1

or, Critical Theory

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All thoughts are zoned, but very few come to be known by the name of a place. Though Jena was the site of a remarkable flourishing of thought in the 1790s it never acquired the legacy of an eponym; similarly, the milieu called “poststructuralism” by Americans was never really a “Paris School” despite the almost total confinement of the phenomenon named by the term to that city. It would appear that neither spatial proximity, nor coevality, nor even resemblance on the terrain of ideas is enough to transform a network of thoughts into the concreteness and determinacy named by a place. It was possible for Frankfurt to become the eponym of a thought, indeed, a synonym for critical theory itself, because that thought was first a “school” – a formalized, articulated institutional machine.

A socialist benefactor whose father made his money in grain; a prudently negotiated affiliation with the University of Frankfurt; a significant network of research and administrative assistants; a spacious building constructed from scratch to house the institute: this is the infrastructural unconscious of perhaps the most comprehensive critique of “administered life” ever developed (Marcuse 2012, 50). Critical theory survived the myriad (mortal) risks of its time, in part on the basis of the durability and material effectiveness of its institutional form. This is neither a guiltily smoking (political) gun nor a banal aside. Whatever its proximity in spirit to the anti-bourgeois avant garde and to the ambient aesthetic nomads and revolutionaries of the interwar period, and however often its members were themselves forced into precarity and flight, critical theory was logistically intentional, organized, and decidedly this-worldly in its desire to intelligently anticipate the conditions for its own comfortable reproduction. Peace and quiet, a certain institutionalized refuge from disruption (and from the disruption of institutions themselves, the endless meetings and obligations of the traditional university form) are consistently framed by Theodor Adorno as the sine qua non of thought in an age of mass distraction: “bustle endangers concentration with a thousand claims” (Adorno 2002, 29). He goes one step further: “for the intellectual, inviolable isolation is the only way of showing some measure of solidarity” (26).

There is in this a substantial departure from an earlier Marxist type, that of the vocational or professional revolutionary intellectual. For figures like Lenin, Gramsci, or Mao (and of course for Marx and Engels themselves), invention, creativity, and thought were dialectically inseparable from distraction, risk, and practice: one could only really think
in the mess of the event, in the externality and obligation – as much temporal as moral – of the demands placed on the intellectual by the political experiments of the many. Nothing could be further from the spirit of this model than Max Horkheimer’s frank admission that he “lived his life as an individualist” (1978, 13). For some, it is precisely in the schoolishness of critical theory – its buttressed existence apart – that one can discern the outlines of an enfeebled middle-class hexis, one which structures from within many of the School’s worst limits, aporias, and failures. György Lukács’s notorious 1962 suggestion that critical theory had taken up residence in the “Grand Hotel Abyss” (Lukács 1971, 22) – a phrase he originally used to characterize the “irrationalism” (Lukács 1981, 204) of Arthur Schopenhauer – turns precisely on an imagined alignment between the political pessimism of the School and its comfortable separation from the risks and intensities of actual political struggle. The abyss is not simply taken in from a (seated) distance, an object of enjoyment viewed from a vantage-point of comfort. Instead, it is to some extent produced by this watching, and in two senses: not only is the abyss history’s summum malum – everything cruel made possible by safety – it is also a direct symptom of passivity, the sadness of a body without politics (Lukács 1971).

Even for those for whom the Frankfurt School names an historical retreat from political praxis, the erudition, provocativeness, and rigor named by the term “critical theory” remains difficult to dispute. This was almost certainly the most sophisticated cultural Marxism ever produced. Its commitment to autonomy, and to an extremely rare (often austere) precision, made it possible not only to be a Marxist philosopher² (or a Marxist in philosophy), but also to be a Marxist at all in an era of massively redrawn revolutionary horizons. Indeed, after Horkheimer, Benjamin, and Adorno, it was possible to be a Marxist not only in philosophy, but in music, literature, science, and art. The reconceptualization of theory itself as a form of praxis was a strategy of conservation, a way of remaining faithful in thought to a practice without options or agents. For some, it only abetted the collapse of twentieth-century socialist praxis, exacerbating the distance between theory and what Marx called its “material force”: the brains, bodies, and energies of the oppressed. For others, it was a necessary and principled retreat, a turning back and away that replenishes a body and gives it time to lick its wounds (Marx 1970).

Frankfurt 1924–1935, The Welter of Method

The Institute for Social Research opened under the directorship of Carl Grünberg in 1924 with the intention of producing a space on the margins of the German academe for the application and diffusion of Marxist social science. Its institutional structure allowed the Institute to share resources (and vital symbolic capital) with the University of Frankfurt, while at the same time granting it administrative control and effective autonomy in the domain of research. This location within and beyond the space of legitimate scholarly discourse was tactical. It was an attempt not just to (subly) politicize the university, but also to academicize Marxism. If in the wake of the sequence linking October 1917 (in Russia) to November 1918 (in Germany) Marxism could be construed as historically ascendant, its proximity to politics compromised its claims to (positivist) scientficity by sullying its “truth-value” (the integrity of the opposition between values and facts) in the grit, specificity, and bias of mere interest. The Institute, then, was to be a space of open
yet methodologically delimited inquiry that was disciplinarily close to Marxism's classical emphasis on political economy and history (and to the increasingly prestigious field of sociology). Its mandate was to work unchecked by the threats posed to thought both (from above) by the republican state and (from below) by the communist movement and its militants. Though many of the School's research assistants were communists and its core faculty avowed the movement's long-term objectives, the Institute was to function primarily as a site for depoliticized Marxist analysis, a zone emphatically free of Second International cant and orthodoxy.

Cutting messily across these institutional and political polarities were a set of methodological quarrels associated with the human sciences and, more specifically, the rule of positivism, during the interwar period. Though the Institute's plan to formulate a rigorous historical materialist social science should not be conflated with Karl Kautsky's determinist positivism (the important critiques of this position had already been formulated by Karl Korsch and Lukács in the early 1920s), it is certainly the case that this period is marked less by overt epistemological considerations and is broadly empiricist in its desire to apply Marxist theory to scrupulously collected social, economic, and historical data. Even the kind of highly theoretical project undertaken by a figure like Henryk Grossman, whose work aimed to express “the logical and mathematical basis of the law of [capitalist] breakdown,” belongs to a broadly defined tradition of scientific empiricism: theory, in this context, is a means (via schematization, or “simplification”) into the “real world of concrete, empirically given appearances,” one “too complicated to be known directly” (Grossman 1992, 2). The characteristic texts emerging out of this period, produced by figures like Karl August Wittfogel (1931) and Friedrich Pollock (1928) – on the economic history of China and on the state of the planned economy in communist Russia respectively – are broadly in line with the kinds of texts being written by Lenin and Rudolf Hilferding, both in terms of object and method. For all their alignment with a broadly Marxian (or even post-Kantian) tradition of “critique,” these representative Marxist projects of the period of the Frankfurt School’s emergence remain distant from “critical theory” properly speaking. The critical theory associated with the Frankfurt School diverges sharply from the mainstream of Marxist thought of the 1920s in its distinctive meshing of philosophy and sociology, as well as its sustained interest in the specificity of the cultural field. The outliers, here, are Leo Löwenthal and Walter Benjamin. Löwenthal's early research on the sociology of literature, in which he documents on the level of both content and form the traces left by the mode of production in a specific genre or text, would directly anticipate the superstructural turn of the 1930s (cf. Löwenthal 1984). Walter Benjamin's 1925 (technically failed) habilitation, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, though still idealist-romantic and metaphysical in tenor, would come to play an important role in the development of Adorno's mature dialectical criticism.

The term “critical theory” was first used by Horkheimer in 1937 and was still employed by Adorno as a rough synonym for dialectical materialist thought as late as 1966 (Horkheimer 1972, 188). The concept's broad outlines can be traced to Immanuel Kant's 1781 insistence that history had passed into a definitive new register – an “age of criticism” (1998, 100) – in which the unquestioned dogma of Church and King (established theology as much as the dogmatic political absolutism it absolved) would finally be supplanted by the transparent sovereignty of reason: that which exists would no longer be left to the brutal contingency of interest, but brought
under the jurisdiction of rational and moral law, Kant’s enlightened (if not still purely regulative) “kingdom of ends” (2012, 48).

If Kant, however, did not reject religion, but allotted it – like Hobbes, Machiavelli, and Rousseau – a supreme social utility, critical theory pushes beyond his strategically curtailed rationalism toward a Marxist reason that is openly – indeed constitutively – atheist. This is a stance it adopts in opposition to positivism’s (post-metaphysical) interdiction against deciding either way. Along with Louis-Auguste Blanqui, critical theory discerns within the agnostic’s punctilious restraint the residues of a “bourgeois skepticism” that prefers its metaphysics unconscious (Adorno 2004, 394). Uncertainty about the nature of being falls away into a profitable practice that answers the question in hard cash. Materialism, however, is not simply one metaphysics among others, but an objective (though never unmediated) encounter with the world as it is. Eschewed here is any attempt to reduce the death of God to the local subjectivism of a Weltanschauung (a world view) or to a mere ideology in the sense imputed to this term by Karl Mannheim’s relativist sociology of knowledge (a position frequently attacked by Horkheimer). Critical theory rejects monist determinism, abjures as Cartesian or idealist any attempt to express matter in the form of a definition or to utilize such a definition as the first principle of a system, and shows little interest in what we might call abject materialism, the gesture – perhaps most famously linked to George Bataille – in which everything naively high and pure is drawn down (and intentionally humiliated) in the impurity and lowness of the real, the dust and shit of things “as they really are.” Its materialism, in other words, is Hegelian Marxist, a work of spirit and history: it is less interested in proving immanence than in the dialectical possibilities opened up for thought (and practice) at the moment it is simply assumed to be the case. Critical theory goes beyond merely asserting, as Hume did, that moral life is possible without religion; instead, following Feuerbach and Marx, the overcoming of transcendence is re-envisioned as the necessary condition of true happiness, justice, and freedom. The critique of religion, however, is significantly framed by the School – again following a position adopted by Marx as early as 1844 – as itself merely preparatory (“essentially completed” in the words of Marx himself [Marx 1970, 131]); for it to matter at all it has to be extended onto the terrain of less obvious gods and fetishes, to capital foremost of all, but also to the many residual Baconian “idols” – from property to representation – which structure the innermost germ cells of modern liberalism (Bacon 2000, 56). It is in this context that Benjamin in 1921 described capitalism as itself religion, a “purely cultic religion” that is “perhaps the most extreme that ever existed” (Benjamin 2004, 288).

At the root of the post-Kantian conception of critique the Frankfurt School inherits is a project of autonomy and freedom. For Hegel, freedom was an arrangement of the whole, a sum distributed throughout by the correct disposition of its various bits and pieces; it is the whole – expressed in the constitution of the absolute idealist state – that is self-conscious, not each and every one of its constituent parts. Substance is the prerogative of women and farmers; universality that of the philosopher bureaucrat. In this Hegel follows very closely the proto-functionalist, hierarchical political philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. Critical theory rejects this political Aristotelianism for a line of thinking that begins in Rousseau, coupling enlightenment to a comportment necessary on the level of the part itself, in the thinking, educated, and free political activity of the individual. What Marx and later Lukács add to this is an idea of enlightenment as collective self-transformation – a liberty inseparable from the very process by which it
Critical Theory comes to be. This understanding of freedom as self-determining praxis remains a core aspect of the enlightened futurity envisioned by critical theory. Crucial, here, is the way these thinkers turn their rationalist suspicion onto the sovereignty and unquestionability of reason itself; this is a project they accomplish without an instant taking refuge in irrationalist intuition or immediacy. Critique, then, would be precisely this dance undertaken between reason and its own limits, a project undertaken not with a view to Lockean epistemological humility or hygiene, but an unleashing of everything depotentiated by the shape of the given. What Horkheimer calls “the critical attitude” (Horkheimer 1972, 207) of the Frankfurt School is thus very close in spirit to what Nietzsche champions as a thought restlessly and perpetually “at odds” with the present, a thought “of the day after tomorrow” (2002, 106).

The term “critical theory” also needs to be seen as a project emerging out of a specific image of time. It is this that separates the project from critique envisioned as mere disagreement, a sedentary or cloistered form of intellectual dissidence. For the thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School, “critical” designates time as the point of contact between two (or more) states of being, a moment grown both heavy and light in the dice roll that separates one future from another. This is Benjamin’s Jetztzeit, a time of rupture, of maximum danger and alertness, in which everything still to come, but also everything already lost to death and pain, wavers in the suddenly “open air of history” (2007, 261). Benjamin counterposes this temporality with the empty, homogeneous time of a present that simply happens to us from the outside and which we fill like a receptacle or chore. From a certain angle, history conceived of as this “state of emergency” (2007, 257) looks exactly like Hegel’s “slaughter-bench” (Hegel 2012, 21): it sounds like screaming bodies. From another, this emergency is the joy of revolutionary negation: its sound is that of “redemption” (Adorno 2002, 247), of a leap taken in the open air, but also that of all the happiness history might have had, but didn’t. The School’s critics are right to discern in much of Adorno and Horkheimer a kind of pessimism, a sobriety of the negative they wrongly attribute to class pretension or humorlessness (a dusty extension of their hatred of jazz and cinema). This darkness, however, is simply the shadow cast by subsequent cruelty on the blocked potentialities of 1917. It arrives from a memory of depression and violently suppressed communist revolt, from Hiroshima and Auschwitz, as much as it does the still resonating bones of all of history’s Thomas Müntzers.

The entire spirit of the Frankfurt School, however, remains foreclosed if the English word “criticism” is not allowed to spill over into the more austere resonances of “critique.” The critic, as opposed to the “theorist,” has its origins in radical aesthetic and literary milieus, and finds its paradigm in German Romantic figures like Friedrich Schleiermacher or Friedrich Schlegel. In this tradition, the critic’s pleasure is judgment, a kind of Nietzschean discrimination that emphatically, even cruelly, divides the good from the bad. This is a writing occasioned from without, a minor, incidental mode always being pulled into the wake of new appearances. It is fragmentary, open to aphorism (as well as paradox), and highly attentive to questions of style; it flirts with the idea that in an age of machinery and information, style itself might protect a thought from its own world-historical irrelevance. The state of emergency mentioned above, then, is not merely politico-historical, but existential, a matter of subjective concern and reflection. The great ideological foils of critical theory – Horkheimer’s Schopenhauer, Adorno’s Kierkegaard, Marcuse’s Heidegger – are never simply irrationalist enemies,
but heavily caveated reserves of solace and hope. It is only in their identities as critics that the continuing interest in aesthetics, art, literature, and music can be properly understood. If Adorno can still be said to participate in a scale that is unconsciously Hegelian – both *Negative Dialectics* (1966) and *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), despite their fragmentary nature, are ghosts of systems – there remains in his method (and that of Benjamin’s) a good measure of the tactical speed and nimbleness one finds in a Karl Kraus or Siegfried Kracauer.

The period of thought opened by Horkheimer’s address in 1931, one virtually isomorphic with the life-span of critical theory proper, can be distinguished from the Grünberg years by a certain wild disciplinary profusion and mixing, and by a hyper-sensitivity to questions of method. This was a response, in part, to the sheer quantitative inflation of institutionalized knowledge in *Grossdeutschland* after the death of Hegel, an inflation linked to the dramatic progress made by the natural sciences in the period and to the neo-Kantian and positivist philosophies which emerged as the natural sciences’ epistemological accomplices. It was also a response to the *Lebensphilosophie* and new ontologies – including those of Henri Bergson and Nietzsche – which emerged to contest precisely a world in which science had become the *sine qua non* of truth. The proliferation of theory into which the Frankfurt School inserts itself was mirrored in the domain of practice by the breakdown of parliamentary monarchism and the illusion that Germany could transition itself from what was still (effectively) a feudal political structure to a modern nation-state via the seamless, apolitical growth of technologies and markets. Tensions already apparent in 1848 – quelled first by Frederick William IV and later by the conservative nationalism of Otto von Bismarck – burst into full view in November 1918 and began a period of instability that witnessed putsches from both the right and the left. This was an era of depression, hyper-inflation, unemployment, civil unrest, and war. In such a context, method becomes the *deus ex machina* of catastrophe: it is no coincidence that a contemporary of the Frankfurt School, Ludwig Wittgenstein, chooses to visualize his method in the form of a ladder – an escape, of sorts, from impossibly difficult circumstances.

Critical theory begins from a hyper-attentiveness to milieu; it is alert to the cacophony of methods not because it is particularly interested in epistemology, or in a modern Cartesian dream of logical certainty, but out of a profound indebtedness to Hegel. The dialectic, of course, has always been a machine built to restlessly accumulate rivals. Critical theory emerges in the space between disciplines, not out of a desire to create bridges, but to burn them: it is a thought that begins in aggression. It is this agonism that allows the School to pursue an image of totality it frames as produced in flashes by the constant breakdown of any given discipline’s claim to have exhaustively described the whole. Critical theory was always also ready to turn this aggressive attention to limits on its own claims and practices. There is perhaps no thought in the twentieth century that has so comprehensively registered its own limits, limits at which critical theory met not only theoretical rivals, but the whole ramifying terrain of things themselves, from the abstract objects of phenomenology to the concrete, sociologically determinate phenomena of radio or anti-Semitism. Compared with this plunge into the heterogeneous fields of economics, philosophy, and sociology, a plunge taken, as well, into a kind of interminable everyday phenomenology, a theoretical practice such as deconstruction appears strangely mono-lingual (even timid), and this despite its self-avowed interest in alterities, margins, and outsides. Critical theory is always being
cracked open from the outside even if this cracking is no longer the kind of “revolutionary practice” once imagined, for example by Karl Korsch, as the necessary catalyst of thought, but a welter of methods, enemies, and things (Korsch 2009).

The work of the Frankfurt School is a neo-Hegelianism altered by close encounters with Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Returning to the work of the School in the wake of the recent work of Slavoj Žižek and others, it is easy to miss the radical improbability and strangeness of this return to Hegel. Remember that in 1820 it was possible for many to believe with Hegel that he had in some profound sense “completed” philosophy – that his project of a Wissenschaft that comprehends entirely its object (but also all objects, and all possible objects) had been fulfilled. A new conjuncture began to emerge in the decades after Hegel’s death in 1831, one that made it increasingly more difficult (if not impossible) to imagine his work as the last word in German (and really world) thought.

Four tendencies were here decisive. First, thinkers like Friedrich Albert Lange and Hermann Cohen championed a “return to Kant” premised on the replacement of Hegel’s speculative idealist logic with an emphasis on epistemology and on the scrupulous attention to the limits of the understanding. This made particular sense against the backdrop of the increasing prestige granted to the empirical sciences, a form of knowledge that didn’t (seem to) require a philosophy of Being to accurately describe and manipulate the natural world. Resistance to Naturphilosophie was intensified by instances in which its specific, empirical claims spectacularly failed to keep pace with developments in the natural sciences: the most embarrassing of these is certainly Hegel’s rejection, avant la lettre, of the Darwinian theory of evolution. There would no longer be room in such a context for a logic with ontological pretensions, one that was, according to Hegel, an “exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and…finite spirit”; henceforth, logic would be confined to the task of laying down the rules for consistent speech and thought (Hegel 2010, 29). Critical theory’s turn to Hegel is all the more surprising given the widespread mistrust of the latter among certain groups of Marxists. “Scientific socialists” like Kautsky, for example, had gone to great lengths to downplay the extent of Marx’s debt to German Idealism.

Second, from an angle we might simply call (with caveats) historicism, questions began to be asked within the newly codified discipline of history (and within culture more broadly) about the mechanics of historical change, an inquiry that would culminate in the rejection of the very notion of a “philosophy of history” as inherently contradictory and meaningless. Here again we see echoes from an empiricist hegemony that frames concepts themselves as (metaphysical) leftovers: the inductive accumulation of data and a focus on positive causal connections replace the soteriological scale of Hegelian World History. What Jacob Burkhardt will most detest in Hegel’s understanding of history is its reliance on a final causality derived from Aristotle (and thought dead since Spinoza). In Burkhardt’s account this reliance transforms history into hierarchy, a move that deprives a given culture or age of its own specificity and difference, but also obscures the complex (efficient) causes actually at work in historical change.

Third, the turn within nineteenth-century European thought toward motifs of the self, experience, authenticity, and life – the existentialism we today link to Kierkegaard, Bergson, or Nietzsche – rendered Hegel’s organicist ontology a sudden cipher for crypto-totalitarian control and overreach. Freedom was no longer the (self-regulated) functioning of a part in a just and rational whole, but an expressive, experientially intense encounter with the absence of objective necessity. For Nietzsche, for example,
the task was not to engineer a final reconciliation between subject and object, but to free the subject – now the “self” – from every trace of realist obedience to the given: Kant’s categorical imperative had here come to fruition in the form of a self-legislation withdrawn entirely from the horizon of the universal (Nietzsche 2002, 81). Seen in the light of Nietzsche, Hegel came to appear stuffily moral and abstract, a figure badly alienated from the precious singularity of the individually lived life.

Fourth, for the century’s bourgeoning liberal, communist, and social democratic movements, Hegel’s politics were perceived as dangerously anachronistic. There was, they argued, an underlying medievalism in his work, one visible in his rejection of universal suffrage, for example, or his taste for corporate (guild-based) subjectivity. This resonated with the empiricists and positivists for whom it only confirmed what they already suspected – that Hegel’s logic itself was little more than bad theology, a trick made possible by analogy and microcosms (for example, in the repeating tripartite functionality of the dialectic, or his obsession with circles).

What useable bits and pieces does critical theory find in the badly weathered legacy of Hegel? First, the School finds in Hegel the model of a method that does not begin (like Descartes or Spinoza) at first principles and definitions, but through an immanent, self-interrogating encounter with things themselves. Critical theory is, in this sense, a dialectical materialist realism that begins in medias res, and not a traditionally grounded philosophical system. Though the School will reject Hegel’s contention that the object of philosophy is in the last instance God, they do to some extent posit an identity between the ambit of philosophy and Hegel’s Absolute: thought directly grasps Being (a word the School associates with Heideggerian mysticism and largely avoids), though in a manner that is always historical, local, mediated, and unfinished. Even Adorno’s late work is not an epistemology of doubt or finitude (as it is most often imagined to be), but a philosophy of truth that takes as its objective an extreme, interminable dialectical engagement with what is.

Second, what Hegel offers critical theory is a picture of thought as intrinsically communal, social, and shared. Though Hegel begins the Phenomenology of Mind (1807) with what first appears to be a solitary cognitive act, this sensory immediacy is later shown to be inhabited from within by an inescapable sociality, the “We” of concepts, of transcendental presupposition, but also that of society more generally conceived, and of a space/time that is necessarily political. Philosophy, for Hegel, is always already “social philosophy” (the term Horkheimer would first use to characterize the work of the School [Horkheimer 1993]). What critical theory likes about this side of Hegel is the way it targets and denatures the seeming immanence and natural autonomy of the bourgeois individual.

Third, critical theory’s characteristic interest in group subjectivity is clearly foreshadowed by Hegel’s “forms of consciousness,” even if it remains in an idealist register in Hegel that connects subjectivities to Herderian wholes, rather than dynamic, internally conflicted Marxist totalities. The School finds in Hegel a model of trans-individual subjectivity, but adds to it a genealogical and genetic impulse that conjoins these mentalities to the historical process and to the specific socioeconomic conditions that produce, abet, and negate them. These subjectivities are submitted to a criterion of “timeliness” that plots them along an axis determined by their distance not from an endpoint of history (Hegel’s own tendency), but from the objective capacity of humans to be better (more free, happier, etc.) (Horkheimer 2013, 59). On these terms, a thought might be
“residual” or “progressive” depending on its relationship to the dominant politico-economic tendencies of the age, with the important caveat that the long-term “progressiveness” of these tendencies is no longer vouchsafed by final causality and instead continuously susceptible to violent reversal, involution, and collapse. One might say: progress is the limit placed on things as they are by the regulative ideal of better.

In addition to Hegel, critical theory owes an enormous methodological debt to sociology, though not one that can be properly traced to any stable sociological school. It was precisely this debt, this disciplinary proximity (as well as a certain emphatic distance) that Horkheimer attempted to demarcate under the early rubric of “social philosophy” mentioned above (Horkheimer 1993). There are two core dimensions to this debt. To begin with, critical theory insists on the heuristic and material efficacy of concrete universals, of abstractions that are real, but which take place beyond the ambit of individual consciousness and psychology. This is a tendency drawn variably from Tönnies, Weber, Durkheim, and Marx (not to mention Hegel himself). Critical theory abjures positivist sociology’s interdiction against universals, but takes great care to avoid the cancellation of appearance by essence often attributed by critics to economistic (or vulgar) Marxism: indeed, Adorno explicitly states that “essence must manifest itself...[in and through] appearance” (Adorno 2000, 21). This is really another way of saying that theory is not an enemy of the particular. In fact, Adorno and Benjamin in particular can be said to have perfected a style of dialectical materialist criticism in which individual *faits sociaux* are read as radiant “ciphers” for the “objective laws” they reflect and refract (22). The presence of the whole in the part does not negate the latter; in fact, the particular as such can only be encountered by a thought that determinately specifies its relationship to the whole. This sometimes takes a different form in Benjamin, for whom the particular is occasionally framed as an end in itself (as in variants of existentialism), a resonant form capable of being “blasted” out of the continuum of homogeneous time and encountered in a light that is at once historical and eternal (Benjamin 2007, 261). Critical theory would agree with Kautsky’s consistent naturalism, wherein the human is placed unapologetically into the determinist domain of the animal, but adds to it Hegel’s insistence on the difference introduced into matter by spirit, by the gap or hole made by thought in nature. The latter, for the School, in a position that draws simultaneously on both Kant and Marx, is at once inescapably determined and relatively (let’s say potentially) free. They have next to no interest, however, in hypostasized, undialectical “universal law[s] of human nature” of the kind famously posited by Spinoza (Spinoza 2001, 175). Universal naturalist human laws such as self-preservation, or the preservation of the species (both of which appear in Kautsky’s work) have no place in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (cf. Kautsky 1988).

At the same time, and despite their well-known suspicions of empirical sociology, the Frankfurt School, especially in the Grünberg years, demonstrate an intense interest in the collection and interpretation of empirical social data. The School does not reject quantification *per se* (as if number and being were inherently opposed to one another), but instead rejects the naïve attempt on the part of empirical sociology to import untheorized the protocols, models, and standards used to produce truth in the natural sciences. Particularly galling to them is the way a truth tethered inflexibly to empiricist description subtracts from the actual all of the virtualities that haunt it from within. An alignment appears between such ostensibly neutral description and the key historical materialist truth that in the last analysis all human facts are norms: when viewed from
the angle of dialectical sociology, what appears to us as a deadened and incontrovertible “is” is no more than an entrenched material “ought.” Though both Marcuse and Adorno concede that “pragmatic sociology” – celebrated by opponents of critical theory as a more “realistic” and “relevant” approach to injustice – is capable of ameliorating the present by making small, yet concrete improvements to the system, both insist that it is ultimately a form of technocracy, one which in the last instance serves the interests of the established order and impedes the imagination of new worlds. At all costs, says Adorno, must the critical sociologist avoid becoming a “research technician,” “social expert,” or mere “salaried employee” (2000, 21–22).

Critical theory owes a final debt to the contributions to this history of thought made by psychoanalysis. While psychoanalysis has a multifaceted and distinct impact on the work of individual members of the School, at core what the Frankfurt School draws from the work of Sigmund Freud and others is a way of articulating an alternative axis of historical domination. The latter is no longer simply an effect of class oppression, but understood as a constituent element of what Nietzsche once called “organized society” itself. For Freud, “civilization” is the necessary locus of repression, an apparatus of deferral which foregrounds survival, necessity, and work at the expense of the human’s chaotic instincts and drives (Freud 2005). In contradistinction to those communisms which propped up labor as freedom or as the site of an essential unfolding of the human, the Frankfurt School uses psychoanalysis to sort through the myriad ways a society built around work, but also class hierarchy and sanitized social norms, embeds into contemporary subjects a complex of neuroses, frustrations, and anxieties. For members of the School, a sharp analysis of the mechanisms through which social revolution (in the broadest sense – not only worker from capitalist, but son from Father, and woman from man) lay latent in the work of Freud. The realization of this critical potential, however, is only possible if the pessimistic philosophical anthropology of psychoanalysis is jettisoned for a properly historical materialist conception of the human. Though the School is quick to say that pain, frustration, anxiety, etc., are necessary (even precious) elements of the human experience, they unambiguously insist that the human can be happier and less repressed and its libidinal complex altered by transformations in the economic infrastructure of society. As such, the School shows little interest in psychoanalysis as a therapeutic practice apart from social revolution; the former, in fact, is often itself framed as itself a key contributor to the reproduction of “wrong life.” Nevertheless, as an alternative means of understanding control and repression in modern social life, revamped and reworked concepts drawn from psychoanalysis would play a key role in the School’s assessment of mentalities and subjectivities, as we shall see below.

**New York 1935–1953, Life Subsumed**

Almost immediately after Hitler came to power in 1933, key members of the Frankfurt School began to make plans to leave Germany. The Institute – whose members were not only Marxist, but also largely born into Jewish homes – would have to emigrate. It was eventually decided by Horkheimer to move the School to New York, where an institutional affiliation was established with Columbia University. Safety did not induce the School’s members into a cautious new centrist (that path of lesser evils). Instead, the
School would come to find at the heart of what was arguably the world’s most advanced liberal state precisely the barbarism they had left behind in Germany. Though in New York the School turns its attention to the cultural, psychoanalytic, and political logics of fascism, these lines of investigation are posed entirely within the coordinates of the history and political economy of capitalist modernity. Refused is any attempt to transform Nazism into the surprise of an outside, something that merely happened to modernity from behind or beyond. Nazism is no meteorite – a foreign body that disrupts modernity in the form of an accident – but the direct expression of “monopoly capitalism” taken to its most extreme limit (this is, at least, the argument put forth by Franz Neumann in his magisterial *Behemoth*) (Neumann 2009, 385). If Friedrich Pollock will alternatively locate the origins of Nazism in the abolition of liberal capitalism proper, he is still able to see it as a shift within modernity intelligible on the terrain of the latter’s obsession with domination and control. Rejected as well in all of this is the idea that fascism is little more than the sudden irruption into view of the human animal’s deep or repressed truth, a phenomenon of the id; for the School, this kind of explanation transforms into dark necessity (something always already there on the inside of the human body) that which is entirely within the purview of political reason to name, anticipate, and avoid. Even more interesting (and controversial) was the School’s insistence that fascisms could be found in embryo in even the least collectivist and political of commercial pleasures. What the School sees in the spectacular consumerism of the New World is not innocent fashion, leisure, or delight, but disturbing new forms of intensified control and repression.

At the root of the Frankfurt School’s critique of modernity is an understanding of history as singularity. This is a conceit drawn directly from Hegel and Marx. A oneness subtends the history of the human even if this oneness is entirely virtual; the latter is expressed as everything possible or thinkable – everything that may have, or may still be – negated by the faux objectivity of things as they are. What is objectively shared by the human is the unnecessariness of suffering, repression, and domination. This means not only that history is not merely a scattered dispersion of particulars, but also that the historicist confinement of truth to the specificity of a given historical stratum is itself only partially true: true, because all human thought exists *in situ*; false, because no one stratum or context is ontologically necessary. The coming into contact of the human with its own freedom is in this sense an encounter between a being and its own essence; there is in this a residual Aristotelianism inherited by the School via its proximity to Hegel. Freedom is at once a (non-essential) norm conventionalized by humans for their convenience – as in Hobbes and Locke, for example – and an ontologically relevant proposition that has to do with what relates to it in the deepest possible sense. This would appear to be the case for Benjamin, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Fromm; Adorno is to some extent the exception here, as he is always finding in even the barest (Hegelian or Marxist) anthropological remainders from the great philosophies of essence, traces that remain untheorized and so function, in the last instance, as barriers to radically free thought. Though modernity as the era in which the human decisively encountered its own historical materialist “essence” is universal – a precious and ultimately untranscendable horizon that is for everyone – it is also a breakable, unevenly distributed promise, a project that can stall or fail completely.

Modernity is a catastrophe, then, and in two distinct ways. First, the development of scientific reason as well as bourgeois individualism introduces into history a new
experience of the self, an uncertainty and anxiety that we sometimes collect under the predicate “existential.” This is the abyss (Abgrund) pointed to by both Nietzsche and Heidegger, an unmooring linked to the collapse of the paradigm of meaning, but also the givenness and immediacy of every Gemeinschaft (what Fromm describes as the security and comfort provided by “primary ties” [2013, 53]). Critical theory concedes the appearance of the abyss, but not the politico-ethical conclusions drawn from it by these figures. Instead, following Hegel and Marx, critical theory affirms the crisis of meaning as the ineradicable prerequisite of the very freedom described above: “nihilistic revulsion,” says Adorno, is the “objective condition of humanism as utopia” (Adorno 2002, 78). The second sense of modernity as catastrophe begins precisely here, in the gap between the possible and the actual. The failure of modernity is expressed by critical theory as the incapacity of the process of modernization to engender a historical subject capable of consciously and collectively articulating its own (repressed) potentiality. Said otherwise, the inversion of modernity lies in its failure to have undergone political “redemption”: a genuine, global, fully realized Marxist revolution (Adorno 2002, 247).

Two logics dominate this “unfinished modernity” (Habermas 1997, 38). The first, derived from Marx, is the law of value, the domination of individual and collective potentiality by the capitalist exchange relationship. In a direct sense this implies the subordination of human beings to economic laws that are (paradoxically) materially objective and at the same instant nothing more or less than relations between people. The diversion of human intelligence and energy into money-making (the hell of “getting ahead”); the psychical and biological effects of poverty and economic insecurity; the wastage and uncertainty produced by business cycles; the differentiated social limits and trajectories distributed by class (reinforced rather than simply alleviated by post-Napoleonic meritocracy): all of this can be included in the inventory of heteronomy established by capitalist exchange (Horkheimer 1978, 21). To be added to it would be the way politics – both national and international – are captured by logics of exchange, endogenously via the transformation of the state into a bourgeois mechanism of control and, exogenously, in the imperialist logics of expansion and war introduced into states by the injunction to endless growth. This fairly straightforward catalogue of the social suffering produced by capitalism – what Marcuse calls broadly a “life of toil and fear” – can be found across the work of the School and should be emphasized to guard against a contemporary tendency (especially in readings of Benjamin and Adorno) to foreground their anti-idealism or their critique of technical rationality (administered life, the state, etc.) at the expense of the consistent, frequently acerbic, and often quite naked rejection of capitalism found in their work (Marcuse 2012, 2). Capitalism, writes Horkheimer, “is exploitation organized on a world-wide scale”; its “preservation preserves boundless suffering” (1978, 28).

In addition to the “social physics” described above – a domain with near-mechanist causal properties and liable to empirical analysis – is a parallel fold within the logic of capital characterized by forms of determination that are resonant and analogical. These are qualitative or intensive changes rooted in quantitative (or extensive) material formations. According to this model, structures constitutive of capitalism – be it property, commodity production, or money as a general equivalent – seep into dimensions of existence that are conceived by society as inherently separate or distinct. Psychologies, practices, objects, and institutions, however autonomous they may appear, are here
shown by the School to radiate the logics and limits of the economic forms mentioned above. No inch of social space escapes contact with these resonant forms of determination. The commodity as a form flows into everything, from love and romance and the (seemingly) natural interiority of the family, to the relations established between ourselves in the quietest moment of subjective reflection. Though framed by positivist critics as insupportable generalizations, the metaphysical nature of this causality is wholly immanent to social process and transforms historical existence from within (not from without). This domain of non-mechanist causation was first discovered by Marx, but left undeveloped until the publication in 1922 of Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*, a book that had an enormous impact on all of the key members of the Frankfurt School (especially Benjamin and Adorno).

The second core logic at work in blocked modernity is that pertaining to “instrumental reason” – what members of the School consistently called “rationalization” (Marcuse 2012, 49; Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 218). This is the process by which the theologico-political systems that dominated medieval Europe – systems that organized common sense in every domain of social life – were slowly disqualified and displaced by mathematized natural science. This displacement is at once emancipatory and enslaving – the enlightenment destruction of transcendence, the “superstition” Spinoza and Kant saw as integral to absolutist rule – reverting into a system of domination and blindness that would eventually culminate in the total subjection of planetary possibility to “machinery” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 33). What appears under the rubric of “progress” as the fortunate coincidence of knowledge and happiness, is in fact little more than thoughtless momentum, an unsuperintended speed that conceals as its worst possible outcome catastrophe on the scale of the planet itself. Increasing rationality on the level of local parts and processes paralleled by an “increasing irrationality of the whole”: this is how Marcuse understands the paradox of modernity (2012, 252). This is a state of affairs epitomized for the School by the meticulously organized violence of Auschwitz or the technically ingenious, but humanly disastrous potentialities of Oppenheimer’s atom bomb.

There are a number of key “externalities” produced by instrumental reason. First, the scientific emphasis on analysis, its claim to exhaustiveness, as well as its interest in systematicity, particularly when combined with the reduction of truth to quantitative verification or bare efficacy, transforms into “nonsense” or “meaninglessness” all value not immediately expressible in the form of a number or subject to repeatable empirical tests. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the refusal to distinguish truth from fact relegates all of ethics, art, culture, politics, and experience to the insubstantial, untestable, domain of mere feeling. As such these phenomena become atavistic remainders, the purview of myth, opinion, uncertainty, mysticism, guessing, or silence. This sharp bifurcation of the world into carefully patrolled “objective” and “subjective” spheres has grave consequences for the subject of science. A miserable dialectic springs into motion. Granted a formidable control over the natural world, the subject pays for its mastery with alienation not only from nature (an extremely complex concept for the School, one not to be confused with German Romantic formulations), but also “itself” (emphatically not “himself,” a term that leaves too much idealist personality and untheorized patriarchy in the concept). Nature ceases to appear as an endlessly differentiating event, an unfolding that remains in some deep way mysterious (and even beautiful, ineffable, or dangerous), and instead takes the form of a complex, yet ultimately meaningless
machine. The subject comes to take one of four dominant shapes: (1) pure transcendental receptivity (an abstractness without specificity, a certain generic Kantian humanity); (2) a psychological monadism indistinguishable from the exercise of mastery and from the blind desire to preserve the self at any cost (a form which, according to Hobbes, builds "competition," "diffidence," and an endless questing for "glory" into the very nature of the human); (3) a positivist extension of the animal in which human action is reduced to biologically determined "behavior"; (4) a being "outside of nature," pure unmediated subjectivity or personality, a form in which the human is granted the capacity to create, think, exist, etc., but in a vacuum fundamentally delinked from social and biological determination (Hobbes 1996, 88).

The affinity between these two dominant logics intensifies along the seam separating "late capitalism" from its nineteenth-century antecedent (Adorno 2002, 239). Whether it is the shift from "private" to "state" capitalism articulated by Pollock in 1941 (Pollock 1990), or that from a "liberal era" (Horkheimer 1972, 198) to one "in which industrial power came to control everything" (1974, 10) suggested by Horkheimer, what remains beyond the terminological differences is a sense of an entirely new interpenetration of instrumental reason and capitalism (Pollock 1990, 72). Though capital has always been incipient rationalization, and rationalization itself a motif consistently exercised within the growing sovereignty of capital, the concept of industrial capitalism is thought to name a distinctly new system with grim consequences for the welfare and autonomy of human beings (to say nothing of life on earth more generally). Marcuse calls this new order "advanced industrial civilization," while Fromm names it "the monopolistic phase of capitalism" (Marcuse 2012, 124; Fromm 2013, 203).

The assemblage at the center of this new dispensation is the "modern large-scale enterprise," the giant, vertically integrated corporations, which appear in the steel, pharmaceutical, armaments, and automotive industries toward the end of the nineteenth century and begin to completely dominate capitalist production by the period between the two world wars (Kracauer 1998, 29). These "modern mechanized complexes" can be distinguished from the corporate entities that preceded them by the extent to which specialized scientific knowledge comes to be integrated into every facet of the production process (Horkheimer 1972, 18). In the first instance, this involves a transformation in the executory and communicational infrastructure of the corporate form, a shift from the private sovereignty of the entrepreneur/owner to the scientific, impersonal, highly articulated operationalism of the manager. Control in such structures is at once vertical – with knowledge at any point in the hierarchy confined to a highly circumscribed domain of specified functions and tasks – and spread throughout, such that each of the system's parts begins to reproduce itself in a bureaucractized and machinic manner that is effectively unconscious. The existence of a CEO – a subject still in control of the system as a whole – becomes a working fiction, a way of assuaging the fear attached to the thought of a process without direction or agency. This same pattern will be seen to structure social relations more generally in industrial societies (whether in democracies or totalitarian states) where leaders take on promethean, auto-poetic traits and styles even as the societal whole increasingly resembles an unwatched machine, an enormous "integrated unit" (Pollock 1990, 77).

The fragmentation of knowledge in the modern corporation and its tendency to inhibit the construction of an active comprehension of the whole becomes a key metonym for life more generally conceived under the "social division of labor" enacted by
industrial capitalism (Adorno 2002, 243). The age of the “employee” is one characterized by the supreme value placed on obedience, one that embeds into social life a nervous dependency that can only be expressed in mass sadomasochism (Horkheimer 1974, 11). This creates a world, says Pollock, of “commander[s] and commanded,” one comprised, at every moment in the hierarchy, by an endless oscillation of suspicion, emulation, and fear (1990, 78). A rage for fragmented tokens of smartness, i.e., for “certificates” which establish somebody as an “expert” in one field or another, takes root even as the old Humboldtian model of the university, grounded in an idea of holistic reason and active citizenship, is eclipsed by a mandate of higher education as mere “training” (Kracauer 1998, 33). However, even as the individual is constantly faced with the psychical frustrations of life in hierarchy, it is also encoded with an overwhelming “need to be part of and to agree with the majority,” to disappear, as it were, into the comforts of the many (Horkheimer 1974, 12). The linkage of corporate culture with “groupthink” and conformity is one that will strike readers born under the sign of the Googleplex as particularly incomprehensible (Whyte 1952). Yet, a key hypothesis of the School about the nature of industrial capitalism is that it engenders a corporate culture that requires mimetic adaptation to existing codes rather than innovation or “outside the box” thinking (the latter, of course, being one of the governing clichés of today’s “knowledge capitalism”). “Regulations replace individual judgement,” says Horkheimer (1974, 12). Much of this was mediated via the reaction of critical theory to the trauma of the modern office, its birth as a highly controlled, ideologically sanitized space, but also to the emergence of a new class of salaried worker, Die Angestellten, studied by Kracauer in his book by the same name (1998). The automated office represented a new form of exploitation, one that no longer employed (and wasted) the forces of the body, but targeted those of the mind and spirit, too. Mind – with all of its Hegelian resonances of ontological adventure, political transformation, and even truth itself – is reduced to mere consciousness: the empty, interminable superintendence of a “now” withdrawn entirely from substance and history. The form of perception appropriate to the age of the employee, in other words, is that of “attention” and “information,” a state of consciousness that has as its verso a constant state of distraction, a presence that is only ever half‐there.

However, it is not just that capitalist production had changed: it had undergone a dramatic transformation in scale. If machines made humans into gods they also triggered – amidst the sheer quantitative profusion of objects or under the brute verticality of the skyscraper – a new animal tininess, “the fragile human body” famously mentioned by Benjamin in “The Storyteller” (2007, 84). The “monstrosity of absolute production” is growth in a coma forever, an autotelic, inherently fascistic form of techno‐economic expansionism that threatens to absorb and negate everything long imagined as precisely beyond economic calculation (Adorno 2002, 15). “Life,” “culture,” “experience,” even “existence itself”: nothing stands untouched by total(itarian) production. If this process begins in the factory, it is only in its (seeming) opposite – the mediated pleasures and privacy of the home – that the full measure of its power becomes visible. Mass culture – newspapers, radio, cinema, but also department stores and mass‐produced consumer objects – had colonized age‐old interpretive and narrative functions – the very distribution of meaning itself – and subordinated them to the blind imperatives of monopoly. Packaged for delivery from a centralized point, its makers the very same people who owned the means of production, culture had itself become a growth industry. The result is mass stupefaction, a standardized, cliché and
jingle-ridden popular culture that Adorno holds in open contempt: “every trip to the cinema leaves...me stupider and worse”; elsewhere, famously, “fun is a medicinal bath” (2002, 24; 112). What is experienced subjectively as “entertainment” – a spontaneous release from the tensions of work – is in fact nothing more than the introjection on the level of the part of “false needs” instrumental to the reproduction of a (unthinking) whole.

These false needs do a number of different things at once. First, they paper over and displace the abyss generated by modernity’s dissolution of “primary bonds” (Fromm 2013, 53). As such, they are mechanisms of escape from the discomforts and uncertainties of freedom – what Marcuse will call “the catastrophe of liberation” (2012, 225). Second, they sustain domains of ideological fantasy that distract the subject and inhibit its capacity to comprehensively map its political and economic “powerlessness” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 116). “Amusement,” they insist, “always means putting things out of mind” (116). Third, and finally, they induce identification with social roles and functions compatible with the reproduction of the system as a whole. If, in the era of the factory, it was enough to be a docile body, the era of the cinema, the department store, and the white-collar office is one in which the individual is now burdened with the pleasures and miseries of “being someone,” of creating and (ceaselessly) curating what the School often derisively calls “personality.” The latter is here completely withdrawn from the German Idealist resonances which once linked it to self-engendered expression and fullness, to a life lived meaningfully in a rational (and even beautiful) social whole; instead it becomes little more than a child’s ill-fitting plastic mask, a socially necessary illusion amenable to life on set. For men it involves the adoption of a charming, effortless, and always slightly cruel masculinity (of the kind seen in Cary Grant films), and for women, a hieratic and brainless femininity – what Kracauer describes caustically as a “morally pink complexion” (1998, 38). Though the Frankfurt School had displaced the attention of Marxism from political economy to culture, the incompleteness of this shift continued to be expressed in its refusal to submit the “texts” of capitalism – its popular films, comic books, and newspapers – to close analytical scrutiny; if they were nothing more than microcosmic repetitions of the whole, there could be nothing more to find in them than the monotonous sameness of the commodity form. It would not be until the much later work of Fredric Jameson (himself influenced by Adorno) that these texts themselves would be minutely examined for the ways they ideologically think, diagnose, and even resist the subsumption of life by capital.

San Diego 1965–, Quandary of the Riot

Two vignettes have come to define our understanding of “late theory.” The first is that of Marcuse in the sun, now a professor in San Diego at the University of California and made famous by One-Dimensional Man (1964). Not only was he arguably the 1960s student movement’s most important theoretician, he was also politically active (involved directly in protests and occupations) and took publicly explicit and often highly controversial positions on current events. From Angela Davis to the war in Vietnam, Marcuse was determinately for and against things. He saw in the student movement a political subject capable of pushing beyond Stalinist conservatism and into a “radical transvaluation of values” that would call into question everything from traditional gender roles and identities to the capitalist apportioning of labor and time (Marcuse 1972, 54).
The second image is of a now “grey on grey” Adorno, frozen stiff at his lectern by student breasts and riots of 1968. He is a caricature of oldness. For the most part, he maintained a crafted distance from what he characterized as student “actionism” – a fully formed pathological complex born of “despair” in the face of unchangeable conditions – and openly (even provocatively) avowed a shift in his work to an even more intensified register of theoreticity and abstractness (Richter and Adorno 2002, 19).

“Philosophy cannot in and of itself recommend immediate measures or changes,” he insists, “it effects change precisely by remaining theory” (ibid.). Theory, in other words, is its own praxis: difficulty, in an era of total immediacy, itself a form of politics. Nothing could be further from Karl Korsch’s claim in Marxism and Philosophy (1972) that the dialectic must exist in constant contact with the “living unity of revolutionary practice” (and that it can have no life as a “science” apart). Though the anecdotes which clouded Adorno’s last year have been used by critics as proof of a jacobitism intrinsic to “mere” theory, the illusion of an outright confrontation between opposites is undermined not only by the student movement’s open debt to Adorno’s critique of the culture industry, but by his own continuing commitment to socialism as an idea. Nevertheless, the tension it points to outlines core differences in the conception of politics taken up by the various members of the School, differences there from the beginning, but exacerbated and irreconcilable by the end. The insights and practices of the Frankfurt School would find purchase in different modalities of politics and theory as the drama of World War II and postwar Keynesian compromises gave way to what would become in time the forces and pressures of neoliberalism.

In its earliest form, and despite its investment in a certain idea of intellectual autonomy, critical theory was never simply against, but always also for: its positive moment lies less in a determinate commitment to a particular party or state and more in an emphatic fidelity not only to socialism as a (Kantian) regulative ideal, but as a system now technically possible on the level of infrastructure itself (cf. Horkheimer 1978, 28). In the sense intended by Horkheimer, Marcuse, and others, socialism described as “technically possible” is not an implication of weak likelihood, but an argument designed to interrupt those for whom socialism is nothing more than idealist moral whim. Consistent rationalism required conceding that the “economic-technical” base had, for the first time in history, the objective capacity to transcend the era of unequally distributed scarcity (Marcuse 2012, 3). In other words, capitalism itself was now “outdated,” a revenant, something staggering on despite its own objective obsolescence (Horkheimer 1978, 29). This is a position less easy for people to understand today in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet economy. But between 1922 and 1970 it was not only possible to believe that socialism was “technically possible” (on the level of infrastructure), but superior on the terrain of economics itself in its capacity to achieve full employment, macroeconomic stability, and even, for a while, real growth, making it an attractive alternative to capitalisms plied by labor unrest, mass unemployment, and unstable business cycles. In fact, what is perhaps most surprising about the School’s position before World War II is how little attention it gives to the actual economics of socialism: outside of Pollock’s work on planned economies in Russia, it often feels as if the technical and the economic are conflated by the School and that all that remained for practice was to evolve a democratic variant of the existing communist systems.

A key motif in the School’s work between 1930 and 1950 is the need to produce a collectively “free subject” capable of “consciously [shaping] social life” (Horkheimer
This free subject, says Horkheimer, “is nothing other than the rationally organized socialist state that organizes its own existence” (ibid). This would be a democratic, “classless,” “planned economy,” effective on the terrain of the planetary whole, rather than confined to a single national space (1978). Crucial to this imaginary is the notion that fully socialized technology would liberate humans from the stupefying protocols of necessity, all of capitalism’s needless work, as well as its division of labor, which violently depotentiate the duration of a life by transforming it into a bare function of the production process. Beyond arresting the “anarchy of the market” – the wastefulness, suffering, and constant incitement to war produced by the law of exchange – this economy would make possible less a collectivist New Man than an epoch (the first of its kind) of “free individuals” (Horkheimer 1972, 200). Under communism, subjectivation would be the prerogative of an individual’s “conscious spontaneity,” rather than unfold under the cloud of ideological individualism; relations between whole and part would no longer be veiled by the obscuring nooks and crannies of capitalist life and labor, but rendered transparent by a negative dialectics which does not even allow its own practice to remain untouched by skepticism, let alone concepts like “transparency” or the “individual” (Horkheimer 1972, 200). Rationalization would abet rather than thwart universal rationality and make possible ways of thinking free from the parameters of instrumental reason: “if the productive apparatus could be organized and directed toward the satisfaction of the vital needs, its control might well be centralized; such control would not prevent individual autonomy, but render it possible” (Marcuse 2012, 2).

It is important to note that there is no trace of a desire in Horkheimer and Adorno for Babouvist egalitarianism (founded on an ideal of sameness), the Gueverist celebration of the dignity of work (”trabajo voluntario”), nor for the tiniest Maoist intensity (that erotics of struggle we still detect today in the revolutionism of Alain Badiou). Revolution, for Horkheimer and Adorno, is nothing more than an undesirable means to a desirable end. Taken as an end in itself, a form necessary to, or coextensive with communist subjectivity, it became its opposite: fascism, atavism, unreason. The exception, here, is Benjamin, in whom traces of a kind of surrealist bolshevism can be detected, a desire for the open chasm of revolutionary time, a certain pleasure taken in revolt he derives in part from Georges Sorel.

However, an important transformation takes place in the work of Horkheimer and Adorno that has to be mentioned. Toward the end of their lives both thinkers reduce determinate political imagination to the bare insistence on the virtual capacity of the present to be otherwise – a position which avows theoretically the capacity of thought to envision alternative futures, but which leaves this capacity oddly unfulfilled on the level of content. It is not simply that the left had been defeated on the terrain of the political, it is that thought itself was in danger of being exterminated by universal “amusement” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 116). Politics is here reduced to thought’s fidelity to its own endangered essence as negation: its task is to immortalize the negative, to protect from death its last, precious seeds. The future is no longer to be the product of a plan, but evolved concretely out of the long baking-process of a praxis that is not actual or imminent, but merely awaited. This has as much to do with Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of idealism – the political ontology of models – and their suspicion of instrumental reason as it does with a clear sense for the “blocked” nature of the present (and an increasing suspicion of the Soviet Union). Horkheimer’s shift, however, goes further: not only does he begin to conceptualize American liberalism as itself the
best possible alternative to totalitarianism, he comes late in life to a fully anti-communist position (even going so far as to support America’s war in Vietnam). If, in 1923, Horkheimer could speculate that political violence might offset the greater brutality of an unjust whole – a position that covers even the pacifist in blood – revolutionary outcomes were now so uncertain, and their tendency to devolve into authoritarianisms so well established, that the best (system) was simply the least intolerable among the worst (1978, 22).

It is only in Marcuse that we continue to encounter determinate “historical transcendence,” a thought that openly (and concretely) fantasizes the future (2012, 15). It would be wrong, however, to conclude that this suspension of political (or revolutionary) specificity on the part of Adorno, for example, reflects an abandonment of the terrain of utopia; instead, the lines connecting thought to the latter continue to exist, but in a paradoxical detour through the past rather than the future. In Horkheimer and Adorno, but also (and perhaps most intensely) in Benjamin, a form of thought (and in my view an occluded style of political prescription) appears that we might call dialectical nostalgia, provided that such a practice is rigorously distinguished from the merely reflective, psychologistic tendencies of a remembrance of things past. Across their work, distinct gestures, phenomena, practices, and ways of seeing and habits of thought are invoked, meticulously described, and then placed into the context of an industrial modernity that has either outright negated them (leading to their extinction as forms) or changed the ecology in which they flourish so dramatically that they can only continue to persist as spiritless rites, repetitions shorn of “truth” or necessity. For Benjamin, flânerie, childhood, and the passionate “confusion of [the collector’s] library” (2007, 60); Adorno’s Beethoven, or the “guest [that] comes from afar” (Adorno 2002, 178), but also the simple “ability to close a door quietly”; the gloominess noted by Ernst Bloch of a “mountain at evening” (Bloch 1998, 64) – all such moments are defining characteristics of the School and often read as vestiges of a romanticist aristocratism unable to come to terms with the accelerationist or posthuman dimensions of technological change. These moments, however, are not untheorized remainders, but positions curated under the pressure of dialectical asceticism. How precisely does such a form of nostalgia work, and in what sense can it be envisioned as revolutionary?

On first glance, the impulse at work in these motifs is purely ethnographical: it cites as simply having existed a form or gesture now lost to being for good. Registered here is the impression left on thought by photos of the dead, a kind of melancholy that forms in the dissonance established by the medium between verisimilitude and extinction. As such, the task of this writing – one originating in Hegelian Marxist social ontology – is to safeguard for thought a working inventory of forms, an archival function presumably indispensable to the only animal characterized by the burden and the freedom of having, and one presumably indispensable to the radical multiplicity of the human, its right to be otherwise.

These moments, however, are more than expressions of a neutrally flat ontology, an extensive domain of forms that merely exist (or at least have in the past). One can often discern here the presence of a stronger injunction, the contours of something that looks like desire, a hope that what has ceased to exist, might still do so again. In other words, it is possible to detect in such passages a crypto-Aristotelian hierarchy of forms, a scala naturae of sorts, though one from which any trace of a presumed ergon of the human has been dispensed with. The American highway, says Adorno, knows “no mark of foot or wheel, no soft paths along their edges to vegetation, no trails leading off into
the valley”: it abolishes entirely any presence of “the human hand.” These kinds of statements are often misread by critics of the School as primitivist oversight, but they should in fact be seen as dialectical attempts to preserve key seams in the history of the human, seams that, once erased, limit once and for all the scale and intensity of its existence. They are not simply, then, indifferent objects of “experience” – a term which, for the English empiricists (and even Kant himself) implied nothing more than mere cognition – but points of entry into a mode of experiencing the world that makes it bigger, stranger, and more beautiful. These are descriptions of a form of being, a mode of life, a way of thinking or existing that should continue to be and that any just, free, thoughtful, or true society would incorporate into its “constitution” (with the latter here not conceived as a founding document, but in an Aristotelian sense as an organizing politico-economic dispensation). This nostalgia is in some ways the necessary verso of any nuanced desire for the future and illustrates just how suspicious the School was of communisms that envision their own telos as evolutionary necessity, a techno-utopian fullness wholly at odds with the past’s long history of misery. For the School, such a thought leaves the future feeling oddly machinic and sterile while simultaneously reducing to squandered possibility all of those who have lived and died before us. Why might we not find in a just and rationally organized tomorrow scraps from all of the beauty, pleasure, and justice already experienced by history? This is a socialism wonderfully pocked by anachronism, one which sees in the future a motley assemblage of things old and new, things experienced and not yet invented, a system as rational and “instrumental” (i.e., centralized) as it is libidinal, democratic, self-reflexive, and free.

1 For comprehensive introductions to the Frankfurt School and its history, the two best sources in English are Martin Jay’s *The Dialectical Imagination* (1973) and Rolf Wiggershaus’s *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance* (1994).

2 I am here speaking exclusively of the difficulty of enacting Marxisms in the West in this period, rather than within the space of the period’s actually existing communisms.

3 For more on the cultural logics of industrial society see Kracauer’s *The Salaried Masses* (1930), William H. Whyte’s *The Organization Man* (1956), and Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), all texts that significantly influenced debates in the period.

4 The Frankfurt School, of course, lives on in the important work of Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, and others, but this afterlife, however interesting, lies outside the purview of this chapter.

5 During the winter term of 1969, Adorno offered what would be his final seminar, “Introduction to Dialectical Thinking”; he would die in August of that year. Adorno cancelled the seminar mid-way through the term, following numerous disruptions by
students inspired by the activist “happenings” of the late 1960s. These disruptions included an infamous incident in which three women approached Adorno at the lectern during his lecture, bared their breasts, and sprinkled flower petals over his head.

6 At the same time, it is absolutely the case that Adorno, despite his insistence that he had always been an opponent of sexual conservatism, was not in any way prepared to understand the new social movements.

7 “Only thought which does violence to itself is strong enough to shatter myths” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 2).

References


