

EDITORIAL

The contribution of Critical Theory in understanding society

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Abstract: *Is Critical Theory a part of our knowledge we can access just in a kind of museum of history of ideas, or is Critical Theory a living part of our culture on which we can still rely in order to understand and (re)orient our society? To answer this basic question, and many others, and also to shed some light on what seems to be a recent abuse of the term “critical”, in this issue will be addressed, under different points of view, the meaning of the expression Critical Theory.*

The papers here collected are divided in an English and an Italian section, to facilitate the reader who is confident, or prefers, only one of these languages. In both sections, Critical Theory is addressed in a twofold way: as regards its origins in the so-called School of Frankfurt and as concerns its further and contemporary developments, from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Keywords: *Critical Theory, Society, Philosophy, Sociology, Anthropology.*

The locution Critical Theory has become increasingly widespread and influential in the last decades. If, on the one hand, it indicates a growing interest in this field, on the other, it risks to inflate this term and concept, until the point that it can mean everything and nothing. Therefore, the first task imagined for the present issue is to take stock of the meaning of the expression Critical Theory: what the/a Critical Theory is. Indeed, only after having clarified it, it is possible to move forward, investi-

gating how a theory, eventually considered critical, can offer an interpretation and, with it, a possible orientation of society. To be close to this perspective, in this issue Critical Theory is not taken in a general, generalist and generic meaning of problematization of something (as recently often happens), but in the particular meaning it had and, notwithstanding several shadows, have in the tradition of the Institut für Sozialforschung of Frankfurt. That is to say, designating particular topics

on the base of a particular background, being those topics resumable (in a kind of list of possible keywords) as: social change – and its possible subject –, capitalism, mass culture technology, instrumental rationality, alienation, repression, domination – of man over nature and man –, critique, emancipation, reason, and being that scenario nothing more and nothing less than the Western civilization.

Obviously, the abovementioned prospect is still too broad, given the fact that, as it is known, the School of Frankfurt is not a monolith, is not a homogeneous address of thought. Very differently, it is rife with distinctions and tensions. Under this, crucial, regard, I do not simply mean the classical division in generations – being the first that including, among the others, Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse; the second, that led by Jürgen Habermas; the third, that turning around Axel Honneth; and observing in the fourth what seems to be a shift from philosophy to sociology –, I instead mean the peculiarity of any singular thought of any individual thinker turning around the “School” – unfortunately, often these thinkers are reduced into pre-established interpretative models where they are lumped together and this is a very pity and a paradox, considering that one of the fundamental points at stake in them is the question of the disappearance of individuality in modernity.

Now (also to open towards the papers here published), I just would

like to briefly remember what seems to be one of the most significant differences inside the School of Frankfurt about the meaning of the Critical Theory: the Horkheimerian and the Marcusean view of it.

In distinguishing between “traditional” and “critical” theory, Horkheimer states that a theory is critical according to a specific practical purpose that is to seek human «emancipation from slavery [...] to create a world which satisfies [human beings] needs and powers»,¹ that is to say «to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them».² In order to accomplish this task, Critical Theory must be explanatory, practical and normative. Namely, it has to explain what is wrong with current social reality, to identify the subject for a possible change and to provide clear norms to grasp the social transformation, and this tension to emancipation can only be developed in an interdisciplinary perspective able to embrace all the aspects of the contemporary society.

To Marcuse, things are definitely different, considering that any Critical Theory of society is, to him, confronted with the following two points:

1. the judgment that human life is worth living [...]

2. that judgment that, in a given society, specific possibilities exist for the amelioration of human life and specific ways and means of realizing these possibilities [...] Social theory is historical theory, and history is the realm of chance in the realm of necessity.³

Here, I cannot go deeper in this comparison, but I would at least like to clear that with Marcuse we are facing an extremely different (than Horkheimer) and peculiar idea of Critical Theory, indeed, he takes emancipation not as the pursuit of an ideal, neither as a task for someone, but as a possibility, for all and for none.⁴

Moving now on the papers collected in this issue, they are divided in an English and an Italian section. This is to facilitate the reader who is confident, or prefers, only one of these languages.

The English section opens with the article of Silvio Ricardo Gomes Carneiro, *Towards an Epistemology of Social Noise*, where the author wisely compare each other Marcuse and Habermas, integrating this work with Michel Foucault and the psychoanalyst Bento Prado Jr., proposing, in order to decipher our present, an epistemology of noise as an alternative to the theory of recognition and the theory of communicative acts.

In the second paper, mine, *The Marcusean Inheritance as a Possibility Not yet Realized: From a Pre- to a Post-Technological Culture and Society*, I point my attention on the famous (but lately academically underestimated) book of Marcuse *One-Dimensional Man*, a kind of milestone⁵ in the tradition of the Critical Theory, dealing with it on different levels: criticizing some interpretation of it; presenting (some of) the links are possible to be found between it and other relevant texts of political and social philosophy and

ethics; and, especially, trying to show that this book contains the key of the thought of the late Marcuse: a particular philosophy of technology that, theoretically, seems to deserve to be (re)meditated more and more and, practically, we have not yet experimented (and maybe it will never be).

Still meditating on Marcuse, Michael Kidd's article *Technology and Nature: A Defence and Critique of Marcuse*, investigates the concept of nature and the call for a "new science" and a "new technology" in the German/American philosopher. As for the concept of nature, the author of the article wonders if Marcuse means it as an essentialist or a constructivist phenomenon – under this regard, it can be interesting to note that the nature that matters for Marcuse is that absorbed in a particular, historical human project that, in turn, is aimed to recognize the beauty, also in nature, through the *Sinnlichkeit*; this is the reason why in reading Sigmund Freud he is more interested in the Freudian metapsychology than in the scientific/clinical side.⁶ As for the proposal of a "new" science and technology, the author stresses in depth the issues related to this project – under this regard, beside an analysis of the Marcusean term of techno-capitalism (maybe adequate in his time, but to be rethought today), it can be a value to bear in mind that the pacification Marcuse was in searching of is twofold: the overcoming of the natural *Ananke*, *Lebensnot* as much

as that of the social one. In any case, Kidd very interesting stresses that in some extent Marcuse still lies in the dimension of the instrumental rationality, and this awareness is pivotal in order to really go “beyond” the one-dimensional man.

The text of Ruggero D’Alessandro, *Critical Theory in Adorno and Marcuse*, closes that which is considerable as a kind of subsection, in this English section, devoted to the most prominently figures of the early School of Frankfurt: Adorno, Marcuse and also Horkheimer are here compared each other; it closes this text a brief appendix where Foucault and Gilles Deleuze too are taken into account.

With the article of Lorenzo D’Angelo, *Anthropology as Storytelling: Fetishism and Terror in Michael Taussig’s Early Works*, we face a Critical Theory no longer as a theory but, so to say, as a method. This paper, indeed, sharpen the Critical Theory influence, of Walter Benjamin in particular, on the anthropologist Michael Taussig. This influence is observable, as main samples, in two specific matters addressed by the anthropologist: the Marxian question of commodity fetishism – where Taussig refuses the analyses of Marx and Freud – and the issue of writing on and against violence and terror – where Taussig reflects on the politics of representation. Still, this inheritance of Critical Theory and of Benjamin is especially conspicuous in the general meaning the scholar attributes to his work:

starting from Benjamin’s reflections on the role of the storyteller in the bourgeois society, for Taussig anthropology is a form of storytelling.⁷

At last, this English section ends with the text, *Throw the Bathwater out but Save the Baby: New Perspectives in Critical Theory*, by Giacomo Pezzano. In this paper the author tries to launch new questions deserving attention in the field of Critical Theory. This effort risks to be undermined by the use of some generalizations, which use is for sure provocative (e.g., the threshold between modern and postmodern Critical Theory seems to coincide with that between German and French thinkers and, in any case, among these thinkers there are radical differences – for one, the Critical Theory of Marcuse is not teleological as that of Horkheimer).⁸ However, it is a deliberate choice of the author to use a less academic style and in so doing he can absolutely success in raising problems that each one has to meditate with the independence of mind.

Then, we move to the Italian section that is opened with the article of Luca Baldassare, *Pulling Oneself out of the Bog by One’s Own Pigtail: The Legacy of Adorno’s Metacritique*, where the metacritical philosophy of Adorno (in some extents compared to Marcuse) is stressed in order to remember its fundamental importance in fostering the “power of negative thinking” and in criticizing questions such as: cultural industry, managed

world, presumed snobbery about mass society, decline of aura, end of individuality, post-individual or pseudo-individuality, ticket mentality. A form of metacritique, that of Adorno, that seems to be more fruitful than those travelled by the second generation of critical theorists onward.

Adorno is still at stake also in the paper of Valeria Ferraretto, *The Society of Paradox and The Paradox of Society: An Adornian Reflection*, where it is discussed the paradoxical relation the German philosopher establishes between society and individual (society exists only through individuals and at the same time it liquidates individuality), and his call (expressed to Horkheimer) for a “New Manifesto”, for a new society.

Now, because Critical Theory extends itself beyond its auroral phase (whose richness is maybe not yet fully developed), the last three papers are contributions to delineate (some of) these further directions. Under this regard, *Transformation of Critical Theory and Political Questions: a Comparison Between Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, by Francesco Giacomantonio considers the turn impressed by

Habermas in the School of Frankfurt, also in the light of a comparison with the positions of Jacques Derrida.

Among the polemics Habermas has had, there is also that with Peter Sloterdijk. Maria Teresa Pansera remembers it in her article, *Anthropotechnics and Its Declinations in Sloterdijk*, taking it as the starting point to introduce the Sloterdijkean discourse on technology, where is pivotal the notion of “anthropotechnics” – which calls for a close confrontation with the Heideggerian philosophy of technology.

Finally, this issue on critical theory is closed by Ubaldo Fadini’s paper, *Different Bodies: Going Back to a Theoretical Critical Approach*, where the author investigates the link between modern technology and work, and the aftermaths it produces on life and body of the contemporary subject.

In conclusion, with this issue we hope to have provided valid reasons to still rely on, study and develop the Critical Theory of society (this number is enriched by other extra sections edited by the Editorial Board of the Journal).

Note

¹ M. Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. M.J. O’Connell, Continuum, New York, 1982, p. 246; this collection also contains his 1937 essay *Traditional and Critical Theory*, pp. 188- 243.

² *Ibid.*, p. 244.

³ H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1964, p. xli. See also: H. Marcuse, *Philosophy and Critical Theory*, in *Negations: Essays in Critical*

- Theory*, trans. J.J. Shapiro, Beacon Press, Boston, 1968, pp. 134-158.
- ⁴ «If art “is” for any collective consciousness at all, it is that of individuals united in their awareness of the universal need for liberation – regardless of their class position. Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* dedication “Für Alle und Keinen” (For All and None) may apply also to the truth of art.» (H. Marcuse (1977), *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1978, p. 31.).
- ⁵ Just like the very famed M. Horkheimer, Th.W. Adorno (1944), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. E. Jephcott, Stanford U.P., Stanford, 2002. A book that Horkheimer would have to write with Marcuse, but the dynamics inside the Institute and the personal biographies of its leading figures brought the German sociologist to write it with Adorno; on the vicissitudes of the Frankfurt School in its American exile, see: D. Kellner, Introduction: *Technology, War and Fascism: Marcuse in the 1940s*, in H. Marcuse, *Technology, War and Fascism: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, D. Kellner (ed.), Routledge, London and New York, 1998, vol. 1, pp. 1-38.
- ⁶ See: H. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, *Eros and Civilization. A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1955.
- ⁷ Perhaps, these conceptions (the original one by Benjamin and its rehash in Taussing) can be fruitfully intertwined with the Adorno’s essay *Trying to Understand Endgame* (1961), in «The New German Critique», n. 26, 1982, pp. 119-150; now also in Id., *The Adorno Reader*, B. O’Connor (ed.), Blackwell, Oxford, 2000.
- ⁸ «The critical theory of society possesses no concepts which could bridge the gap between the present and its future; holding no promise and showing no success, it remains negative. Thus it wants to remain loyal to those who, without hope, have given and give their life to the Great Refusal.» (H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, cit., p. 261).

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