modernity which has fallen apart, the idea that without surrendering the differentiation that modernity has made possible in the cultural, the social, and economic spheres, one can find forms of living together in which autonomy and dependency can truly enter into a non-antagonistic relation, that one can walk tall in a collectivity that does not have the dubious quality of backward-looking substantial forms of community. The intuition springs from the sphere of relations with others; it aims at experiences of undisturbed intersubjectivity.⁴⁷⁴

Habermas's understanding of the motives and intentions behind his work can be connected to the two questions that were introduced in the beginning of the previous chapter, i.e. whether reason can be understood in terms of a unified concept and whether this concept of reason can be realized in the form of a rational society. As I showed in Chapter 4, Habermas relies on the theory of communicative rationality in order to reclaim this ideal of a unified concept of reason without abandoning the differentiation between the three value spheres.

To be sure, this attempt to reclaim the rational potential in modern culture comes at a price. For, as Habermas is well aware, given that the unity of rationality is redefined in terms of the “possibility of reaching understanding linguistically,” we have to abstain from the strong claims associated with the metaphysical tradition and be content with a concept of reason that is “weak and transitory”.⁴⁷⁵ Furthermore, as Habermas has repeatedly emphasized, the

⁴⁷⁴ Jürgen Habermas, “The Dialectics of Rationalization”, in *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jürgen Habermas*, p. 125.

⁴⁷⁵ Jürgen Habermas, “The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of Its Voices”, in *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, pp. 117 and 139.

idea of a rationally motivated consensus cannot serve as a practical model for an emancipated society, for, in his view: “this idea [...] contains no more, but also no less, than the formal characterization of the necessary conditions for the unforeseeable forms adopted by a life that is not misspent.”⁴⁷⁶

In this chapter I will spell out some of the consequences that follow from this approach. More specifically, I will show that Habermas’s critical theory suffers from a lack of emancipatory potential and critical force. As I will further argue, the outcome of the controversy surrounding these limitations in Habermas’s work has settled into two opposing camps, reflecting a split within contemporary critical theory between a unitary and a pluralist approach. In my view, both of these one-sided alternatives have proved incapable of renewing critical theory in a convincing way.

5.1 The Neutralizing Effect of the Theory of Rationalization

Does Habermas succeed in his effort to combine the skeptical view of the post-war Frankfurt School with the more positive outlook of early critical theory?

As I argued in Chapter 4, Habermas’s attempt is carried out within the framework of his two-tiered theory of social rationalization. To reiterate, the theory of social rationalization refers to a fundamental distinction between social integration and system integration:

In one case, the integration of an action system is established by a normatively secured or communicatively achieved consensus, in the other case, by a nonnormative regulation of individual decisions that extends beyond the actors’ consciousnesses.⁴⁷⁷

The distinction between social integration and system integration is accompanied by a twofold concept of society. According to Habermas, it is misleading to conceive of society exclusively as the product of communicative action or as the unintended consequence of human action. For, on the one hand,

society is conceived from the perspective of acting subjects as the *lifeworld of a social group*. In contrast, from the observer’s perspective of someone not involved, society can be conceived only as a *system of actions* such that each action has a functional significance according to its contribution to the maintenance of the system.⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid, pp. 145-146.

⁴⁷⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, p. 117.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.

Unwilling to choose between these perspectives, Habermas proposes that we conceive of society as both socially and systemically integrated. In other words, we should make use of the internal perspective of the participant as well as the external perspective of the observer in order to understand society simultaneously “as the *lifeworld of a social group*” and “as a *system of actions*”.⁴⁷⁹ As I explained in Chapter 4, this distinction between two kinds of action coordination and the corresponding two-level concept of society enables Habermas to criticize the predominant characteristics of the process of modernization while maintaining a well-grounded confidence in the possibility of an alternative development.

In spite of his critique of his predecessors in the Frankfurt School, he subscribes to a version of the Enlightenment-skeptical view according to which the modernization of society is characterized by an increasing degree of domination. At the same time, he is trying to revive the more optimistic view of the early Frankfurt School, arguing that society can after all be transformed in a liberating way.

In the literature on Habermas’s work, this strategy has been questioned in terms of its empirical adequacy. According to Honneth, the twofold concept of society that follows from Habermas’s distinction between social integration and system integration is misleading, since it produces the fiction “of a society divided into communicatively and purposive-rationally organized domains of action.”⁴⁸⁰ Similarly, McCarthy has argued that social integration and system integration must be regarded as “extremes of possibilities rather than alternatives that exhaust the field of possibilities”.⁴⁸¹

Regarding the perspective of system integration, it is not necessarily the functional analysis per se that is questioned but rather the assumption that the material reproduction of society can *only* be explained from such a point of view.⁴⁸²

There is no doubt that the somewhat contradictory outline of the two-level approach in *The theory of communicative action* can be interpreted in such a way.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁰ Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, p. 256. See also pp. 298-303.

⁴⁸¹ Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory*, p. 168. For example, although one might describe the market as a norm-free sphere of action, “as an ethically neutralized system of action in which individuals interrelate on the basis of egocentric calculations of utility, in which subjectively uncoordinated individual decisions are functionally integrated,” it seems dubious to characterize the political sphere of action in a similar way. See *ibid.*, p. 160. A similar point has been made by Bohman, who asserts that “the overly strong versions of system integration that [Habermas] borrows from Luhmann and Weber are inadequate as empirical descriptions of what actually goes on in the settings of formal institutions.” See James Bohman, “Habermas, Marxism and Social Theory: The Case for Pluralism in Critical Social Science”, in Peter Dews (ed.), *Habermas: A Critical Reader*, p. 76.

⁴⁸² However, Honneth clearly rejects the functionalist approach. See, for example, Axel Honneth, “The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory Today”, in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, pp. 69-73; and Jean-Philippe Deranty, *Beyond Communication: A Critical Study of Axel Honneth’s Social Philosophy*, Brill, Leiden, 2009, pp. 88-98.

For, while, on the one hand, Habermas argues that “even within formally organized domains of action, interactions are still connected via the mechanism of mutual understanding”, on the other hand, he maintains that since such domains “are ethically neutralized by their legal form of organization, *communicative action forfeits its validity basis in the interior of organizations.*”⁴⁸³

However, in spite of such inconsistencies, it seems quite clear that Habermas did not set out to characterize commercial enterprises and public authorities as norm-free domains in a literal sense but rather to make it credible that, although communicative acts may be performed here as well, in such spheres action is essentially coordinated by means of system integration.⁴⁸⁴

Similar criticism has been raised against the category of social integration and thus with respect to the idea of a communicatively structured lifeworld. As argued by Honneth, for example: “the image of communicatively integrated spheres of action suggests the independence of the lifeworld from practices of domination and processes of power.”⁴⁸⁵

In response to this critique, Habermas has made clear that, in his opinion, the mechanisms of social integration is not necessarily tied to a specific type of action. As long as the improbable conditions of a fully emancipated society free from repression do not prevail, “social integration proceeds via norms of domination which sublimate violence, on the one hand, and consensus formation in language which fulfils the conditions for latent strategic action, on the other.”⁴⁸⁶

It might be argued that this preoccupation with the exercise of domination at the level of social integration and the possibility of acting communicatively within purposive-rational systems of action somehow ignore Habermas’s main point. For, as we have seen, Habermas does not take an interest in the

⁴⁸³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, p. 310. In his analysis of the emergence of the capitalist economy and modern administration, he even makes the claim that: “Norm-conformative attitudes and identity-forming social memberships are neither necessary nor possible in these spheres; they are made peripheral instead.” See *ibid.* p. 154.

⁴⁸⁴ Indeed, as he argues in a reply to McCarthy, “my thesis amounts merely to the assertion that the integration of these action systems is *in the final instance* not based on the potential for social integration of communicative actions and the lifeworldly background thereof [...]”. See Jürgen Habermas, “A Reply”, in Axel Honneth & Hans Joas (eds.), *Communicative Action: Essays on Jürgen Habermas’s The Theory of Communicative Action*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1991, p. 257. Anyway, as McCarthy points out: “If the analyses of *The Theory of Communicative Action* were consistently carried through in this more-or-less (in contrast to either-or) vein, I would have to revise some of [my arguments], but Habermas too, I think, would have to revise his analysis of the political system.” See Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory*, p. 240, note 23.

⁴⁸⁵ Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, p. 299. See also Maeve Cooke, “Avoiding Authoritarianism: On the Problem of Justification in Contemporary Critical Social Theory”, in *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2005, pp. 391-392.

⁴⁸⁶ Jürgen Habermas, “A Reply”, in Axel Honneth & Hans Joas (eds.), *Communicative Action: Essays on Jürgen Habermas’s The Theory of Communicative Action*, p. 254.

constitution of formally organized and communicatively structured spheres of action for its own sake but rather in order to analyze the conflict-laden interchange relations between social domains that are differently coordinated.⁴⁸⁷ On the other hand, Habermas himself acknowledges this as a potential problem, and while, on some occasions, he assures his critics that the lifeworld “by no means offers an innocent image of ‘power free spheres of communication’”⁴⁸⁸ and opens up for the slight possibility of a “democratization of the administration”⁴⁸⁹, on other occasions, he appears to assert just the opposite.

This problem is arguably bound up with the broader issue concerning the major shortcomings of Habermas’s theoretical approach. Indeed, it is in the attempt to clarify the concepts of emancipation and domination that Habermas tends to fall back on the one-sided distinction between socially and systemically integrated spheres of action. Moreover, as the normative ideal of emancipation is combined with the critique of domination, the two aspects of his critical theory tend to neutralize each other in a peculiar way.

On the one hand, the utopian contents of the concept of emancipation is limited by reference to the process of system differentiation. Given that this process, whereby some domains of action are withdrawn from the horizon of the lifeworld and “congeal into the second nature of a norm-free sociality,”⁴⁹⁰ belongs to the course of social evolution and cannot be reversed without further ado, emancipation cannot be realized in the form of a “self-organization of society as a whole.”⁴⁹¹ As I shall further argue, by reinterpreting the utopian aspect of the concept of emancipation in terms of a pragmatic presupposition of everyday speech, the transfigurative potential of this concept is essentially lost.

On the other hand, the critical potential of the concept of domination is limited by reference to the rationalization of the lifeworld. When viewed from the internal perspective of the lifeworld, “all the counterintuitive aspects”⁴⁹² of societal reproduction are filtered out. For: “As long as they maintain a performative attitude, communicative actors cannot reckon with a systematic distortion of their communication.”⁴⁹³ In order to understand the contemporary structures of domination, one has to adopt an approach that

⁴⁸⁷ According to Habermas: “we have to show that the theory of communication can contribute to explaining how it is that in the modern period an economy organized in the form of markets is functionally intermeshed with a state that has a monopoly on power, how it gains autonomy as a piece of norm-free sociality over against the lifeworld, and how it opposes its own imperatives based on system maintenance to the rational imperatives of the lifeworld.” See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 349.

⁴⁸⁸ Jürgen Habermas, “A Reply”, in Axel Honneth & Hans Joas (eds.), *Communicative Action: Essays on Jürgen Habermas’s The Theory of Communicative Action*, p. 254.

⁴⁸⁹ See Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, p. 440.

⁴⁹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 352.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

⁴⁹² Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, p. 151.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

makes it possible to analyze societal reproduction from an external point of view as well. As I will argue, given that domination is understood primarily as the subordination of the lifeworld to systemic constraints, it becomes difficult to explain what could motivate the emergence of political struggle and thus to clarify the inherent potential for social change.

5.2 The Limited Potential for Emancipation and Critique

The lack of emancipatory potential and critical force has been a recurring theme in the debate surrounding Habermas's critical theory, at least since the publication of *The Theory of Communicative Action*. In the growing literature on Habermas's work, contemporary critical theorists keep coming back to these two fundamental issues.

With regard to the limited potential for emancipation, on the one hand, Seyla Benhabib argued in the 1980s that, while Habermas's theory represented a shift from the utopian legacy of the late Frankfurt School to the communicative concept of reason, the problem with this theory is that it establishes "a link between Enlightenment and emancipation by forsaking too much of its utopian tradition."⁴⁹⁴

More recently, a similar point has been made by Deborah Cook, who argues that the opposition between the ideal and the real is cancelled out in Habermas's mature thought. As she maintains: "Habermas simply refuses to ascribe any kind of transcendent role to communicative reason."⁴⁹⁵ Furthermore, in another version of this critique, Nikolas Kompridis has argued that Habermas fails to address the question of emancipatory politics in a sufficiently radical way:

To rest content merely with offering a formal description of the necessary but general conditions of an 'undamaged intersubjectivity' is not just to beggar the utopian contents of critical theory, it is to suppress and misrepresent those contents and their sources in the German philosophical tradition.⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹⁴ Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 329. See also Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, pp. 300-303; Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory*, pp. 164-172; and Joan Alway, *Critical Theory and Political Possibilities: Conceptions of Emancipatory Politics in the Works of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Habermas*, pp. 125-127.

⁴⁹⁵ Deborah Cook, *Adorno, Habermas, and the Search for a Rational Society*, p. 153.

⁴⁹⁶ Nikolas Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory Between Past and Future*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2007, p. 28. See also Maeve Cooke, "Redeeming Redemption: The Utopian Dimension of Critical Social Theory", in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 30, No. 4, 2005, pp. 413-429; James Bohman, "Participants, Observers, and Critics: Practical Knowledge, Social Perspectives, and Critical Pluralism", in Thomas McCarthy et al (eds.), *Pluralism and the Pragmatic Turn: The Transformation of Critical Theory*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2001, p. 100; and David Owen, "Criticism and Captivity: On Genealogy and Critical Theory".

The limited potential for emancipation is closely related to the lack of critical force. Regarding this second issue, Axel Honneth has noted that one consequence of Habermas's two-level concept of society is that power "as a means for the coordination of social action, is considered only at the level of systems integration".⁴⁹⁷ As Honneth explains in a later work, as long as the disorders of modern society are only measured in relation to the universal conditions of reaching understanding in language, we are likely to end up with a version of critical theory which is too narrow.⁴⁹⁸

A similar argument has been put forward by Joan Alway. As she argues, by redefining the concept of reification as a "colonization of the lifeworld" and by explaining the emergence of radical social movements in terms of a reaction to this colonization, Habermas "comes close to eliminating differentiated forms of oppression and resistance from the picture altogether."⁴⁹⁹ Moreover, according to James Bohman, Habermas's attempt to reconstruct a comprehensive critical theory tends to ignore the plural nature of contemporary social criticism. Indeed, as Bohman points out, there is nothing to show that such a reconstruction "would yield a single theoretical framework that is consistent with all the goals of critical social science."⁵⁰⁰

5.2.1 The Lack of Emancipatory Potential

In what way does Habermas's critical theory suffer from a lack of emancipatory potential?

Within the tradition of critical social theory, the notion of emancipation has been understood in two different ways. When described in terms of a project of "fulfilment", emancipation is intended to realize "in a better or more adequate form, the already attained results of the present". When it is conceived as a project of "transfiguration", by contrast, emancipation corresponds to a view of social transformation that implies "a radical and qualitative break with some aspects of the present."⁵⁰¹ As emphasized by Benhabib, however, an adequate account of social criticism must be able to combine the two projects: "Despite their essential tension, a critical social

⁴⁹⁷ Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, pp. 300-301.

⁴⁹⁸ Axel Honneth, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect", in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 73. For a similar early critique of Habermas's narrow focus on the problems of colonization, see Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, pp. 251-252. See also Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory*, pp. 153 and 174-180.

⁴⁹⁹ Joan Alway, *Critical Theory and Political Possibilities: Conceptions of Emancipatory Politics in the Works of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Habermas*, p. 137.

⁵⁰⁰ James Bohman "Habermas, Marxism and Social Theory: The Case for Pluralism in Critical Social Science", in Peter Dews, (ed.), *Habermas: A Critical Reader*, p. 55. See also Nikolas Kompridis, "From Reason to Self-Realisation? Axel Honneth and the 'Ethical Turn' in Critical Theory", pp. 342-344; Maeve Cooke, *Re-Presenting the Good Society*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2006, Ch. 8 (especially p. 206); and Amy Allen, "Systematically Distorted Subjectivity? Habermas and the Critique of Power", in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 33, No. 5, 2007, p. 641.

⁵⁰¹ Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, pp. 41-42. See also Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, Ch. 1.

theory is only rich enough to address us in the present, insofar as it can do justice to both moments.”⁵⁰²

In the above analysis of classical critical theory, I argued that emancipation was increasingly understood in terms of transfiguration rather than fulfilment.⁵⁰³ Indeed, while in their early works the members of the Frankfurt Institute based the potential for liberation on the possibility of realizing reason and thus on the expectation of radical social change, later on – as the confidence of such a development grew weaker – a purely utopian concept of emancipation, relying upon the mere critique of existing forms of reason, superseded the former one.

The position of the early Frankfurt School was reinterpreted by Habermas as the conceptual cornerstone of a theory of emancipation that draws on the potential of communicative rationality. According to Benhabib, by focusing on the relationship between philosophy and social sciences and by demonstrating that a potential for liberation can be extracted from the pragmatic presuppositions of everyday speech, Habermas has managed to reestablish the connection between Enlightenment and emancipation. On the other hand, this reformulation of the normative foundations of critique can be said to lack a utopian dimension. As she argues, while in the theory of the late Frankfurt School, the

conception of utopian reason was so esoteric as not to allow embodiment in the present, the difficulty with Habermas’ concept is that it seems like such a natural outcome of the present that it is difficult to see what would constitute an emancipatory break with the present if communicative rationality were fulfilled.⁵⁰⁴

On this account, Habermas’s critical theory suffers from a lack of emancipatory potential, since it emphasizes the moment of fulfilment at the cost of “repressing the moment of utopia or transfiguration.”⁵⁰⁵ Now, this conclusion is not as obvious as it may appear.

While it is clear enough that Habermas’s concept of emancipation is closely related to the possibility of reaching understanding free from domination and that, on his account, communicative rationality is actually embodied in the structure of intersubjective social relations, Habermas has noticed that the mutual recognition of validity claims, from which such an agreement is supposed to derive, seems to point in two directions at once: “As claims, they transcend any local context; at the same time, they have to be raised here and now and be de facto recognized if they are going to bear the agreement of interaction participants that is needed for effective cooperation.”⁵⁰⁶

⁵⁰² Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 13.

⁵⁰³ See Chapter 2 and Chapter 3.

⁵⁰⁴ Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 277.

⁵⁰⁵ Seyla Benhabib, “Rhetorical Affects and Critical Intentions: A Response to Ben Gregg”, in *Theory and Society*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1987, p. 156.

⁵⁰⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 322.

On the one hand, everyday communicative practice is “permeated with idealizations”,⁵⁰⁷ i.e. in trying to reach an intersubjective agreement about something the communicative actors *have* to assume that such a rational consensus *can* be attained.⁵⁰⁸ On the other hand, criticizable validity claims are necessarily context-dependent. Since the participants cannot turn their backs on the social practice of justification in which a process of reaching understanding is taking place, the rational ideal may not be realized as such:

In fact, we can by no means always, or even only often, fulfill those improbable pragmatic presuppositions from which we nevertheless set forth in day-to-day communicative practice – and, in the sense of transcendental necessity, from which we *have to* set forth.⁵⁰⁹

In this manner, the process of reaching understanding turns out to be characterized by a tension between transcendence and immanence. Perhaps, then, rather than speaking of a complete lack of a utopian dimension of emancipation in Habermas’s thought, it might be more fruitful to speak of a reconceptualization of this aspect. For, while denying that the counterfactual presuppositions built into language can be transformed into an ideal to be realized, Habermas is convinced that such idealizations “open up a perspective allowing [participants in argumentation] to go beyond local practices of justification and to transcend the provinciality of their spatiotemporal contexts that are inescapable in action and experience.”⁵¹⁰ However, this argument does not save Habermas’s concept of emancipation from the charge of being too weak. This becomes clear once we consider how the theory of communicative action is applied to practical problems.

At the level of political theory, the communicative concept of emancipation is tied to the Enlightenment-philosophical ideal of a potential integration of private and public autonomy.⁵¹¹ Basically, it refers to the possibility of self-determination and self-realization that would arise from the establishment of a community where all those possibly affected are able to take part freely in the process whereby different norms of action are reproduced. Habermas’s understanding of this idea is presented in relation to the liberal and republican traditions of modern political thought.

According to Habermas, from the standpoint of political philosophy, “political freedom has always been conceived as the freedom of a subject that

⁵⁰⁷ Jürgen Habermas, “The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of Its Voices”, in *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, p. 143.

⁵⁰⁸ In other words: “Once participants enter into argumentation, they cannot avoid supposing, in a reciprocal way, that the conditions for an ideal speech situation have been sufficiently met.”

See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 323.

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

⁵¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, p. 323.

⁵¹¹ As outlined in Chapter 2.

determines and realizes itself.”⁵¹² Either it is conceptualized in terms of the moral freedom of an individual subject, or it is understood as the ethical freedom of a self-legislating community. The relation between these two concepts of autonomy is marked by an unresolved competition. Whereas on a liberal view law has to be subordinated to morality, according to republicans morality should be subordinated to law. None of these proposals has succeeded in reconciling private and public autonomy in a convincing way. On Habermas’s account:

Human rights might be quite justifiable as *moral* rights, yet as soon as we conceive them as elements of *positive* law, it is obvious that they cannot be paternalistically imposed on a sovereign legislator. The addressees of law would not be able to understand themselves as its authors if the legislator were to discover human rights as pre-given moral facts that merely need to be enacted as positive law. At the same time, this legislator, regardless of his autonomy, should not be able to adopt anything that violates human rights.⁵¹³

The communicative view of emancipation depends on the possibilities for solving this problem. In Habermas’s theory, the symbiosis between private and public autonomy “can become clear only under the *pragmatic* conditions of rational discourses in which the only thing that counts is the compelling force of the better argument”.⁵¹⁴ In general terms, the theory of communicative reason provides the basis for translating Habermas’s ideas into the dimension of morality and politics.

Communicative rationality differs from the classical form of practical reason “in that it is no longer ascribed to the individual actor or to a macrosystem at the level of the state or the whole society.”⁵¹⁵ On the other hand, while the concept of communicative reason can no longer serve as “a direct blueprint for a normative theory of law and morality,” it shares the transformative intentions of practical philosophy and provides a critical standard for evaluating the procedures of opinion- and will-formation that occur in the public sphere. In other words, “it offers a guide for reconstructing the network of discourses that [...] provides the matrix from which democratic authority emerges.”⁵¹⁶

In order to disclose the internal relation between the two forms of autonomy, Habermas has sought to define the concept of practical reason in a way that is neutral with respect to the distinction between morality and law. In accordance with this, the reconciliation of private and public autonomy is premised on the idea of a discourse principle that reflects the potential for

⁵¹² Jürgen Habermas, “Popular Sovereignty as Procedure”, in *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, p. 469.

⁵¹³ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, p. 454.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 3.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

rationality that is inherent in the communicative processes of modern society.⁵¹⁷

An important conclusion that can be drawn from this is that whether we are concerned with moral or legal norms, the discourse principle points to an ideal procedure of validation according to which practical questions can be decided rationally. Regarding the validity of moral norms, “the discourse principle takes the form of a universalization principle.”⁵¹⁸ Insofar as we are dealing with legal norms, “the democratic principle states that only those statutes may claim legitimacy that can meet with the assent (*Zustimmung*) of all citizens in a discursive process of legislation that in turn has been legally constituted.”⁵¹⁹

In Habermas’s political philosophy, emancipation becomes a matter of the conditions for such rational communicative processes to occur. In other words, emancipation becomes a matter of expanding the scope for communicative action.

As I have shown, the normative potential inherent in the concept of communicative reason is understood to be embodied in the structures of grammatical speech. In Habermas own words: “The utopian perspective of reconciliation and freedom is ingrained in the conditions for the communicative sociation of individuals; it is built into the linguistic mechanism of the reproduction of the species.”⁵²⁰ As I have further argued, the conditions for the emergence of a more emancipated society can be clarified by connecting Habermas’s concept of reason to his theory of societal rationalization.⁵²¹ However, the communicative conception of emancipation is likely to remain an impotent ideal unless it is “internally connected with contexts of a rationalized lifeworld that meets it halfway.”⁵²² In other words, it must enjoy the support of “an ‘existing reason’ already incorporated in political practices, however distorted these may be.”⁵²³

⁵¹⁷ In *Between Facts and Norms*, the discourse principle is formulated as follows: “Just those action norms are valid to which all possibly affected persons could agree as participants in rational discourses.” See *ibid.*, p. 107.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁵²⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, p. 398.

⁵²¹ As he argues, “communicative reason is directly implicated in social-life processes insofar as acts of mutual understanding take on the role of a mechanism for coordinating action.” See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 316.

⁵²² Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, p. 302. As emphasized in an interview with Torsten Hviid Nilsen, “the universal pragmatic presuppositions of argumentation in general are in no sense merely regulative, since these conditions must be fulfilled *hic et nunc*, in an adequate approximation, if we wish to engage in argumentation at all.” See Jürgen Habermas, *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jürgen Habermas*, p. 260.

⁵²³ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, p. 287. As he further explains: “Only in an egalitarian public of citizens that has emerged from the confines of class and thrown off the millennia-old shackles of social stratification and exploitation can the potential of an unleashed cultural pluralism fully develop [...]”. See *ibid.*, p. 308. See also “Popular Sovereignty as Procedure”, in *ibid.*, pp. 487-488; and

To be sure, Habermas has been careful to point out that the idealizations presupposed by participants in argumentation must not be represented as a concrete reality or as a condition that is attainable in actual fact.⁵²⁴ On the other hand, while Habermas's idea of a liberated society is exempt from the requirements of a rational ideal to be realized, it promotes the notion of "emancipated forms of life about which the participants *themselves* must first reach an understanding".⁵²⁵ In this sense, the communicative concept of emancipation is tied to the discourse theory of law and democracy.

As has recently been pointed out by several scholars, since Habermas's theory of democracy is modelled on the counterfactual assumptions that constitute the ideal speech situation, "it fails to supply anything like a political strategy under conditions that are hostile to deliberation."⁵²⁶ For, while this theory tend to describe the "struggle against the oppression of collectivities"⁵²⁷ as a rational process of will-formation that is unlikely to succeed unless it is met halfway by a rationalized lifeworld, we certainly cannot pretend that all citizens will act as if this ideal is realized. What is unclear in Habermas's account, then, "is what to do when argument is not possible, either because most people reject engagement in it or because social conditions do not sufficiently approximate the ideal."⁵²⁸

To conclude, when the utopian aspect of emancipation is understood in terms of a pragmatic presupposition of everyday speech, the possibility of context-transcendence appears to be limited to contexts were people are able to rely on a process of reaching understanding as a mechanism for coordinating action. In my view, the apparent difficulty in accounting for the possibility of transformative political action under conditions unfavorable for deliberation indicates the need for supplementing this approach with an alternative (more encompassing) notion of emancipation. As I will argue when I return to this issue in Chapter 6, critical theory must be broad enough to allow for a more radical definition of its utopian dimension.

"A Conversation about Questions of Political Theory", in Jürgen Habermas, *A Berlin Republic: Writings on Germany*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1997, p. 145.

⁵²⁴ According to Habermas: "no complex society could ever correspond to the model of purely communicative social relations." See Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, p. 326.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xli.

⁵²⁶ Christian Røstbøll, "Dissent, Criticism, and Transformative Political Action in Deliberative Democracy", in *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2009, p. 20. See also Iris M. Young, "Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy", in *Political Theory*, Vol. 29, No. 5, 2001, pp. 670-690; Archon Fung, "Deliberation Before the Revolution: Toward an Ethics of Deliberative Democracy in an Unjust World", in *Political Theory*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2005, pp. 397-419; and William Smith, "Civil Disobedience and Social Power: Reflections on Habermas", in *Contemporary Political Theory*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2008, pp. 72-89.

⁵²⁷ Jürgen Habermas, "Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State", in *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, p. 204.

⁵²⁸ Christian Røstbøll, "Dissent, Criticism, and Transformative Political Action in Deliberative Democracy", p. 30.

5.2.2 The Lack of Critical Force

I have argued that Habermas's critical theory is characterized by a lack of emancipatory potential. However, in what way does it suffer from a lack of critical force?

According to Axel Honneth, for those who, like himself, feel bound to what Horkheimer once defined as the central task of critical theory – i.e. “man's emancipation from slavery”⁵²⁹ – it is necessary to formulate a theory that can comprehend: “both the structures of social domination *and* the social resources for its practical overcoming.”⁵³⁰

In his attempt to deal with this challenge, Honneth lays great emphasis on the demand that a critical social theory must be capable of demonstrating that the normative basis of critique can be backed up by empirical support. Indeed, on his view: “Without some form of proof that its critical perspective is reinforced by a need or a movement within social reality, critical theory cannot be further pursued in any way today”.⁵³¹

As we have seen in the case of the Frankfurt School, as long as the proletariat could be counted on as a collective agent that would bring the transcending ideal into practice, the question regarding the pre-theoretical potential for critique was hardly recognized as a problem. According to Horkheimer, for example: “This part of humanity, which necessarily counts on this change due to its situation, already contains (and attracts even more) forces to whom the realization of a better society is a matter of great importance.”⁵³² However, during the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the following decade, as the Institute's attitude toward the working class became more and more skeptical, this approach was abandoned in favor of an Enlightenment-skeptical critique of reason.⁵³³

In Habermas's attempt to bridge the gap in classical critical theory, the position of the late Frankfurt School was reformulated in terms of a theory of domination that focuses on the colonization of the lifeworld. While this approach is able “to provide a systematic concept of what is currently threatened by the domination of systems,”⁵³⁴ it is not aimed “at giving

⁵²⁹ Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” p. 246.

⁵³⁰ Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, p. xiv. This is Honneth's interpretation of the, by now classical, essay *Traditional and Classical Theory*, in which Horkheimer argues that the critical theory “in its concept formation and in all phases of its development very consciously makes its own that concern for the rational organization of human activity which it is its task to illumine and legitimate.” See Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p. 246.

⁵³¹ Axel Honneth, “The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory today”, in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 66.

⁵³² Max Horkheimer, “Materialism and Morality”, in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, p. 43.

⁵³³ See, for example, Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, “On the Critique of the Philosophy of History,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*.

⁵³⁴ Axel Honneth, “The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory today”, in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 68.

expression to an existing experience of social injustice.”⁵³⁵ Therefore, given that domination is understood mainly as the subordination of the lifeworld to systemic constraints, it becomes difficult to explain what could motivate the emergence of political struggle and thus to clarify the inherent potential for social change. In this sense, one can say that Habermas’s approach suffers from a lack of critical force. In order to examine the legitimacy of this criticism, we need to look more closely at Habermas’s theory of domination.

Habermas understands colonization as a kind of reification. This mode of domination arises as a result of the conversion to “another principle of sociation,” i.e. “when language, in its function of coordinating action, is replaced by media such as money and power.”⁵³⁶ Now, in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, the main focus is on how contemporary juridification processes are involved in this development. In other words, Habermas seeks to clarify why the effort to make use of social welfare legislation for the purpose of countering social inequality tends to bring about the phenomena of colonization.

To be sure, welfare-state regulations are freedom-granting to the extent that they “cushion the external effects of a production process based on wage labor”⁵³⁷ by means of monetary rewards and legally guaranteed social security. However, this freedom often has to be compensated for by a restriction on the possibility of human beings to determine their social activities by their own efforts. According to Habermas, the ambivalent result of welfare measures has to be understood as a consequence of the way in which such measures are generally put into practice:

although legal entitlements to monetary income in case of illness, old age, and the like definitely signify historical progress when compared with the traditional care of the poor, this juridification of the life-risks exacts a noteworthy price in the form of *restructuring interventions in the lifeworlds* of those who are so entitled. These costs ensue from the bureaucratic implementation and monetary redemption of welfare entitlements.⁵³⁸

Besides the fact that social needs related to, for example, old age, sickness or unemployment “cannot as a rule be subjected to consumerist redefinition,” i.e. compensated for in the form of money, the realization of welfare policies by means of social welfare law supposedly introduces into matters of distribution a formal structure that is alien to the everyday life situations in which such needs arise:

The situation to be regulated is embedded in the context of a life history and of a concrete form of life; it has to be subjected to violent abstraction, not merely

⁵³⁵ Ibid., p. 70.

⁵³⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, p. 375.

⁵³⁷ Ibid., p. 362.

⁵³⁸ Ibid.

because it has to be subsumed under the law, but so that it can be dealt with administratively.⁵³⁹

What seems clear from this brief account of Habermas's version of the theory of reification is that it explains domination mainly in an indirect way, as the systemically induced restriction of the possibility of reaching understanding communicatively. This approach seems reasonable enough. While it follows from Habermas's theory of communicative reason that a rational potential for emancipation can be extracted from the pragmatic presuppositions of everyday speech, the colonization thesis can be seen as an attempt to reconstruct the late Frankfurt School's skepticism regarding the possibility of realizing this normative goal. To the degree that social welfare legislation limits the possibility of reaching understanding by means of communicative action, its freedom-guaranteeing character is accompanied by a loss of freedom. In other words, colonization is seen to threaten the normative potential that "is built into the linguistic mechanism of the reproduction of the species"⁵⁴⁰

However, given that one important reason for analyzing contemporary forms of domination is to clarify the potential for social change, we have to consider a possible weakness in this view. As has been observed by several scholars, one problem with Habermas's theory of colonization is that, while offering a functionalist account of reification, it does not clarify "what is wrong with reification from the perspective of the people whose social relations are reified."⁵⁴¹ This question cannot be answered from a functionalist standpoint alone, since "there is no direct route from a social malfunction to a normative wrong."⁵⁴²

Given that domination is understood in such a limited way, it becomes difficult to explain the emergence of political struggle and protest movements. Furthermore, if domination is comprehended in terms of a narrowed scope for communicative action, the corresponding critical theory – which relies on this notion in order to find support for its normatively motivated critique – has to focus exclusively on the phenomena of the colonization of the lifeworld. As follows from Habermas's focus on the problems of colonization, "all those social pathologies that do not refer to the developmental level of human rationality cannot come to light at all."⁵⁴³

⁵³⁹ Ibid., p. 363.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 398.

⁵⁴¹ Timo Jütten, "The Colonization Thesis: Habermas on Reification", p. 702. See also James G. Finlayson, "The Persistence of Normative Questions in Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action*", in *Constellations*, Vol. 20, No. 4, 2013, pp. 518-532.

⁵⁴² Timo Jütten, "The Colonization Thesis: Habermas on Reification", p. 719. Similarly, according to Honneth: "The question concerning the point at which objectifying attitudes unfold their reifying effects cannot be answered by speaking of functional requirements in an apparently nonnormative way." See Honneth, Axel & Butler, Judith, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008, p. 55.

⁵⁴³ Axel Honneth, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory today", in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 73. For a similar early critique of Habermas's narrow focus on the problems of colonization, see Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm*

As we shall see in the next section, Honneth takes this as a reason to reject Habermas's colonization thesis, along with the language-philosophical approach. On his view, critical theory "must shift its attention from the self-generated independence of systems to the damage and distortion of social relation of recognition."⁵⁴⁴ However, as I will argue in Chapter 6, we need to reformulate the theory of domination in a way that is strong enough to regenerate the capacity for criticism without having to accept the normative foundationalism of Honneth's approach.

5.3 Alternative Ways of Renewing Habermas's Theory of Communicative Reason

Habermas relies on the theory of communicative rationality in order to reclaim the ideal of a unified concept of reason without abandoning the differentiation that modernity has made possible. In contrast to the efforts of metaphysical thought to explain the world as a whole, Habermas argues that "philosophy can no longer refer to the whole of the world [...] in the sense of a totalizing knowledge."⁵⁴⁵ Yet, unlike the contemporary tendency to equate the disintegration of this conception with the emergence of a "new polytheism", Habermas is convinced that unity can be secured "at the formal level of the argumentative redemption of validity claims."⁵⁴⁶

Furthermore, as a consequence of Habermas's post-metaphysical approach, the philosophical attempt to rescue a comprehensive concept of reason has to collaborate with empirical social science:

Only thus can philosophy contribute its best to a nonexclusive division of labour, namely, its persistent tenacity in posing questions universalistically, and its procedure of rationally reconstructing the intuitive pretheoretical knowledge of competently speaking, acting and judging subjects.⁵⁴⁷

Ironically, in the debate surrounding Habermas's critical theory, the issue of unity and plurality arises once again, casting doubt on the plausibility of his account.

In the previous section, I argued that there are two main problems with Habermas's version of critical theory: its limited potential for emancipation

and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory, pp. 251-252. See also Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory*, pp. 153 and 174-180.

⁵⁴⁴ Axel Honneth, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory today", in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 72.

⁵⁴⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, p. 1.

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

⁵⁴⁷ Jürgen Habermas, "A Return to Metaphysics?", in *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, p. 38.

and its lack of critical force. These shortcomings in Habermas's reformulation of the Frankfurt program have been recognized by a number of scholars working within the tradition of critical theory.⁵⁴⁸ However, the apparent unity of this critique is deceptive. As I will argue in this section, the outcome of the controversy surrounding the perceived shortcomings in Habermas work has crystallized into two opposing points of view, reflecting a split within modern critical theory. Behind the supposedly shared assumptions regarding the lack of emancipatory potential and critical force, we have to distinguish between two major strands of thinking.

As I will show, the difference between the two views can be summarized in terms of their respective approaches to Habermas's concept of communicative rationality. According to the unitary approach, on the one hand, Habermas's concept of reason is too weak to be able to provide critical theory with a normative ground that is sufficiently focused on "giving expression to an existing experience of social injustice."⁵⁴⁹ On this view, the lack of emancipatory potential and critical force can be overcome by developing a more substantial and far-reaching version of Habermas's communicative theory.

According to the pluralistic approach, on the other hand, Habermas's concept of reason is too strong. Therefore, in order to address the shortcomings of Habermas's theory, the ideal of a comprehensive framework for critical social science needs to be abandoned: "Critical theory must become normatively as well as methodologically pluralistic."⁵⁵⁰

5.3.1 "Too Weak": Axel Honneth's Unitary Approach

Habermas's communicative reconstruction of critical theory has come under criticism from a variety of sources. While agreeing on the necessity to reassert the "lost unity of reason", the proponents of the unitary approach argue that Habermas's attempt to combine a normative ideal of emancipation with a critique of domination "cedes too much territory to systems theory" and that, as a result, "critical theory is left in an unnecessarily defensive position."⁵⁵¹

Axel Honneth is arguably the most well-known and influential representative of this line of criticism.⁵⁵² Indeed, ever since his first major work, *The Critique of Power*,⁵⁵³ Honneth has been concerned with reformulating the project of the early Frankfurt School in order to develop a version of

⁵⁴⁸ See above, Section 5.2.

⁵⁴⁹ Axel Honneth, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory today", in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 70.

⁵⁵⁰ Nikolas Kompridis, "From Reason to Self-Realisation? Axel Honneth and the 'Ethical Turn' in Critical Theory", p. 342.

⁵⁵¹ Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory*, p. 153.

⁵⁵² See, for example, Maeve Cooke, "Habermas's Social Theory: The Critical Power of Communicative Rationality", in Ruth Sonderegger & Karin de Boer, (eds.), *Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy*, pp. 199-200; and Nikolas Kompridis, "From Reason to Self-Realisation? Axel Honneth and the 'Ethical Turn' in Critical Theory", pp. 323-360.

⁵⁵³ Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*.

critical theory that differs considerably from that of Habermas. Even though Honneth's theory can, to some extent, be seen as a further development of the communicative approach initiated by Habermas,⁵⁵⁴ he consistently returns to what he considers to be a central problem in Habermas's work: "It concerns the question of how we are to determine more precisely the reflexive connection held to obtain between pre-theoretical praxis and critical theory."⁵⁵⁵

At first sight, Honneth's version of critical theory does not appear to differ significantly from that of Habermas. After all, Habermas's emphasis on the "desublimation of reason"⁵⁵⁶ and thus on the importance of "a rationalized lifeworld that meets it halfway"⁵⁵⁷ seems to be largely in line with Honneth's own idea of a historically situated reason. However, for Honneth and other proponents of the unitary approach, even though it might be argued that Habermas's idea of a communicative rationalization of the lifeworld establishes a connection between reason and history, such a process "is typically something which could be said – with Marx – to occur behind the backs of the subjects involved".⁵⁵⁸

According to Honneth, critical theory represents a particular kind of normative critique that can inform us about the objective foothold within social reality on which "its own critical viewpoint is anchored extratheoretically as an empirical interest or moral experience."⁵⁵⁹ The central point of Honneth's argument against Habermas is that the communicative concept of reason cannot be relied upon in order to discover the "unitary structure"⁵⁶⁰ of such experiences and interests. As a consequence, Habermas's attempt to ground critical theory in a philosophy of language is difficult to conceptualize in terms of a pre-theoretical resource. In other words, it is too weak to be able to provide a credible explanation of the immanent potential for social change.

So, what can be said about Honneth's own approach to the question of the normative grounds for critique? In my view, Honneth's attempt to lay the ground for a "strong context-transcending form of social criticism"⁵⁶¹ is

⁵⁵⁴ See, for example, Honneth's description of his own project in Nancy Fraser & Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, Verso, London, 2003, p. 246.

⁵⁵⁵ Axel Honneth, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory Today", in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 68.

⁵⁵⁶ Peter Dews, "Introduction: Habermas and the Desublimation of Reason", in Peter Dews (ed.), *Habermas: A Critical Reader*.

⁵⁵⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, p. 302.

⁵⁵⁸ Axel Honneth, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory Today", in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 70. See also Timo Jütten, "The Colonization Thesis: Habermas on Reification", pp. 710-711; and Joan Alway, *Critical Theory and Political Possibilities: Conceptions of Emancipatory Politics in the Works of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Habermas*, p. 125.

⁵⁵⁹ Axel Honneth, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory Today", in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, pp. 63-64.

⁵⁶⁰ Axel Honneth, "The Point of Recognition: A Rejoinder to the Rejoinder", in Nancy Fraser & Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, p. 246.

⁵⁶¹ Axel Honneth, "Reconstructive Social Criticism with a genealogical Proviso: On the Idea of 'Critique' in the Frankfurt School", in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, p. 44.

characterized by a tension between a foundationalist and a non-foundationalist strategy of justification.⁵⁶² As we shall further see, the former alternative, for which Honneth eventually appears to have settled, is incompatible with the pluralistic structure of modern societies.

As Habermas, Honneth starts from the assumption, developed in close connection with the social psychology of George Herbert Mead, that a subject's personal identity is communicatively generated.⁵⁶³ Unlike the former, though, Honneth does not concentrate on the cognitive side of the process of subject formation, and he is not interested in whether the model of ideal role-taking may explain the ontogenesis of grammatical speech. On the contrary, he tends to focus on the affective aspects of this process and seeks to combine a normative theory of society with a notion of conflict and social struggle.

According to Honneth's model of intersubjectivity, the formation of a positive relation to oneself is dependent on three forms of recognition:

the prospect of basic self-confidence is inherent in the experience of love; the prospect of self-respect, in the experience of legal recognition; and finally the prospect of self-esteem, in the experience of solidarity.⁵⁶⁴ These conditions are critical to the successful development of identity. When people fail to receive the recognition they feel they deserve, "they will generally react with moral feelings that accompany the experience of disrespect – shame, anger or indignation."⁵⁶⁵

It is important to note that, in contrast to deontological theories, Honneth's approach suggests that normativity needs to be derived negatively, from feelings of disrespect. For, while the experience of misrecognition may ultimately result in a breakdown of personal identity,⁵⁶⁶ it may also lead to a sudden awareness, from the perspective of those affected, of being denied social recognition, something that can present a source of motivation for political resistance. Consequently, unlike Habermas's preoccupation with the conditions of reaching mutual understanding in language, Honneth tends to focus on the presuppositions for the acquirement (or denial) of social recognition: "The feelings of injustice that accompany structural forms of disrespect represent a pre-theoretical fact, on the basis of which a critique of the relations of recognition can identify its own theoretical perspective in social reality."⁵⁶⁷

Honneth provides a persuasive account of how an emancipatory interest in recognition can be derived from the experience of disrespect. However, this

⁵⁶² For a similar reading of Honneth, see Nikolas Kompridis, "From Reason to Self-Realisation? Axel Honneth and the 'Ethical turn' in Critical theory", pp. 323-360.

⁵⁶³ See Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁵⁶⁵ Axel Honneth, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory Today", in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 72.

⁵⁶⁶ See Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, pp. 131-132.

⁵⁶⁷ Axel Honneth, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory Today", in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 72.

non-foundationalist justification of the normative grounds for critique will hardly result in a more solid form of social criticism than that of Habermas. To wit, it is an obvious drawback of this approach that it lacks a criterion to distinguish between progressive and reactionary claims for justice:

Simply put, the mere experience of shame, anger, or indignation is not in itself proof of anything. Such experiences can be the source of illegitimate as much as legitimate demands for recognition: they do not decide the issue of their moral legitimacy in advance.⁵⁶⁸

As Honneth himself has pointed out in relation to extremist movements such as neo-Nazi youth groups, the experience of disrespect is “in itself an extremely ambivalent source of motivation for social protest and resistance”, since it ultimately “lacks any normative indication or direction that would stipulate in what ways one should struggle against the experience of disrespect and humiliation.”⁵⁶⁹ This leads Honneth to emphasize the necessity of a more ambitious strategy of justification. Having dismissed deontological theories of the sort offered by Habermas as too weak, however, he has to make sure that the institutionalization of justified norms is prepared in a different way, namely by making appeal to “a provisional end-state, from the perspective of which it would be possible to classify and evaluate particular events.”⁵⁷⁰ Honneth thus draws on the Hegelian notion of a “struggle for recognition” in order to reformulate critical social theory in connection with a formal conception of “the good”.

As we have seen, while Habermas shows a similar concern for the reconciliation of modern societies, he is careful to distinguish this goal from the nostalgic ideal of a unified ethical life. According to Habermas: “given the differentiated forms of life characteristic of pluralistic societies, [the effort to create a shared ethical self-understanding] is doomed to failure.”⁵⁷¹ As Honneth is quick to point out, though, his understanding of the Hegelian notion of ethical life is not intended to impose a substantial conception of the good life: “Rather, it has to do with the structural elements of ethical life, which, from the general point of view of the communicative enabling of self-realization, can be normatively extracted from the plurality of all particular forms of life.”⁵⁷²

However, if the concept of ethical life is to be formal enough “not to raise the suspicion of representing merely the deposits of concrete interpretations of

⁵⁶⁸ Nikolas Kompridis, “From Reason to Self-Realisation? Axel Honneth and the ‘Ethical Turn’ in Critical Theory”, p. 328. See also Rainer Forst, “First Things First: Redistribution, Recognition and Justification”, in Danielle Petherbridge (ed.), *Axel Honneth: Critical Essays*, Brill, Leiden, 2011, pp. 303-319.

⁵⁶⁹ Axel Honneth, “The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory Today”, in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 77.

⁵⁷⁰ Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, p. 171.

⁵⁷¹ Jürgen Habermas, “A Genealogical Analysis of the Cognitive Content of Morality”, in *The Inclusion of the Other*, p. 39.

⁵⁷² Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, p. 172.

the good life”⁵⁷³, how could it then serve as a normative criterion for distinguishing between progressive and reactionary claims for justice? In other words:

If formal ethical life is in fact nothing other than the patterns of recognition themselves, [...] then it is not clear how formal ethical life is to be taken as *ethical*, in the sense of describing a sphere of interpretations of the kind of life desirable *for us*.⁵⁷⁴

Thus, it is questionable whether the ideal of freedom from feelings of disrespect can be adequately justified in a pluralistic society.

To conclude, Honneth’s effort to provide a more broadly based and comprehensive communicative framework can be seen in the light of the unitary approach of which he is the most authoritative exponent. In this sense, it can be understood as an attempt to overcome the main shortcomings of Habermas’s critical theory, i.e. its lack of emancipatory potential and critical force. As I see it, in Honneth’s theoretical proposal, the utopian legacy of classical critical theory is recovered in terms of a potential communicative organization of society as a whole. Furthermore, this approach is also supposed to enable a more solid and expansive conception of critique.

Firstly, then, while Habermas starts from the assumption that, as a result of a process of social evolution that cannot be reversed, some domains of action have been removed from the horizon of the lifeworld, Honneth is committed to a view according to which “the apparently purposive-rational organizations are also codetermined by moral-practical viewpoints that must be conceived as results of communicative action.”⁵⁷⁵

Secondly, in contrast to Habermas’s excessive focus on the tension between system and lifeworld, Honneth argues that critical theory has to shift its attention to the violation of identity claims:

If the communication paradigm is thus extended beyond the language-theoretic framework, it can then indicate the degree to which any harm to the normative presuppositions of interaction must be directly reflected in the moral feelings of those involved.⁵⁷⁶

⁵⁷³ Ibid., p. 173.

⁵⁷⁴ Max Pensky, “Social Solidarity and Intersubjective Recognition: On Axel Honneth’s Struggle for Recognition, in Danielle Petherbridge (ed.), *Axel Honneth: Critical Essays*, p. 152.

⁵⁷⁵ Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, p. 274. See also *ibid.*, p. 303. Similarly, according to Thomas McCarthy: “The dissolution of a comparatively undifferentiated unity of thought does appear to be a necessary step in the progress of rationality. But the separation of domains of reality and types of validity claims, of an ego that stands over against nature, society, and its own feelings and desires, must eventually allow for a nonregressive reconciliation with self, others and nature if the ‘dialectic of enlightenment’ is to lose its sway over our lives.” See Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory*, p. 150. See also Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 250.

⁵⁷⁶ Axel Honneth, “The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory Today”, in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 71. See also Axel Honneth,

As indicated above, the second of Honneth's two points is worth taking into further consideration, and I will return to this issue in the concluding chapter. However, as we have also seen, it is questionable whether Honneth's attempt at developing a more substantial and far-reaching version of Habermas's communicative theory is compatible with the pluralistic character of modern societies. Whereas Habermas stresses the need to combine the ideal of unified concept of reason with the sundering process of differentiation, Honneth tends to emphasize unity at the expense of pluralism.⁵⁷⁷

5.3.2 "Too Strong": The Pluralist Approach

We have seen that, according to the proponents of the unitary approach, Habermas's critical theory is influenced too much by the presumed consequences of an inescapable process of differentiation, something that would limit its ability to demonstrate the potential connection between reason and history. Indeed, as emphasized by Joan Alway: "what even his most sympathetic critics question is whether Habermas's efforts can in any way be thought of as continuing the tradition of theory with practical intent associated with Marx."⁵⁷⁸

However, even though one can agree that Habermas's critical theory is too dependent upon a particular approach to the process of modernization, it would be unwise to leave the problem of differentiation unaccounted for. Tempting as it may be to put forward a more substantial and far-reaching concept of communicative reason, it is hard to see how such a suggestion could avoid the difficulties that this problem raises. Indeed, once "a positive conception of complexity plays a role in political theory, it also follows that modern society cannot be expressively unified and reintegrated without cognitive loss or political repression."⁵⁷⁹

A second line of criticism emerges from the shortcomings of the first one. On this view, Habermas's conception of critical theory is not sensitive enough to the differentiated character of modern society. Accordingly, the deficiencies

"The Point of Recognition: A Rejoinder to the Rejoinder", in Nancy Fraser & Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, p. 247. Likewise, Timo Jütten has recently argued that: "Habermas must explain how the functionalist explanation of a social malfunction offered by the critical social theorist is related to the experience of a normative wrong on the part of members of the lifeworld. In my view, he does not explain this relationship clearly enough." See Timo Jütten, "The Colonization Thesis: Habermas on Reification", p. 711.

⁵⁷⁷ Indeed, "it might be more correct and more fruitful to think of the conception of ethical life as *one* substantive account of ethical life among several, rather than *the* formal account of ethical life for post-traditional societies." See Bert van den Brink, "Recognition, Pluralism and the Expectation of Harmony: Against the Ideal of an Ethical Life 'Free from Pain'", in Danielle Petherbridge (ed.), *Axel Honneth: Critical Essays*, p. 160.

⁵⁷⁸ Joan Alway, *Critical Theory and Political Possibilities: Conceptions of Emancipatory Politics in the Works of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas*, p. 125. See also Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 277.

⁵⁷⁹ James Bohman, "Critical Theory and Democracy", in David M. Rasmussen (ed.), *Handbook of Critical Theory*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996, p. 202.

of Habermas's theory should rather be understood as a result of the attempt to reclaim the ideal of a unified concept of reason. As argued by the proponents of this pluralist approach, modern differentiation and complexity is motive enough to give up the idea of a unified concept of reason along with the closely related project of a comprehensive social theory.

To reiterate, the main intention behind Habermas's theory of communicative rationality is to "reconstruct the concept of reason"⁵⁸⁰ in order to lay down the normative grounds of social criticism and to put forward once again, within the frame of such a theory, the project of an emancipated society. As I have argued, the communicative concept of reason can be understood as an "explicitation of the rational potential built into the validity basis of speech."⁵⁸¹ The potential for reason resides in the possibility of coming to an uncoerced understanding among speaking and acting subjects. We have also seen that, on Habermas's view, "we can explain the concept of reaching understanding only if we specify what it means to use sentences with a communicative intent."⁵⁸² According to Habermas, the universal core of our ability to communicate can be clarified by means of a formal-pragmatic theory of language.

While agreeing with the general goal of his critical project, the exponents of the pluralist approach perceive "a tacit authoritarianism in Habermas's account of communicative rationality." For, as has been argued by Maeve Cooke, it can be objected that this account "claims privileged insight into the true nature of human flourishing and into the social arrangements that hinder its realisation."⁵⁸³

To be sure, it follows from Habermas's theory of communicative reason that a rational potential for emancipation can be extracted from the pragmatic presuppositions of everyday speech. On this view, the idealizing yet unavoidable character of the preconditions of linguistic communication represents "an immanent potential for criticism that actors can draw upon in seeking to transcend and transform the limits of their situations."⁵⁸⁴ However, according to Cooke, Habermas's further assumption that the normative basis of critique has to be backed up by empirical support reveals a weak spot in his argument:

By making the validity of his critical perspective dependent on the validity of empirically contestable theses relating to the conduct and practice of

⁵⁸⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jürgen Habermas*, p. 93.

⁵⁸¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 315.

⁵⁸² Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, p. 287.

⁵⁸³ Maeve Cooke, "Habermas's Social Theory: The Critical Power of Communicative Rationality", in Ruth Sonderegger & Karin de Boer (eds.), *Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy*, p. 204.

⁵⁸⁴ Thomas McCarthy, "Philosophy and Critical Theory: A Reprise", in David Hoy & Thomas McCarthy, *Critical Theory*, pp. 37-38.

argumentation, Habermas opens the door for rational objections to his claim that the idealizing suppositions guiding argumentation are universal.⁵⁸⁵

It has been suggested more than once that Habermas's attempt to clarify the basic structures of communication represents "a thinly disguised Eurocentrism."⁵⁸⁶ On this account, "some of the idealizations on which Habermas's theory relies are not features of language use in general but orient communicative practices only in certain social-cultural contexts as a result of specific historical developments."⁵⁸⁷

The alleged authoritarian implications of Habermas's view can be seen as a result of his reluctance to deal with the consequences of this critique. Since the emancipatory potential of his theory of communicative action depends on the idealizing suppositions that can be derived by means of the formal-pragmatic approach, he simply cannot do without them. According to Cooke:

by continuing to appeal to these idealisations as the normative underpinning for his context-transcending critical perspective, his critical theory is vulnerable to the objection that key elements are immune to rational contestation in public spaces – in other words, authoritarian.⁵⁸⁸

In their efforts to deal with the problem of authoritarianism the leading advocates of the pluralist view tend to distance themselves from the entire idea of establishing an empirical basis for critique. As they see it, since the idea of a general critical theory depends upon the assumption of an inner connection between reason and history, any attempt to put forward such a theory would have to rely on a concept of reason that is too strong.⁵⁸⁹ Therefore, "we should abandon not only Marx's particular theory, but the very project of reconstructing an analogue to historical materialism as a comprehensive framework for critical social science".⁵⁹⁰ Unlike Habermas's project of locating a pre-theoretical resource for critique in everyday speech, and unlike the overarching goal of gaining an empirical foothold in social reality, the pluralist approach insists that we should "reject the demand for a scientific or objective

⁵⁸⁵ Maeve Cooke, "Avoiding Authoritarianism: On the Problem of Justification in Contemporary Critical Social Theory", p. 391.

⁵⁸⁶ Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory*, p. 134.

⁵⁸⁷ Maeve Cooke, "Avoiding Authoritarianism: On the Problem of Justification in Contemporary Critical Social Theory", p. 391.

⁵⁸⁸ Maeve Cooke, "Habermas's Social Theory: The Critical Power of Communicative Rationality", in Ruth Sonderegger & Karin de Boer (eds.), *Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy*, p. 206.

⁵⁸⁹ As maintained by Bohman, this is something which Habermas has "consistently sought" in order to "unify and ground his social criticism". See James Bohman, "Habermas, Marxism and Social Theory: The Case for Pluralism in Critical Social Science", in Peter Dews (ed.), *Habermas: A Critical Reader*, p. 62.

⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

basis of criticism grounded in a grand theory”⁵⁹¹ and rely instead on a more pragmatic version of critical theory that “must be theoretically, methodologically and practically pluralistic.”⁵⁹²

As follows from this pluralist approach, in order to avoid a potential accusation of authoritarianism, we have to find an alternative way to justify the normative foundations of critical theory. As suggested by Cooke, Habermas’s insight regarding the “intimate connection between validity and argumentation”, i.e. his insistence on a potential for emancipation residing in the process of communicative understanding, should be seen “as a normative claim that must itself be argued for.”⁵⁹³ Not only “unlike Marx”, but unlike any critical approach that is based on the assumption that its normative standpoint is actually embodied in the structure of intersubjective social relations, Cooke insists that

contemporary critical social theorists have to *justify* the ideas of the good society that guide their critical analyses and emancipatory projections [exclusively] by making their case in processes of argumentation guided by an idea of context-transcending validity that are inclusive, fair and genuinely open-ended.⁵⁹⁴

A similar point is made by Bohman, who maintains that contemporary critical theorists are well advised to give up the attempt to formulate a comprehensive social theory and to concentrate instead on the pluralistic interpretation of critical theory. In order to account for the legitimacy of a critical view, it is sufficient for it to be accepted by those who participates in the practice: “This weak idealization of the possible future audience that can appropriately verify a critical claim is all that a practical and pluralist Critical Theory requires.”⁵⁹⁵

The importance of avoiding a possible accusation of authoritarianism has been emphasized by the proponents of the unitary approach as well. According to Honneth, given that a “context-transcending form of social criticism necessarily brings the risk of paternalism or even despotism,” contemporary critical theorists who seeks to appeal to “the heritage of the Frankfurt School”⁵⁹⁶ face the additional challenge of avoiding making such an elitist or paternalistic claim.

⁵⁹¹ James Bohman, “Critical Theory as Practical Knowledge: Participants, Observers, and Critics”, in Stephen P. Turner & Paul A. Roth (eds.), *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, U.K., 2003, p. 92.

⁵⁹² James Bohman, “Habermas, Marxism and Social Theory: The Case for Pluralism in Critical Social Science”, in Peter Dews (ed.), *Habermas: A Critical Reader*, p. 55. See also Nikolas Kompridis, “From Reason to Self-Realisation? Axel Honneth and the ‘Ethical Turn’ in Critical Theory”, p. 342.

⁵⁹³ Maeve Cooke, “Avoiding Authoritarianism: On the Problem of Justification in Contemporary Critical Social Theory”, p. 394.

⁵⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 398.

⁵⁹⁵ James Bohman, “Critical Theory as Practical Knowledge: Participants, Observers, and Critics”, in Stephen P. Turner & Paul A. Roth (eds.), *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, p. 106.

⁵⁹⁶ Axel Honneth, “Reconstructive Social Criticism with a Genealogical Proviso: On the Idea of ‘Critique’ in the Frankfurt School”, in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, p. 44.

While agreeing with Honneth that this problem cannot be resolved by anchoring the theory of communicative reason in a program of formal pragmatics (à la Habermas), the proponents of the pluralist approach do not agree with Honneth's alternative and more ambitious strategy of justification. In contrast to the latter's optimistic view regarding the "possibility of giving the theory's critical perspective an objective foothold in a pre-theoretical resource,"⁵⁹⁷ the pluralists seem generally to assume that there is no need to provide social criticism with a more robust foundation than what can be obtained subsequently, through a formal process of justification.⁵⁹⁸

In my view, the drawback with this restatement of the project of critical social theory lies in its inability to regenerate the capacity for criticism. For, while it might be argued that the pluralist strategy of justification makes it possible to avoid authoritarianism, the same strategy puts critical theory in a weak position. This becomes clear when we consider how this alternative model of criticism is supposed to function.

As we have seen, Cooke rejects Habermas's attempt to account for the universal-pragmatic structures of communication. More specifically, she argues that general norms such as those of publicity, inclusiveness and fairness are not "unavoidable features of everyday linguistic practices".⁵⁹⁹ Rather, these normative ideas need to be justified in a process of critical evaluation. However, if contemporary critical theorists have to "acknowledge the historical contingency of the normative intuitions and expectations to which they appeal for rational support of their critical analyses and emancipatory projections"⁶⁰⁰, how can we then decide whether a process of argumentation is "open-ended, inclusive, and fair"⁶⁰¹ enough to enable these same normative claims to be justified?

Similarly, Bohman maintains that the goal of critical social science is to "initiate processes of self-reflection, the outcome of which agents determine for themselves."⁶⁰² However, since the material prerequisites for such a process of deliberation may not already be in place, the critic should also seek to "create the *appropriate social conditions* under which agents themselves may verify or falsify the criticism offered."⁶⁰³ The obvious question is what the criteria for such a judgement are. On what normative basis will the critical theorist have to

⁵⁹⁷ Axel Honneth, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory Today", in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 65.

⁵⁹⁸ Unlike Bohman and Cooke, Kompridis explicitly distances himself from a procedural conception of reason. See for example Nikolas Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory Between Past and Future*, pp. 228, 236 and 238.

⁵⁹⁹ Maeve Cooke, "Habermas's Social Theory: The Critical Power of Communicative Rationality", in Ruth Sonderegger & Karin de Boer (eds.), *Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy*, p. 206.

⁶⁰⁰ Maeve Cooke, "Avoiding Authoritarianism: On the Problem of Justification in Contemporary Critical Social Theory", p. 395.

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 396.

⁶⁰² James Bohman, "Habermas, Marxism and Social Theory: The Case for Pluralism in Critical Social Science", in Peter Dews (ed.), *Habermas: A Critical Reader*, p. 80.

⁶⁰³ *Ibid.* [My emphasis]

rely in order to bring about those social conditions and does this element of the normative perspective have to be subjected to a similar process of rational interrogation?⁶⁰⁴

In their effort to avoid being accused of paternalism, the proponents of the pluralist approach appear to be convinced that the possibility of a retrospective method of justification can serve as a complete substitute for the idea of an empirical basis for critique. In my opinion, this attempt to redefine Habermas's concept of reason leaves critical theory in the position of being unable to deal with problems that result from the sundering process of differentiation and pluralization. In other words, pluralism is emphasized at the expense of unity.

As in the case of Honneth's unitary approach, the call for a more pragmatic and pluralistic version of critical theory can be understood as an attempt to overcome the perceived shortcomings of Habermas's view. Regarding the lack of emancipatory power, Habermas's idea of a potential for rationally motivated agreement embedded in the pragmatic presuppositions of everyday speech is abandoned in favor of a conception of truth as something "that always in some way transcends our descriptions and interpretations of it."⁶⁰⁵ In this sense, the utopian perspective of classical critical theory is understood as a practice of critique aimed at the "disclosure of possibility".⁶⁰⁶ In other words: "Instead of seeking to engage others directly in argumentation about the single correct answer, critics can aim at something else: to change participants' perspectives and thus to begin processes of reflection anew."⁶⁰⁷

As for the lack of critical force, Habermas's focus on the colonization of the lifeworld is rejected in favor of a pragmatic approach emphasizing methodological and theoretical pluralism. Indeed, according to the leading advocates of this approach: "Critical theory requires multi-dimensional explanations that integrate the results of many different theoretical perspectives."⁶⁰⁸

No doubt, pluralist critical theory has identified a number of limitations of Habermas's communicative approach. However, while opening up for a utopian perspective that is essentially missing in Habermas's thought, the proposed alternative is based on a concept of reason that is too weak, leaving it

⁶⁰⁴ The same questions can be raised with reference to Kompridis's assertion that "the insights of critique needs to be endorsed by those to whom it is addressed, and this must be done under the right social conditions - that is, through an inclusive and highly reflective practical discourse." See Nikolas Kompridis, "From Reason to Self-Realisation? Axel Honneth and the 'Ethical Turn' in Critical Theory", p. 340.

⁶⁰⁵ Maeve Cooke, "Avoiding Authoritarianism: On the Problem of Justification in Contemporary Critical Social Theory", p. 397.

⁶⁰⁶ Nikolas Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory Between Past and Future*, p. 254.

⁶⁰⁷ James Bohman, "Participants, Observers, and Critics: Practical Knowledge, Social Perspectives and Critical Pluralism", in William Rehg & James Bohman (eds.), *Pluralism and the Pragmatic Turn: The Transformation of Critical Theory*, p. 100.

⁶⁰⁸ James Bohman, "Habermas, Marxism and Social Theory: The Case for Pluralism in Critical Social Science", in Peter Dews (ed.), *Habermas: A Critical Reader*, p. 76. See also Maeve Cooke, *Re-presenting the Good Society*, pp. 198-206; and Nikolas Kompridis, "From Reason to Self-Realisation? Axel Honneth and the 'Ethical Turn' in Critical Theory", p. 343.

ill-equipped to resolve problems of differentiation and complexity. In other words, pluralist critical theory is unable to accommodate the goal of reconciling “a modernity which has fallen apart”.⁶⁰⁹

To conclude, with respect to the problems encountered in Habermas’s work, two fundamentally opposed responses can be distinguished. Among contemporary proponents of critical theory, the main lines of objection that have been directed against Habermas’s project tend to be either focused on reconciliation at the expense of pluralism, in the case of the unitary approach, or focused on differentiation at the expense of unity, in the case of the pluralistic approach. In my view, both of these one-sided alternatives have proved incapable of renewing critical theory in a convincing way.

Having said that, both of these approaches contain valuable elements that can be used in order to overcome the limitations of Habermas’s critical theory. Indeed, as I will suggest below, the pluralist account of emancipation in terms of the “disclosure of alternative possibilities”⁶¹⁰ provides a clue as to how to deal with the lack of emancipatory potential. Furthermore, Honneth’s conception of domination as the “systematic violation of the conditions for recognition”⁶¹¹ can be seen as a means for overcoming the lack of critical force.

To be sure, the limited potential for emancipation and critique should not be taken to imply that Habermas’s critical theory is incapable of explaining the nature of freedom and the conditions for emancipatory social change. Rather, in my view, it indicates that his theory needs to be supplemented by an alternative analysis of emancipation and domination. As I will argue, the normative dimension of critical theory must be broad enough to enable a more utopian notion of emancipation. Likewise, its social-scientific dimension should be broad enough to allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions of possibility for social change.

⁶⁰⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jürgen Habermas*, p. 125.

⁶¹⁰ Nikolas Kompridis, “From Reason to Self-Realisation? Axel Honneth and the ‘Ethical Turn’ in Critical Theory”, p. 354.

⁶¹¹ Axel Honneth, “The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory Today”, in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 72.

6.

Retrieving the Legacies of Classical Critical Theory: Toward a More Profound Understanding of Emancipation

The main focus of this study has been to evaluate Jürgen Habermas's attempt to overcome the opposition between the early and the late Frankfurt School in order to examine whether this approach can serve as a key for combining the concepts of emancipation corresponding to these two types of critique.

In the preceding chapters, I have reconstructed Habermas's critical theory, showing that it can be understood as an attempt to bridge the gap between the early and the late Frankfurt School. Furthermore, I have exposed the main shortcomings in Habermas's reformulation of critical theory, relying on a genealogical method of critique in order to unmask the neutralizing consequences of this position: a limited potential for emancipation and critique.

The perceived shortcomings in Habermas's work can also be understood in terms of the dimensions of classical critical theory that Habermas's reconstruction of the Frankfurt School program is responsible for concealing: the utopian aspect of emancipation (in late Frankfurt School theory) and the affective aspect of oppression (in early Frankfurt School theory).

As I have argued, Habermas's attempt to deal with the dual legacy of critical theory is based on a one-sided reconstruction of the two strands of the Frankfurt School, recasting the normative aspects of the original program into a theory of emancipation and the negativist tendencies of the subsequent view into a theory of domination. In my view, this effort to combine a positive notion of emancipation with a negative dialectic of reification is beset by two difficulties.

Firstly, by reinterpreting emancipation in terms of a theory of communicative action, the transfigurative potential of this concept is essentially lost. Secondly, given that domination is understood mainly as the subordination of the lifeworld to systemic constraints, it becomes difficult to explain what could motivate the emergence of political struggle and thus to clarify the inherent potential for social change.

In other words, I suggest that there are two main problems with Habermas's approach: the lack of emancipatory potential and the lack of

critical force. My own alternative, as set out below, can be understood as an attempt to supplement the missing parts of Habermas's critical theory.

In this final chapter, I shall begin by briefly examining two recent attempts to deal with these issues. As it turns out, neither of the two proposals is fully capable of performing the task of overcoming the limitations of Habermas's approach. Instead, I argue that we should reconsider Habermas's interpretation of the early and the late Frankfurt School in order to explore the possibilities of an alternative analysis. In the final part of the chapter, I use this alternative as a starting point for the development of a theoretical framework that can accommodate a more profound interpretation of the concept of emancipation and possibly lay the ground for a productive dialogue between the two main strands in contemporary critical thought. To be sure, the construction of such a framework is a complicated question that can only be touched on here.

6.1 Reconstructing the Concepts of Deliberation and Colonization: Two Strategies for Addressing the Shortcomings of Habermas's Critical Theory

In this section, I will briefly examine two proposals for addressing the limitations of Habermas's critical theory. Firstly, in the debate surrounding the discourse theory of democracy, the ambiguities in Habermas's approach to political activism is taken to indicate the need for expanding the notion of deliberation. In my view, this proposal can be regarded as an attempt to deal with the lack of emancipatory potential. Secondly, in the debate surrounding the interpretation of social pathologies, Habermas's failure to account for the subjective experiences of injustice caused by the pathological tendencies of modern society is thought to indicate the need for expanding the notion of colonization. I see this proposal as an effort to deal with the lack of critical force.

6.1.1 A More Extensive Concept of Deliberation

According to Habermas's communicative concept of emancipation, the "struggle against the oppression of collectivities"⁶¹² is deemed to take place in the informal processes of opinion- and will-formation whereby the legitimacy of political authority is secured. As an illustration of this point, Habermas has argued that emancipatory movements such as "the labor movement and feminism" were able to join these processes of political deliberation "in order to shatter the structures that had initially constituted them as 'the other' of a

⁶¹² Jürgen Habermas, "Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State", in *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, p. 204.

bourgeois public sphere.”⁶¹³ However, since Habermas’s theory of democracy is modelled on the counterfactual assumptions that constitute the ideal speech situation, it offers little guidance on how to conduct policies “under the conditions of structural inequality that characterize democracies today”.⁶¹⁴ In Chapter 5, I relied on this argument in order to substantiate the charge that Habermas’s critical theory fails to do justice to emancipation understood as a utopian project of transcendence.

How can this lack of emancipatory potential be resolved? According to one suggestion, this problem can be overcome simply by redefining Habermas’s theory of democracy, opening it up to the radical strategies employed by political activists and, thereby, making the deliberative process more responsive to the interests of those who are subject to structures of domination.

In the last decade, various attempts have been made to extend the conception of deliberation.⁶¹⁵ These efforts to develop a more expansive approach to deliberation can be seen as different ways to deal with the first of the consequences that follow from Habermas’s one-sided distinction between socially and systemically integrated spheres of action, i.e. the restriction of the utopian contents of the concept of emancipation. As implied, this would not have to involve the creation of an alternative model that would correct the formal-pragmatic design of the concept of emancipation.

In a recent essay, some of the most important contributors to this debate seek to synthesize the various accounts into “a *systemic approach to deliberative democracy*.”⁶¹⁶ According to this approach, if we consider deliberative democracy as a system of interrelated parts, non-deliberative strategies such as demonstrations, boycotts and the like do not have to be excluded. On this view: “highly partisan rhetoric, even while violating some deliberative ideals such as mutual respect and accommodation, may nonetheless help to fulfil other deliberative ideals such as inclusion.”⁶¹⁷

This strategy has the potential advantage of broadening the realm of deliberation, making it possible to include marginalized groups or to force new reasons into public conversation. However, when deliberative theory is

⁶¹³ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, p. 374.

⁶¹⁴ Iris M. Young, “Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy”, p. 683.

⁶¹⁵ See for example Christian Rostbøll, “Dissent, Criticism, and Transformative Political Action in Deliberative Democracy”, pp. 19-36; William Smith, “Civil Disobedience and Social Power: Reflections on Habermas”, pp. 72-89; and Archon Fung, “Deliberation Before the Revolution: Toward an Ethics of Deliberative Democracy in an Unjust World”, pp. 397-419.

⁶¹⁶ Jane Mansbridge et al, “A Systemic Approach to Deliberative Democracy”, in John Parkinson & Jane Mansbridge (eds.), *Deliberative Systems: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, p. 2.

⁶¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3. Similarly, according to Rostbøll, “different forms of political activism as well as alternative forms of communication do not violate the deliberative ideal if they are employed to bring up new issues and bring otherwise excluded groups into the political process.” See Christian Rostbøll, “Dissent, Criticism, and Transformative Political Action in Deliberative Democracy”, p. 29.

expanded in such a way, it runs the risk of becoming “so broad as to admit communicative distortions and forms of coercion and manipulation,”⁶¹⁸ something that would threaten to undermine the basic assumptions of deliberative democracy.⁶¹⁹

Christian Rostbøll follows a similar argumentative pattern. On Rostbøll’s account, even if the typical tactics of political activism would fail to respect the values intrinsic to deliberation, they may be necessary in order to bring about a situation that more closely approximates this ideal: “if we are truly committed to democratic deliberation, we will look to this ideal not only as an *end* but also for guidance for determining which *means* it would be legitimate to use to reach that end.”⁶²⁰

I fully agree with those who contend that the theory of deliberative democracy has little to say about the potential for transformative political action under conditions hostile to deliberation. However, I am not convinced that the attempt to justify activist tactics as a way of creating the context necessary for deliberation could provide a solution to the problem of the possibility of emancipatory action under such conditions.⁶²¹ After all, if citizens who find themselves in a situation characterized by inequality and oppression *cannot* act as if the idealizations of argumentation are “sufficiently approximated,”⁶²² how could they then let themselves be guided by the aim to use other means than arguments “*if and only if they help further deliberative goals?*”⁶²³ Indeed, as pointed out by Emmanuel Renault:

it is simply a fact that political claims emerging from the experience of injustice are not primarily expressed in the language of moral practical reason. Many experiences of injustice are only constituted by a feeling that a social situation is unbearable, and not by any consciousness that these situations are in contradiction with legal or moral principles. And even when such a consciousness arises, it is not necessarily within discourses or reasoning about what can be justified in respect to universality.⁶²⁴

⁶¹⁸ André Bächtiger et al., “Symposium: Toward More Realistic Models of Deliberative Democracy. Disentangling Diversity in Deliberative Democracy: Competing Theories, their Blind Spots and Complementarities”, in *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2010, p. 34.

⁶¹⁹ As pointed out by Owen and Smith, while there may be democratic justifications for non-deliberative speech acts and practices “it is not clear that they can be *deliberative democratic* justifications.” See David Owen & Graham Smith, “Deliberative Systems and the Deliberative Ideal”, unpublished paper, <https://soton.academia.edu/DavidOwen/Papers>, 2013?, p. 11.

⁶²⁰ Christian Rostbøll, “Dissent, Criticism, and Transformative Political Action in Deliberative Democracy”, p. 31.

⁶²¹ Moreover, much of what Habermas says about civil disobedience as a “means for obtaining more of a hearing and greater media influence for oppositional arguments” is well in line with the efforts to extend the conception of deliberative democracy. See Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, p. 382.

⁶²² Christian Rostbøll, “Dissent, Criticism, and Transformative Political Action in Deliberative Democracy”, p. 20.

⁶²³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁶²⁴ Emmanuel Renault, “Radical Democracy and an Abolitionist Concept of Justice”, in Robert Sinnerbrink et al (eds.), *Critique Today: Social and Critical Theory*, p. 140. Similarly, according to

In my view, deliberation can still be seen “as an ideal for how political decisions should be justified at the end stage of the political process,”⁶²⁵ and I will return to this issue later. However, what can be said about the path that leads forward to this stage of emancipation?

6.1.2 A More Extensive Concept of Colonization

Despite the criticism that has been levelled against the concept of colonization, some commentators have recently devoted renewed attention to this key notion in the work of Habermas.⁶²⁶ The way these thinkers are dealing with this issue can be understood as an attempt to resolve the second of the problems that follow from Habermas’s one-sided distinction between socially and systemically integrated spheres of action, i.e. the restriction of the critical potential of the concept of domination. According to this approach, the normative deficit of the colonization thesis can be reduced without abandoning this model as a whole.

According to the proponents of this view, Habermas’s colonization thesis “remains compelling and should be central to critical theory today.”⁶²⁷ The problem with Habermas’s theory of colonization, however, is that, while offering a functionalist account of reification, it does not explain the pathological effects of colonization “from the perspective of social agents themselves, as effects which are demonstrably bad and or intolerable to them”⁶²⁸. This issue cannot be clarified from a functionalist standpoint alone, since “there is no direct route from a social malfunction to a normative wrong.”⁶²⁹

The theoretical considerations underlying this argument are close to the position of Axel Honneth, but rather than rejecting the idea of colonization, Timo Jütten believes that it can be expanded, arguing that Habermas’s functionalist explanation of domination “needs to be complemented with a normative account of the legitimate expectations that members of modern capitalist societies have about the organization of their societies.”⁶³⁰ In my

Lasse Thomassen: “those who engage in civil disobedience are often those whose voices are not and cannot be registered within the present political system or civil society, and who are, as a consequence, not able to appropriate the principles of constitutional democracy as theirs.” See Lasse Thomassen, “Within the Limits of Deliberative Reason Alone: Habermas, Civil Disobedience and Constitutional Democracy”, p. 211.

⁶²⁵ Christian Rostbøll, “Dissent, Criticism, and Transformative Political Action in Deliberative Democracy”, p. 29.

⁶²⁶ See James G. Finlayson, “The Persistence of Normative Questions in Habermas’s *Theory of Communicative Action*”, pp. 518-532; Timo Jütten, “The Colonization Thesis: Habermas on Reification”, pp. 701-727; and Thomas Hove, “Understanding and Efficiency: Habermas’s Concept of Communicative Relief”, pp. 240-254.

⁶²⁷ Timo Jütten, “The Colonization Thesis: Habermas on Reification”, p. 701.

⁶²⁸ James G. Finlayson, “The Persistence of Normative Questions in Habermas’s *Theory of Communicative Action*”, p. 528.

⁶²⁹ Timo Jütten, “The Colonization Thesis: Habermas on Reification”, p. 719.

⁶³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 710. On the contrary, Honneth argues that: “Critical social theory has to shift its attention from the self-generated independence of systems to the damage and distortion of

view, this attempt at reconceptualizing Habermas's notion of colonization raises more questions than answers.

The ironic problem with the proposal to supplement Habermas's colonization thesis with a normative account of reification is that the normative foundations of the alternative approach itself remain frustratingly unclear. While arguing that it is impossible to explain what is wrong with reification "unless one takes into account the normative expectations of the people concerned," Jütten merely observes that such expectations "may be fairly indeterminate" and that "critical theory depends on at least a minimal conception of the good."⁶³¹

If the theory of reification should focus on "why the bureaucratic implementation and monetary redemption of welfare entitlements is experienced as a disappointment"⁶³² rather than on how it affects the capacity of human beings to reach understanding in language, it remains to be explained what is threatened by the colonization of the lifeworld. Unless the normative content of the alternative approach is explicitly spelled out, it can hardly serve as a strategy for overcoming the lack of critical force.⁶³³

The limitations of Habermas's critical theoretical approach (together with the unsuccessful attempts to deal with these limitations) may provide good reasons for reconsidering classical critical theory. As I will argue, in the theory of the late Frankfurt School, the idea of liberation was reconceptualized in a way that can be used in order to overcome the lack of emancipatory potential. Furthermore, in the theory of the early Frankfurt School, an understanding of domination that can be adopted in order to address the lack of critical force began to take shape. To begin with, let us return to Habermas's interpretation of classical critical theory in order to explore the possibilities of an alternative approach.

6.2 Lost Potentials or Latent Possibilities? Uncovering the Utopian Dimension of Emancipation and the Affective Dimension of Oppression

Habermas's analysis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*⁶³⁴ is arguably one of the most interesting attempts to explain the theory of the late Frankfurt School. In the

social relations of recognition." See Axel Honneth, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect", in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 72.

⁶³¹ Timo Jütten, "The Colonization Thesis: Habermas on Reification", p. 727. See also James G. Finlayson, "The Persistence of Normative Questions in Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action*", p. 528.

⁶³² Timo Jütten, "The Colonization Thesis: Habermas on Reification", p. 719.

⁶³³ Indeed, Habermas's view that colonization threatens the normative potential that "is built into the linguistic mechanism of the reproduction of the species" appears to be more convincing. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, p. 398.

⁶³⁴ Jürgen Habermas, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno", in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, pp. 106-130.

context of his effort to respond to “the challenge from the neostructuralist critique of reason,”⁶³⁵ Habermas argues that Horkheimer and Adorno joined with Nietzsche “to conceptualize the Enlightenment’s process of self-destruction”⁶³⁶ and thus ended up advocating a position “confusingly” similar to that of post-structuralism.

However, Habermas’s analysis in itself is not without problems, since it tends to reproduce the conventional picture of Enlightenment skepticism as either a radical form of Enlightenment thought or as a rejection of the idea of Enlightenment in general. Indeed, in its ambivalent oscillation between claiming that all Horkheimer and Adorno “perceive everywhere is a binding of reason and domination” and that they may after all stand firmly against such a “fusion of reason and power,”⁶³⁷ Habermas’s analysis bears witness to the difficulty in making sense of this paradoxical view. While his approach is not uncommon among interpreters of Frankfurt School theory,⁶³⁸ it relies heavily on a controversial interpretation of Nietzsche that may provide a clue as to the reason for this difficulty. In other words: “It is instructive that in Jürgen Habermas’s endeavour to reconstruct socialist humanism, a respectful criticism of the Frankfurt school has been combined with a fundamental rejection of its Nietzschean component.”⁶³⁹

To put it briefly, Habermas identifies two strains of Nietzschean thought. The young author of *The Birth of Tragedy* was strongly influenced by Richard Wagner’s ideal of an “aesthetically renewed mythology.”⁶⁴⁰ On the other hand, as Nietzsche made clear in an essay written a few years after this work was first published, and as we have seen above,⁶⁴¹ he soon distanced himself from this approach and gave “a twist to the program of the new mythology that was foreign to Romantic messianism.”⁶⁴² As I understand Habermas’s analysis, despite this twist in the construction of the theory, Nietzsche’s approach to reason and emancipation remained more or less unchanged. According to this interpretation: “With Nietzsche, the criticism of modernity dispenses for the first time with its retention of an emancipatory content. Subject-centered reason is confronted with reason’s absolute other.”⁶⁴³

⁶³⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. xix.

⁶³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 121 and 128.

⁶³⁸ For instance, David Held on the one hand argues that “the recognition of the dialectic of enlightenment as a condition and continuing experience of Western civilization owes a great deal to Nietzsche”. On the other hand, he is convinced that “the writings of the Frankfurt theorists all conclude on a note which is in contrast to Nietzsche’s sceptical view of reason.” See David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas*, Berkeley, 1980, pp. 156-157. For a similar approach, see Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, Ch. 5; Albrecht Wellmer, “Reason, Utopia, and the Dialectic of Enlightenment”, Section III; and Peter Pütz, “Nietzsche and Critical Theory”, in J. M. Bernstein (ed.), *The Frankfurt School: Critical Assessments*. 1.

⁶³⁹ Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1990*, p. 190.

⁶⁴⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 88.

⁶⁴¹ See above, Section 3.2.2.

⁶⁴² Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 94.

⁶⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

The outcome of Habermas's reflection on the relation between Nietzsche and the Frankfurt School remains somewhat unclear. To the extent that "Horkheimer and Adorno perceive cultural modernity from a similar experiential horizon", i.e. to the extent that "they surrendered themselves to an uninhibited scepticism regarding reason, instead of weighing the grounds that cast doubt on this scepticism itself,"⁶⁴⁴ their theoretical approach seems to be amenable to the same kind of analysis as proposed for Nietzsche. However, as we have already seen, Habermas's interpretation does not sustain such a clear-cut diagnosis. On his account, "the stance of Horkheimer and Adorno toward Nietzsche is ambivalent."⁶⁴⁵

While I agree with Habermas and other contemporary exponents of critical theory that it makes sense to analyze the late Frankfurt School from the viewpoint of Nietzsche's radical critique of reason, I do not share the dogmatic understanding of the latter approach as a "critique of reason that sets itself outside the horizon of reason."⁶⁴⁶ This one-sided interpretation of Nietzsche's complex theoretical work should not be allowed to conceal its possible consequences for the idea of emancipation and thus to prevent us from realizing the full implications of this view for the members of the institute: "For Adorno and Horkheimer, Nietzsche's critique of enlightenment was not simply a creative insight. If it contained the seeds of its own misappropriation, it was also [...] the site of potential liberation in the darkest of times."⁶⁴⁷

In my view, Habermas's perception of Enlightenment-skepticism as a complete rejection of the tradition of Enlightenment blinds him to the emancipatory potential of such theories. For, as I argued in Chapter 3, while the late Frankfurt School rejected the possibility of realizing the Enlightenment-philosophical notion of reason – something that precludes the idea of emancipation as a reconciliation between private and public autonomy – emancipation was redefined in terms of the development of a capacity for self-creation or in terms of abstract transcendence.

While Habermas's analysis of late Frankfurt School theory alternates between emphasizing the similarity to or difference from the philosophy of Nietzsche, his account of early critical theory is characterized by a one-sided interpretation of its relationship to Marx.

The theory of the early Frankfurt School has often been described as a body of thought emerging from Marxism. Moreover, it is typically assumed that the original members of the Institute began to distance themselves from this tradition in response to the political and economic realities of the 1930s. According to this view: "Critical Theory began as a primarily Marxian critique of capitalist modernity, and then progressively moved away from orthodox

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 129.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 120.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 96.

⁶⁴⁷ Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1990*, p. 291. See also Karin Bauer, "Nietzsche, Enlightenment, and the Incomplete Project of Modernity", in Babette Babich (ed.), *Habermas, Nietzsche, and Critical Theory*, pp. 105-122.

Marxian positions in response to the vicissitudes of twentieth-century history.”⁶⁴⁸

However, as I pointed out in Chapter 2, while there is much evidence to support the validity of this general picture of early Frankfurt School theory as rooted in the Marxian critique of political economy, it should not be understood as a simple continuation of Marx’s theoretical approach. In particular, the attempt to make use of psychoanalytic theory in order to clarify the subjective conditions for social change constitutes an example of the Frankfurt scholars’ rejection of Marxian orthodoxy. Most importantly, in Horkheimer’s early works, the experience of suffering was taken to have normative force.⁶⁴⁹

The conventional view of the Frankfurt scholars’ commitment to Marxist theory tends to ignore that their understanding of the relationship between theory and practice differs from that of Marx. Indeed, rather than appealing to a dogmatic philosophy of history, the early Frankfurt School relies on the “instrument of empirical social research for information about the critical readiness of the public.”⁶⁵⁰

In his insistence that the research program of the 1930s “was still based on the Marxist philosophy of history,”⁶⁵¹ Habermas’s analysis appears to be consistent with the conventional understanding of the early Frankfurt School. In other words, it seems to imply that classical critical theory relied on the assumption that it “could provide the continuity between theory and practice by merely appealing to a certain predetermined addressee”.⁶⁵² In the end, this analysis prevents Habermas from dealing adequately with the Frankfurt scholars’ attempt to identify the motivational causes of social struggle.

I have examined the limitations of Habermas’s work in terms of the dimensions of classical critical theory that his reconstruction of the Frankfurt School program tends to conceal. As we saw in Chapter 5, while Habermas’s critical theory suffers from a lack of emancipatory potential and critical force, the outcome of the controversy surrounding these limitations in Habermas’s work has settled into two opposing camps, reflecting a split within contemporary critical theory. In the case of the unitary approach, the attempt to overcome the limitations of Habermas’s thought tends to emphasize reconciliation at the expense of pluralism. In the case of the pluralist approach, differentiation is emphasized at the expense of unity.

Neither of these two approaches alone is sufficient to address the problems of Habermas’s critical theory. Rather, we should try to integrate these views into a theoretical framework that is broad enough to enable a more radical

⁶⁴⁸ Douglas Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity*, pp. 1-2.

⁶⁴⁹ See J. C. Berendzen, “Suffering and Theory: Max Horkheimer’s Early Essays and Contemporary Moral Philosophy”, pp. 1019-1037.

⁶⁵⁰ Axel Honneth, “A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory”, in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, p. 37.

⁶⁵¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, p. 382.

⁶⁵² Axel Honneth, “A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory”, in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, p. 37.

notion of emancipation as well as a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions of possibility for social change.

6.3 Hope, Struggle and Understanding: A Sequential Theory of Emancipation

Toward the end of the last century, some of the most influential representatives of contemporary critical theory spelled out their disagreement with the traditional understanding of emancipation, as employed in Western social and political thought. While Ernesto Laclau provided his conclusions regarding the “disintegration” of the classical notion of emancipation,⁶⁵³ Jürgen Habermas argued that this notion “must not be filled in as the totality of a reconciled form of life and projected into the future as a utopia.”⁶⁵⁴

The traditional understanding of emancipation rested on a belief in progress that can be derived from Christianity. As demonstrated in a classic study by Löwith: “the eschatological outlook of the New Testament [...] opened the perspective toward a future fulfilment – originally beyond, and eventually within, historical existence.”⁶⁵⁵ The centrality of eschatological thinking is apparent, for example, in Marx’s and Engels’s projection of a classless society in the *Communist Manifesto*. Indeed, it is not by chance that:

the whole process of history as outlined in the *Communist Manifesto* corresponds to the general scheme of the Jewish-Christian interpretation of history as a providential advance toward a final goal which is meaningful. Historical materialism is essentially, though secretly, a history of fulfilment and salvation in terms of social economy.⁶⁵⁶

Now, in the context of our effort to deal with the limitations of Habermas’s critical theory, we should consider the development of an alternative to this classical concept of emancipation.

In the previous chapter I referred to Benhabib’s distinction between two visions of politics in order to establish the claim that Habermas’s critical theory suffers from a lack of emancipatory potential.⁶⁵⁷ To reiterate, Benhabib argues that Habermas has “established the link between Enlightenment and emancipation by forsaking far too much of its utopian tradition.”⁶⁵⁸ I agree with Benhabib that critical theory has to do justice to emancipation understood as a project of “transfiguration” no less than as a deliberative project of

⁶⁵³ See Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, Ch. 1.

⁶⁵⁴ Jürgen Habermas, “The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of Its Voices”, in *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, p. 145.

⁶⁵⁵ Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*, p. 197.

⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁶⁵⁷ See above, Section 5.2.1.

⁶⁵⁸ Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 329.

“fulfilment”.⁶⁵⁹ As I see it however, the utopian aspect of emancipation should not be conceived as a final goal or as a stage that goes beyond the vision of emancipation as a project of fulfilment. It is rather the other way around.

In addressing the shortcomings of Habermas’s approach, my attempt to recover the utopian legacy of classical critical theory can be understood as an effort to turn the classical notion of emancipation on its head. Contrary to the traditional view, as exemplified by the teleological tendencies within Marxism, the moment of utopia or transfiguration ought to be seen as the initiation of an open-ended process rather than the end point of a gradual development.⁶⁶⁰ In this sense, the utopian aspect of emancipation is conceived as a possible break in the continuity of history.⁶⁶¹ Furthermore, in contrast to those for whom the perspective of fulfilment corresponds to the “culmination of the implicit logic of the present,”⁶⁶² this moment of emancipation is taken to indicate the political struggle to realize the emancipatory vision which animates such a radical break.

In my attempt to deal with the problems encountered in Habermas’s approach, I claim that emancipation can be understood in terms of a vaguely defined process involving three steps. In the following sections, the three aspects of emancipation are characterized in terms of hope, struggle and understanding. As I will argue, the third step in this process of emancipation can be understood to take place in the informal processes of opinion- and will-formation that Habermas presents us with in his discourse theory of law and democracy. However, how can we understand the process by which marginalized individuals and social groups become liberated enough to participate as equals in this deliberative phase?

To illustrate how the proposed theory can be used in order to make sense of contemporary struggles for liberation I draw from Taiaiake Alfred’s work

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 41.

⁶⁶⁰ Similarly, Michel Foucault, in his delineation of genealogical critique, has observed that: “An entire historical tradition (theological or rationalistic) aims at dissolving the singular event into an ideal continuity – as a teleological movement or a natural process. ‘Effective’ history, however, deals with events in terms of their most unique characteristics, their most acute manifestations. An event, consequently, is not a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, but the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who have once used it, [...] the entry of a masked ‘other’.” See Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *The Foucault Reader*, p. 88.

⁶⁶¹ As vividly described by Benjamin: “We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.” See Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *Illuminations*, p. 264. For a recent reflection on the significance of this work, see Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History’*, London, Verso, 2005.

⁶⁶² Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 13.

Wasáse: Indigenous Resurgences, which was referred to in the introduction to this book.⁶⁶³ As pointed out by Alfred:

Classically, the phases of revolt are thought of along a continuum moving from the self-assertion of an independent identity, to seeking moderate reforms of the system, to protesting and openly rejecting authority, and then to revolutionary action to destroy the state and replace it with another order of power.⁶⁶⁴

Along with Alfred's conception of a decolonization movement and along with what has been argued above, I believe that it is necessary to "reframe revolt."⁶⁶⁵

6.3.1 The Hope of Those Without Hope

As I argued in Chapter 3, late Frankfurt School theory can be seen as a form of social criticism that draws on the tradition of Enlightenment skepticism. This sort of criticism refers to a conception of emancipation as self-creation or abstract transcendence. To reiterate, from the perspective of genealogical critique, liberation is associated with the ability to reveal the homogenizing tendencies in society in order to open up the possibility for alternative forms of life. From the perspective of disclosing critique, it is connected with the abstract possibility of a future state of society whose discovery depends upon revelation.

The first aspect of emancipation can be understood as a combination of these two ideas. In the first step of the emancipatory process, individuals subjected to the levelling effects of domination become aware of the repressive character of existing social reality and thereby come to recognize the elusive possibility of a utopian negation of present social conditions.

In order to briefly illustrate this point, let me use the example of self-creation in Taiaiake Alfred's theory of the emancipation of Indigenous peoples. As argued by Alfred, emancipation requires the development of a capacity to break free from "the limiting logic of the colonial myths."⁶⁶⁶ Furthermore, if understood in terms of a potential for personal transformation, "peace" can be viewed as a liberatory concept:

Reconceptualized for our struggle, peace is being Onkwehonwe,⁶⁶⁷ breaking with the disfiguring and meaningless norms of our present reality, and re-creating ourselves in a holistic sense. This conception of peace requires a rejection of the state's multifaceted oppression of our peoples simultaneously with and through the assertion of regenerated Onkwehonwe identities.⁶⁶⁸

⁶⁶³ Taiaiake Alfred, "Wasáse: Indigenous Resurgences", in Jacob T. Levy & Iris M. Young (eds.), *Colonialism and Its Legacies*, pp. 79-96.

⁶⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁶⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁶⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁶⁶⁷ Mohawk term for "the original people".

⁶⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

To some extent, this view of emancipation can be linked up with insights from French post-structuralism. In particular, a similar position has been developed by Jacques Derrida, whose theory of deconstruction can partly be seen as a continuation of the Enlightenment-skeptical critique once formulated by the members of the late Frankfurt School.

Firstly, the initial phase of the emancipatory process can be understood in line with what Horkheimer states in the concluding sentence of his work *Eclipse of Reason*, namely that:

If by Enlightenment and intellectual progress we mean the freeing of man from superstitious belief in evil forces, in demons and fairies, in blind fate – in short, the emancipation from fear – then the denunciation of what is currently called reason is the greatest service reason can render.⁶⁶⁹

To be sure, this does not have to be read as a critique of modernity that has given up on the possibility of retaining “an emancipatory content,” as Habermas tends to see it.⁶⁷⁰ Rather, it should be taken to imply that, in order to initiate a process of emancipation in a situation characterized by oppression, one has to uncover the essentially constructed and repressive character of the ideas and norms on which the social order is based, thereby opening up the possibility for alternative ways of life.

The notion of emancipation inherent in the theoretical formulation of such a radical self-examination can be found in the theory of deconstruction as well. For, in the first place, deconstruction may be understood as an attempt to demonstrate that what is presently referred to in terms of reason or considered as a legitimate state of order actually presupposes the marginalization or suppression of its other.

In his essay *Force of law*, for instance, Derrida claims that there is no legal order that does not presuppose an initial act of violence and that there is no right that does not hinge on the possibility of being realized through an act of force. Now, one may ask in what way the *legitimate* enforcement of a law essentially differs from the *illegitimate* acts of violence it intends to neutralize: “How are we to distinguish between this force of the law [...] and the violence that one always deems unjust?”⁶⁷¹ The disturbing answer to this question is that no such fundamental distinction can be made: “Since the origin of authority, the foundation or ground, the position of the law can’t by definition rest on anything but themselves, they are themselves a violence without ground.”⁶⁷² The aim of the law, the very existence of the legal order itself, seems to presuppose the suppression of its other.

⁶⁶⁹ Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p. 126.

⁶⁷⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 94.

⁶⁷¹ Jacques Derrida, ‘Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’, in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld & David G. Carlson (eds), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, Routledge, New York, 1992, p. 6.

⁶⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

In the first place, then, deconstruction sheds light on the difference between the ideal of justice that reason pledges and the oppression on which it is actually based. In this sense, the theory of deconstruction is based on the ability to become aware of the homogenizing character of Enlightenment rationality and thus makes reference to a conception of emancipation as a capacity for critical reflection and self-creation.

The first phase of the emancipatory process can actually be seen as a combination of two types of emancipation. In addition to the development of a capacity for self-creation, the first step of this process is also taken to involve the revelation of a utopian counter-image of the established order of repression and thus to hold out the possibility of abstract transcendence. Arguably, it is such a view of emancipation that Adorno has in mind when he claims that: “Freedom is solely to be grasped in determinate negation, in accordance with the concrete form of unfreedom.”⁶⁷³

Can Derrida’s theory of deconstruction be taken to accommodate this second type of emancipation as well? To be sure, the disturbance that the conceptual disclosure of the other and the symbolic inversion of metaphysical oppositions may produce is hardly sufficient for the deconstruction to be regarded as liberating in this sense. As Derrida himself points out: “Here, one risks ceaselessly confirming, consolidating, *relifing* (*relever*), at an always more certain depth, that which one allegedly deconstructs.”⁶⁷⁴ For that reason, it seems necessary, in addition, to aim for a change of terrain:

By means of this double, and precisely stratified, dislodged and dislodging, writing, we must also mark the interval between inversion, which brings low what was high, and the irruptive emergence of a new ‘concept,’ a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime.⁶⁷⁵

If, in the first place, deconstruction seeks to denounce what is currently called reason by exposing the marginalization of the other, in the second place, it sets out to destabilize and overturn this hierarchy, opening up for a justice “to-come”. Indeed, “wherever deconstruction is at stake, it would be a matter of linking an *affirmation* (in particular a political one,) *if there is any*, to the experience of the impossible, which can only be a radical experience of the *perhaps*.”⁶⁷⁶

Contrary to Habermas, then, who has made clear that he suspects Derrida and other post-structuralists of “merely cloaking their complicity with the venerable tradition of counter-Enlightenment in the garb of post-

⁶⁷³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, Routledge, London, 1990, p. 231 [Translation modified]

⁶⁷⁴ Jacques Derrida, “The Ends of Man”, in *Margins of Philosophy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982, p. 135.

⁶⁷⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, Athlone, London, 1981, p. 42.

⁶⁷⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, Routledge, London, 2006, p. 35.

Enlightenment,”⁶⁷⁷ I read Derrida as following in the footsteps of the late Frankfurt School. Furthermore, I find the theory of deconstruction to be useful in order to reveal a phase in the process of emancipation that has to take place before anything like a deliberative discourse could get started. For, at least from the point of view of the most marginalized individuals and groups, the established social order must appear to be repressive in a totalizing way.

It is characteristic of Derrida to say little about the practical implications of deconstruction. Indeed, as I argued in the case of the late Frankfurt School, one of the main characteristics of the Enlightenment-critical understanding of emancipation is a fundamental skepticism regarding the possibility of realizing this idea. Since it is my intention to indicate what a theoretical framework that is profound enough to enable a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions of possibility for social change, as well as a more utopian notion of emancipation, would look like, this skepticism obviously constitutes a problem.

Is there any way to tease out the political implications of the concept of emancipation outlined above?

In Chapter 4, a similar view was detected among the adherents of the so-called pluralist approach. As I suggested, pluralist critical theory seeks to resolve the utopian deficit in Habermas’s thought by way of a critique aimed at the “disclosure of possibility”.⁶⁷⁸ On this account as well, the possibility of emancipation appears to be closely related to the idea of reason as changeable, as radically open to the occurrence of what is novel. Unlike Derrida, however, while convinced that the goal of critique must be to make future “receptive to utopian hopes and expectations,”⁶⁷⁹ the pluralists do not reject the possibility of a rational process of justification. For, as maintained by Kompridis, “the insights of critique needs to be endorsed by those to whom it is addressed, and this must be done under the right social conditions – i.e. through an inclusive and highly reflective practical discourse.”⁶⁸⁰

By acknowledging the need for a critical process of evaluation, we can stick to the idea of emancipation as self-creation and abstract transcendence without necessarily arriving at a conception that is unacceptably skeptical. The possibility of a retrospective method by which the validity of a critical insight can be verified “in the course of time”⁶⁸¹ at least indicates what the realization of this emancipatory perspective would imply.

6.3.2 The Sisyphean Struggle of the “as if Equal”

I have explained how, in the first phase of the emancipatory process, individuals subjected to the crippling effects of domination become aware of

⁶⁷⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, p. 5. See also pp. 310-311.

⁶⁷⁸ Nikolas Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory Between Past and Future*, p. 254.

⁶⁷⁹ Nikolas Kompridis, “From Reason to Self-Realisation? Axel Honneth and the ‘Ethical Turn’ in Critical Theory”, p. 354.

⁶⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

⁶⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

the oppressive nature of the existing social order and thereby come to recognize the possibility of a radical negation of present social conditions.

While I did argue that this experience can be described as a combination of self-creation and abstract transcendence, I did not explain how this initial form of emancipation can emerge. And, while I did maintain that the utopian potential inherent in this notion of emancipation can be concretized by specifying the conditions for its realization, I did not say anything about the dynamics of such a process.

In order to explain the emergence of political struggle and protest movements, I believe that it is necessary to provide social criticism with a more robust foundation than that offered by pluralist critical theory. Indeed, as pointed out by Honneth, to understand the conditions for emancipatory social change, it is not sufficient merely to “refer to unmet claims in the present and use them as social evidence for the necessity of critique.”⁶⁸² Furthermore, the possibility of a retrospective method of justification cannot serve as a substitute for the idea of an empirical basis for critique: “Without a realistic concept of ‘emancipatory interest’ that puts at its center the idea of an indestructible core of rational responsiveness on the part of the subjects, this critical project will have no future.”⁶⁸³

In the critical theory of the early Frankfurt School, the experience of suffering was seen to have normative force. As argued by Horkheimer, for example: “The simple establishment of commonality in suffering and the description of oppressive relations, which tend to be hidden from the light of consciousness by the ideological apparatus, can be liberating.”⁶⁸⁴ In contemporary critical theory a similar position is adopted by advocates of the unitary approach. According to Honneth:

The use of the concept of suffering [...] has unfortunately remained until now largely unexplored within the reception of critical theory. A more precise analysis would likely show that, as with Freud, suffering expresses the feeling of not being able to endure the ‘loss of ego [capacities].’⁶⁸⁵

⁶⁸² Axel Honneth, “The Point of Recognition: A Rejoinder to the Rejoinder”, in Nancy Fraser & Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?: A Political-philosophical Exchange*, p. 243.

⁶⁸³ Axel Honneth, “A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory”, in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, p. 42.

⁶⁸⁴ Max Horkheimer, “The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy”, in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, p. 261.

⁶⁸⁵ Axel Honneth, “A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory”, in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, p. 39. See also Emmanuel Reanault, “The Political Philosophy of Social Suffering”, in Boudewijn de Bruin & Christopher F. Zurn (eds.), *New Waves in Political Philosophy*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2009 pp. 158-176.

Honneth's conception of domination as the "systematic violation of the conditions for recognition,"⁶⁸⁶ can thus be regarded as a development of the theory of the early Frankfurt School.

Another aspect of this step in the process of emancipation has been discussed by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière. As pointed out by Rancière, as long as we start from the assumption of inequality and conceive of emancipation as the process through which this inequality can be overcome, it will not be possible to bring about emancipatory change:

anyone who starts out from distrust, who assumes inequality and proposes to reduce it, can only succeed in setting up a hierarchy of inequalities, a hierarchy of priorities, a hierarchy of intelligences – and will reproduce inequality ad infinitum.⁶⁸⁷

Instead, he argues that we must begin from the opposite assumption and thus that we must start "from the point of view of equality".⁶⁸⁸ Rancière's attempt to provide an alternative to the traditional concept of emancipation is derived from his analysis of the French labor movement in the nineteenth century. As follows from this analysis, the emergence of the working-class movement cannot be explained as a result of a growing awareness among workers of their "objective conditions" or the development of a working-class identity. Rather, working-class emancipation is understood as "a rupture in the order of things that founded these 'values:'"

At the birth of the "workers' movement," there was thus neither the "importation" of scientific thought into the world of the worker nor the affirmation of a worker culture. There was instead the transgressive will to [...] act as if intellectual equality were indeed real and effectual.⁶⁸⁹

While it is reasonable to assume that, at some point in the process of emancipation, the members of marginalized groups must begin to act "as though the other can always understand their arguments,"⁶⁹⁰ and thus to engage "in a series of actions that reconfigure the space where parties, parts, or lack of parts have been defined,"⁶⁹¹ it does not make sense to conceive of equality as an "initial axiom"⁶⁹². Indeed, as I have already shown, in order to

⁶⁸⁶ Axel Honneth, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory Today", in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 72.

⁶⁸⁷ Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, Verso, London, 1995, p. 52. See also Gert Biesta, "A New Logic of Emancipation: The Methodology of Jacques Rancière", in *Educational Theory*, Vol. 60, No. 1, 2010, pp. 39-59.

⁶⁸⁸ Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, p. 52.

⁶⁸⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2003, p. 219.

⁶⁹⁰ Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, p. 50.

⁶⁹¹ Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, p. 30.

⁶⁹² Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor*, p. 223.

account for the conditions of possibility of emancipatory practices, we have to identify the motivational causes of social struggle.

Thus, in the second step of the emancipatory process, the experience of social suffering can be viewed as providing the motivational impetus for the emergence of collective political resistance and thus as the basis for the development of a capacity to tear oneself “out of the nether world of inarticulate sounds”⁶⁹³ and assert oneself as an equal. In the words of Alfred:

The challenge is to recreate ourselves and take back our dignity. Then, meaningful change will be possible, and it will be a new existence, one of possibility, where Onkwehonwe will have the ability to make the kinds of choices we need to make concerning the quality of our lives, and begin to recover a truly human way of life.⁶⁹⁵

As I showed in Chapter 5, Honneth’s attempt to lay the ground for a “strong context-transcending form of social criticism”⁶⁹⁶ is characterized by a tension between two strategies of justification. On the one hand, according to the non-foundationalist strategy, normativity can be derived negatively from feelings of disrespect. On the other hand, according to the foundationalist strategy of justification, the theory of recognition serves as the normative ground upon which the necessary conditions of the “good life” can be formally determined.

As we have seen, it is questionable whether the latter attempt to develop a more substantial and broad-based version of the communicative paradigm is compatible with the pluralistic character of modern societies. Sure enough, to the extent that this view conceives of the “good society” as a condition that can actually be attained by human beings, it is incompatible with the first aspect of emancipation that I described above.

The non-foundationalist strategy avoids the dead-end of “a provisional end-state”⁶⁹⁷ and is more consistent with the first step in the emancipatory process. However, while such a strategy provides a persuasive account of how an emancipatory interest in recognition can be derived from the experience of disrespect, it cannot replace the need for a subsequent process of justification. Indeed, as argued by Rainer Forst:

recognition accounts provide an indispensable *sensorium* for experiences of social suffering generally and of injustice more narrowly. Yet when it comes to the question of the criteria of the *justification of justice* claims, a procedural-deontological, discourse-theoretical account is necessary.⁶⁹⁸

⁶⁹³ Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, p. 50.

⁶⁹⁵ Taiaiake Alfred, “Wasáse: Indigenous Resurgences”, in Jacob T. Levy & Iris M. Young (eds.), *Colonialism and Its Legacies*, p. 96.

⁶⁹⁶ Axel Honneth, “Reconstructive Social Criticism with a Genealogical Proviso: On the Idea of ‘Critique’ in the Frankfurt School”, in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, p. 44.

⁶⁹⁷ Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, p. 171.

⁶⁹⁸ Rainer Forst, “First Things First: Redistribution, Recognition and Justification”, in Danielle Petherbridge (ed.), *Axel Honneth: Critical Essays*, p. 307.

We have to move on to the third step in the emancipatory process in order to clarify this point.

6.3.3 The Mutual Understanding Between Participants in Discourse

In an essay dedicated to the question of whether “the orienting power of the French Revolution is exhausted,” Habermas lays emphasis on the fundamental ideas that are associated with the development of the modern constitutional state: “Democracy and human rights form the universalist core of the constitutional state that emerged from the American and French Revolutions in different variants. This universalism still has its explosive power and vitality [...].”⁶⁹⁹

Yet, he finds it necessary to rethink the “new mentality”, the “revolutionary consciousness”, by means of which these ideas were carried forward:

Our current posture has two features: we still appeal to the readiness to act and to the political-moral orientation to the future, on the part of those who want to rebuild the existing order; at the same time, however, we have lost our confidence that conditions can be changed by revolution.⁷⁰⁰

To be sure, Habermas’s theory of democracy appeals to the readiness to act, but not in order to take possession of the state through a political revolution. As far as he is concerned, the revolutionary mentality is associated rather with the potential vitality of the public sphere. According to the deliberative democratic view of Habermas, public reason cannot be satisfactorily exercised when accomplished merely “within the formal organizations of the economy and the state, or within formally organized political parties, interest and pressure groups, or the like.”⁷⁰¹ Rather, the rational collective deliberation is primarily supposed to take place outside of such organizations, in the political public sphere.

As I understand the final step of the process of emancipation, social groups engaged in the struggle for new forms of social organization become actively involved in the cooperative search for mutually acceptable solutions and thus make use of the potential for liberatory social change that is located in the political public sphere. Indeed, as pointed out by Alfred as well, while the struggle for the liberation of Indigenous peoples would surely engender more conflict, “it would be conflict for a positive purpose and with the hope of re-

⁶⁹⁹ Jürgen Habermas, “Popular Sovereignty as Procedure”, in *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, pp. 464-465.

⁷⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 467.

⁷⁰¹ Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory*, p. 163.

creating the conditions of coexistence”⁷⁰² between the indigenous and non-indigenous populations.

According to Habermas, if the public sphere is to manage to serve the important function of accommodating the exercise of public reason, it has to perform two basic functions. On the one hand, the public sphere is expected to discover conflicts that ought to be regulated from the moral point of view, i.e. problems that apply to the society as a whole. In this sense, the operation of the public sphere is dependent on:

groups, associations, and organisations that, before parliaments and through the courts, give voice to social problems, make broad demands, articulate public interests or needs, and thus attempt to influence the political process more from normative points of view than from the standpoint of particular interests.⁷⁰³

On the other hand, the political public sphere is supposed to provide possible solutions to such problems, i.e. it must be able to “not only detect and identify problems but convincingly and influentially thematize them, furnish them with possible solutions, and dramatize them in such a way that they are taken up and dealt with by parliamentary complexes.”⁷⁰⁴ In the case of this second function in particular, Habermas obviously relies on the basic assumptions of his deliberative view on democracy.

In my view, Habermas does not draw a clear enough distinction between these two functions of the public sphere. As I see it, the first function refers to the development of a critical attentiveness to various forms of domination in present social life. The second function has more to do with the possibility of a rational collective deliberation that has to take the existence of such a critical awareness for granted in its intention to bring forth norms that can be agreed to by each person who is assumed to be affected by their consequences.

When considered from the point of view of the final step in the process of emancipation, the distinction between these two functions of the political public sphere becomes more apparent. If the public sphere is seen as a “warning system,”⁷⁰⁵ it refers to an institutionalized readiness to be influenced by the formation of critique against the oppressive consequences that stem from the material reproduction of society. In this sense, the activities of the political public sphere can be more or less responsive to the preceding steps in the emancipatory process, indicating its relationship to the utopian aspects of emancipation. When it is counted on as a field of problem solving, it refers to

⁷⁰² Taiaiake Alfred, “Wasáse: Indigenous Resurgences”, in Jacob T. Levy & Iris M. Young (eds.), *Colonialism and Its Legacies*, p. 81.

⁷⁰³ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, p. 355. See also “On the Pragmatic, the Ethical, and the Moral Employments of Practical Reason”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 5.

⁷⁰⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, p. 359. See also “Popular sovereignty as procedure,” in *ibid.*, p. 485.

⁷⁰⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, p. 359.

the consensus generating potential of communicative reason. As such, it alludes to the institutional conditions for realizing the potential for liberatory social change.

By way of conclusion, in this chapter I have proposed a reconceptualization of emancipation. This approach can be understood as an attempt to supplement the missing parts of Habermas's critical theory. As I have argued, in the first step of the emancipatory process, individuals subjected to experiences of social suffering become aware of the repressive character of existing social reality and are thereby confronted by the possibility of a utopian negation of present social conditions. Second, this experience becomes the motivational impetus for collective political resistance. In the final step, social groups engaged in the struggle for new forms of social organization become actively involved in the cooperative search for mutually acceptable solutions and thus make use of the potential for liberatory social change that is located in the political public sphere.

To reiterate, while suggesting the possibility of a productive dialogue between the two main strands in contemporary critical thought, the compatibility of Enlightenment-philosophical critical theory and Enlightenment-skeptical critical theory should be understood in terms of the possibility of *combining* two different (but not necessarily conflicting) concepts of emancipation rather than a *complete reconciliation* of these two views. Having said that, the sequential theory of emancipation, as outlined above, is far from complete and further research is clearly needed.

Svensk sammanfattning (Summary in Swedish)

Avhandlingen handlar om begreppet emancipation, eller frigörelse. I politisk teori har emancipation traditionellt definierats i termer av en rationaliseringsprocess som innefattar spridandet av mänskliga rättigheter eller överskridandet av kapitalism. Dessa två förhållningssätt kommer till uttryck i Immanuel Kants respektive Karl Marx teorier.

Mot slutet av 1700-talet definierade Kant emancipation på grundval av hans förståelse av upplysning som: ”*människans utträde ur hennes självförvällade omyndighet.*” Därmed kom idén om människans fria vilja att hävdas framför lagar och traditioner som tidigare hade betraktats som okränkbara:

Omyndighet är oförmågan att göra bruk av sitt förstånd utan någon annans ledning. *Självförvällad* är denna omyndighet om orsaken till densamma inte ligger i brist på förstånd, utan i brist på beslutsamhet och mod att göra bruk av det utan någon annans ledning. *Sapere aude!* Hav mod att göra bruk av *ditt eget* förstånd! lyder alltså upplysningens valspråk.⁷⁰⁶

Hädanefter, menade alltså Kant, måste grunden för människans kunskap och samvaro sökas hos människan själv, inte i något utanförliggande.

Om Kant menade att människan besitter en potential att bli medveten om sig själv och låta sina handlingar styras av denna förmåga, invände Marx att detta var en abstrakt form av självmedvetande som inte hade något att säga om människan som samhällsvarelse, det vill säga vilken roll människan spelade i samhällets utformning och hur samhällets utformning i sin tur påverkade människan. Enligt Marx kunde verklig mänsklig frigörelse inte åstadkommas inom ramen för den rådande samhällsordningen. Upplysningens idéer kunde med andra ord förverkligas först med en förändring av människans materiella livsvillkor. En meningsfull idé om ett samhälle fritt från förtryck var därmed nödvändigtvis kopplad till den praktik i form av politisk kamp etc. som krävdes för att sätta den i verket: ”Filosoferna har endast på olika sätt *förklarat* världen, men vad det gäller är att *förändra* den. [...] Människan måste i praktiken bevisa sitt tänkandes sanning, d.v.s. verklighet och makt, dess egenskap av något som tillhör jordelivet.”⁷⁰⁷

Dessa båda uppfattningar som i hög grad präglade den moderna debatten om frigörelse har i sin tur ifrågasatts av Friedrich Nietzsche. Enligt Nietzsche är upplysningsfilosofiska teorier likt de som förespråkades av Kant och Marx problematiska eftersom de utgår från ett förnuftsbegrepp som tycks implicera

⁷⁰⁶ Immanuel Kant, ”Svar på frågan: Vad är upplysning?”, i Brutus Östling (red.) *Vad är upplysning?*, Symposion, Stockholm, 1992, s. 27.

⁷⁰⁷ Karl Marx, ”Teser om Feuerbach”, i *Marx i ett band*, Prisma, Stockholm, 1974, s. 45-47.

möjligheten av ett tillstånd fritt från makt: ”man svärmar numera överallt, till och med under vetenskaplig förklädnad, för framtida samhällstillstånd som ’inte längre’ äger ’en exploaterande karaktär’: – det låter för mig som om man lovade att uppfinna ett liv som undvarar alla organiska funktioner.”⁷⁰⁸ Nietzsche ansåg att det är den likriktning som åtföljer ett sådant bruk av förnuftet, snarare än det lidande som det försöker råda bot på, som bör ses som förtryckande då den förvanskar den grundläggande drivkraften i människans tillvaro, nämligen viljan till makt. Därmed föregriper Nietzsche den förnuftskritik som är utmärkande för samtida poststrukturalism.

I vår tids samhällskritik har motsättningen mellan liberalism och marxism i hög grad kommit att ersättas av en motsättning mellan upplysning och upplysningskritik. Utifrån ett upplysningsfilosofiskt perspektiv är möjligheten till emancipation fast förankrad i ett förnuftsbegrepp som förutsätter att spänningen mellan privat och offentlig autonomi kan upphävas. Den upplysningsskeptiska förståelsen av emancipation utgår å sin sida från en radikal förnuftskritik och tycks därmed utesluta möjligheten av ett sådant överskridande.

Konflikten mellan upplysningsfilosofi och upplysningskritik präglar förhållandet mellan de två tongivande riktningarna inom samtida kritisk teori. En sådan motsättning har dock redan tidigare kommit till uttryck, inom ramen för det teoretiska förhållningssätt som utvecklades av den s.k. Frankfurtskolan. För att klarlägga denna skiljaktighet kan man skilja mellan den tidiga (1930–1940) och den sena Frankfurtskolan (1940–1945). Den tidiga Frankfurtskolan utgick från en upplysningsfilosofisk tanketradition till vilken vitt skilda tänkare som Immanuel Kant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Hegel och Karl Marx kan räknas. Enligt detta synsätt antas människans emancipation förutsätta förverkligandet av en i vår samtid inneboende förnuftspotential. Den sena Frankfurtskolan utgick snarare från ett upplysningsskeptiskt förhållningssätt som bland andra Friedrich Nietzsche och Max Weber tidigare har gett uttryck för. Enligt detta synsätt ses förnuftet snarare som en källa till förtryck och möjligheten till frigörelse förknippas med den paradoxala insikten om detta sakernas tillstånd samt med det blotta hoppet om en framtida förändring till det bättre.

Frågan är nu vad detta innebär för den kritiska teorins möjlighet att bedriva samhällskritik. Är det meningsfullt att tala om *en* kritisk teori, eller måste vi utgå från att den tidiga och den sena Frankfurtskolan har legat till grund för två konkurrerande kritiska teorier? Är det idag överhuvudtaget möjligt att tala om emancipation på ett otvetydigt sätt?

Det övergripande syftet med denna avhandling är att undersöka emancipationsbegreppets innebörd i samtida kritisk teori. Mer specifikt syftar studien dels till att visa att Jürgen Habermas kritiska teori kan förstås som ett försök att hantera motsättningen mellan den tidiga och den sena Frankfurtskolan, dels till att undersöka huruvida detta försök kan ligga till

⁷⁰⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, ”Bortom gott och ont”, i *Samlade skrifter*, Bd. 7, Symposion, Eslöv, 2002, s. 159.

grund för en sammankoppling av de två emancipationsbegrepp som svarar mot dessa båda synsätt.

Habermas kritiska teori kan tolkas som ett försök att överbrygga klyftan mellan upplysning och upplysningskritik inom klassisk kritisk teori. Genom att omformulera den tidiga Frankfurtskolans upplysningsfilosofiska perspektiv i termer av en teori om kommunikativt handlande och den sena Frankfurtskolans upplysnings skeptiska perspektiv i termer av en teori om systemens kolonisering av livsvärlden ger sig Habermas i kast med att kombinera dessa båda ståndpunkter inom ramen för ett övergripande teoretiskt förhållningssätt. Det huvudsakliga problemet med Habermas strategi är att han i sitt försök att hantera spänningen mellan den tidiga och den sena Frankfurtskolan tolkar dessa traditioner på ett ensidigt sätt och därmed tenderar att reducera deras emancipatoriska och kritiska potential. Den första invändningen mot Habermas kritiska teori riktar sig således mot dess begränsade emancipatoriska potential och har att göra med att det kommunikativa frigörelsebegreppet saknar en klart definierad utopisk dimension. Den andra invändningen riktar sig mot teorins begränsade kritiska potential och har att göra med att dess koloniseringsbegrepp saknar en tydligt uttalad normativ innebörd.

Vad innebär emancipation idag? För att kunna svara på denna fråga menar jag att det är nödvändigt att återvända till det tudelade arv som den första generationen av kritiska teoretiker lämnade efter sig. Det är först när vi är kapabla att upprätta en dialog mellan upplysningsfilosofisk och upplysnings skeptisk kritisk teori och därvid använda oss av centrala element från båda dessa teoretiska förhållningssätt som det blir möjligt att besvara frågan om frigörelsebegreppets samtida innebörd.

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